# Metalinguistic Awareness in Linguistic Relativity
## Cultural and Subcultural Practices Across Chinese Dialect Communities

**MINGLANG ZHOU**
*University of Colorado at Boulder*

## 1. Introduction

The essential claim of linguistic relativity, as made in Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf, is that culture, via language, shapes the way in which we as speakers think, whereas we as speakers are not aware of the way in which language affects our thought (cf. Brown 1967; Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Lee 1996; Miller 1968; Penn 1972). However, Whorf has in fact moderated this claim when he considers the role of metalinguistic awareness of linguistic categories, though he suggests that lexical meaning is reflected upon more often than grammatical meaning by speakers (cf. Lucy 1992: 37-38). Unfortunately, the relationship between this kind of awareness, which was later termed metalinguistic awareness, and linguistic relativity was not seriously examined until Silverstein's work in the 1970s and 1980s, and was not more extensively explored until his and others' work in the early 1990s (cf. Lucy 1992: 115; 1993). Moreover, as Lucy (1992: 121-122) has pointed out, most of these studies focus on the universal processes constraining metalinguistic awareness, but fail to address possible cultural variations in the constitution of metalinguistic activity.

In the current chapter, I address cultural variations in metalinguistic activity by examining the use of language in some cultural practices in different Chinese dialect communities, where metalinguistic activity is an integrated part of these cultural practices. This chapter demonstrates that (1) cultural practices may utilize metalinguistic awareness far beyond the claimed most awareness-susceptible referential lexical items, (2) this utilization appears to be universal within a culture and across dialects, though dialect difference may lead to different ways to implement the same cultural practice, (3)

metalinguistic awareness allows creative and unique language use that is unseen without such awareness, and (4) cognitively metalinguistic awareness, like other linguistic categories, facilitates objectification in treating abstract concepts as concrete objects. Regarding the relationship between metalinguistic awareness and linguistic relativity, moreover, the evidence from Han Chinese cultural practices appears to challenge the hierarchy of susceptibility suggested in Whorf (1956e: 257-263) and the universality of the constraining factors hypothesized in Silverstein (1979, 1981, 1987, 1993).

I first briefly review metalinguistic awareness in relation to linguistic relativity. Second, I examine the relationship between cultural practices, such as rituals, taboos, and propitious symbolisms, and the utilization of certain kinds of metalinguistic awareness in the manipulation of linguistic categories in language use in these cultural practices in Mandarin dialect communities. Third, I look into the relationship between metalinguistic awareness and subcultural practices across some Chinese dialect communities, and examine how the subcultural practices differ from those in Mandarin communities because of dialect differences in these communities. Fourth, I show how these dialect-specific subcultural practices spread with dialect spread, a fact that suggests an inseparable relationship between dialect/language and the (sub)cultural practices in question, as Enfield (this volume) argues. In conclusion, I summarize the significance of metalinguistic awareness and its utilization in the examined cultural practices for the study of linguistic relativity.

## 2. Metalinguistic awareness and linguistic relativity

The term "metalinguistic awareness" does not appear in any of Whorf's writings. It was introduced much later than when he was writing, as has been documented in Lee (1996) and Yaden and Templeton (1986). In his works, Whorf uses a number of terms: "overt knowledge of linguistic processes" (1956b: 212), "semiconscious" knowledge of patterns of formula in language (1956c: 225), and "multilingual awareness" (1956d: 244), which are more or less equivalent to the modern concept that metalinguistic awareness is the ability to reflect upon and manipulate the structural features of language, treating language itself as an object of thought, as opposed to simply using the language system to comprehend and produce utterances (Tunner and Herriman 1984: 12).

The significance of metalinguistic awareness lies in its relation to the linguistic relativity principle. Speakers perceive and classify the complexity of the world by means of linguistic categories in their minds (Whorf 1956b: 213). Because these linguistic categories differ across languages, speakers of different languages may arrive at different observations and evaluations of the same outside world (Whorf 1956c: 221). Awareness of these linguistic categories has the potential to facilitate higher human cognition, freeing speakers from the conventional thinking and behavior dictated by their native languages, and helping them handle their native languages with greater effect (Whorf 1956c, d: 222-244). On the other hand, metalinguistic awareness may subject itself to the constraints of the same principle, since speakers depend on the same system of linguistic categories to raise into consciousness these linguistic categories (cf. Lee 1996: 33, Lucy 1993: 24-27). Whorf (1956e: 246-270) suggests that referential lexical items are more susceptible to awareness than are grammatical patterns, that lexical items with concrete reference are more subject to awareness than lexical items with abstract reference, and that overt grammatical categories strike awareness more easily than covert ones. Whorf clearly suggests a hierarchy of susceptibility to metalinguistic awareness for linguistic categories.



The significance of this hierarchy for linguistic relativity was not further explored until Silverstein published a number of studies on the reflective nature of metalinguistic awareness (1979, 1981, 1987). Silverstein formulated five specific hypotheses on the relationship between the descriptive signals (metalanguage) and the described signals (object language) in terms of semiotic properties (see Silverstein 1993 for distinction). First, described speech signals that are highly referential are more readily susceptible to awareness (e.g., nouns with concrete reference vs. nouns with abstract reference, and lexical items vs. grammatical patterns). Second, described speech signals that are continuously segmental are more readily susceptible to awareness (e.g. third personal singular marker vs. third person present progressive marker in English ). Third, described speech signals that are relatively presuppositional are more readily susceptible to awareness (e.g., pronouns vs. pronominal markers). Fourth, functions or meanings of described speech signals/utterance that are decontextualized or propositional are more readily susceptible to awareness (decontextualized deducibility). Fifth, described speech signals/utterances that have highly corresponding descriptive forms are more readily susceptible to awareness (metapragmatic transparency). Silverstein assumes these factors constraining metalinguistic awareness to be universal across languages and cultures.

In commenting on Silverstein's studies, Lucy (1992: 121-122) raises the question of possible cultural variations in the constitution of metalinguistic activity, which have not received worthy attention in studies in this area. Work on this question only begins with an orientation toward use of reflexive language in reported speech and the cultural specificity of such use (Lucy

1993). To address the same question, the current chapter focuses on metalinguistic activity in another aspect of everyday life – the manipulation of linguistic categories in language use in taboo, auspicious, and other rituals – in the Han Chinese culture. This chapter particularly explores what bearings these cultural practices across Chinese dialect communities (possibly language communities, see Mair 1991) have on Silverstein's universal constraining factors and Whorf's hierarchy for metalinguistic awareness in linguistic relativity

## 3. Metalinguistic awareness and Han Chinese cultural practices

Metalinguistic awareness may cover the ability to reflect upon as well as to manipulate, as objects, a large range of morphological, phonological, and syntactical structures in a language (Tunner and Herriman 1984: 12). This section starts with some clarification on five levels of metalinguistic awareness – words, homophones, word formation rules, phonological rules, and phrasal structure rules – and proceeds to examine the manipulation of these five levels of linguistic categories in some cultural practices in Han Chinese communities and to explore cognitive functions of metalinguistic awareness and its utilization.

Metalinguistic awareness of the word may consist of awareness of the word as a unit of language, a pattern of sounds, an arbitrary phonological label, a syntactic functional unit of a sentence, and even the term "word" (see Akmajian *et al.* 1990, Bowey and Tunner 1984). Metalinguistic awareness of the word as a unit of language may be defined as the awareness of the word as a unit larger than a phoneme but smaller than a phrase, and syntactically distinct from a bound morpheme, as evidenced in the play with words by young speakers (see Chao 1951/1971, Bowey and Tunner 1984). Metalinguistic awareness of the word as a pattern of sounds means the awareness of similarity or difference in sound. The awareness of the word as an arbitrary phonological label indicates the understanding of the distinction between a word as a label and its referent. When one knows a word's part of speech and whether it is the subject or the object in the sentence, s/he is said to have metalinguistic awareness of the word as a syntactical functional unit. After a speaker competently treats those aspects of a word as objects, s/he may well be ready to define the term "word", since objects must be categorized before they can be named (Lenneburg 1967).

Metalinguistic awareness of homophones is a higher level of awareness than awareness of the word, and is based minimally on the metalinguistic



awareness of the word as a pattern of sounds and as an arbitrary phonological label. Two words are homophonous when they have an identical pronunciation but completely different meanings. Metalinguistic awareness of a homophone is the awareness that two tokens are phonologically identical and that an identical phonological form refers to two different referents or has two different meanings. This awareness is found in young speakers who not only have the necessary metalinguistic skills to identify homonym pairs but also realize that homophones represent two different linguistic categories (cf. Backscheider and Gelman 1995).

However, published studies show little evidence, if not none, of metalinguistic awareness among nonlinguist speakers of the following three types: word formation rules, phonological rules, and phrasal structure rules. Metalinguistic awareness of word formation rules is an even higher level of awareness than awareness of the word and homophone, either in Whorf (1956) or Silverstein (1981), since it involves abstract patterns or rules rather than concrete lexical items. Word formation rules include derivation, compounding, blending, etc. (cf. O'grady *et al.* 1989: 99-106, Spencer 1991). Metalinguistic awareness of word formation rules means conscious knowledge of how all or one of these rules operate in word formation, depending on the language in question. Metalinguistic awareness of phonological rules may include awareness of segmental categories and phonological principles and of how they determine sound patterns in a language. Metalinguistic awareness of phrasal structure rules is built on the awareness of lexical categories and phrasal categories with their operations (cf. O'grady *et al.* 1989: 137-139). Metalinguistic awareness of this type means minimally the awareness of how NP rules and VP rules operate in specifying the grouping of lexical categories, such as nouns, determiners, adverbs, and verbs, into phrases and of what are possible grammatical groupings and what are ungrammatical groupings of lexical categories into phrasal structures in a language.

Given the above definitions of metalinguistic awareness, let us first specifically examine the utilization of metalinguistic awareness of homophones in some cultural practices in Han Chinese culture communities in China. The most obvious effect of metalinguistic awareness of homophones on cultural practices is taboo in naming. The practice of taboo in naming relies on the integration of two different foundations: a belief, and metalinguistic awareness of phonological labels and referents. It is believed that a human being is made of a body, a soul and a name. The soul rests inside the body, and may leave the body when the person's name is called. The body withers when the soul is absent. This belief is best illustrated in a fable in early classical Chinese. When a woman was giving birth to a child, two ghosts came and

knocked at the door. Everyone was busy attending the woman in labor, however, and nobody heard the knock. Then one of the ghosts stole into the house through a back door and heard the parents naming the baby. When the two ghosts met, the one who heard the naming told the other that he had gotten the baby's name and that the baby would live only till fifteen years of age. In this fable, the linguistic part of the belief is the conscious theorizing of the relationship between the phonological label and the referent involved in naming, while the nonlinguistic part is the imperative to keep this name as sacred as possible.

Taboo may occur when someone is named. Traditionally in Chinese, one must avoid a name that is identical, either phonologically or orthographically, to that of an emperor or ancestor. This practice in naming involves metalinguistic awareness on three levels: phonological, semantic, and orthographic. Taboo on phonologically identical names, such as homophones, is based on metalinguistic awareness of sound patterns in Chinese. Taboo in naming involves not only complete phonological identity, as in [kōng] vs. [kōng], but sometimes also partial phonological identity, as in [kōng ] vs. [gōng], with free variations being allowed.[1] Taboo on both phonologically and orthographically identical names is the result of education, which elicits the metalinguistic awareness involved in reading. Chinese is a non-alphabetic language, so that a phonologically identical name is mostly not orthographically identical, as in [dì] with the fourth tone, which has at least two orthographically different words (地 and弟 ), while an orthographically identical name could be phonologically different, as in the word 行, which has two pronunciations ([háng] and [xíng]). Identities in both phonological and orthographic forms or in either are avoided in naming. The key to taboo in naming lies in the metalinguistic awareness of homophones: one phonologically identical form with two referents. One does not want a name that may refer to two souls in two bodies, particularly when one of them belongs to the sacred ancestor and the awesome emperor, since it may well confuse both souls when the name is called. It is evident to us that taboo in naming in Chinese is based on a belief and on metalinguistic awareness on the orthographic, phonological, and semantic levels.

The influence of metalinguistic awareness of homophones in Chinese is more commonly seen in culturally specific rituals, such as weddings, funerals, Spring Festival celebrations, childbirth, etc. In fact, homophone-related practices in cultural rituals are an essential part of these rituals for the Han Chinese, without which "Han Chineseness" may not exist in these rituals. Let us look at two examples, one from the Spring Festival celebration and one from the wedding ritual, to see exactly how metalinguistic awareness helps the manipulation of linguistic categories in Han Chinese cultural practices.



During the Spring Festival celebration, which runs from New Year's Eve to the fifteenth of January in the lunar calendar, one object that people from various Han Chinese communities must uniformly deal with as part of the celebration ritual is fish (cf. Ye and Wu 1990). For the New Year's Eve dinner and meals during the New Year's celebration, there must be some fish in some form. In the past when some people could not afford fish, they served "fish" made from other food, or even carved from wood placed in a plate, during a meal. The host or hostess proudly commands [chī yú, chī yú] "Eat fish, and eat fish", while other people, particularly guests joining the meal, politely reply [yǒu yú, yǒu yú], literally "there is fish and there is fish", or [nián nián yǒu yú], literally "Year and year there is fish". In some Han Chinese communities, in addition to fish on the table, people cut colorful paper fishes and paste them beside water containers in the kitchen so that colorful reflections of fish are seen in the water from every corner of the kitchen. These cultural practices in celebrating the new year are due to the awareness of the linguistic fact that, in Chinese, the word "fish" is homophonous with the word "surplus/ample", both having the phonological form [yú]. When one says [yǒu yú, yǒu yú] "there is fish and there is fish", he also says that "there is surplus, and there is surplus". When he compliments the meal by saying [nián nián yǒu yú], he simultaneously prays "there is surplus every year". Thus, serving and commenting on fish during a Spring Festival meal becomes a Han Chinese ritual for praying for a surplus and plentiful new year. These cultural practices clearly arise from metalinguistic awareness of the homophonous pair of words "fish" and "surplus" in the phonological form of [yú], and from the manipulation of this homophonous pair in the given situation.

The central theme of weddings is, at least traditionally, to carry on one's family name by giving birth to the next generation. There are a lot of cultural rituals related to metalinguistic awareness for weddings in Han Chinese communities. During a wedding, for example, one common practice in Mandarin dialect communities is based on the manipulation of the homophonous pair of [shēng] "raw/undercooked" and [shēng] "to give birth". In some communities, undercooked noodles or dumplings are intentionally served to the bride, who is asked the question [shēng bù shēng] " Is it undercooked or not?". Given the homophonous pair, the question actually means "Give birth or not give birth?". The bride is supposed to answer with [shēng] "Give birth". If she is caught saying [bù shēng] "not give birth/not underdone", the bridegroom's family will feel very sad about the possibility that she is not going to give birth to a child. This ritual again manipulates homophones in praying for a successor to the family.

In addition, there is ample evidence from Han Chinese rituals that metalinguistic awareness of word formation patterns facilitates the manipulation of compounding of pairs of monosyllabic homophonous words into bisyllabic homophonous words. For example, in some Mandarin dialect communities, particularly in the Beijing area, traditionally, vendors sell drinking water and firewood to homeowners early in the morning of the day following the New Year's Day. When they carry the goods to the doorway, they shout [jìn cái jìn shuǐ], literally "Receive firewood and receive water". In response, the homeowners reply loudly [jīe cái shuǐ, jīe cái shui], which literally means "Accept firewood and water", but actually means "Welcome the flow of fortune, and welcome the flow of fortune", and pay the water vendor handsomely five days after the New Year's Day. In the vendor's utterance, [cái] is a homophone with two meanings, "firewood" and "wealth", but [shuǐ], by itself, does not form a homophonous pairing. In the homeowner's utterance, however, [cái] and [shuǐ] can be read as monosyllabic words in juxtaposition, meaning "firewood and water", and as a bisyllabic compound word [cáishuǐ], meaning "flow of fortune"; the latter is the intended prayer in the ritual. This practice demonstrates not only metalinguistic awareness of homophones but also awareness of word formation rules.

Moreover, there is evidence that Mandarin dialect communities use metalinguistic awareness of phrasal structure rules in manipulating the syntactic distinctions between regular phrasal expressions and idiomatic expressions as part of rituals. This point can be seen in a ritual for a wedding. When the bride dismounts from a sedan, car, bike, etc. at the entrance to the bridegroom's house, she steps on cloth bags, which are laid one by one into the house. As she walks on the bags into the house, the crowd chorus [yí dài chuán shí dài ] [shí dài chuán bǎi dài], [bǎi dài chuán qiān dài] and [qiān dài chuán wàn dài], which literally means "Pass from one bag to ten bags, from ten bags to one hundred bags, from one hundred bags to one thousand bags, from one thousand bags to ten thousand bags". The significance of this ritual lies in reassigning the syntactic structure [VP->V NP] a different syntactic structure of the form [VP->V]. The former expression [chuán dài] with [VP->V NP] is a regular verbal phrase meaning "pass bags", whereas the latter expression [chuándài] with [VP->V] is an idiomatic verb meaning "to give birth to a boy baby so that the family can pass on to the next generation". Therefore, the chorus really means "Pass from one generation to ten, from ten to one hundred, from one hundred to one thousand, and from one thousand to ten thousand generations", while the bride is actually passing from one bag to another bag. This ritual is built on metalinguistic awareness and manipulation of homophones, word formation rules, and phrasal structure rewriting rules.



Metalinguistic awareness of words, homophones, word formation rules, and phrasal structure rules and the manipulation of these linguistic categories in cultural practices have significant consequences in language use and human cognition, as Whorf (1956d: 244) has expected. First, in these cultural practices there is a unique and creative use of language that is unseen in situations where metalinguistic awareness is not utilized. In the case of the homophone, both referents are intentionally and simultaneously referred to in the cultural practices. For example, in manipulating [yú] in New Year's celebration, both "fish" and "surplus" are referred to, though the former is at the material level while the latter is at the abstract level. In the case of the syntactic structure with two readings, both readings are applied in the cultural practice. In the manipulation of [chuán dài] with [VP->V NP] and [VP->V], for instance, the first reading is applied to the situation where the bride is walking from one bag to another bag, while the second reading is applied to the prayer for the birth of a male child. Use of language in this way is impossible without the facilitation of metalinguistic awareness, and is unimaginable outside these cultural practices. For example, in most cultures we may find puns, which involve metalinguistic awareness and its manipulation. However, two meanings of a pun are not simultaneously applied in the same situation where it is used, but usually only one of the two meanings is intended. Second, metalinguistic awareness facilitates objectification of relatively abstract concepts as relatively concrete objects, a general cognitive strategy utilized in linguistic categorization of the world (cf. Duranti 1997: 62-64; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lucy 1992: 50-59; Whorf 1956a: 137-148). The cultural practices examined above share one common feature: unperformable acts are made performable by the creative use of language. For example, the relatively abstract concept of "welcoming the flow of fortune" is objectified as welcoming the vendor of firewood and water at one's doorway. Metalinguistic awareness of word formation rules and the manipulation of these rules make it possible to do so. Creative use of language and objectification of abstract concepts as concrete objects in cognition are two of the most obvious consequences of metalinguistic awareness and its utilization.

In summary, we have shown that metalinguistic awareness of words, homophones, word formation rules, and phrasal structure rules leads to the manipulation of them in some Han Chinese cultural practices, and that metalinguistic awareness facilitates creative use of language in cultural practices and objectification of relatively abstract concept as concrete objects in cognition.

## 4. Metalinguistic awareness and subcultural practices across Chinese dialect communities

In Han Chinese communities, in addition to the standard dialect, Mandarin, there are several major dialects of the Chinese language, such as Cantonese, Wu (Shanghainese), Min, and Xiang, the difference among which is no less than that among the West Germanic languages (Chao 1943, Mair 1991; Zhou 1998). The Chinese dialect communities have a population of more than three hundred million people, who occupy most of southern, southeastern, and southwestern China. In these communities, cultural practices, such as rituals, taboos, and auspicious symbolisms, sometimes appear to be dramatically different from those in Mandarin dialect communities in northern China. I label these cultural practices subcultural practices, which are different from the (mainstream) cultural practices in the vast Mandarin dialect communities within the Chinese culture. The main question is whether these differences have any bearings on the hypothesized universals in metalinguistic awareness. I will examine evidence from Wu and Cantonese communities as well as other cross-dialect evidence for answers to this question.

First, let us start with three subcultural practices in Wu dialect speech communities. The Wu dialect is spoken in the southeastern provinces around Shanghai, and is considered one of the oldest dialects of the northern Chinese dialects. It is now both phonologically and syntactically different from Mandarin and other Chinese dialects in many respects (cf. Zhou and You 1986). One subcultural practice in Wu dialect communities that is completely different from its analogue in Mandarin and other dialect communities is a taboo on bringing apples to someone who is ill. In Mandarin communities, one brings fruits, such as apples, oranges, and bananas, when one visits a sick friend, colleague, or relative. In Wu dialect communities, one can bring fruits in this kind of situation, but one seriously offends the sick person if there are apples in the fruit basket. This taboo is a direct consequence of metalinguistic awareness of homophones in the Wu dialect. In Mandarin Chinese, "apple" is pronounced as [píngguǒ], whereas in the Wu dialect it is pronounced as [bĭnggù]. In the latter dialect, [bĭnggù] is homophonous with "to die from illness", though this is not the case in Mandarin and other dialects. Naturally, neither the visitor nor the patient wants to see anything that suggests, based on their metalinguistic awareness of homophones, death from illness.

A second example is found in a unique gift and gift presentation custom practiced by a pregnant woman's parents in Wu dialect communities. During the late stage of a woman's pregnancy, her parents prepare a gift package of baby clothing, shoes and some nutritious food, items that are the same in any other Chinese community, as well as cooked duck in a container, which is unique. As they carry this container with the duck to their daughter's home, they cry loudly and repeatedly [ā guān lĕi zē], which is literally "The duck container is coming"; they are actually praying "The boy is coming". This ritual utilizes two levels of metalinguistic awareness: first, metalinguistic awareness of [ā guān] as a homophone for the words "(the) duck container" and the words "(the) boy", which are not homophonous in Mandarin and other dialects though, and second, metalinguistic awareness of [ā guān] with the phrase structure [NP->Det Adj. N] for "(the) duck container" and the phrasal structure [NP->Det N] for "(the) boy".



The third example is a ritual in the process of gift exchange between the potential bride and bridegroom families in some Wu dialect communities. When the betrothed woman's family receives betrothal gifts, they send the betrothed man's family some gifts in return, which always include a set of rice bowls. The set of bowls symbolize stability in the relationship between the two families, since the word "bowl" and the word "stability" are possible homophones in the Wu dialect. The word "rice bowl" is pronounced [ɜ̈w]. The word "stable" as a single word is pronounced [wɜ̈w], but as [ɜ̈wn] in casual speech. One gets a homophone for "rice bowl" and "stable" in Wu when the nasal is phonologically treated as a free variation. That is exactly what Wu dialect speakers manipulate in this ritual. These three examples suggest that Wu dialect communities have metalinguistic awareness of homophones, free variations, and phrasal structure rules and manipulate them to create subcultural practice.

Now let us turn to two Cantonese subcultural practices demonstrating metalinguistic awareness and its utilization. The first example is a subcultural practice for the Lantern Festival on the fourteenth day following New Year's Day. On that day, people who wish to have a boy baby in the new year go to temples to "invite" a lantern.[2] They tell the monks in charge of the lanterns which one they want to "invite". The monks will write down the client's name and address on a piece of red paper and paste it on the lantern. Three days later, the lantern will be delivered to the client's house. This ritual is called [sung3 ding1], literally "deliver lantern".[3] In Cantonese, [ding1] is a homophone for "lantern" and "son/male", though they are not homophonous in Mandarin Chinese. Thus, the ritual is intended "to deliver a man/boy". The second example is a Guangzhou variant on the New Year's ritual. Early morning on New Year's Day in Guangzhou, instead of selling firewood and water as in Beijing, vendors carrying shellfish shout for sale [fad3 coi4 dai6 hin2], which is literally "fortune large shellfish". Upon hearing this cry for sale, people rush from their houses to buy some shellfish. The ritual relies on the manipulation of the homophone [hin2], which has two meanings, "shell-

fish" and "to reveal/manifest", and the manipulation of phrasal structure rules assigning [fad3 coi4 dai6 hin2] [NP-> Det Adj. N] for "fortune large shellfish" and [S->NP VP] for "The God of fortune manifests". In this ritual, the shellfish vendors' cry is actually understood as "The God of Wealth manifests" so that people rush to welcome the God of Wealth's arrival. These two examples show how homophones and phrasal structure rules are manipulated in subcultural practices in Cantonese communities and also why Cantonese subcultural practices are different from those in Mandarin communities.

Now we will examine the variations of one ritual across various dialect communities to further show the universal nature of utilization of metalinguistic awareness in subcultural practices. In many communities in central, eastern, and southwestern China, in the ritual of praying for a boy for a married couple, relatives or friends give them some kind of melon as an auspicious symbol promising the arrival of a boy. This practice is associated with two linguistic elements in the dialects in question. First, the name of the melon must be a homophone, the other meaning of which is "boy/son/male". Thus, the situation not only symbolizes the delivery of a boy, but also homophonously sounds like "deliver a boy" when one talks about it. Second, the melon must have seeds inside it so that the couple will see them upon opening it, since the word "seed" is a homophone that also means "boy/son". This symbolizes that they see a boy/son, and it homophonously sounds like "see a boy/son" when people talk about it. The second part of the ritual is universal in that all natural melons have seeds, and the word "seed" is pronounced similarly across all the dialect communities in question. What is of interest here is the first part of the ritual, in which one must find a melon with a homophonous name. In most communities, people present a pumpkin as an auspicious symbol. In their dialects, the word for "pumpkin" is [nánguā], and the first syllable of it is a homophone for the word "male". In other communities, particularly in the southwestern official dialect (Xinan Guanhua) communities in Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan Provinces, where [wá] is standard for the word "boy", people just give any melon as a lucky symbol. In doing so, they allow a free variation of [gu] and [w] in the pair of [wá] and [guá], though these may not necessarily be free variations anywhere else in their dialect, so that [guá] becomes a homophone for the words "melon" and "boy". This example shows how the same cultural practices may be performed across Chinese dialect communities as long as metalinguistic awareness allows manipulation of the linguistic categories involved.

In a word, we have shown that, as in Mandarin dialect communities, metalinguistic awareness facilitates the manipulation of homophones, word formation rules, phonological rules, and phrasal structure rules in subcultural practices across Chinese dialect communities. It appears that dialect difference leads to difference in subcultural practices in most cases, while invariant cultural practices may be found across dialect communities, if metalinguistic awareness facilitates them. Dialect-specific subcultural practices may shape the way in which dialect speakers view the world, in terms of the linguistic categories manipulated rather than the utilization of metalinguistic awareness, as the relationship between apples and death from illness is salient in Wu dialect communities but not in Mandarin and other dialect communities.



## 5. Dialect spread and the spread of dialect-based subcultural practices

Given the close relationship between subcultural practices and metalinguistic awareness of linguistic categories in a dialect, it is expected that dialect-specific subcultural practices will spread when a dialect spreads. This section demonstrates the phenomenon with two specific examples of subcultural practices that have accompanied the invasion of northern China by fragmented Cantonese since the late 1970s.

Let us start with some background information regarding the spread of fragmented Cantonese and some Cantonese-specific subcultural practices. In the late 1970s, China launched an economic reform with Guangdong (Canton) as its pioneer. When the reform began to be successful, Guangdong became politically and economically strong within the country. At the same time, Cantonese began to appear, though it was in fragments, in national newspapers, radio, and television. As a status symbol of new richness, people in other dialect communities began to speak some broken Cantonese in business, and businesses tried to use it in their advertisements in other parts of China.

Accompanying the spread of fragmented Cantonese to northern China is, first of all, the subcultural practice of displaying potted orange trees and serving oranges when one opens a new business and celebrates the New Year's Day or other occasions. In Cantonese, the word "orange" is pronounced [ged1], which is homophonous with the word "lucky". Therefore, oranges and orange trees are auspicious symbols, based on metalinguistic awareness of the homophone, in Cantonese dialect communities. In Mandarin, however, the word "orange" is pronounced [jie2], while the word "lucky" is pronounced [ji2], without any homophonous relationship between the two words. Nevertheless, in Mandarin dialect communities in northern China, people now also display potted orange trees, particularly when they open new businesses, and serve oranges on other occasions of gathering

since the early 1980s. When they refer to orange or potted orange trees, they do so with a Cantonese accent to create a homophone for the word "orange" and the word "lucky" in fulfilling the performance of the ritual.

The second case of spread is the subcultural practice of treating the number "8" as an auspicious symbol. In Cantonese, the word "8" is pronounced as [bad3], while the word "become wealthy/prosperous" is pronounced as [fad3]. In the subcultural practice, a free variation between [b] and [f] is allowed for a homophone for both words. Cantonese speakers treasure anything with the number "8", and prefer to do anything significant in association with that number. For example, they may like to open a new business on the eighth of August or may purchase a house at a price much higher than its market price, if its street number has an "8" in it. However, there used to be no such cultural practice in Mandarin and other dialect communities before the late 1970s. Since they started to speak some broken Cantonese, business people in other parts of China have begun to treat "8" as a lucky number as people do in Guangdong. By the late 1980s, a telephone number with three or more "8s" could be auctioned for nearly two hundred thousand Chinese dollars in central and northern China. By the beginning of the 1990s, when an average working Chinese's annual salary was no more than three thousand Chinese dollars, a car license plate with this number "518" was auctioned for three hundred thousand Chinese dollars in Shanghai (cf. Shen 1995). In Cantonese, the number "518" is pronounced [ng5 yed1 bad3], which is phonologically close to [ngo5 yiu3 fad3] "I will become rich.". In treating this sequence of numbers as a lucky symbol, speakers of (broken) Cantonese allow a number of free variations in the pair of [ng5 yed1 bad3] and [ngo5 yiu3 fad3], and assign a syntactic structure of the form [S] to [ng5 yed1 bad3] to make available the reading "I will become rich". When "8" and "518" are used as lucky symbols in other dialect communities, non-Cantonese speakers read them with a Cantonese accent.

These two recent cases indicate motivations behind the development of new cultural practices as well as patterns of the spread of a dialect and dialect-specific subcultural practices. When a dialect spreads to other speech communities, its linguistically related subcultural practices also tend to follow in its path.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the relationship between cultural practices and their variations and metalinguistic awareness, and explored this relationship with Whorf's hierarchy of susceptibility of linguistic categories to



awareness and Silverstein's (cf. 1979, 1981, 1987) hypothesized universal constraining factors bearing on linguistic relativity. This study demonstrates four points concerning the relationship between metalinguistic awareness and linguistic relativity.

First, I have shown that cultural practices in Han Chinese communities utilize metalinguistic awareness of words, homophones, word formation rules, phonological rules, and phrasal structure rules, all of which are manipulated in the performance of these practices. The availability of so many levels of linguistic categories to awareness and the manipulation of them question Whorf's (1956e: 246-270) suggested hierarchy of susceptibility and the universality of Silverstein's (cf. 1979, 1981, 1987, 1993) constraining factors. Contrary to the hierarchy in Whorf, the evidence from the cultural practices examined in this chapter indicates, at most, a continuum of susceptibility of linguistic categories to awareness, given the fact that homophones are manipulated in all of the examined practices while more abstract categories are not manipulated in everyone of them. Moreover, the same evidence presents a problem for the supposed universality of Silverstein's first hypothesis based on Whorf's hierarchy, unless Chinese is considered to be an exception. The fact that Chinese as an isolating language barely has discontinuous segments suggests that Silverstein's second hypothesis is universal only within certain types of languages. The evidence from the examined cultural practices does not seem to support Silverstein's fourth and fifth hypotheses either, because it is the context of cultural practices, not any describing signal (metalanguage), that makes linguistic categories available to awareness and manipulation. The relationship between the evidence presented here and Silverstein's third hypothesis may require further study.

Second, the cultural practices examined in this chapter suggest that utilization of metalinguistic awareness appears to be universal, at least, within a culture across different dialect communities (possibly different language communities, as suggested by Mair [1991]), on the one hand, and linguistic categories in a dialect may specify ways to implement a cultural practice, on the other hand. This view complements the argument that language shapes cultural practices (see Bickel Forthcoming). Metalinguistic awareness helps, by manipulation of linguistic categories, to shape cultural practices, whereas cultural practices may also shape, in terms of the linguistic categories manipulated, the way in which cultural practice participants behave and view certain relationships in the world. This view of the relationship among language, thought, and culture echoes that of Enfield (This volume). The three are inseparable.

Third, the cultural practices examined in the above sections suggest that metalinguistic awareness allows creative and unique language use in which

two readings of a linguistic form are intentionally made available and applied simultaneously. In usual language use, a linguistic form with two or more readings may be available, but only one of them may be intentionally applied in a given context, even in a pun, while in these cultural practices, a linguistic form is manipulated to have two readings and have both of them applied in the same situation at the same time. In this sense, utilization of metalinguistic awareness frees speakers from the conventional thinking and behavior dictated by their native languages, and helps them handle their native languages with greater effect, as Whorf (1956d: 244) expects.

Finally, the cultural practices examined here indicate that, cognitively, utilization of metalinguistic awareness in language use facilitates objectification in treating abstract concepts as concrete objects. Across languages, objectification is a cognitive strategy invariably employed but variably implemented in linguistic categorization of the world (cf. Duranti 1997: 62-64, Lucy 1992: 50-59, Whorf 1956a: 137-148). Further evidence of utilization of metalinguistic awareness across languages is needed to show that objectification in utilization of metalinguistic awareness falls into the same pattern as in linguistic categorization, though ontologically this is highly possible (cf. Lakoff 1987: 5-11). Findings along this line will have significant bearings on the relationship among language, thought, and culture.

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### Notes

1. Square brackets are used to represent the phonological form of a word in Chinese. Tones are represented by numbers.
2. People in Han Chinese communities say [qǐng] "to invite" instead of "buy", to be respectful, when they purchase something sacred.



3. Cantonese has six to nine tones, which are represented by numbers in this chapter.

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