An essay exploring a case of a cultural-linguistic phenomenon discussed in the context of theories of the relationship between social practice and language, or language and cognition.

"So much of our everyday lives, so many of our interactions with other people, so much of our learning, goes on through the medium of language (spoken and written), that it is almost impossible to discuss any aspect of human behaviour or thinking without taking the role of language into account…" (Gross, 1992)

One definition of language given by psycholinguists is that of language being a means of understanding the ways and values of the culture within which a particular social group operates. When used in the contexts of communication, language is seen to express, embody and symbolize the cultural reality of a social group. Expression of cultural reality is evident since words people utter make reference to commonly shared experiences. The embodiment of cultural reality through language can be see through its "verbal and non-verbal aspects" for, quite often, the way in which people express experience (tone of voice, accent, gestures) creates meanings that are understandable to the social group they belong to. For example the popular usage of the word "wicked" to mean "great" in the western world. To students of English in eastern countries, not exposed to western culture, fail to understand the contextual meaning of the word "wicked". Speakers of a particular language identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. Through developmental processes such as child rearing, behavioural upbringing, schooling and professional training, people are shaped and socialised according to the norms of the culture they live in by learning etiquette, expressions of politeness and "correct" social behaviour. Culture influences the written language of a social group also, for example, with rules on different styles of

writing letters depending on whom one is writing to and the nature of the letter (job application, business letter, chatty letter to friend). “Social conventions, norms of social appropriateness, are the product of communities of language users” (Kramsch, 1998).

Edward Sapir and a pupil of his Benjamin Whorf, two pioneering linguists whose theories form the basis for many debates about whether culture and language are or are not related entities influencing the thought processes of the social group. Sapir (1921), an anthropologist and linguist by profession, in his acclaimed book *Language* …… Whorf believed that since individuals are born into a particular culture and a particular language community, this language being a feature of culture, would be the greatest influence on the individuals way of thinking (Gross, 1992). This notion of the interdependence of language and thought has come to be known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that the language a person uses influences the style in which that person thinks and behaves. Whorf’s famous example of gasoline drums exploding with fire due to cigarette butts being thrown into them as a result of there being a sign with the word “EMPTY” on the front. Whorf (1940) noticed that the way in which the word empty was construed determined the reactions people had to it. In the case above, the English sign had been taken to mean “a free space, void of substance in total” however had actually meant “empty of liquid gasoline”. This and consequent studies based on the American-Indian Hopi tribe, led Whorf to conclude that the reason why different languages can lead people to different actions is because language filters their perception and the way they categorise experience. Put simply, speakers of different languages view the world in different ways because of the different meanings they attribute to the same thing.

Does this mean that children raised in different cultures think about things in different ways?

There has been much research emphasising primary caregiver's influence on a child's language acquisition (Snow, 1979) Elinor Ochs (1997) suggested that culture has an effect on language acquisition skills as primary caregivers in differing cultures have various child-rearing practices (inclusive of care-giving responsibilities and views on infants' socialisation abilities). She gives examples of cultures where "the very young, language-learning child is neither expected nor encouraged to initiate topics of talk". These beliefs differ somewhat to American/English (western) culture where the child is encouraged to indulge in "baby talk" and personality traits are allowed to be expressed freely. The essence of Ochs's argument was that when children living within a multicultural society are "socialized inside the household, according to traditional norms and child-rearing practices" and then placed in schools at age (3 to 4) "where typically someone from outside his culture is the socializing agent"; the children may well find themselves having internal conflict on "correct" conversational procedures and often in cases where the educator is not aware of the child's cultural values, the child is seen to have a linguistic problem rather than the more probable conflict in cultural norms for using language (Hymes, 1974).

Relating Ochs's theory to personal experience I examined the case of my younger brother. The language spoken in our house was Gujarati (little background on origin of language) and up until the age of playschool (2½) it was the only language he knew how to speak. His first day at playschool turned into a disaster as he was reduced to tears as teachers/care-assistants were unable to respond to his requests for "paani"

(Romanised form of Gujarati word for water) and later soiled his underwear after failed attempts to alert the teachers that he needed assistance! As can be expected, my parents were given strict instructions to start teaching and conversing with my brother in English at home (both are fully capable) or the playschool would not be able to look after him. From that day, a special effort was made by our parents to converse with both my brother and myself and the responsibility was left to my grandmother (who lived with us) to continue to facilitate out acquisition of Gujarati by conversing solely in that language when speaking with us.

In their haste to focus on his development of the English language, my brother's learning of Gujarati was given less and less emphasis and when (in later years) he began to struggle with grammar and other language semantics in private Gujarati classes, and voiced a desire to give up, my parents readily agreed, citing earlier difficulties at bilingual acquisition. He now finds it difficult to speak Gujarati, can only manage short sentences whereas I can speak fluently. I began to compare myself to my brother and failed to understand how we could have different levels of bilingual competence. I find languages really easy to pick up and merited this skill to learning two languages to the same time, thus developing the understanding that different languages work in different ways. I did not, however, give any thought to the aspect of learning two different languages concurrently whilst being exposed to their relative cultures and the impact that it may have had on my ability. The difference between my brother and myself, therefore, was that during the early stages of life, I acquired two languages and functioned as part of two social identities concurrently whilst my sibling did not. By concentrating on one, he was unable to understand differences of the other. He was being socialised mainly with an English social identity, with

minimal Gujarati cultural influences so as to speed up his acquisition of English. I, in sharp contrast, had to gain understanding of the semantics and pragmatics of the languages and cultures and their respective differences at the same time.

My disillusions of being able to speak "proper" Gujarati were brought to light as I prepared to undertake a GCSE examination in Gujarati. I was fortunate to be taught by a lady born and brought up in the state of Gujarat in India, having lived in England for over a decade. Although there were no communication barriers/breakdowns (I have never visited India), it became evident that not only my Gujarati, but aspects of my culture were not typical of traditional Gujarati Indian culture. Generations of my family as far back as my great grandparents were born in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) and both my parents lived in East African countries until their mid-teens. They were fluent in Swahili (East African local language, spoken and taught), Gujarati (spoken at home), and English (taught at school).Of the three languages learnt their knowledge of and, more so, competence at English was noticeably less evident even though they were taught it at school at the same time as Gujarati and Swahili, because they were not exposed to English culture they were unable to fully grasp the language and still make mistakes after living in the country for nearly 30 years.

This is supported by Michael Agar's (1991) notion that "culture or background knowledge or member's resources are what make the difference between the speechless master of L2 syntax and the L2 speaker who is communicatively competent in a non-native world." When referring to L2 he was referring to the second language learnt by an adult (after the critical learning period that ends at

around ±11 years) in a setting where the learner's first language (L1) is not ordinarily part of everyday life. Agar approached second language acquisition as the study of interpretive frames which provide "a context in terms of which an expression makes sense, knowledge in terms of which the expression can be discussed, and links in terms of which the poetic echoes … can be made explicit ... (offering) a useful systematic function in terms of which the analyst can make explicit a way to understand, a way to interpret, a problematic piece of language." His theory is based on Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, claiming that some connections, when two languages come into contact with one another, are easy to formulate whereas other connections seem almost impossible to make. The parts of language that are difficult to make connections to are "puttied thickly into far-reaching networks of association and many situations of use (and) when one grabs such a piece of language, the putty is so thick and so spread out that it's almost impossible to lift the piece of language out." He referred to these parts of language that make it difficult to connect with in relation to the other language it is brought into contact with as "rich points". The failure of my parents to fully grasp the rich points of the English language is evident in their stunted ability to grasp certain concepts of the English language that are relative to the living within a totally English community.

I had been aware of this for a long time but my Gujarati teacher had also helped to me realise that my Gujarati was stilted with Swahili words. For example, the true Gujarati word for "iron" is "isthree" but I have always known it to be "paasi" (Romanised form of Swahili word for "iron"). It became evident that many words had been incorporated into "our version" of Gujarati (mostly nouns referring to household objects and food stuffs) as a result of my parents having native speaking home-help

when living in East Africa. After consultation with peers with parents also from East Africa (many emigrated from there to England after the Revolution of the Seventies), I realised that a new dialect/edition/deviation of Gujarati had been formed. The ancestors had assimilated and accommodated parts of East African language as well as East African culture as a result of their adaptation to their environment. This idea of assimilation and accommodation is a key factor of Piaget's developmental theory, with the belief that children pick up new experiences and assimilate them into their schemas, leading to accommodation of these new schemas to fit the world they exist in (Piaget, 1970).

The accommodation of Swahili nouns into the spoken language of my parents which was then passed down to me led me to consider the Sapir–Whorf Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis and whether it applied in my case. Did the deviant language I had picked up mean that I thought in a different way to my peers in India? Although I had acquired Gujarati living within a society of people speaking the same language and following the same cultural values, were they necessarily the same as those of a native speaker of Gujarati from the state of Gujarat in India? My Gujarati is also stilted with many English words and Caucasian friends often comment that the language I speak with my mother is semi-understandable as we speak in a "language" mixed with English interspersed with Gujarati, completely natural to ourselves. It does follow that my individual thought pattern follows a similar thread. I often find myself slipping into Gujarati when trying to explain things to people. I have also caught myself "thinking" in Gujarati terminology and even when in midst of a conversation in English regarding a universal topic, sometimes I find it easier to explain what I mean to say in Gujarati. This supports the weak version of the Whorfian hypothesis that

language users tend to sort out and distinguish experiences differently according to the semantic categories provided by their respective codes.

Does this "new" language that most seem to British Asians identify with and understand signify a convergence (over time) to a multicultural language due to cohabitation in a culturally integrated society? The term British Asian itself signifies a need for youth of Indian (now referred to as Asian) cultural heritage and background: born, brought up and currently living in Britain to identify with their British culture also (Valecha, 2003). It is an integration of cultures which is clearly evident in the language. Ask a young, Gujarati speaking "British Asian" the Gujarati word for "television" and most will reply "T.V.", blissfully unaware that "doordarshan" is the correct answer. Such is the case with words like "computer", "email", "DVD" and other 'modern' technological words. The incorporation of such words into the Gujarati spoken in England today is can also be seen in articles published in current events magazines and newspapers such as Garavi Gujarat (printed in Gujarati, written in England for British Gujarati people) and Gujarat Samachar.

"Text language" is a very recent example of culture and language working together and changing each other yet again. A new craze/culture has developed as the result of the use of SMS text messaging initially introduced with the popularisation of mobile phones and assisted by the internet. Due to ever-increasing costs and a character limit per message, a "text language" has emerged where people use abbreviated forms of words so they can fit more into each text message. There are even books that have been written, explaining what all the terms mean (Pope, 2002). Phrases such as 'see you later' are abbreviated to 'c u l8r', punctuation is often left out and a whole new

method of expressing emotions ('emoticons') through text messages has been invented. There are many symbols for expressing how one is feeling and even to express the tone of the comment made with: :-) = smiling, ;-) = winking, :-O = surprise being just a few. Adults and children alike are indulging in the use of this new language and often can be seen to filter through to across nations with international roaming on mobile phones, holiday romances etc. A universal "text language" that is a product of a new technological culture therefore acting as evidence that to understand language is reflective of culture and the thought processes linked to that culture.

Is it the changes in the language that are affecting the way we think or is it the case that language constitutes reality? The development of "text languages" as described above suggests that as our thought patterns change and adapt, these changes are reflected in the 'updated' language, thus supporting the Whorfian claim that language influences thought.

This idea of language influencing thought can be further discussed with reference to the Japanese language and comparing it to the English language. The Japanese language is filled with many different terms for saying the same thing – dependant on who is speaking, their status and the person they are speaking to. The Honorifics of the language are reflected in the thought processes of the Japanese people and the way in which they act. Bachnik (…) and her paper on the two faces of self and society in Japan described her return to a family she had lived with for five years, after fifteen years away from them. She was surprised to discover that despite having not seen the family she had grown very close to for fifteen years, they still followed social norms

and practices when in company of other people regardless of the relationship or degree of familiarity she herself shared with the guests.

To compare the form of social action to English/British trends it can be said that s the language suggests there is no form of linguistic respect. Growing up in England (a Brit with an Indian cultural upbringing) I was always instructed by my parents to call all my friends' mothers "auntie" as a mark of respect for elders and was understandable surprised to find my Caucasian British counterparts address my mother by her first name.

Gujarati also has actual words in the language to signify respect (similar to the use of 'tu/vous' in French and 'du/sie' in German. When speaking with people you ar expected to respect (usually those in positions of authority, elders and strangers) the word 'tame' is used to refer to that person whereas when speaking to a peer or somebody younger than you, the word 'tu' is used.

By the 16th century, the written form of the English language was standardised and English literature, especially from then forth, can be used to chart the influences of social changes that were taking place in England (Pope, 2002). English did used to have terminology that showed some linguistic differences in terms for "respect" and this is hugely evident in Shakespearean literature. English literature has been used by historians and others as evidence of languages reflecting social status. Using the, now out-of-use, pronoun 'thou' to refer to someone signified that the speaker thought themselves to be of higher social status than the person they are speaking to. If the 'thou/you' difference was as reference to social status, then it is possible to suggest

that honorific morphemes indeed did not and have not existed in the English language since "honorifics have little to do with…class stratification, but a lot to do with respect one wants to convey to the other" Irvine (1998).

As a result of technological inventions and with the gradual social abolition of the western class system and the English (1642-51) and American (1861-65) civil wars resulting in the equal rights for women, slaves and the others, the use of pronouns such as 'thou' and 'thy' ceased to occur by native/non-native speakers of English. All speakers of the English language now referred to each other as 'you'. This is also evident when reading English literature.

It seems then that language can be seen as a medium for representing changes taking place in the world over time. Countries in the western world are increasingly becoming multicultural societies and media (newspapers, television, and films) representation of cultures may have been instrumental in the incorporation of new frames by which to understand the "rich" points of language that previously seemed difficult to comprehend. Television channels are increasingly producing documentary style features on popularly unfamiliar cultures with the example of a programme broadcast by the BBC which had Ian Wright (a famous football player) going to Africa and spending a week living amongst a tribe and having no contact with members of the 'outside world' he was able to understand the rituals of the tribe even though there was a lack of verbal communication and indeed understanding.

The emergence of international films produced and directed by as well as starring individuals that exist within the culture they wish to educate the world about (Chinese

born director Ang Lee directing the film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and releasing it as a Hollywood blockbuster) can be said to have had the intended effect. Many critics of the film berate it because they cannot identify with the thought pattern of the Eastern Culture. The film was heavily filled with instances where honour (in a variety of different contextual meanings of the word) was the reason for seemingly insensible actions of the characters. The film dramatises and makes available for viewing the aspects of culture that were previously only understood through literature. With societal popularisation and increasing interests of cultures different to our own, the western world is striving to use all methods of communication to bring knowledge and understanding of cultures to light. Films like "East is East" and "Bend it like Beckham" are aimed to highlight the difficulties encountered by British Asians brought up with strict Indian cultural values in the home and the cultural values they have gained living amongst people of varying cultures. Theatre productions such as Bombay Dreams (a play about the difficulties of an Indian actor) produced by one of Britain's leading producers Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber have been successful due to musical and wardrobe related collaboration with artists of Indian background and the script being written by a well-known British author who has encountered these cultural conflicts first hand. With media bringing together cultures with the specific aim of creating deeper understanding, it is indeed possible that rich points in a language may be solved and connections may be made through the exposure of actions and values and rituals of a community.

In conclusion, it can be said that Whorf's claim that the language we speak influences that way we see the world and understand it hold true. My ability to think in Gujarati contrasted with my brother's inability highlights the importance of cultural setting in

language acquisition. Difficulties in understanding of other languages may be attributed to the lack of knowledge about the cultural associations heavily linked to that piece of language. And finally with media communication bringing together different cultures and educating the world, it is possible that a convergence to a "world language" will happen over time.

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