

The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis

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Many linguists, including Noam Chomsky, contend that language in the sense we ordinary think of it, in the sense that people in Germany speak German, is a historical or social or political notion, rather than a scientific one. For example, German and Dutch are much closer to one another than various dialects of Chinese are. But the rough, commonsense divisions between languages will suffice for our purposes.

There are around 5000 languages in use today, and each is quite different from many of the others. Differences are especially pronounced between languages of different families, e.g., between Indo-European languages like English and Hindi and Ancient Greek, on the one hand, and non-Indo-European languages like Hopi and Chinese and Swahili, on the other.

Many thinkers have urged that large differences in language lead to large differences in experience and thought. They hold that each language embodies a worldview, with quite different languages embodying quite different views, so that speakers of different languages think about the world in quite different ways. This view is sometimes called the Whorf-hypothesis or the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, after the linguists who made it famous. But the label linguistic relativity, which is more common today, has the advantage that makes it easier to separate the hypothesis from the details of Whorf's views, which are an endless subject of exegetical dispute (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996, contains a sampling of recent literature on the hypothesis). The suggestion that different languages carve the world up in different ways, and that as a result their speakers think about it differently has a certain appeal. But questions about the extent and kind of impact that language has on thought are empirical questions that can only be settled by empirical investigation. And although linguistic relativism is perhaps the most popular version of descriptive relativism, the conviction and passion of partisans on both sides of the issue far outrun the available evidence. As usual in discussions of relativism, it is important to resist all-or-none thinking. The key question is whether there are interesting and defensible versions of linguistic relativism between those that are trivially true (the Babylonians didn't

have a counterpart of the word 'telephone', so they didn't think about telephones) and those that are dramatic but almost certainly false (those who speak different languages see the world in completely different ways). A Preliminary Statement of the Hypothesis

Interesting versions of the linguistic relativity hypothesis embody two claims: Linguistic Diversity: Languages, especially members of quite different language families, differ in important ways from one another. Linguistic Influence on Thought: The structure and lexicon of one's language influences how one perceives and conceptualizes the world, and they do so in a systematic way. Together these two claims suggest that speakers of quite different languages think about the world in quite different ways. There is a clear sense in which the thesis of linguistic diversity is uncontroversial. Even if all human languages share many underlying, abstract linguistic universals, there are often large differences in their syntactic structures and in their lexicons. The second claim is more controversial, but since linguistic forces could shape thought in varying degrees, it comes in more and less plausible forms.

Like many other relativistic themes, the hypothesis of linguistic relativity became a serious topic of discussion in late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Germany, particularly in the work of Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). It was later defended by thinkers as diverse as Ernst Cassirer and Peter Winch. Thus, Cassirer tells us that There are connections among some of these writers; for example, Sapir wrote his M.A. thesis on Herder's Origin of Language. Still, this is a remarkably diverse group of thinkers who often arrived at their views by different routes, and so it is not surprising that the linguistic relativity hypothesis comes in a variety of forms. When languages are similar, Whorf tells us, there is little likelihood of dramatic cognitive differences. But languages that differ markedly from English and other Western European languages (which Whorf calls, collectively, "Standard Average European" or SAE) often do lead their speakers to have very different worldviews. We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. ...The relativity of all conceptual systems, ours included, and their dependence upon language stand revealed.

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds--and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. Some writers have linked these themes directly to issues in metaphysics. For example, Graham argues that there are vast differences among human languages and that many of the concepts or categories (e.g., physical object, causation, quantity) writers like Aristotle and Kant and Strawson held were central, even indispensable, to human thought, are nothing more than parochial shadows cast by the structure of Indo-European languages. These notions, it is said, have no

counterparts in many non-Indo-European languages like Chinese. If this is so, then a fairly strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis might be true, but the thesis hasn't been backed with strong empirical evidence and the most common views today lie at the opposite end of the spectrum. Indeed, Whorf himself held a similar view: (Western) Science ...has not yet freed itself from the illusory necessities of common logic which are only at bottom necessities of grammatical pattern in Western Aryan grammar; [e.g.,] necessities for substances which are only necessities for substantives in certain sentence positions ...(1956, pp. 269-270).

It is worth noting, finally, that although Whorf was certainly a descriptive relativist he was not a normative relativist. He believed that some languages gave rise to more accurate worldviews than others. Indeed, he thought that the Hopi worldview was superior in various ways to that of speakers of Indo-European languages.

Human languages are flexible and extensible, so most things that can be said in one can be approximated in another; if nothing else, words and phrases can be borrowed (*Schadenfreude*, *je ne sais quoi*). But what is easy to say in one language may be harder to say in a second, and this may make it easier or more natural or more common for speakers of the first language to think in a certain way than for speakers of the second language to do so. A concept or category may be more available in some linguistic communities than in others (e.g., Brown, 1956, pp. 307ff). In short, the linguistic relativity hypothesis comes in stronger and weaker forms, depending on the hypothesized forms and the hypothesized strength of the hypothesized influence.

Languages can differ in their grammar or syntax. To take a simple example, typical word order may vary. In English, the common order is subject, verb, object. In Japanese it is subject, object, verb. In Welsh, verb, subject, object. Languages can differ in whether they make a distinction between intransitive verbs and adjectives. And there are many subtler sorts of grammatical difference as well. It should be noted that grammar here does not mean the prescriptive grammar we learned in grammar school, but the syntactic structure of a language; in this sense, a grammar comprises a set of rules (or some equivalent device) that can generate all and only the sentences of a given language.

Different languages have different lexicons (vocabularies), but the important point here is that the lexicons of different languages may classify things in different ways. For example, the colour lexicons of some languages segment the colour spectrum at different places. For the most part discussions of the linguistic relativity hypothesis have focused on grammar and lexicon as independent variables. Thus, many of Whorf's claims, e.g., his claims about the way Hopi thought about time, were based on (what he took to be) large-scale differences between Hopi and Standard Average European that included grammatical and lexical differences (e.g., 1956, p. 158). Subsequent research by Ekkehart Malotki and others suggests that Whorf's more dramatic claims were false, but the important point here is that the most prominent versions of the linguistic relativity hypothesis involved large-scale features of language.

In light of the vast literature on linguistic relativity hypotheses, one would expect that a good deal of careful experimental work had been done on the topic. It hasn't. Often the only evidence cited in Favor of such hypotheses is to point to a difference between two languages and assert that it adds up to a difference in modes of thought. But this simply assumes what needs to be shown, namely that such linguistic differences give rise to cognitive differences. On the other hand, refutations of the hypothesis often target implausibly extreme versions of it or proceed as though refutations of it in one domain (e.g., colour language and colour cognition) show that it is false across the board. A linguistic relativity hypothesis says that some particular aspect of language influences some particular aspect of cognition. Many different aspects of language could, for all we know, influence many different aspects of cognition. This means that a study showing that some particular aspect of language (e.g., the colour lexicon of a language) does (or does not) influence some particular aspect of cognition (e.g., recognition memory of colours) does not tell us whether other aspects of language (e.g., the lexicon for spatial relations) influence other aspects of cognition (e.g., spatial reasoning). It does not even tell us whether the single aspect of language we focused on affects any aspects of thought besides the one we studied, or whether other aspects of language influence the single aspect of thought we examined. The point here is not merely a theoretical one. When the mind is seen as all of a piece, whether it's the result of stepping through Piaget's universal stages of development, the output of universal learning mechanisms, or the operation of a general-purpose computer, confirming or disconfirming the hypothesis in one area (e.g., colour) might bear on its status in other areas. But there is increasing evidence that the mind is, to at least some degree, modular, with different cognitive modules doing domain specific work (e.g., parsing syntax, recognizing faces) and processing different kinds of information in different kinds of ways. If this is right, there is less reason to expect that findings about the influence of language on one aspect of cognition will generalize to other aspects.

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Resume

The suggestion that different languages carve the world up in different ways, and that as a result their speakers think about it differently has a certain appeal. But questions about the extent and kind of impact that language has on thought are empirical questions that can only be settled by empirical investigation. And although linguistic relativism is perhaps the most popular version of descriptive relativism, the conviction and passion of partisans on both sides of the issue far outrun the available evidence. As usual in discussions of relativism, it is important to resist all-or-none thinking. The key question is whether there are interesting and defensible versions of linguistic relativism between those that are trivially true.

რეზიუმე

მოსაზრება იმის შესახებ, რომ სხვადასხვა ენა სხვადასხვაგვარად აყალიბებს სამყაროს და, შედეგად, მათზე მოსაუბრენი მასზე განსხვავებულად ფიქრობენ, გარკვეული გამოწვევაა, მაგრამ კითხვები იმის შესახებ, თუ რამდენად და რა სახის გავლენა აქვს ენას აზროვნებაზე, არის ემპირიული, რომლებიც შეიძლება გადაწყდეს მხოლოდ ემპირიული გამოკვლევით და მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ლინგვისტური რელატივიზმი, ალბათ, აღწერილობითი რელატივიზმის ყველაზე პოპულარული ვერსიაა, ბევრად აღემატება არსებულ მტკიცებულებებს. ჩვეულებისამებრ რელატივიზმის განხილვისას, მნიშვნელოვანია წინააღმდეგობა გავუწიოთ ყველა-ან-არავის აზროვნებას. მთავარი კითხვაა არის თუ არა ენობრივი რელატივიზმის საინტერესო და დასაცავი ვერსიები მათ შორის, რომლებიც ტრივიალურად მართალია.