CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES
Since the turn of the 20th century, a number of thinkers have pointed out that human beings don’t all have the same concepts. Instead, different cultures and different languages work with different sets of concepts or ‘conceptual schemes’. How should we understand this?

Philosophers and anthropologists who were interested in the differences in the ways in which people think of the world argued that there are two distinguishable elements to our experience – the data of the senses and then the interpretation of this data by a set of concepts. Our senses do not ‘let in’ ideas; rather, before we can form ideas, we must interpret what our senses tell us. (The data of the senses was sometimes thought of as purely physiological – the image on the retina, the vibrations of the ear drum, or the firings in the brain that these cause immediately.) On this data, different people would impose different conceptual schemes (usually thought of as cultural in some way).

It was then argued that these different conceptual schemes may be irreconcilable – that we can’t translate from one into another. The strongest form of this ‘conceptual relativism’ claims that because their conceptual schemes are fundamental to how people experience and understand reality, people with different conceptual schemes have different ‘realities’.

One famous version of this view is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, deriving from the linguist Edward Sapir and anthropologist Benjamin Whorf. They were struck by the difficulties in translating between languages. For example, Whorf worked with Hopi Indians, and argued that the way they talked about time could not be expressed in English. But this isn’t just a matter of language – their language is a reflection of how they think, of their concepts:

We are inclined to think of language simply as a technique of expression, and not to realize that language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order.

So their very experience of time was different from ours, or as some thinkers put it – time is different for them:

We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence [i.e. stream of sensory experience] to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated’ (Language, Thought and Reality, p. 55).

So if people have different languages, different conceptual schemes, then they will end up with different pictures of the universe.
AN IMPLICATION: CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

If there are different schemes, but we can translate between them, then Whorf is wrong – this doesn’t lead to ‘relativity’. However, the view that there are different conceptual schemes and that we cannot translate between them leads to the conclusion that truth is relative to conceptual schemes.

Some thinkers have gone so far as to claim that reality is relative to conceptual schemes, so that people with different conceptual schemes experience different worlds. But this is very difficult to defend, and it may not even make sense. First, it supposes that language somehow ‘constructs’ reality – but the world would still exist even if no one spoke any language. It existed before language, after all! Second, as the quotation from Whorf indicates, the theory is usually developed by contrasting something that is the ‘same’ (physical evidence, sensory experience) with the differing interpretations imposed by different conceptual schemes. So there is something that is ‘real’ which is ‘outside’ or ‘before’ or ‘beyond’ all interpretations.

The weaker claim, that truth is relative to conceptual schemes, says this: because there are conceptual schemes which cannot be translated into each other, a proposition in one scheme can be true without being something that the other scheme can express at all. So there is no one set of truths – or Truth – which describes how the world is. (Again, if we can translate between the schemes, then any true proposition in one scheme has an equivalent translation in another – so truth is not relative.)

AN OBJECTION

Conceptual relativism looks like an empirical claim – we need to go and find out whether there are any conceptual schemes which are not translatable. But some philosophers have argued that the account of the relation between experience and conceptual schemes given above doesn’t make sense. Whorf says that language (or the conceptual scheme embodied in a language) ‘organizes’ or ‘arranges’ our experience of the world. You can only organize something if it has parts or contains objects – you can organize the clothes in a wardrobe, but you can’t organize a wardrobe itself. If we claim that a conceptual scheme organizes our ‘experience’, then we must then of experience as comprised of experiences. So here is something that different conceptual schemes all have in common – the set of experiences (that they organize differently). But in talking about these experiences, how do we pick them out? We can only do so in familiar ways – feeling cold, seeing a plant, smelling a rose. Any conceptual scheme which starts with these sorts of experiences will end up very similar to our own, and so we will be able to translate between the two schemes.

Of course, there may be parts of a scheme that cannot be translated. And perhaps this leads to a mild form of conceptual relativism. But it will be very mild. Because there are parts of the scheme that can be translated, we can use these to understand the parts that we cannot translate. We can then add these new thoughts into our conceptual scheme – we can expand our concepts. So we don’t end up with the view that there is no one set of truths that describes reality, just that we will need a very expanded conceptual scheme to provide the means for expressing these truths.

The metaphor of ‘organizing’ should perhaps be rejected. But that doesn’t mean we avoid conceptual relativism. The second part of the answer assumes that we can always combine different conceptual schemes. But this is questionable. A popular example is
given by colour concepts. Different cultures, it seems, carve up the colour spectrum differently. Suppose that one culture uses just one concept in thinking about what we think of as two colours, blue and green. We cannot combine all three concepts in one scheme, since they conflict. In our scheme, we can say – truly – ‘it is green but not blue’; in theirs, it is impossible to say this. Either you think of blue and green (as we would say) as two separate colours or as one colour.

However, it is misleading to say that ‘truth is relative to conceptual schemes’. This would suggest that what is true according to one scheme is false in another. But what we have said is that what is true in one scheme cannot be expressed in another. In this situation, there is no disagreement over what is true – to disagree, the two schemes would have to be able to express the same proposition (e.g. ‘it is green but not blue’). But this is what they cannot do.

We end up with the somewhat unsurprising position that in order to state something true, you must be able to state it. But what you can state depends on what concepts you have. However, we have not established just how different such conceptual schemes can be.