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Abstract

Using sources, which address various theories of Linguistic Relativity - Rossi-Landi (1973), Penn (1972), Miller (1968), and Rollins (1980) – the unique aspects of these theories are explained. The intent of the paper is to expose Benjamin Lee Whorf not as the soul progenitor of the theory (that language culture and thought are interrelated), but as a reviser of centuries of scholarship. The theories of Hamann, Herder, Humboldt, Boas, and Sapir are examined and conclusions are made on their influences on and differences from the Whorfian Hypothesis.

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Benjamin Lee Whorf, an engineer by trade, never received an advanced degree in the field that his name is automatically associated with – Linguistics. Being naturally interested in language, he began to study and correspond with scholars in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics (Rollins, 1980:1-9). In the 1930's, he studied under Sapir, out of pure interest. From then until his death in 1941, he published several essays on the themes of language and its relation to science and culture (Rollins, 1980:1-9). According to Kay, he put forth two main hypotheses. These are that the different structures of languages will be associated with “non-linguistic cognitive differences” and that an individual's native language will influence or determine their world-view (Kay, 1983:2). Essentially, this means that language, thought, and culture are related. These ideas – frequently referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Theory but more commonly the as Whorfian Hypothesis – are not unique to Whorf. The so-called Whorfian Hypothesis is merely one of the latest versions of Linguistic Relativity that has arisen in recent history. Whorf's theory was the product of hundreds of years of development of the theory of Linguistic Relativity. This was largely due (but not limited) to philosophers Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt, and anthropologists Boas and Sapir. Hamann taught Herder, and both of them influenced Humboldt's work. Further, Boas brought Humboldt's hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity to America and taught Sapir who taught Whorf (Penn, 1972:54). “Thus the linear descent of the idea is easily traced from Hamann to Whorf” (Penn, 1972:54). Whorf's version of the basic hypothesis – that language and thought and culture are interrelated – exhibits definite influences from each of the scholars above, but also diverges from them in distinct ways.

Before one can analyze the effects that earlier scholars had on Whorf's theory, it is necessary to understand what his theory involves. He called his theory “a new principle of relativity” which indicates the presence of earlier theorists associated with earlier versions. In “Language, Thought and Reality” – a book of his collected essays assembled after his death in 1941 – Whorf is quoted as stating that “all observers are not lead by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar” (Penn, 1972:29). An individual's ‘mother tongue’ organizes the world for them, and, with every language learnt, their perception of the world will change (Penn, 1972:29). The effect that language has on one's perception of the world is subconscious but obligatory (Rossi- Landi 1973:30). The tool of perception (i.e. the ‘thought world’) is “the microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm” (i.e. the objective world) (Caroll, 1956:147). He looked at the ‘practical mechanics’ of a given language (i.e. the parts of speech, if and how case, gender and tense are formed, etc.) and posited conceptual and cultural effects of these features (Rossi-Landi 1973:32). He acknowledged the difficulty in analyzing languages objectively without imposing one's worldview onto the language. Whorf stated, “if we take a very dissimilar language, this language becomes a part of nature, and we even do to it what we have already done to nature” (Caroll, 1956:138). Despite

this understanding, he studied the Hopi language extensively and placed it in opposition to Western languages.

In his article, “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behaviour to Language,” Whorf’s view of the shaping power of language is evident. He compared Standard Average European (SAE) languages – these are essentially the Indo-European languages – to non-Western languages, specifically Hopi. He did this to understand their distinct perceptions of time, space and matter (Carroll, 1956:139). It must be kept in mind that the accuracy of his analysis of Hopi and SAE is questionable and has been criticized by many scholars (Penn, 1973:30). Beginning with the formation of plurals in SAE, he pointed out that units of time are pluralized in the same manner as regular physical objects (Carroll, 1956:139). This, he believed, leads to an objectified view of time that is incompatible with the subjective experience of time as getting later (Carroll, 1956:139). In Hopi, plurals only apply to physical objects and not periods of time. Where SAE might say, “I spent 2 days writing” objectifying each individual day, Hopi would subsume the period of time into a whole, saying, “I finished writing on the second day” (Carroll, 1956:139).

Further, cycles in nature (the seasons, days of the week, etc.) are treated as regular nouns in SAE but as their own part of speech in Hopi (Carroll, 1956:143). Much like SAE adverbs, these Hopi parts of speech imply a process and a “subjective duration feeling” (Carroll, 1956:143). Whorf discusses the different classifications of nouns in SAE. There are both discrete nouns (items that can be counted) and mass nouns (items that cannot be counted, for example, water, sand, air, etc.) (Carroll, 1956:140).

In SAE it is common to reduce mass nouns to a single portion, usually by commenting on their containers (for example, a glass of water, a bucket of sand, etc.) (Carroll, 1956:141). In Hopi, however, all nouns can be pluralized and there is no need to emphasize their shapes or containers (Carroll, 1956:141). Finally, he discusses the SAE three tense system, which “colours all our thinking about time” (Carroll, 1956:143). The present is a time unit, which is situated between the units of the past and future, which, once again, objectifies the subjective experience of time (Carroll, 1956:143). In Hopi, no tense is marked on verbs. Only aspects, which indicate duration, and tendency of the event, are marked (Carroll, 1956:144). Whorf asserted that Newton’s ideas (which are the basis of SAE speakers view of the world) had embedded a linear objective way of perceiving time, space, and matter.

Twentieth century developments in physics (for example, the Theory of Relativity) had proved that the Newtonian understanding of reality was, in fact, incorrect (Carroll, 1956:152). He believed that the Hopi would be more apt to understand the new theories than SAE speakers (Rollins, 1980:76). He concluded with his wish that SAE speakers learn from the Hopi so that the conflict between religion and science could be eliminated (Rollins, 1980:76).

Despite many similar ideas, Hamann’s version of linguistic relativism that came 200 years earlier distinguishes it from Whorf’s, which never discusses the origin of language. Hamann was the first German philosopher to discuss the relationship between language and thought. Albeit a contemporary of the Enlightenment (he published his work in the mid 1700’s), his views were staunchly anti-Enlightenment (Miller, 1968:14). He specifically disagreed with the German rationalist Kant, who felt that language was a product of humans’ innate faculty of reason (Penn, 1972:48). His theory is very much coloured by a belief in the divine origin of language. “In the beginning, when God called the world into being through the divine Logos, so man too, having been taught this miracle recreates his own spiritual reality by means of human language” (Miller, 1968:15). Penn says that Whorf’s lack of concern with the origin of language allows for a contradiction free argument – unlike those of earlier theorists, Hamann included (Penn, 1972:28). There “seems to be [...] [the implicit] assumption that language is a manifestation of the soul of man apart from his body and hence not the creation of his [...] neurological organization” but this is never explicitly stated by Whorf (Penn, 1972:28). To Hamann, language, a primary given (or an *Urfaktum*), occurred simultaneously to

thought in the spontaneous communicative process (Miller, 1968:15). Language, was not merely a product of reason, rather it “entered into the very structure of cognition [and] was a constitutive factor in its development” (Miller, 1968:15). Because of this, there was no universal faculty of reason that all humans had (what his contemporary Kant referred to as *gemeiner Menschenverstand*) and reason had to be considered relative to the particular language spoken by a people (Miller, 1968:17). In his “Essay Concerning an Academic Question” of 1760, he elaborated his theory of an innate God-given language present in all people, to say that each group or nationality has their own separate natural mentality (*natürliche Denkungsart*) (Miller, 1968:18). This natural mentality, also referred to as the genius of a culture, will be reflected in the people’s laws, customs, and outward culture (Miller, 1968:18). Hamann’s natural mentality can be compared to Whorf’s belief in people’s thought as a microcosm. In his article “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behaviour to Language,” he compares and contrasts the Hopi and SAE perceptions of the world to show that they indeed occupy two worlds unto themselves (Carroll, 1956:147).

Despite having certain core similarities to Whorf’s theory, Herder’s version of linguistic relativism differs from Whorf’s by the lack of cross-cultural references or examples. Herder was a student of Hamann and his opinions on the relationship between language and thought reflect this influence. In his first book “Fragments Concerning Modern German Literature,” published in 1768, he acknowledges and accepts the majority of Hamann’s theory (Miller, 1968:20). He stated, “we cannot think without thoughts, and [...] we learn to think through words, then language gives to the whole of human knowledge, its limits and contours” (Miller, 1968:20). This reflects his belief in language as primary to reason. Unlike Hamann, he did not advocate a divine origin of language. Rather, he felt, that language originated and developed as a result of psychological, historical and natural forces (Miller, 1968:23).

One of these psychological forces (which should not be confused with reason) is *Besonnenheit*, the uniquely human inborn capacity to reflect (Penn, 1972:52). He was influenced by the emerging field of biology – by Leibnitz in particular – so his theory focuses on language growth and development in terms that parallel the growth of an organism (Miller, 1968:22). Both he and Whorf believed that language reflects it’s historic, geophysical and psychological context (Miller, 1968:23). Like Hamann, Herder believed that each language with its idiosyncrasies and special features, was a reflection of the national mentality, and that “an examination of the different languages of the earth [would be] the best contribution toward a philosophy of human understanding” (Miller, 1968:20). He made this declaration and yet did not attempt to study other cultures or languages to substantiate his theories (Penn, 1972:53). In theory, he believed that the physiognomy of a language could reveal the natural mentality of its speakers. What this means is that the external features of a particular language could provide clues as to its inner character (Miller, 1968:24).

This is essentially what Whorf put into practice in his studies of the Hopi and SAE.

Humboldt’s theory of linguistic relativity is fairly consistent with Whorf’s. Wilhelm von Humboldt was a German philosopher and language theorist of the early 19th Century. Humboldt stressed the heuristic power of speech – the power of language to teach speakers and alter the cognitive process itself (Miller, 1968:26).

According to his theory, language and thought were one. Language was not a product of thought, but an activity through which “the formless thought-mass and the equally formless sound mass [...] [met] and [became] ordered” (Miller, 1968:27). Without language, thought could not be clear or fully articulated (Miller, 1968:26). He felt that languages should not be examined by words or features alone but should be considered as webs, where all features are connected (Miller, 1968:29). The creative synthesis of language (the process by which it is produced) affects all levels of speech at once – at the word level, sentence level, phonetic level, etc. (Miller, 1968:29).

Humboldt, the “first European to combine the knowledge of non-Indo European languages with a broad philosophical background,” paved the way for scholars like Whorf (Penn, 1972:19). He stressed that most ideas could not be separated from the words of a particular language and that accurate translation was impossible (Penn, 1972:30). He gave the example of the word for elephant in Sanskrit and in English. In Sanskrit there were several words each connoting a different meaning, whereas, in English there is only one. He believed that this would lead to (as well as perpetuate) different ways of perceiving the animal in the associated cultures (Penn, 1972:30).

Like Whorf, he felt that each culture had its own separate world-view. The difference between languages “is not one of sounds, and signs, but a diversity of world perspectives (*Weltansichten*)” (Miller, 1968: 29). The reason he gives for such differences in perception is the mysterious existence of individual national spirits (or *Geists*) (Penn, 1972:20). The internal structure of a language (or *innere Sprachform*) is a reflection of the national spirit and influences the consciousness of a people (Penn, 1972:19). This can easily be likened to Whorf’s hypothesis where the mechanics of a language (its vocabulary, syntax, grammatical features) give insight to the different microcosms speakers of the individual languages experience.

Franz Boas, the founder of the American School of Anthropology, was not a linguistic relativist, but his theories of culture are important in the development of Whorf’s work. Boas’ ideas formed in reaction to the Classical Cultural Evolutionists and their ethnocentric, negative view of unwritten languages (Kay, 1983:1). Boas had respect for non-Western cultures and world-views (Rollins, 1980:53). Each culture was distinct and had to be studied with respect to its own particular history, surroundings, practices, and language. Further, he believed, that the elements of each culture were structured by one central organizational principle. As an anthropologist, learning the language was key to uncovering what this principle was (Rollins, 1980:53). So Boas, due to his respect for and focus on non-Western cultures and languages, legitimized their study. This was a necessary precursor to Whorf’s work with the Hopi and his version of the theory of Linguistic Relativism. One can see Boas’ influence when Whorf discusses the traditional ethnocentric view of Indo-European languages. He stated that these languages could no longer be seen as the “apex of evolution of the human mind” and that they should be understood as only “one constellation in a galactic expanse” (Rollins, 1980:7). Boas was the first scholar to bring Humboldt’s theory of *Weltanschauung* to America (Penn, 1972:54).

Thus, Humboldt’s ideas were present in American anthropology for Sapir and then Whorf to gain inspiration from. Whorf, in one of his unpublished papers, actually credited Boas with the recognition that “American Indians and other exotic languages exemplify different kinds of thinking” (Rollins, 1980:53). Although they both observed that speakers of different languages had different world-views, Boas believed that this was due to conceptual differences, while Whorf credited their respective linguistic structures (Rollins, 1980:55). Also, Boas believed that humans were not limited by the languages they spoke, rather “language [was] a tool which could be continuously modified” (Rollins, 1980:54).

Understanding the theories of Edward Sapir (Boas’ student and Whorf’s teacher) is important to understanding those of Whorf. It is through Sapir’s teaching that Whorf learned of Boas’s view of non-Western languages and Humboldt’s ideas. Also, reading Sapir’s own research on the concept of Linguistic Relativity, certainly inspired Whorf. In his 1928 essay entitled “The Status of Linguistics as a Science,” Sapir wrote that, “the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (Rossi-Landi 1973:28). Because of this, he believed that language was a symbolic guide to culture and that Linguistics could help other disciplines understand human nature (Rollins, 1980:59).

Penn feels that Sapir’s theory of Linguistic Relativity is just a milder restatement of Humboldt’s (Penn, 1972:23). Similar to Humboldt’s theory, the process of language production, to Sapir, was

necessary in symbolically structuring the idea. “Language is primarily a pre-rational function. It works up to the thought that is latent in [it and] that may eventually be read into [it]” (Penn, 1972:24). Similar to Humboldt’s Geist, he believed that the ability for language comprehension and production was a fully formed aspect of the human psychic or spiritual being (Penn, 1972:25). He held that language is two faceted - both a consensual, culturally shared system and an individual product (Penn, 1972:25). It seems as though Sapir dwelled on the latter, whereas, Whorf focused on the former. Sapir believed in the importance of the individual’s perspective in all aspects of culture. He stated, “the true locus of culture is in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meanings which each one of these individuals may unconsciously abstract for himself” (Rollins, 1980:68). For him, one could not absolutely generalize the symbolism inherent in language to the population as a whole without paying due attention to the individuals within the society.

To analyze Whorf’s role in the development of the theory of Linguistic Relativity, it is necessary to examine the ideas of scholars Hamann, Herder, Humboldt, Boas and Sapir, because of their roles in inspiring his version of the theory. The theory of Linguistic relativity – that language, thought and culture affect each other – has come to be synonymous with the “Whorfian Hypothesis.” This title seems to dismiss a long tradition of philosophical and anthropological thought giving credit to only one person. Unless one is a proponent of Rationalism, it is evident that no idea comes out of a void. The individual is situated in a particular context, where given theories and ideas are manifest. No matter how intelligent that individual is, it is from these older ideas that new insights form. The same is true for Whorf. He assumed some of the ideas of the previous Linguistic Relativists and added his own Whorfian touch.

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