

LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

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The linguistic relativity hypothesis, the proposal that the particular language we speak influences the way we think about reality, forms one part of the broader question of how language influences thought. Despite long-standing historical interest in the hypothesis, there is relatively little empirical research directly addressing it. Existing empirical approaches are classified into three types. 1. Structure-centred approaches begin with language differences and ask about their implications for thought. 2. Domain-centred approaches begin with experienced reality and ask how different languages encode it. 3. Behaviour-centred approaches begin with some practical concern and seek an explanation in language. These approaches are compared, and recent methodological improvements highlighted. Despite empirical advances, a theoretical account needs to articulate exactly how languages interpret experiences and how those interpretations influence thought. This will entail integrating theory and data concerning both the general relation of language and thought and the shaping influence of specific discursive structures and practices.

Few ideas generate as much interest and controversy as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, the proposal that the particular language we speak influences the way we think about reality. The reasons are obvious: If valid it would have widespread implications for understanding psychological and cultural life, for the conduct of research itself, and for public policy. Yet through most of this century, interest and controversy have not given rise to sustained programs of empirical research in any of the concerned disciplines and, as a result, the validity of the proposal has remained largely in the realm of speculation. This situation has begun to change over the past decade, hence the occasion for this

review. The linguistic relativity proposal forms part of the general question of how language influences thought. Potential influences can be classed into three types or levels (Lucy 1996). The first, or semiotic, level concerns how speaking any natural language at all may influence thinking. The question is whether having a code with a symbolic component (versus one confined to iconic indexical elements) transforms thinking. If so, we can speak of a semiotic relativity of thought with respect to other species lacking such a code. The second, or structural, level concerns how speaking one or more particular natural languages (e.g. Hopi versus English) may influence thinking. The question is whether quite different morphosyntactic configurations of meaning affect thinking about reality. If so, we can speak of a structural relativity of thought with respect to speakers using a different language. This has been the level traditionally associated with the term linguistic relativity, and this usage will be employed here. The third, or functional, level concerns whether using language in a particular way (e.g. schooled) may influence thinking. The question is whether discursive practices affect thinking either by modulating structural influences or by directly influencing the interpretation of the interactional context. If so, we can speak of a functional relativity of thought with respect to speakers using language differently. This level has been of particular interest during the second half of this century with the increasing interest in discourse level analyses of language and can, therefore, also be conveniently referred to as discursive relativity.

Although this review concentrates on the second level—whether structural differences among languages influence thinking—it should be stressed that the other two levels are ultimately involved. Any claims about linguistic relativity of the structural sort depend on accepting a loose is functionality across speakers in the psychological mechanisms linking language to thinking and across languages in the everyday use of speech to accomplish acts of descriptive reference (Hymes 1966, Lucy 1996). More importantly, an adequate theoretical treatment of the second level necessarily involves engaging substantively with the other two levels

A number of recent publications have extensively reviewed the relevant social-science literature on linguistic relativity. Lucy (1992a) examines the historical and conceptual development of empirical research on the relation of language diversity and thought within the fields of linguistic anthropology and comparative psycholinguistics.

The appearance of abundance given by the long lists of references in these reviews is deceptive. Although the majority of the studies cited have some

relevance to evaluating the relation between language and thought, few address the relativity proposal directly or well. In this context, there is little reason to re-invent all these materials here. Rather, the current review provides a conceptual framework for interpreting current research by clarifying the sources and internal structure of the hypothesis, characterizing the logic of the major empirical approaches, and analysing the needs of future research.

Interest in the intellectual significance of the diversity of language categories has deep roots in the European tradition. Formulations recognizably related to our contemporary ones appear in England (Locke), France (Condillac, Diderot), and Germany (Hamman, Herder) during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries see also Friedrich 1986 on Vico in Italy). They were stimulated by theoretical concerns (opposition to the tenets of universal grammarians regarding the origin and status of different languages), methodological concerns (the reliability of language-based knowledge in religion and science), and practical social concerns (European efforts to consolidate national identities and cope with colonial expansion). Later, nineteenth-century work, notably that of Humboldt in

Germany and Saussure in Switzerland and France, drew heavily on this earlier tradition and set the stage for twentieth-century approaches.

This European work was known and criticized by scholars in North America, and the same impulses found historically—the patent relevance of language to human sociality and intellect, the reflexive concern with the role of language in intellectual method, and the practical encounter with diversity—remain important today in motivating attention to the problem. But the linguistic relativity proposal received new impetus and reformulation there in the early twentieth century, particularly in the work of anthropological linguists.

Surprisingly, there has been an almost complete absence of direct empirical research through most of the present century—perhaps half a dozen studies up to a decade ago (Lucy 1992a). The neglect of empirical work is so conspicuous that it must be regarded as one of the central characteristics of this area of research and warrants brief comment. One source of the neglect surely lies in the interdisciplinary nature of the problem itself which is compounded by increasing disciplinary specialization. But other, broader concerns play a role in discouraging research. Some worry that accepting linguistic relativism would effectively undermine the conduct of most of the social sciences (but see Lucy 1993a). Others fear that accepting linguistic relativism opens the door to ethical relativism. Others equate linguistic relativity with absolute linguistic determinism and dislike the implied limits to individual freedom of thought (but

see Gumperz & Levinson 1996, p.22). Anyone working on the relativity problem must be prepared to face these

complicated issues and the passions and prejudices they arouse. In sum, despite long and well-motivated interest in the issue, concrete research and even practical approaches to research remain remarkably undeveloped.

There are a variety of specific linguistic relativity proposals, but all share three key elements linked in two relations. They all claim that certain properties of a given language have consequences for patterns of thought about reality. The properties of language at issue are usually morphosyntactic (but may be phonological or pragmatic) and are taken to vary in important respects. The pattern of thought may have to do with immediate perception and attention, with personal and social-cultural systems of classification, inference, and memory, or with aesthetic judgment and creativity. The reality may be the world of everyday experience, of specialized contexts, or of ideational tradition. These three key elements are linked by two relations: Language embodies an interpretation of reality and language can influence thought about that reality. The interpretation arises from the selection of substantive aspects of experience and their formal arrangement in the verbal code. Such selection and arrangement are, of course, necessary for language, so the crucial emphasis here is that each language involves a particular interpretation, not a common, universal one. An influence on thought ensues when the particular language interpretation guides or supports cognitive activity and hence the beliefs and behaviours dependent on it. Accounts vary in the specificity of the proposed mechanism of influence and in the degree of power attributed to it—the strongest version being a strict linguistic determinism (based, ultimately, on the identity of language and thought). A proposal of linguistic relativity thus claims that diverse interpretations of reality embodied in languages yield demonstrable influences on thought. Hill & Mannheim (1992, pp. 383–87) discuss and endorse various criticisms of treating the relativity issue as a “hypothesis” about three discrete, identifiable, and orthogonal “variables.” But if there is any interesting claim here, it is about discoverable relations between distinguishable phenomena. Such a full linguistic relativity proposal should be distinguished from several partial or more encompassing formulations that are widely prevalent.

First, linguistic relativity is not the same as linguistic diversity. Without the relation to thought more generally (i.e. beyond that necessary for the act of speaking itself), it is merely linguistic diversity. Second, linguistic relativity is not the same as any influence of language on thought. Without the relation to

differences among languages, we just have a common psychological mechanism shared by all (an effect at the semiotic level). Third, linguistic relativity is not the same as cultural relativity, which encompasses the full range of patterned, historically transmitted differences among communities. Linguistic relativity proposals emphasize a distinctive role for language structure in interpreting experience and influencing thought. Although such a relativity may contribute to a broader cultural relativity, it may also crosscut it. Sometimes the various elements can be technically present in a formulation but inappropriately filled. One can take as representative of language some aspect so bleached of meaning value (e.g. prefixing versus postfixing) that no interesting semantic differences suggest themselves. Or one can confound the elements by using verbal responses to assess thought or verbal stimulus materials to represent reality. Thus, in evaluating research, it is important to ask whether the various components of the hypothesis have all been represented and appropriately filled. Most existing research fails in this regard and therefore cannot address the hypothesis directly and decisively.

გამოყენებული ლიტერატურა:

1. Lucy 1996; Gumperz & Levinson 1996;
2. Cf Silverstein 1976, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1993).
3. Edward Sapir (1949a, b, 1964) and Benjamin Linguistic Relativity
4. Aarsleff 1982, 1988; Gumperz & Levinson 1996;

Resume

A structure-centred approach begins with an observed difference between languages in their structure of meaning. The analysis characterizes the structure of meaning and elaborates the interpretations of reality implicit in them. Then evidence for the influence of these interpretations on thought is sought in speakers' behaviour. The strength of the approach lies in its interpretive validity: It makes minimal assumptions beforehand about possible meanings in language and to that extent remains open to new and unexpected interpretations of reality. In a sense, this approach "listens" closely to what the language forms

volunteer, pursuing various structured, crosscutting patterns of meaning and attempting to make sense of how the world must appear to someone using such categories; ideally it makes possible the characterization of the distinctive way a language interprets the world. The search for language influences likewise tends to be interpretive, searching for widespread, habitual patterns of thought and behaviour—although this is not essential to the approach.