

## Chapter 4

### Book Name : Schools of Linguistics

#### The Sapir -Whorf hypothesis

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This idea that a man's language moulds its perception of reality or that the world a man inhabits is a linguistic construct although in one form or another every old one has become associated with the names of the Americans Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf and more particularly with the latter.

It is discussed in a separate chapter about Sapir and Whorf because the aspect of their work which we shall examine represents a rather special development within the descriptivist , school and one which conflicted fairly sharply with the thought of many other members of that school, The Sapir -Whorf fully shared the relativism of Boas and his descriptivist successors with its emphasis on the alieness of exotic languages while never been influenced by the behaviorism of Bloomfield.

Sapir's work was quite comparable to that of other descriptivist linguistics though he differed from the behaviorist in stressing that patterns revealed by linguistic analysis of patterns in speaker, s minds and Sapir took it for granted that if one wants to know how a language is structured for its speakers because it is appropriate to ask them Sapir's independence of his American colleges assumptions is particularly obvious in his notion of linguistic drift behind the more or less random fluctuations which make up the detailed history of any language The accuracy of his name in turn Sapir thought there was a long-term tendency for that language to modify itself in some particular Direction as the coming and going of waves on a beach masks a steady long term tidal movement.

This idea comes very close to implying that a language has a life of its own in some more than metaphorical sense and it would clearly have been anathema to a methodological individualism such as Bloomfield.

The occurrence of his name in the term Sapir Whorf hypothesis is perhaps due to the fact that Whorf took his general approach to linguistics from Sapir than to Sapir's being one of the most active proponents of that hypothesis.

In his popular book language indeed Sapir suggests that differences between languages are merely differences in moods of expressing a common range of experiences rather than corresponding to differences in the experience themselves later though he changed his mind. Sapir believes that human beings do not live in the objective world alone not alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for the Society.

it is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjust to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving a specific problems of communication or reflection.

It is a fact that no two languages are even sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality the world in which different societies live or distinct world's not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Benjamin Lee whorf a descendant of 17th century English emigrants to Massachusetts was in his scholarly work and outstanding example of the brilliant a major after taking a degree in

chemical engineering he began his successful career as a Fire Prevention inspector with an insurance company in Hartford Connecticut and despite several offers of academic posts he continued to work for the same company until his death at the age of 44 .

Whorf makes the point that only certain grammatical categories in any language are marked overtly as for example the distinction between present and past tense is marked in every finite verb which occurs in English . They exist or so numerous covered categories or crypto types as Whorf sometimes called them.

Thus one can say I live in it when it refers back to a phrase such as that house or the basement but not when it refers to Kendal or Bulgaria even though I live in Kendal I live in Bulgaria are perfectly correct.

Whorf felt that such covered categories were more telling than the overt categories of a language in establishing the worldview of its speakers . On the ground that the use of overt markers maybe merely learnt by rote but crypto types can be manipulated consistently only if the categorization which they employ is real for the speaker.

If all country names and town names ended in some special suffix say -ia when an Englishman could simply remember nouns ending in -ia may not pronominalize after a preposition but since they in fact have no special form we must think of them as a semantic class.

Although this neatly illustrates Whorf's point about the importance of correct categories it is not a particularly good example of the differences Whorf claims to exist between Hopi and European Worldviews.

Thus suppose that we encounter another tribe in which sex is a covered category so that say all nouns referring to females evoke special suffixes in words modifying them and suppose further that many words for inanimate objects such as stone , water , moon belong to the female crypto type while others such as iron , fire , sun , behave like the words for males.

Whorf did not in fact apply his notions to differences between the familiar European languages he felt that these all presupposed the same worldview because of the long period in which Europe has shared a common culture and he referred to them collectively as a standard average European.

In fact , the various contrasts in world view for which Whorf argues differ greatly in the extent to which they are surprising or controversial. Boas had already made the point that for instance where English has the one word snow Eskimo has separate basic roots for snow falling, snow on the ground drifting snow and so forth , at this relatively concrete level disparities between the conceptual schemes of different languages are fairly familiar and there is no doubt that they influence perception it can be shown that people's perceptions of their surroundings or modified by the conceptual categories their language happens to provide.

Whorf rightly says is to find that various generalizations of the Western world such as time velocity and matter are not essential to the construction of a consistent picture of the universe. Hopi he is particular maybe called timeless language the language does not recognize time as a linear dimension which can be measured and divided into units like a spatial dimensions so that for instance hopi he never borrows spatial terms to refer to temporal phenomena in the way so common in European languages.

And since there is no concept of time there can be no concept of a speed which is the ratio of distance to time . Hopi he has no word for Fast and their nearest equivalent for he runs fast would translate more literally as something like He very runs.

One objection to the interpretation of Hopi sold voice thought voiced for example by Max Black 1959 is that Whorf's claim is untestable and therefore vacuous.. It might be that the h o p i have much the same concept of time as we have but simply use somewhat exotic turns of phrase in talking about matters of time he very runs is just their way of saying he runs fast and they mean by this sentence just what we mean by ours . After all an Englishman calls it huntsman's coat

pink but that does not imply that he sees it as other than red.

Whorf admits that the Hopi language is capable of accounting for and describing correctly, in a pragmatic or operational sense, all observable phenomena of the universe could any evidence then force us to conclude that the difference between Hopi and English ways of talking about time is more than a difference in formal modes of expression a common range of ideas?

There may be a reply to this objection (as it relates two Whorf's claims- not to the more general point made by Quine). In the first place, it may be that there are indeed observable aspects of Hopi behavior which correlate with the timeless outlook on life of Whorf.

It has been said in this book: I have read that Indians on reservations in the US southwest (unfortunately I do not remember whether this was said specifically of Hopi) have difficulty in holding jobs in the white man's economy because they cannot get into the habit of catching commuter buses and generally keeping to a timetable and this might be evidence in favor of Whorf's ideas.

There's Whorf's (although not Wittgenstein) does fall down badly in his apparent inability to allow for the radical changes of worldview which occur within a given linguistic community since we are discussing time and space, the obvious example two quote here is Albert Einstein. Einstein's new account of the grand generalization of Physics seems fully as alien, from the standpoint of received abuse, as the Hopi approach yet Einstein spoke to a standard average European language. the history of science over several centuries has been a history of repeated radical changes or worldview almost all of which occurred reading the standard average European linguistic framework.

Whorf in 1941 suppose that Newton's physics was given to him ready made by his language, but this idea that Newtonian physics is just common sense rendered explicit is an illusion deriving from the long period in which Newtonian physics has been accepted as true.

Of course it is true that each of us accepts many inherited presuppositions and search police positions may will be reflected in our language but none of our inherited prejudices are sacrosanct and human thought consists of a constant process of individuals questioning received presuppositions and replacing them by new and better ideas which then become later generations common sense until another individual has still better idea. As the German philosopher, J. G. Hamman wrote in 1760 a mind which thinks at its own expense will always interfere with language. Certainly the language of the community and the thought of individual members of the community each influence the other. But what ultimately comes is the individual's influence on the language, the influence of language on individual is it purely negative matter of the individual's failure to examine critically all the ideas of various earlier individuals.

Sapir and Whorf right as if language exerted a positive influence, and one with far more power than the reverse influence, Sapir writes of individuals being at the mercy of their language which exerts tyrannical hold over their mind. Whorf writes of a speaker's being parties to an absolutely obligatory agreement to conceptualize the world in a certain way. There is a further problem that arises when Whorf's hypothesis is taken in its most radical interpretation: it may actually be self-contradictory. the most fundamental component of any semantic structure deeper even than the grand generalizations of Physics is it's logical apparatus - in English the use of words such as not, if, all, and so forth.

One might take the Whorf hypothesis to mean that even logic is related to language, so that say if Aristotle had been a Hopi when mother logic as well as modern physics would have developed quite differently. There are hints in Whorf's writings (e.g. 1941) that he meant to go as far as this and other linguists have put the point plainly. To see this letters turn to a predecessor of Sapir and Whorf who argued for the view that I regard as untenable perhaps more fully than anyone else has done, namely the French anthropologist Lucien Levy - Bruhl.

What distinguishes the Bororo as described by von den Steinem, from the European is surely not but the beliefs about fairly abstract matters of facts: It's community holds certain sophisticated theories which are only very indirectly connected with observable reality and these theories cannot be merely translated but must be taught at least two members of the other community just as they must be taught to young members of the community which has evolved them.

Now logical words like not and and or words whose meanings are a certain exclusively from internal evidence of the sort rather than by observation of the external world show someone a parakeet what one can hardly show them and furthermore I like the choice of charity for not and and the relevant internal evidence is very simple and straightforward. It is senseless to claim that is Savage or anyone else believes and explicit contradiction because to believe any proposition in terms understanding it and understand it conservation is to recognize that it is necessary false.

I say that the hypothesis is trivial insofar as it refers to differences in the categorization imposed by various languages on concrete observable phenomena because examples of such differences are familiar to many people and this aspect of the hypothesis was until recently quite on controversial.

In the case of colors for instance it is well known that various languages cut the visible spectrum up in different ways. Thus Welsh subsumes blue and green under a single word gals, while Russian uses separate words Sinij and goluboj for our light blue and dark blue respectively.

Colors is in fact a particularly favorable arena for the Whorf hypothesis possibly the most favorable of all. It's an immediate property of observed sense data: to find out whether vekti meant tax for charity we had not only to observe but also to investigate speakers beliefs about vekti .