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Linguistic Relativity versus Universalism: Does language really influence thought?

The question of whether experience is informed by thought and language is a pervasive one in the domains of cognitive psychology and philosophy. Moreover, there are competing viewpoints that attempt to offer insight into this philosophical problem. The views of linguistic determinism, linguistic relativity, and universalism all try to articulate solutions about the nature of language and thinking, albeit not always successfully. Linguistic determinism (also termed the “strong hypothesis”) asserts that language and linguistic structures determine cognition. This idea has relevance in anthropological discourse, as it presupposes that people who speak different languages and are a part of different cultures have different thought patterns. The strong hypothesis does not fare well in linguistic discourse, and few subscribe to it today. Linguistic relativity (the “weak hypothesis”) is the idea that language shapes cognition, but to a lesser degree. This idea has been contested by the principles of Universalism, or the position of universal grammar, which states that structural rules underlie all languages. These rules are innate to most humans, and cognition is thought to follow a similar pattern for humans. However, if thought processes are different for different humans, that isn’t because they speak different languages -- we might think differently for other reasons, because of cultural and historical factors.

Nevertheless, I will be taking the perspective of Universalism, arguing that even if nonlinguistic cognitive differences are resultant of structural differences between languages,

these differences are insignificant and are prone to cultural/environmental influence. For the sake of brevity, I will only be rebutting the position of linguistic relativity, rather than determinism and relativity both. Because of the enormity of arguments made against linguistic relativity, I will be directing my focus towards two major claims: the underlying similarities of human cognition and its influence on language development and structure, and the undeniable influence of culture and environment that may influence thought and, in turn, language. These claims tie in with the overarching idea that language and thought are inextricable -- it is difficult (if not impossible) to assess the influence that language has on thought, so the undertaking may prove fruitless. I concede that linguistic influence on thought is not nonexistent, but it is weaker than relativists give it credit for. Language can augment certain types of thinking in some domains, but the effect is not prominent enough for it to meaningfully shape worldviews and thinking.

Human cognition consists of fundamental building blocks that are subject to some degree of variation. Perceptual elements typically do not vary for most humans. Steven Pinker in his essay "The Language Hoax" emphasizes this idea, pointing to the fact that, fundamentally, perceptual elements govern every human's existence and even if we have different words to describe colors, we "color our words with the same perceptual palette, and this constrains the vocabularies we develop" (Pinker, 62). The color-naming phenomenon in linguistic relativity has been explored in countless literature and has designated itself as one of the more seductive indices of the alleged validity of linguistic relativity. One of the most famous examples of this includes the distinction between the different types of "blue" in Russian, where "siniy" (dark blue) and "goluboy" (light blue) indicate a different perceptual mode of engaging with the world. The argument of linguistic relativity is that, because groups of people have these designations, (such as Eskimos and their names for different types of snow, or aboriginals in Australia that use

cardinal directions instead of left and right in their orientation) then these linguistic properties dictate thought itself. By this logic, aboriginal Australians may be more attuned to direction, Hopi peoples' lack of a concept of time is due to the absence of time-related words in their language, and Russians can literally see more colors because they have more words for them. However, Pinker makes the reasonable argument that "the way we see colors determines how we learn words for them, not vice versa" (Pinker, 63). The chicken and the egg conundrum is applicable to the domain of linguistic relativity -- which element takes precedence, thought or language? Proponents of "common sense" ideology like Pinker argue that thought (which encapsulates perceptual elements) influences language first and foremost. Linguistic relativity falls prey to circular reasoning in this manner, and conceptual soundness is lost. Even Lera Boroditsky, a proponent of linguistic relativity concedes in her point about French people exhibiting greater reverence for their elders by using the formal *vous* -- "Just look at how they talk!" This just takes us in a circle. We haven't done anything to add evidence for our claim. We have only restated that French speakers talk differently from English speakers" (Boroditsky, 4). She goes on to argue that talking differently does not imply thinking differently, because we can only utter so much of what we truly know and understand. The cognitive building blocks that aid understanding and language-production are theorized by some cognitive scientists (such as Chomsky and Pinker) to be already-existing. According to this idea (assuming it is true), because these quintessential experiential and cognitive elements tend not to vary among humans, and because of the inseparability of language from thought, one cannot assert with confidence that language has a sizable role in influencing thought, and that language differs significantly altogether. Even if nonlinguistic cognitive differences are resultant of structural differences between languages, these differences are insignificant.

According to Pinker in his book *The Language Instinct*, human beings possess an inborn proclivity for language-learning. This idea is built on the framework of Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, which postulates that human languages contain similar structures and rules. However, Pinker and Chomsky both acknowledge that there are many differences between different languages, even if there is a shared core. So, while their views are compatible with those of linguistic relativity in that languages differ and may at times produce different ways of looking at the world, these differences do not matter as much as relativists believe, because Chomsky's theories presuppose an underlying, hardwired cognitive linguistic element which influences language production and creation. If the language acquisition device about which Chomsky speaks truly exists, then the idea that most humans are imbued with the capacity to learn structure in a similar (though not identical) fashion is a plausible one, and one that is in line with Universalism. This is not to say that meaningful differences between languages do not exist -- they certainly do. Whether it be through the differing grammatical genders and the implications they have on thought, or varied color-words, differences certainly exist. However, we have no clear way of assessing whether or not these things affect thought and the degree to which they might, given the delicate interplay between language, culture, cognitive processes, and the individual. Language experiments conducted on the weak version of the Whorfian hypothesis have tested the idea that words can have some effect on memory or categorization. While these experiments have proven some statistically significant degree of effect, whether or not this has practical implications outside of the laboratory is in question. As Pinker aptly states, "It is hardly an example of incommensurable world views...or of dissecting nature along lines laid down by our native languages according to terms that are absolutely obligatory" (Pinker, 66).

The influence of culture and environment on language production cannot be emphasized enough. Because of linguistic relativity's fundamental issue of being unable to divorce elements such as thought from it, the same problem applies to the notion of environmental influence. One of the objections to linguistic relativity is the inability to "disentangle language from culture in general, and from social interaction in particular, so it is impossible to attribute differences in the thought patterns of the members of different cultural communities to the structures of language" (Zlatev & Blomberg, 2). Because of inherent differences in cultures, geographies, and needs, language is devised as a tool specifically designated for the context. Thus, the claim that "language influences thought" cannot hold up, because there is no way of telling whether or not language is devised to fit needs and mirror environments. Cultural elements as opposed to linguistic elements have the possibility of taking precedence and determining whether or not language "influences" can become a fruitless endeavor. John McWhorter in his book *The Language Hoax* articulates this phenomenon with the Guugu Yimithirr people -- "But just as Eskimos have a reason to focus on snow, the Guugu Yimithirr have a reason to rely heavily on geographical coordinates: they live on flat land in the bush" (McWhorter, 28). This idea does not only have its significance in culture, but any in-group which has its own terminologies to refer to things. Pinker notes that "horsebreeders have various names for breeds, botanists have names for leaf shapes; interior decorators have names for shades of mauve..." (65). With this in mind, how are we to determine whether one's way of being is affected by language, and not the reverse? Anthropologists have speculated that small indigenous groups have languages of a greater grammatical complexity simply because they have seen lesser linguistic interference by nonnatives, given that many indigenous groups have been isolated throughout history. Groups like the Khoi-San who have click-based mother tongues which are incredibly complex in nature

and hard to replicate by others. This is unlike languages like American English, which has seen countless transformations throughout history, and it was “therefore beaten up by the mundane fact that it’s tough to really learn a language after adolescence” (McWhorter, 65). Thus, a cultural influence (or lack thereof) on language cannot be ignored, because language is an ever-shifting, context-dependent entity. This is not to say that this linguistic complexity is somehow beneficial to these people -- it is merely a byproduct of cultural evolution, and more evidence of the idea that language is, probably more than anything else, subject to the underlying cognitive and cultural processes that govern the rest of human existence. In the examination of groups like the Hopi tribe, their supposed inability to tell time (which has been disproven, according to historical records) is said by Whorf to correlate with the absence of time-related words in their language. However, even then, there is nothing intrinsic about the inability to tell time. Perhaps their environment never necessitated time-telling, or by pure linguistic accident, words to denote time-telling were never developed. This isn’t a product of language mediating thought -- it is a product of culture mediating language. Thus, the inseparability of culture and environment with language attests to the overall flimsiness of the linguistic relativity as a whole.

Linguistic relativity as a theoretical position is enticing for many reasons. It punctuates difference and exoticism, and challenges our existing conceptions of language and cognition. However, it has fallen out of favor for many reasons. Universalism does a better job at minimizing difference, because of its verifiability -- since many languages have a shared core, thought and perception are thought to be grounded by many of the same rules that govern language production, and vice versa. Cognition and language are so deeply intertwined, and it is likely impossible to determine causality because of the circular argumentation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, hence one cannot determine which comes first, but only infer. Lastly,

language does not exist in a vacuum -- cultural and environmental influence can play a big role in the development of words altogether. It is important to acknowledge this distinction, because of the simple fact that our thinking might be the result of socially-prescribed differences, rather than linguistic ones.

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