

an abomination, is a new stratagem taking hold in the circles of the far right? Rep Sally Kern of Oklahoma has introduced a bill to restrict the legal right of couples to get a divorce. Protect marriage at any cost, and force couples to remain together—now this is a strategy worth pushing! It will be interesting to see the outcome. Someone in California thinks it is interesting enough to push the same idea out to the voters there as well, though in a more tongue-in-cheek fashion.

Today, the spread of ideas about sexuality via the media reaches past the usual fare of celebrity sex and anti-gay marriage. A recent study conducted in the UK tells us that the G-spot is a myth. Never mind all that pleasure, women—move on. The study (a survey, actually) claimed that the evidence was conclusive that the G-spot did not exist, and that it was “irresponsible” to claim its existence if it put pressure on women who were fearful of *not* having one. That lesbian and bisexual women were (apparently) excluded from the study lends credence to its detractors. Is it enough to simply counter the claims with good research?

*“He thinks too much; such men are dangerous.”
“Fear him not, Caesar; he’s not dangerous.”*

—Julius Caesar, Act I Scene II

The prominence of former anti-gay luminaries such as Judith Reisman seems to have faded; even David Horowitz’s book sales are down. The all too abundant angry dialog of the past eight years has abated to a mere hiss. The dialog may be less audible, but those who, as Caesar said, “think too much” still *are* dangerous. Their impact may be far greater and longer lasting than anything that Kern and others can do.

The revisions to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or DSM, fifth edition, have begun, and the outlook is not so rosy for some. One of the more powerful voices on the DSM-V revisions team is Kenneth Zucker, who has parlayed a position of note into a position of power, advancing an agenda that seems to unabashedly seek to pathologize transsexualism in a way that will mean many more are classified as diseased. “Paraphilia,” as used in his descriptions, is a multi-purpose umbrella, and even those whose self-selection as “normal,” those whose day-to-day actions fit comfortably within the purview of what many accept as innocuous, could, if such revisions are accepted, wind up defined through and impacted by the terms of mental illness. It’s difficult to grasp how an “erotic target location error” can seriously be applied to a wide spectrum of individuals whose only “crime” is to be who they truly are.

These forces are the Brutuses of our age. They wait quietly, taking small steps with great deliberation.

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Society for Linguistic Anthropology

MARK ALLEN PETERSON AND JAMES STANLAW,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Sapir-Whorf Redux

By Mark Allen Peterson

Let’s begin by acknowledging up-front that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was formulated by neither Edward Sapir nor Benjamin Whorf, but by Eric Lenneberg and Harry Hoijer, based on ideas stretching back to Von Humboldt. The evidence against a strong version of the hypothesis—that people who speak different languages literally perceive the world in different ways—is overwhelming. At best, there seems to be evidence that it is easier to articulate some concepts in some languages but nothing deterministic. Still, the question of whether and how grammatical systems and cultural categorization shape some of the ways in which we think—or perhaps vice versa—remains interesting.

George Lakoff reinvigorated this discussion by raising the question of whether metaphorical speech—which includes a great deal of human discourse—shapes our habitual ways of thinking. And tropes like metaphor have very real performative uses. Recently I stumbled across the work of another scholar who is examining these questions in terms of language acquisition and spatial indexicality. Marianella Casasola, an associate professor of human development at Cornell University, conducted laboratory experiments in 2005–06 looking at how babies learn concepts and actions in tandem.

Babies between 6 and 10 months of age understand very little language, but are beginning to explore the English-language concepts of containment (“in”) and support (“on”) with plastic nesting cups and blocks. In the Korean language, the concept is slightly different from English. Instead of “in” and “on,” these babies learn the concept of “tight-fit,” or “kkita,” by putting a peg into a hole or by snapping together Duplos (extra large Legos for toddlers). By 18 months, Casasola found that English-learning and Korean-learning babies diverge in the way they organize their concepts of containment and support based on how their language describes it.

“Between 10 and 18 months of age, English-learning babies are not yet able to visually recognize the commonality between the different examples of support,” said Casasola. “But when an adult says, ‘Look, it goes *on*’ the presence of the specific word aids understanding and attention for this spatial relation. Taking that knowledge a step further, we wanted to know if English-speaking toddlers could understand the Korean concept of ‘tight-fit,’” Casasola

explained in an NSF report on her work. When she demonstrated examples of “tight-fit” to 20-month-old English-speaking toddlers using a cork in a bottle, Duplos or a peg in a hole, and when she then showed them videos of new examples of “tight-fit,” their responses showed that they could, in fact, grasp the new concept. Or, as she wrote in a 2005 *Developmental Psychology* article, during play activities “a familiar word can facilitate infants’ formation of an abstract spatial category, leading them to form a category that they do not form in the absence of the word.”

In 2007, Casasola began working with collaborators to examine differences in language acquisition between babies learning German, Korean and English. Although hardly ethnographic in the anthropological sense, Casasola’s new work does involve looking at babies in the home, exploring the role of caregivers in language acquisition. The researchers visit the children and their caregivers—mostly mothers—in their homes every six weeks to videotape children’s play with objects, their speech, and the speech of their caregivers. Speech and action are then coded and aggregated to discern patterns. “It’s slow going,” Casasola has said.

Casasola emphasized that it was the language-thought debate that drew her to the research: “which comes first, the concept or the words?” She turned to spatial categories because it seemed to her a productive case for study. Assigning categories to objects seemed pretty straightforward compared to understanding actions. “I’m not interested in spatial concepts *per se*. It just seemed like a domain that would lend itself to looking at the relationships between thought and language,” she said. “All kids like to talk about ‘up, down.’”

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Society for Medical Anthropology

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SMA Notes from the Field: Immigrant Healthcare in the Mississippi Delta

By Monica A Rosas Gutierrez (Mississippi State U) and Alan W Barton (Delta State U)

Cultural practices structure interactions in healthcare settings and can create barriers that impede effective interpersonal relations and positive health outcomes. These barriers are highlighted when Mexican immigrants seek assistance from US healthcare providers (HCP) unaccustomed to Mexican culture. Under such circumstances, the process of acculturation is a two-way street—not only do Mexican