Language Prefabs and Habitual Thought

When I suggested to Dr. Kohn the title, Language Prefabs and Habitual Thought, I also confessed to him that I am venturing into what is for me a new territory. The focus of my research has long been on language history, especially phonological change. During the last several years, however, partly as a result of work on a campus committee at Berkeley, I was frequently asked to comment on the relations between language and cultural behavior.

The embarrassment of not being able to say anything sensible to these questions forced me to do some homework on them. I still don't feel I have anything particularly novel to say here. But I hope you will see that the issues I suggest here are interesting and important, and that you will want to join in with me to search for the answers.

To give you an idea on what I mean by the word "prefab" in my title, I would like to begin by recalling a parable told by Herbert Simon:¹

There once were two watchmakers, named Hora and Tempus, who manufactured very fine watches. Both of them were highly regarded, and the phones in their workshops rang frequently — new customers were constantly calling them. However, Hora prospered, while Tempus became poorer and poorer and finally lost his shop.

The watches the men made consisted of about 1,000 parts each. Tempus had so constructed his that if he had one partly assembled and had to put it down — to answer the phone, say — it immediately fell to pieces and had to be reassembled from the elements.

The watches that Hora made were no less complex than those of Tempus. But he had designed them so that he could put together subassemblies of about ten elements each. Ten of these subassemblies, again, could be put together into a larger subassembly; and a system of ten of the latter subassemblies constituted a whole watch. Hence, when Hora had to put down a partly assembled watch in order to answer the phone, he lost only a small part of his work, and he assembled his watches in only a fraction of the man-hours it took Tempus.

¹This was presented as part of a series of Forum Lectures at the 1989 TESOL Summer Institute, San Francisco State University. Many people helped me in shaping the remarks here, especially Dwight Bolinger, Charles Fillmore, Reiko Hasuike and Paul Friedrich; to them my warmest thanks.
Simon gave his parable in a lecture on the making of complex structures. There is probably nothing more complex in this world that we have made for ourselves than the language we speak. And certainly when we are speaking, there are usually numerous interruptions - some from outside, such as the ringing telephone, and some from within ourselves, as simultaneous strands of feelings and thoughts crisscross.

The distinction drawn in the parable between Tempus and Hora was foreshadowed for language in an important article by Dwight Bolinger.\(^2\) He posed the question as follows:

> Is grammar something where speakers "produce" (i.e., originate) constructions, or where they "reach for" them, from a preestablished inventory, when the occasion presents itself? If the latter, then...constructions are not produced one from another or from a stock of abstract components, but filed side by side, and their interrelationships are not derivative but mnemonic.

Simon's paper was published in 1962. Bolinger's article appeared in Language one year earlier, in 1961. But the climate in linguistics in the 60's was not conducive to reflecting on the question Bolinger asked. It was an era of radical formalism, when we thought of language more like a problem in algebra, to be analyzed with single shafted phrase structure rules and double shafted transformation rules. Not many linguists of my generation paid much heed at that time to the interaction between language and behavior, either within a language or cross-linguistically.

I remember reading Bolinger's article when it appeared, and reflecting on it. Language is a filing cabinet — what a quaint idea! Everyone knows that there are infinitely many sentences, since there is no upper bound to the length of a sentence. How large this filing cabinet must be.

A few years later, I had the pleasure of spending a whole academic year in Bolinger's company. We were both fellows at the Canter for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, in 1969. The euphoria of transformationism was still with me then. Even though we had numerous conversations, I suspect he saw that I was happy in my bubble, and was too kind to burst it.

Actually, it does not require much sense to see that: "Almost all conversation is...literally formulaic in the sense of conjoining and interlocking prefabricated words, phrases, and other units."\(^3\)

This is the way Paul Friedrich phrased it in his recent book, The Language Parallax. The word "parallax" is interesting. It refers to an APPARENT change in the position of an object, or its direction of movement, that is due to a change in the position of the observer. The idea is reminiscent of Sapir's metaphor, which he first proposed in 1924:

To pass from one language to another is psychologically parallel to pass-
ing from one geometrical system of reference to another. The environing world which is referred to is the same for either language: the world of points is the same in either frame of reference. But the formal method of approach to the expressed item of experience, as to the given point of space, is so different that the resulting feeling of orientation can be the same neither in the two languages nor in the two frames of reference. Entirely distinct, or at least measurable distinct, formal adjustments have to be made and these differences have their psychological correlates.4

A clear example of this parallactic effect that language has is in inter-personal relations. I have had several students over the past years at Berkeley who came from China. When we are speaking Chinese, the student would address me as "Professor Wang," and I would address him by his full name. These asymmetric terms of address, among other nuances of the language, create one type of mutual perception.

When we are speaking English, on the other hand, we call each other by first names, and the inter-personal relation has apparently changed with the change in language. The relation has to match the language. It would not feel comfortable to be "chummy" in Chinese; nor would it be natural to remain "formal" in English. I am sure that you are aware that such an example can be given for many languages, and the word "parallax" captures very well the nature of the shift.

To go back to the distinction Bolinger made, we can imagine a continuum along which we may rank utterances. At the propositional end, we have utterances which are made up of largely novel combination of words and phrases. The surface information content of these utterances is usually high, with relatively little predictability among the parts. At the opposite end, we have utterances which are highly automatic, such as songs, nursery rhymes, lines from jokes, plays and poems.

In between along this continuum, there is a wide heterogeneity of prefabs, swirling in our mental filing cabinet, ready to be "reached for." These include greetings such as "how're ya doing today?", pause fillers such as "ya know," "what can I say?", formulas such as "I can't believe it," "I could care less," "well, nobody's perfect," advertising jingles such as "you're in the Pepsi generation," or "don't leave home without it," exclamations such as "Oh my God!"

They also include a whole range of expressions that we call cliches, hedges, proverbs, idioms, metaphors, similes, allusions, curses and swearings, maxims and epigrams, mottos, slogans, aphorisms, quotations from well-known sources, and so on. Like words in the vocabulary, the inventory of these expressions is constantly changing. In a community like the San Francisco Bay Area, a steady supply of candidate expressions come from diverse sources such as lines from rap songs and popular movies, or bumper stickers on cars.5

In a classroom on rhetoric, the teacher may be able to provide clear definitions that
distinguish each of these. But to the average user of the language, the lines between these categories are not so clear. Nonetheless, in ways which are more or less transparent, I believe these prefabs exert a powerful influence on our habitual thought and what we say. They are the grooves on the phonograph record in which the speakers of the language tread, to adapt a picturesque phrase from the late Barnard Bloch.⁶

An intriguing start was made some years ago when Diana Van Lancker wrote a Ph.D. dissertation at UCLA, called Heterogeneity in Language and Speech: Neurolinguistic Studies.⁷ Using methods of delayed auditory feedback and dichotic listening, she demonstrated that we may use our brain differentially depending on whether the utterance is more propositional or more automatic.

Specifically, she found that propositional utterances appear to lateralize more to the left hemisphere, whereas automatic speech shows more lateralization to the right hemisphere. This finding is consistent with the belief that the left hemisphere is especially involved in making sequential decisions, and propositional utterances are made up of longer sequences of decision units than automatic utterances.

At any rate, it is important to note that the prefabs we are discussing are processed differently, and that one may reach for them more in the right hemisphere than in the left. It would be useful to follow up on Van Lancker's research with more materials from other languages and cultures.

There have been a variety of discussions along in the literature on language pathology that all utterances are not equal. A century ago, the neurologist Hughlings Jackson made the distinction between automatic and propositional speech, and noted that automatic speech is in general better preserved in patients with left hemisphere damage.⁶

An aphasic may not be able to produce spontaneous speech, but has no difficulty in using common greetings or exclamations. Another observation is that for patients who suffer involuntary repetition of words or phrases, a symptom called palilalia, some parts of the automatic speech may be exempted.

An interesting case was discussed by Critchley on a cultured scientist, who was speechless for three days after a brain operation. When he regained speech, he produced complex Shakespearean lines, such as "Methinks the lady doth protest too much," or flamboyant expressions, such as "There but for the grace of God go I," but all in a very monotonous articulation. This mode of speaking, Critchley reports, lasted a few months.

The most striking way automatic speech surfaces in the literature on language pathology is in the disease discovered by Gilles de la Tourette in 1885, and named after him. Although patients with this curious disease preserve their language ability, many of them suffer a syndrome called coprolalia, i.e., compulsive and involuntary swearing. When the patient feels the attack coming, he may be able to delay its onset by a few
minutes to escape to a bathroom, say, to relieve himself with a spell of intense obscenities.

Normal people, whatever the term means these days, differ in the stock of prefabs they control, as well as the extent they choose to reach for them. Excessive use of a few prefabs has been called verbal mannerisms. When a comedian caricatures, "Let me make this perfectly clear," everyone knows he is imitating Richard Nixon. Effective use of these prefabs, on the other hand, is a major ingredient of fluent and expressive speech, much as a rich vocabulary is a hallmark of a good fluent speaker. In every culture and for every language, we can expect a wide range of individual differences in linguistic skills.

Variation here does not seem to be necessarily correlated with general intelligence or level of formal education. I still remember vividly some years back when I accompanied Pavle Ivic on his field work with an old farmer he interviewed in rural Serbia. The old man spoke slowly, puffing on his pipe. I could understand very little of the language, but it was obvious that he held everyone around spellbound as he conjured up one beautiful verbal image after another in talking about his crops. Ivic was as much awed by the eloquence of the man's language as anyone else there, he told me later.

There is considerable variation as well from language to language on how large an inventory of prefabs each has accumulated through the centuries. Take the category of swearing again, for instance. The Chinese dialects I have observed all have a very rich supply of these. I have witnessed opponents square off a safe distance from each other, say ten or twelve feet apart, and indulge in a good half hour of highly creative and colorful curses, ranging from private parts of the anatomy to the sins of ancestors going many generations back. After the emotions of aggression and hostility have been released linguistically, they return to their business. Often such a ritual serves as a useful device for releasing inter-personal tensions and airing grievances in public, perhaps even to elicit support from the community.

Japanese has a great deal in common with Chinese, both in language and in culture. An important aspect of this commonality is the sharing of a very distinctive writing system for well over a thousand years. However, to the best of my knowledge, the Japanese language offers very little in the way of swearing or curses. About the worst thing one can find in the vocabulary is to call someone a fool, which is so mild that it can almost be used as a friendly gesture in some cultures.

On the other hand, in common with Chinese, Japanese has no dearth of proverbs and idiomatic sayings. Recently I had occasion to browse through a collection of a hundred of these, compiled and translated by David Galef. The volume itself is named after a proverb — Even Monkeys Fall From Trees, SARU MO KI KARA OCHIRU. It corresponds more or less to the English cliche, nobody's perfect, though there can be no denying to the wit and vividness of the Japanese prefab for saying the same thing.

The common cultural heritage with Chinese is immediately apparent in many of
these proverbs. The Japanese KUNI HOROBITE SANGA ARI, literally "the nation has fallen but the mountains and rivers remain" has been translated to mean "the land outlasts the king." It is in fact adapted from the first line of a very famous poem by Du Fu (712-770), considered by some to be China's greatest poet.

Likewise, the well known saying, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step is SENRI NO MICHII MO IPPO KARA in Japanese. In Chinese, it is QIANLI ZHI LU SHI YU YI BU. It urges one not to be daunted by the magnitude of the challenge. Another Japanese with a related theme is KOKETSU NI IRAZUMBA KOJI O EZU, literally "without entering the tiger's den, you cannot capture the tiger's pup," and translated as the English "nothing ventured, nothing gained." Again, the Chinese counterpart is BU RU HU XUE YAN DE HU ZI, which is exactly equivalent.

In cases of close correspondence such as that between Chinese and Japanese, the likelihood, of course, is that the expression has been borrowed from one language into the other. While the circumstances of the borrowing are clearly of interest to the student of cultural history, they are largely irrelevant to the user of the language as he reaches for them in his mental files.

The point to be made here, rather, is that because the two languages provide these same prefabricated images so readily available, it is reasonable that the speakers will tend to say the same things. And to take it one step further, saying them will predispose the speakers to behave in similar ways. According to one scenario, at least, the chain of events is from reaching for the language prefab to the formation of habitual thought to maintaining a consistent course of action. Obviously, such complex events are not always so unidirectional and discrete in time. But it seems to me quite plausible that the three events are interactive in some such fashion.

The subject matter of the prefabs has different degrees of universality, and this is a fertile area for crosslinguistic research. For instance, an ethical principle that is enunciated again and again is sometimes called the Golden Rule. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Confucius advocated "do not do to others what you do not wish others to do to you" — JI SUO BU YU WU SHI YU REN.

A few centuries later in ancient Greece, Aristotle suggested "We should behave to our friends as we would wish our friends to behave to us." Another several centuries later at yet another site, the New Testament reads, "therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." I would expect such a prefab to be widely available, wherever people wish to get along with each other.

Another category that has wide appeal includes commentaries on the nature of life, and its dream-like qualities. The musings of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi are now well-known — whether he was Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly, or whether he was a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi. Such commentaries may take the form of highly elegant lines of poetry which people love to recite, or of catchy little songs to sing.

An example is Su Shi's beautiful "Nian Nu Jiao," which has the line: REN SHENG RU
MENG, YI ZUN HUAN LEI JIANG YUE, life is like a dream, I offer this wine to the river moon. Another is the line which begins the reflective poem, "Das Leben" by Johann Gottfried Herder:

Ein Traum, ein Traum ist unser Leben Auf Erden hier. 
Wie Schatten auf den Wogen schweben Und schwinden wir. 
A dream, a dream is our life here on earth. 
Like shadows on the billows we float and vanish.

Then, of course, there is the very popular song of rowing your boat down the stream, riving with life is but a dream, which also connects life and dreams with flowing water. Again, I would expect that a search in the language prefabs of diverse cultures will result in numerous similar allusions.

Then, there are commentaries on the nature of life which are more culture specific. In the Japanese collection, for instance, there is the prefab JINSEI WA FUZEN NO TOMOSHIBI, literally, life is like a candle before the wind. This corresponds to the first half of a Chinese saying about the transitoriness of life, alluding to candle before the wind and frost on the tile: FENG QIAN ZHU, WA SHANG SHUANG. The two allusions are of course variations on the same theme.

Similarly, most languages probably have sayings which complain of an unappreciative audience, but with different allusions. Here is an amusing triplet all involving animals: in English it is casting pearls before swines, in Chinese it is playing the lute to a cow — DUI NIU TAN QIN, and in Japanese it is reading sutras to a horse — UMA NO MIMI NI NEMBUTSU. The message is the same, whether you are calling the audience cow, horse or swine.

On the other hand, language prefabs may convey opposite messages, reflecting the ethos of the community. There is an American saying, "The squeaking wheel gets the grease," which traces back to a 19th century humorist with the pen-name Josh Billings. It urges people to speak out for causes rather than conform and preserve harmony. This may be contrasted with the Japanese expression, DERU KUGI WA UTARERU, literally, the nail that sticks out will get hammered.

In this respect, Chinese has two common sayings in the same spirit as the Japanese expression. One is: the rafter that sticks out will rot first — CHUTOU CHUANZI XIAN LAN. The other is: the bird which sticks its head out will be shot — QIANG DA CHUTOU NIAO.

In working with such data, it is always necessary to look at both sides of the issue. Sometimes one can find expressions advocating opposite messages. Such a pair is "absence makes the heart fonder," as opposed to "out of sight out of mind." Another pair is "too many cooks spoil the broth," as opposed to "many hands make light work." That we should find this is not surprising, of course. It just means that different people have different inclinations, and folk wisdom contains many points of view.
So in opposition to the squeaking wheel expression, English also has sayings such as: "don't make waves" and "don't rock the boat." On the other hand, I know of no opposing Chinese or Japanese expressions, that is, those which are opposite in spirit to the hammer and nail proverb. I expect this is indicative of a difference in attitude between speakers of English on the one hand, speakers of Chinese and Japanese on the other.

A while ago, I referred to the metaphor of language being a phonograph record, and speakers tread in its grooves or get stuck in its ruts. The idea that we are constrained by our language has a long history tracing back to at least Wilhelm von Humboldt, as discussed for instance in Roger Brown's monograph. No doubt remarks on this subject can be found much earlier.

The English writer, Aldous Huxley, was also very sensitive to this issue, and repeatedly expressed himself on it. In 1940 he wrote:

> Words are magical in the way they affect the minds of those who use them. "A mere matter of words," we say contemptuously, forgetting that words have power to mould men's thinking, to canalize their feeling, to direct their willing and acting. Conduct and character are largely determined by the nature of the words we currently use to discuss ourselves and the world around us.

A few years later, in 1954, Huxley came back to the same theme in his book, *The Doors of Perception*, in a discussion of the relations between our senses and our actions. There we find these eloquent images:

> Every individual is at once the beneficiary and victim of the linguistic tradition into which he has been born — the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives access to the accumulated records of other people's experience, the victim in so far as it confines him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things.

In academic circles, these ideas received the most airing in recent years in the context of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis has served as a forum for extensive interdisciplinary dialog, especially among anthropologists, linguists and psychologists, resulting in a rather large body of literature.

An article Whorf wrote to honor the memory of Sapir, who was his intellectual mentor, was entitled "The relation of habitual thought and behavior to language." Among his many writings on this subject, perhaps the most widely quoted passage in this connection is the following:
The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face. On the contrary the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which have to be organized in our minds. This means, largely, by the linguistic system in our minds.\textsuperscript{13}

Sometimes, I think, people have put too much emphasis on the word "system" in the last sentence just quoted. The assumption frequently made is that if the grammar makes certain categories explicit, then these systematic categories must have deep seated cognitive consequences. If one grammatical system favors the use of morphological tense for its verb, while another favors the use of morphological aspect, this assumption would lead us to expect that the speakers of these two languages perceive and structure time differently.

It is in the spirit of this assumption, for example, that prompted Alfred Bloom to do a series of experiments on the counterfactual construction with Chinese and English speakers. In English, sentences such as "if John had gone yesterday, he would have been seen" clearly entail the knowledge that John did not go. The grammatical device in English is the use of the past perfect in the first clause and the "would" in the second clause.

In Chinese, however, there is no readily available grammatical device for expressing the counterfactual. Therefore, Bloom hypothesized, a Chinese speaker would not be able to analyze texts which involve counterfactual statements effectively. The experiments Bloom carried out have been criticized in various contexts for both method and interpretation. So his findings are not convincing. The more basic difficulty, however, lies with the assumption, and its reading of the word "system" as compulsory categories.

In this connection, we may recall some early remarks made by Floyd Lounsbury at a conference held in 1953 that was largely devoted to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. "Are the Chinese," Lounsbury asked, "whose language lacks grammatical number, inhibited in developing an arithmetic or a mathematics?" He went on to answer:

No! The fact is that mathematics depends not upon compulsory grammatical categories, but upon freely manipulable terms for certain concepts. If it depended upon grammatical categories of the compulsory variety, then people like the Kiwai Pauans should be mathematicians par excellence, because in the inflection of their verbs it is obligatory to specify, by means of grammatical affixes, the number of both the subject and the object of the verb. Furthermore, they distinguish not just singular and plural, as we do, nor singular, dual and plural as in Iroquois and Greek, but singular, dual, trial, and plural, and they do this for both subject and object. It happens that these people are not mathe-
maticians par excellence. Their numerical vocabulary goes only to five.\(^\text{14}\)

I find these remarks very much on target. Much research has been based on the wrong assumption with compulsory grammatical categories whereas as Lounsbury correctly points out it is the "freely manipulable terms" which are cognitively potent. And these are, I believe, in large part the language prefab we have been discussing.

Another direction that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has developed is in the lexical density in various parts of the vocabulary. This is a topic that arouses considerable popular interest, and Geoffrey Pullum recently wrote an urbane piece on snow, called The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax.\(^\text{15}\)

Apparently, the story starts with a low-key observation of Franz Boas. In his Introduction to the Handbook of North American Indians, Boas listed four distinct Eskimo roots - for snow on the ground, falling snow, drifting snow, and snow drift. As Pullum traces it, this number has grown steadily as the story gets retold, much in the fashion that rumor exaggerates.

In his Science and Linguistics, Whorf himself suggests that there are at least seven. In a play written by Lanford Wilson, it has grown to 50. Mass media, of course, are not to be outdone. In a New York Times editorial (Feb. 9, 1984), it has grown to 100. But the record goes to a Cleveland TV weather forecaster, who claims 200 words for the Eskimos to say snow.

The more serious point that Pullum makes, which I agree with, is that such variations in lexical density is altogether unsurprising and to be expected. It is exactly comparable to the rich vocabulary a sailor has for his boat, a geologist has for landforms, or a computer scientist for the hardware and software used by his machines. More terms are needed, so more terms are created. Very little additional cognitive content can be attributed to such observations.

An area of vocabulary study that may prove to be fertile has to do with not the number of words a language has, but with the pattern of polysemy of individual words across languages. In English, for instance, the adjective "high" refers to a variety of qualities. The high in "high mountain" is somewhat different from "high airplane." These are still different from "high note on the piano," "high position in the administration," or "high spirits." It would seem that some of these meanings are quite distant from each other.

The line is not always clear on when a meaning is a semantic extension, when it is a metaphor, or when it belongs to another word altogether. Yet in Chinese, the adjective GAO also has every one of these meanings. It cannot be due to sheer coincidence.

Many similar examples can be given for every pair of languages, of course. It is the implicit recognition that meanings tend to come in such families, labelled by the same word, that makes the tremendous task of mastering a language a little easier for the young child as well as for the foreign student. And it is only when such semantic exten-
sions produce wrong expressions, resulting in what has been called "faux amis," that we become aware that some mental process of analogizing is at work. When it works, we do not notice it.

But what do these patterns of similar polysemy across languages tell us about habitual thought? The other day, in the context of discussing these issues with a friend, Chuck Fillmore, I mentioned that the French word, conscience, means conscience, as in conscience nette (a clear conscience). It also means consciousness, as in avoir la conscience de (to be conscious of). His flip remark was that this means the French are always moral when they are awake!

We must not interpret these polysemies too literally, of course. Clearly the word "breakfast" no longer evokes images of breaking bread or breaking eggs, or breaking anything anymore, especially since the phonetic forms have changed. Nonetheless, that different languages often categorize seemingly disparate experiences with the same word is an observation within our area of discussion that has been little explored.

Let me now return to larger chunks of these "freely manipulable terms," which are the prefabs. They clearly exert a more prominent effect on our consciousness since they are bigger, often newer in the language, and contain whole messages in themselves. Since relatively little attention has been devoted to the study of language prefabs, we have no reliable knowledge at present on the range of variation they have across different languages. I will now describe a special category of language prefabs.

There is an unusual class of expressions in Chinese, for instance, that I have not seen paralleled in any other language. These are called XIE-HOU-YU, literally PAUSE-AFTER-EXPRESSION. Since there is some uncertainty in the literature on how to translate this Chinese phrase into English, I will use for now the neutral term, two-part-expression.

As contrasted to the elegant proverbs or four-syllable-sayings, for which the Chinese language is famous, two-part-expressions are often much folksier in spirit and in content. They frequently contain words considered to be vulgar, and references which are earthy and indecent. They might be seen by the more purist minded to be undesirable elements in the language to be weeded out. Indeed there have been public debates on the status of two-part-expressions by famous writers in China.

At any rate, these expressions would typically not be found in more formal literature. Nonetheless, they offer a channel of communication that is remarkably effective in being humorous, colorful, spontaneous and vivid in ways that more studied language cannot achieve.

The first part of such expressions sets the stage — it announces the subject matter. The speaker usually pauses a little, before saying the second part, which is the punch line. If the hearer knows the expression, he may fill in the second part. Or, the second part may not be said at all.

One example of such an expression can be quite useful in academic circles. After an interminable boring lecture, a student may complain that it is like an old woman's foot
cloth — LAO TAIPU DE GUO JIAO BU. This is the first part of the expression, which refers to the practice of foot binding in women, ostensibly for beauty’s sake. The second part of the expression can be omitted, since most Chinese would know it. It says, it stinks and it is long — YOU CHOU YOU CHANG.

Notice that the effectiveness of this expression rests on the fact that the two descriptors can be used in both cases. That is, "to stink" can refer to the odor of a piece of cloth, and to the quality of a speech. Likewise, the adjective "long" can refer to the physical dimension of the cloth, and to the duration of the speech. I remember first hearing someone say this years ago, and the very strong impression it made on me. It is also of interest to note that the double intent of this expression translates well from Chinese into English. In fact, such semantic extensions, mostly from the concrete and sensory to the abstract, are quite common in languages.

Another example that makes use of a similar semantic extension is this. Suppose Mr. Li, who used to be rather high-handed in his treatment of others, has lost his position of power. Someone then might say that he is like noodles that have been put into the pot — XIALE GUO DE MIEANTIAO. The second part of this expression says, cannot become hard — YING BU QILAII. Again, the pivot of the expression lies in the word for ‘hard,’ which can refer to a physical quality, such as noodles before they get boiled, and to a psychological quality in human personalities. Again, both the Chinese and the English adjective have this duality of meanings.

These expressions can be seen to operate at two levels. At the surface, the message appears to concern a piece of cloth or noodles. But the true message is really about a lecture or a person. And the true message is recovered from the surface message via the pivot word or pivot words. In the two examples we discussed, the pivot words worked by simple semantic extension. The general structure of these two-part-expressions, then, can be shown as:

First Part — Pause — Second Part (Surface Message)

| Derivation on pivot word
| Second Part (True Message)

A slightly more complex case is one in which the pivot word switches grammatical category as well. For this, I will use an example analyzed by Sam Cheung, in his excellent study of two-part-expressions in Cantonese. In this example, part one of the expression says, paper mache tiger — ZHI HU DE LACHU. The second part follows with XIA SI REN, or scare dead people in its surface message. The allusion is to various paper
mache animals burned at funerals which are believed to be transported to the nether world to be with people who have died.

The pivot here is the morpheme SI, which enters into construction in the surface message with REN, making up a noun phrase meaning "dead people." But SI can also be a constituent with the preceding verb XIA, to scare. In that case, it works as an intensifier, meaning "to scare to death," again, like the English constructions "starve to death, bore to death," etc. The true message, then, is that the situation is really scary.

Note that the phrase structure of the three morphemes in the second part is different for the two messages as the pivot changes its grammatical category. For the surface message the structure is 1 + 2, whereas for the true message the structure is 2 + 1. The structure of this expression can be shown as:

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ZHI HU DE LACHU — Pause — XIA SI REN
paper mache tiger scare (dead people)
grammatical change
(scare to death) people
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Yet another type of two-part-expression uses a pivot by pun, that is, by exploiting the homophony of the syllable. An example is: A nephew wearing a mourning hat — WAI SHEN DAI XIAO MAO. The second part is: no uncle — MEI JIU LE, meaning his uncle is dead. But the pivot syllable, JIU, can also mean "to save," a case of simple homophony. So the true message actually refers to a situation or a person that cannot be saved.

The last example I will give for this fascinating form of language prefabs in Chinese comes from a real news story. It illustrates the difficulties in cross cultural communication, and how easy it is to go wrong, even for a seasoned expert. It has to do with an exclusive interview that the American writer, Edgar Snow, had with Mao Zedong in December 1970. The Cultural Revolution was in full swing then, and Mao felt he could talk with his old journalist-friend. In a later issue of Life Magazine, Snow reported as follows:

As he courteously escorted me to the door, he said he was not a complicated man, but really very simple. He was, he said, only a lone monk walking in the world with a leaky umbrella. (Life Magazine. Vol. 70. April 4, 1971, p. 48.)

Mao was then giving the first part of a two-part-expression, which says: monk under an umbrella — HESHANG DA SAN. The second part of this expression is: no hair no sky — WU FA WU TIAN. The surface message refers to the fact that the monk has a shaven
head and that he cannot see the sky. But the pivot syllable here, FA, also means law, and the phrase WU FA WU TIAN, which is another prefab, actually means to be not constrained either by laws or by heaven. Considering the tremendous havoc that the Cultural Revolution was wreaking, such a statement is indeed understandable from one who unleashed its force. Yet how widely Snow missed the mark here. The structure of this expression is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HESHANG DA SAN — Pause — WU FA WU TIAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>monk with umbrella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no hair no sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homophony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no law no heaven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In bringing these preliminary thoughts to a close this afternoon, I would like to leave you with an appeal. The director of this Institute, Dr. Kohn, told me that this year's TESOL Institute is the largest ever, with participants coming from some 20 different countries. My memory of this field goes back 30 years, to the 1950's, when I served on the staff in the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, under the guidance of Charles Carpenter Fries and Robert Lado, from both of whom I learned a great deal.

There has been a tremendous amount of growth in the TESOL profession over these decades. This is a most heartening development, perhaps not surprising, in the light of the ever more prominent role that the English language plays in human affairs. The growth is not only in numbers of people involved, but also in sophistication of method and theory, and in drawing more and more on knowledge of other languages.

As I was musing over the various issues I discussed today, time and again I wished I knew how this idiom is expressed in this language, or how that metaphor is expressed in that language. But the literature that deals with these questions is extremely scanty. Data are especially lacking for the smaller languages, and for cross-language comparisons. Dictionaries of course are hopelessly inadequate for the task. It is much more an exception than a rule to be able to find a reference such as an article by Tannen and Oztek, on formulaic expressions in Turkish and Greek.

Yet I am certain that every language has some stock of prefabricated formulaic expressions. Some inventories are bound to be larger, while others are smaller. Some may have a heavy concentration on religious and ritual themes; others may dwell on social relations and manners. What are the dimensions along which these expressions are same and different? Discovering them and studying them can gain us much knowledge
about the habitual thought of diverse peoples.

It is in this context that I marvel at the range of linguistic knowledge that is gathered together at this Institute, coming from some 20 countries, and representing I don't know how many different languages and cultures. We are pretty much on solid ground by now on most of the basic aspects of language — phonetics, phonemics, morphology, syntax. Efforts can always be made to make the system more formal or the rules prettier, but these are mostly frosting on the cake.

The interesting questions now are more and more in the area of semantics, pragmatics and discourse strategies. And the study of language prefabs, to my mind, is central to this area, and is an important bridge between language and culture. Here is the locus where language and habitual thought intersect most cogently, and much of culture is directly reflected. These prefabs are the instruments that "have the power to mould men's thinking, to canalize their feeling, to direct their acting and willing."

I tried to discuss this area in a general context today, but my efforts are very preliminary indeed, and touching on only a handful of languages. Probably everyone in this room can think of additional examples, refinements and corrections, improved interpretations for the things I said, from his or her own languages and cultures. My hope is that you will do just that. Reach into your mental files to examine the nature of the prefabs there, and together we can develop this area of linguistic research, that has been largely neglected so far.

Finally, I can think of no better way of concluding these remarks on language prefabs with an appropriate metaphor — this one from Chinese: PAO ZHUAN YIN YU, literally throw brick attract jade. If these crude bricks I brought with me this afternoon can stimulate you to produce some jade in this important and interesting area of language research, then I will be amply gratified.

Notes

5. Recently I drove behind a pick-up truck with large letters of TOYOTA impressed in its tail-gate. Directly below, promptly displayed is a bumper sticker, reading "BUY AMERICAN." Perhaps the owner of that vehicle is a psychologist doing experiments on cognitive dissonance.
6. From a remark Bloch made from the floor during a summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1958.