The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

In the 1930's, Benjamin Lee Whorf, a student of Edward Sapir at Yale, did an intensive study of the structure of the language of the Hopi Indians of Arizona as opposed to that of Standard Average European languages.

Whorf emphasized grammar - rather than vocabulary, which had previously intrigued scholars - as an indicator of the way a language can direct a speaker into certain habits of thought. The Eskimo speaker, for example, possesses a large and precise vocabulary to make exacting distinctions between the kinds and conditions of seals, such as "young spotted seal", "swimming male ribbon seal" and so on. But such an extensive vocabulary has less to do with the structure of the Eskimo language than with the fact that seals are important for the survival of its speakers. The Eskimo would find equally strange the distinctions that the English vocabulary makes about horses - *mare*, *stallion*, *pony*, *bay*, *paint*, *appaloosa*, and so forth. And both Eskimos and Americans would be bewildered by the seventeen terms for cattle among the Masai of Africa, the twenty terms for rice among the Ifugeo of the Philippines, or the thousands of Arabic words associated with camels.

Instead of vocabulary, Whorf concentrated on the differences in structure between Hopi and the European languages - and also on what he believed were associated differences in the ways speakers of these languages viewed the world.

After his painstaking analysis of such differences between Hopi and European languages, Whorf asked the question that was central to his research. Do the Hopi and European cultures confirm the fact that their languages conceptualize reality in different ways? And his answer was that they do. Whereas European cultures are organized in terms of space and time, the Hopi culture, Whorf believed, emphasizes events. To speakers of European languages, time is a commodity that occurs between fixed points and can be measured. Time is said to be *wasted* or *saved*; an army fighting a rear-guard action *tires* to *buy* time; a television station *sells* time to an advertiser. People in the European tradition keep diaries, records, accounts, and histories; their economic systems emphasize wages paid for the amount of time worked, interest for the time money is loaned.

Hopi culture has none of these beliefs about time, but instead thinks of it in terms of events. Plant a seed - and it will grow. The span of time the growing takes is not the important thing, but rather the way in which the event of growth follows the event of planting. The Hopi is concerned that the sequence of events in the construction of a building be in the correct order, not that it takes a certain amount of time to complete the job. That is why the building of a Hopi house, adobe brick by adobe brick, may go on for years. Whorf's comparison of Hopi and European languages and cultures - considerably more involved than the summary I have presented - convinced him that the contrasting world views of their speakers resulted from contrasts in their languages. He concluded that, linguistically speaking, no human being is born free; his mind was made up for him from the day he was born by the language of his speech community. Whorf questioned peoples' ability to be objective, and he threw into doubt the rationality of everyday utterances. He suggested that all their lives English speakers have been tricked by their languages into thinking along certain channels - and it is small consolation to know that the Hopi has also been tricked, but in a different way.

Whorf's theories about the relationship between culture and language have been greeted enthusiastically by some scholars and attacked or treated warily by others. The weakness of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, as it has come to be known, is the impossibility of generalizing about entire cultures and then attributing these generalizations to the languages spoken. The absence of clocks, calendars, and written histories obviously gave the Hopis a different view of time than that found among speakers of European languages. But such an observation is not the same thing as proving that these cultural differences were caused by the differences between Hopi and European grammars. In fact, an interest in time-reckoning is not characteristic solely of European cultures but can be found among speakers of languages as different as Egyptian, Chinese and Maya. And, on the other hand,
thousands of unrelated speech communities share with the Hopis a lack of concern about keeping track of time. To attempt to explain cultural differences and similarities as a significant result of the languages spoken is to leave numerous facts about culture unexplained. The great religions of the world - Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam - have flourished among diverse people who speak languages with sharply different grammars. Islam, for example, has been accepted by speakers of languages with grammars as completely different as those of the Hamito-Semitic, Turkish, Indo-Iranian, Tibeto-Burman, and Malayo-Polynesian families. And the reverse is true as well. Cultures as diverse as the Aztec Empire of Mexico and the Ute hunting bands of the Great Basin spoke very closely related tongues.

Nevertheless, attempts have been made to prove the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, such as one experiment which used as test subjects bilingual Japanese women, living in San Francisco, who had married American servicemen. The women spoke English to their husbands, children, and neighbours, and in most everyday speech situations; they spoke Japanese, whenever they came together to gossip, reminisce, and discuss the news from home. Each Japanese woman thus inhabited two language worlds - and according to the predictions of the hypothesis, the women should think differently in each of these worlds. The experiment consisted of two visits to each woman by a bilingual Japanese interviewer. During the first interview he chatted with them only in Japanese; during the second he carried on the same discussion and asked the same questions in English. The results were quite remarkable; they showed that the attitudes of each woman differed markedly, depending upon whether she spoke Japanese or English. Here, for example, is the way the same woman complete the same sentences at the two interviews:

When my wishes conflict with my family's...

it is a time of great unhappiness. [Japanese]
I do what I want. [English]

Real friends should...
help each other. [Japanese] ...
be very frank. [English]

Clearly, major variables in the experiment had been eliminated - since the women were interviewed twice by the same person in the same location of their homes, and they discussed the same topics - with but one exception. And that sole exception was language. The drastic differences in attitudes of the women could be accounted for only by the language world each inhibited when she spoke.

Many linguists nowadays are aware of the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis. Attempts to confirm the hypothesis, such as the experiment with the Japanese women... are usually regarded as fascinating examples rather than as universal truths about the way speech communities view the world. Neither Whorf nor any of his followers has proven to everyone's satisfaction that differences between two speech communities in their capacity to understand external reality are based entirely or even overwhelmingly on differences in their languages. Whorf overemphasized one point (that languages differ in what can be said in them) at the expense of a greater truth (that they differ as to what is relatively easy to express in them). Languages, rather than causing cultural differences between speech communities, seem instead to reflect the different cultural concerns of their speakers. The history of language is not so much the story of people misled by their languages as it is the story of a successful struggle against the limitations built into all language systems...

The true value of Whorf's theories is not the one he worked so painstakingly to demonstrate - that language tyrannizes speakers by forcing them to think in certain ways. Rather, his work emphasized something of even greater importance: the close alliance between language and the total culture of the speech community. No linguist today doubts that language and culture interpenetrate one another; nor does any linguist fail to pay due respect to Whorf for emphasizing this fact.

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