

Each of the theories presented so far highlights a particular aspect of linguistic systems. In this sense, each theory contributes to our understanding of culture as a complex phenomenon and points toward a different set of properties that can be studied. Each theory implies a different research agenda, but all of them together form a broad mandate for the study of culture and for the analysis of language as a conceptual and social tool that is both a product and an instrument of culture. The chapters to follow will examine in more detail some of the methodological and theoretical foundations of such a research agenda.

### 3 Linguistic diversity

Linguists have always been concerned with linguistic diversity. But, depending on the theoretical approach and research interest of the scholars involved, the goals and methods for looking at differences across languages have varied considerably. Generative grammarians like Noam Chomsky and his students have devoted their professional lives to explaining phonological, morphological, and syntactic differences across languages by means of a few general principles. They developed a theory of Universal Grammar, a set of rules and conditions on rules that should allow us to describe the grammar of any language and could hence be used to hypothesize the innate interpretive strategies that allow children to acquire any human language. In their endeavor to describe and account for differences between languages, formal grammarians have tended to ignore differences within the same language. Their research strategy has been to assume homogeneity rather than diversity within the same speech community. Sociolinguists have criticized this strategy and chosen the opposite route. They have started from the empirical observation that there is a considerable amount of differentiation within any given speech community in terms of how people pronounce words, construct and interpret utterances, and produce more complex discourse units across social contexts. On the basis of this observation, sociolinguists have devised methodologies for the systematic study of linguistic variation and its relation to contextual factors (including social class, gender, age, setting, style). This research dealt with a number of issues usually ignored by formal grammarians, like, for instance, the challenging goal of defining the boundaries of speech communities and the type of knowledge that is necessary for being a competent member of any such community. Linguistic anthropologists have been concerned with similar issues, but they have also faced the complex question of the relation between language and thought or what has been known as the "linguistic relativity hypothesis." More recently, language diversity has been recast as one of the dimensions of what has been called "language ideology." This chapter will introduce linguistic diversity by drawing from these various traditions.

### 3.1 Language in culture: the Boasian tradition

To understand how the issue of linguistic diversity arose in North American scholarship, we must go back to when linguistic anthropology was conceived as part of the "four fields approach" in anthropology. Starting with the founding of the American Ethnological Society in 1842 and the American Anthropological Association in (1902) which was launched by members of Section H of the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS), anthropology in the United States was conceptualized and in many respects practiced as a holistic discipline that studied the physical (now "biological"), linguistic (first referred to as "philological"), cultural, and archaeological records of human populations. In contrast to Europe, where **ethnologists** had their own departments, separate from archaeologists, paleontographers, and philologists (the earlier incarnation of today's "linguists"), in the United States anthropology students were required to have some knowledge of all four fields, in addition to an in-depth knowledge of their own field of specialization. The scholar who more than anyone else represented in theory and practice this holistic view of anthropology was Franz Boas.

#### 3.1.1 Franz Boas and the use of native languages

One of the founders of American anthropology, the German-born Boas (1858–1942) was attracted to the study of language by his experience among the Eskimos and the Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest Coast.<sup>1</sup> He argued that one could not really understand another culture without having direct access to its language. Such a need for linguistic study was not only a practical one, but, he insisted, a theoretical one, due to the intimate connection between culture and language:

In all of the subjects mentioned heretofore, a knowledge of Indian languages serves as an important adjunct to a full understanding of the customs and beliefs of the people we are studying. But in all these cases the service which language lends us is first of all a practical one – a means to a clearer understanding of ethnological phenomena which in themselves have nothing to do with linguistic problems ... It seems, however, that a theoretical study of Indian languages is not less important than a practical knowledge of them; that the purely linguistic inquiry is part and parcel of a

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of Boas's role in the development of the field of anthropology in general and in the US in particular, see Hatch (1973: 37–73), Langness (1987); on Boas's views on language, see Hymes (1964b), Lucy (1992a), Stocking (1974).

thorough investigation of the psychology of the peoples of the world. If ethnology is understood as the science dealing with the mental phenomena of the life of the peoples of the world, human language, one of the most important manifestations of mental life, would seem to belong naturally to the field of work of ethnology.

([1911]n.d.: 52)

Boas's interest in American Indian languages was transmitted to his students, some of whom, like Edward Sapir, went on to make important contributions not only to American Indian linguistics but to the study of language in general (see below). More importantly, however, Boas's view of the necessity of language for human thought and hence for human culture became a basic thesis of American cultural anthropology in the first half of this century, as shown in this passage by another of his students, A.L. Kroeber ([1923]1963: 102):

In short, culture can probably function only on the basis of abstractions, and these in turn seem to be possible only through speech, or through a secondary substitute for spoken language such as writing, numeration, mathematical and chemical notation, and the like. Culture, then, began when speech was present; and from then on, the enrichment of either meant the further development of the other.

Methodologically, this view of the role of language in culture meant that linguistic systems could be studied as guides to cultural systems. In Boas's case, his fascination with language led to the publication of numerous volumes of ethnography almost exclusively based on recorded "texts," that is, transcriptions of what (usually bilingual) key informants would recall about past traditions, including ceremonies, art, etc. These transcriptions were sometimes done by Boas himself, at other times directly by his key informant (see Sanjek 1990c: 107; Stocking 1974). Many, for example, were done by his Kwakiutl collaborator George Hunt who learned Boas's transcription techniques (Boas 1966: 4–5; Sanjek 1990b: 199).

Transcribing native descriptions of ceremonies and other aspects of traditional culture was part and parcel of the "salvaging anthropology" practiced by Boas and had obvious implications. Like other anthropologists of his time, Boas was concerned with the rapid disappearance or dramatic alteration of Native American languages and cultures and wanted to preserve them by documenting them while there were still people who spoke the languages fluently and could describe their cultural tradition. A positive side of this process was the

realization that many of the ideas about "primitive languages" found in the literature were empirically unsound, including the claim that in American Indian languages sounds were not pronounced as accurately as in European languages. This view, Boas showed, was based on the limitations of the observers who had difficulties recognizing sounds that were uncommon in European languages (Boas 1911). A less positive consequence was that, by concentrating on narratives about the past, the method used by Boas created an **ethnographic present** that was empirically questionable (Fabian 1983). Ethnographers concentrated on informants' recollections of past customs and ignored a century or more of European contact, even when such contact had quite striking consequences in the life of the people they were studying. Furthermore, the texts were often produced by one "key informant" and were not checked against other sources or versions (see chapter 5 for a discussion of transcription).

Despite these limitations, however, Boas's methods became a landmark of what became linguistic anthropology. He insisted on the publication of verbatim native accounts of ceremonies and other aspects of their cultural heritage. Publications of the texts used by the ethnographers in formulating their accounts should allow readers to have access to some of the sources from which the ethnographies were based. This is the same logic that is used today in providing detailed transcription of verbal interaction (see chapters 5 and 8). Readers can see with their own eyes what the discussion is based on. Although not all information can be shown on a transcript, there is in it much more than can be found in descriptions that offer no textual sources. When participant-observation (see chapter 4) was introduced and accepted as a standard method in ethnography, it replaced the so-called "armchair anthropology." Direct experience of cultural practices – "being there" (Geertz 1988) – became the source of most descriptions and the collection. At the same time, however, the practice of publishing texts with the informants' accounts was largely abandoned. Paradoxically, although participant-observation was meant to be a more empirical method for collecting information on a community's customs, once ethnographers started to give their own descriptions of the social life of the people they studied, the empirical validation of fieldwork experience suffered a considerable blow: readers no longer had access to the textual sources of such descriptions (Tedlock 1983).

While transcribing native texts and translating them, Boas became fascinated by the different ways in which different languages classify the world and the human experience. He used this observation as another argument in favor of **cultural relativism** – the view that each culture should be understood in its own terms rather than as part of an intellectually or morally scaled master

plan, in which the Europeans or those of European descent tended to be at the top.<sup>2</sup>

Boas used his knowledge of American Indian languages to show that the way languages classify the world is arbitrary. Each language has its own way of building up a vocabulary that divides up the world and establishes categories of experience. What in English might be represented by different words (water, lake, river, brook, rain, etc.), in another language might be expressed by the same word or by derivations from the same term (Boas 1911/n.d. 19). It is in this context that he mentioned what is now the famous example of the different words for "snow" in Eskimo:

It seems important ... to emphasize the fact that the groups of ideas expressed by specific phonetic groups [read "words" or "morphemes"] show very material differences in different languages, and do not conform by any means to the same principles of classification. To take again the example of English, we find that the idea of WATER is expressed in a great variety of forms: one term serves to express water as a LIQUID; another one, water in the form of a large expanse (LAKE); other, water as running in a large body or in a small body (RIVER and BROOK); still other terms express water in the form of RAIN, DEW, WAVE, and FOAM. It is perfectly conceivable that this variety of ideas, each of which is expressed by a single independent term in English, might be expressed in other languages by derivation from the same term.

Another example of the same kind, the words for SNOW in Eskimo, may be given. Here we find one word, *aput*, expressing SNOW ON THE GROUND; another one, *qana*, FALLING SNOW; a third one, *piqsirpoq*, DRIFTING SNOW; and a fourth one, *qimuqsug*, A SNOWDRIFT.

As shown by Laura Martin (1986), the "words for snow in Eskimo" became a standard reference in the popular and scientific discussions of the relationship among language, culture, and thought, with the number of words escalating from

<sup>2</sup> It is important to understand Boas's cultural relativism in the context of the types of evolutionary models of societies common at the time. It is also important to remember that culture for him was a mental or psychological concept. Hence, he was especially a relativist with respect to intellectual achievement (he criticized the view that there were living people who were less intelligent than others) and moral standards (he ridiculed the use of the term "savages" when talking about people, like the American Indian tribes he studied, who in many respects, like, for example, hospitality, seemed to Boas much more gracious than "civilized" Europeans).

words  
for  
snow -  
Eskimo.

five to the hundreds.<sup>3</sup> Whereas there would be nothing special about the fact that a language has more words than another for a particular area of experience, Boas was aiming at the more general point that there might be a cultural motivation for the development of lexical distinctions. This intuition was later modified by Sapir and by Whorf who argued that if a language encodes a particular experience of the world, its use might predispose its speakers to see the world according to the experience encoded in it. Before examining some of the implications of this intuition, I need to introduce some of Sapir's and Whorf's ideas which are relevant to this discussion.

### 3.1.2 Sapir and the search for languages' internal logic

Edward Sapir (1884–1939), probably the most famous scholar in the history of linguistic anthropology, continued and expanded Boas's interest in languages by paying more attention to linguistic structures and emphasizing the ways in which each language is a complete and perfect system that must be understood in its own terms (Darnell 1990). He saw language as a prerequisite to the development of culture and continued in the Boasian tradition of harsh criticism of any attempt to classify certain languages as "primitive" or more "limited" than others.<sup>4</sup>

No tribe has ever been found which is without language and all statements to the contrary may be dismissed as mere folklore ... language is an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people. Of all aspects of culture it is a fair guess that language was the first to receive a highly developed form and that its essential perfection is a prerequisite to the development of culture as a whole.

(Sapir 1933: 155)

Sapir's fascination with the internal logic of each linguistic system is well illustrated by his enthusiasm for the notion of phoneme, an abstract unit of linguistic analysis to which we will return in later chapters. Sapir was well aware of the potential psychological consequences of the idea that languages have their own internal logic. What came to be later known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" or the "linguistic relativity hypothesis" is partly an outcome of his views on the socializing and uniformizing force of human languages. At the same time, Sapir

<sup>3</sup> Martin shows that all the "Eskimo" words mentioned by Boas are actually derived from two roots – she also points out that there is no "Eskimo" language, but a number of related language varieties belonging to either the Yupik or Inuit-Inupiaq branches (see Woodbury 1984). This means that "Eskimo" has as much differentiation as English, which distinguishes between snow and flake (Martin 1986: 422f).

<sup>4</sup> For a more recent criticism of the work on "primitive" languages, see Wierzbicka (1994).

was also an advocate of the importance of individuality in culture. He saw culture as the symbolic interplay between individuals and society. He used to say that anthropologists "believe in a world of discrete individuals but a oneness and continuity of culture" (Sapir 1993: 141). His distinction between "genuine" and "spurious" cultures (Sapir 1924) is a theoretical warning against the dangers of a society – such as the industrialized western society in which Sapir lived – that does not properly recognize the needs of its individual members. A genuine culture is one in which there is harmony between societal and individual needs – as in the traditional American Indian societies Sapir came into contact with during his fieldwork. A spurious culture instead is one in which the individual is forced into frustrating and spiritually meaningless tasks in the name of higher efficiency. In a genuine culture, "[t]he major activities of the individual must directly satisfy his own creative and emotional impulses, must always be something more than means to an end" (1924: 316). Sapir's interest in poetry and aesthetic functions of language was part of his efforts to make sense of the struggle of individuals against what he saw as the constraints (or "tyranny") of the symbolic system (e.g. language) they must use to express themselves. As pointed out by Jane Hill (1988b), Sapir's position on how tight each linguistic system is changed over time. We must thus be careful to assign to Sapir either a deterministic stance on the language-thought relation (i.e. "language determines thought") or a pre-structuralist view of language as a closed system (i.e. "we cannot explain language structure through non-linguistic factors"). For instance, it is questionable whether he really believed that any "language is an essentially perfect means of expression and communication" (see quote above). After all, it is in his book *Language* that he makes the famous statement: "Unfortunately, or luckily, no language is tyrannically consistent. All grammars leak" (Sapir 1921: 38). In the next chapters, we will occasionally return to Sapir's work to examine or draw from his contributions to specific areas of study within linguistic anthropology.

### 3.1.3 Benjamin Lee Whorf, worldviews, and cryptotypes

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) was a chemical engineer who managed a double career as a successful insurance agent and as a linguist. His interest in languages arose out of his concern, in his adult life, for the potential and actual conflict between religion and science. But even as a boy, according to his biographer John B. Carroll (1956: 6), Whorf had been an avid reader of Middle America prehistory and Maya archaeology. Whorf later studied Hebrew in order to read the Old Testament and became fascinated by a book by an early nineteenth-century French dramatist, philologist, and mystic, Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, entitled *La langue hébraïque restituée*. Fabre d'Olivet had proposed a theory of interpretation in which each letter of the Hebrew alphabet was associated with a specific

meaning. These meanings could be used as keys to what the author saw as the hidden meanings of the book of Genesis. Such an approach, on more scientifically solid but not less original grounds, was later extended by Whorf to the study of grammar. As he became motivated to read more widely on languages and linguistics, Whorf approached the subject of American Indian languages. In a few years, he was presenting papers at the International Congress of Americanists and publishing papers in professional journals. His meeting with Sapir in 1928 and his consequent studies at Yale put him in contact with new intellectual resources and sharpened his understanding of grammatical theory and analysis.

Whorf's most famous contribution to linguistic theory is his focus on the relationship between language and worldview. He believed that the structure of any language contains a theory of the structure of the universe, which he at times called "metaphysics." Such a structure becomes particularly evident when one examines languages and cultures that are quite different from one's own:

I find it gratuitous to assume that a Hopi who knows only the Hopi language and the cultural ideas of his own society has the same notions, often supposed to be intuitions, of time and space that we have, and that are generally assumed to be universal. In particular, he has no general notion or intuition of TIME as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate, out of a future, through a present, into a past; or, in which, to reverse the picture, the observer is being carried in the stream of duration continuously away from a past and into a future.

(Whorf 1956a: 57)

Thus, the Hopi language and culture conceals a METAPHYSICS, such as our so-called naïve view of space and time does, or as the relativity theory does; yet it is a different metaphysics from either.

(Whorf 1956a: 58)

For Whorf, the goal of linguistic analysis is to describe such worldviews. Since they cannot be inferred from direct questioning of informants, who are often not aware of their choices and habits, they must be studied on the basis of systematic observations of grammatical patterns and, in particular, on the basis of comparison between languages that are radically different, such as, for instance, English (or other European languages) and Hopi (or other American Indian languages). The systematic study of patterns of language – Whorf also used the term "configurations" – can reveal not only explicit or overt categories (also called phenotypes) but also implicit or covert categories (also called cryptotypes). In English,

for instance, the plural of nouns is an overt category because it is either marked by the suffix *-s* or by other features of the phrase or sentence they occur with (e.g. form of the verb, the use of the article). A noun like *fish* for instance does not inflect in the plural (remains *fish*), but its number may be reflected in the shape of the verb (*the fish are in the tank*) or in the presence or absence of the article (*fish appeared*). Intransitive verbs in English are instead a covert category because they do not have a particular suffix or marker that distinguishes them from other types of verbs. "The classification of the word is not apparent until there is a question of using it or referring to it in one of these special types of sentence, and then we find that this word belongs to a class requiring some sort of distinctive treatment, which may even be [a] negative treatment," (1956f: 89) that is, the fact that certain rules cannot apply. Only by applying certain kinds of rules do we realize that certain English verbs like *go, lie, sit, rise, gleam, sleep, arrive, appear, rejoice* behave alike and differently from other verbs (e.g. from transitive verbs like *cook, push, see, seat, take, show*). For instance, we cannot use intransitive verbs in passive sentences. We do not say *it was being gone* or *it was arrived*.

The recognition of covert categories is an important intuition for a number of reasons. (First) it shows that languages make distinctions not only in terms of what words look like or can do, but also in terms of what they do not or cannot do – this insight was further developed by Noam Chomsky in his use of unacceptable sentences in linguistic argumentation (see below). The notion of covert category or cryptotype can also be seen as a precursor of the notion of deep structure (Chomsky 1965) – a level of linguistic categorization that is not directly visible or audible but nevertheless necessary to explain why a language behaves in a certain way (see chapter 6). (Second) the belief in cryptotypes meant that languages that may appear rather "simple" at the superficial level (e.g. languages that have no overt gender or number distinctions) might actually be quite complex at a more abstract, covert level (Whorf 1956b: 83). This was one of the ways in which Whorf linked his research to his moral and political views. He was committed to reducing the European sense of superiority and with promoting a "brotherhood of thought" (Carroll 1956: 27). A careful linguistic analysis allows us to appreciate the complexities of linguistic systems that at a superficial level might seem simple. (Finally, the systematic identification of overt or covert patterns in a given language makes it possible to form empirically verifiable hypotheses about the limits of awareness that native speakers can have about their own use of language, a theme more recently explored by Silverstein (1981), Lucy (1992a) and others (Lucy 1993) (see section 6.8).

The relationship between language and worldview, which is such a central part of Whorf's program, has continued to be an important part of linguistic anthropology (Hill 1988a; Koerner 1992). But our notions of language and

worldview have changed and so have our ideas about their relationship (Gumperz and Levinson 1991, 1996; Hill and Mannheim 1992). This has meant not only that the range of phenomena investigated under the rubric "linguistic relativity" has been modified and partly expanded, but also that we can no longer take for granted some of the assumptions on which Sapir's and Whorf's work were based. The notion of worldview used by Whorf (as well as by Sapir and Boas) is tied to a particular theory of culture, namely, culture as knowledge (see section 2.2). It is also tied to a particular theory of language, one that predates the work of sociolinguists and other researchers devoted to the empirical study of variation within communities as well as within individuals. Before introducing some of these more recent contributions, we need to review some of the implications of the classic view of linguistic relativity.

### 3.2 Linguistic relativity

One of the strongest statements of the position that the way in which we think about the world is influenced by the language we use to talk about it is found in Sapir's 1929 article "The status of linguistics as a science" where he states that humans are actually at the mercy of the particular language they speak:

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems in communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir [1929] 1949b: 162)

This position was echoed a decade later by Whorf, who framed it as the "linguistic relativity principle," by which he meant "that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by the grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of extremely similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world" (Whorf 1956c: 221). As mentioned earlier, for Whorf, the grammatical structure of any language contains a theory of the structure of the universe or "metaphysics." He articulated this view in a number of examples on how different languages classify space, time, and matter. Perhaps the most famous English example he ever gave is the use of the word *empty* referring to drums that used to contain gasoline. In this case, he argued, although the physical, non-linguistic situation is dangerous ("empty" drums contain explosive vapor) speakers take it to

mean "innocuous" because they associate the word *empty* with the meaning "null and void" and hence "negative and inert" (1956d: 135). The relationship among these different meanings and levels of interpretations is well captured in figure 3.1.

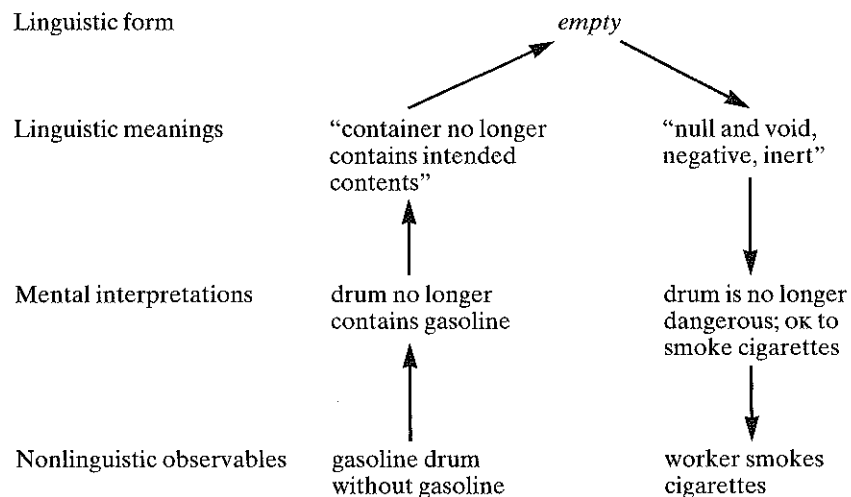


Figure 3.1 Diagram of one of Whorf's fire-causing examples

(Lucy 1992a: 50)

These ideas generated a considerable debate within anthropology and psychology, including a fair number of empirical studies aimed at either confirming or disproving the linguistic relativity hypothesis (Hill and Mannheim 1992; Koerner 1992; Lucy 1992a). Whorf's ideas remain attractive even after studies that show that some of his specific claims about the Hopi language are empirically questionable or simply inadequate. Malotki (1983), for example, showed that Hopi verbs do have tense inflection (present, past, future) (Whorf 1956d: 144) and that the Hopi language does use spatial metaphor for talking about time.

Despite some of the empirical problems encountered by Whorf's linguistic analyses, the issue of whether or not, or to what extent, language influences thought is likely to remain an important topic within linguistic anthropology, especially as a new generation of scholars find themselves attracted by new ways of testing Whorf's intuitions about how "grammatical categories, to the extent that they are obligatory and habitual, and relatively inaccessible to the average speaker's consciousness, will form a privileged location for transmitting and reproducing cultural and social categories" (Hill and Mannheim 1992: 387). This is an attractive idea for many reasons, including the fact that it deals

with epistemological themes that are quite central to the study of cultural practices.

### 3.2.1 *Language as objectification of the world: from von Humboldt to Cassirer*

Sapir and Whorf were not the first ones to articulate the view that language might influence thinking. A century earlier, the German diplomat and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) wrote the treatise *Linguistic variability and intellectual development*, published posthumously by his brother Alexander, which presents the first systematic statement on language as worldview (German *Weltanschauung*). This book, although not always consistent in its argumentation, does anticipate the basic formulation of linguistic relativity, as shown in the following statement:

Each tongue draws a circle about the people to whom it belongs, and it is possible to leave this circle only by simultaneously entering that of another people. Learning a foreign language ought hence to be the conquest of a new standpoint in the previously prevailing cosmic attitude of the individual. In fact, it is so to a certain extent, inasmuch as every language contains the entire fabric of concepts and the conceptual approach of a portion of humanity. But this achievement is not complete, because one always carries over into a foreign tongue to a greater or lesser degree one's own cosmic viewpoint – indeed one's personal linguistic pattern.

(von Humboldt [1836] 1971: 39–40)

By being handed down, then, language is a powerful instrument that allows us to make sense of the world – it provides categories of thought – but, at the same time, because of this property – constrains our possibilities, limits how far or how close we can see. Embedded in these existential themes, there lie several important assumptions about the nature of language and the relationship between language and the world.

(First) the conceptualization of language as an objectification of nature, and hence the evolutionary step toward the intellectual shaping of what is considered as an otherwise unformed, chaotic matter, is at the basis of the philosophical assumptions that guide a linguist like Ferdinand de Saussure and a philosopher like Ernst Cassirer. The roots of these assumptions can be found in Kant's view of the human intellect as a powerful device that allows people to make sense of an otherwise unordered or incomprehensible universe. We can interpret experience thanks to a priori principles such as time and space – we learn about the world from perceiving objects in our environment, but we can experience them

only through the a priori concepts of time and space. When we examine the neo-Kantian perspective represented by Cassirer's philosophical work on language, we find something that Humboldt had in fact already done, namely, the replacement of Kant's cognitive categories (the transcendental knowledge that allows humans to make sense of experience) with linguistic categories.

Like cognition, language does not merely “copy” a given object; it rather embodies a spiritual attitude which is always a crucial factor in our perception of the objective. (Cassirer 1955: 158)

This substitution of cognitive categories with linguistic categories, however, comes with a price. Whereas the categories of human thinking can be at least in principle conceived as shared and hence universal, the categories of human languages immediately present themselves as highly specific, as shown by the inherent difficulties of translating from one language into another and by the attempts to match linguistic patterns across languages. For instance, the “cases” or inflections of nouns in Latin do not easily match the surface distinctions made in languages with very little nominal morphology, like English or Chinese. Similarly, the gender distinctions found in European languages (masculine, feminine, and, sometimes, neuter) are too crude for the distinctions made by Bantu languages, which can have more than a dozen of gender (or “noun class”) distinctions (cf. Welmers 1973: ch. 6). If we read these problems as evidence of the fact that different languages classify reality in different ways, we are faced with the question of freedom of expression. In other words, if a language gives its speakers a template for thinking about the world, is it possible for speakers to free themselves of such a template and look at the world in fresh, new, and language-independent ways? For Cassirer, like for Kant before him, humanity solves this problem partly through art, which allows an individual to break the constraints of tradition, linguistic conventions included. The true artist, the genius for Kant, is someone who cannot be taught and has his or her own way of representing the world. This uniqueness is a partial freedom from the constraints of society as they exist in language and other forms of representation.

Language – which is understood by Cassirer as an instrument for describing reality<sup>5</sup> – is hence a guide to the world but is not the only one. Whereas individual intuitions can be represented by art (Cassirer [1942] 1979: 186), the group's intuitions can be represented by myth, which sees nature *physiognomically*, that is, in terms of a fluctuating experience, like a human face that changes from

<sup>5</sup> This is what linguists and philosophers of language refer to as the “denotational function” or property of linguistic expressions (see 6.1).