Color and Language: Whorf was half right

Paul Kay Department of Linguistics and International Computer Science Institute, University of California at Berkeley, USA

Abstract: The domain of color has been the locus classicus for the empirical testing of the Whorf hypothesis of radical linguistic relativity for over half a century. Separate traditions of research have assessed the hypotheses that (1) basic color terminologies partition color space arbitrarily, and (2) differences in color terminologies between languages induce differences in color perception in their speakers. Relativists affirm both hypotheses; universalists deny them both. Recent research is providing evidence that both hypotheses are half-right, providing a more nuanced perspective on the relation of language to thought than either relativism or universalism.

About the speaker: Paul Kay, PhD, is a Professor in Linguistics and International Computer Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His research interest is within the broad area of cognitive science, centering around language, its structure, and its relation to thought and perception. His research mostly concerns either color naming or grammatical structure.