

The most well known discussion of the language - thought relationship is The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which suggests that our thoughts are controlled by our language. It is worth looking at the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis in a little more detail. Here are some comments on it by an Irish linguist, Dr. Tina Hickey:

*Does our language affect how we think about the world? Many people assume that thought is primary and language depends on it. According to this view, thought happens separately from language and is only encoded in words later. The pioneer linguist Edward Sapir claimed that Human beings do not live in the objective world alone but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression of their society.*

*Whorf, Sapir's pupil, went on to develop this argument further. Whorf studied a language of the American Indians called Hopi, which is very far removed from English indeed. He came to believe that speakers of Hopi and English could not possibly perceive the world in the same way. Whorf argued that speakers of different languages will have different conceptions of and experiences of the world. So in its strongest form his argument is that we are intellectually imprisoned by the language we speak.*

*When Whorf looked at Hopi he found that something that had just a brief duration, like lightning or a wave, can only be expressed as a verb, not a noun. In English we treat time as a mass as in 'I have a lot of time' and we carve it up into units we can count. You can't do this in Hopi, as they don't see time as a quantity but as duration. This means they don't have forms like our tenses; instead they talk about duration from the point of view of the speaker.*

*There are many other examples of differences in the way languages code aspects of the world. In Navaho, for example, if I tell you I am passing you a stone I would have to add the endings to the verb to tell you that the stone I am passing is flat and round, something that is not necessary to the English speaker. But Whorf's claim was most appealing when he looked at word differences rather than grammar differences. The language of Lesu Islanders has more than a dozen words for pig. Speakers of Hananoo, a Philippine language, have a large number of words for rice. The most famous of Whorf's example is the fact that Eskimo has different words to describe snow, like snow that is falling, and snow that has fallen but hasn't become compacted, and snow that is thawing, which Whorf contrasted with our single word snow. But wait a minute. English speakers who are particularly interested in snow - skiers for example - do have more terms to describe it: powder, corn, ice, slush, though the rest of us may normally use just snow. This is where some of the criticisms of the Whorfian hypothesis come in. Specialists in particular areas develop words to describe distinctions that non-specialists might not be aware of.*

---