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Linguistic Relativism (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis) vs. Universal Grammar

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Introduction

"Early in the twentieth century, American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) inaugurated an important expansion of scientific investigation of the languages of native North America. As part of a broad critique of nineteenth-century evolutionary arguments he stressed the equal value of each language type and their independence from race and cultural level. He argued that each language necessarily represents an implicit classification of experience, that these classifications vary across languages, but that such variation probably has little effect on thought or culture.

His student Edward Sapir (1884-1939) accepted the main thrust of Boas' position but came to feel that the closely knit system of categories in a language could represent incommensurable analyses of experience with effects on speakers' conceptual view points and aesthetic interpretations. Gestalt and psychoanalytic psychology and Sapir's own literary efforts also played a role in his thinking on this issue. Sapir's concern was not with linguistic form as such (for example, whether a language uses inflections or not), nor with linguistic content or meaning as such (for example, whether a language could refer to a particular referent), but rather with the formal organization of meaning characteristic of a language, the regular ways meanings are constructed (for example, grammatical categories and patterns of semantic composition). Despite the suggestiveness of his formulation, Sapir provided few specific illustrations of the sorts of influences he had in mind.

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), a gifted amateur linguist independently interested in these issues as they related to the nature of science, came into contact with Sapir in 1930 and began developing these views to a more systematic way. He analysed particular linguistic constructions, proposed mechanisms of influence, and provided empirical demonstrations of such influences on belief and behavior. However, his views on this issue are known to us largely through letters, unpublished manuscripts and popular pieces, which has led to considerable debate about his actual position. In this context, the one article on this issue prepared for a professional audience must be given special weight (see Whorf 1956). (1) Whorf argued that each language refers to an infinite variety of experiences with a finite array of formal categories (both lexical and grammatical) by trouping experiences together as analogically 'the same' for the purposes of speech. These categories also interrelate in a coherent way, reinforcing and complementing one another, so as to constitute an overall interpretation of experience. Languages vary considerably not only in the basic distinctions they recognize, but also in the assemblage of these categories into a coherent system of reference. Thus the system of categories which each language provides to its speakers is not a common,

universal system, but one peculiar to the individual language, and one which makes possible a particular 'fashion of speaking'.

But speakers tend to assume that the categories and distinctions of their language are natural, given by external reality. Further, speakers make the tacit error of assuming that elements of experience which are classed together on one or another criterion for the purposes of speech are similar in other respects as well. The crux of Whorf's argument is that these linguistic categories are used as guides in habitual thought. When speakers attempt to interpret an experience in terms of a category available in their language they automatically involve the other meanings implicit in that particular category (analogy) and in the overall configuration of categories in which it is embedded. And speakers regard these other meanings as being intrinsic to the original experience rather than a product of linguistic analogy. Thus, language does not so much blind speakers to some obvious reality, but rather it suggests associations which are not necessarily entailed by experience. Ultimately, these shaping forces affect not only everyday habitual thought but also more sophisticated philosophical and scientific activity. In the absence of another language (natural or artificial) with which to talk about experience, speakers will be unlikely to recognize the conventional nature of their linguistically based understandings." (p. 471)

Notes

(1) "The relation of habitual thought and behavior to language" (1939) reprinted in B. L. Whorf *Language, thought, and reality. Selected writings.* Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1956 pp. 134-159).

From: John A. Lucy, "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis", in: Edward Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London, New York: Routledge 1998.

"The original idea, variously attributable to Humboldt, Boas, Sapir, Whorf, was that the semantic structures of different languages might be fundamentally incommensurable, with consequences for the way in which speakers of specific languages might think and act. On this view, language, thought, and culture are deeply interlocked, so that each language might be claimed to have associated with it a distinctive world view.

These ideas captured the imagination of a generation of anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists, as well as members of the general public. They had deep implications for the way anthropologists should conduct their business, suggesting that translational difficulties might lie at the heart of their discipline. However, the ideas seemed entirely and abruptly discredited by the rise of the cognitive sciences in the 1960s, which favoured a strong emphasis on the commonality of human cognition and its basis in human genetic endowment. This emphasis was strengthened by developments within linguistic anthropology, with the discovery of significant semantic universals in color terms, the structure of ethno-botanical nomenclature, and (arguably) kinship terms. However, there has been a recent change of intellectual climate in psychology, linguistics, and other disciplines surrounding anthropology, as well as within linguistic anthropology, towards an intermediate position, in which more attention is paid to linguistic and cultural difference, such diversity being viewed within the context of what we have learned about universals (features shared by all languages and cultures). New work in developmental psychology, while acknowledging underlying universal bases, emphasizes the importance of the socio-cultural context of human development. Within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology there has also been increasing attention to meaning and discourse, and concomitantly a growing appreciation of how interpretive differences can be rooted as much in the systematic uses of language as in its structure." (pp. 2-3) (...)

"The boldness of Whorf's formulation prompted a succession of empirical studies in America in the 1950s and early 1960s aimed at elucidating and testing what now became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Anthropological and linguistic studies by Trager, Hoijer, Lee, Casagrande, and others have been well reviewed elsewhere (see Lucy *Language diversity and thought. A reformulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis* chapter 3; and this volume). These studies hardly touched on cognition, but in the same period a few psychologists (notably Lenneberg, Brown, Steffler) did try to investigate the relation between lexical coding and memory, especially in the domain of color,

and found some significant correlations (again see Lucy chapter 5). This line of work culminated, however, in the celebrated demonstration by Berlin & Kay (1969) of the language-independent saliency of "basic colors," which was taken as a decisive anti-relativist finding, and effectively terminated this tradition of investigations into the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. There followed a period in which Whorf's own views in particular became the butt of extensive criticism.

It is clear from this background that the "Sapir-Whorf" hypothesis in its classical form arose from deep historical roots but in a particular intellectual climate. Even though (it has been closely argued by Lucy op. cit.) the original hypothesis has never been thoroughly tested, the intellectual milieu had by the 1960s entirely changed. Instead of empiricism, we now have rationalistic assumptions. Instead of the basic tenets of structuralism, in which each linguistic or social system must be understood first in internal terms before comparison is possible, modern comparative work (especially in linguistics) tends to presume that one can isolate particular aspects or traits of a system (e.g. aspect or subjecthood) for comparison. The justification, such as it is, is that we now have the outlines of a universal structure for language and perhaps cognition, which provides the terms for comparison. It is true that the assumption of unconscious processes continues, but now the emphasis is on the unconscious nature of nearly all systematic information processing, so that the distinctive character of Whorf's habitual thought has been submerged.

In this changed intellectual climate, and in the light of the much greater knowledge that we now have about both language and mental processing, it would be pointless to attempt to revive ideas about linguistic relativity in their original form. Nevertheless, there have been a whole range of recent intellectual shifts that make the ground more fertile for some of the original seeds to grow into new saplings. It is the purpose of this volume to explore the implications of some of these shifts in a number of different disciplines for our overall view of the relations between language, thinking, and society." (pp. 6-7)"

From: John J. Gumperz and Stephen C. Levinson, *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996.

Historical roots of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

"In traditional scholarship concerning the intellectual roots of the so-called Sapir -Whorf Hypothesis' -- a term perhaps first used by Harry Hoijer (1904-1976) in 1954 in a paper at a conference devoted to the subject, but probably made more widely known through John B. Carroll's (b. 1916) posthumous edition of Benjamin Lee Whorf's papers in 1956 (cf page 27) -- these are traced largely, but not exclusively, to German language theory of the 17th (e.g., Leibniz) through the early 19th century, which, in Humboldt's version, connects the 'inner form' of a language with the particularity of a world view of the nation that speaks it. This traditional view (surveyed in Koerner 1992) has recently been challenged by Joseph (1996) and, where Whorf's work in general is concerned, by Lee (1996) in her monograph treatment of Whorf's 'theory complex' (especially Chapter 3). In this short paper the argument is made that these seemingly opposite positions concerning intellectual indebtedness are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but that an allowance should be made for the presence, latent or keenly felt, of two distinct but at least loosely connected layers of influence discernible in the work of North American linguists and anthropologists studying indigenous languages from Whitney to Whorf and his followers. So while the first, perhaps more general and less explicit kind of influence (at least where Whorf is concerned) derives from a fairly long-standing tradition in German philosophy of language, appropriate room should definitely be given to the more immediate sources of the idea that one's native language determines individual and cultural patterns of thought which Joseph (1996) has documented so carefully, this idea held by Herder and, notably, by Humboldt (which he dubs the 'magic key' view), whereby language is seen as embodying the national mind and unfolding in line with the Romantic concept of history, in contrast to the other version (dubbed by him 'metaphysical garbage'), which envisions language developing within an evolutionary view of history and which is seen as introducing obstacles to logical thought. This latter view, Joseph holds, appears to have been commonplace in Cambridge analytical philosophy, represented most prominently by Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), and in Viennese logical positivism, reflected in the Work of Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970). Joseph identifies Charles Kay Ogden (1889- 1957) as the key link between

Cambridge and Vienna, whose influential book of 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning*, co-authored with Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893-1979), subtitled "The influence of language on thought and of the science of symbolism", contains, Joseph demonstrates, many of the positions held by both Whorf and Sapir.

According to Joseph (1996), Sapir's positive review of the same year of Ogden and Richards' influential book marks a turning point from his view of language as a cultural product (as in his 1921 book *Language*, which incidentally was one of the works criticized in Ogden and Richards) to a sort of template around which the rest of culture is structured, as argued in his "The Status of Linguistics as a Science" (1929). This paper, Joseph suggests, like others of Sapir's writings from 1923 on, takes up the rhetoric of 'metaphysical garbage' almost exclusively. Whorf in turn, drawn by Sapir to structuralism from originally mystical interests in language - beginning with his discovery in 1924 of the quasi-Cabbalistic writings of Antoine Fahre d'Olivet (1768-1825), likewise takes up this 'garbage' line, interweaving it with 'magic key' only in the two years between Sapir's death and his own. Joseph in his important, indeed ground-breaking study on the subject -- also investigates other influences on Whorf, for instance the writings of the analytic philosopher Count Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), founder of the General Semantics movement in the United States. As a result, my own paper, like my previous research on the subject, can be regarded as dealing more with part of the general intellectual climate that informed American scholarship during much of the 19th and the early 20th century, than with most of the direct, textually traceable sources, of the so-called Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that Joseph had identified." (pp. 1-2)

From: E. F. K. Koerner, *Towards a 'Full Pedigree' of the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis'. From Locke to Lucy*. In: Martin Pütz and Marjolijn H. Verspoor (eds.), *Explorations in Linguistic Relativity*, Philadelphia: John Benjamins 2000, pp. 1-24.