

**Linguistics Relativity:  
Edward Sapir's Perspective on Language, Culture, and Cognition**

**Ronald Maraden Parlindungan Silalahi  
Bunda Mulia University**

**Abstract**

Language is a sign system which is used by society to cooperate, interact, and identify. Culture, Society, and Cognition is built based on human perception in their world. It is reflected through linguistics element used by language users for communication purposes. The idea about inter-relation of language and those three elements (Culture, Society, and Cognition) is conducted by an anthropologist and linguist, Edward Sapir. Sapir's perspective on culture is highly influenced by some western linguist and philosopher (like Boas, Morris, and Saussure). Sapir believes that language is cultural product. The linguistic constructions in particular language are built from influence mechanisms. Each language related to immeasurable variety of experiences and a limited array of formal categories (both lexical and grammatical). These categories coherently related to the interpretation of experience in the world. Whorf believes that the system of categories in each language provides an unusual system to certain language. Together with Whorf, Sapir conducted a hypothesis. The hypothesis conducted is an idea of differentiating the way of language is encoded cognition category and culture. Their existence in society influences the way of thinking. It influences human thought and action. Language determines thought and linguistics category determine cognitive category. Hypothesis which was conducted by them is named Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

**Key Words**

*Edward Sapir, Relativity, Culture, Society, Cognition*

**1. Introduction**

Language is an arbitrary sign system, which is used by society to cooperate, interact, and identify. Such language sign form a mutually-dependent relationship between concept and mental characteristic and acoustical picture. The use of

language by speech and writing (*parole*<sup>1</sup>) and its relation with the sign system (*langue*<sup>2</sup>) creates a sign system used in communication.

Basically, modern linguistics studies are focused on the function of language as a medium of verbal communication. Initially, linguistics phenomenon was analyzed by using formal<sup>3</sup> approaches (internal structure of language) named structuralism. In the next phase, the importance of culture, cognition<sup>4</sup>, and extra linguistics<sup>5</sup> (non-linguistics) aspect as part of communication influence linguistics analysis.

Related to the importance of culture and cognition in the study of linguistics; in this article, I will portray one of the most important and outstanding figure that bridge those three fields, named Edward Sapir and his view concerning culture, religion, and psychology. The last section will discuss about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis with his student Benjamin Lee Whorf.

## 2. Edward Sapir

Edward Sapir is an anthropologist and linguist, which is considered genius by his friends. Sapir's knowledge of language is phenomenal. His talent and bright idea manifested in immeasurable area inspire the others. Edward Sapir was born in Lauenburg, Germany on 26 January 1884, in a Jew family. His father who is a *cantor* (song leader in Synagogue) brought Sapir together with his family to America when he was five years old. His talent and astuteness can be seen when he got a scholarship at Horace Mann School and Colombia College. In 1904, He

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<sup>1</sup> *Parole* is written in Saussure book "*Cours de Linguistique generale* (1916)". *Parole* is the actual use of a language in speech

<sup>2</sup> *Langue* is written in Saussure book "*Cours de Linguistique generale* (1916)". *Langue* is the actual use of language.

<sup>3</sup> Formal Approaches is an approaches used in the study of linguistic phenomenon based on internal or structural element of language. In Psychology structuralism can be defined as a method of interpretation and analysis of human cognition, behavior, culture, and experience, which focuses on the relation of contrast between elements in a conceptual system.

<sup>4</sup> Cognition is the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge through thought, experience, and the senses (perception, sensation, or intuition.)

<sup>5</sup> Extra linguistic is anon-linguistics element (not involving or beyond the bounds of language)

finished his study in Columbia College and took his Master degree in Germanic study. At that time, he came in contact with Franz Boas<sup>6</sup> and Morris<sup>7</sup> (experts in linguistics and philosophy).

His curiosity in language and anthropology brought Sapir in the chain of researches, which was finally decanted in his hypothesis. In a research of American-Indian language, Sapir found that exotic Indian language have an immeasurable difference with Indo-European language. Furthermore, he tried to relate the difference among those cultures with social- cultural aspect of those languages. Hereinafter, in a research of Tekelma language, he presented the results of his research in his dissertation that was published when he was twenty years old.

In 1907, Edward Sapir conducted a research on Yana language (an Indian language) with a full support from the anthropological department of the University of California. Along with the end of the research, Sapir decided to move to the University of Pennsylvania and conducted a research about Ute language. In 1909, Sapir was awarded a PhD title. At the University of Colombia, Sapir set his mind to leave federal America and go to Ottawa, Canada in the year 1910. In Ottawa, Sapir formed an Anthropological division at the Geological Survey Canadian National Museum. In the same year, he married Florence Selson and had three children, Michael, Hellen, and Philp. In 1925, Sapir left Ottawa and went back to Chicago after his wife died. He married Jean Mcclenaghan in 1926 and had a child from that marriage. In the end, he left Chicago, because the University of Yale gave him an interesting offer which is impossible to refuse. He

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<sup>6</sup> Franz Boas is (July 9, 1858 – December 21, 1942) was a German American anthropologist a pioneer of modern anthropology who has been called the "Father of American Anthropology". Boas once summed up his approach to anthropology and folklore by saying: "In the course of time I became convinced that a materialistic point of view, for a physicist a very real one, was untenable.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Morris is an expert in semiotics fields. Morris's development of a behavioral theory of signs (semiotics) is partly due to his desire to unify logical positivism with behavioral empiricism and pragmatism. Morris's union of these three philosophical perspectives eventuated in his claim that symbols have three types of relations: 1) to objects, 2) to persons, and 3) to other symbols. He later called these relations "semantics", "pragmatics", and "syntactic".

believed that his dream to form an anthropological and linguistics center can be reached in Yale University. After a chain of heart attacks in 1937, Sapir's condition progressively deteriorated and in 1939 he passed away.

### **3. Genuine Culture and Empty Throne**

Sapir's views about language are different from people at his time. At that time, anthropologists tried to keep the studies from culture, but Sapir tried to formulate an idea about culture which is considered good and real (Genuine Culture). Through his knowledge which is obtained from a serial of anthropological study in primitive culture; Sapir tried to propagate his formulation about real and good culture (Genuine Culture) to be understood and applied in society at that time in an article entitled "Culture, Genuine and Spurious". This article is considered unfinished finely because it does not express an overall ideas of Sapir.

In "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" Sapir portrays the condition of society at that time. The article starts with the description of society faction in certain culture. Basically, the culture becomes the base of life and the perspective of society. Every people assess from culture perspective. There is no personal discretion to individual choice. It can be seen clearly in the word *crime* and *nobility*. Everyone who lives in certain culture assign different value about those two words. Every undesirable and evil thing is classified in *crime* category and every admirable action is classified in nobility. The classification is relied on the values embraced by society with certain culture. This statement is an indication that every regulation is peremptory and convention has an absolute truth. In the end, that condition forces people to do action, which is suitable with culture. For example, if convention states "we hate art work", hence all convention members will assume that the art work is not good for them. Sapir states that condition as the empty throne. The empty throne is the enemy of mankind. Through this statement, Sapir tries to formulate a good and real culture, which is named Genuine Culture by him.

Before entering into the article (Genuine Culture), Sapir describes some variants of meaning related to the concept of culture. He expresses that the word *culture* is generally used in three variants of meaning

1. The first definition is technically used by all culture historian and ethnologist. The definition implies that culture represents endowed element in the life of human being, material, and spiritual
2. The second definition refers to a conventional idea. The definition expresses that culture comes from individual omission or repair. The culture is an empirical assimilation of knowledge. In the end, the assimilation creates a numbers of sanction and rule
3. The third definition related spiritual aspect owned by certain group.

Sapir believes that those three variant are built throughout history. The way of thinking and reacting is highly affected by the development of culture in human history.

According to Sapir, the Genuine Culture can be compiled in each level or type of civilization. Genuine Culture is harmony, balance, and self-satisfaction. It is the expression of action in the life of human being. Furthermore, he expresses that empty culture is the spiritually-meaningless culture. It finally brings the men to a wrong end. I believe that Sapir's interpretation is the reflection of his social critics to American society at that time (which is well known as the Jazz Age or Roaring Twenty). At that time, people were living in frustration. They were trying to find the meaning of life by satisfying their earthly ambition, but in the end, they obtain the meaningless meaning of life. The statement is the indication that they have been damned before they are born (F.S Fitzgerald <sup>8</sup>in "The Beautiful and Damned").

Sapir expresses that the Genuine Culture is not a kind of spiritual patching from small element from men consciousness that avoids a harmonious blend in human life. The human consciousness is analogized as water-tight compartment in

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was an American author of novels and short stories. His works are the paradigm writings of the Jazz Age. The term is coined himself. Fitzgerald is considered a member of the "Lost Generation" of the 1920s. He finished four novels, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *Tender Is the Night* and his most famous, the celebrated classic, *The Great Gatsby*.

a ship. Genuine Cultures is not a small element in human consciousness. It is the consciousness of men.

In his three article, entitled "Group", "Custom", and "Fashion"; Sapir relates anthropology with sociology. Through those three articles; Sapir communicates his idea about the demeanor pattern brought by tradition and lives in a social group. An old established demeanor pattern can change, which is resulted by the appearance of new demeanor pattern. In the end, it forms the ethics and the law in society.

#### **4. Religion**

In his article entitled "The Meaning of Religion (1928)" Sapir discusses about religion issues and interfaith-religion relationship. Initially, the article is presented as one issue in his lectures in University of Northwester. All issues discussed in those lectures are collected into a volume entitled "Man and His World".

In "The Meaning of Religion (1928)"; Sapir tries to clarify the definition of religion by his own perspective. Sapir looks religion as a never-ending effort conducted by human to find a spiritual peace. Sapir's perspective on religion is the representation of American during 1920's. At that time, the American experienced of vagueness of life, because target of their life is ill defined. The vagueness brings the American into the course of seeking for peace.

Sapir perspective on religion is not limited in the forms of trust and compliance to the creator; or a group of individual who trust the existence of God (who own an absolute power); or even the group of human, which is gathered in a religious service building to express their love and compliance to God. According to Sapir religion can be defined as.

1. A never ending effort conducted by human to find spiritual peace in their life
2. Religion do not signify a definite trust to God, deity, or soul

3. Religion is not a religious concept but scientific and erudite concept
4. Religion is not ethics, science, and art. However, religion do not close any possibilities to relate to those three elements
5. The manifestation of religion can be found in social organization at one particular tribe.

According to Sapir, the existence of religion influences society. He expresses that the existence of religion in society can form reality to entire aspect of life, such as art, ethics, and science.

## 5. Language

The idea concerning the relationship between cognition and language has been debated by American and European philosopher throughout history. St. Augustine expressed that language is the label for the existing concepts in human mind. Immanuel Kant believes that Language is the tool to experience the world.

According to Sapir, Issues related to language and cultural phenomenons are interesting to be analyzed. His desire to analyze language and anthropology brings him to a serial of research about language and culture. Sapir's view about language and culture is highly influenced by the so called Germany philosopher, Wilhelm Von Humboldt<sup>9</sup>. Humboldt is philosopher and thinker who often used the functional principal in his writings. By using the one-on-one relation; Humboldt analyzes the relation between form and meaning. Humboldt states that way of human look into their world are determined by the language used by them. Therefore, language influences men's perspective about their world.

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Christian Karl Ferdinand Freiherr von Humboldt (22 June 1767 – 8 April 1835) was a German philosopher, government functionary, diplomat, and founder of Humboldt Universität. He is especially remembered as a linguist who made important contributions to the philosophy of language and to the theory and practice of education. Wilhelm Von Humboldt is Humboldt was a philosopher of note and wrote *On the Limits of State Action* in 1791-2 (though it was not published until 1850, after Humboldt's death), one of the boldest defenses of the liberties of the Enlightenment.

In 1820 Wilhelm von Humboldt expressed that language is a mind factory that yielding thought. Thought is produced as a kind of internal dialogue in human mind by using a similar grammatical category. Von Humboldt believes that the cultural perspective (*Weltanschauung*) is reflected by the language used. In 1820 Wilhelm Von Humboldt expresses that the differences among languages are not related to the difference among sign system. The difference among language is the reflection of the difference perspective of people about the world. This statement implies that world view owned by language users is highly related to the language used for communication purposes.

In the early year of 1920, Von Humboldt Wilhelm refused the idea of a linguist named William Dwight Whitney<sup>10</sup>, who explains that some languages are naturally more superior to other languages. The superiorities is owned by the nations, which lives in civilization. The rejection of this idea is also submitted by Franz Boas. Boas believes that every language equally has the same repertoire. The repertoire manifests the meaning equally.

In his research and article, Sapir describes the relation between language and the world view. Language is not a limited appliance of communications. Language system creates scheme (schemata) to analyze the world. His view about the scheme is based on Bartlett's analysis. Bartlett views scheme as a chain of organizing knowledge that is related to certain element in world. The definition is similar to all language users in every culture. For example, every language has different words to describe the meaning of the word *house*, but the encyclopedic knowledge about *house* is similar in each language. Every house has room, roof and door, and even every house can be rented or made as residence. The example implies that the scheme has a similar elementary element for every language.

During 1917-1923; through his four books ("Ace Trait personality Speech"; " Personality And Symbolism"; " Why Cultural Anthropology needs psychiatrist"; and " Understanding Behavior in Society"), Sapir tried to relate the

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<sup>10</sup> William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894) was an American linguist, philologist, and lexicographer who edited *The Century Dictionary*



ideas proposed by Freud<sup>11</sup>, Rivers<sup>12</sup>, and Jung<sup>13</sup> with his own idea. In his book; Sapir tries to link psychological with anthropological aspects. I believe Sapir is one of the pioneers in the study of social-psychology science.

Conservative study of psychology positions psychology as the interpersonal study. They believe that psychological aspect of human can be studied from one perspective (individual human perspective). Sapir believes this perspective is a great mistake. Sapir believes the existence of men relates to an extra-personal relation. The extra personal relationship can influence psychological aspect of society and its environment. This statement triggers the change of conservative psychology into a modern perspective of social psychology. Modern psychology believes that every man influences the world and society. It is caused by the social interaction between each perpetrator in society.

Sapir believes that every language represents an implicit classification of experience that varies across languages. The variation has little effect on thought or culture. Edward Sapir (1884-1939) accepted the idea proposed by Boas<sup>14</sup>. According to Boas, certain categories in one particular language enchain experience, the way of thinking, and the way of interpreting social phenomenon in the world. Gestalt<sup>15</sup>, psychoanalytic theory, and Sapir's literary knowledge play

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<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud (Sigismund Schlomo Freud (6 May 1856 – 23 September 1939), was a Jewish Austrian neurologist who founded the psychoanalytic school of psychiatry. Freud is best known for his theories of the unconscious mind and the defense mechanism of repression, and for creating the clinical practice of psychoanalysis for treating psychopathology through dialogue between a patient.

<sup>12</sup> William Halse Rivers (12 March 1864 - 4 June 1922) was an English anthropologist, neurologist, ethnologist and psychiatrist, best known for his work with shell-shocked soldiers during World War I.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Gustav Jung (26 July 1875 – 6 June 1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist, an influential thinker and the founder of analytical psychology. Jung is often considered the first modern psychologist to state that the human psyche is "by nature religious" and to explore it in depth. Though not the first to analyze dreams, he has become perhaps one of the most well known pioneers in the field of dream analysis.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Boas (1858-1942) American anthropologist conducted an investigation of the native North American languages.

<sup>15</sup> Gestalt 'psychology' an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts)

an important role to develop his idea about to this issue. Sapir in his article does not focus on linguistics form or content, but rather at the formal organizational characteristic, meaning, intention, and the way language is built.

## 6. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

One of the so called Sapir's students, Benjamin Lee Whorf, a chemical engineering who worked as an expert of fire effect damage, made a research on a number of world language in the world, like Hebrew and Indian. In his research, he finds that language influences the world view of its users.

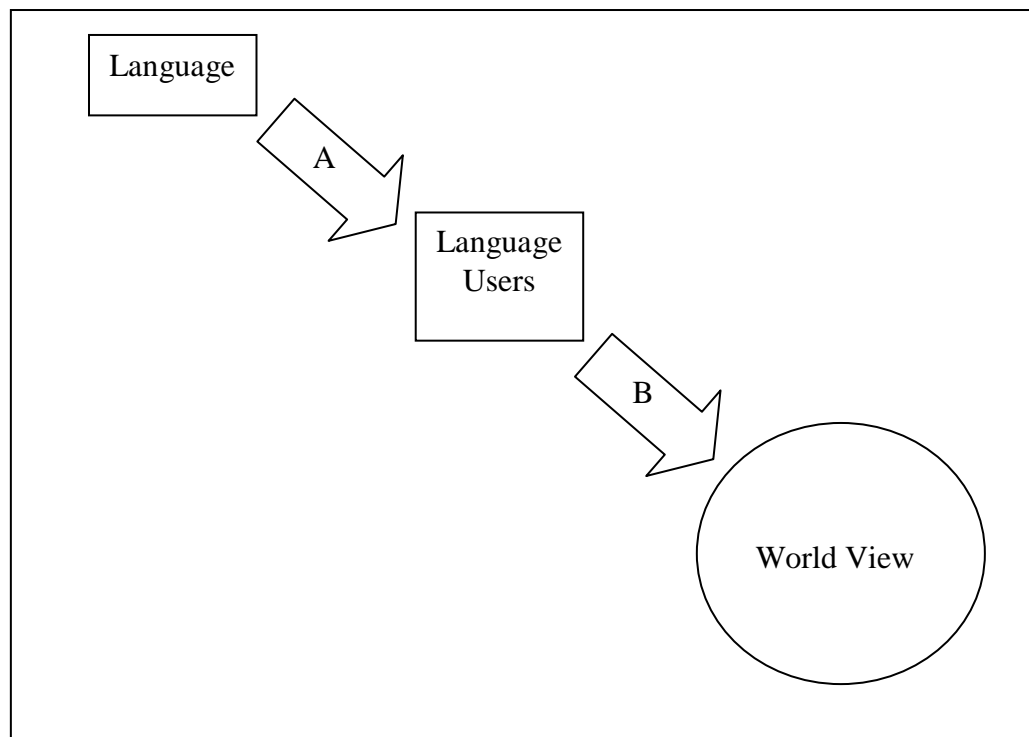


Figure 6.1 Whorf's Perspective on World View

(The Figure is pictured by the Writer)

The first arrow (A) portrays the relation between language and its users. Language builds human perspective about his world (B).

Initially, his view emerges when he inspected an oil company. In the inspection, he found that the fire was set by the employees who threw a match into an empty oil drum. The employees did not realize that the empty drum contained the flammable materials (vapors). Basically, the empty drum represents certain language or special perception. The residue (vapor) inside the drum can influence the world which is represented by the burnt oil company.

In his research, Whorf analyzed the linguistic constructions in a particular language. He believes in the existence of influence mechanisms and demonstrates that relation of a particular belief and behavior of language users. In one of his articles, Whorf stated that each language is related to an immeasurable variety of experiences and a limited array of formal categories (both lexical and grammatical). These categories are coherently related to the interpretation of experience in the world.

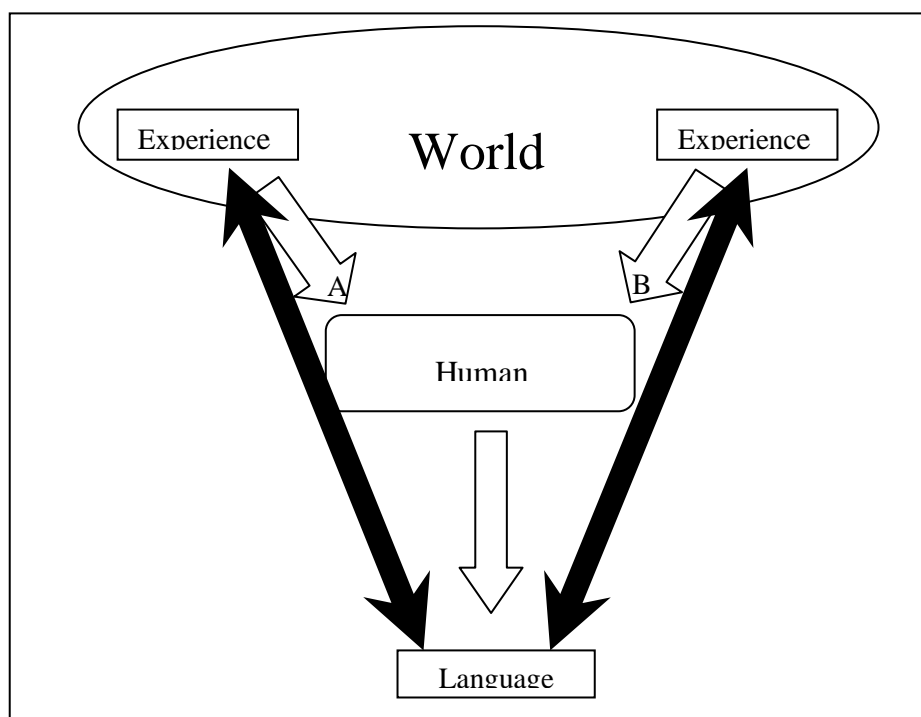


Figure 2 Whorf's Perspective on the Relation of World View and Language Categories  
(The Figure is pictured by the Writer)

The arrows (A and B) portray the relation between human experiences in the world and human perspective about his world. That perspective is reflected through the language used for communication purposes (B).

The variation of languages is recognized based on the distinction of language and the usage of these categories (see p.10) as a system of reference. Whorf believes that the system of categories in each language provides an unusual system to certain language. Usually, the native speaker assumes that the categories and distinctions in their own language are natural. When speaker interprets an experience by using certain category of language; automatically, they will entangle other intentions that are hidden in certain category. The hearer defines this as a matter which is implicitly owned by language. The knowledge about how to interpret the meaning (implicitly and explicitly) is built based on the agreement which is not realized by the users of language. For examples, to express his anger, **A** will use certain linguistics category (suprasegmental features: stress or tone). Those categories are communicated to **B**. **B** receives those features and try to comprehend it. **B** defines this as matter which is implicitly owned by **A**'s language based on **B**'s experience in the world.

Together with Whorf, Sapir conducted a hypothesis which gives a deep impact to language studies and discourse. The hypothesis conducted by Sapir and Whorf is an idea of differentiating the way language encodes cognition category and culture. Their existence in society influences the way of thinking. It influences human thought and action. Language determines thought and linguistics category determine cognitive category. The hypothesis which was conducted by them is named Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis generated quarrel among the experts at that time, because the relationship of language and the world view is unacceptable and ill defined. There are three important points in The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that are considered unclear, unacceptable, and ill defined, that requires clarification.

1. The interpretation of the term *language* from Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Basically, it is acceptable that language has variants of word for each

object, however it is not precise to classify all objects in one word. For example, some languages have some different word to define the word *ship* 'sea transportation appliance'. However, the speaker of a language that has one word to define the word *ship*, can differentiate the object *Vessel* and *coaster* 'small ship operated in the sea shore'.

2. The meaning of world view offered need to be clarified. Do *world view* relate to the way of thinking and perception of reality? Do the word *world view* relate to the way we used to remember something? Do the world views represent action, belief, or behavior? The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis followers relate *world view* with action. However, the relation between those things requires verification.
3. The meaning of word *relation* in Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Sapir-Whorf defines *relation* as impact, but the word assessed is imprecise, because *relation* imply a causal relationship. Some experts reject Sapir-Whorf definition on relationship, because the term *relationship offered* is not related to non-causal relation.

Eric Lenneberg<sup>16</sup> published an erudite criticism to the idea proposed by Whorf and Sapir. He expressed that the examples proposed by Whorf (from language user view) are unacceptable in the real world. When Whorf tries to present an event from the native language perspective by using English; he is translating the native language in English. It is unacceptable for every language, since every language has different concepts. Whorf is assumed try to comprehend a language without comprehending the thought of its users. Lundeberg believes that Whorf does not show the existence of causal relation among linguistic phenomenon, behavior, and reality.

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Heinz Lenneberg (1921–1975) was a linguist and neurologist who pioneered ideas on language acquisition and cognitive psychology, particularly in terms of the concept of innateness.

Together with Roger Brown<sup>17</sup>, Lenneberg stated that Sapir and Whorf cannot directly relate the linguistic symptom with behavior. Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis didn't portray a real hypothesis. Brown & Lenneberg formulated two rationale principles about the relation of linguistics symptom and behavior.

1. World is differently accepted in language community
2. Language causes and builds cognitive structure.

These two principles are developed into two formulations by Roger Brown.

1. Structural difference between language systems interact with one another through nonlinguistic element in native language
2. The structure of native language influences and determines the world view. It is built in the process of studying language.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is not accepted by experts. Among the core hypothesis, the parallel relation between language structure and the construction of reality is accepted by all experts. This is the reason why Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is named as "linguistic relatively principle". This statement implies that the linguistics picture of meaning about reality is considered relative. However, the idea that language reflects the way reality is looked upon incites the study of language and culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Roger William Brown (April 14, 1925 – December 11, 1997) was an American social psychologist.

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