1.  **LANGUAGE STRONGLY INFLUENCES THOUGHT**.  Benjamin Whorf, like Sapir studied Native American languages.  Whorf sites several examples form the Native American language, Hopi, to support his hypothesis that thought is strongly based on language.  According to Whorf the Hopi language does not contain any words, grammatical constructions or expressions that refer to the English concept of ‘time.’  Whorf goes on to explain that it is possible in the Hopi language to express the world or reality in ways other than what many languages refer to as ‘time.’  The Hopi view of reality is specific to the language and can only be best expressed if one is familiar with the language (Carroll, 1956:57).  In this example where Whorf feels language strongly influences thought, he is often criticized with circularity because he “infers cognitive differences between two speakers from an examination of their respective languages,” (Hopi and English).  His proof of cognitive differences is only “based on reiteration of the linguistic differences” (Harre, 1990:5).

            The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has remained a divisive topic for many years because many researchers feel that Whorf’s examples failed to show a real relationship between language and thought while others agree with Whorf that thought is truly dependent on language.  Similarly researchers find it difficult to find a set of variables that fit a valid research and do not come under the same criticism as Whorf’s alleged circularity.  Although these constraints continue to make it difficult for researchers, many continue to look for ways to prove or disprove the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

            A common argument for the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is the perception of color across languages.  According to the hypothesis, if one language categorizes color differently than another language, then the different groups should perceive it differently also.  In a study done in the 1970’s a group of researchers studied the difference in perception of color in English compared with a small tribe from Papua New Guinea called Berinmo.  The Berinmo were given a sample of 160 different colors and asked to categorize them.  The Berinmo not only had less categories, they did not differentiate between the English colors blue and green, however, they did draw a category between colors in their language *nol*and *wor* which in English would both be perceived in the category of yellow.

The researchers found that the Berinmo speakers were better at matching colors across their *nol*,*wor* categories than across the English blue and green categories and English speakers were better at matching colors across blue and green than across the Berinmo *nol* and *wor* (Sawyer, 1999).  According to the researchers by showing that the color perception of the two language groups is dependent on the categorization in the language the results support the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

**2.  LANGUAGE DOES NOT INFLUENCE THOUGHT.**There are three main points that researchers use to dispute the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: translatability, differences between linguistic and non-linguistic events and universals.

Translatability is a common argument scholars use against the hypothesis, for although language may differ considerably in the way they express certain details, it is still quite possible to translate those details from one language to another (Fishman, 1976:273).

            The argument made by Eric Lenneberg against the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is that “linguistic and non-linguistic events must be separately observed and described before they can be correlated” (Carroll, 1956:28).  He argues that there is no way to define language as influencing thought when there is no distinction between these two events and that the evidence which supports language as influencing thought is based purely on linguistic differences.

            The third argument that gives evidence against language influencing thought is the concept of universals.  The idea of universals can be traced back to the Port Royale:

There are in the grammar observations that apply to all languages; these observations constitute what one calls general grammar.  Grammar, which has for its object the expression of thought by the help of speed, spoken or written, thus admits of two sorts of rules.  One kind are immutably true and universally followed, they apply to the form of thought itself, they follow from the analysis of it and are only the consequence of it…(Cowie, 1999:227).

The theory of Universals, commonly attributed to Chomsky and generative grammar is the claim that there are deep structures that are common to all languages (Fishmann, 1976:13).

In examining this thought in relation to linguistic relativity all cultures would be related and have similar realities which is in deep contrast with Whorf’s ideas that all cultures see the world differently because of their language.

**3.  LANGUAGE PARTIALLY INFLUENCES THOUGHT.**The writings of Sapir and Whorf brought about a huge change in the way scholars view language and thought.  Researchers scurried to find evidence that would give the hypothesis validity.  Although the research is easy to formulate, the problem lies in finding a set of variables that accurately test the hypothesis.  Most researchers up to this time have found it hard to conclude that language determines thought, however through examples from Whorf’s studies in Hopi and other observations from researchers it is valid to suggest that language does partially determine thought.  In determining linguistic relativity the question is not whether a language affects ones thoughts but to what degree (Wierzbicka, 1992:7).

            Many examples are given to support a weak interpretation of linguistic relativity.  One experiment done by Linda Rogers gives evidence to support a weak interpretation.  Rogers read a story to a group of bilingual children while recording their brain-wave patterns.  She first read the story in English while observing that the children’s brains were active in the left hemisphere and then read the story in Navaho and observed their brain activity in the right hemisphere.  This according to Rogers gave evidence to the fact that English as a noun-centered language was processed in the left side of the brain and the Navaho as a verb-centered language was processed in the right side of the brain.  This gave evidence to the fact that although the same story was told to the same children they processed the story differently according to which language it was told in (Gill, 1997:140.

            Another example is a study contrasting Japanese and English passive constructions done by Agnes Niyekawa-Howard in 1968.  The study explains that Japanese has two types of passive constructions in which when one is combined with the other the meaning changes so that the subject of the sentence was “caused” to take the action that is found in the verb.  In translating stories from Japanese to English this construction was not seen, however, in the translation from English to Japanese the Japanese translators included this construction.

 Similarly when asked to interpret cartoons that dealt with interpersonal conflict, the Japanese “were found to attribute responsibility for the negative outcome to others” more that did the English.

The study’s purpose was to show that although not consciously seen by native Japanese, this construction of grammar contributes to a “perceptual habit or cultural outlook” in the Japanese culture (Salzmann, 1993:163).

            Support for the idea that language partially influences thought can also be seen in the concept of codability.  Codability can be seen as the ability to translate a word, phrase or idea from one language to another.  Anyone that speaks two languages would agree that some ideas are easier said in one language over the other.  Many times in language there are words that explain a thought, location, emotion etc. that in other languages could take up to a paragraph long to describe.  An Eskimo tribe in Alaska called the Dena’ina Athabaskans has an entire lexicon that describes different kinds of streams and trails.  In one word the Dena’ina are able to describe the following phrases: “a place of fast or slow current, covered with slush ice or overflow ice, a packed snow trail or a trail with snow drifted over, an animal trail, or a trail used for getting wood” (Lord, 1996).  The concept of codability, the ability to code in one language a word or phrase in another, exemplifies the idea of language partially influencing thought because in one language a speaker may be able to perceive a lexical category better than another but that in no way limits another language from being able to perceive the same category.

            Linguists and Anthropologists have been concerned with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and the implications that surround the claims made by Sapir in 1928 and continue to look for ways to prove or disprove the idea that language directly influences the way reality is perceived.  Because the perfect research situation to completely prove or disprove this hypothesis does not exist researchers are left to examine small examples of specific registers in which language can be seen to affect thought and reality and through research in these registers most researchers agree with the weak interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.