

## Relativity

Linguistic relativity was born out of the observation that languages provide different ways of describing the world. The next step was to posit that each language establishes a system of meanings that is incommensurable with other systems. On that assumption, the hypothesis was made that speakers, depending upon their language, may see the world differently and pay attention to different aspects of reality. Thus, linguistic diversity became a way of predicting and explaining at least some aspects of cognitive and cultural diversity.

Despite the potential implications of these assumptions for the study of language, the issue of linguistic relativity has been largely ignored by formal linguists in the second half of the twentieth century mostly due to (1) Noam Chomsky's insistence on the universal properties of grammatical systems and (2) the misunderstanding of the scope and meaning of linguistic relativity. The stereotypical view of linguistic relativity as pertaining to differences in number of words for the "same" concept (e.g., the supposedly high number of words for snow in Eskimo, a myth finally discredited by Laura Martin) for a while undermined its theoretical importance. And yet linguistic relativity speaks to the core of the anthropological enterprise, to the limits of our ability to understand who we are and what we do. It also forces us to think about the power of words and the relative freedom we have to transcend the world as constructed through discursive practices. It forces us to take seriously Martin Heidegger's thesis that we do not speak language, but language speaks us.

Linguistic relativity is historically tied to Romanticism and the view, expressed by the German diplomat and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), that a language represents the spirit of a nation and therefore that to speak another language means to accept its implicit worldview. But even for von Humboldt, each (sociohistorically defined) language should be distinguished from language as a universal human capacity. Thus, contrary

to popular belief, from the very beginning linguistic relativity has not been incompatible with the belief that there are universals of language.

The names of two North American scholars are usually identified with linguistic relativity: Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941). The frequent use of the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis” as a synonym for linguistic relativity is, however, misleading given that the two scholars never worked out a joint statement about linguistic relativity and a close analysis of their writings shows some important differences. For Sapir, linguistic relativity was a way of articulating one of the fundamental paradoxes of human life, namely, the need that each individual has to use a shared and predefined code in expressing what are subjectively different experiences. Sapir also saw the logic of grammar as similar to the logic of artistic codes (e.g., the rule about marking plural or gender in some languages but not in others is similar to a stylistic preference that needs to be honored by the artist working within a certain type of material and within a particular tradition). Whorf was interested in finding ways of characterizing the worldview expressed in American Indian languages as alternative “fashions of speaking,” with the same legitimacy of what he called “Standard Average European,” an amalgamation of the formal properties shared by languages like English and French. For Whorf, language is a guide to behavior because its logic is transferred, through analogy, to other domains of human cognitive activity (his most famous example was the discovery of the common and dangerous interpretation of the label “empty” on gas drums as equivalent to “devoid of gas” and thus innocuous). He formulated a “linguistic relativity principle” according to which different grammars direct their users toward different types of observations and different evaluations of what could otherwise be seen as similar circumstances.

After a period of criticism of Whorf’s work, which culminated with Brent Berlin and Paul Kay’s discovery of cross-linguistic universals in the coding of color across a large number of languages, researchers have returned to Whorf’s basic insights with renewed interest and new methods. An important contribution in this area has been John Lucy’s project comparing the performance of speakers of Yucatec and speakers of English in a series of cognitive tasks. Starting from the observation that English marks plural overtly and obligatorily on a wide range of noun phrases, whereas Yucatec usually does not mark plural and, when it does, it is optional, Lucy hypothesizes that English speakers should habitually attend to the number of various objects more than Yucatec speakers do and for more types of referents. The results of his experiments support his hypothesis. Similar work is being done on the coding and perception of space by other researchers.

Another line of research on the impact on language on human cognition has been pursued by Michael Silverstein, who hypothesizes that native speakers’ “metalinguistic awareness,” that is, their ability to have intuitions about the meaning and use of linguistic expressions, is conditioned by certain formal properties of those expressions, e.g., whether or not there is a one-to-one correspondence between parts of a word and units of meaning. Even J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, Silverstein argues, was based on the ability to name certain (speech) acts through such (referential) expressions

as "I promise that," "I declare that," "I order you to," etc. But there are plenty of social acts done through language that cannot be easily named by such referential expressions and therefore may not be as easily accessible to native speakers' consciousness. These phenomena have consequences for social scientists' ability to use members' intuitions in their research.

Recent studies on a variety of communicative activities and genres have expanded the theoretical and methodological boundaries of what used to be thought of as linguistic relativity. No in-depth study of intentionality, agency, indexicality, formality, or code choice, for example, can be possible without assessing the relative power that words have on our ability to understand, act in, and ultimately affect our psychological and social worlds.

(See also *act, category, color, functions, iconicity, ideophone, indexicality, metaphor, space*)

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