Language and Thought

No one would disagree with the claim that language and thought interact in many significant ways. There is great disagreement, however, about the proposition that each specific language has its own influence on the thought and action of its speakers. On the one hand, anyone who has learned more than one language is struck by the many ways in which languages differ from one another. But on the other hand, we expect human beings everywhere to have similar ways of experiencing the world.

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.

Relativity and Determinism

There are two problems to confront in this arena: linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism. Relativity is easy to demonstrate. In order to speak any language, you have 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 you are speaking about: It's raining; It rained; and so forth. In Turkish, however, it is impossible to simply say, 'It rained last night'. This language, like many American Indian languages, has more than one past tense, depending on one's source of knowledge of the event. In Turkish, there are two past tenses—one to report direct experience and the other to report events that you know about only by inference or hearsay. Thus, if you were out in the rain last night, you will say, 'It rained last night' using the past-tense form that indicates that you were a witness to the rain; but if you wake up in the morning and see the wet street and garden, you are obliged to use the other past-tense form—the one that indicates that you were not a witness to the rain itself.

Differences of this sort have fascinated linguists and anthropologists for centuries. They have reported hundreds of facts about 'exotic' languages, such as verbs that are marked or chosen according to the shape of an object that is being handled (Navajo) or for the relative ages of speaker and hearer (Korean). Such facts are grist for the mill of linguistic relativity. And, indeed, they can be found quite readily in 'nonexotic' languages as well. To cite a fact about English that is well known to linguists: It is not appropriate to say Richard Nixon has worked in Washington, but it is perfectly OK to say Gerald Ford has worked in Washington. Why? English restricts

the present perfect tense ('has worked') to assertions about people who are alive. Exotic!

Proponents of linguistic determinism argue that such differences between languages influence the ways people think—perhaps the ways in which whole cultures are organized. Among the strongest statements of this position are those by Benjamin Lee Whorf and his teacher, Edward Sapir, in the first half of this century—hence the label, 'The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis', for the theory of linguistic relativity and determinism. Whorf proposed: 'We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language' (Whorf, 1940; in Carroll, 1956, pp. 213-4). And, in the words of Sapir: 'Human beings...are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. ...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; in Manlbaum, 1958, p. 162).

Investigating Language and Thought

How can such bold claims be substantiated beyond examination of individual languages themselves? If one takes the hypothesis seriously, it should be possible to show that Turks are more sensitive to evidence than are Americans, but that Americans are more aware of death than Turks. Clearly, the hypothesis cannot be supported on so grand a level. Rather, experimental psychologists and cognitive anthropologists have sought to find small differences, on controlled tasks, between speakers of various languages. Maybe Navajos are somewhat more sensitive to shapes of objects, for example.

The results have been mixed. In most cases, human thought and action are overdetermined by an array of causes, so the structure of language may not play a central causal role. 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. For example, if you regularly speak a language in which you must pick a form of second-person address (you) that marks your social relationship to your interlocutor—such as Spanish *tu* ('you' for friends and family and for those socially subordinate) vs. *usted* ('you' for those socially above in status or for those with whom you have no close connection) or French *tu* versus *vous*—you must categorize every person you talk to in terms of the relevant social dimensions. (As a thought experiment of linguistic determinism, think of the categorizations of social relationships that would have to be made if Spanish became the common language of the United States.)

Going beyond thought experiments, some of the most convincing research demonstrating some degree of linguistic determinism is being conducted under the direction of Stephen C. Levinson at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Levinson and his collaborators distinguish between languages that describe spatial relations in terms of the body (like English 'right/left', 'front/back') and those that orient to fixed points in the environment (like 'north/south/east/west' in some aboriginal Australian languages). In a language of the second type one would refer, for example, to 'your north shoulder' or 'the bottle at the

west end of the table'; in narrating a past event, one would have to remember how the actions related to the compass points. Thus, in order to speak this type of language, you always have to know where you are with respect to the compass points, whether you are speaking or not. And Levinson's group have shown, in extensive cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies, that this is, in fact, the case.

Much more research needs to be done, but it is not likely that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will be supported in the strong form quoted above. For one, language is only one factor that influences cognition and behavior. For another, if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis were really true, second language learning and translation would be far harder than they are. However, because language is so pervasive—and because we must always make cognitive decisions while speaking—weaker versions of the hypothesis will continue to attract scientific attention. (For a lively debate on many of these issues, with much new evidence from several fields, read Gumperz and Levinson 1996.)

Suggested Readings

Gumperz, J. J., and Levinson, S. C. 1996. *Rethinking linguistic relativity.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lucy, John A. 1992. *Language diversity and thought: A reformulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sapir, E. 1929. "The status of linguistics as a science". *Language 5*. 207-14. Reprinted in *The selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture, and personality*, ed. by D. G. Mandelbaum, 160-6. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Whorf, B. L. 1940. "Science and linguistics". *Technology Review 42*: 227-31, 247-8.*Reprinted in Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. by J. B. Carroll, 207-19. Cambridge, MA: The Technology Press of MIT/New York: Wiley. 1956.