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**Title:** “Eskimo words for snow”: *The life cycle of a linguistic example*

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In this talk we examine the “Eskimo words for snow” as a case study in the complex interdependence of linguistics and the social sciences and philosophy. By tracing the history of the example, we demonstrate the influence of social and philosophical theories on linguistic analysis, and the subsequent reflexive impact of linguistic evidence on social sciences and philosophy. In particular, we examine the foundations of the demand for the example and the reasons for its prevalence, based on an analysis of studies in linguistics, sociology, cultural anthropology and philosophy.

The “Eskimo words for snow” belong to the most controversial linguistic examples popularized in the 20th century humanities. We distinguish three phases in the history of the example: a) origin and propagation; b) exposition; and c) largely uncritical reception of the critique. While the example was used by Boas (1911) to show how linguistic categorization depends on the practical interests of the speakers, it was popularized by Whorf (1940 [1956]) as evidence supporting the idea of linguistic relativity. At the same time, the example was applied in a variety of theoretical contexts both sympathetic to and dissenting from the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”. More recently, the belief in the extraordinary plenitude of Eskimo words for snow was questioned by Martin (1986) and Pullum (1989) in an exposition that is characterized by frequently erroneous interpretations, impressionistic and offensive argumentation and disregard for linguistic evidence.

The “Eskimo words for snow” constitute a prototypical example of a sloppy approach to linguistic data and neglect of primary sources. In addition, the example illustrates the persistence of misconceptions concerning “exotic” languages, which are still prone to prejudiced accounts among linguists, social scientists and philosophers, even though they are no longer treated as “primitive”.

#### References:

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