Language and culture

Unit 7

Unit 7. Language and culture

1. The topic of this unit:

This unit discusses the connection between language and culture, and the kind of sociolinguistic evidence we have regarding a connection between the two.

Culture in the sociolinguistic sense is understood as the ways of experiencing the world and forming concepts, not in the sense of "high culture" (like literary classics, classical music, etc.). In this sense, culture is what we know when we know how to function in our society and fit in. It includes seemingly trivial details of everyday life such as which door one should board a bus or tram through, how much tip to give in what service situation, and who is included in the concept of "immediate family".

2. The connection between language and culture

It is widely believed that language and culture are in a symbiotic relationship, but the two are definitely not the same. If you know a language, you do not necessarily know its culture – as any person who grew up as a bilingual in one country will tell you: such a person might know two languages and know the culture s/he grew up in, but s/he will likely know the other culture only partially. Of course, if such a bilingual lived in both countries while growing up, s/he may also have full knowledge of both cultures, but this is relatively rare. (It is not a coincidence that when spies are sent by one country into another to live as if they were natives of the latter (as deep-cover agents), their training includes many years' practical instruction on the culture of that country in addition to the language.)

Regarding the idea of a connection between language and culture, the widely accepted stance is that that culture shapes language, and language reflects culture.

2.1. The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis

Probably the best known expression of the relationship between language and culture is the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis (also known as the Whorf Hypothesis or the Whorfian Hypothesis), so named after the American linguists and anthropologists who formulated it, Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941). Their ideas regarding language and culture came out of their work with Native American languages, especially Hopi, which have grammatical categories very different from those of Indo-European languages. (For instance, Hopi makes a grammatical distinction between nouns that indicate processes vs. those that are constant.) This prompted the hypothesis that language determines or shapes how its speakers view and think about the world, acting as a filter to their reality. If taken to its extreme, this

hypothesis would mean that speakers of different languages see reality in vastly different ways; that speakers who grow up bilingual can see the world in two very different ways, depending on which language they are using at a given moment, and have essentially split personalities; and it would also mean that it is impossible to translate from one language to the other. We know of course that this is not so: bilingual people do not have split personalities, and it is very much possible to translate between languages. Moreover, we also know that one can actually explain one language in terms of another! But we also know that it is not always possible to translate something in exactly the same way into another language, and that bilingual people can feel and be seen as different when speaking one or the other of their languages. This means that the "strong version" of the hypothesis is not true, but a weak version very likely is.

Video tasks:

1. Watch this talk, "How language shapes the way we think" in which Lera Boroditsky talks about how our thinking is influenced by the language we speak.

https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think

Can you think of examples in the languages you know that show that there very different ways of thinking about the same thing in different languages?

2. Watch this other talk, "Could your language affect your ability to save money?" by Keith Chen, in which he talks about his very surprising research results that can have very far-reaching consequences regarding the implications of differences between languages.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lw3YTbubyjI

Can you think of similarly far-reaching differences between your native language and English, or between two languages you know well?

2.2. Some differences between languages

Interesting differences between languages that offer a glimpse into different ways of categorizing things in the world abound.

Examples concerning vocabulary and concepts are as follows. The Garo language, spoken in India, has several words for different types of rice, but not one word that would serve as the collective word for the various types. Russian has two different words for *blue*: синий (*sinij* in Latin script) and голубой (*goluboj*), where the former is "dark blue", the latter is "light blue", but there is not one word that would convey the spectrum of what *blue* stands for in English, ranging from dark to light blue. English and Russian both have words for *berry* (Russian: ягода), which is a collective word for any kind of berry (strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, blueberry, etc.), which is something that Hungarian does not

have. Meanwhile, Hungarian has a special set of verbs that is used with animals separate from another set that can be used with people: *zabál* "eat", *megdöglik* "die", and *ellik* "give birth" are verbs that are used with animals, whereas *eszik* "eat", *meghal* "die", and *szül* "give birth" are used with people. (Truth be told, the former set can also be used with people, but such usage is highly derogatory.)

There are also grammatical categories that languages differ in greatly. Many languages do not have articles (such as Russian and other Slavic languages, Finnish and Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian, Chinese, Korean and Japanese) and do not differentiate between phrases such as "a book" vs. "the book", whereas many do (English and other Germanic languages, French and other Romance languages, Hungarian, and Greek) – does this mean that speakers of the former type of languages have a different way of thinking about definiteness, however? Chinese does not mark (e.g. singular vs. plural) number on nouns; some languages (e.g. Hungarian) do not mark grammatical gender while others (e.g. Russian, German, Dutch, French, etc.) do, whereas English does so only in pronouns (*he* vs. *she* vs. *it*) but not in nouns. Some languages, such as, for instance, Turkic languages, use evidential tenses, i.e. grammatical marking differentiating between what the speaker knows by hearsay vs. by experience.

Sometimes languages lack entire concepts that other languages have: for instance, the concept of *privacy* (as in *I need some privacy* or *it's hard to have any privacy in this house*) is largely missing in Hungarian whereas it is clearly present in English. Or, English vs. Hungarian speakers use different concepts when urging their small children to play with their toys together with other children: English speakers urge their children to *share* their toys, while Hungarian parents urge theirs to *let* or *allow* (*enged*) other kids to use them, in what could be argued to be very different ways of disregarding vs. focusing on ownership of said toys, respectively.

2.3. Prototype theory

Do speakers of different languages have markedly different views of the world because of the differences in concepts or grammatical categories of their languages? We do not really know. But we do know that the presence of linguistic categories (such as words that cover certain concepts) in a language makes it easier to refer to that concept and perceive instances of it than if it is absent.

Issues such as these are explained by a strand of research in cognitive science called prototype theory, advanced by psychologist Eleanor Rosch and dealing with how concepts are composed, and what are (proto)typical instances of concepts. Prototypical instances are, in brief, members of a class of objects most readily or most often associated with that class, where associations are often culturally determined. For instance, while for speakers of European languages a *table* is probably the prototypical instance of *furniture*, and *apple* is the prototypical instance of *fruit*, the prototypical *dog* is likely a *vizsla* for a Hungarian speaker, a *German shepherd* for a German speaker, and a *beagle* for an English speaker. *Soccer* is likely the prototypical game in many countries of Europe and Latin America, whereas *basketball* is for North Americans.

3. Kinship terminology

The system of kinship terms – that is, the terms for persons to whom one is related through kinship, including both through common ancestors and marriage – provides important indications about relationships that bear importance and/or significance in the given society and culture as far as family relations are concerned, which is why anthropologists have long been studying kinship terms as one of the first aspects of a society/culture they investigate. For instance, if the two types of uncles (parent's brother vs. parent's sister's husband) are designated with different words in a society, that serves as an indication that they are distinguished on the basis of social organization.

Kinship terms, thus, provide an insight into social organization. When social organization changes in a society, kinship terms typically change, too, to reflect these changes. An elaborate example of this is provided by Russian kinship terms, investigated by Paul Friedrich in 1966. Until the emancipation of serfs in 1861, Russian peasants lived in large and stable, multigenerational, extended households (often totaling several dozen people) in which a complex and detailed social hierarchy prevailed based on a combination of social relationships and age. This necessitated keeping track of how one was related to the other people in the household, with distinct designations for a great number of kinship terms. Dal's classic dictionary of the modern Russian language published in the 1860s included over 300 kinship terms, and, according to Friedrich, the average Russian speaker at the time knew and used at least 150 regularly. Because women joined their husband's household after marriage, the Russian kinship system differentiated in parallel fashion between blood relatives and relatives by marriage (square brackets include the English transliteration of the Russian words in Cyrillic, with ' marking the palatalization of consonants):

Father-in-law: свекор [svjokor] "husband's father" vs. тесть [test'] "wife's father"
Mother-in-law: свекровь [svekrov'] "husband's mother" vs. теща [tjoshja] "wife's mother"
Brother-in-law: деверь [dever'] "husband's brother" vs. шурин [shurin] "wife's brother"
Sister-in-law: золовка [zolovka] "husband's sister" vs. свесь [sves'] "wife's sister"

In addition to blood relatives and relatives by marriage, the kinship terms included those for step relatives and also for milk kinship, formed during nursing by a non-biological mother.

The emancipation of serfs in 1861 freed people from the obligation to live in the traditional households and made them free to move elsewhere. In his article Friedrich noted in detailed observations that at the time of writing, a hundred years after the emancipation, the average Russian speaker knew about two dozen kinship terms and had difficulty keeping the parallel terms for in-laws straight. So, basically, what happened during these 100 years is that many kinship relationships lost their importance or even relevance for speakers and that quickly resulted in speakers' disuse of kinship terms referring to these relationships.

4. Basic color terms

An interesting insight into differences between languages with no apparent explanation of why they are there or how they arose is offered by what has been called basic color terms since Brent Berlin and Paul Kay's 1969 eponymous work. A basic color term is a color name which is one word (such as *red*, *blue*, or *green* in English, but not *emerald green*), is not a subdivision of another color (e.g. *magenta* is not a basic color term because it is a kind of *pink*), is known to all speakers, and is used for anything (e.g. note that *blonde* satisfies the first three requirements but not the fourth, since it is only used for *hair*).

Using a spectrum of colors such as the one below, Berlin and Kay asked speakers of over 100 languages to indicate the areas subsumed by basic color terms in those languages (as well as mark the typical manifestations of the colors with dots – this aspect of their study will not be discussed here, but interested readers should check the original work for details).
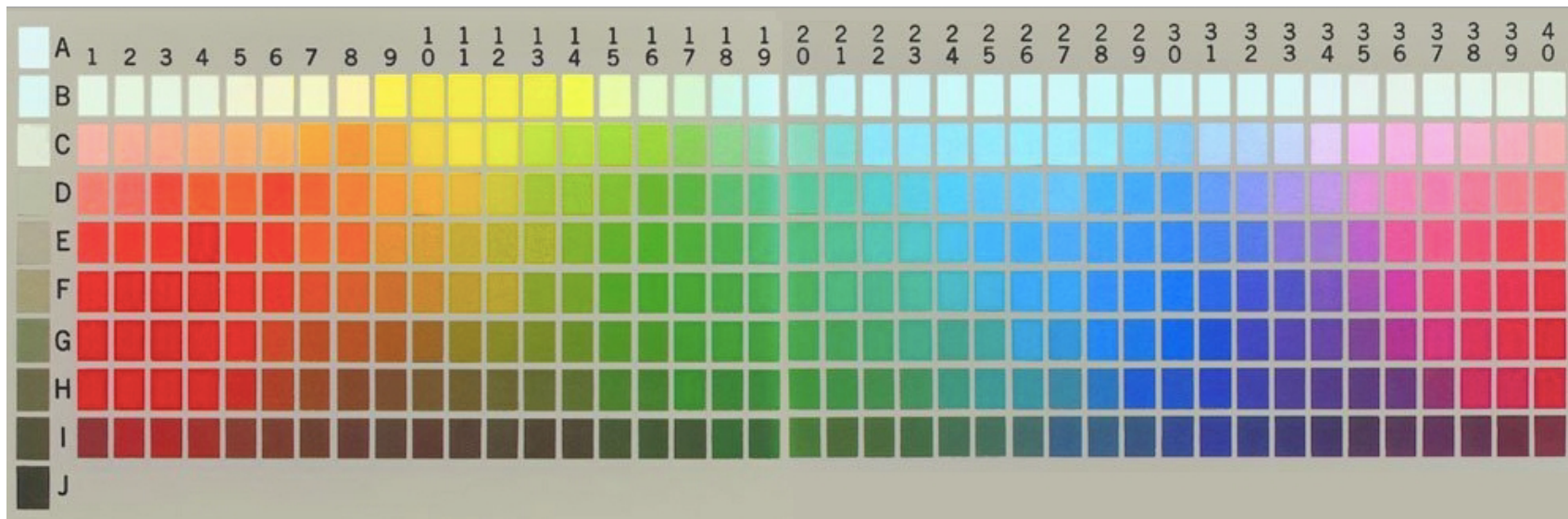

Figure 1. Berlin and Kay's color spectrum

Berlin and Kay made very interesting observations about the range of languages they studied. First of all, languages have between 2 and 11 basic color terms, and the terms they have follow a fairly uniform pattern. The whole range of basic color terms is the following: black, white,

red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey. (A language having only two basic color terms does not, however, mean that its speakers do not see colors or do not have names for them, it only means that they do not name the other colors through basic color terms, but, for instance, through descriptors like "grass color" or "blood color", which, by definition, do not count as basic color terms since they consist of two words.)

If a language has only two basic color terms, like Ngombe (an Afroasiatic language of Africa), these are black and white. If a language has three, like Swahili, these are black and white plus red; if four, like Somali (another Afroasiatic language) or Tongan (an Austronesian language of the South Pacific), these are black and white and red, plus green or yellow (Somali has green, and Tongan has yellow as its fourth color); and if it has five, like Navajo (a Native American language of the Athabaskan family in the United States), then these are black, white, red, green, and yellow. If a language has six basic color terms, it has the first five plus blue, as is the case with Mandarin; if it has seven, it has the previous six plus brown, like Javanese (a language spoken in Indonesia). And if a language has 8, 9 10, or 11 basic color terms, it has the previous seven plus one, two, three, or four of purple, pink, orange, or grey (added in any combination). A language with 8 basic color terms is Urdu (it has the first seven plus purple); there are 9 in Cantonese (the first seven plus pink and grey) and 10 in Vietnamese (it lacks orange). Many languages have all 11 terms: English, Hungarian, Russian, Bulgarian, Spanish, Hebrew, Japanese, etc. As we can see, the basic color terms seem to be hierarchical! Their ordering is as follows:

[white, black] < [red] < [green, yellow] < [blue] < [brown] < [purple, pink, orange, grey]

This means, remarkably, that there are only 22 possible combinations (instead of the logically possible 2,048!) of the eleven basic color terms in languages. Why? No one knows for sure. There are also peculiarities in some languages: Russian has two words for *blue*, as has been mentioned above, whereas Hungarian has two words for red, *piros* and *vörös* (the latter is not a basic color term in that it is used with a limited number of objects such as blood, wine, and naturally red hair, as well as for the red flag of the communists).

In recent years the American linguist Daniel Everett has discovered that the Amazonian language Pirahã in Brazil does not have any color terms at all. He attributes this fact to the more principle of the speakers of the language which Everett calls "the immediacy of experience": the fact that speakers make "assertions only related directly to the moment of speech" and do not categorize or generalize. Color terms are in fact encoded categorizations: we assign the outward hue of an object to a group of other objects of the same hue and label it with a term. There are also no numbers in Pirahã, and no art whatsoever in Pirahã culture.

There are other peculiarities surrounding color terms in languages as well. If we look at Berlin and Kay's charts documenting the areas that speakers of various languages consider to be manifestations of particular colors, we see that areas of what is essentially equivalent colors are by far not the same across languages, even in the case of languages with the same number of basic color terms. Let's compare the areas assigned to basic color terms by speakers of American English and Hungarian in Berlin and Kay's study:
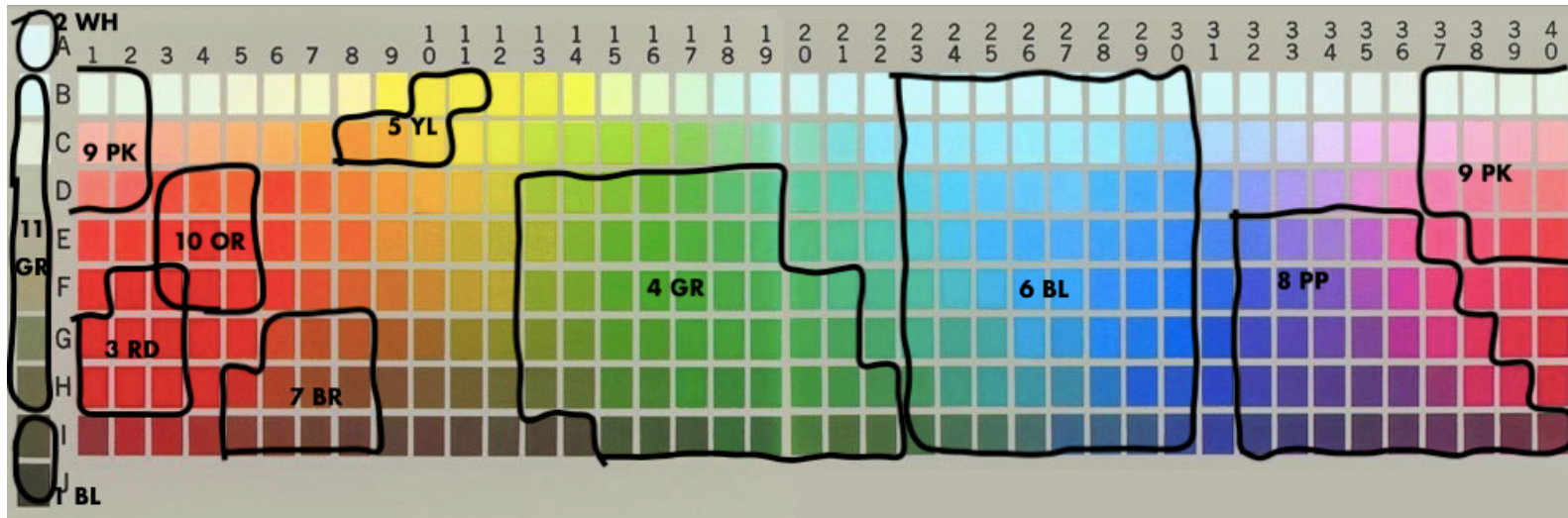
Figure 2. The areas of the American English basic color terms (based on Berlin and Kay 1969)
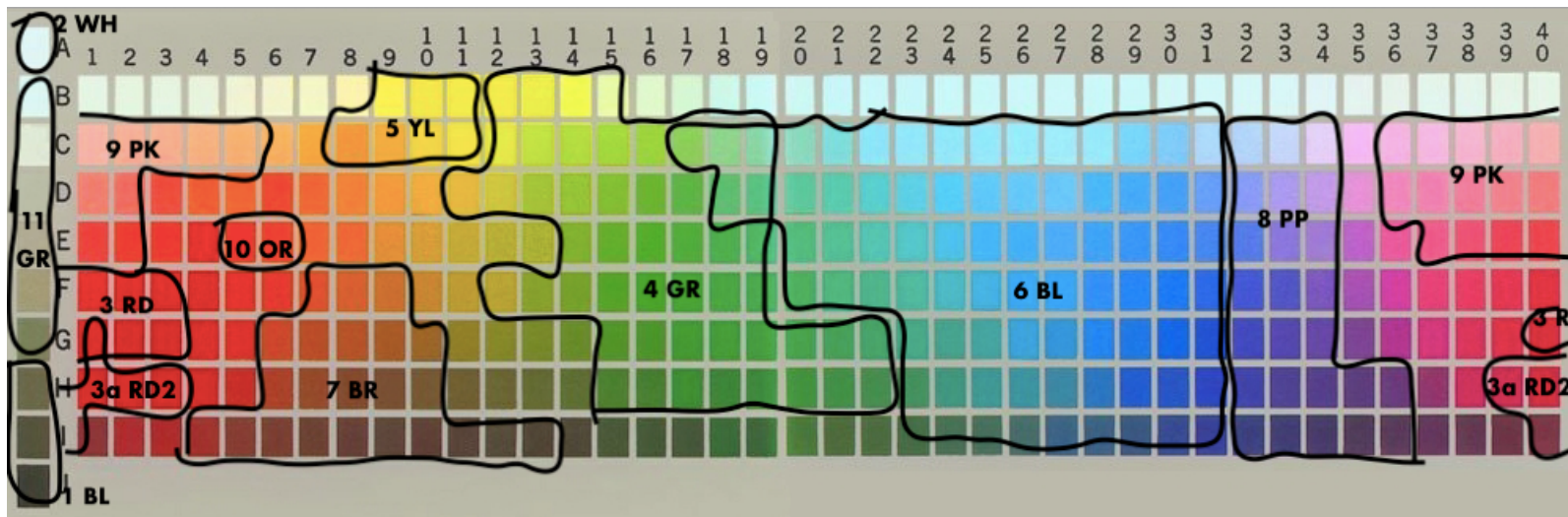

Figure 3. The areas of the Hungarian basic color terms (based on Berlin and Kay 1969)

What we can see if we compare the two charts, Figures 2 and 3, is that the areas of the color spectrum assigned to the various colors by speakers of the two languages are not exactly in the same place, they are not the same size, and sometimes there are even greater differences: one and the same segment of the color spectrum is assigned to one color in one language and another color in the other language. For instance, English *purple* includes part of the area assigned to *vörös* ("red", RD2 in the chart), the darkest part of *grey* in English is in the territory of *black* in Hungarian, whereas what is part of the territory of *blue* in Hungarian is clearly *green* in English. This latter shade is in fact what is called *teal green* in English and *(zöldes) kék* "(greenish) blue" in Hungarian. This difference can potentially cause misunderstandings between speakers of English and Hungarian: cf. this conversation from real life (slightly modified):

Wife (Hungarian): "Where is your blue sweater? I want to wash it."
Husband (American): "I don't have a blue sweater."
Wife: "The one your mother gave you last Christmas?"
Husband: "Oh, that's GREEN!"

Research tasks:
1. Using Berlin and Kay's color spectrum (on p. 5 above), ask 5 each of native speakers of two languages to mark the areas they assume to be of the eleven basic color designations. What differences do you get in the responses of speakers of the same language? Do you see any systematic differences between the responses of the speakers of the two languages?
2. Using the same color spectrum, ask 2 or 3 people who grew up speaking the same two languages (e.g. English and Hungarian etc.) to mark the areas of the basic color designations first in one and then in the other of their languages. Do the responses of the same speaker in their two languages differ? Are there between-speaker differences?

5. Linguistic taboos

Taboos exist in all societies: things we are not supposed to eat, touch, or talk about. Linguistic taboos constitute another interesting point at the crossroads of language and culture: points where words exist for certain things in the language, but society places a ban on using them, we are "not supposed to" use them, because they refer to things that people are "prohibited from" discussing or even referring to. Sometimes these are threatening things, other times they are considered sacred, or, in our modern society, some things are tabooed because they are unpleasant.

The earliest linguistic taboos were animals that constituted a threat to communities of speakers. The most prominent European taboo animal was the bear for speakers of Slavic languages: its name was so strongly tabooed that it was not even passed down. The word for *bear* in Slavic languages (e.g. Russian *медведь*, Czech *medvěd*, Slovak *medved'*, Serbian *медвед*) means "honey eater", from Common Slavic *med* "honey" + *(j)esti* "eat": it is the descriptor that was used instead of the original (taboo) word. Such words that are used instead of the taboo words or expressions are called euphemisms.

Along the lines of threats being tabooed, favorable reference to the enemy is usually taboo at the time of war, but even in everyday situations people sometimes express their negative feelings about somebody by calling them or referring to them with derogatory names (cf. *hey, you asshole!* or *you know what that bastard did now?*). At the time of the communist dictatorship in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s, the country's dictatorial head of the state was often referred to in Romanian as the *conducător* "leader" rather than by his name, Nicolae Ceausescu. Referring to powerful and threatening entities by name is often avoided literary works as well (cf. "he who must not be named", "you-know-who", and "the Dark Lord" as euphemistic references to Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter books).

Words associated with religion are often taboos outside the religious context, cf. words like *bloody* in British English, *hell*, *damn* in all Englishes, which are considered taboos (swearwords), with euphemisms like *blasted*, *heck*, and *dang* often used instead of them.

Words referring to sex and sexual organs, acts, and some other bodily functions are tabooed in many languages. Interestingly, in English, the oldest Anglo-Saxon words referring to these are taboos (cf. *fuck, cunt, dick, shit, piss*, etc.), and Latinate words are used instead (cf. *intercourse, vagina, penis, excrement, urine*, etc.), basically as euphemisms. In some languages/cultures, sex is less of a taboo than in others: with Scandinavian societies famously relaxed about the topic of sex in general, it is not surprising that in Swedish there are only two slang words (euphemisms) for *penis*, whereas in English, Hungarian, or Russian slang words on the topic abound, and entries for *penis* in slang dictionaries and other words that have to do with sex are about the longest and most varied, with many synonyms etc.

Death and dying are also taboo subjects in language to the extent that people often use euphemisms instead of the actual words *die* and *death* and things associated with them: *die – pass away, pass on, lose one's life, expire, breathe one's last, draw one's last breath, meet one's end, meet one's death, lay down one's life, be no more, perish, be lost [e.g. in battle], go the way of the flesh, go the way of all flesh, go to glory, go to one's last resting place, go to meet one's maker, cross the great divide,* [informal:] *give up the ghost, kick the bucket, bite the dust, croak, flatline, conk out, turn up one's toes, cash in one's chips, go belly up, shuffle off this mortal coil, go the way of the dinosaurs, push up the daisies, be six feet under; death – demise, end, passing, passing away, passing on, loss of life, expiry, expiration, departure from life, final exit, eternal rest;* and newspaper columns announcing deaths are called *obituaries* (rather than *death column*, for instance).

In all societies, things which are perceived as negative are sometimes tabooed. For instance, in modern Western societies being fat is perceived negatively, so it is considered impolite to refer to somebody as fat, with euphemisms being widely used instead: for instance, *plump, stout, overweight, heavy, large, solid, chubby, portly, rotund, flabby, paunchy, pot-bellied, beer-bellied, dumpy, meaty, broad in the beam, of ample proportions, Falstaffian; buxom; obese, corpulent, bloated, gross, gargantuan, elephantine; fleshy; tubby, roly-poly,*

beefy, porky, blubbery, poddy, chunky, well padded, well covered, well upholstered, to mention just a few.

Questions to think about:
1. Consult a slang dictionary in your native language and see the entries for sex, sexual organs, and sexual acts. Did you find many or just a few? What does that tell you about the extent to which sex is a taboo subject in this language?
2. Make a list of euphemisms for words like death, die, and things connected to these in your language. You can consult a slang dictionary, too.
3. In your native language, is it acceptable to call somebody fat? If not, what kind of euphemisms are there instead?

Review questions:
1. What is the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis? To what extent does it hold true?
2. What is a kinship term? What kind of information can be deduced from kinship systems?
3. What is a basic color term?
4. What is a linguistic taboo? What is a euphemism?

Glossary of terms:

Basic color term: a color designation that is one word, not a subdivision of another color, is used for all things and by all speakers.
Euphemism: a word used instead of a taboo word (e.g. *beefy* instead of *fat*), sometimes of similar sound (e.g. *heck* instead of *hell*).
Kinship term: a term designating a relative (by blood, marriage, etc.).
Taboo: a word that speakers are "not supposed to" say, due to societal limitations on their usage.

Further reading:

Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. 1969. *Basic color terms: Their universality and evolution.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Everett, Daniel L. 2008. *Don't sleep, there are snakes: Life and language in the Amazonian jungle*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Friedrich, Paul. 1966. The linguistic reflex of social change: From Tsarist to Soviet Russian kinship. In: Lieberson, Stanley, ed. *Explorations in sociolinguistics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 31–57.
Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1998. Language and culture. In: Wardhaugh, Ronald. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 215–235.