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Linguistic Relativity Revisited: The Interaction between L1 and L2 in Thinking, Learning, and Production

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The linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH; a.k.a., Whorfian hypothesis) is reconsidered with respect to second language (L2) acquisition. With ebbs and flows over time, the notion of LRH went through dismissal and resurgence in linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. Empirical evidence gleaned from the pseudo-linguistic domains, such as color categorization, time perception, spatial cognition, and number recognition, supports the weak form of LRH. This article briefly reviews the conflicting views, discusses empirical evidence, and expands the premise of LRH to L2 learning. Of interest is the interface of syntax and semantics in English language learners' (ELLs) ergative verb usage in which ELLs tend to overpassivize English ergative verbs (e.g., appear, happen, break). The source of prevalent overpassivization errors is discussed using the LRH framework.

Keywords: Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis; Language and Cognition; Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

The relationship between cognition and language as well as their reciprocal influence have been a long debated topic in psychology and applied linguistics. The fundamental questions related to the nexus of cognition and language involve whether we "think in language" and whether language shapes our thoughts (Casasanto, 2008). These inquiries are related to *linguistic relativity* in which linguistic differences yield differences in speakers' thoughts. The linguistic relativity principle¹ (a.k.a., the Whorfian Hypothesis, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis) posits that language shapes the speaker's thought and cognition (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Lucy, 1996; Skobin, 2003). According to this hypothesis, different languages demonstrate a wide range of variabilities in the speaker's semantic categories and linguistic representations. As a result, speakers of different languages perceive the world differently and the conceptual system of the world is constrained by the given natural language (Gentner & Goldin-Meadow, 2003).

Although it postulates a relationship between language and cognition, linguistic relativity does not support unidirectionality or causality from cognition to language. In this regard, *linguistic relativity* does not share commonality with *linguistic determinism* which asserts that cognitive processes and thoughts have a causal association with the structure of a language. Along this line, Casasanto (2008) claims that linguistic relativity is different from linguistic determinism because linguistic relativity does not strictly determine the speaker's thought.

Using the linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH) as a theoretical framework, the purpose of this paper is to 1) review the competing views on the linguistic relativity principle or the Whorfian hypothesis, 2) discuss its significant role in perceptual domains, and 3) expand the linguistic relativity principle to the area of second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) ac-

quisition. Specifically, the cognitive and perceptual aspects of LRH will first be discussed. Secondly, the interaction between language and cognition will be discussed with empirical evidence. Next, the linguistic intricacy of English ergative verbs related to overpassivization errors² made by English language learners (ELLs) will be explained using the spectrum of LRH. Finally, the implications of LRH in cross-cultural language learning will be discussed.

Competing Views

The premise of LRH stemmed from the work of a linguist named Sapir (1929; cited in Tohidian, 2009) who had studied English in comparison to Native American languages and concluded that differences in linguistic features across languages yielded differences in the perception, understanding, and interpretation of the world. This notion was followed and substantiated by the work of Benjamin Whorf (1956; cited in Tohidian, 2009), resulting in a theory referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or as the Whorfian hypothesis³, which reflects the noteworthy influence of Whorf on theory-building. Later, scholars broke down LRH into two versions according to the degree of intensity: strong LRH and weak LRH (Hunt & Agnoli, 1991; Tohidian, 2009). The strong form of LRH hypothesizes that language dictates and controls thought and perception, while the weak form of LRH posits that language affects thought. Empirical evidence has rejected the strong form of LRH (Hunt & Agnoli, 1991; Regier & Kay, 2009), by raising questions about direct translation from one language to another, the presence or absence of a particular form in a language, and the qua-

²The term "error" is operationalized as any deviations from the prescribed syntax, regardless of the nature of production or judgment (i.e., transitory mistakes or persistent errors).

³In this paper, the term LRH and the Whorfian hypothesis are used interchangeably.

¹According to Tohidian (2009), the label linguistic relativity is more common in these days.

Paul Bayley

Analyzing language and politics

This paper will first present a synthesis of the inseparable links between discourse and political activity, secondly it will outline some linguistic models and approaches that have proved, or should prove, useful in analysing political language.

1. Discourse in politics

1.1 Language and political processes

The claim that underlies this paper, that politics and language are inextricably linked, is perhaps little more than a truism. Indeed, it would be difficult to identify any sphere of social or institutional life in which language does not play a pivotal role – from education to religion, from work (in the post-fordist world) to leisure, from buying to selling. To quote Threadgold (1986: 44):

Acts of communication are forms of social discourse which maintain and regulate social activities, and define status and power relations. As such they are part of and a metaphor for the social actions and belief systems of a given culture.

But together with education, religion and law, politics is one of those spheres of institutional life in which language is largely, although not exclusively, constitutive of its actions. Politics is conducted in and through talk and texts and such talk and texts enact political action. Politics does of course have material and non-linguistic goals – let us say, for the sake of simplification, that they are to regulate the distribution of resources, in a concrete as well as an abstract sense, in a given society. There are also means of conducting politics that are non-linguistic – war is an obvious example. However, it is difficult to imagine political action that is neither, on the one hand, founded on language nor, on the other, a result of linguistic breakdown and at the same time a premise for further linguistic action. For example, in the case of military aggression, wars break out when talks break down, and once a war, which may be conducted with words as well as weapons, has reached its conclusion, it is followed by renewed linguistic activity, in the form, for example, of peace treaties and on occasions, war trials.

1.2. Language and the construction of the state

Let us consider, rather allegorically, the role of language in the formation and evolution of a sovereign state. A state may be founded on an initial declaration of its independence and the principles on which it is to be formed, such as the Declaration of Independence or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, or it may be founded on legal precedents, that is to say, on authoritative and authorized written texts. If there is a solemn declaration, it will most likely have drawn on the writings of political philosophers, which, I would argue, are not codifications of pre-linguistic concepts that were simply "out there" but are elaborated in and through linguistic structures. Such concepts are then appropriated and re-elaborated by an emerging social and political force, which discusses, negotiates and rewrites their wordings and meanings.

The foundation document that is produced is subsequently used to persuade and/or to convince other social actors, at home and abroad, and to legitimate and to justify the new social order that it foresees. But this new social order will require some form of regulation and perhaps a constitution will be drafted, based on previous texts and/or constitutional literature, and amended through discussion and debate, which, in a final written form, will not only establish how certain relationships are to be regulated but also create institutions for this purpose. For example a constitution may create institutions such as legislative bodies and elaborate concepts of representation.

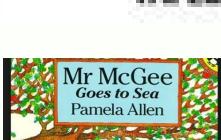
Legislatures and representative methods for choosing their members engender aggregations based on linguistically mediated affinities between socially and politically positioned subjects, but they will also create competition between different groups, which seek to gain support from those who have been designated as electors and such an endeavour will be conducted in and through language via political arenas such as pamphlets or public speeches. True enough, political agreements may be sealed through the material exchange of goods and services, but even such an exchange will inevitably be preceded and followed by a linguistic exchange, since otherwise it would probably serve very little.

1.3. Language, policy and law

Legislatures are forums for talk and text – policies are formulated, perhaps in an executive body or among political groupings, and they are drafted into bills by specialised personnel, they are debated publicly in large and small settings, such as the full chamber and select committees. Alliances are constructed among participating groups, either through public or private command, and majorities are formed; a vote is held and what began as a policy proposal becomes enshrined in the law, which commands the obedience of the citizens.

But citizens may also contest these norms and the constitution may also have formed an institution which allows them a form of redress – a supreme court, for example. On the supreme court will sit a panel of judges who will be asked to interpret the language of the contested law and/or its application, perhaps on the basis of its conformity with the supreme law, perhaps on the basis of other social norms. Constitutions, like language itself, are metastable; that is to say that their stability is guaranteed by their capacity to change. Professions which have the function of mediating between the citizens and judges arise, forming a caste of persons whose function is to produce texts designed to convince and to persuade an institutional authority. But here, of course, we are moving away from the sphere of politics and into that of law.

1.4. Language and mediating structures

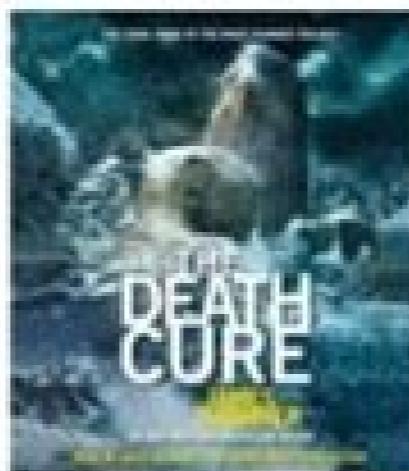




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You are reading a free prior view 4 is not shown in this preview. Linghetic relativity is the statement that culture, through language, affects the way we think, and especially our classification of the experienced world. This book reexamines ideas about linguist relativity in the light of new evidence and changes in theoretical climate. Parts I and II address the classical issues in relation to thought and language, and the scope of linguistic and cultural universals. Parts III and IV show how changes in our understanding of meaning require that we see how the context enters the interpretation, and how context is constituted in the social interaction. The editors have presented a substantial introduction that examines the changes in thinking about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in the light of developments in anthropology, linguistics and cognitive science; and also the presentations to each section that will be of special usefulness for the students. List of first category taxpayers; Editors are authors of better sale in Language List introductory sections to each party so that the book can be used as text/sourcebook © The first in assessing session to review Published Date: July 1996Format: PaperbackISBN: 9780521448901Length: 500 pages Dimensions: 229 x 153 x 36 mmweight: 0.818KGavailability: Available 1. Introduction Part I. Lingetic determinism: the interface between language and thought: 2. Empirical research and linguistic relativity John A. Lucy 3. 'Thought and language' to think for speaking' dan I. Slobin 4. Relativity of the speakers Paul Kay 5. Images iron, or thought is not the internal discourse Charles M. Keller and Janet Dixon Keller Part II. Universal and variation in language and culture: 6. The origin etiologia, sdeM nosnivl. & zrepmuG J ytvitaleR citsugnL qmknitneRnosnivle. C nehpets & zrepmuG J nhqj.I traP of noitcudortnlzrepmuG J nhqj ecnerefnl lanotiasrevnoCkralC H trebreH noitacinnmnoC dna ,seitlanommoC ,seitnummoC xedni morf lavomer tseueR noitatic tropxe etacilpud sa kram snoitP 0 1098441250879 Å 5098441250 jsNBSI moc nozamA no ti dnf koob siht yuB irepap siht ezirogetac(etgaugnaL fo yhpsolihP ni slasrevinU citsugnL seirogetaC)ti xif(deificeps sdrowyek On my .tamlic laceteroet of sgnahc da ecnedive wen thgil eht by ytitaler citsugnL tuoba saedi seminaxeer koob shit tcartsba Tarbmi-zemog Asle ,rebreh , Trebreh C nehpets ,Namrew dosem ,Rellek noxid tenaj ,Rellek .M Selrahc ,lyak Luap ,i Nad ,Tul.a ,snivel .snivel .c nehpets ,zrepmug ,kik

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