

Rethinking linguistic relativity

Edited by

John J. Gumperz

and

Stephen C. Levinson

RETHINKING LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

Edited by

JOHN J. GUMPERZ

Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley

and

STEPHEN C. LEVINSON

*Director, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics
and Cognitive Anthropology Research Group, Nijmegen*



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Rethinking linguistic relativity

Linguistic relativity is the claim, associated especially with the names of Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf, that culture, through language, affects the way in which we think, and especially our classification of the experienced world. This book re-examines ideas about linguistic relativity in the light of new evidence and changes in theoretical climate. Parts I and II address the classical issues in the relation between thought and language, and the extent of linguistic and cultural universals. Parts III and IV show how changes in our understanding of meaning require that we look at how context enters into interpretation, and how context is constituted in social interaction, reflecting properties of larger social wholes. The editors have provided a substantial introduction which summarizes changes in thinking about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in the light of developments in anthropology, linguistics, and cognitive science; and also introductions to each section which will be of especial use to students.

Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language

The aim of this series is to develop theoretical perspectives on the essential social and cultural character of language by methodological and empirical emphasis on the occurrence of language in its communicative and interactional settings, on the socioculturally grounded "meanings" and "functions" of linguistic forms, and on the social scientific study of language use across cultures. It will thus explicate the essentially ethnographic nature of linguistic data, whether spontaneously occurring or experimentally induced, whether normative or variational, whether synchronic or diachronic. Works appearing in the series will make substantive and theoretical contributions to the debate over the sociocultural-functional and structural-formal nature of language, and will represent the concerns of scholars in the sociology and anthropology of language, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, and socio-culturally informed psycholinguistics.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Melissa Bowerman

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen

Pascal Boyer

Dynamique du langage, M.R.A.S.H., Lyon

Herbert H. Clark

Department of Psychology, Stanford University

Elsa Gomez-Imbert

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

John J. Gumperz

Professor Emeritus, University of California at Berkeley

William F. Hanks

Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago

John B. Haviland

Dept. of Linguistics and Anthropology, Reed College, Portland, Oregon

Paul Kay

Department of Linguistics, University of California at Berkeley

Charles M. Keller

Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Janet Dixon Keller

Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Stephen C. Levinson

Director, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and Cognitive Anthropology Research Group, Nijmegen

John A. Lucy

Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

Elinor Ochs

Department of TESL/Applied Linguistics, University of California at Los Angeles

Dan I. Slobin

Department of Psychology, University of California at Berkeley

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INTRODUCTION: LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY RE-EXAMINED

JOHN J. GUMPERZ AND STEPHEN C. LEVINSON

Quelle est l'influence réciproque des opinions du peuple sur le langage et du langage sur les opinions?

The theme of the 1757 Prize Essay Competition of the Berlin Academy.¹

1 Language, thinking, and reality

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. Much of our experience seems to support some such idea, for example the phenomenology of struggling with a second language, where we find that the summit of competence is forever over the next horizon, the obvious absence of definitive or even accurate translation (let alone the ludicrous failure of phrasebooks), even the wreck of diplomatic efforts on linguistic and rhetorical rocks.

On the other hand, there is a strand of robust common sense that insists that a stone is a stone whatever you call it, that the world is a recalcitrant reality that imposes its structure on our thinking and our speaking and that the veil of linguistic difference can be ripped aside with relative ease. Plenty of subjective experiences and objective facts can be marshalled to support this view: the delight of foreign friendships, our ability to “read” the military or economic strategies of alien rivals, the very existence of comparative sciences of language, psychology, and society.²

These two opposing strands of “common sense” have surfaced in academic controversies and intellectual positions over many centuries of Western thought. If St. Augustine (354–430) took the view that language is a mere nomenclature for antecedently existing concepts, Roger Bacon (1220–92) insisted, despite strong views on the universal basis of grammar, that the mismatch between semantic fields in different languages made accurate translation impossible (Kelly 1979:9).³ The Port Royal grammarians of the seventeenth century found universal logic thinly disguised behind linguistic difference, while the German romantics

in a tradition leading through to Humboldt in the nineteenth century found a unique *Weltanschauung*, “world view,” in each language. The first half of our own century was characterized by the presumption of radical linguistic and cultural difference reflecting profound cognitive differences, a presumption to be found in anthropology, linguistics and behaviourist psychologies, not to mention philosophical emphasis on meaning as use. The second half of the century has been dominated by the rise of the cognitive sciences, with their treatment of mind as inbuilt capacities for information processing, and their associated universalist and rationalist presuppositions. St. Augustine would probably recognize the faint echoes of his views in much modern theorizing about how children acquire language through prior knowledge of the structure of the world.

There is surely some spiral ascent in the swing of this pendulum. Nevertheless it is important to appreciate how little real scientific progress there has been in the study of lexical or morphosyntactic meaning – most progress in linguistics has been in the study of syntax and sound systems, together with rather general ideas about how the meaning of phrases might be composed out of the meaning of their constituents. Thus there is still much more opinion (often ill-informed) than solid fact in modern attitudes to “linguistic relativity.”

There are three terms in the relation: language, thought, and culture. Each of these are global cover terms, not notions of any precision. When one tries to make anything definite out of the idea of linguistic relativity, one inevitably has to focus on particular aspects of each of these terms in the relation.⁴ This book will show how each can be differently construed and, as a consequence, the relation reconsidered. In addition the connecting links can be variously conceived. Thus by the end of the book the reader will find that the aspects of language and thinking that are focused on are selective, but also that the very relation between culture and community has become complex. Readers will find the original idea of linguistic relativity still live, but functioning in a way that differs from how it was originally conceived.

2 Linguistic relativity re-examined

The original idea, variously attributable to Humboldt, Boas, Sapir, Whorf, was that the semantic structures of different languages might be fundamentally incommensurable, with consequences for the way in which speakers of specific languages might think and act. On this view, language, thought, and culture are deeply interlocked, so that each language might be claimed to have associated with it a distinctive world-view.⁵

These ideas captured the imagination of a generation of anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists, as well as members of the general public. They had deep implications for the way anthropologists should conduct their business, suggesting that translational difficulties might lie at the heart of their discipline.⁶ However, the ideas seemed entirely and abruptly discredited by the rise of the cognitive sciences in the 1960s, which favoured a strong emphasis on the commonality of human cognition and its basis in human genetic endowment. This emphasis was strengthened by developments within linguistic anthropology, with the discovery of significant semantic universals in color terms, the structure of ethnobotanical nomenclature, and (arguably) kinship terms.

However, there has been a recent change of intellectual climate in psychology, linguistics, and other disciplines surrounding anthropology, as well as within linguistic anthropology, towards an intermediate position, in which more attention is paid to linguistic and cultural difference, such diversity being viewed within the context of what we have learned about universals (features shared by all languages and cultures). New work in developmental psychology, while acknowledging underlying universal bases, emphasizes the importance of the socio-cultural context of human development. Within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology there has also been increasing attention to meaning and discourse, and concomitantly a growing appreciation of how interpretive differences can be rooted as much in the systematic uses of language as in its structure.⁷

2.1 The "classical" hypothesis: some historical background

Speculation about the relation between language, culture, and thought can probably be traced back to the dawn of philosophy. We cannot here give an adequate history of the ideas, which has yet to be written from the current perspective, and would in any case connect closely to the entire treatment of epistemology and ontology in two millennia of speculations about language and mind. Many early classical and medieval controversies centered on issues of translation, which have always played a central role in Christian thinking.⁸ Speculations about the origin of language in the course of human cognitive and cultural development, and debate about whether language presupposes or instead makes available abstract symbolic thought, also have a long history, with celebrated controversies in the eighteenth century.⁹ The process of conquest and colonialism also brought forth from its beginning many ruminations on the role of language in perceived cultural superiority.¹⁰ Thus in a number of arenas, theological, philosophical, legal, and colonial, there have been for centuries well-rehearsed debates about the mutual dependence or independence of

language and thought, and about the relation between social systems and that interdependence.

Special conditions reinvigorated the debate in the first half of this century in America.¹¹ Suffice it to say here that the phrase *linguistic relativity* achieved notoriety through its use by Whorf, and that the basis of Whorf's ideas can be lineally traced through Sapir to Boas, or alternatively through (German-trained) Whitney and other early American linguists, and thus to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), the great German educator, linguist, and philosopher.¹² From there the conventional history has it that the trail leads to Herder and the German romantics, and on back to Leibniz in opposition to the enlightenment ideas of Universal Grammar and words as mere nomenclature for pre-existing concepts.¹³ The lineage is both stepwise and direct: e.g. Sapir wrote a master's thesis on a comparison between Herder and Humboldt, while Boas of course embodied the transatlantic migration of the German tradition.¹⁴

However, this potted history is now known to be at least partially misleading, because Humboldt also directly absorbed French eighteenth-century ideas, some of which, by the close of the century, almost sketched his own program (Aarsleff 1988).¹⁵ Those ideas were transmitted through multiple channels to America, directly (e.g. in the person of Duponceau, an early student of Amerindian languages), and indirectly through Humboldt's correspondence in the 1820s and 1830s with Pickering, Duponceau, and others,¹⁶ through publication of Humboldt's works in translation as early as 1885, and via Steinthal's writings to Whitney by 1867.¹⁷

An additional source of these ideas is the growth of early twentieth-century structuralism.¹⁸ For example, the Saussurean notion of *valeur*, wherein an expression picks up distinctive meaning through its opposition to other expressions, has the implication that the content of linguistic expressions depends on the system in which they are embedded, rather than in the first instance on their denotation.¹⁹ Since no two linguistic systems or subsystems are ever identical, as is easily shown by comparison of semantic fields from English vs. French, linguistic relativity more or less follows. This form of linguistic relativism is historically tied to the cultural relativism immanent in Durkheim's later sociological ideas, which still (despite protestations to the contrary) dominate anthropological ideas. Anthropologists, as indeed do many field linguists, take these kind of structuralist ideas as a *methodological presupposition*: "strive to understand the native ideas in the context of the entire local system of ideas, leaving comparison to be made between *systems*, not between isolated words or traits across systems." It is hard to quarrel with this as a methodological stance, but it is a reasonable

charge that subscribers to this doctrine have mistaken methodological prescription for theory: the result of comparison between systems may be a robust finding of universal principles governing individual traits.

The essential point here is that the ideas we associate today so especially with Whorf and Sapir have a long and distinguished lineage on the one hand, while perhaps being no more than one of two opposing perennial strands of thought, universalism vs. relativism, on the other. Nevertheless, they crystallized in a particular fashion in American intellectual life of the 1940s.²⁰ The idea of a close link between linguistic and conceptual categories took on a new meaning in the context of three further background assumptions characteristic of the first half of the century. One was the presumption of a (sometimes tempered) empiricist epistemology, that is, the view that all knowledge is acquired primarily through experience. The other was the structuralist assumption that language forms a system of oppositions, such that formal distinctions directly reflect meaning distinctions.²¹ The third was the idea of an unconscious mental life, and thus the possibility of linguistic effects beyond conscious awareness. It was the conjunction of these background ideas together with the specific formulation of the “linguistic relativity” hypothesis, that gave that hypothesis its particular character in the history of ideas.

Sapir may have originated the phrase,²² but the *locus classicus* (though by no means the most careful statement) of the concept of linguistic relativity is the popular articles by Whorf (1940a–b, reprinted 1956: 207–33), where the following oft-quoted passages may be found which illustrate all the central themes.

Epistemology

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds.

(1956: 213)

Structuralism

Pattern-symbolic expressions [i.e. linguistic notations of inherent linguistic patterning] are exact, as mathematics is, but are not quantitative. They do not refer ultimately to number and dimension, as mathematics does, but to pattern and structure.

(1956: 226)

Quantity and number play little role in the realm of pattern, where there are no variables but, instead, abrupt alternations from one configuration to another. The mathematical sciences require exact measurement, but what linguistics requires is, rather, exact “patterment.”

(1956: 230–1)²³

Unconscious thought

[T]he phenomena of language are to its own speakers largely of a background character and so are outside the critical consciousness and control of the speaker. (1956: 211)

Linguistic relativity

The phenomena of language are background phenomena, of which the talkers are unaware or, at most, dimly aware... These automatic, involuntary patterns of language are not the same for all men but are specific for each language and constitute the formalized side of the language, or its "grammar"...

From this fact proceeds what I have called the "linguistic relativity principle," which means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers, but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world.

(1956: 221)

Or in alternative formulation:

We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. (1956: 214)

The boldness of Whorf's formulation prompted a succession of empirical studies in America in the 1950s and early 1960s aimed at elucidating and testing what now became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.²⁴ Anthropological and linguistic studies by Trager, Hoijer, Lee, Casagrande, and others have been well reviewed elsewhere (see Lucy 1992a: ch. 3; and this volume).²⁵ These studies hardly touched on cognition, but in the same period a few psychologists (notably Lenneberg, Brown, Stefflre) did try to investigate the relation between lexical coding and memory, especially in the domain of color, and found some significant correlations (again see Lucy 1992a: ch. 5). This line of work culminated, however, in the celebrated demonstration by Berlin & Kay (1969) of the language-independent saliency of "basic colors," which was taken as a decisive anti-relativist finding, and effectively terminated this tradition of investigations into the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.²⁶ There followed a period in which Whorf's own views in particular became the butt of extensive criticism.²⁷

It is clear from this background that the "Sapir-Whorf" hypothesis in its classical form arose from deep historical roots but in a particular intellectual climate. Even though (it has been closely argued by Lucy 1992a) the original hypothesis has never been thoroughly tested, the intellectual milieu had by the 1960s entirely changed. Instead of empiricism, we now have rationalistic assumptions. Instead of the basic tenets of structuralism, in which each linguistic or social system must be

understood first in internal terms before comparison is possible, modern comparative work (especially in linguistics) tends to presume that one can isolate particular aspects or traits of a system (e.g. aspect or subjecthood) for comparison. The justification, such as it is, is that we now have the outlines of a universal structure for language and perhaps cognition, which provides the terms for comparison. It is true that the assumption of unconscious processes continues, but now the emphasis is on the unconscious nature of nearly all systematic information processing, so that the distinctive character of Whorf's habitual thought has been submerged.²⁸

In this changed intellectual climate, and in the light of the much greater knowledge that we now have about both language and mental processing, it would be pointless to attempt to revive ideas about linguistic relativity in their original form. Nevertheless, there have been a whole range of recent intellectual shifts that make the ground more fertile for some of the original seeds to grow into new saplings. It is the purpose of this volume to explore the implications of some of these shifts in a number of different disciplines for our overall view of the relations between language, thinking, and society.

2.2 The idea behind the present volume

This volume explores one chain of reasoning that is prompted by these recent changes in ideas. The line of argument runs in the following way.

Linguistic relativity is a theory primarily about the nature of meaning, the classic view focusing on the lexical and grammatical coding of language-specific distinctions. In this theory, two languages may "code" the same state of affairs utilizing semantic concepts or distinctions peculiar to each language; as a result the two linguistic descriptions reflect different construals of the same bit of reality. These semantic distinctions are held to reflect cultural distinctions and at the same time to influence cognitive categorizations, an issue re-examined in part I below.

Assuming that there is such a link between linguistic structure and conceptual categories, the possibility of conceptual relativity would seem at first sight to depend on whether linguistic codings are significantly different across languages. Very little, however, is actually known about substantive semantic or conceptual universals. It is true that there are demonstrations of universal semantic principles in a few domains like color terminology, ethnobiological taxonomies, perhaps also in systems of kinship terminology. However, these demonstrations carry no necessary general implications, and the same holds for studies of grammatical meaning. These issues are discussed in part II below.

Yet, on further reflection, distinctive linguistic (grammatical or lexical) codings are not the only ways in which “meanings” or interpretations can vary systematically across cultures. This is brought out by recent developments in the theory of meaning. These developments show that “meaning” is not fully encapsulated in lexicon and grammar, which provide only schematic constraints on what the speaker will be taken to have meant in a particular utterance. These ideas are quite general across the different theories and frameworks which typify modern linguistics. For example, the same point is made in very different ways in formal semantic theories like Discourse Representation Theory²⁹ or Situation Semantics,³⁰ where contextual determination of interpretation is one of the main issues driving development away from classical truth-conditional theories. Equally, in different varieties of pragmatic theory, from Relevance Theory³¹ to more conservative Gricean theories,³² current work is addressed to explaining how almost vacuous or semantically general expressions can have determinate interpretations in particular contexts.

These changes in the theory of meaning have been prompted quite largely by the phenomena of deixis, the existence in all natural languages of a plethora of (indexical or deictic) expressions that only refer relative to a context: if you find a note on the ground that says “See you here in ten minutes from now,” you will be puzzled about who *you* denotes, where the place *here* refers to, and when the countdown from *now* began. The semantics of these expressions is designed to fix a reference only when given a context by the situation of utterance. But these are simple examples. The kind of contextual information that is actually needed turns out to be deeply embedded in practices of speaking, the local conduct of social life, and the social distribution of shared understandings. All this is the subject of part III of this book.

A large part of the burden of interpretation is thus shifted from theories of context-free lexical and grammatical meaning to theories of use in context. Some important principles of the use of language may plausibly be argued to be universal (e.g. Grice’s “maxims of conversation” or the turn-taking and repair systems of conversation, or even some principles of interactional politeness). Yet others seem much more clearly culture-specific. For example, the ethnography of speaking has shown how diverse can be the principles governing the production and interpretation of utterances in specific speech events – court proceedings, formal greetings, religious rituals, councils, and the like. Recent work, however, shows that we cannot always think of speech events as antecedently constructed, forming the frame or context for interpretation. Sometimes, through modulation of the verbal interaction itself, these contextual frames can be invoked, so that utterances can carry with them, or project, the context in which they should be interpreted. These