



Think 53: Food Talks

Dan Jurafsky & Yoshiko Matsumoto

Language and Culture

Thursday, April 6, 2017



Today's quick question:

According to Suzuki, which proverb in English conveys different meanings in the British and American interpretations?




Outline for today

1. Language and culture

Looking at the world from different perspectives

2. Linguistic relativity

Empirical studies and an opposing view



Suzuki, Takao. *Words in Context* “Language and Culture”

*The original book was written for Japanese readers in 1973.

1. Have you had any experience that you could add to the examples given by Suzuki?

2. Do you think your perception of the world is affected by the language(s) you speak?

- Examples?



Takao Suzuki (1926 -)

- Linguist (sociology of language) and essayist
- Professor emeritus at Keio University, Tokyo, Japan.
- Visiting Professor at universities in U.S.A., Canada, UK, Australia, Russia, and France.

The Structure of Cuisine Synchronic v. diachronic

When do you eat rice?!



A Diachronic Meal – Italian cuisine

aperitivo – antipasto – **primo** – secondo – (controno) – insalata –
formaggi e frutta – dolce – caffè – digestivo



Primo (risotto, pasta or soup)



Secondo (meat)



Insalata

A Synchronic Meal – The Japanese Example



Myoshinji (妙心寺)



Kaiseki - A Japanese Diachronic Meal

Sakizuke (先附): [an appetizer similar to the French amuse-bouche.](#)

Hassun (八寸) [the second course. Typically one kind of sushi and several smaller side dishes.](#)

Mukōzuke (向付): [a sliced dish of seasonal sashimi.](#)

Takiawase (煮合): [vegetables served with meat, fish or tofu; the ingredients are simmered separately.](#)

Futamono (蓋物): [a "lidded dish"; typically a soup.](#)

Yakimono (焼物): [flame-grilled food \(esp. fish\)](#)

Su-zakana (酢肴) [a small dish used to cleanse the palate, vegetables in vinegar; vinegared appetizer.](#)

Hiyashi-bachi (冷し鉢): [served only in summer; chilled, lightly cooked vegetables.](#)

Naka-choko (中猪口): [another palate-cleanser; may be a light, acidic soup.](#)

Shiizakana (強肴): [a substantial dish, such as a hot pot.](#)

Gohan (御飯): [a rice dish made with seasonal ingredients.](#) ←

Kō no mono (香の物): [seasonal pickled vegetables.](#)

Tome-wan (止椀): [a miso-based or vegetable soup served with rice.](#)

Mizumono (水物): [a seasonal dessert; may be fruit, confection.](#)

Kaiseki – A Japanese Diachronic Meal



Sakizuke - appetizer



Wanmono – a soup



Mukōzuke – seasonal sashimi

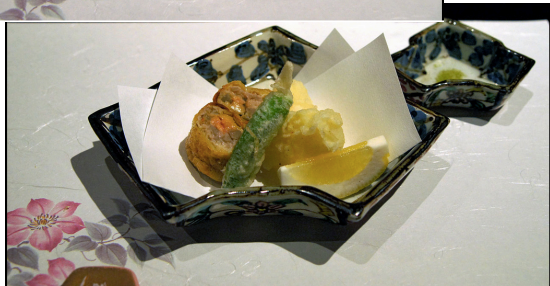
Kaiseki - continued



Hachizakana – fried fish



Shiizakana - a boiled dish



Agemono – a deep-fried dish

Kaiseki - continued



Gohan – rice with pickles
and soup.



Mizumono - fruits (dessert)



Suzuki, Takao. *Words in Context* “Language and Culture”

What was Suzuki’s mistake when rice was served by his (Italian-American) host?

Why did he make that mistake?

Have you had a similar experience of making a cultural misinterpretation?



Suzuki, Takao. *Words in Context*
“Language and Culture”

Culture

“Most people are totally unaware of **the structure of their own culture**. They tend to assume that items existing in their culture are in themselves endowed with absolute, and therefore universal, values” (p. 13)



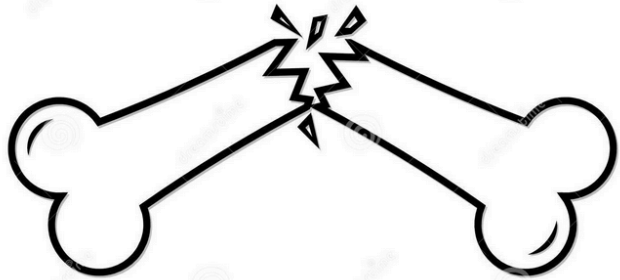
Suzuki, Takao. *Words in Context*
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Language

“Meaning and usage in language have structure and this structure varies from language to language”
(p.15)

“Each language slices the world differently, each at different angles and in different ways.” (p. 24)

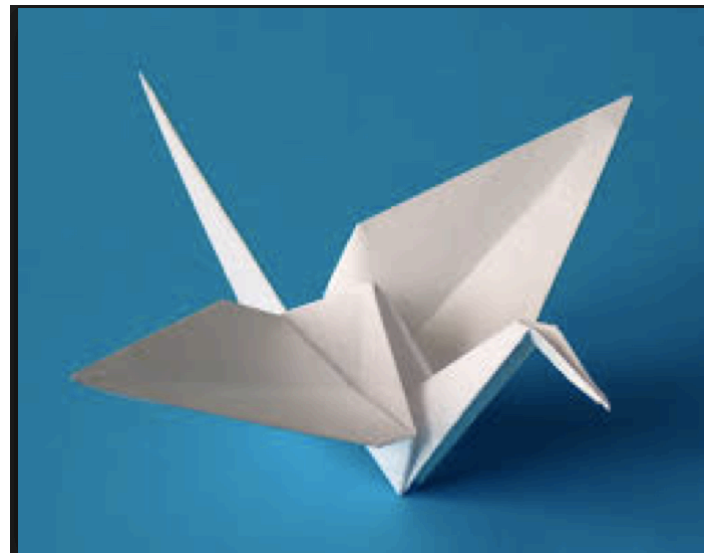
Semantic Field: *Break vs. Oru*



To **break** a bone
Hone o oru

To **fold** a paper
Kami o oru

Folded paper/Origami



break vs. *oru* (折る)

to break – “to separate something into two or more parts by applying a sudden external force other than an edged tool to it.”

***oru* (折る)** – dividing an object into two [or multiple] sections by the application of external force, without necessarily requiring that the sections actually be separate from each other.

(See Suzuki, p. 21)

Japanese likes to drink
drink vs. nomu



To **drink** coffee
Kōhī o nomu



To **eat** soup
Sūpū o nomu

Japanese likes to drink



To **take** medicine
*Kusuri o **nomu***

Nomu - “introducing a substance into one’s body
without chewing it.” (Suzuki, p. 20)

What is water?

Linguistic relativism

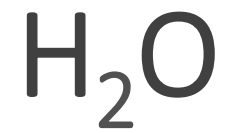
(Suzuki pp.35-37)



Hot water/ *yu*

Cold water/ *mizu*





	H_2O
Malay	ayër
English	Ice water
Japanese	Kōri 'ice' mizu 'cold water' yu 'hot water'

Suzuki (1978:37)

Lukewarm liquids



Lukewarm coffee

Nurui kōhī


(lower temperature than desired)

Lukewarm beer

Namanurui bīru

(higher temperature than desired)





Do you think your perception of the world is affected by the language(s) you speak?

- Examples?

Does Our Language Shape the Way We Think?

Preview of **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis** (next week)

Strong version: Linguistic Determinism

Weak version: Linguistic Relativism

“People who speak different languages do indeed think differently and even flukes of grammar can profoundly affect how we see the world.” (Boroditsky 2009)

Boroditsky, L. 2009. How does our language shape the way we think? In Brockman (Ed.) What's Next? Dispatches on the Future of Science. Vintage Press.



Do speakers of different languages think differently about the world? (Boroditsky 2009)

Believers in cross-linguistic differences:

- “Speaker of different languages must attend to and encode strikingly different aspects of the world just so they can use their language properly.”

VS.

Believers in universality of language and thought:

- “English speakers don't include the same information in their verbs that Russian and Turkish speakers do doesn't mean that English speakers are not paying attention to the same things. ... It's possible that everyone thinks the same way, notices the same things, but just talks differently.”

Examples (Boroditsky 2009)



- Space

- Kuuk Thaayorre (Northern Australia)
- Cardinal directions (NSEW) rather than relational positions (right, left, etc.)

“Move the cup to the north northwest a little bit”

→ “How do we know that it is language itself that creates these differences in thought and not some other aspect of their respective cultures?”

Examples (Boroditsky 2009)

- Colors

- Russian

- Light blue – *goluboy*

- Dark blue – *siniy*

- English

- blue*

- blue*

- Russian speakers are quicker to distinguish two shades of blue than English speakers



Examples (Boroditsky 2009)

Objects (and Grammatical Gender)

- Romance languages: **masculine or feminine**
(cf. Australian Aboriginal languages up to 16 genders, i.e. classes of objects! -- Hunting weapons, canines, shiny things, etc.)

Word association test

Key

- German (masc.) – hard, heavy, jagged, metal, useful
- Spanish (fem.) – golden, intricate, little, lovely shiny, tiny

Bridge

- German (fem.) – beautiful, elegant, fragile, peaceful, pretty, slender
- Spanish (masc.) – big, dangerous, long, strong, sturdy, towering

-> Arbitrary gender assignments have an effect on people's ideas of concrete objects.

Objects (Grammatical Gender and Art)

- Personification of death

German: man

vs.

Russian: woman



Hans Baldung Grien, *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (Death and the Maiden) (1517)



La mort du fossoyeur (Death of the gravedigger) by Carlos Schwabe

But, there is opposition to these findings

John McWhorter (Professor of linguistics and Western Civilization, Columbia University)



“This kind of thing is neat—but **the question is whether the quiet background flutterings of awareness they document can be treated as a worldview.**” (2014a)

“An analysis that covers everything, [...], is that ***what shapes worldviews is culture, with how a people’s grammar works having nothing significant to do with it.***” (2014a)


John McWhorter. (2014a). *Languages Conditioning Worldviews*

Further...

“...Chinese leaves **hypotheticality to context much more than English does**. In the early eighties, psychologist Alfred Bloom, following the Whorfian line, did an experiment suggesting that ***Chinese makes its speakers somewhat less adept at processing hypothetical scenarios than English speakers...***

“What creates a worldview is culture—i.e., a worldview. And no, it won't work to say that culture and language create a worldview together holistically. **Remember, that would mean that Chinese speakers are—holistically—a little dim when it comes to thinking beyond reality.**”

(McWhorter 2014b. 2014 : What Scientific Idea Is Ready For Retirement?)




However, another empirical study argues: (Fausey et al. 2010):

“It is important to note that **remembering individuals involved in accidental events is *not* inherently a good or a bad thing to do.**

...

Research demonstrating differences does not license us to place a value on any given cognitive skill. Such attributions of value necessarily depend on culturally and situationally relevant goals and can only be constructed with respect to cultural and social context.”

(Fausey et al. 2010: 8)



Caitlin M.Fausey, Bria L.Long, Aya Inamori and Lera Boroditsky (2010)

“Constructing Agency: the role of language”

Front. Psychol., 15 October 2010.

Questions:

- Is agency a straightforward and universal feature of human experience?
- Or is the construction of agency (including attention to and memory for people involved in events) guided by patterns in culture?
(Focus on patterns in language)

Fausey et al. (2010):

Study 1

Do English and Japanese speakers describe intentional and accidental events in the same way?

Intentional events:

- **English AND Japanese** speakers used mostly **agentive** language (e.g. *She broke the vase*) [vs. **non-agentive** language, e.g. *The vase broke*]

Accidental events:

- Agentive language used by **English > Japanese**

Fausey et al. (2010)

Study 2

Do these different patterns found in language manifest in cross-cultural differences in attention and memory?

Intentional events:

- **English AND Japanese** speakers remembered the agents equally well

Accidental events:

- Agents were remembered better by
English > Japanese



Fausey et al. (2010)

Study 3

Manipulation of agency in local linguistic environment

English speakers shifted attention with respect to agency, i.e. **English speakers remembered the individuals involved in causal events better when they were primed with unrelated agentive expressions (vs. non-agentive expressions).**

Conclusion of Fausey et al.

- Eye-witness memories for events are influenced by patterns in culture.
- Such cultural differences may be evident in and supported by patterns in the languages we speak.
- Speakers of different languages remember different things about the same events.
- Memories of who did what in events appears to pattern with how events are normally described in one's language community as well as with the patterns in one's local linguistic environment.



The controversies suggest—

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis can be controversial from the point of view of cultural evaluation, too.