

Course syllabus

Course title	Language and Thought
Instructor(s)	Ewelina Wnuk, Ph. D.
Contact details	Institute of English Studies, Dobra 55 ewelina.wnuk@wn.uw.edu.pl
Affiliation	University of Warsaw
Course format	seminar
Number of hours	30 hours
Number of ECTS credits	3 ECTS

Brief course description In this course, we ask the question whether the languages we speak shape the way we think. We review the extraordinary linguistic diversity attested in the world's 7000 languages across different domains—from space, through color, to grammatical gender—linking this variation to human cognitive diversity. In particular, we look at how linguistic variation maps onto variation in how we perceive, remember, and reason about the world.

Full course description With over 7000 distinct languages in the world differing on every level of structure, human language is the most varied communication system in the animal kingdom. Is this variation somehow reflected in how we think? Are there fundamental cognitive differences between people that could be attributed to the languages they speak? In this course, we review existing evidence for linguistic relativity (also known as Whorfian effects), according to which language plays a critical role in shaping thought. We discuss specific case studies of linguistic variation from across a wide range of domains, e.g., space, color, grammatical gender, attempting to link it to variation in different aspects of cognition, including perception, memory, and reasoning.

Learning outcomes At the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe fundamental differences between languages across different semantic and grammatical domains (K_W01, K_K07)
- Describe variation in cognitive tasks in speakers of diverse languages (K_W01, K_K07)
- Critically evaluate the relationship between linguistic and cognitive

diversity and evidence for influence of language on thought (K_W02, K_U01)

- Prepare a written proposal of research investigating the topic of language and thought in a specific domain: survey the existing literature, design research to address the main question, describe details of the selected methodological approach, and discuss the possible results and their potential implications for the identified research question (K_U02, K_U06, K_U08, K_K06)

Learning activities
and teaching methods

Classes will include presentations by the lecturer and discussions in class. Students are expected to read academic papers assigned as obligatory readings and actively participate in discussions. Students will also perform a range of practical in-class activities working towards developing their individual research proposals, e.g., taking part in group discussions, preparing short presentations, and providing constructive feedback to other students.

List of topics/classes
and bibliography

The class will cover language and thought research from a wide range of domains. These will include: speech sounds, sound metaphors, color, smell, spatial frames of reference, time, events, number, false belief understanding, grammatical gender and nominal classification. The last three to four classes will be dedicated to work on various aspects of students' research proposals. Course timetable with scheduling of topics and readings will be provided at the beginning of the course.

Bibliography:

Dolscheid, S., Shayan, S., Majid, A., & Casasanto, D. (2013). The thickness of musical pitch: Psychophysical evidence for linguistic relativity.

Psychological Science, 24(5), 613–621.

Fausey, C. M., & Boroditsky, L. (2011). Who dunnit? Cross-linguistic differences in eye-witness memory. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 18(1), 150–157. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-010-0021-5>

Gordon, P. (2004). Numerical cognition without words: Evidence from Amazonia. *Science*, 306(5695), 496–499.

Kuhl, P. K., Williams, K. A., Lacerda, F., Stevens, K. N., & Lindblom, B. (1992). Linguistic experience alters phonetic perception in infants by 6 months of age. *Science*, 255(5044), 606–608.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1736364>

Majid, A. (2020). Human olfaction at the intersection of language, culture, and biology. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*

Majid, A. (2020). Language and cognition. In *International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1-8.

Majid, A., Bowerman, M., Kita, S., Haun, D. B. M., & Levinson, S. C. (2004).

Can language restructure cognition? The case for space. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8(3), 108–114.

Núñez, R., & Cooperrider, K. (2013). The tangle of space and time in human cognition. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17(5), 220–229.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2013.03.008>

Regier, T., & Kay, P. (2009). Language, thought, and color: Whorf was half right. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13(10), 439–446.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2009.07.001>

Slobin, D. I. (1996). From “thought and language” to “thinking for speaking”. In J. J. Gumperz & S. C. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity* (pp. 70–96). Cambridge University Press.

Phillips, W., & Boroditsky, L. (2003). Can quirks of grammar affect the way you think? Grammatical gender and object concepts. In *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* (Vol. 25, pp. 928–933).

Wolff, P., & Holmes, K. J. (2011). Linguistic relativity. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 2(3), 253–265.

Assessment methods and criteria	<p>- Written exam (70%)</p> <p>- Research proposal, 2500-3000 words (30%).</p> <p>Students are expected to prepare a written research proposal (without actually carrying out the research) following an academic report format. The proposal should consist of the following parts: (1) Introduction, reviewing background literature and articulating the main research question, (2) Method, with details as to how research would be conducted, (3) Conclusion, with possible results and explication of how the proposed research speaks to the central research question, and (4) References, including at least 15 relevant items in the reference list</p>
Attendance rules	Two absences are allowed. Additional absences require a note from a doctor or an exceptional personal circumstance.
Prerequisites	Elementary knowledge of basic linguistic concepts
Academic honesty	Students must respect the principles of academic integrity. Cheating and plagiarism (including copying work from other students, internet or other sources) are serious violations that are punishable and instructors are required to report all cases to the administration.
Remarks	Any remarks you would like students to know