Is there any relationship between Language, Thought and Representation?
   1. **Iman Tohidian and 2. Ezatollah Tohidian**

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Abstract

In this paper we are going to explore Saussure's theories of the sign: that concepts and labels are essentially arbitrary, but are linked to form signs; that the value of signs comes from other signs in the language system; and that, to speakers, signs appear a natural and transparent way of representing reality. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that cultures have different values and their language usages reflect their different perceptions of reality (Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis). It also states that continuous usage of a particular language reinforces the perceptions encoded in the language so they become firmly entrenched and difficult to question. However, as our understanding that language can manipulate and direct our perceptions increases, so too does our ability to challenge usages and the perspectives behind them. So, here we explore the relationship between *experience, perception and language*. But first of all we define language as a system of *representation* and then we will consider the extent to which it informs our thoughts and analytical processes.

Keywords: Language; Thought; Representation; Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Langue and Parole; Saussure's theories of the sign.

1- Introduction

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Language and thought are central to the study of cognitive psychology and, some would argue, are defining aspects of humanity. There are many ways of describing cognitive psychology, but Solso (1998) defines it as 'the scientific study of the thinking mind' (p.2). Cognitive psychology therefore covers a wide variety of areas of research including perception, attention, memory, language and thought. Language is used both to communicate with others and do monitor our internal thoughts, or, as Harley (2001, p.1) notes, 'in some form or another it so dominates our social and cognitive activity that it would be difficult to imagine what life would be without it'. Many people regard the ability to use language and rational thought as uniquely human qualities and believe it is these abilities that distinguish humans from other animals. For example Harley (2001, p.1) considers language to be 'an essential part of what it means to be human, and it is partly what sets us apart from other animals'. Similarly Garnham and Oakhill (1994, p.16) suggest 'the nature and complexity of our thought processes …. Appear to set people apart from other animals'. Considering this brief introduction on language and thought, we explore what is the relationship between these two concepts and representation. Consider the following extract as an example:

> Out of the right fob hung a great silver chain, with a wonderful kind of engine at the bottom…which appeared to be a globe, half silver, and half of some transparent metal: for on the transparent side we saw certain strange figures circularly drawn, and thought we could touch them, till we found our fingers stopped by that lucid substance. He put this engine to our ears, which made an incessant noise like that of a water-mill and we conjecture it is…the god that he worships…because he assures us…that he seldom did any thing without consulting it…

(Swift, 1726 [1994]: 28)

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On first reading *Gulliver's Travels,* this extract seemed puzzling to us. Why were the Lilliputians describing everyday objects in such a strange manner? Surely they must have known what a watch was and would have had a word for it? We find that cultures are different from one another and what is perceived as ordinary in one (like a watch) is not necessarily understood in the same way in a different culture. This extract also illustrates that these differences of experience and perception may be encoded in language (by the nonexistence of the word *watch* in the language of the Lilliputians, in this instance).

2- Saussure's Theories of the Sign

It is common to think of language as a way of describing and giving information about the world around us. If you own a wristwatch, you can call it a *watch* and be sure that other speakers of English will know you are referring to the gadget on your wrist. There appears to be a transparent relationship between the word *watch* and the object, your watch. In this chapter we are going to probe the relationship between words and what they represent more closely, and consider the ways in which the language we use might affect the way we think. To complicate things, however, we aren't going to talk about objects but about concepts. By concept we mean the perception you have in your mind of something. This might be the idea of your watch, or the idea of a tree which you can call into your head while sitting in an enclosed room, or your idea of something which doesn't exist in a concrete form: a unicorn, tomorrow or frustration. We have to assume, for the purposes of discussing theories about language, that we can't actually 'get at' reality, but only at the way you interpret your senses and form a concept in your head as a result. This concept, we will be arguing, is affected by the language that is available to

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you. To complicate things still further, we aren't going to talk about 'words'. This is

because we want to make a clear distinction between the written form or sounds we use

to represent a concept (which we will call a label) and the concept itself. The ideas we are

presenting in Figure 1 are a partial summary of those held by Ferdinand de Saussure

(1857–1913), who formulated theories on (i) the idea of language as a system and (ii) the

nature of the linguistic sign.

2-1 Langue and Parole

Saussure proposed a theory of language which assumes that by the time we are mature,

we all have a perfect and complete template of our language in our heads, and he referred

to this template as **langue**. *Langue* is:

> Our innate knowledge of the systematic correspondences
> between sound and meaning that make up our language
> (including the knowledge of what utterances are possible
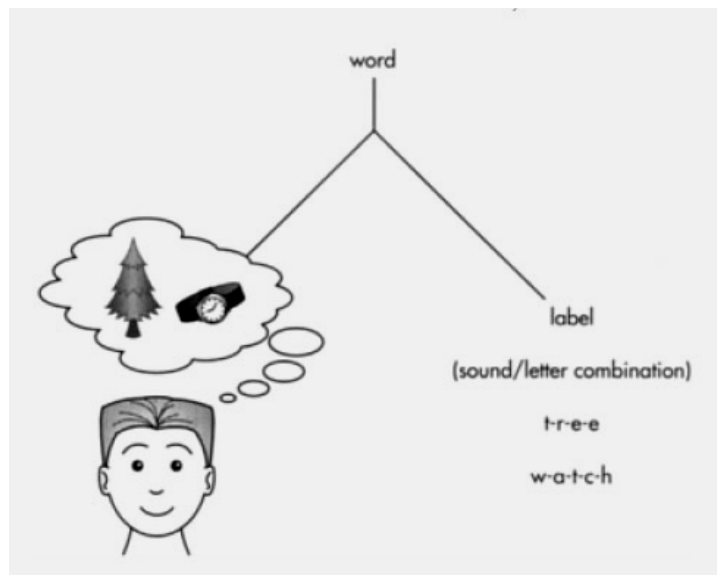> in our language, and what utterances are not).

Figure 1 Words represent labels and concepts

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Source: (Anderson, 1988:24)

For example, if you are an English speaker, you know that the sound/letter combination *tree* is possible in your language, but that *xng* is not. You also know that *tree* has a meaning for English speakers, but that *xng* does not. However, *xng* is meaningful in one of the Bantu languages, where it means 'to run'. Your instinctive understanding of the meaningfulness of *tree* is the same as a Bantu speaker's understanding of *xng*. Your innate knowledge of your native language extends beyond this level. For example, you also know that your language allows certain structures and excludes others. As an English speaker, you belong to a global *speech community* which consists of all the people in the world who understand English, and have a template of how it works in their heads. Consequently, you know that

1) I planted a tree yesterday

and

2) Alex the tree pinched me as I went past

are grammatical sentences in English (even if the second one is unlikely in the world as we know it) but that

3) a I yesterday tree planted

is not a grammatical English sentence. We should add here that it can be difficult to decide exactly where a speech community begins and ends. For example, if you are an English speaker from Dallas, Texas, you will probably use language in ways similar to other inhabitants of Dallas, while differing in your use of English in significant ways from an English speaker from Calcutta, India, or from Norfolk, England. In this way we

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can say that there are smaller speech communities within the larger global one. If *langue*

is the perfect knowledge of a language that we have in our heads, in practice, according

to Saussure, we sometimes deviate from this template. ***Parole*** refers to the way in which

we actually use language, including the errors we make when confused, or

mispronunciations because we tried to talk with our mouths full. If someone were

staggering home drunk one night and stumbled into a tree, they might say something like:

tha' bloody shree hit me!

Now, your *langue* tells you that the tree couldn't possibly have hit you, and also that the

typical pronunciation is not *shree*. However, inebriation can distort pronunciation and

perceptions. Thus, the way in which language is used on this occasion (the *parole*) does

not reflect what a member of the community of English speakers knows about the label

tree and what is represented by it (the *langue*).

2-2 The Linguistic Sign

Langue, as was explained above, is the term used to describe the innate knowledge of the

systematic pairings of labels and meanings which form a language. Saussure's theory is

that these pairings produce a system of *signs*. Each sign has two parts to it, a ***signifier*,**

which we have been calling a 'label', and a ***signified*,** which is what we have called a

'concept'. The actual sign is not one or both of these elements; the sign is the association

that binds them together (see Figure 2). Saussure states that, once the correspondence

between the signifier and signified has been established, it tends to appear natural and

indivisible to speakers of that language:

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> Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one
> side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it
> is impossible in a language to separate sound from thought,
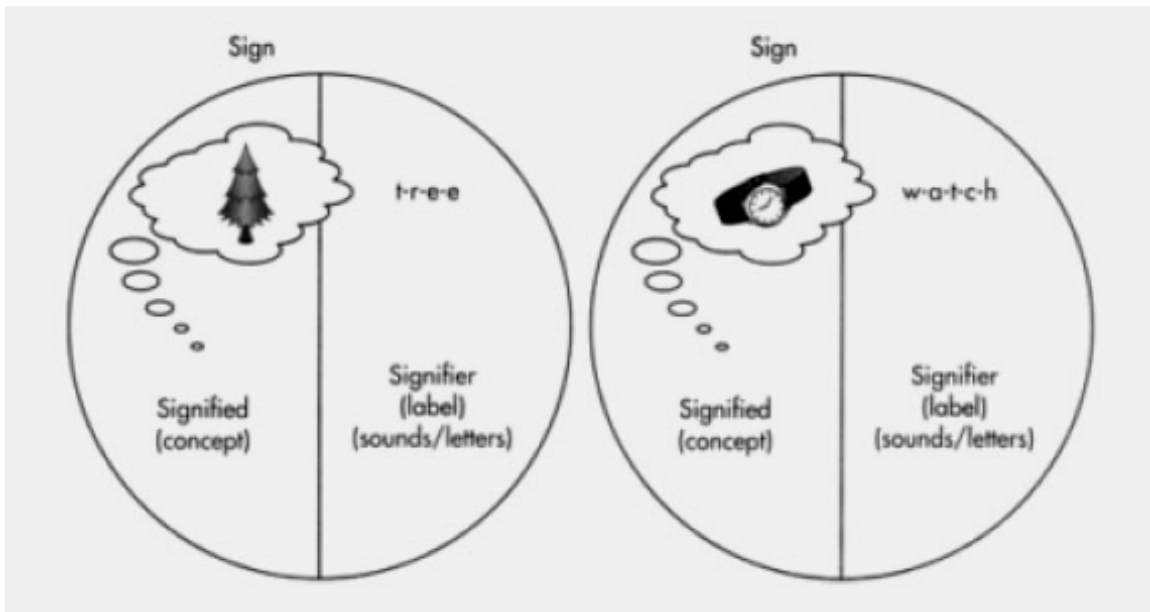> or thought from sound.

Figure2 Signs are made of signifiers and signifieds
Source: (Saussure, in Harris, 1988:29)

If we accept this theory, it has very important consequences. Amongst other things, it implies that the way we use language can affect the way we think, because of the indivisible link between our concept of something and the language we use to represent it. In other words, language affects our perception of reality. However, although the link between the label (signifier) and the concept in our minds (signified) can seem natural, obvious, and indivisible to us as speakers of that language, this is in fact far from being the case. If there were really an unbreakable link between the sounds/letters of *tree* and the concept of a tree which you have in your head, then people all over the world would also have to use *tree* for their concepts of leafy, bark-covered objects. Clearly they don't;

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French people, for example, call the same concept *arbre,* while Germans call it *Baum*.

Although for English speakers there is a very strong link between *tree* and what we

perceive to be a tree, for speakers of other languages, the link will be equally strong

between their perception of the object and the particular sounds/ letters they use for

referring to it. Saussure referred to this phenomenon as the *arbitrariness of the sign*, by

which he meant that there is no reason why we can't call a tree an *arbre* or, for that

matter, an *ostrich* or an *umbrella*. There is actually a pun here for some English speakers.

The French and English words *arbre* and *tree* combined produce the word *arbitrary* (for

those who pronounce it *arbitree*); reminding us that there is no reason why anything we

name should not have a different name, as it probably does in a different language. If all

the members of the English speech community agreed that from now on that all objects

with leaves and bark should be called *ostriches,* there would be no reason why

communication shouldn't continue to work perfectly well.

2-3 The Arbitrary Division of Reality

Saussure also argued that what is treated as a separate concept in a language, worthy of

its own letter/sound combination, is also arbitrary: 'different languages cut up reality in

different ways' (Andersen, 1988:27). For example, we could investigate two different

languages and find that Language A uses three different words to refer to *still water, rain*

and *floodwater,* but that Language B only has one word which is used for all three kinds

of water. Language B might, on the other hand, have a word for *sandstorm,* unlike

Language A. The reason behind such a difference might lie in the ways in which the two

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communities live. Speakers of Language A might belong to a settled community in a fertile valley which experiences water in various forms, while speakers of Language B might be desert nomads, who have no need to distinguish between different types of water but for whom sandstorms are common. Another aspect of Saussure's theory is his claim that signs depend on one another for their meaning. Take the example of Language B above. If the circumstances of the speakers of Language B changed, they might find that it would be useful to distinguish rain from other kinds of water and adopt the word from Language A (in the same way that English adopted the word *yoghurt* from Turkish). The consequence would be that the original word used for *water* in Language B would have to shift slightly in meaning, because it would no longer include the concept of rain water, since this now has its own sign.

The idea that signs depend on one another for their meaning, and that by adding a sign, or by removing one, the others have to shift their meaning, is an important one. To summarize Saussure's theories, he proposed that we divide up the world into arbitrary concepts, and we assign arbitrary labels (sound/letter combinations) to those concepts. The union of concept and label he called a sign. He argued that signs depend for their value on the other signs in the language system: they 'shift around' to make room for one another. For native speakers, it is very hard to perceive the division between the label and the concept; despite the arbitrariness, we perceive them as 'natural' and the arbitrariness is invisible to us. We perceive language as a transparent tool for talking about reality. This is what, we shall argue, makes it possible for language to have such a powerful effect on our perception of reality.

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3- The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

While Saussure was interested in language as a system, other scholars were interested in the linguistic and philosophical differences between cultures, and the impact language has on our perception of reality. The work of anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), in this area has come to be known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. It has two parts: *the theory of linguistic relativity* and *the theory of linguistic determinism*. The theory of linguistic relativity states that different cultures interpret the world in different ways, and that languages encode these differences (this corresponds to Saussure's theory that we divide up the world in arbitrary ways). Some cultures will perceive all water as being the same, while others will see important differences between different kinds of water (such as rain, flood water and still water, as we saw in the example above). The difference in perception will be apparent in the languages, because speakers have to articulate the way they see the world, and will develop differences in their languages accordingly. The term *relativity* refers to the idea that there is no absolute or 'natural' way to label the world. We label the world according to our perception of it and that perception is relative: it varies from culture to culture.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis also incorporates another theory, the theory of linguistic determinism. This states that not only does our perception of the world influence our language, but that the language we use profoundly affects how we think. Language can be said to provide a framework for our thoughts and, according to the theory of linguistic determinism, it is very difficult to think outside that framework. Sapir stated that: 'We

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see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits

of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation' (quoted in Lucy,

1992:22). Once a linguistic system is in place, according to this theory, it influences the

way in which members of that speech community talk about and interpret their world.

One of Whorf's most famous explorations of linguistic relativity and linguistic

determinism is his 1939 paper 'The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to

Language' (reprinted in Carroll, 1956:134–59). Whorf focused particularly on

grammatical features, including the *tenses* of *verbs***,** which might be thought of as the

'unnoticed "background" to speakers' thinking about the world' (Cameron, 1992:136).

Whorf compared the Hopi language, an indigenous language in the south of the United

States, with a group of languages he referred to as Standard Average European (SAE)

which included English, French, German and other related European languages. As a

result of his research, he claimed that 'the grammar of Hopi bore a relation to Hopi

culture, and the grammar of European tongues to our own Western or European culture'

(in Carroll, 1956:138). One of the linguistic differences that Whorf highlighted in his

Hopi-SAE comparison was ways of talking about concepts such as time and space.

European languages distinguish between physical and abstract entities. *Physical entities*

are anything we experience through sensory faculties such as sight and touch. They have

substance and exist in what we perceive to be three-dimensional space. *Abstract entities,*

on the other hand, are not tangible: they do not have substance and space in the sense that

physical matter has them. In European cultures, we seem to treat our experience of

physical matter as primary and use it to shape the ways we think and talk about the

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abstract. We objectify the abstract by talking about it in physical terms. Therefore an

abstract concept such as an argument can be talked about as if it were a physical entity;

we 'put' an argument or point of view, we 'move a debate forward', 'grasp' a point or

'squash' a suggestion. We frequently talk about abstractions in terms that bestow them

with substance and space, as sometimes demonstrated by the physical gestures that

accompany or even replace expressions such as 'that went right over my head'. Hopi

does not represent abstract concepts using physical metaphors in the same way, and this

can be demonstrated from the way it is possible to talk about time in Hopi. According to

Whorf, all people have an awareness of time, 'the basic sense of becoming later and later'

(in Carroll, 1956:139). In European languages, we can mark our verbs to indicate whether

we are talking about the present, the past or the future, as shown in the following

examples:

	Past ────────────►Now ────────────►Future			
	Pronoun	**Verb**	**Pronoun**	**Verb**
Future	He	will eat	She	will walk
Present	He	has	She	walks
Past	He	had	She	walked

The use of this system could be said to reflect and reinforce our belief that time is

basically ordered into three separate periods. For us, the past is over and done with (and

is therefore at the most consigned to memory), the present is happening now, and the

future is yet to be and can only be imagined. On the whole therefore, SAE cultures seem

to have interpreted and linguistically represented the abstract concept of time in physical

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terms, as something that can be divided into discrete units that progress in a linear

fashion. We can draw time as a line that starts in the past, passes though 'now' and goes

into the future: This is not the case in Hopi. Even though the Hopi too have a sense of

time as a 'becoming later and later', they view its passage as a duration of stages rather

than as a row of discrete units. Thinking of the human cycle may make this clearer. The

human life cycle can be said to start at one stage, say the embryonic, and then progress

through to different phases such as baby, infant, preadolescent, adolescent, young adult

and mature adult. Each of these stages can be more or less clearly defined but they are not

really discrete, because each flows into the other. At each point, the individual is still the

same person, even though aspects of their appearance and certain characteristics may

have changed.

The Hopi conceive of the passage of time in much the same way. Thus an expression

such as *ten days,* which reflects a belief that each day is a different entity, is not possible

in Hopi, where 'the return of the day is felt as the return of the same person, a little older

but with all the impresses of yesterday' (Whorf, in Carroll, 1956:151). This concept of

time explains why Hopi verbs have no tenses like those in European languages. Whorf

gives no examples, but states that the verbs instead denote 'different degrees of duration'

(ibid.: 144). Thus, SAE languages and the Hopi language differ in certain fundamental

aspects, a development that seems to stem essentially from different worldviews. The two

types of culture have evolved in different circumstances and with different influences,

and so it should come as no surprise that their experiences of 'reality' have diverged. It is

also unsurprising that each worldview would have informed other aspects of culture in

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addition to the linguistic, since *'language, culture and behavior…have grown up together, constantly influencing each other'* (Whorf, in Carroll, 1956:156).

Whorf states that European cultures are preoccupied with time-keeping; we wear watches, keep calendars, take a great deal of interest in historical chronology and worry about 'saving', 'wasting' and 'running out of' time. The Hopi on the other hand are very different in their outlook. Their understanding of time as a duration means that certain cultural elements that SAE speakers perceive as essential are, to them, irrelevant. Speakers of European languages like keeping records as a means of preserving the past before it disappears. However, this is not important for the Hopi people because 'everything that ever happened still is, but in a necessarily different form' (Whorf, in Carroll, 1956: 153). Sapir claimed that once 'the language habits of the group' have been fixed, its speakers are at their 'mercy' (Sapir in Lucy, 1992:22), which suggests that we are passive victims of our language. However, all the actual Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states is that perceptions are encoded in language systems and can be reinforced through *constant and unquestioned use* by their speakers. As Cameron (1992:136) points out, Sapir himself stated that as our awareness grows, 'we must learn to fight the implications of language', that is, to question our language and the way we use it.

4- One Language Represents Many Worlds

The most effective way of illustrating the creation and acceptance of distinct realities by speakers of one language is to look at examples of where it can and actually does occur. One area where the process can be observed is racist terminology. Take for example a

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racist term such as *Paki*.[1] Assume that you were born into a community where all Asians,[1] regardless of where they were born or what language they spoke, were referred to by this term. You would probably hear it in utterances where this group were being vilified, so you would form a negative stereotype (or perception: the signified, in Saussure's terms) of such people, and the term *Paki* would be its signifier. When you heard the word being used, and when you started to use it yourself, you wouldn't stop to think, 'now, what's the concept behind that word?', because the word is a complete linguistic sign: the thought and the term are one and the same. Furthermore, since *Paki* would be the only word available to you and your community to talk about Asians, it is the only one you would use, and every time you did (most likely in a denigrating way), you would reinforce the negative thoughts behind it. Therefore, because your language only gave you that one linguistic sign to denote Asians, you would always think of them in terms of it. In addition, because you were not consciously aware that *Paki* arose from your group's negative experiences and consequent perceptions of Asians, and because you never heard of them being talked of in any other way, you would believe that the negative meaning of *Paki* is objective, factual truth. Another example can be seen in the language of the nuclear arms industry. A.M.Karpf, writing in *The Guardian* on 20 October 1988, calls this language *'Nukespeak'*, which she defines as 'a specialized vocabulary which isn't neutral… but ideologically loaded in favor of the nuclear culture'.

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[1] In the UK the term 'Asian' is used to refer to people whose ethnic background is from the Indian subcontinent: e.g. India, Bangladesh, Pakistan. In the US this term is used more extensively to include people whose ethnic background is from a wider geographical area incorporating, for example, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Vietnam. *Paki* is a racist abuse term in the UK directed at anyone whose ethnic background appears to be from the Indian subcontinent.

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This means that this discourse is the result of, and promotes, an ideology that nuclear armaments are not frightening or dangerous but beneficial and harmless. This discourse is created in a variety of ways. Nuclear weapons are given labels that have positive connotations (such as *cruise*), that are opaque (such as *MIRV:* an acronym for Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicle) or have mythical and majestic connotations *(Polaris, Poseidon, Titan)*. Some labels carry connotations of innocence or harmlessness. The Hiroshima bomb, for example, was called *Little Boy* and the neutron bomb was nicknamed *cookie cutter*. Such terminology is insidious because the application of labels with positive and/or harmless connotations makes such things seem normal and less scary. Continued use of such labels, combined with a deliberate elimination of any that suggest unpleasantness, danger or death (Karpf points out that 'Nukespeak' avoids all mention of death), makes it difficult to talk about the nuclear industry in anything other than positive terms. To illustrate this, Karpf cites American researcher Carol Cohn, who explored the development of American nuclear strategies and their implementation at an American University Center for Defense Technology. To carry out her research, Cohn adopted 'Nukespeak' but found that 'the better she became at using this discourse, the more impossible it became for her to express her own ideas and values.' Cohn states: *the more conversations I participated in, the less frightened I was of nuclear war. How can learning a language have such a powerful effect?... I could not use the language to express my concerns, because it was conceptually impossible. This language does not allow certain questions to be asked, certain values to be expressed.* 'Nukespeak', therefore, makes the world of nuclear warfare seem safe and familiar. Its exclusive use in

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some settings reinforces a positive attitude to nuclear perception and makes it difficult to entertain any other: 'if we do learn and speak it, we not only severely limit what we can say, but we also invite the transformation…of our own thinking' (Cohn). Such transformation is worrying because it is not conscious; we are not always aware that our worldviews are being manipulated or directed. We may accept usages such as those of 'Nukespeak' (which, for example, gain widespread currency through use by the media) because like Cohn, we are forced to: 'she found that when she spoke English rather than [Nukespeak], the men responded to her as if she were ignorant' (Karpf). Once acceptance of such discourse occurs, it can become what we consider *'common sense'* or *'truth'*, and therefore remain unchallenged. However, as Cohn demonstrates by voicing her concerns, we do not have to be totally passive recipients of the ideas encoded in our language; we can and do question and contest them as our awareness of the issues involved grows.

5- Conclusion

In this paper we presented Saussure's theories of the sign: that concepts and labels are essentially arbitrary, but are linked to form signs; that the value of signs comes from other signs in the language system; and that, to speakers, signs appear a natural and transparent way of representing reality. The Sapir-Whorf-Hypothesis states that cultures have different values and their language usages reflect their different perceptions of reality (the theory of linguistic relativity). It also states that continuous usage of a particular language, or a discourse within that language, reinforces the perceptions encoded in the language so they become firmly entrenched and difficult to question.

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However, as our understanding that language (in representing certain hidden ideologies) can manipulate and direct our perceptions increases, so too does our ability to challenge usages and the perspectives behind them.

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