



Language and Thought

(A Study of Language Determinism and Language Relativity)

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Abstract

This paper is based on the hypothesis that there is an intrinsic relationship between language and thought, and language influences the way the humans think. Taking cue from the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, the study attempts to highlight the nuances of the relationship between language and thought. A significant part of this paper is devoted to understand and explore the concept of language determinism and language relativity. The paper also briefly discusses the concept of 'language universals' and 'language particulars'. The paper also takes into account the mould and cloak theory, and lays bare the criticism of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Keywords: Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, language determinism and language relativity, language universals and language particulars, mould and cloak theory, criticism

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group (Sapir, 1929).

Mind cannot be understood without and outside of language (Kravchenko, 2011).

Introduction

Since time immemorial, human beings, known as *Homo sapiens*, have an innate capacity to learn and acquire a language. They are also endowed with a capacity to think. The relationship between language and thought has been a subject of considerable interest among linguists, psychologists and anthropologists. This relationship became a dominant subject of discussion in the 1930s and 40s after the rise and popularity of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that suggested the idea that 'speakers of different languages think differently.' Moreover, there has been a substantial investigation into the nature of language, and its place in the mind,

exploring to what degree, it should be regarded as an incarnation of thought (Wallace, 1980). Even psychologists and anthropologists argue that differences in a language structure and the choice of vocabulary plays a significant role in determining the way humans think.

Sapir - Whorf Hypothesis

Edward Sapir, an American linguist, studied indigenous languages in 1920s. In his studies, Sapir was surprised to notice 'the contrast between how indigenous people and European people spoke differently about the order of the world'.¹ Sapir observed that there is a relationship between people in reference to hierarchy and social proximity. The discovery led him to the conclusion that the language, we are born into, determines the way in which we perceive and manipulate objects, and understands abstractions.²

Sapir exercised the idea that language is essential to understanding one's worldview and difference in language implies a difference in social reality. Whorf took Sapir's idea further and reformulated Sapir's thought in his essay 'Science and Linguistics'.³ Whorf's stand on linguistic relativity was more radical. In Whorf's view, the relationship between language and culture was a deterministic one, and language played a crucial role in our perception of reality. Language is what gives the thought its expression and thus shapes it; in other words, thinking is determined by language.⁴

According to Whorf, formulation of ideas and thoughts is not a rational independent process, rather, it is determined by particular grammar and vocabulary of the language in which these ideas are expressed. It is only through language, the world appears to be organized. Whorf's conclusion was largely based upon a close examination and extensive study of the 'Hopi Indian' language.⁵ During earlier years, Whorf published a number of essays in which he analyzed various linguistic aspects of Hopi, and concluded that Hopi is a timeless language whose verbal system lacks 'tenses'. The Hopi's assessment of 'time' is different from Standard Average European's (SAE) linear temporal view of the past, present and future and varies with each observer. The 'timeless Hopi verb' does not distinguish between the present, past and future of the event itself but must always indicate what type of validity the speaker intends the statement to have (Whorf, 1956).

Language Determinism

Linguistic determinism is the concept that language and its structure limit and determine human knowledge or thought, as well as thought processes such as categorization, memory and perception. The term implies that people who speak different languages as their mother tongues have different thought processes (Hickmann, 2000).

Linguistic determinism considers that the structure of language such as vocabulary, grammar and other aspects strongly influence or determine the way its native speakers perceive of reasons about the world (Andrew & Keil, 2001). The theory puts weight on the unconscious influence that language has on habitual thought (Sokoto, 1997) highlighting that language comes first, shapes and influences thought.

This is the idea propounded through the concept of linguistic relativity which claims that viewpoints vary from language to language. In other words, how people think, doesn't vary depending on their language, but is actually determined by the specific language of their community.⁶ Even psychologists and anthropologists argue that differences in a language structure and words, may play a significant role in determining how we think.

At the same time, linguistic determinism maintains that language determines thought. The proponents of linguistic determinism argue that the structure of language does not simply affect our way of thinking about the world; it actually determines how we think about the world. Therefore, linguistic determinism is the harder, original form of linguistic relativity which softened the deterministic angle of Sapir's linguistic determinism.⁷ Linguistic determinism is the strong form of linguistic relativity, popularly known as Sapir Whorf hypothesis. It argues that individuals experience the world based on the structure of the language they habitually use.⁸

Language Relativity and Linguistic Determinism

The principle of linguistic relativity, in its strong deterministic form, first found its clear expression in the writings of Benjamin Whorf who dedicated himself to proving and examining Sapir's hypothesis.⁹ Whorf discovered that while there are deterministic construction of reality imposed on our cognition and perception through our birth language, yet, there are cultural linguistic factors that can override aspects of deterministic strides of our original language, and they can enlarge our perception and cognition relevant to the world we live in.

According to Whorf, since there is an opportunity to broaden and enlarge the deterministic structure of language, at least in degrees, hence, the deterministic nature of language is relativistic. It is relative to what is done or what is experienced to broaden, or enlarge perception and cognition.¹⁰

In the 1990s, Benjamin Whorf talked about this way. Whorf argued that different languages represent different ways of thinking about the world around us. The view has come to be called linguistic relativity.¹¹

Through the concept of linguistic determinism, Benjamin Whorf holds that the structure of a language has an impact on the way its speakers view the world. Because one can think of the world only through the use of language and words. It makes sense that the structure of our language has an impact on how we perceive the world and think of both concrete and abstract objects and ideas.¹²

There are two problems to confront this arena: linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism. Relativity is easy to demonstrate. In order to speak any language, one has to pay attention to the meanings that are grammatically marked in that language. For example, in English, it is necessary to mark the 'verb' to indicate 'the time of occurrence' of an event one is speaking about : it is raining ; it rained, and so forth.¹³

Sapir's contribution of linguistic determinism sees only the rigidity of the contrasts between languages, while Whorf's contribution of linguistic relativity acknowledged that conceptual paradigms of thought can be modified, expanded, enlarged and reshaped relative to the experience the individual has or the effort the individual makes. There is a subtle, but very important difference between the two ideas. The proponents of linguistic determinism argue that such differences between languages influence the ways people think--- perhaps the ways in which the whole cultures are united.¹⁴

Mould Theories and Cloak Theories

The two extreme thoughts concerning the relationship between language and thought are commonly referred to as "Mould Theories and Cloak Theories". According to the 'mould theory, 'language constructs our thoughts; and they are interwoven in such a way that all the people are equally being affected by the confines of their language. People can be considered as mental prisoners as they are unable to think in any other way which the language he speaks does not support.¹⁵

The 'cloak theory' casts a different view and described language as a cloak conforming to the customary categories of thought as its speaker. In this theory, language is considered only as a medium to express our thoughts just like the way we can use our physical movement to represent what we are feeling. According to the 'cloak theory', language does not control our way of perceiving things and we imagine our world in the way we like.¹⁶

The Sapir -Whorf Hypothesis is classified as mould theory of language. In 1929, Sapir presented his belief that the possible range of human behavior is controlled by the language he speaks. It is totally dependent on the vocabulary existing in the specific language one is familiar with. This hypothesis is known as the strong form of Sapir's Hypothesis. It also mentioned that as different languages have different structures, barrier free communication between cross-cultural groups is impossible as they will never be able to think in the same way as they are bounded by different languages.

Language Universals

Human beings have similar ways of experiencing the world. However, 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 individual language, or type of language is 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 specific capacities of human beings.¹⁷

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, as, it is too difficult to pin down effects of a particular thought pattern, this issue remains unresolved. However, language scientists raised a lot of criticism on the theory propounded by Sapir, and claimed that 'language and thought are universal' and, are not tied to any specific language and culture.¹⁸

Criticism

Over the decades, the concept of ‘linguistic determinism’ and ‘linguistic relativity’ has been criticized with an intention to show that perception and cognition are universal, and they are not tied to language and culture. Sapir’s contribution of linguistic determinism sees only the rigidity of the contrasts between languages, while Whorf’s contribution of linguistic relativism acknowledged that conceptual paradigms of thought can be modified, expanded, enlarged and reshaped relative to the experience the individual has or the effect the individual makes. There is a subtle, but very important difference between these two ideas.

Language and thought interact in many ways. There is a great disagreement about the proposition that each specific language has its own influence on the thought and action of its speakers. Anyone who has learned more than one languages is struck by many ways in which languages differ from one another (Bernard Comrie, *Language and Thought* : Linguistic Society of America).

The differences of this sort have fascinated linguists, scientists and anthropologists. They claim that in most cases, human thoughts and action are overdetermined by an array of causes, so the structure of language may not play a central causal role (Slobin, 1988). Linguistic determinism can best be demonstrated in situations in which language is the principal means of drawing people’s attention to a particular aspect of experience.¹⁹

Though it played a considerable role historically, linguistic determinism is now discredited among main stream linguists (Ahearn, 2011). Another argument against the principle of linguistic determinism is that humans are able to perceive objects and events that have no corresponding words in our mental lexicon, even if existing linguistic representations would make the perception easier.²⁰

Opponents of the theory maintain that thoughts exist prior to any conception of language. Steven Pinker’s theory embodies this idea. He proposed that all individuals are, first, capable of a ‘universal mentalese’ of which all thought is composed prior to its linguistic form. Language enables us to articulate these existing thoughts into words and linguistic concepts (Steven, 2007). However, the proposal that language influences our thinking has frequently been discussed and studied (Masharov, 2006).

Conclusion

Language is the only factor that influences cognition and behavior. If the Sapir -Whorf hypothesis were really true, second language learning and translation would be much more difficult than what they are. However, because we must always make cognitive decisions while speaking—weaker versions of the hypothesis will continue to attract language scientists and anthropologists. There is, in fact, a phenomenon called ‘language’ that is independent of the phenomenon called ‘mind’. Mind cannot be understood without and outside of language (Kravchenko, 2011). An existing impasse in the study of this relationship between language and mind cannot be understood without and outside of language. Rather, the issue of linguistic influence on thought can be formulated fairly simply : to what extent and in which ways do languages mediate cognition ?

The Whorfian theory was subjected to various criticisms from psychology. First, as argued by Steven Pinker, Wason and Johnson Laird is the lack of evidence that a language influences a particular way of thinking towards the world for its speakers. (Skotko, 1997; Leva, 2011).

Despite criticism on Whorf's linguistic deterministic theory, recent research indicates that people who speak different languages really do think differently, and that language does influence individual's perception of reality. A possible conclusion that can be drawn here is that language and thought have interactive relationship in that language dictates thought whereas thought also influences language.

In the field of linguistic studies, the relation between language and thought is still an emerging topic of discussion. Present research in this area is not very exhaustive, and thus, there is a need for further research especially one that utilizes the new technology in brain neurology. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis cannot be totally denied, yet it cannot be fully accepted. There are numerous arguments which support Sapir and also negate the hypothesis. The fact remains that language is the medium to express our internal thought process.

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