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Q6(c)

## **Describe briefly the theoretical perspectives in linguistic anthropology to explain the relationship of culture, language and thought**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Linguistic Anthropology.

(d) Linguistic Anthropology.

### **Core demand of the question**

- State how linguistic anthropology relates language, culture and thought
- Describe the main theoretical perspectives, including relativity and its critiques
- Give ethnographic examples
- Keep the note on theoretical perspectives, not on grammar as such

### **Revision summary**

Boas, Sapir and Whorf linked language to habitual thought. Strong determinism is rejected; weak relativity remains.

**Berlin and Kay's** colour research showed universals and language-specific splits.

Hymes's ethnography of speaking studies who speaks how, when and to whom.

Silverstein and language-socialisation work treat meaning as social and learned.

Kinship terms and speech events are better illustrations than exotic mind-prisons.

Chomsky's innateness is a neighbouring foil, not the centre of this anthropological question.

### **Introduction**

Linguistic anthropology asks whether the language we speak is only a tool for labelling a ready-made world, or whether it also organises what we notice and how we think. The field does not rest on one slogan. It offers a set of perspectives from **Boas** and **Sapir** to **Whorf**, **Hymes**, and later cognitive and practice approaches.

### **Body**

#### **Boas, Sapir and Whorf**

**Franz Boas** treated language as a window on culture and insisted that each language be described in its own terms. **Edward Sapir** argued that language is a social guide to reality. **Benjamin Lee Whorf**, using Hopi and English contrasts, claimed that grammatical categories can channel habitual thought. This is linguistic relativity.

The strong version - language determines thought, so speakers live in sealed worlds - is not accepted. The weak version - language biases attention and memory - still organises research. Colour-term work by **Brent Berlin** and **Paul Kay** showed both universals and language-specific splits, which cooled the strongest Whorfian claims without killing the

question.

- **Kinship vocabularies are an anthropological example:** a language that splits maternal and paternal uncles trains a social eye that English "uncle" blurs. That is culture, language and thought in one kinship term.

### Language as social action

- **Dell Hymes** moved the field from inner thought to the **ethnography of speaking**: who may speak, in which code, on which occasion. Competence is cultural, not only grammatical. **Mikhail Bakhtin** (read into anthropology) and later **Michael Silverstein** treated indexicality: words point to context, rank and identity.

Here thought is less a private mental grammar and more a public skill. A court oath, a Sanskrit verse, factory Hindi, and an English-medium classroom are different speech events in the same country.

### Constraint, interaction and practice

**Noam Chomsky's** universal grammar is a neighbouring theory of an innate language faculty. Linguistic anthropologists usually reply that the interesting variation for culture sits in use, ideology and socialisation, not only in deep syntax. **Elinor Ochs** and language-socialisation studies show children acquiring culture as they acquire clauses.

**Pierre Bourdieu's** notion of legitimate language links accent to class. Thought here includes what one dares to say.

Emoji, code-mixing, or English-medium schooling are new channels for old questions about whose language counts as knowledge.

### How to close the relationship

Language is a cultural system, a cognitive habit and a field of power. Relativity without social use is too mental. Speech-event analysis without cognition is too thin. The relationship is that joint.

### Flow diagram

Language -> Relativity / Whorf  
Language -> Speech events / Hymes  
Language -> Indexicality and power  
Relativity / Whorf -> Habitual thought  
Speech events / Hymes -> Culture in use

### Conclusion

The main perspectives are Boasian description, Sapir-Whorf relativity in a weak form, Hymes's ethnography of speaking, and later work on indexicality and language socialisation. Culture, language and thought meet in kinship terms, colour words, and who is allowed to speak. Grammar does not trap a people in a sealed world forever.

### Facts & figures

**Sapir-Whorf relativity**

The claim that grammatical and lexical categories of a language influence habitual thought. The weak version is used; the strong determining version is not.

**Dell Hymes**

He proposed the ethnography of speaking: language as culturally organised events, not only as inner grammar.

**Berlin and Kay**

Their colour-term study argued for recurring universal foci as well as language-specific encoding, a major check on extreme Whorfianism.

**Franz Boas**

He insisted that languages and cultures be understood in their own categories, which opened the relativity debate without a rigid prison model.

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