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Master 1: Language and culture
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Language, Culture and Thought

Introduction

Human beings live in language; they speak and listen constantly to speech, and at least an important part of their silent thinking, imagining, and problem solving takes place in some transform of spoken language. Communication through reading, writing, speaking, listening to speech, and thinking in words can take place only in the medium of a particular language and must bear the imprint of that language's peculiarities.

Relativism vs. Determinism

Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis

The term relativity is associated with the American linguist Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), who developed the ideas of Sapir's teacher Franz Boas (1858–1942). Sapir and Whorf hypothesis, that came with the positivistic trend, proposed a 'principle of linguistic relativity' with an explicit reference to Einstein's theory of relativity. Sapir and Whorf focussed on Amerindian languages in which the physical world was encoded in ways that differed markedly from the more extensively studied languages of Indo-European stock. They concluded from their observations that languages function as perceptual and conceptual filters, a notion which subsequently became known as the "**linguistic relativity hypothesis.**" A rigid interpretation of this hypothesis sees speakers' cognition strongly influenced, if not wholly determined, by the language they speak. Sapir believes on the dependence of the individual on conceptual patterning that is derived from the language that he or she speaks. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, makes the claim that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves. According to this principle, the way in which we think about the world is directly influenced by the language we use to talk about it. The passage most commonly quoted to demonstrate the supposed linguistic determinism of Sapir and his student Whorf is the following:

the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are different worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir, 1929).

We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

The idea that language determines the way we think about the world around us and that difference in language results in difference in thought, is known as **linguistic determinism**. A look at how users of different languages view **colour, linguistic etiquette and kinship systems** helps to illustrate this point. As an example, Hanunóo, a language from the Philippines, has four terms to refer to white, black, green, and red, but under further analysis it turns out to mean roughly lightness, darkness, wetness, and dryness. Such observations imply that some cultures interpret colours based on their language. Kinship systems have similarly been studied to discover how language is related to thought through the ways in which the use of terms like father, brother, or older brother reflect how people behave toward these people (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 229). A typical example comes from Algerian context where people in certain regions used to recognize “the eldest brother” as “dada”, which is also labelled to “a father’s brother” and sometimes to “father”. The grand father is called sometimes just as the father “baba”. The use of the term ‘father/baba’ in a conversation between a native English speaker and an Algerian would logically produce a different image for both people, as culturally each may classify the roles and image of this person differently.

When extending determinism claim to languages that are, for example, structured to reflect social hierarchy such as with Japanese and its numerous levels of politeness, the issue of whether the language actually controls the thoughts of the user is difficult to confirm. The fact that translation from one language to totally a different language weakens the determinism claim that the structure of the native language determines the way in which native speakers perceive the world. In addition, universalists who argue that there exist common shared features between different languages would also oppose Sapir’s strong view. Unfortunately, determinism ignores about the role of individual cognitive processes and schemata. People retrieve from their previous knowledge and experiences to confront familiar as well as unfamiliar situations and to find appropriate strategies and behaviours to deal with these situations.

Kramersch (1988) encounters for other limitations in the strong version of Sapir and Whorf work stating that the generic semantic meanings of the code that have established themselves over time within a given discourse community are subject to the various and variable uses made of them in social contexts (e.g., concepts like terrorism, revolution and literacy has been changed over time to cope with other political, social and scientific changes).

We are, then, not prisoners of the cultural meanings offered to us by our language, but can enrich them in our pragmatic interactions with other language users.

A weak version of the hypothesis suggests that our thought is merely influenced by our language (**linguistic relativism**). Such weak determinism allows for additional influences to enter into the relationship between language and culture. Notwithstanding individual cognitive processes or general knowledge, it is fair to assume that worldviews may be influenced by culture and not just language. The belief that there are cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by seemingly concepts. The way a given language encodes experience semantically makes aspects of that experience not exclusively accessible, but just more salient for the users of that language. That is, the linguistic structure does not constrain what people can think or perceive; it only tends to influence what they routinely do and think. Elmes (2013, p. 14) asserts that although language structure provides us with phrasings for our understanding and can manipulate our thoughts in this respect, if pre-existing knowledge does not supply a foundation for general understanding, the ways in which we define and evaluate each individual encounter would be left solely to linguistic knowledge.

Kramersch (1988) points out that the work of Sapir and Whorf, in its weak version (**relativity**) has led to **two important insights**:

1. There is nowadays a recognition that language, as code, reflects cultural preoccupations and constraints the way people think since culture is semantically encoded in the language itself. In this way language is linked to culture through what it says or what it refers to as an encoded sign (**semantics**).

2. More than in Whorf's days, however, we recognize how important context is in complementing the meanings encoded in the language. Here, we refer to culture as expressed through the actual use of the language. In this way language is linked to culture through what it does as an action in context (**pragmatics**). it is frequently difficult to draw a clear line between the generic semantic meanings of the code and the pragmatic meanings of code in various contexts of use.

Conclusion

To what extent the structure of one's language shapes one's view of the world thus remains an unresolved issue. Yet, the idea that language has an influence on people's perception and concepts is still espoused by many researchers and often forms the underlying paradigm for describing the relation between language and society. How speech habits

interact with ways of thinking, then, remains one of the many intricate questions into which empirical research is needed.

Further reading

Linguistic relativity: precursors and transformations by John Leavitt (Chapter 2, pp. 18-30) in Sharifian, F. (2015). *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*. Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group.