

## **Week 2 - Language as Technology: Spoken language**

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## **[2.3] Task 2: Does language shape the way we think? (Optional task)**

Watching Dr. Lera Boroditsky's 2017 SAR lecture, "How the Languages We Speak Shape the Ways We Think," prompts me to reflect on how the words we use are powerful tools for conveying meaning. In her presentation, Boroditsky explores how language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a framework that shapes cognition, perception, and worldview. When I listen to this lecture, I bring my background and experiences into the discussion. I was born and raised in Nigeria, a country with over 500 languages and three dominant ethnic groups: Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Growing up multilingual has provided me with firsthand insight into the ways language reflects culture, structures thought, and shapes identity.

In this reflection, I focus on Yoruba and Igbo, two Nigerian languages that have significantly influenced my perspective and continue to affect my methods of teaching, learning, and interacting with others. Although Hausa is not the primary focus of this analysis, its extensive use in northern Nigeria and its function as a lingua franca in trade and politics evoke Boroditsky's assertion that each language provides its speakers with a distinct perspective on the world. Together, these three ethnic and linguistic traditions illustrate the diversity and richness of Nigerian thought. I will start each paragraph of my reflections by highlighting quotes from Boroditsky's lecture.

### **My Reflections on Dr. Boroditsky's Six Statements with Quotes**

**[00:52] Dr. Boroditsky says, "To have a second language is to have a second soul."**

As a Nigerian who speaks multiple languages, this statement resonates deeply with me. It often feels like I'm living in different worlds when I switch between Yoruba, Igbo, and English. In greetings, Yoruba has a tone of respect and hierarchy. A Yoruba saying, "Ènìyàn l'áṣọ mi" ("People are my covering"), shows how important it is to rely on others and respect them. Igbo, on the other hand, uses proverbs to stress identity and wisdom. One example is "Ilu bụ ndụ" ("Proverbs are like palm oil, which enhances the words that are spoken.") The Hausa saying

"Komai nisan jifa, kasa zai fāḍi" ("No No matter how far something is thrown, it will eventually land, which also illustrates how language can shape a person's soul. This saying teaches patience and the fact that things will happen no matter what. Every language I speak opens up a different part of me, which supports Boroditsky's idea that every language is another "soul" or way of being.

**[03:25] Dr. Boroditsky says, "Every language has its own set of tools for thinking... people have made 7,000 different ways to think."**

This passage makes me think of how rich Nigerian languages are. Yoruba's "toolkit" for thinking includes proverbs and long greetings that help people get to know each other and set up a hierarchy. For instance, "Agba kii wa loja, ki ori omo tuntun wo" ("An elder cannot be in the market, and a child's head remains bent") shows how elders protect people in the community. Igbo's toolkit often includes proverbs to teach morals. An example is "Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe" ("When one agrees, their personal god agrees"), which stresses the importance of taking responsibility. Hausa's toolkit shows that they are practical and can last through tough times. For example, the saying "Hakuri maganin zaman duniya" means "Patience is the cure for living in this world." These language features give people ways to think, make decisions, and act that are based on their culture.

**[06:47] Dr. Boroditsky says, "Language affects how we see space and direction. For example, instead of saying "left" or "right," we say "north" or "south."**

People who speak Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria often use landmarks or natural features to give directions. This connects spatial orientation to memory and the environment. A Yoruba phrase like "ni ègbé igi ọpẹ" ("beside the palm tree") is a common way to locate places. In Igbo, one might also say "n'azụ ahịa" ("behind the market") instead of "left" or "right." These patterns, as Boroditsky said, link people to more than just physical space; they also link them to community life and shared history.

**[08:15] Dr. Boroditsky explains, “Grammatical gender affects how people perceive things.”**

Yoruba and Igbo don't use gendered nouns, but they show respect and worldview in how they talk to people and things. In Yoruba, rivers or gods are given honorific titles, like calling the river goddess Ọ̀ṣun with respect, which shows how important they are to the spirit. Igbo also uses polite forms when talking about sacred places or ancestors. Proverbs frequently reinforce these values; for instance, the Igbo adage “Mmiri bụ ndụ” (“Water is life”) portrays water not merely as a resource but as a sacred essential. Hausa also shows spiritual awareness in sayings like “Allah ya isa” (“God is enough”), which puts divine responsibility above human control. These ways of speaking affect how people perceive the environment, fate, and respect.

**[11:22] Dr. Boroditsky notes, “Language has an effect on how we remember things and who we blame or hold responsible.”**

Boroditsky's example of languages that make agency less clear or more clear made me think of Yoruba phrases. Yoruba might say “Ikoko fọ” (“The pot broke”) instead of “He broke the plate.” This form of speech puts the focus on the event instead of the person. This practice is similar to what Boroditsky said about how language shapes responsibility. In Igbo, proverbs also stress group blame over individual blame. For example, “Igwe bụ ike” (“The crowd is strength”) means that responsibility often lies with the community instead of one person. Hausa also shows this sense of community with sayings like “Gari ya waye” (“The town has woken up”), which means that everyone is aware and responsible for what happens.

**[14:36] Dr. Boroditsky says, “Languages teach us to think about time and order in new ways.”**

Boroditsky talks about how people can see time in two ways: as a space or as a cycle. Yoruba talks about time in cycles that are often connected to nature. For example, “Akoko rere a máa dé” means “The right time will come.” Igbo uses phrases that are similar, like “Oge erugo” (“The time has come”), which show readiness and seasonality instead of linear progression. Hausa proverbs also show that you should be patient with time. For example, “Da sannu a ke dínki riga” (“It is with patience that a robe is sewn”) stresses steady progress. These language metaphors

change the way I plan and think: I often see life events as cycles of opportunity instead of a straight line.

## **Conclusion**

Thinking about Boroditsky's lecture in terms of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa has shown me how Nigerian languages can help me think. They change how people think about space, time, responsibility, and relationships, putting cultural knowledge into everyday conversations. Igbo proverbs stress wisdom, responsibility, and the strength of the group, while Yoruba proverbs stress respect, hierarchy, and the group. Hausa, which stresses patience and unity, shows how language can be a cultural guide and a way to bring people together. These languages exemplify Boroditsky's assertion that each offers a unique cognitive framework that significantly shapes cognition.

These cultural views affect how I teach now that I live and work in Canada as a teacher and mother. From Yoruba, I bring a focus on respect, building relationships, and community responsibility, which helps me create learning environments that are open to everyone. I learned to value critical thinking and responsibility from Igbo. I want my students to see themselves as active participants in their learning. From Hausa, I learned that language can connect people from different backgrounds. This is a lesson that is especially useful in Canada's multicultural classrooms. This reflection reminds me that respecting students' languages and backgrounds means supporting their beliefs and giving them the tools to succeed.

## **Reference:**

SAR School for Advanced Research. (2017, June 7). *Lera Boroditsky, how the languages we speak shape the way we think* [Video]. YouTube.

