



Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf (2nd edition)

论语言、思维和现实

——沃尔夫选集 (第2版)

[美] John B.Carroll, Stephen C.Levinson & Penny Lee 主编

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总 序

世界图书出版公司是国内最早通过版权贸易出版影印海外科技图书和期刊的出版机构,为我国的教学和科研做出了重要的贡献。作为读者,我自己也是得益于这项工作的人之一。现在世界图书出版公司北京公司打算引进出版一套"西方语言学视野"系列丛书,一定也会受到广大研究语言、教学语言的人士的欢迎。

世界图书出版公司的宗旨是:把中国介绍给世界,把世界介绍给中国。我认为,从总体上讲,在今后相当长不好时间内,把世界介绍给中国这项任务还是主要的。西方的语言学在过去几十年里的发展和变化是很快的,新理论、新方法、新成果很多,特别是在语言学和其他学科的资本相比,据我所知,我们翻译、引进西方语言学者作无论在速度还是数量上都是有差距的不错,从《马氏文通》开始,我们就在不断地引进和学习还看,从《马氏文通》开始,我们就在不断地引进和学习还要继续到哪一天?其实,世界范围内各种学术传统的勇气还要继续到哪一天?其实,世界范围内各种学术传统的勇气、独立创新的精神,也要有宽广平和的心态。要使我们的语言研究领先于世界,除了要继承我们传统中的优秀部分,逐必须将别人先进的东西学到手,至少学到一个合格的程度,然后再加上我们自己的创新。

这套丛书叫"西方语言学视野",顾名思义,就是要开拓我们的视野。理论和方法姑且不谈,单就关注的语言而言,我们的视野还不够开阔,对世界上各种各样其他民族

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的语言是个什么状况,有什么特点,关心不够,了解得更少,这肯定不利于我们探究人类语言的普遍规律。我们需要多引进一些语言类型学方面的书,看来出版社已经有这方面的考虑和计划。我发现这套丛书中有一本是《历史句法学的跨语言视角》,另一本是《语法化的世界词库》,都是从各种语言的比较来看语言演变的普遍规律,还有一本是《语言与认知的空间——认知多样性探索》,大概是从语言的多样性来看认知方式的多样性。这都是值得我们参考学习的。

请专家给每本引进的书写一个导读,这是一个帮助一般读者阅读原著的好办法。种种原因不能通读原著的人,至少也可以从导读中了解到全书的概貌和要点。最后希望世界图书出版公司能不断给这套丛书增添新的成员,以满足读者的需求。

沈家煊 2007年2月

导 读

姚小平

本杰明·李·沃尔夫(Benjamin Lee Whorf, 1897—1941)生前并无专著,撰有论文、书评约 40 篇,散见于多家专业刊物;加上遗存手稿 15 篇,便是他的全部著述。1956 年,John B. Carroll 从中选出 18 篇,编成一部集子,取名《论语言、思维和现实——沃尔夫选集》(Language,Thought,and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf),由麻省理工学院出版社出版。这部选集从此成为各国学界了解沃尔夫语言学思想的通行读本,到 1998 年,英文原本已印行第24 版。不过逾半个世纪,一本书的版次竟然如此之多,在语言学的著作中是罕见的,沃尔夫学术思想传布的广度和诱人的魅力由此也可见一斑。

2012 年,麻省理工学院出版社推出了沃尔夫选集新版,由列文森(Stephen C. Levinson)撰序,评述了半个世纪以来学界对沃尔夫思想的接受、批评和反思。内容方面,仍维持 1956 年初版不动,只是添加了一篇附录:《耶鲁报告》(Yale Report)。这是一篇关于耶鲁大学人类学系 1937 年 9 月至 1938 年 6 月期间课程设置的报告,增收的原因是"其理论意义和历史价值不低于 1956 年原编选集中的各篇论文"(p. 345)。

沃尔夫创立了"语言相对论",认为语言影响并制约着思维。在 西方语言思想史上,这种观点的根苗最早见于古希腊巴门尼德关于 思维、语言、世界三者具有同一性的认识,然而直到 19 世纪,在洪 堡特的著作中才初次成为一种清晰的理论,即"语言世界观"之说。 20 世纪的新洪堡特语言学思潮主要有两支:一支在德国本土,领军 人物有魏斯格贝尔、特里尔等,以探索母语的精神世界和教育问题 为己任,兼及语义场的分析;另一支在美国,以萨丕尔、沃尔夫为 代表,结合人类学实地勘察的传统,着眼于印第安语言的研究。由 于有人类学的背景,以及语料独特、语型殊异,后一支给语言学带 来了更多的新鲜气象和宽广自由的想象空间;又因为沃尔夫个人的 关系,这一支的发展一度给人以偏离正统的印象,甚至带有某种传奇色调。

沃尔夫不是职业语言学家,他从未在任何研究机构和大学里任职,也没有高等学位。大学期间他主修化学,获得化学学士学位后即被一家保险公司雇用,终身担任该公司的火险视察员。他在本行业于得非常出色,很快成为业务骨干。John B. Carroll 在《选集》的导论中讲述了有关沃尔夫的一段故事:有一次他去探视一家化工厂,被以保密的理由挡在厂房外面。这时他掏出钢笔,在纸上迅速写下一个化学公式递给厂长,说:"我想这就是你们的生产过程。"不用说,这是最好的通行证。学界同人都劝沃尔夫另谋出路,觉得这门职业不利于他拓展语言学的兴趣,可是沃尔夫本人并不这么看。他所选择的职业薪酬可观,为他营造了舒适的生活环境;况且,虽然工作要求他频频出差,但利用到各地视察的机会,他往往顺带也就做了语言考察。沃尔夫喜欢这种半商半学、不受学院约束的学术生活。而事实是,仅仅利用工余、休假,他的创获就已经高出了语言学专业的水准。以业余身份跻身大师行列,这在现代语言学史上恐怕是仅有的一例。

沃尔夫的语言相对论与爱因斯坦的物理相对论似乎有一定的可比性:第一,它也强调观察者的立足点或参照系的重要性,即语言不同,对经验的分类、组织便不一样,所描绘的世界因此也就有别;第二,它也试图从时空上取得突破,从物质存在和运动的这一最基本形式入手,分析不同语言所呈现的宇宙图景。沃尔夫肯定受到爱因斯坦相对论的启发和鼓舞,在一种美洲印第安语言霍皮语(Hopi,一译河皮语)里发现了奇特的时空图景:

"霍皮人的总体概念和直觉中没有这样一种时间——一个平缓流动的连续体…… [他们的语言] 没有任何词、语法形式、结构或表达方式直接指称我们所说的'时间',或过去、现在、将来;也没有任何形式直接指称持久、永久……无论在直接还是间接的意义上,霍皮语都没有'时间'的概念。然而,在实用或操作意义上,霍皮语能够正确地解释和描述宇宙中所有可观察到的现象。……正如欧几里德几何学之外的其他几何学理论可以对空间形状做出同样完美的解释,我们也可以抛开自己熟悉的时空对立,用其他方式对宇宙

做出同样有效的描述。现代物理学的相对论便是这样一种宇宙观,它是用数学术语构建的;霍皮世界观 (Weltanschauung) 则是另外一种,它不是数学的,而是语言的。" (An American Indian model of the universe 《美洲印第安人的宇宙模式》)

关于什么是语言相对论, 沃尔夫解释说:

"……我所说的'语言相对论原则'(linguistic relativity principle),用通俗的话来讲,就是使用明显不同的语法的人,会因其使用的语法不同而有不同的观察行为,对相似的外在观察行为也会有不同的评价。因此,作为观察者,他们是不对等的,也势必会产生在某种程度上不同的世界观。……这种世界观是朴素的、未经概括的。人们可以对这种世界观的基本语法模式进行更高层面的特征概括,从而由每一种朴素的世界观发展出一种清晰的科学世界观。"(Linguistics as an exact science 《作为精确科学的语言学》)

这么说,一种语言的语法模式跟使用这种语言的人会形成怎样的科学认识很有关系。操霍皮语的人绝对构想不出爱因斯坦式的相对论,但假如霍皮人的科学思维足够发达,就有可能提炼出一种另类的宇宙时空观。当然,针对历史提出这样的假定总有一个问题,那就是无法逆转和复验。在与西方人相遇之前,霍皮人还处于化外状态,基本上没有"科学",而一旦与西方人交往,霍皮人便不得不全盘接受西方文明,以至连本族语言也不保,哪里还有可能去发展自己的科学世界观?中国科学史上的所谓"李约瑟难题",也是同样性质的问题。虽说我们更有理由假定,中国依靠自身的传统也完全能够发展起现代科学,可是,在大规模遭遇西方科学之后,中国传统科学实际上已没有可能再沿原路独自发展。现代科学被统一于西方模式,而西方模式的科学世界观在沃尔夫看来则得益于印欧语言的语法构造:

"……现代科学的世界观是根据西方印欧语言的基本语法特征概括而成的。

我们称之为'科学思想'的东西,是西方印欧语言的产物。" (Language, mind, and reality 《语言、心理与现实》)

这种把科学思维同语言结构直接对应起来的说法容易招致误解, 所以立论谨慎的沃尔夫马上补充道:

"当然,这并不是说这种语法导致了(caused)科学的产生,它只是影响了(colored)科学。科学产生于该语系之中,是因为一连串的历史事件刺激了世界上某个地区的商业、度量制度、制造业以及技术革新,而在那个地区,该语系的语言占了主导地位。"

他又进一步指出,以印欧语言为底基构筑起来的现代科学观难免会有缺陷,因为它只是一种语言世界观的反映:

"科学理论当中有某些僵化的语言模式,它们往往也蕴涵在孕育了这些科学的欧洲文化当中,并被当作纯粹的'理性'本身而长期受到崇拜。这些僵化的模式已经走上穷途末路。……西方学术发展的重要一步,是重新审视自身思维的语言背景。"

只有依靠全人类的努力,融聚各种语言世界观的长处,才能形成一种全面、完满的宇宙观。

语言相对论又称"萨丕尔一沃尔夫假说"。后来的学者往往把它分作两种形式:一种是强式,主张语言制约着思维结构,并主导着感知行为;另一种是弱式,主张语言只是在一定程度上影响了思维,并不起制约或主导作用。从沃尔夫本人前前后后的阐述来看,他有时站在弱式论一边,有时则偏向强式论。不管怎样理解,我们都不应把语言相对论等同于"语言决定论"(linguistic determinism),否则就背离了沃尔夫的初衷。其次,语言相对论只是一种语言理论或假说,并无价值观念的取向,或者说,跟语言优劣的评判无关。沃尔夫把话说得很明白:

"欧洲语言及思维习惯处于显赫地位,也是经济和历史原因所致……但据此声称这些语言代表了某种优越性,则是毫无根据的。" (A linguistic consideration of thinking in primitive communities 《原始社群思维的语言学考察》)

沃尔夫最终的探索目标超越了语言学和人类学, 甚至也超出了

心理学和物理学的正常研究范围,但语言学的研究仍是关键的一环。 他这样形容自己正在构建的那个思想体系:

"这个思想非常极端,很难用一个现成的方式表现出来。我宁愿先不为它命名。这一思想就是,一个本体的世界——一个超空间的、更高层次的世界,正等待着所有科学去发现;它将在这一过程中结合并统一起各门学科。这一有待发现的领域,首先是关系模式或关系型式(patterned relations)的王国,它纷繁复杂,但又与语言丰富、系统的结构有着清晰可辨的联系;例如纯数学和音乐,它们从根本上说与语言同类。……关于这一话题我唯一可能的新贡献,就是未知的、更广阔的世界在语言中的前兆,我们置身并从属于这一未知世界,而物理现象不过是它的表面或表皮。"

这段话出自《语言、心理与现实》一文,刊登在绝大多数语言学家不屑翻阅的一本刊物——印度的《通神论者》(Theosophist)上。文章发表之时,沃尔夫已经离开这个现实的世界。在追求一个统一的、超学科的本体世界时,沃尔夫坦承他与思想活跃的通神论者有更多的共同语言。他是一个怪才,身上总有一些常理难喻的东西。

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B. L. Wharf

Foreword

Stephen C. Levinson

Whorf's Claims and Their Reception

This little book has had an extraordinary career.¹ Initially admired, then reviled, then rehabilitated, then once again attacked, it has proved unsinkable. This is all the more surprising given the contents: a handful of rather dated papers on Amerindian linguistics, a couple on ancient Mesoamerican writing systems (also now dated), four papers for a general audience about language differences, and some unfinished manuscripts found among the papers of the author after his premature death. This is not the kind of material that one would have expected to inflame the passions or rouse phlegmatic scholars of linguistics and psychology from their detailed and meticulous pursuits. How surprising, then, that Pinker (1994, 57) announces, "But it is wrong, all wrong," or that Deutscher (2010, 21) calls Whorf "that most notorious of con men." (For the other side of the story, see Lucy 1992a; Lee 1996, 2000.)

Why has this book caused such a row, a flaming controversy that continues over a half century later? One reason is that the ideas sketched in the book suggest that the structuring of

1. This foreword replaces the original by Stuart Chase, whom Whorf viewed as a dubious champion (Lee 1996, 16). I am grateful for suggestions from colleagues, especially Penelope Brown, Melissa Bowerman, Mark Dingemanse, Nick Enfield, Penny Lee, and Pim Levelt.

particular languages is altogether too interesting to be left to the plodding philologists, and specifically that the implicit patterning in languages might have something to do with how we think, whatever the psychologists tell us. Simple exposure to this message has turned on generation after generation of students; suddenly the arbitrary rules and conventional clothing of languages seem to have a new significance. Over a beer, many eminent researchers in the language sciences will confess that they were first drawn into the study of language through the ideas associated with Benjamin Lee Whorf. In short, a seductive, revolutionary set of ideas is buried in these pages, and they are in a form that permits enough latitude of interpretation to rekindle the flames of controversy at any point.

Before we proceed, something should be said about how the book came about. Whorf's combined career, as businessman and linguist, is outlined in the introduction by John B. Carroll. Whorf had died in 1941 at forty-four. A dozen years earlier, when just a boy, Carroll had fallen under Whorf's spell, meeting him in the library where Whorf liked to work (Lee 1996, 8). When, after World War II, a number of conferences met to discuss ideas at the intersection of psychology and language—and thus inevitably Whorf's own ideas—the need for such a volume became apparent, and Carroll, now a psychologist, was the natural editor. Whorf published some thirty papers in his lifetime, many of which were concerned with ancient Mesoamerica, including one of the first works (Whorf 1933, not republished here) to argue systematically for the phonetic character of the ancient Mayan script.² Whorf's published oeuvre on

^{2.} Whorf was wrong about many details, but as Tozzer put it in the introduction to the monograph, "With great acumen and courage Whorf dares to re-open the phonetic question" against the received view of the time (Danien and Sharer 1992, 35). Moreover, "his assumption that Maya writing recorded a Mayan language proved to be crucial to decipherment" (Sharer and Traxler 2006, 141).

the topical ideas about the connections between linguistics and psychology, including four popular papers, was thus relatively slight, and Carroll supplemented it with unpublished material (see Lee 1996 for supplementary information, including what Lee calls the Yale Report, an important manuscript that clarifies Whorf's position on many counts and is included in this second edition of his writings). The book we have consists of the fragments from the pen of a part-time academic whose life was cut tragically short. The fragments span some fourteen years, during the middle of which his work became much more sophisticated through personal contact with Edward Sapir, and the ideas are therefore not entirely consistent from beginning to end. This hampers both sympathetic exegesis and determined condemnation, since it is often possible to find an exclusion clause on the other side of the argument.

Apart from the fragmentary picture presented by the papers reprinted here, our reading of Whorf is hindered not only because we inhabit a distant intellectual clime but also because Whorf was not a characteristic child of his times. For example, the psychology of the time was heavily behavioristic (as was Leonard Bloomfield's linguistics, the leading theory of the day), and although Whorf admired Bloomfield and presumed the importance of conditioning (as in his emphasis on habitual language use and a kind of proto-connectionism he sketches), he drew more extensively on Gestalt psychology, as Lee (1996, 2000) shows in detail. Whorf, a chemical engineer by first training, was widely read and eclectic, and it is not easy to identify all the intellectual currents in his thought (for a review of the relevant contemporary thought, see Koerner 2002 and Levelt 2012).

With these caveats, let us try to identify some of the central ideas surrounding the notion of "linguistic relativity" that have made this book so provocative. The doctrine has the following central tenets (with page references to the current volume):

- 1. Thought and perception have a certain independence from language (207–208).
- 2. Nevertheless some aspects of thinking are deeply interconnected with language and the concepts it provides (84–87).
- 3. Some of these interconnections are backgrounded because the concepts are implicit in grammatical distinctions. Some grammatical concepts are especially covert in that they do not have direct exponents in surface forms. Such concepts may highlight specific percepts (e.g., number or shape of referents) and group them at the expense of others that may be prominent in other languages (116–119). They are recurrent categories that, given the structure of the language, we cannot fail to use (70–71).
- 4. Nevertheless such grammatical concepts, especially when they are covert, exist beyond our conscious awareness and may influence our classifications and reactions (133–134, 174).
- 5. These grammatical distinctions form an interconnecting web of concepts, which may represent in a partial and fragmented way (187–190) a particular take on the perceptual world associated with a language and culture.
- 6. The ways in which languages offer different such takes make them invaluable correctives to our own commonsense views about the nature of human experience (313–314).

From these premises, Whorf derives "'the linguistic relativity principle,' which means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars towards different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation" (282–283).

This perspective on language has had the polarizing effect described earlier. It suggests that linguistic difference is fundamentally interesting and important; that formal difference tends to imply conceptual difference; that conceptual distinctions may cohere in a system; and that when we lose a minor