

# Language and Thought

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## Language and Thought

- ◆ **Semiotics** –The study of signs and symbols of all kinds, what they mean, and how they relate to the things or ideas they refer to.
- ◆ **Linguistic relativity** and **linguistic determinism** – Culture (through language) affects the way we think.

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# Semiotics

The Theory of Signs

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## Two Theories of the Sign



- ◆ Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

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## Saussure's Theory of the Sign

- ◆ Sign = Linguistic form + Meaning
- ◆ 'The word *cat*' = [kʰ æ t] + 

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## Signification

- ◆ 'The word *cat*' = [kʰ æ t] + 
- ◆ SIGN = SIGNIFIER SIGNIFIED

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### Signs are Arbitrary

- ◆
  - Water
  - Wasser
  - Eau
  - Shui
- ◆ /li: /
  - "lit" in French = bed
  - Question marker in Russian
  - "meadow," "side sheltered from the wind," or "proper name Lee" in English



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### Two Theories of the Sign



- ◆ Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)

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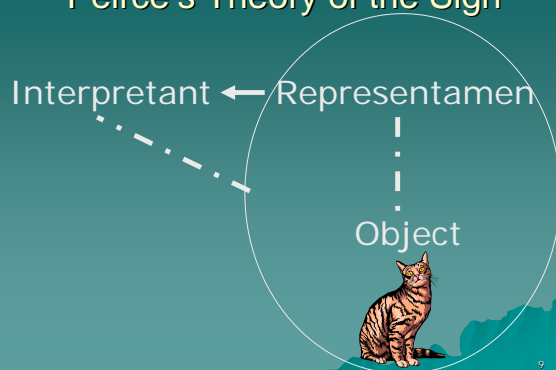
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### Peirce's Theory of the Sign



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## Types of Sign

- ◆ Symbolic sign
  - The representamen is connected to its object by an arbitrary rule.
- ◆ Iconic
  - The representamen is connected to its object by virtue of physical similarity.
- ◆ Indexical
  - The representamen is connected to its object by spatio-temporal contiguity.

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## Symbolic Signs (cf. Saussure)

- ◆
  - Water
  - Wasser
  - Eau
  - Shui
- ◆ /li: /
  - “lit” in French = bed
  - Question marker in Russian
  - “meadow,” “side sheltered from the wind,” or “proper name Lee” in English



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## Iconic Signs

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

- ◆ Tennyson *The Princess*

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## Iconic Signs

The moan of doves in immemorial  
elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

◆ Tennyson *The Princess*

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## Onomatopoeia

- ◆
  - [kakodudldu]
  - [kikiRiki] German
  - [kokoRiko] French
  - [kukuku] Spanish
- ◆
  - [miauw]
  - [miauw] German
  - [meauw] Chinese
  - [niauw] Japanese



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## Iconic Signs

- ◆ Which is heavy? Which is light?
  - Lat – Loat
  - Foon – Feen
  - Mobe – Meeb
  - Toos – Tace
  - Fleen – Flen
  - Seeg – Sleg
  - Poas – Poat
  - Toos – Tood

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### Which is Iconic?

- ◆ We flew from San Francisco to New York via Chicago.



- ◆ We flew from San Francisco to Chicago and then on to New York.

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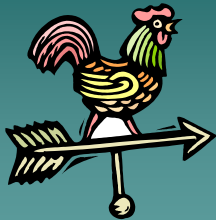
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### Indexical Signs



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### Indexical Signs

- ◆ Deictics
  - This, here, now, tomorrow
- ◆ Personal pronouns
  - I, you, we, he, she, they
- ◆ Tenses
  - She ran, she'll run, she's running
- ◆ Mood
  - She might run, she shouldn't run

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## Indexical Meanings

A man was rowing a boat carrying his wife and his mother.

His mother, who was sitting in the front of the boat, asked him, "If the boat were to capsize and your wife and I were drowning, who would you save?"

The man replied with one word that made his mother and his wife both very happy.

- ◆ How did the man reply?

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## Indexical Signs and Social Meaning

- ◆ Language form can also index ...
  - Gender
  - Social class
  - Occupational group
  - Geographical origin
  - Other social characteristics

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## Indexing Gender



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## Indexing Gender

- ◆ How do these linguistic forms index gender?
  - Lexical choice (vocabulary)
  - Speech acts
  - Forms of address
  - Morphology
  - Grammar
  - Intonation

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## Indexing Gender

- ◆ Listen to "[Transgender Voice Therapy](#)"
  - *All Things Considered, April 13, 2001* · The numbers are hard to estimate but as many as 25,000 or even more transgender people live in the United States. For those males redefining themselves as women the voice can be a difficult part of the transition. From member station KUOW in Seattle Cathy Duchamp reports on a voice therapy program designed to help them sound more feminine.

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## Indexing Social Class

- ◆ Look at the illustrations from brochures for five Trane air conditioners.
- ◆ Rank them from most to least expensive.
- ◆ What visual signs in the brochures index social class?

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### Language and Thought

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### Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ The vocabulary and morphology of different languages differ in the way that they represent the world. Consider how the languages you know express ...
  - Kinship
  - Colors
  - Time

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## Linguistic Relativity

◆ Kinship



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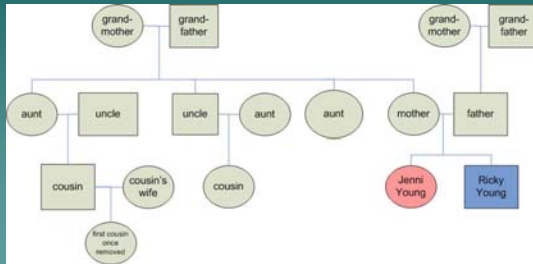
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## English Kinship Terms



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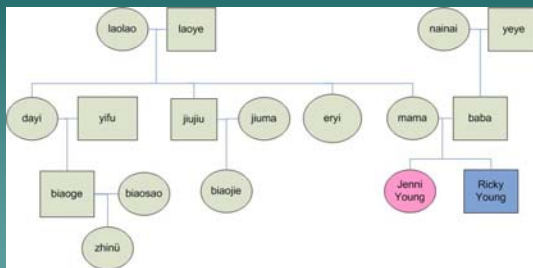
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## Chinese Kinship Terms



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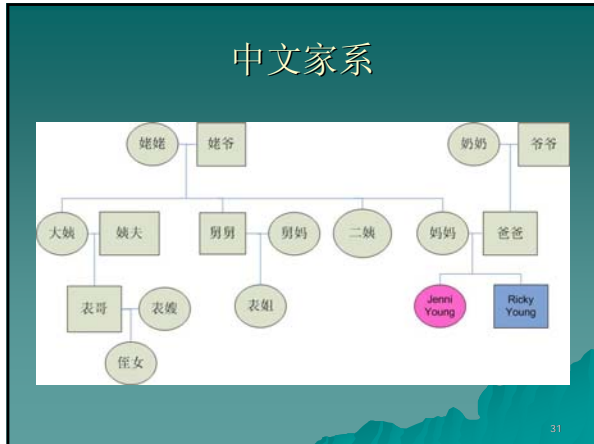
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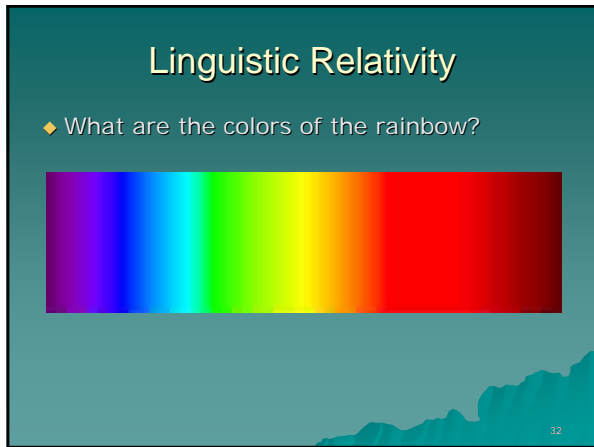
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- ### Linguistic Relativity
- ◆ English has 11 basic color terms.
  - ◆ Russian has 12 – *sinii* (dark blue), *goluboy* (light blue).
  - ◆ Shona (a language of Zimbabwe) has 3: *citema* (black), *cicena* (white), *cipswuka* (red).
  - ◆ Bassa (a language of Liberia) has 2: *húi* and *ziza*.

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### Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ In English, we can count both physical things and time:
  - Two hot dogs, two days.
  - I ate two hot dogs.
  - I stayed ten days in New York.
- ◆ In Hopi, time is cyclical
  - I left New York after the tenth day.

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### Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ In English we distinguish between imaginary and real things but we apply a timeline to both:
  - She went, she's going, she'll go
  - She would have gone, she would go

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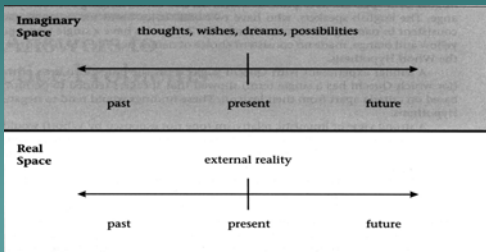
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### Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ Time in English and other Standard Average European Languages



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## Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ Hopi distinguishes between the manifest realm and the unmanifest realm:

– Manifest: the present here and now

– Unmanifest: the distant past, the future, the world of thoughts, wishes, and dreams, and the spirit world

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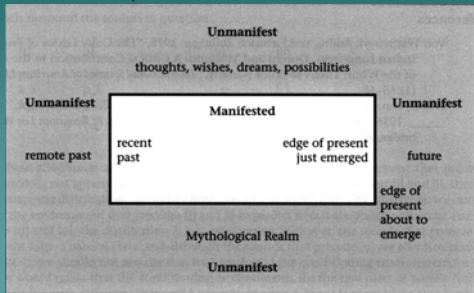
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## Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ Time in Hopi



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## Linguistic Relativity

- ◆ Hopi verbs take **-ni** to indicate the unmanifest:

– Wari “is running, just ran”

– Wárik-**ni** “will run”

– Wárik-**ni-qa** “a possible runner”

– Tewá-**ni** “I will see, would have seen”

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Wilhelm von Humboldt  
1767-1835

Edward Sapir  
1884-1939

Benjamin Lee Whorf  
1897-1941

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## Linguistic Determinism?

- ◆ "There resides in every language a characteristic world-view. As the individual sound stands between man and the object, so the entire language steps in between him and the nature that operates, both inwardly and outwardly, upon him. ... Man lives primarily with objects but he actually does so as language presents them to him."  
– Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1836

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## The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- ◆ "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. ..."

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## The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- ◆ ... We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees."

—Benjamin Lee Whorf, 1940

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## Linguistic Determinism?

Empty or full?



Safe or dangerous?

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## Linguistic Determinism?

- ◆ The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association:
  - Avoid labeling people.
  - Sexist bias can occur when pronouns are used carelessly.
  - The terms 'lesbians' and 'gay men' are preferable to 'homosexual'.
  - Authors are expected to avoid racial and ethnic terms that are perceived as negative.

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### Linguistic Determinism?

- ◆ Problematic
  - The elderly
  - Mankind
  - Wives
  - Adolescent homosexuals
  - Eskimos
- ◆ Preferred
  - Older people
  - Humanity
  - Spouses
  - Gay male adolescents
  - Inuit and Aleuts

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### Linguistic Determinism?

- ◆ We are even changing how we talk and think about Army Reserve service. We no longer call ourselves **Reservists**—we are **Army Reserve Soldiers**. What we used to call **“weekend drills”** are now known as **“battle assemblies.”** As our army—and the threats we face—change, it is important that we change how we think. We are not weekend warriors; we are citizens first, warriors always. Honor is never off duty.  
— AR News (Army News Service)

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### Linguistic Determinism?

- ◆ It used to be, cars had cool names: **Dart, Hawk, Fury, Cougar, Hornet, Mustang, Barracuda, Rocket 88!** Now we have **Elantra, Altima, Acura, Lumina, Sentra, Corolla, Maxima, Tercel!** Further proof America has lost its edge.  
— George Carlin

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### Linguistic Determinism?



◆ Two residents waded through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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### Linguistic Determinism?



◆ A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005. Flood waters continue to rise in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina did extensive damage when it made landfall on Monday.

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### 2005 – ADS Words of the Year

- ◆ American Dialect Society Word of the Year
  - **truthiness**: the quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.
- ◆ Most Useful
  - **podcast**: a digital feed containing audio or video files for downloading to a portable MP3 player. From the brand name MP3 player *iPod* + *broadcast*.

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## 2005 – ADS Words of the Year

- ◆ Most Creative
  - **whale tail**: the appearance of thong or g-string underwear above the waistband of pants, shorts, or a skirt. Also known as a longhorn.
- ◆ Most Unnecessary
  - **K Fed**: [Kevin Federline](#), Mr. Britney Spears.
- ◆ Most Outrageous
  - **crotchfruit**: a child; children. Perhaps inspired by the expression the fruit of one's loins, this term began among proponents of child-free public spaces, but has since spread to parents who use it jocularly.

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## 2005 – ADS Words of the Year

- ◆ Most Euphemistic
  - **internal nutrition**: force-feeding a prisoner against his or her will.
- ◆ Most Likely To Succeed
  - **sudoku**: a number puzzle in which numbers 1 through 9 must be placed into a grid of cells so that each row or column contains only one of each. The current craze started in Japan, caught on in the U.K. in 2004, and then exploded in the U.S. in 2005.
- ◆ Least Likely To Succeed
  - **pope-squatting**: registering a domain name that is the same of a new pope before the pope chooses his new name in order to profit from it.

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## Learning Activity

- ◆ Read *Finding a Name that Fits* by Kendra Hamilton and answer these 5 questions.
1. What do the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" denote and connote for those interviewed in this article? What are the sources of those meanings? Why is the distinction important?
  2. What is the history of the term "Hispanic"? Why is Latin America called "Latin America"? (Remember that Portuguese, not Spanish, is the main language of Brazil.) In what ways do the labels "Hispanic" and "Latino" reflect and create a linguistic division from a colonial past?

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## Learning Activity

3. Consider two other minority groups in the U.S.—African Americans and Asian Americans. What are some terms of self-reference that have been used by members of these groups? What might account for variations in these naming practices?
4. An Asian American students' association posted a sign entitled "The Ten Things Asian Americans Hate Most." Number 1 on the list was "the hyphen." Why all the fuss about a hyphen?
5. Outsiders who do not wish to offend ethnic groups (and even more so those who wish to demonstrate support or solidarity), often find it difficult to choose terms. Why? How might outsiders decide which term or terms to use or not to use?

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