

## Language Learning and Linguistic Relativity

*The central question in research on linguistic relativity, or the Whorfian hypothesis, is whether people who speak different languages think differently. Linguistic relativity comprises two main ideas: first, it assumes that languages can differ significantly in the meanings of their words and syntactic constructions. Second, the proposal holds that the semantics of a language can affect the way in which its speakers perceive and conceptualize the world, and in the extreme, completely shape thought, a position known as linguistic determinism. The evidence for this kind of linguistic relativity is clear to everyone who really masters a second language. Teachers often talk of “thinking” in a second language as if this meant no more than responding to situations rapidly and automatically and more or less correctly with the surface structures of the language.*

*Key Words: Sapir - Whorf hypothesis, linguistic relativity, linguistic determinism, universals, particulars, innate knowledge.*

The central question in research on linguistic relativity, or the Whorfian hypothesis, is whether people who speak different languages think differently. The recent resurgence of research on this question can be attributed, in part, to new insights about the ways in which language might impact thought. We identify seven categories of hypotheses about the possible effects of language on thought across a wide range of domains, including motion, colour, spatial relations, number, and false belief understanding. While we do not and support for the idea that language determines the basic categories of thought or that it overwrites preexisting conceptual distinctions, we do and support for the proposal that language can make some distinctions difficult to avoid, as well as for the proposal that language can augment certain types of thinking.

Linguistic relativity comprises two main ideas: first, it assumes that languages can differ significantly in the meanings of their words and syntactic constructions—an assumption that is strongly supported by linguistic, anthropological, and psychological studies of word and phrasal meaning across languages. Second, the proposal holds that the semantics of a language can affect the way in which its speakers perceive and conceptualize the world, and in the extreme, completely shape thought, a position known as linguistic determinism.

It has often been claimed that linguistic relativity is a weaker form of linguistic determinism. But the strong–weak distinction oversimplifies the more complicated picture that is

emerging in recent research on the relationship between language and thought. Linguistic relativity can now be said to comprise a 'family' of related proposals that do not necessarily fall along a single strong-to-weak continuum.

Comparisons of different languages can lead one to pay attention to 'universals'—the ways in which all languages are similar, and to 'particulars'—the ways in which each individual language, or type of language, is special, even unique. Linguists and other social scientists interested in universals have formulated theories to describe and explain human language and human language behavior in general terms as species-specific capacities of human beings. However, the idea that different languages may influence thinking in different ways has been present in many cultures and has given rise to many philosophical treatises. Because it is so difficult to pin down effects of a particular language on a particular thought pattern, this issue remains unresolved. It comes in and out of fashion and often evokes considerable energy in efforts to support or refute it. An example from our daily life can easily illustrate the idea: A doctor saw an elderly patient and, at the end of the visit, told her in parting, "Take it easy." He meant it as an informal way of saying goodbye, nothing more. But this poor lady took it as medical advice, promptly took to her bed, and refused to get out for the next two weeks, until the doctor returned from what turned out to be an ill-timed vacation. By that time the little lady was so weak from her self-imposed inactivity that she was unable to walk.

The problems faced by the student learning a language in the field are not basically different from those faced by any learner of a second language. They are, however, exacerbated by the fact that he may have to fend for himself to a large extent once he has reached the foreign country and has no systematic and planned instruction. It is particularly important, therefore, that he should be prepared in advance, if not in the language of the country he is going to, then at least in understanding the kinds of problems which he will have to face. He should be at least minimally aware of the kinds of differences that exist between languages, and particularly of the problem of linguistic relativity and he should perhaps also be made aware of those particular attitudes of mind which will help him to learn, or to increase his previously acquired competence, in the theoretically ideal situation represented by actually living in the country where the language is spoken.

Currently popular linguistic theory stresses, among other things, the following:

- The hypothesis that human beings have a built-in propensity for learning language—an “innate knowledge” not of any particular language, but of the kinds of rules which constitute the grammar of any language (cf., e.g. Chomsky, 1965: 51-58)
- The hypothesis that the sentences of all languages are to be described in terms of a deep structure, which is an abstract representation of underlying conceptual categories and patterning of these, which is converted

into a structure by the application of transformational rules.

- The hypothesis that many (some would say all) aspects of deep structure, and many types of transformational rules, and other “formal” features of language are universal—that is, the same for all languages.

That language is a characteristically human trait is obvious enough: but it is not the case, as Chomsky (1968a) has recently pointed out, that human language is merely a more completely evolved system of animal communication. No system of animal communication is at all analogous to human language, and not even the most “intelligent” ape is capable of learning a language. On the other hand, all normal children acquire their mother tongue with, as it appears, little difficulty. They utter a first “word” at 10 to 12 months, combine words at 18 to 20 months, and acquire syntax at 48 to 60 months. The remarkable regularity of this process has suggested to some psychologists and linguists that learning a first language is more like the maturation of an inborn capacity than the development of a capacity imposed by learning: though it is clear that both learning and maturation must be involved since children deprived of linguistic experience do not acquire language (McNeill, 1970:15)

The view that language learning is partly a “natural” maturation process characteristic of young children seems to be supported by what is often presented as the astonishing speed and accuracy with which children acquire their first language compared with the fumbling ineptitude of adults

learning a second language. This distinction, however, is largely illusory, and is probably due more to the adverse circumstances of most second-language learning rather than to the later loss of an innate faculty.

In other words, in terms of amount learned in comparable time, the adult is about five times as efficient as the child. This is what one would expect of any other kind of intellectual or rational activity, and that is precisely what second -language learning is, or ought to be-on intellectually interesting process of internalizing experience and a new set of rules, or notational conventions, for their surface manifestation. The adolescent, or adult, starts with the advantage of greater general maturity, greater powers of analysis and of concentration and so on. He practice in the conceptualizations and rules of his mother tongue, which now have to be replaced, or supplemented, by new rules, but above all by the adversity of the circumstances in which he usually has to learn a second language in high school or university, namely low intensity of language practice (about, say, 6 to 15 hours per week), lack of motivation and the continual distraction of the demands of other courses and the multiple cares of the adult world.

It would probably be widely conceded that we can posit for all languages the occurrence, underlying at least some sentences, of a deep structural representation of the logico - grammatical categories known as Verb /V/, Subject /S/ and Object /O/.(Wier, 1962:44)

Languages differ, however, in the surface representation of those universal categories particularly with respect to their linear ordering. The three dominant sequences are SVO, SOV, and VSO. English is a typical SVO language: typical SOV languages are Hindi and Japanese: typical VSO languages are Arabic and the Celtic languages. That is to say, where in English we say.

- The dog ate the meat. (SVO)

Hindi and Japanese have the equivalent of:

- The dog the meat ate. (SOV)

and Arabic and Celtic have the equivalent of:

- Ate the dog the meat. (VSO)

In some languages, particularly those where the S and O functions are surface – marked by special overt “case-forms”, there appears to be more freedom of surface ordering: but it is never complete freedom, and the learner has to note that a changed order may itself be the surface representation of some other deep category. Thus Armenian is generally as primarily an SVO language. However, in

- “Շունը կերավ միսը” “The dog ate the meat.”

One is free to change the surface order around without destroying the representations of S and O, producing the form

- Միսը կերավ շունը:

However, this change of linear ordering of the surface representation of S and O represents a change in deep categories of “definiteness” somewhat corresponding to categories represented by articles in English. Thus (4) means something

like "The dog ate the/some meat" while (5) means something like "A dog ate the meat" We have dealt so far with differences in the way different languages convert universal, or quasi-universal, features of deep structure into their surface representations. Now we want to turn to a deeper and more interesting characteristic of languages, and one which presents a subtler and more difficult problem for the learner, namely: the fact that the lexical sets and grammatical systems of particular language interpose a conceptual "grid" between the speaker and his experience of the world. Up to a pint, the speaker is obliged to "dissect" experience, for the purpose of talking about it, along lines laid down by the language he is speaking. There is no universal human way of selecting and grouping items of experience for the purposes of communication. This is what is meant by "linguistic relativity".

The evidence for this kind of linguistic relativity is clear to everyone who really masters a second language. Teachers often talk of "thinking" in a second language as if this meant no more than responding to situations rapidly and automatically and more or less correctly with the surface structures of the language: operating, that is, in the fluent and automatic way which is supposed to be engendered by "direct method" and intensive "pattern practice". It seems, however, that the only valid and interesting sense of "thinking in a second language" must imply categorizing one's experience directly in the terms laid down by the deep grammatical systems of the language. And learning, consciously, to do this is an interesting and even



exciting experience for an intelligent adult: much more so than the rote learning of dialogues, and the tedious repetition of pattern drills. Some tedium is unavoidable in language learning, but it can be lightened by intelligent adult appreciation of what precisely one is trying to internalize.

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## Изучение языка и лингвистическая относительность

*Центральной проблемой в исследованиях лингвисти÷еской относительности или гипотезы Сепира- Уорфа является вопрос - думают ли люди говорящие на различных по – разному. Лингвисти÷еская относительность вклю÷ает в себя 2 идеи: во-первых, предполагается, что языки сильно различаются с то÷ки зрения семантики слов и синтаксических структур; во –вторых, семантика языка влияет на восприятие и концептуализацию окружающего мира со стороны носителя данного языка, и может даже полностью определять мышление последнего, подход известный как лингвисти÷еский детерминизм.*

*Подобные свидетельства не являются ÷ем-либо необы÷ным для тех, кто изучает иностранный язык. Учителя очень часто говорят о мышлении на иностранном языке, ÷то означает не более чем реагирование на речевую ситуацию быстро и механически и более или менее правильно на поверхностном пласте языка.*

*Ключевые слова: Гипотеза Сепир – Уорфа, лингвистическая относительность, лингвистический детерминизм, универсалии, врожденные знания.*

**Լեզվի ուսումնասիրությունը և լեզվաբանական  
հարաբերականությունը**

*Լեզվաբանական հարաբերականության հետազոտությունները կամ Մեպիր – Ուորֆի վարկածի հիմնական խնդիրն է այն հարցն, թե արդյոք տարբեր լեզուներով խոսող մարդիկ տարբեր են մտածում: Լեզվաբանական հարաբերականությունը ներառում է երկու գաղափար . նախ ենթադրվում է, որ լեզուները շատ են տարբերվում բառիմաստով և շարահյուսական կառույցներով: Երկրորդ՝ լեզվի իմաստաբանությունը ազդում է լեզվակրի աշխարհընկալմանը և նույնիսկ կարող է ամբողջովին կանխորոշել վերջինիս մտածելակերպը: Նման վկայությունները անսովոր չեն բոլոր նրանց համար, ովքեր ուսումնասիրում են օտար լեզու: Ուսուցիչները շատ հաճախ խոսում են օտար լեզվով մտածելու մասին, ինչը նշանակում է ոչ ավելին, քան խոսողական իրավիճակին արագ և ինքնաբերաբար արձագանքել և քիչ թե շատ ճշգրիտ լեզվի մակերեսային մակարդակում:*

*Բանալի բառեր. Մեպիր – Ուորֆի վարկած, լեզվաբանական հարաբերականություն, լեզվաբանական դետերմինիզմ, ընդհանրություն, բնածին գիտելիքներ:*