

Language, thought and representation

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Introduction: What does this text imply?

On 2 July 2001, three underground trains on the London Victoria line were halted in a tunnel, where they remained for over an hour. Passengers had to be evacuated, and over six hundred treated for heat exhaustion – a consequence, it seemed, of too little ventilation and too many people. An investigation was subsequently launched into what was termed ‘overcrowding’ on underground trains. On 23 January 2003, however, London Underground officially stated that there was ‘no such thing as an *overcrowded* Tube train’, since the term meant ‘excess over a defined limit’, and no restriction on passenger numbers had ever been set (*London Metro*, 24 January 2003: 11).

- Indeed, many of us are very aware of similar types of ‘trickery’ in advertising, news reporting and even (or especially?) political speeches.
- The fact that it is so common implies a perceived link between how we talk about things and how we construe them: London Underground, for example, chose to represent conditions on the train in a way that not only mitigates their responsibility to passengers but also potentially alleviates fears about commuter safety.
- It’s not just people in the public eye who exploit the links between language use and perception.

- it has even been argued that such alternative ‘angles on reality’ exist not only within the resources of individual languages but also between languages themselves. The following sections explore both of these ideas, and we begin by looking at a well-known theory of language as a representational system devised by Ferdinand de Saussure.
- Section 2.3 then looks at the premises of the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis, which posits a relationship between experience, perception and language, and section 2.4 discusses examples of ‘angles of telling’ within one language.

2.2 Saussure and language as a representational system

- Saussure theorised that speakers of different languages engage in an arbitrary division of reality.
- Thus, every language can be said to be a particular system of representation that mirrors, and indeed so reinforces, the 'world' of its speakers.
- The mental links that speakers make between concepts or perceptions and the labels used to 'name' them, is made at the level of *langue*, which is 'our [innate] knowledge of the systematic correspondences between sound and meaning which make up our language.'

Examples

- think of words such as *tree*, or *tomorrow*, or *summer* or *elephant*.
- Think of new words such as *gleek* or *xng*.
- I hope to see an elephant standing under that tree tomorrow.
- hope standing an to elephant see under that I tomorrow.

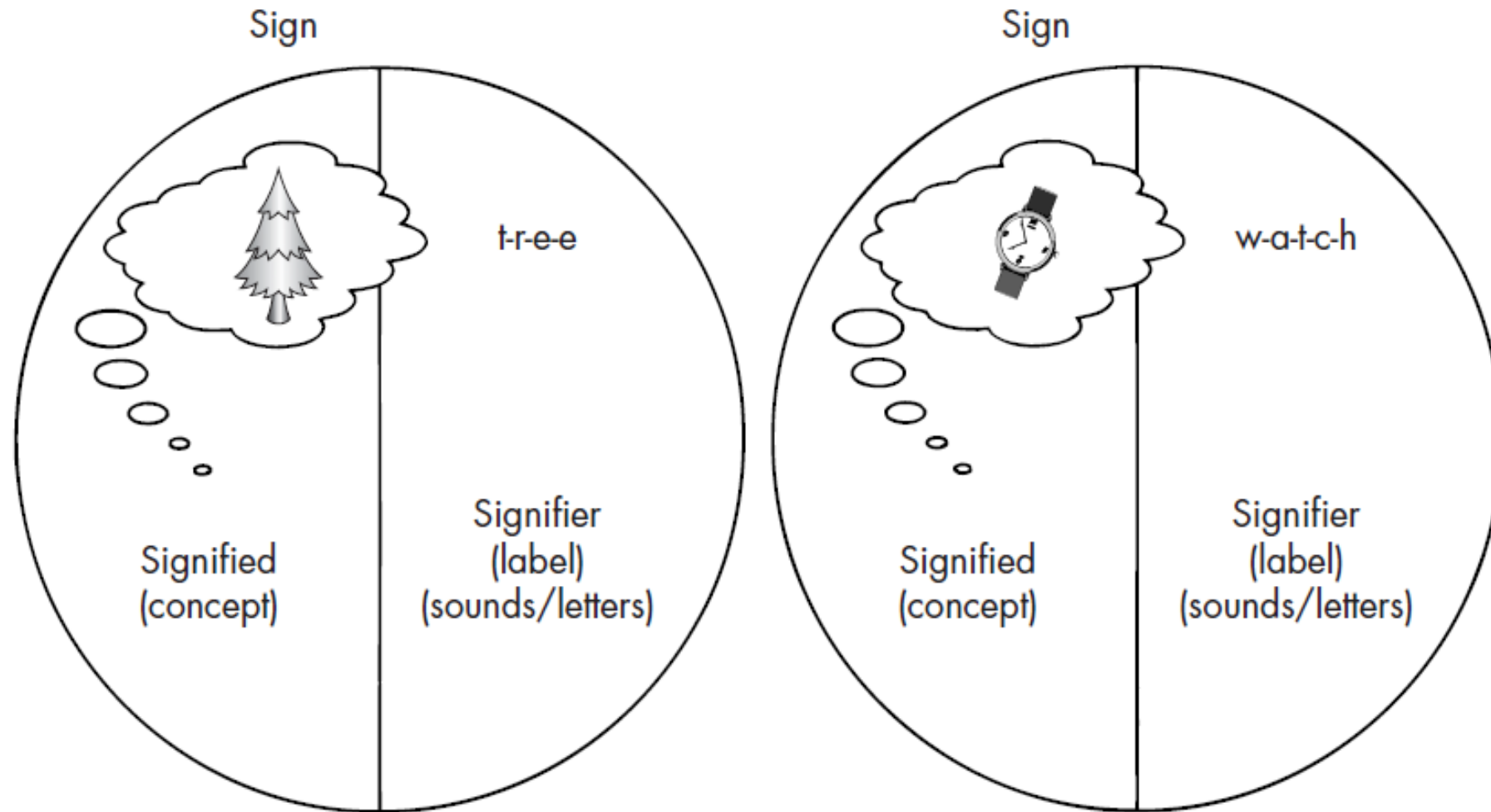
- In essence, *langue* comprises an ‘abstract system of units and rules’ (McMahon 1994: 25) that members of a speech community subconsciously share.
- This innateness of *langue* means that it is very difficult, if not impossible, ever to come to a true and accurate description of how it is actually constructed in each language (though Saussure felt that this should be the ultimate concern of linguistics).
- The only glimpses into the workings of *langue* that we are afforded are through analysis of *parole*, the actual use of language in both speech and writing. Whereas the ‘hardwiring’ of *langue* is shared by a speech community, *parole* encompasses the *individual* use of language.

Sign (Signifier/Signified)

- Saussure terms the sound sequence which makes up a label a signifier, and the meaning or concept associated with it the signified.
- The correspondence between the two constitutes the linguistic sign. Saussure was careful to stress, that the actual sign is not one or the other of its component parts but instead the association that binds them together.
- Saussure stated that, once the correspondence between the signifier and the signified has been established in a language, it tends to appear 'natural' and indivisible to speakers.

- However, Saussure did maintain that the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. In other words, there is no pressing reason why the concept of a tree, for example, *has* to be symbolised by the exact sequence of sounds or letters in *t-r-e-e*. This is underlined by the fact that different languages label the same concept with different signifiers: *arbre* in French, for example, or *Baum* in German.
- In addition, because the link is ultimately arbitrary, there is also no reason why either might not change over time, and a new 'natural' link established.

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- The second major point in Saussure's theory of the sign relates to the idea that we mentioned earlier, namely that signs partially derive meaning from their relationship with other associated signs.
- Thus, to paraphrase a famous movie title, we're more likely to anticipate being scared when we see *An American Werewolf in London*, and to look forward to a few laughs with *An American Wolfman in London*.
- Part of our understanding of *wolfman* is predicated on the fact that it does not refer to the traditional *werewolf*. Thus, at the level of *langue*, signs do not exist in isolation, but in systems of associative relationships.

- Furthermore, as our example indicates, these associative relationships can shift to make room for new signs. We could therefore argue that an older system of *wolf~werewolf~man* has altered somewhat to accommodate *wolfman* so that, now, *werewolf* embodies an increasingly ominous element as compared with the friendlier newcomer.
- The idea that language users partly derive their understanding of signs from the latter's associative relationships ties into Saussure's theory that we can truly get at the essence of a sign only by contextualising it in its current system of use.
- For example, even though Anglo-Saxon texts have been able to tell us that the signifier *wer* was tied to signified 'man', we can't confidently say that we fully understand how it was used in everyday Anglo-Saxon life. What were the associative relationships of *wer*? Could it be used as a general term for 'male', or, more specifically, for a particular type of man? Did *wer* have favourable connotations in speech (that is, did it refer to a male who possessed qualities valued in that society)?

- To better understand **the subtle layering of meaning a sign accrues** through its use; consider a modern English sign such as *paki*, a term of racist abuse in the UK denoting someone who appears to have ethnic affiliations with the Indian subcontinent. If we had to separate it into its component parts, we could say that the signifier *paki* is tied to the signified or concept 'person ethnically linked to the Indian subcontinent'.
- However, to leave it at that would be to ignore the fact that socially negative perspectives have become encoded into the signified component. They may be difficult to deconstruct and objectify, but the fact that this sign is used in racist *parole* testifies that they are nevertheless present and potent. In the UK, *paki* exists in a system of associative relationships with signs which negatively label other ethnic groups.

- It is noteworthy that individual languages are made up not just of linguistic signs: as we have seen, we also have knowledge, at the level of *langue*, of the structural principles which allow us to create utterances that are meaningful in our native languages. We can refer to our 'native knowledge' of these structural rules as our **grammar**, and the systems of each also vary from language to language.

Activity 1

- You will need other people for this activity. Take two familiar objects and agree that you will reverse their names (for example, you will call dogs *tulips*, and you will refer to tulips as *dogs*). Now ask each other questions, including the reassigned names, which the other person must answer. For example,
- QUESTION: Have you ever been bitten by a tulip?
- ANSWER: Yes, but not badly. I didn't need a tetanus injection.

2.3 The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis

- The notion of an arbitrary but significant link between perceptions of ‘reality’ and linguistic representation is neither new nor particular only to Saussure.
- The work of Edward Sapir, and that of his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, gave impetus to the theory that ‘culturally based “ways of speaking”’ exist: a concept that would form the basis of what is known today as the **Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis**.
- The hypothesis comprises two parts, **linguistic relativity** and **linguistic determinism**. Linguistic relativity theorises that the languages of different cultures comprise distinct systems of representation which are not necessarily equivalent. Linguistic determinism proposes that a language not only encodes certain ‘angles on reality’ but also affects the thought processes of its speakers.

- Whorf's position seems to have been that language is linked to 'unconscious habitual thought' and that there is 'at least some causal influence from language categories to non-verbal cognition' (Gumperz and Levinson 1996: 22). Users of a language are generally unaware both of the relative nature of their linguistic system and of its impact on how they think.

One language, many worlds

- In one episode of the sitcom *Friends* (Episode 175254, Series 9), the character Rachel tells the group that Ross, the father of her baby, still consults his childhood paediatrician. In order to stall their teasing, Ross protests that the doctor 'is a great diagnostician!'. His brother-in-law, Chandler, retorts: 'diagnostician, or boo-boo fixer?'
- As in our earlier example of *overcrowded* versus *crowded*, the crux of the matter lies in the labelling: how you name it links to how you perceive it. While this version of Ross's 'reality' generated a healthy giggle from the audience, there are many who would argue that some real-life choices of representation are no laughing matter.

- One of these is Carol Cohn (1987), who wrote of her first-hand experiences of the *technostrategic* language used in the US nuclear industry.
- One of her significant conclusions was that the language used by this Nukespeak community reflected and reinforced a particular perspective; namely that nuclear weapons are safe. We can refer to this perspective as the group's **ideology**.
- Simpson (1993: 3) defines ideology as 'the taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs and value-systems which are shared collectively by social groups'. Thus, the people whom Cohn met appear to have subconsciously participated in a particular, positive 'reality' about nuclear power, as natural and as obvious to them as is the horror-filled alternative to many of the rest of us.

- Cohn identified a high use of ‘abstraction and **euphemism**’ (1987: 1) in technostrategic language. For example, certain nuclear devices are labelled as *clean bombs*, directing perception away from the dreadful results of their highenergy blasts. *Counter value attacks* obscure the destruction of cities, and *collateral damage* neatly hides the resultant human corpses. She notes too that there is an explicit element of sanitisation in some aspects of representation:
- *clean bombs* are employed in *surgically clean strikes* where an opponent’s weapons or command centres can be *taken out*, meaning that they are accurately destroyed without significant damage to anything else.

- Among the other categories that Cohn identified as being important in Nukespeak were sexual **metaphors**, domestic imagery and religious terminology. Lecturers in the industry talked of *penetration aids*, advisers of ‘releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump’, and of the fact that nuclear weapons were ‘irresistible, because you get more bang for the buck’.
- According to Cohn, patting denotes intimacy and sexual possession; here, transposed to the appropriation of what she terms ‘phallic power’. However, as she also points out, patting can also embody an element of domestication. Thus, *patting* the missile also means rendering it familiar and harmless.

- Finally, Cohn identified a significant use of religious terminology. The first atomic bomb test was named the *Trinity*, and famously, Oppenheimer (the lead scientist on the project) thought of the Hindu avatar Krishna's words on a battlefield in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'I am become death, destroyer of worlds'.
- Certain members of this Nukespeak world also refer to themselves as the *nuclear priesthood*, making, as Cohn points out, an 'extraordinary implicit statement about who, or rather what, has become God' (ibid.: 5).
- Overall, Cohn believes that the 'angle of telling' embodied in such modes of representation makes it easier to ignore the human cost of nuclear war.
- Nukespeak is relative to the perspective of the creators and controllers of nuclear weapons: the worldview it encodes is not that of the victim.

Activity 2

- Jon Hooten (2002) suggests that many English-speaking communities have increasingly included 'war terminology' into everyday usage, normalising it and de-sensitising speakers to the actual horrors of such conflict. Thus, headlines such as *Farmers battle Summer Drought*, *Mayor defends Budget* and utterances such as *Your new car is da bomb* or *Did you see that comedian bomb last night?* demonstrate how 'the extra-ordinary metaphor of war has infiltrated the everyday' (ibid.: 2). Can you think of similar instances of normalisation from *warspeak* or from any other specialist domain? Do you think that such 'infiltration of the everyday' can in fact influence our perceptions of the 'extra-ordinary' as ordinary?

- In section 2.3, we saw that the differences in representation encoded in individual languages are a result not just of their distinct systems of signs but also of particular features in their discrete grammars. The same principle holds for the structural choices available within one language: the ways in which users construct utterances are also significant in the representations they make.
- For example, the *London Metro* article mentioned at the beginning of this chapter also printed a comment made on BBC Radio 4 by London Underground's safety director, Mike Strzelecki, about the evacuation of passengers from the three halted trains. He had said, as part of his statement to the press, 'mistakes were made'. This is an interesting choice: note that he *didn't* say 'we made mistakes', or even 'London Underground made mistakes'. The latter two alternatives give a clear sense of who might have been responsible for those errors, but in Mr Strzelecki's comment such information

- is imperceptible and, as such, the reader or listener is not ‘directed’ to look for it. The differences in perception that the real and fictional examples engender is due to the use of two **voices**: Mr Strzelecki’s comment makes use of **passive voice** and my alternatives of **active voice**.
- The following illustration makes use of a simplified model detailed in Simpson (1993: 4). This is the **transitivity model**, used in the analysis of utterances to show ‘how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world’ (Simpson, *ibid.*: 89). Utterances potentially comprise three components: (1) *process*, which is typically expressed by a verb; (2) *participants* in the process: the participant who is the ‘doer’ of the process represented by the verb is known as the *actor*; the *goal* is the entity or person affected by the process; (3) *circumstances* associated with the process: in utterances such as *she cried loudly* or *he jumped from the cliff*, the underlined components provide extra information about the process, and can in fact be omitted.

- In active voice, utterances typically follow the structure *actor + process + goal*. Thus, our earlier fictional examples would be structured as:
- We/London Underground made mistakes
actor *process* *goal*
- Here, the foregrounding of the actor makes their involvement perceptually important. In passive voice, on the other hand, it is the goal which becomes foregrounded, and the actor is moved to the end of the utterance:
- mistakes were made (by us/London Underground)
goal *process* *actor*
- I've bracketed the actor in the above example to signal that it can be either retained or omitted, making agency less or not at all visible. The marginalisation or exclusion of the actor in such constructions can contribute to a perception that it is relatively unimportant. Consequently, a reader or listener may be more likely to concentrate on the foregrounded information and spend less, if any, time thinking about the actor.

- Thus, the combination of structural and sign choices is integral to the creation of certain representations. A good illustration of this can be seen in newspaper headlines, which typically condense an ‘angle of telling’ on a particular story. For example, in January 2003, police raided a flat in Manchester, England, which contained ingredients for making the poison ricin.⁵ A policeman, Stephen Oake, was fatally stabbed. The incident was widely covered in the British press, and headlines such as the following appeared on 15 January.

- *Daily Mirror*

- Ricin Raid Copper Knifed to Death
participant (goal) process circumstance

- *The Times*

- Policeman Murdered in Ricin Raid
participant (goal) process circumstance

- *Northwest Evening Mail*

- Butchered

- *Process*

- The *Daily Mirror* and the *Times* headlines both make use of passive voice, foregrounding the victim of the stabbing. In addition, neither makes explicit mention of the alleged actor of the ‘knifing’ or ‘murdering’, but it is noteworthy that later reports in various British newspapers went on to make explicit links between this incident and threat from *terrorists*: currently, a highly negative sign.
- The *Northwest Evening Mail*, on the other hand, omits explicit mention of both actor and goal and focuses instead on the all-important process which has resulted in death. One-word headlines such as this are extremely interesting, because they highlight the fact that the signs used are chosen with some measure of deliberation.
- Why not simply *Killed*, for example, or *Murdered* or *Knifed*? Indeed, if we were to consider the three signallers of process as being in an associative relationship (see section 2.2), as in *murdered~knifed~butchered*, we might agree that while they all share certain elements of meaning, such as a sense

- of deliberate violence and untimely death, *butchered* is much more horrifically emotive than the other two, carrying as it does very strong connotations of cruelty and inhumanity when used in reference to a human being. The *Evening Mail's* choice of representation, therefore, is likely to skew the reader's perception towards a certain angle of telling in the narration of this episode, as indeed are the choices of the other two newspapers.
- Although neither headline explicitly mentions who might have been responsible for the stabbing, it is arguable that the notion of the threatening *them* is implicit in *ricin raid*, since the media have consistently been carrying numerous warnings on the potential manufacture and use of such poisons as chemical weapons by *terrorists*.
- it is important to remember that newspapers do not write themselves but are necessarily put together by people who, by virtue of being people, necessarily have perspectives on how the world unfolds.

- Such viewpoints consciously and unconsciously become linguistically encoded and readers are arguably influenced into either going along with or rejecting them. Thus, as Simpson (1993: 6) states, we can assume that language is not a transparent, objective medium for communication but, instead, a ‘projection of positions and perspectives . . . a way of communicating attitudes and assumptions’.
- And in Nukespeak, or headlines, or comments made by spokespeople for safety or indeed, in whatever type of discourse we choose to examine, ‘the elusive question of the “truth” of what [is said] is not an issue; rather, it is the “angle of telling” adopted’ that necessitates our scrutiny.

Activity 3

- Look at the headlines and the first lines of reports of the same story from three or four different newspapers on a particular day. Using the discussion of the newspaper headlines in section 2.4 as a guideline, compare how information is being presented in each. What are the perspectives being presented, and how are they being linguistically encoded?

Summary

In this chapter we have explored the notion that ...

- each language can be considered a unique and arbitrary system of representation which ‘cuts up reality’ in different ways.
- The resources of each language allow for different discourses, which can reflect and reinforce the ideologies of the groups they are used by.
- Thus, ‘language is not used in a context-less vacuum’ but ‘in a host of discourse contexts . . . which are impregnated with the ideology of social systems and institutions (Simpson 1993: 6).
- Because we do not always interrogate language use, assuming it instead to be a ‘natural, obvious’ medium of representation, we can become normalised to the ideological perspectives that discourses encode, seeing them instead as ‘common sense’.

Summary

- Indeed, this is what Carol Cohn experienced when she stated that integration into the Nukespeaking community made it increasingly difficult to think outside of the worldview embodied in the discourse.
- Thus, since language can be used to naturalise us into accepting certain ideas about 'the way things are and the way things should be' (Simpson 1993: 6), we must learn to challenge its representations and, as Sapir once stated, fight its implications. These ideas will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.