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Essay on

The relationship between language and thought

Part of the BRAC MA TESOL Module:
Foundations of Linguistics (TSL 501)

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TSL 501 (Foundations of Linguistics): Assignment: Thought and Language Tehzeeb Karim (15377005)

The relationship between language and thought can be an intriguing topic for the layman. Do the languages we speak affect the way we think? And do they have a lasting influence on the way we see the world around us? Our common sense might conclude that in adults at least, there is a close relationship between language and thought. Linguisticsociety.org (2015). However, for linguists and cognitive psychologists, this is not a new subject and has been a rather debated one for several decades.

There are those who claimed that language controls or guides our thoughts, while others claimed just the opposite. Yet others proposed that our thoughts are initially independent from the way we speak, but their interdependence slowly develops during infancy. The first view was mainly promoted by Edward Sapir and Benjamin L. Whorf. The others, with their subtle nuances, can be attributed to Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Naom Chomsky (Lund, 2003).

The original idea of a causal influence of language on cognition is often attributed to Humboldt, Boas, Sapir, Whorf and is termed was "linguistic determinism"(Gumperz& Levinson, 1996) or linguistic relativity hypothesis (Lund, 2003). According to the view, speakers access different perceptions of the world while using their language (Sapir, 1921; cited in Levinson, 2003). Hence, the reality of the world for a particular group of people is built upon their language habits which makes them interpret whatever they see or hear in a ceratin way (Sapir ,1956:134, cited in Gumperz & Levinson, 1996).

Initially, this hypothesis was supported by studies on how colours are described in some languages, and how they influence their users' perception of colour. Following this, the Whorfian view was widely accepted during the 1950s and 60s. (Levinson, 2003)

However, Rosch's study (1972) on the Dani people in New Guinea disproved the Whorfian view by showing that Dani's perception of color was very similar to those of English speakers, despite there being only 2 basic colour terms in their language (Gentner& Meadow, n.d.). Rosch's work thus triggered the start of an era of mistrust in the Whorfian view. This scepticism further resonated among cognitive psychologists, fuelled by Jean Piagetian's findings which showed that thought actually precedes language (Levinson, 2003) and not vice versa.

The loss of popularity of the Whorfian views continued with further developments in cognition sciences and linguistic anthropology, which now suggest an inborn thought or language mechanism underneath the varying languages of humans (Gumperz& Levinson, 1996). In cognitive psychology, the *Language of Thought Hypothesis* (LOTH) of Jerry Fodor (1975) proposed that "thought and thinking take place in a mental language" or *mentalese* (Jerry Fodor, 1975 cited in Aydede and McLaughlin). Hence, all the thinking of all humans was considered to have universal structural properties with little or no relationship to their linguistic variances (Fodor, 1983, cited in Gumperz& Levinson, 1996). In linguistics, Naom Chomsky proposed that there is an inborn, universal syntax of language in all humans and that language is altogether a separate mechanism from cognition (Levinson, 2003). These developments in cognitive

psychology and linguistics inevitably discredited the Whorfian notion that a language affects the worldview and thoughts of its speakers. (in Gumperz & Levinson, 1996)

As explained above, these developments, often termed as nativist views, hold that cognitive or linguistic structures are native to humans. According to them, knowing a language is the ability to translate these native structures to words and sentences or in other words, "finding the local phonetic clothing for the pre-existing concepts." (Levinson, 2003). Recently, many studies have raised strong arguments against these nativist views and in support of the Whorfian views. Most of these studies have focused on the degree to which languages differ, and how these affect differences in semantics and subsequently, the thought processes of the speakers (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996).

Refutations of the nativist views:

In his compelling argument, Levinson (2003) mentioned that languages can differ on several parameters, one of them being phonemes. For instance, languages range from having only 11 to as many as over 140 distinct phonemes. (Maddieson 1984, cited in Levinson, 2003). Languages can also differ in terms of having or not having tenses, morphology, word classes and syntactic regulations on words or phrases (Levinson, 2003).

Levinson (2003) also listed the many semantic variations in the spatial concepts conveyed by languages. For example, research shows there are not only two but many more semantic distinctions in demonstratives (e.g *this* and *that*) (Meira and Dunn, in preparation, cited in Levinson, 2003). Similarly, Wilkins and Hill (1995, cited in Levinson, 2003) showed how differently the words 'come' and 'go' are used in different languages and the contrasting images and concepts the depict in the mind.

Thus, according to Levinson (2003), the differences between languages in the concepts they reflect are by no means insignificant or superficial as was propagated in the nativist views. His argument was that *spatial concepts* is one area where the nativists would expect the greatest commonalities, and yet the abundance of differences points to the fact the languages can generate very different thinking processes in the minds of their speakers.

Levinson (2003) also points out that the nativist claims of an innate universal language mechanism in humans are not well researched. He points out that such claims are only based on the analysis of 5-10 percent of the existing well-described languages. Hence, when more languages are taken into account, it is the many differences mentioned earlier which are amplified and not the commonalities between languages.

Refutations of the Whorfian views:

The arguments in favour of the Whorfian views were mostly based on the cross-linguistic diversity of languages, which the proponents of the view claimed to impact a deeper cognitive diversity among the speakers. However, many commentators saw this cross-linguistic diversity as superficial. Their studies in morpho-syntax showed that these surface level differences could well be explained using underlying structural commonalities (Chomsky, 2000; Baker, 2001, cited in Gleitman & Papafragou, 2005). Others have also shown evidence that cognition can often be

independent of language, as is the case with infants, who can often form complex thoughts without language (Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Senghas et al., 1997, cited in Gleitman&Papafragou, 2005). Another example could be animals who also form ideas without language (Hauser & Carey, 1998; Gallistel, 1990; Hare, Call, &Tomasello, 2001, and Call &Tomasello, cited in Gleitman & Papafragou, 2005)

Final words - The need for a balanced view

In conclusion, it is clear that there are studies showing evidence in support of the Whorfian views , for example, Boroditsky (1999, 2001), Bowerman (1996), Davidoff, Davies & Roberson (1999), Imai and Gentner (1997), Levinson (1996), Lucy (1992) and Slobin (1996). Similarly, there are studies which have shown empirical evidence contradicting the Whorfian views such as Rosch andHeider (1972) and Li & Gleitman (2002).

It should be noted there are two versions of the Sapir-Whorf views - The 'strong' version claiming that language determines thought while the weaker version only suggesting that language influences (but does not determine) thought (Lund, 2003). Many of the arguments against Whorfian views were actually directed against the stronger views. For instance, Wason and Johnson-Laird (1977:411, cited by Gumperz& Levinson, 1996) points out that there is no empirical evidence supporting the fact that language controls and determines our thoughts. According to Lucy (1992), not even Whorf ever suggested the stronger view, but merely suggested that "certain syntactic structures 'might induce habitual or non-reflective thought' (Lucy, 1992).

Hence, a middle ground could be reached between the nativist views and the weaker version of Whorfian views (which in fact was the original view of Whorf as shown above). This toned down balanced view was also apparent in the words of Boroditsky, Schmidt & Phillips (2003) who mentioned that there is evidence to suggest that people's thinking can be influenced by the varying grammatical aspects of languages. The authors thus mentioned that

> *"the private mental lives of people who speak different languages **may** differ much more than previously thought."* (Boroditsky, Schmidt & Phillips ,2003)

What is called for is therefore more research into the matter, making use of modern technology which was not available at the time of some of the aforementioned earlier studies. This may lead to a more balanced view, which acknowledges both the influence of language on thoughts, and also the inborn language mechanisms in humans.

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