

## BENJAMIN LEE WHORF

(1897-1941)

"Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about."

The principle of linguistic relativity (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis): speakers of different languages will construct reality differently because language affects how individuals perceive reality.



## Biography

- \* Benjamin Whorf was born in Winthrop, Massachusetts on April 24, 1897.
- \* In 1913, Whorf graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Chemical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and in 1919 he was appointed an Engineer for the Hartford Fire Insurance Company – his first and only job (having an independent, non-academic source of income allowed him to pursue his specific academic interests more freely)
- \* Whorf began studying Linguistics at Yale University in 1931 and later became known for his collaboration with Edward Sapir, a prominent linguist and anthropologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (an expert on Native American languages) .
- \* He was appointed Honorary Research Fellow in Anthropology in 1936, received a Sterling Fellowship in 1937, and lectured in anthropology from 1937 through 1938.

## Interests

Benjamin Whorf, even as a child, soon began to show a wide curiosity: he read books on almost any subject he encountered, and he had special enthusiasm for codes and puzzles.

Whorf was religious (his family was Methodist), and he later came under the influence of the French mystical writer and linguist Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767–1825), whose metaphysical thinking was linked to his belief that the texts of the Bible and other sacred volumes contained hidden meanings.

Whorf spent time in the early 1920s learning to read biblical Hebrew. The perceived conflict between science and religion was a major issue at the time, and Whorf looked to language as a way of resolving the conflict. Fascinated by the seemingly powerful significance of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, he began to search for similar phenomena in other languages. He became interested in Native American languages and familiarized himself with the long effort to reconstruct the languages of the ancient Mayan and Aztec societies.

## Linguistic achievements

1928 - translated a previously undeciphered Aztec manuscript  
1930 - won a Social Science Research Council fellowship to visit Mexico for firsthand study of Aztec and Mayan materials where he deciphered stone ideographs.

From "The relation of habitual thought and behavior to language" (Hopi vs. SAE, Standard Average European):

- 10 days vs. a relation between two events in lateness
- a summer vs. "while morning is occurring"
- mental image of a rose-bush vs. interaction of thought and a real subject (good thought => rich harvest)

## Publications

*The Comparative Linguistics of Uto-Aztecan* (1935)  
*Maya Writing and Its Decipherment* (1935)  
*Discussion of Hopi Linguistics* (1937)  
*Science and Linguistics* (1940)  
*Linguistics as an Exact Science* (1940)  
*Languages and Logic* (1941)  
*Grammatical Categories* (1945)  
*An American Indian Model of the Universe* (1950)  
*A Review of General-Semantics* (1950)

Under the editorship of John B. Carroll, many of Whorf's most important essays were collected in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, published in 1956 by the M.I.T. Press