

Chapter 3: The Power of Language in Society

The concept of "linguistic relativity" is an idea that suggests that the language we speak influences how we think and how we perceive the world. Sapir-Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity suggests that "languages use their experiences into distinct categories," (Cahill, 2007, 15) meaning that despite class differences, humans will put similar things into a category and give them similar labels and exaggerate their differences. (Cahill, 2007, 18) It argues that linguistic relativity and typification to create order in the chaotic world described in the text. However, typification can have downsides that can be very subtle. Boundaries are crossed (as with race and sex) and these islands discriminate our world or lead us to believe that one island is better than the other (Cahill 2007, 17).

A human mind is constantly putting things together and putting them into categories. We are constantly grouping and splitting them, yet still seeing whether categories. I realize that islands are islands, perceive reality in a social way. For example, it is in the same way that humans group similar items together and create one or the "animal" group, but then someone will take another step and separate them based on differences (the "animal" group is split into the "human" group). (Cahill 2007, 19) However, these clusters that we create are not fully separated in the human world. The groups often spill into other groups and the boundaries are more social constructs. They often vary from one society to another as well as across historical periods. (Cahill 2007, 20)

I have seen two examples of this and both can be seen in high school's social structure. A teacher divides his groups into stereotypes of "freshman", "sophomore", "junior", and "senior". The group is created based on similarity of age and grade level. For example, if the group could be the same age, but everyone is

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Chapter 3: Islands of Meaning

“Islands of meaning” is an idea that Eviatar Zerubavel developed to explain how “humans sort their experiences into distinct categories,” (Cahill 2007, 18) meaning that despite clear differences, humans will put similar things into a category and “ignore similarities and exaggerate their differences” (Cahill 2007, 18). Humans use classification and typification to create order in the chaotic world around them. Classification and typification can have downsides that can be seen when islands are created (as with race and sex) and these islands discriminate one another and believe that one island is better than the other (Cahill 2007, 17).

A human mind is constantly grouping similar things together and then taking the already made groups and splitting them, yet again, into smaller categories. Creating these islands help humans perceive reality in a socially acceptable way. An example listed in the book shows how humans group similar items (foxes and camels are in the “animal” group), but then humans will take another step and separate them based on differences (the “animal” group is different than the “human” group) (Cahill 2007, 19). However, these clusters that are made are not fully separated in the human mind. The groups often spill into other groups and “the boundaries are mere social artifacts. They often vary from one society to another as well as across historical periods within each society” (Cahill 2007, 20).

I have seen two examples of this and both can be seen in high schools across America. Students are grouped into categories of “freshman”, “sophomore”, “junior”, and “senior”. This group is created through the similarity of age and academic completion. Not everyone in the group could be the same age, but everyone in the group has

completed certain academic qualifications to place them in that group. This also creates a social hierarchy in the students' minds. A senior will perceive that he/she has more privileges than a freshman because they have been there longer, but the school rulebook applies to everyone. Not only that, but sometimes faculty will exaggerate this point by reinforcing what a senior has said.

The groups are then separated, but it is not clear until the senior level, possibly the junior level (depending on the school). The separation I am talking about is when those in the senior level are separated by grade point average and labels such as "valedictorian" and "salutatorian" is given to the top of the class. Also, there are students that wear gold cords (again, depending on the school) that denotes "top ten" honors and even a sash that shows that certain students are in the National Honors Society. Students in the senior category are split into groups showing academic excellence over one another. All the seniors in the class, that have completed their academic responsibilities, are going to receive a diploma, but only those with a certain GPA can receive a diploma "with honors".

Chapter 4: The Self as Sentiment and Reflection

Horton Cooley developed a theory called "the looking-glass self" which states that "the individual imagines how he or she must appear to someone, imagines how that person must be judging her or her appearance and behavior, and consequently feels either pride or shame" (Cahill 2007, 26). This also covers how a human will claim material objects or even people as "mine". It is also believed that when something a human declares as "mine" is threatened, that human will act out in a way where they will defend it. An example listed in the book is when a young child is teased by an adult with the "I

got your nose” trick, the child will fight to get it back because in his/her mind, the adult may just have their nose (Cahill 2007, 29). In a sense, we are not what we are on our own; we are what we are based also on what others perceive us to be. “The social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own” (Cahill 2007, 27).

An example of this theory I have seen in life can be seen in my younger cousin who is 12-years-old. Her mother is an alcoholic and has done some, well, unfavorable things in her life. My cousin, we will call her D, goes to a school in a rather small district so it can easily be said that this school suffers the “small-town syndrome” where everyone knows everyone else’s business. D got into a fight with another girl in her class, to which the girl told her, “My mom says that your mom is a crack whore.” D basically shut down and started to cry and since that day has the “history will repeat itself” concept in her mind. Her grades started to drop (which for D was a major thing because D is a very smart child and has maintained straight As through her schooling until this point) and when our aunt (who has temporary custody of D) asked her why she was not trying anymore, D simply replied, “What does it matter? I’m just going to end up like mom.” In a sense, society pushes certain roles on children and one role that was pushed on D, whether accidentally or on purpose, was that a child will end up like their parent. This concept is certainly not true because any child can rise above what their parents once were, but even children can hear adults mutter, “They’ll probably end up like their mother/father.” This shows the looking-glass self because D perceived herself as no better than her mother because of a combination of one statement from a fellow classmate and the concept that “history repeats itself”.

Chapter 5: The Self as Social Structure

George Herbert Mead is an important figure in sociological psychology. “Mead makes a number of important points about the human self ... the self is separate from the body; it arises in social experience; but it is more than a mere product of socially reflected self-images” (Cahill 2007, 31). Mead states that language is important to human self development because “in speaking, we are both the subject and object of our own action” (Cahill 2007, 31). When speaking, humans hear what they are saying and respond accordingly, including those who are being addressed.

Mead also states that humans develop different selves that they adopt from others that they feel are important in their lives (these others being called “significant others” by Mead). “Mead argues, a multiple personality is, in certain sense, normal” (Cahill 2007, 31). Humans begin to tie these personalities together into a whole and function as a unified self that they develop. The development of the self is not something that is accomplished alone, though. “The self is profoundly social not only in the sense that it arises in social experience, but also in the sense that it is a social process – a continuous inner conversation between an ‘I’ and a ‘me’” (Cahill 2007, 31). In the end, conversation is possible through social interactions, but conversation is nothing predictable and it is unclear what “self” can emerge in what conversation.

An example of this that I have seen in life is myself. As a communication major, I have done speeches and one thing that you have to learn when giving presentations is how to use language to your advantage. I want to be entertaining, but at the end still get my main point across. In this way, I develop a self that is both the subject and object of attention and my own action.

References

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