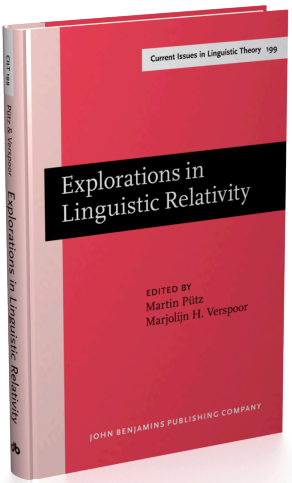
Current Issues in Linguistic Theory
199

Introduction

Martin Pütz
Marjolijn H. Verspoor

https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.199.02put



Pages ix–xvi of
Explorations in Linguistic Relativity
Edited by Martin Pütz and Marjolijn H. Verspoor
[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 199]
2000. xvi, 369 pp.

Introduction

MARTIN PÜTZ AND MARJOLIJN VERSPOOR

In their Introduction to the book "Rethinking Linguistic Relativity", Gumperz and Levinson (1996: 1) argue that "every student of language or society should be familiar with the essential idea of linguistic relativity, the idea that culture, *through* language, affects the way we think, especially perhaps our classification of the experienced world". The claim that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world is today most usually associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. However, the organizers of the conference also made it clear in their Call for Papers that the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" (or the theory of linguistic determinism or linguistic relativity) can be traced back to others, particularly to the German linguist, educator and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). Von Humboldt placed great value on the diversity of the world's languages and cultures. For him, this diversity corresponds with the diversity of mentalities, i.e. language was an interior form independent of the world but which organizes the world (see Williams 1992).

About a century after the year Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) was born, his theory complex is still the object of keen interest to linguists. As Lee (1996: 14-23) argues, it was not his theory complex itself, but an oversimplified, reduced section taken out of context that has become known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that has met with so much resistance among linguists over the last few decades. Whorf presented his views much more subtly than most people would believe.

In its broadest sense, linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis means that a speaker's language sets up a series of lexical and grammatical categories which act as a kind of grid through which s/he perceives the external world, and which constrain the way in which s/he categorizes and conceptualizes different phenomena. In other words, a language can affect a society by influencing or even controlling the world-view of its speakers. A weaker version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that language may

not determine the way we think, but that it does influence the way we perceive and remember. In this regard, Whorf (1956: 12) states the following:

> The linguistic system fashions the ideas, it is the programme and the guide of individual mental activity, the cause of their analyses of impressions, the cause of the syntheses which operates his mental stock.

As Palmer (1996: 12) states, determining exactly what Whorf believed concerning the channeling influence of lexical and in particular grammatical categories on culture and world-view has become in recent years a small industry within anthropology and linguistics (see especially Gumperz and Levinson 1996, Lee 1996, Lucy 1992a, b). The present book constitutes yet another attempt to revive this interest in linguistic anthropology and especially to raise new ideas and issues surrounding the notions associated with linguistic relativity, i.e. the complex interaction of language, culture, thought, and world-view.

The first six papers deal with Whorf's own notion of linguistic relativity. In "Towards a 'full pedigree' of the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis': From Locke to Lucy", Koerner offers a 'tour d'horizon' and sketches the transmission of the so-called 'Weltanschauungstheorie' from Humboldt to 20th-century American ethnolinguistics. The traditional view has been that the origins of the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' can be traced to German language theory of the 17th through the early 19th century. A more recent view is that Whorf was intellectually indebted to the General Semantics movement in the United States. Koerner attempts to bridge these positions by suggesting two distinct but at least loosely connected layers of influence discernible in the work of North American linguists and anthropologists from William Dwight Whitney to Whorf and his followers in the second half of the 20th century.

The second paper focuses on Humboldt, examining his views within the context of his own time and pointing out the resemblances and differences with future views, especially those of Whorf. In "How relativistic are Humboldt's 'Weltansichten'", Trabant shows that the notion of "Weltansichten" exemplifies Humboldt's thinking of language and linguistics in cognitive terms. Because language is primarily a cognitive process, a discovery of truth, and because this process of discovery occurs according to individual historical languages and not in a universal and unified way, every language discovers its own truth: those truths are the "Weltansichten". To examine to what degree these "Weltansichten" are related to the notion of linguistic relativity, Trabant discusses this question in view of notions of universality, relativity, structure, character, lexicon, and grammar.

Whorf's own notion of linguistic relativity is closely examined in "When is 'Linguistic Relativity' Whorf's Linguistic Relativity". Lee argues that debates about 'linguistic relativity' which do not mention Whorf's ideas may be valid in their own terms, but where his name is brought into such discussions, it is important to clarify the degree to which the 'linguistic relativity' under discussion is Whorf's linguistic relativity or something else. She therefore presents a close study of Whorf's discussions of linguistic relativity, in which she reveals the centrality of a construct he brought into linguistics from Gestalt Psychology. Lee maintains that Whorf's theorizing about 'isolates of experience' and their operationalization in languages as 'isolates of meaning' is one of the keys to understanding the logic of the linguistic relativity principle as he defined it on analogy with the relativity principle of physics. According to Lee, Whorf argued that isolates of experience are abstracted, in both the 'external' and the 'internal' (or 'egoic') fields of experience, from the full range of experiential data available to human beings.

To investigate the impact linguistic relativity has had on translation theory, House, in her article entitled "Linguistic relativity and translation" first surveys Humboldtian, Neo-Humboldtian and Whorfian views, which cast serious philosophical doubt on translatability. As the actual practice of translation is in direct contrast with the dictum that translation is theoretically impossible, she turns to recent proposals which link linguistic diversity and differences in communicative conventions and expectation norms to different historical, social and cultural backgrounds, thus positing a different kind of linguistic-cultural relativity. To exemplify the relevance of this type of relativity for translation, she then briefly sketches a pragmatic model of translation and translation criticism, in which the use of a cultural filter to account for linguacultural differences in communicative norms is proposed.

Lee's argument that Whorf may have been attributed ideas that he himself has never had is strongly supported by Mühlhäusler in "Humboldt, Whorf and the Roots of Ecolinguistics". Mühlhäusler explores the alleged relationship that pertains between Humboldt, Whorf, and language ecology. In the past, the new subdiscipline of ecolinguistics has been portrayed by some writers as a direct development of Humboldt's and Whorf's linguistics. However, according to Mühlhäusler, a closer inspection suggests that their influence had been much less direct and that appeal to their names has more to do with the wish to legitimize a new program by pointing to a respectable ancestor than the wish to make use of their linguistics. Mühlhäusler shows that even though there was an environmental crisis at the time when Whorf composed the bulk of his work, such matters were not the topic of general discussion anymore than they featured in Whorf or indeed Whorf inspired General Semantics. Mühlhäusler concludes that while Whorf did address the

intrinsic value of diversity of culture, he never mentioned any link between the diversity of conceptual systems and the diversity of natural kinds.

After the papers that seek to elucidate Whorf's own notion of linguistic relativity comes a group of papers that deals with particular methodological and theoretical issues related to linguistic relativity.

In line with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Chafe in his article "Loci of diversity and convergence in thought and language" argues that from the basic nature of language it follows that different languages are responsible for partially different ways of thinking, at least to the extent that thinking involves linguistic meanings. However, to clarify the link between language and thought , the author suggests that meanings be assigned to three basic types, which he calls 'focused meanings', 'shadow meanings', and 'orienting meanings'. Focused meanings include the ideas on which people's attention is focused as they talk. Shadow meanings are the literal meanings of metaphors, idioms, and other lexicalized phrases. Finally, orienting meanings are those associated with inflectional elements like tense, aspect, and modality and they are especially important in influencing different ways of thinking. Thus, it is impossible to speak at all without using them constantly, they are often obligatory, and they are usually unconscious.

Enfield's paper "On linguocentrism" addresses the methodological and theoretical issue in linguistic relativity research that has emerged from two current conflicting positions. According to one view, one may experimentally test a language/culture/thought connection by isolating phenomena from these putatively separate realms, and then demonstrating whether or not there is some influence or non-accidental connection. A second view argues that the said prior separability of language, culture and thought is illusory, and that rather, the point of studies in linguistic relativity is to describe the ways in which particular conceptual themes dominate particular linguistic and cultural systems. Enfield supports the linguocentric view, which favors the position of language in cognitive and cultural phenomena, allowing linguistic evidence to be used in describing such phenomena. However, Enfield concludes that even though linguocentrism is a fact of life, in its methodology, monolinguocentrism, and therefore ethnocentrism, must be avoided at all cost to avoid circularity in argumentation.

Hays' paper "From the Jurassic dark: linguistic relativity as evolutionary necessity" argues that the concept of linguistic relativity can be regarded as an 'evolutionary survival trait'. For Hays, this relationship, which is manifest in the cultural relativity of language use, arose from an evolutionary necessity to pass on internal concepts for survival to our offspring. He argues that the development of concepts in the mind as a way of ordering external experience is a dynamic process, driven by and in turn driving the process of vo-

cabulary, as well as linguistic, acquisition. In other words, the physical structures of the mind arose as the internal processing of sensory input became more complex so that the development of abstract symbols to encode concepts became a survival trait. Thus, according to Hays, linguistic relativity can be seen as an important evolutionary survival trait which leads to the development of language.

Lamb, in his paper "Neuro-cognitive structure in the interplay of language and thought", maintains that although various kinds of evidence have been brought to arguments about Humboldt and Whorf's ideas, the neurobiological basis of language and thought is usually not considered. According to Lamb, such neglect is due to the fact that until recently the neurological basis of language has not been understood well enough to provide plausible evidence. However, thanks to the enormous progress made within the fields of cognitive linguistics, neurolinguistics, and neurology, it is now possible to provide for a neurologically plausible theory of the formation of conceptual categories and of their operation in thinking. Lamb's paper describes such a theory, argues for its neurological plausibility, and applies it to an assessment of the ideas of Benjamin Lee Whorf. His conclusion is that it is largely through language that each generation learns the system of boundaries and categories and semantic mirages projected onto the world by its culture.

Whorf's view that there is a relationship between words and 'isolates of experience' and that 'naming things' is to a great degree motivated is examined in greater detail in the next four papers.

Kronenfeld, in his article "Language and thought: collective tools for individual use" considers one specific avatar of the Whorfian question, namely the relationship between cognition as implicit in lexical categories and between cognition as implicit in behavioral categories. In particular, he addresses the relationship between lexical categorization and the categorizations implicit in language in use. His Fanti kinship study suggests that "essential" properties of categories – which include componential definitions, taxonomic relations, functional properties, and so on – pertain to core or prototypical referents. However, normal referential use of categories includes a much broader range of referents. Such an application is based on a comparison of the target referent (taking into account of what is functionally important and salient about it in context) with the core referents of alternative categories. Thus, applying a category label to some referent entails thinking separately about the category and the entity to be labeled. Kronenfeld thus concludes that language cannot provide the basic categories of thought, even though cores do provide the most convenient available packages for recognizing, organizing, remembering, and communicating thought – and thus do bias our communication about thought, whether with ourselves

or with others. But since the prototypicality of cores represents a joining of function, form and communicative use, we see that at this collective communicative level, language is itself shaped by shared thought and experience.

Also Palmer and Woodman in "Ontological classifiers as polycentric categories, as seen in Shona Class 3 nouns" present a detailed case study into semantic relativity by examining Shona classifiers. Classifiers are known to vary widely from language to language in both grammar and semantic structure and appear to grammaticize important dimensions of world view. The authors apply the approach of cultural linguistics, proposing that the assignment of classifiers to referents is governed by a small set of scenarios involving ritual and domestic activities. Shona classifiers index categories that are much like the radial categories described by Lakoff (1987) for Dyirbal and Japanese, except that instead of a single central category per classifier, Shona class 3 has several categories of central importance, based on five different scenarios, which form the basis for category chaining. The authors propose the term polycentric category for this semantic structure.

In "Linguistic relativity and the plasticity of categorization: universalism in a new key", MacLaury offers another way to evaluate linguistic relativity, this time with the study of color categorization, in part, because color categorization seems easy to specify. MacLaury argues against the rather naïve assumption that naming a category simply converts thought to unconscious habit. He maintains that this assumption was difficult to scrutinize, or even to recognize for what it was, until we had at hand sufficient data and theory to understand how categories actually behave and how they are probably constructed. This system of data collection and explanation is called vantage theory. Vantage theory models how a person constructs any category as one or more points of view. He argues that the method of construction is inborn but adaptable. It provides people with a ready means to categorize in ways that suit personal predisposition, whatever the impetus. As people face the world with enough intrinsic structure and native technique to make sense of what they encounter, they resiliently build on these basics. The complex of aptitudes leaves no need and little chance for the content of lexical and grammatical categories to enforce a particular way of thought. On the contrary, such categories are the thoughts people improvise.

Hawkins in "Linguistic relativity as a function of ideological deixis" argues that linguistic relativity directly results from the meaning-making process of deixis. A dynamic, processing perspective on language provides and understanding of deixis as a cognitive process through which meaning is derived necessarily by relating the semantic/referential features of a text to the experiential complex that constitutes the context in which that particular text is created and used. The central feature of this argument is that ideology,

understood as "a systematically organized presentation of reality" is akin to time and space in that it constitutes a major variable in the context in which any particular speech event is grounded and, as such, has a significant impact on how particular experiences are described and how particular texts are interpreted. The paper illustrates the phenomenon of ideological deixis by examining sets of texts which refer to the same experience, but do so from different grounding ideological systems. Analysis of these data ultimately leads to the conclusion that linguistic relativity results from variability of the deictic ground in the meaning-making process of ideological deixis.

The final two papers of this volume investigate two specific Whorfian constructs in more detail. The suggestion that claims about how language shapes thought should not be based solely on rather obvious structural differences among languages but also on in-depth analyses of linguistic systems that easily escape the notice of even linguists because they are deeply rooted in the subconscious conceptual systems of language users is taken up by Thornburg and Panther in their paper "Why we subject incorporate (in English): A post-Whorfian view". They contrast Subject Incorporations (SiS) like *nosebleed*, which attach a subject to a verb stem, with both the highly productive Object Incorporations like *giftwrap*, which incorporate a direct object into a verb stem, and the almost non-productive incorporation of transitive subject with its verb, e.g. **clerk wrap*. The authors provide a conceptual analysis of SiS in terms of participants and event types and explain why they rarely occur with human participants. The differing productivity of these incorporations suggests a hidden ergative-absolutive pattern, i.e. a covert category in the sense of Whorf. They conclude that bringing to light and describing such 'covert' patterns of languages will enhance claims about the relationship between linguistic structure and thought.

And finally, in "Metalinguistic awareness in linguistic relativity: cultural practices across Chinese dialect communities, Zhou challenges the role Whorf contributes to the notion of 'metalinguistic linguistic awareness'. In Chinese, metalinguistic awareness is a conventional source of creative language use, allowing one linguistic expression to have two readings available simultaneously in one situation. He shows how common this utilization of metalinguistic awareness is to Chinese culture across different dialects, even though different varieties may have different ways to implement the same cultural practices. He believes that the utilization of metalinguistic awareness is similar to that of linguistic categories: it facilitates objectification in that it treats abstract concepts as concrete ones. Zhou concludes that Chinese cultural practices utilize metalinguistic awareness of linguistic categories beyond the claimed most awareness-susceptible referential items, thereby challenging not only Whorf's hierarchy of susceptibility but also Silverstein's hypothe-

sized universal constraining factors regarding the role of metalinguistic awareness in linguistic relativity.

As editors of the present volume, it is our hope that linguistic anthropologists and linguists will intensify the kind of cooperation that we find reflected in the contributions which follow. We certainly trust that this collection of papers will give the reader an insight into some of the exciting directions which current research on language, thought and culture is taking.

References

Gumperz, John J. and Levinson, Stephen C. (eds). 1996. *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, Penny. 1996. *The Whorf Theory Complex. A Critical Reconstruction*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Lucy, John A. 1992a. *Language Diversity and Thought. A Reformulation of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— 1992b. *Grammatical Categories and Cognition. A Case Study of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Palmer, Gary B. 1996. *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, Thought and Reality*. J. B. Carroll (ed.). New York: Wiley.

Williams, Glyn. 1992. *Sociolingusitics. A Sociological Critique*. London and New York: Routledge.