**Linguistic relativity. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**

**Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** This hypothesis—a position of linguistic relativity—argues that (to quote one of its authors) language ‘is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but is itself a shaper of ideas, the programme and guide for the individual's meaningful activity’. In short, language determines (or shapes) our perceptions of reality. The classic literary example of this is the ‘newspeak’ of the [totalitarian](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-totalitarian.html) rulers of George Orwell's 1984. The most famous commonly cited examples in social science are probably those of the Hanunoo, who have 92 names for rice, each conveying a different reality, and the Eskimo, who have over a hundred words for snow. Such fine differentiation permits these cultures to see important facets of their culture more clearly.

This is an important theory and there is broad truth in the argument that [language](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-language.html) plays a role in shaping reality. But it should not be overstated and collapse into extreme [relativism](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-relativism.html): there seem also to be linguistic universals, or features common to every language; and words are often invented to reflect, rather than construct new phenomena in reality. (In the case of microwave ovens, for example, we need the word ‘microwave’ to depict a real phenomenon—not to invent the ovens themselves.)