The University of New York in Prague, Psychology Department,

in cooperation with the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic

Presents a lecture by

Dr. James Boster

University of Connecticut, USA

on the topic of

Where's Whorf?: Language Differences without Corresponding Cognitive Differences.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits the strongest form of cultural determinism: that language differences will be paralleled by nonlinguistic cognitive differences in native speakers. This paper presents evidence from three domains (color, destruction events, and facial gestures of emotion) in which similarity judgments do not show the influence of language differences. In these three concrete domains, individuals can make many more perceptual distinctions than can be lexicalized. Thus, language is a feeble guide in tasks like similarity judgment that require close examination of exemplars in the domain. Indeed, individuals judge the similarity of exemplars more closely to the naming pattern of an aggregate of languages than to the naming pattern of their native language. Languages vary in what perceptual distinctions they lexicalize, so a number of languages will lexicalize more of the distinctions that an individual can make that his or her own language does not.

The irony is that language is the basis of conscious thought both ontologically and phylogenetically; humans have evolved to adapt to a niche constructed through language. Following Sapir, "human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood" but also in a world of abstract labeled categories like "democracy", "lawsuit", "marriage", "corruption", "dictatorship", "human rights", and so on. In this virtual world of abstractions, language cannot help but influence thought because the categories thought about are created through language. Unfortunately, we can only test Whorfian effects on human categorizations and perceptions of the concrete.

Friday November 11th at 11:00

Academy of Science of the Czech Republic

at Politických vězňů 7, Prague 1, Room 7