

Lexis and Culture: Bound and Determined?

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Although never validated by either quantitative or qualitative research, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis continues to be a dominant position from which to consider the relationship between language and culture. This paper challenges the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, and attempts to show that lexis and culture are not as inextricably bound to each other as is commonly supposed. After considering numerous examples from Spanish, English and Japanese, the model of cultural prototypes is offered as an alternative to the present psycholinguistic paradigm.

“*Kuchi wa wazawai no moto.*”
“The mouth is the source of disaster.”
—Japanese proverb

INTRODUCTION

Recently Deignan, Knowles, Willis, and Sinclair (1995) stated that “. . . a speaker is, to a certain extent, bound by the lexis of his/her language in the range of meanings he/she can express . . . especially when there does not seem to be a neutral term available” (p. 37). This type of assertion, strongly influenced by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is generally accepted by many trained linguists, researchers, and teachers alike (cf. Matsumoto, 1989; Sharwood Smith 1988). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (also known as the Whorfian hypothesis; see Sapir, 1929, 1970; Whorf, 1956) asserts that it is the lexis of a particular language that shapes or limits in some way the cognition

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and expression of a particular society. The influence that words exert on society supposedly makes it distinct from any other culture or language group.

Scovel (1991) rightly pointed out that, while the Whorfian hypothesis continues to be popular, it has yet to be validated by either quantitative or qualitative research. This prompts us to ask the question: Is a speaker truly limited in the range of meaning for a lexical item in his or her language, especially when there is no parallel neutral term? When in doubt, we should at least be open to other ways of describing psycholinguistic processes in lexical fields. The basic premise of this paper will be to offer an alternative view—that cultural prototypes, rather than lexis, shape a society's world view. We will lay the foundations necessary to contemplate this premise first by looking at some basic concepts from the work on lexicon, and lexical acquisition research, as well as by drawing upon current theories in psycholinguistics. Lexical items from Japanese, Spanish, and North American English will be used as living examples of cultural prototypes. In answer to pragmatic concerns, this paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications our discussion has for teaching.

BASIC DEFINITIONS

What do we mean when we say “word” or “lexis”? Linguists have a hard time delineating these concepts, since both commonsensical orthographic and technical descriptions fail to completely define what words are. Instead, they have found it easier to describe the functions of words. Words are *polysemous*. That is to say, words having the same orthographic form can have multiple meanings. Words also can be *homonymous*, meaning that words of different meanings can have the same orthographic form. Words are *denotative*, which McCarthy (1994, p. 16) interpreted as the real-world meaning of a word, and/or *connotative*, which is the meaning that mingles with the emotional content associated with the word. Denotation and connotation will figure prominently in our reflections on lexis and culture.

“Word” is obviously the subject of a very complex philosophical debate. However, for simplification, in this paper we will follow Carter's (1992) lead by using the term *word* when there is no need to be exact, but the terms *lexis* or *lexical item* as “. . . a neutral hold-all term which captures and, to some extent, helps to overcome the instabilities in the term word, especially when it becomes limited by orthography” (p. 7). *Lexis* and *lexical item* are handy all-encompassing terms that will include but not be limited to items such as fixed phrases, idioms, and metaphorical extensions. The justification for this procedure will be explained later, and is significant to

the argument of this paper and for second-language (L2) teaching implications.

Lexical Acquisition Research: An Overview

Much of the research in lexical acquisition has been with the first-language (L1) acquisition process of children. Some might have doubts about whether such research is applicable to L2 acquisition, but many researchers (cf. Channell, 1988; Cutler and Fay, 1982; cf. Fromkin, 1980) feel the processes of L1 and L2 acquisition are sufficiently linked together to make at least general inferences from L1 onto L2 acquisition. Also, while recognizing the contributions that Krashen (1981) has made to our understanding of the terms *learning* and *acquisition*, for the sake of simplicity we will use the terms interchangeably.

Clark's (1973) feature acquisition hypothesis says that children acquire lexis through describing the aspects of an object. For example, ice would be understood by a child as cold, wet, and possibly glass-like, not hot, dry, and sweet. According to this hypothesis, children might overextend their understanding of lexis and mislabel other objects with similar aspects. A child, after being exposed to the word *fly*, may then overextend the word to a bird or an airplane. Nelson (1974) felt that children learn words not by their static aspects, but by interacting with the objects themselves. Her functional core concept asserts that what a child does with the object is more important than what the object is. It is through playing with an object that a child eventually acquires words.

However, Bowerman's (1978) research suggested that features and functions are included in the learning of a word for a child, but that they are part of a developing set of prototypes. These "semantic prototypes" change and grow through time until the child can develop more defined prototypes that will fit into a larger and more sophisticated mental lexicon. This process of growth was described in Anglin's (1970) research. Anglin showed how his subjects' mental lexicon shifted from a syntagmatic to a more paradigmatic understanding. The subjects over the years also showed a steady progression from a concrete to an abstract comprehension of words. And in the process of learning new vocabulary, Bolinger (1976) found that children often learn lexis in chunks, relying heavily on fixed, idiomatic, and deistic expressions. Crossing over to L2 research, Meara (1982) found that L2 learners also go through various stages of lexical instabilities, much like young L1 learners. Johnston (1985) also identified at least six progressive stages in L2 lexical acquisition. But the acquisition of lexis and progression through these stages seems to move more quickly for learners when they learn the lexical items in context. Craik and Lockhart (1972) found that

deeper mental processing takes place when students are given vocabulary tasks that require them to think deeply about the form of the words they are studying. The implications of Meara's (1984) later works seem to show that L2 learners develop more complex prototypes while their knowledge of the forms of lexical items grow.

All these findings offer us some interesting insights into the L2 acquisition process. However, Nunan (1989) warned that many findings in such research were uncovered in laboratories rather than classrooms, and often under limited circumstances. So while we should not close the door to looking for ways to utilize the insights gained from L1 and L2 acquisition researchers, our application of their findings must be carried out with an appropriate amount of caution.

Word Knowledge

What do we mean when we say a person knows a word? Is it the memorization of the definition of the lexical item, or the ability to use the word in context? Linguists would say both and more is required to know a word. Carter (1992) felt that knowing a word "... involves knowing how to use the word syntactically, semantically and pragmatically or discursively" (p. 174). McCarthy (1994) and Carter also stated that to know a word involves mastering its syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Syntagmatic relations involve words joining to make larger blocks of text. Paradigmatic relations deal with how each word consists of a choice from several words that have similar, but not necessarily exact, meanings. Actually knowing a lexical item is a perplexing process for second-language learners, especially when it comes to comprehending the vast range of meanings and the connotations that word may have for a culture.

How then can one know the meaning of a lexical item? There are two main schools of thought concerning word meaning. One group, called structural semanticists, is represented by such scholars as Carter and McCarthy. Aitchison (1995, p. 40) called the other group the fuzzy-meaning adherents.

Structural Semantics and Core Vocabulary

Carter (1992) described the approach of structural semanticists by saying that "... words do not exist in isolation: their meanings are defined through sense relations they have with other words" (p. 18). Central to the semanticist view is the idea of *core vocabulary*. Carter defined core vocabulary as the most basic words in a language. Quirk (1982, p. 43) asserted core vocabulary bears no marks of culture, or as he put it, "... as culture-free as calculus, with no literary, aesthetic or emotional aspirations" (p. 43). Core words are also said to be neutral with respect to field and tenor of

discourse (Carter 1992, pp. 41–42). These and other lexical items are stored in a cognitive framework called the *mental lexicon*. Within it are *semantic fields* and *lexical fields*. McCarthy (1994) defined these terms in the following way:

These *lexical fields* are the *realization* (or flesh and bones, as it were) of the abstract notion of *semantic fields*. . . . Semantic fields contain only concepts; lexical fields contain real words. (p. 21)

In this sense, *food* might be considered a semantic field, and below it another semantic field of *fruit*. Under this would be the lexical fields of *apple*, *banana*, *orange*, etc. However, an item such as *tomato*, which is actually a fruit, is not normally included in this set. One's mental image of a lexical item seems to have something to do with what field in which it is mentally lexicalized. Carter (1992) quietly mentioned the weakness of only looking at the structures of the mental lexicon by stating:

. . . there is no such thing as an *inherently* neutral item, but that in most contexts and in a taxonomy such as this, *dog* is the more usually neutral specification. This allows us to observe in a relatively systematic way that the more under- or overspecific an item, the more immediate the communication and the more marked the evaluative overtones produced by the use of the item. (p. 85)

While lexis can be designated in structures, Carter implied that meaning can still evade us. Not only that, but cultural neutrality in core words is, at best, relative. Besides this, Lyons (1977, p. 305–11) said that semantic and lexical fields are uniquely arranged from culture to culture.

McCarthy (1994, p. 47) and Langacker (1987, p. 155) felt that one way to better understand the process at work in these different lexical fields is through the schema theory. This psycholinguistic theory, which is loosely based upon Aristotlean philosophy states that words are symbolic keys to mental knowledge, and because of this, words will process different images (or schemata) and feelings depending upon the culture.

We can see now that the structural semanticists provide an important piece of the puzzle in our quest for a more coherent picture in what happens with lexis, meaning, and culture. However, psycholinguists can also participate with their insights on mental images and cultural schematic representations. At this point, it is significant to realize the virtual nonexistence of neutral terms, core or otherwise, in a language. This will be further explained when looking at Japanese core vocabulary.

The Prototype Theory

Aitchison (1995) presented a psycholinguistic viewpoint, which says that word meanings are abstract. She focused on how our affective mental images

of lexical items are more important than what we cognitively perceive as reality:

Word meanings cannot be pinned down, as if they were dead insects. Instead, they flutter around elusively like live butterflies. Or perhaps they should be likened to fish which slither out of one's grasp. (pp. 39–40)

While she agrees that some words are more basic (core) in meaning than others, lexical meaning, according to this point of view, is found in *prototypes*. Closely related to the schema theory, Aitchison defined a prototype as “. . . mental models of the world which we live in, models which are private and cultural architectures, and only partially in touch with ‘reality’ ” (Aitchison, 1995, p. 70). Instead of thinking merely of structure which contains core words or other lexical items, according to the prototype theory, the mental lexicon contains vague pictures of the words. While there are many strengths in this theory, especially around the problems of polysemy, Aitchison admitted to its inconsistencies, writing: “. . . the more closely prototypes are examined, the more elusive they seem to be” (Aitchison, 1995, p. 64).

IS LEXIS LIMITED?

We can now return to the assertion made at the beginning of this paper. Are speakers limited to the range of meaning they can ascribe to a lexical item? A main skill we have as speakers entails the ability to use the figurative meanings of a word. Metaphor allows us to use lexis in more creative ways than just the basic meaning. For example *la mano* in Spanish means *hand* in English, and often carries a meaning of someone or something that demonstrates ability (or the lack thereof). For example: *Cargó la mano* (*He really laid it on thick*); *Se me fue la mano* (*I got carried away*); *La medicina fue mano de santo* (*The medicine was like a saint's hand—i.e., The medicine worked wonders*). McCarthy (1994) called this a word's metaphorical extension, which is based upon the word's central meaning:

This view of polysemy is creative; it leaves open the possibility of new metaphorical extensions of the central meaning . . . [this] is not a fringe aspect of language; it is at the very heart of word meaning and affects the vast majority of words. (pp. 25–26)

He continued by explaining the differences between conventional metaphors (metaphors most native speakers have heard or used themselves) and unconventional metaphors (highly creative, uncommon uses of language). Aitchison (1995, pp. 71–72) called the conventional metaphors part of fixed

mental models, and the unconventional ones temporary models, the fluid structures set up at a moment's notice to express something in a novel way.

It is the unconventional metaphor, the temporary model, which is at the forefront of word meaning. Although some (see Carter, 1992, p. 119) consider unconventional metaphors a deviant usage of lexis, this form of metaphor ensures that potential meanings of lexical items will be limited only by creativity of those wielding the language.

It is found, however, that the range of acceptability in a metaphor becomes increasingly limited as it becomes more unconventional. Eventually the language can become incoherent. McIntosh (1966, p. 193) touched upon this by discussing the tension between normal collocations and grammar and unusual collocations and grammar. He felt that the range of tolerability between collocations and other lexical items (such as metaphor) is relative. Extension of lexical items are certainly possible, as we can see in new words such as *software*, *rightsizing*, or *outsourcing*.

As Fig. 1 shows, evidently the higher a lexical item is metaphorically extended, the less chance it will be understood by most encoders. The question mark symbolizes an area of metaphor or creative collocation that may only be understood by the speaker. However, today's maker of incoherent metaphor may become tomorrow's literary genius in art, philosophy, or other esoteric disciplines. From there the item can move further down the cline

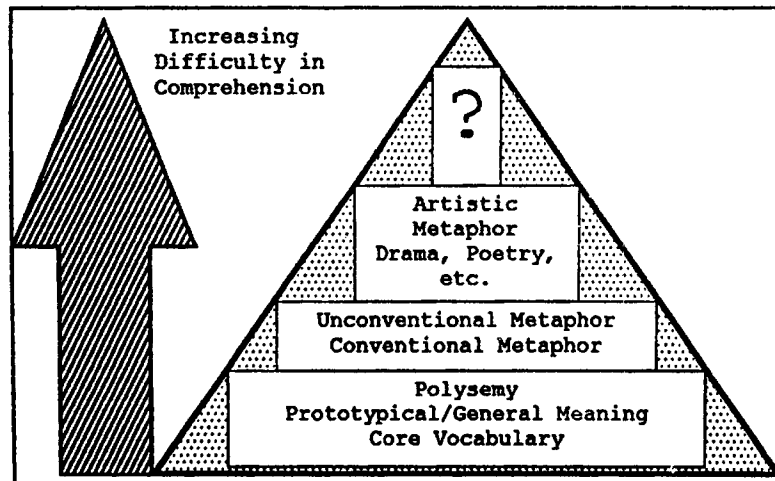


Fig. 1. Model of metaphorical extension: potential for increased expression of meaning with decreasing number of encoders.

and be accessed by larger numbers of encoders, to the point where it can become a conventional metaphor. For example, the Zen Buddhist metaphor of “the sound of one hand clapping” was incoherent when it first arrived in the West some years ago. Now it has become almost conventional in marked usage. The following *tanka* by poet Sanford Goldstein (1995, p. 14) further illustrates the point that lexical manipulation is relative and, especially with planned texts such as in literature, metaphorical extension can be quite unusual, yet perfectly acceptable:

how set
 this cylinder of rice
 rolled with seaweed—
 I bite into memory
 I samurai my coffee cup

Practically speaking, most lexical usage will stay near the bottom of the triangle shown in Fig. 1. However, as we can clearly see, the potential range of lexical meaning is virtually boundless, or at least is much freer in terms of expression than most speakers realize.

LEXICAL CONNOTATION AND CULTURE

We will now move on to discuss my basic premise, that the connotation of lexical items is influenced by the prototypes of the dominant culture, rather than the culture being affected by lexis. Carter (1992) represented the current mainstream by saying that, at least with neutral core vocabulary, the culture is affected by this lexis. But it seems a difficult task to find truly neutral and cultureless words. Core words are full of cultural connotations, if not unique prototypical representations. In Japanese, core words like *zabuton* (a cushion used on bamboo-mesh floors as a chair) or *yūnomi* (a Japanese teacup) are full of societal connotations. *Zabuton* are used in traditional ceremonies, old country homes, and formal social visits, among other cultural functions. *Yūnomi* are traditionally used for drinking Japanese green tea only, while other teas are served in Western-style *kappu* (from the English *cup*). These are only a few examples of how even basic lexical meaning is first affected by cultural views. Carter and others run the risk of making brittle theories about lexis that are not flexible enough to deal with the twists of reality.

Some would hold that lexical items are too fluid and diverse to discover any extension of the dominant culture’s views. Cultural attitudes, they claim, are always in a state of flux, and there is no unanimous official societal view on anything. They point out that the connotation of a word changes fre-

quently, especially with regard to euphemisms. For example, the word *gay* in English has changed from a synonym of *happy* to that of *homosexual*, even though North American culture continues to struggle with the issue of homosexuality, and few would agree that all homosexuals are inherently happy or that the subject is necessarily joyous. *Gavacho*, once used in Spanish as a pejorative term for a man who has been influenced by French culture, is used in Mexico today to negatively describe white American males.

People subscribing to this view also cite many examples of diverse connotations of words and variety of “antilanguages” (see Halliday, 1978) found within subcultures, which they assert are just as valid. In the dominant North American culture, *bitch* is a negative term, yet can be a term of affection between intimate friends in the African American community. *Pen-dejo* is a contemptuous term used throughout Latin and South America, yet is a word expressing companionship in Costa Rica.

While it is true that connotation and euphemism can be notoriously misleading, a danger of this view is that one can fall into a relativistic frame of mind stating that, since nothing can be completely known, any discussion on lexis and culture is pointless. We are then left discarding common sense, doubting the obvious, and enduring the mental gymnastics of explanations about lexicon that, while highly creative, are absurd.

A Possible Solution

Let us assume that, considering the inability of the structuralists to validate their views on lexis, dominant cultural views, rather than the words themselves, affect the connotations of lexical meaning. In what way would they be influenced? Our point of departure begins with viewing words and lexical items as *cultural prototypes*. Aitchison (1995) argued that the source of prototypes is often something of high cultural value, and that they

... represent internal theories. People construct mental models for themselves in order to handle their lives and everything in them. These models are an inextricable mixture of acute observation, cultural brainwashing, fragments of memory and a dollop of imagination. They embody a person's assumptions about the world, including naïve beliefs as to how it works, some learned, some invented. (p. 68)

What I am suggesting is that we can extend Aitchison's reasoning to the next logical step: that prototypes are not only for individual mental models, but *also for the culture at large*. A culture's particular world view is expressed through lexical choices, but is not held prisoner to the lexis used. We will see later as we look at metaphors, idioms, and proverbial phrases that lexical items represent the theories, values, and observations of the

dominant culture, but not in any concrete, empirical way that would be satisfying to those seeking hard data. Aitchison (1995, p. 69) noted that individual prototypical mental models can be fixed or temporary, the temporary ones being the subject of sudden, complex, and often illogical innovations. In the same way, lexis and its connotation can be fixed or temporary for a society, while still maintaining an abstract representation of what the society believes *should be*, but not necessarily is, reality.

If the prototype theory can be extended from the individual to the level of culture, this would help to explain subcultural variations in lexical connotation. As Fig. 2 shows, the dominant culture's lexical understanding would be the focal point, while subcultural connotations and antilanguages would polysemically cluster around the central meaning. The dominant culture's connotation in this way would remain the foundation for the subculture and also for the individual's use of a lexical item.

Shadows of a Culture

Metaphorically speaking, words are like the shadows of a society. They are not the society in themselves, but reveal the cognitive shape of that culture in an abstract sort of way. Shadows are best studied and defined from afar. When lexical items are studied dispassionately and are discon-

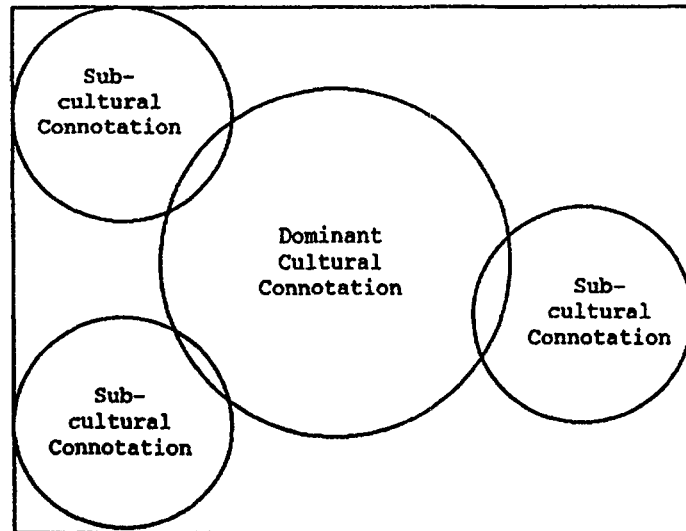


Fig. 2. Subcultural dependance on dominant cultural lexical meaning.

nected from the actual culture, one can say something of the form of a culture's shifting mental models. This can be done, however, only in a very general sort of way. The closer one approaches a shadow, the more its edges blur until eventually one is enveloped in the shadow and no longer an observer. Similarly, the more one attempts to detail and define societal views encoded in lexical items, the more inexplicable meaning and connotation become. Contradictions arise and confusion sets in. Prototypes, like the cultures they represent, are enigmatic. As Aitchison (1995) stated, "The more closely prototypes are examined, the more elusive they seem to be" (p. 64).

Survey of Spanish and Japanese

It seems, then, that we can learn something of the societal views encoded in a word, but only in a very rough sense. We will now go on to look at some examples from Japanese and Spanish to see if any general societal prototypes can be lifted from the lexical items. One excellent source for exploring cultural attitudes is through the metaphor of idioms and proverbs. Although these are made up of multiword units, McCarthy (1994) gave many instances of how multiword units, idioms, binomials/trinomials ("... pairs and trios of words which display fixed membership and sequence" [p. 8]) and metaphors should be treated as single lexical items.

Looking at Spanish idioms, we can see a culture that has been deeply influenced by Christianity. *Hablar en cristiano* (literally: *to speak Christian*) means "to talk plain Spanish." *En un decir "Jesús"* (*before you can say "Jesus"*) means "in an instant." *Mas falso que Judas* (*falsest than Judas*) is a common saying about people who are two-faced. We can find a strong fatalistic vein in their common idiomatic references to God: *a la buena de Dios* (literally: *by God's goodness*) means "something done just any old way," which will fall as it will. *Como Dios manda*, (literally: *as God commands*) means "to do something the way it is supposed to be done." *Estar de Dios* (literally: *to be of God*) means "to be fated," "to be meant to be." *Sabe Dios* (*God knows*) is a very common idiom meaning that there is no telling what will happen. The North American idiom, "To let the fox in the chicken coop" finds its humorous counterpart in these predominantly Roman Catholic cultures: *Dejar la iglesia en las manos de Lutero*—*to leave the church in Luther's hands!*

Japanese idioms and proverbs are also illuminating. There is the classic expression: *Deru kugi wa utareru* (*the nail which sticks up will be hammered*), which is often told to middle school students as a warning not to become too individualistic or outstanding in any way so as to draw attention to oneself and away from the group. *Chinmoku wa kin* (*silence is gold*) values suppression of self-expression over speaking one's mind. *Nō aru taka*

wa tsume o kakusu (skillful hawks hide their talons) is often said about people who modestly hide a great talent. Concepts such as *mono no aware* (the Japanese view of the transience and melancholy beauty in all life which is here today and gone tomorrow) are expressed in sayings such as *rakka eda ni kaerazu, hakyō futatabi terasazu*, meaning *fallen blossoms do not return to branches; a broken mirror does not reflect again*. Some have universal appeal, like *Naku ko to jitō ni wa katenu*, or *you can't win with crying children and bureaucrats*. Such metaphorical expressions are telling a very common fatalistic strain often heard in Japanese conversation: Life is often unfair, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Again, it must be emphasized that such lexical items are only prototypes of what a culture feels should be valued. While the connotations of these prototypes are definitely encoded in the lexis, we must remember that many agnostic Spaniards use idioms replete with Christian meaning with no thought as to the significance of what they are saying. Nails stick up in Japan (though usually in groups), some hawks show their claws, and, very rarely, someone gets their way with a bureaucrat!

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that lexis and culture are not bound and determined, and speakers are much freer than they often realize in terms of lexical expression. Lexis grows as the culture grows, not the other way around. Cultural views are encoded into lexis but are not encoded by lexis. These societal values can be identified only in a vague, prototypical way. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is just that—a hypothesis. It is a relic of the past when the world was still a big place and our understanding of psycholinguistics was much less defined. As inert as a preserved specimen in a jar, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has contributed to a stagnation in psycholinguistic thinking. As we approach the 21st century, we need to be open to new psycholinguistic paradigms, such as those found in the model of cultural prototypes. Those who do so will not only remain on the cutting edge for years to come, but will also participate in the vital process of future psycholinguistic innovation.

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