

Titel: Language and culture: notes on Whorf, [Kerlin] 025-0050

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LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: NOTES ON WHORF

Eloise Kerlin

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1. Whorf's thesis on language and culture.
2. Expression and Content.
3. Instrument and Observation.
4. Lexicon and Morphology.
5. Conclusions.

0. Introductory.

The writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1) on language and culture have warranted much interest and discussion. There still seems to be considerable disagreement, however, among both linguists and anthropologists, as to the validity and even the nature of his assertions. It is the intent of the present discussion to establish the sources of this confusion, which may be traced to an ambiguity inherent in Whorf's approach. No attempt is made to consider whether Whorf's conclusions are justified by his data, since most of his writings on this subject were informal and expository, and were designed to be provocative discussion rather than the systematic investigation of a problem.

1. Whorf's thesis on language and culture.

1.1. Whorf was primarily interested in the relationship between language and thought, and his assumptions on the relationship between such behavior and culture are implicit. In each of his important essays he is concerned with demonstrating that how we talk about something affects the way in which we think of it. In his work as an insurance investigator, he noted a relationship between the talking and the behavior in a given situation; when the former was inappropriate, so was the latter, behavior which contributed to or failed to prevent the occurrence of a fire. People who spoke of a certain material as "stone" did not regard it as combustible, and behavior around gasoline storage drums spoken of as "empty" was not properly cautious.

1.2. Whorf wished to refute the view that thought can be formulated independent of language, or that language merely expresses thought. This common sense or "natural logic" view he ascribed to a lack of knowledge of the different structuring of experiences provided by languages differing from our own. Only by means of such knowledge can the observer gain sufficient perspective to realize that his own perceptions of the world about him are affected by his language; otherwise, the formulations imposed by the language appear to be universal, and "laws of thought" are deduced. This is because the language provides the speaker with a set of distinctions and generalizations concerning events which are compulsory, and which are organized into a total structure which varies from language to language, and is influenced by other factors,