So let’s say you’re learning a new language. First you might learn the nouns and verbs of everyday objects, then the syntax and sentence structure, and finally, you might start stringing those terms and grammar rules into full sentences and dialog. But if you’ve ever followed that process yourself, you’ll know that taking your newfound language from the classroom to the streets of another country is a whole different story. Often, certain words from one language just simply don’t have an equivalent word, phrase, or concept in the other that fits. So, If we all live in the same world and interact with roughly the same environment, why might this happen, and what might that tell us about the speakers of the worlds 7,000 languages? To take it even further, do differences in language bely a difference in the way we think?

[ Lena Boroditsky: this is an ancient question

That’s Lena Boroditsky, she’s one linguist exploring the boundaries of this question

and roman emporer exaple]

This is the question that Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf set out to answer in 1929. The two linguists built on the work of Wilhelm Von Humboldt who declared in 1820: *The diversity of languages is not a diversity of signs and sounds but a diversity of views of the world.”* Sapir and Whorf tried to build on this idea and prove its merit. Whorf found his most convincing piece of evidence in the language of the Hopi Indians. A fire-safety engineer turned linguist, Whorf studied the Hopi language extensively, and what he found was that the Hopi had no words for time. If they had no words for time, they must not have any concept of time. Whorf took this as concrete proof of language affecting the way that the speakers of that language think. This theory became known as the Sapir-Whorf theory and thus the field of linguistic relativity was born. In the hundred years after Whorf’s statements, his work with the Hopi Native Americans would be dissproved, further studies would realize that while they didnt have words like minutes and seconds, they used angles and levels of sunlight to indicate when things happened. While his observations were off, Whorf had opened the door to a whole new world of research about how the words that we speak and think affect the way we perceive the world around us.

. Here’s Lena explaining one example from her work involving an aboriginal tribe in Australia.

[aborigine example]

Now imagine I asked you to point southeast right now. [crickets soundtrack] Now, I can’t see you but I’m willing to bet that you either had no idea where to point or, if you did point, that you’re off by a pretty wide margin. *But* if I went to a six year old boy in the pomponow tribe, he’d instantly be able to tell me exactly where southeast was. Members of this tribe and others that use a similar language structure actually stay oriented better than we thought humans could. The addition of this data point to everyday language engrains it within the way they think.

Lena’s research found dozens of other examples like this in languages across the world where factors that we consider fundamental about the world around us were drastically changed by the way that the language permitted for them to be described or biased by things inherent to the language. Take the gendering of nouns for example.

[Lena example of German and Spanish]

Now, why does any of this matter? Well, consider this, when describing an accident in English, like “I broke the vase” or “she hit the cat” one explicitly has to name the perpetrator while in languages such as Spanish, one would be more likely to say “the vase broke.” So what you ask? Lena explains.. [9:45]

1:43: does lang shape the way we think question and roman emporer quote.

2:35 Aborigine example of cardinal directions

5:09 time description

7:00 color differentiation

10:14 two people witness the same crime but remember it differently

Noam Chomsky

2:40 baby pulls out language from the buzzing around them.

Student TED- The amazonian tribe that has no concept of numbers because they do not have the language terms to describe it.