



## GST 35 – Linguistic Divergence

### Formal Description

Linguistic divergence is the process by which individuals, cultures, disciplines, and communities develop different concepts, terminologies, metaphors, and explanatory frameworks to represent overlapping aspects of reality. Divergence arises because different observers employ different compressions, perspectives, purposes, and experiences when representing complex phenomena.

### Plain English Explanation

If people lived identical lives, had identical experiences, and focused on identical problems, they would probably develop very similar ways of describing the world.

In reality, however, people differ enormously in their experiences, interests, cultures, occupations, and goals. As a result, they develop different ways of representing reality.

A doctor, engineer, economist, and sociologist may all examine the same organisation yet describe it using very different concepts and terminology. Likewise, people from different cultures often use different metaphors, assumptions, and categories when discussing similar situations.

This process is known as linguistic divergence.

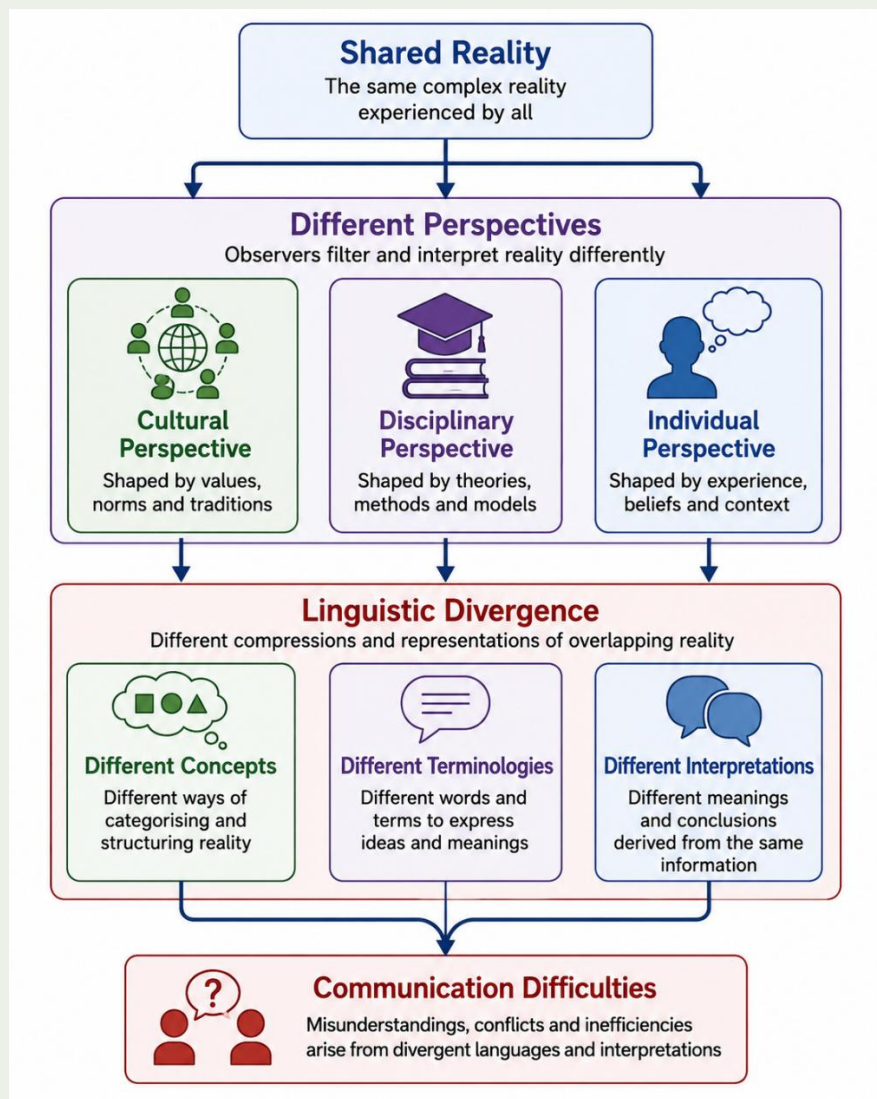
Linguistic divergence does not necessarily mean that people are describing different realities. More often, it reflects the fact that they are compressing and representing overlapping parts of the same reality from different perspectives.

As knowledge grows, divergence often increases. Disciplines become more specialised. New terminology is introduced. Communities develop their own assumptions, methods, and conceptual frameworks. These specialised languages can improve understanding within a group but often make communication with outsiders more difficult.

Individuals also contribute to divergence. Every person possesses unique experiences, memories, associations, and interests. Consequently, even when using the same words, people may not mean exactly the same thing.

Linguistic divergence is therefore a natural consequence of human cognition. Different people and groups develop different compressions of reality because they focus on different aspects of it.

The challenge is that increasing divergence can make communication, cooperation, and productive coordination more difficult. Understanding how divergence emerges is therefore an important step towards improving communication across disciplines, cultures, and communities.



#### Example 1 – Climate Change

A climatologist may discuss atmospheric processes, an economist may discuss incentives and markets, and a politician may discuss policy and public opinion. Each describes the same broad issue using a different language.

#### Example 2 – Healthcare

Doctors, nurses, administrators, patients, and politicians often use different terminology and priorities when discussing healthcare systems.

#### Example 3 – Organisations

An engineer may describe an organisation in terms of processes and performance. A psychologist may focus on motivation and behaviour. A sociologist may focus on relationships and culture.

#### Example 4 – Everyday Life

Members of different generations often use different words, metaphors, and references to describe similar experiences, creating communication difficulties despite discussing the same reality.



### **Provenance and Links**

The study of linguistic divergence draws upon linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and systems theory.

Relevant contributors include:

- Ferdinand de Saussure – language as a symbolic system.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein – language games and meaning.
- Thomas Kuhn – paradigms and disciplinary language.
- Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann – social construction of meaning.
- Jerome Bruner – cognition and representation.
- Gregory Bateson – communication and difference.

Related topics include language, communication, culture, paradigms, cognition, representation, social systems, and knowledge.

### **Practical Exercise**

Choose a topic that is discussed by multiple groups.

Examples might include:

- education,
  - healthcare,
  - climate change,
  - artificial intelligence,
  - economic development.
1. Identify at least three groups that discuss the topic.
  2. Describe how each group talks about it.
  3. Identify differences in terminology, assumptions, or priorities.
  4. Consider why these differences exist.
  5. Reflect on whether the groups are describing different realities or different perspectives on the same reality.

How might communication between the groups be improved?