**The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis**

Many linguists, including Noam Chomsky, contend that language in the sense we ordinary think of it, in the sense that people in Germany speak German, is a historical or social or political notion, rather than a scientific one. For example, German and Dutch are much closer to one another than various dialects of Chinese are. But the rough, commonsense divisions between languages will suffice for our purposes.

There are around 5000 languages in use today, and each is quite different from many of the others. Differences are especially pronounced between languages of different families, e.g., between Indo-European languages like English and Hindi and Ancient Greek, on the one hand, and non-Indo-European languages like Hopi and Chinese and Swahili, on the other.

Many thinkers have urged that large differences in language lead to large differences in experience and thought. They hold that each language embodies a worldview, with quite different languages embodying quite different views, so that speakers of different languages think about the world in quite different ways. This view is sometimes called the *Whorf-hypothesis* or the *Whorf-Sapir hypothesis*, after the linguists who made it famous. But the label *linguistic relativity*, which is more common today, has the advantage that makes it easier to separate the hypothesis from the details of Whorf's views, which are an endless subject of exegetical dispute (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996, contains a sampling of recent literature on the hypothesis).

The suggestion that different languages carve the world up in different ways, and that as a result their speakers think about it differently has a certain appeal. But questions about the extent and kind of impact that language has on thought are empirical questions that can only be settled by empirical investigation. And although linguistic relativism is perhaps the most popular version of descriptive relativism, the conviction and passion of partisans on both sides of the issue far outrun the available evidence. As usual in discussions of relativism, it is important to resist all-or-none thinking. The key question is whether there are interesting and defensible versions of linguistic relativism between those that are trivially true (the Babylonians didn't have a counterpart of the word ‘telephone’, so they didn't think about telephones) and those that are dramatic but almost certainly false (those who speak different languages see the world in completely different ways).

**A Preliminary Statement of the Hypothesis**

Interesting versions of the linguistic relativity hypothesis embody two claims:

**Linguistic Diversity**:
Languages, especially members of quite different language families, differ in important ways from one another.

**Linguistic Influence on Thought**:
The structure and lexicon of one's language influences how one perceives and conceptualizes the world, and they do so in a systematic way.

Together these two claims suggest that speakers of quite different languages think about the world in quite different ways. There is a clear sense in which the thesis of linguistic diversity is uncontroversial. Even if all human languages share many underlying, abstract linguistic universals, there are often large differences in their syntactic structures and in their lexicons. The second claim is more controversial, but since linguistic forces could shape thought in varying degrees, it comes in more and less plausible forms.

**Whorf**

The linguistic relativity hypothesis grained its widest audience through the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose collected writings became something of a relativistic manifesto.

Whorf presents a moving target, with most of his claims coming in both extreme and in more cautious forms. Debate continues about his considered views, but there is little doubt that his bolder claims, unimpeded by caveats or qualifications, were better suited to captivate his readers than more timid claims would have been.

When languages are similar, Whorf tells us, there is little likelihood of dramatic cognitive differences. But languages that differ markedly from English and other Western European languages (which Whorf calls, collectively, “Standard Average European” or SAE) often do lead their speakers to have very different worldviews. Thus

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. …The *relativity of all conceptual systems*, ours included, and their dependence upon language stand revealed (1956, p. 214f, italics added).

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 in our minds (p. 213).

…no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free (p. 214).

In fairness it must be stressed that these passages come from a single essay, “Science and Linguistics,” of 1940, and in other places Whorf's tone is often more measured. But not always; elsewhere he also says thing like

…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, p. 221).

And in yet a third essay “facts are unlike to speakers whose language background provides for unlike formulation of them” (1956, p. 235).

The passages from Sapir and Whorf bristle with metaphors of coercion: our thought is “at the mercy” of our language, it is “constrained” by it; no one is free to describe the world in a neutral way; we are “compelled” to read certain features into the world (p. 262). The view that language completely determines how we think is often called *linguistic determinism*. Hamann and Herder sometimes seem to equate language with thought, and in these moods, at least, they came close to endorsing this view.

**Wonderful Foreign Words We Could Use in English**

**Kummerspeck (German) --** Excess weight gained from emotional overeating. Literally, grief bacon.

**Shemomedjamo (Georgian) --** You know when you’re really full, but your meal is just so delicious, you can’t stop eating it? The Georgians feel your pain. This word means, “I accidentally ate the whole thing."

**Tartle (Scots) --** The nearly onomatopoeic word for that panicky hesitation just before you have to introduce someone whose name you can't quite remember.

**Iktsuarpok (Inuit) --** You know that feeling of anticipation when you’re waiting for someone to show up at your house and you keep going outside to see if they’re there yet? This is the word for it.

**Pelinti (Buli, Ghana) --** Your friend bites into a piece of piping hot pizza, then opens his mouth and sort of tilts his head around while making an “aaaarrrahh” noise. The Ghanaians have a word for that. More specifically, it means “to move hot food around in your mouth.”

**Mencolek (Indonesian) --** You know that old trick where you tap someone lightly on the opposite shoulder from behind to fool them? The Indonesians have a word for it.

**10. Faamiti (Samoan)**
To make a squeaking sound by sucking air past the lips in order to gain the attention of a dog or child.

**11. Gigil (Filipino) q**
The urge to pinch or squeeze something that is irresistibly cute.

**12. Yuputka (Ulwa)**
A word made for walking in the woods at night, it’s the phantom sensation of something crawling on your skin.

**13. Zhaghzhagh (Persian)**
The chattering of teeth from the cold or from rage.

**14. Vybafnout (Czech)**
A word tailor-made for annoying older brothers—it means to jump out and say boo.

**15. Fremdschämen (German); Myötähäpeä (Finnish)**
The kindler, gentler cousins of Schadenfreude, both these words mean something akin to "vicarious embarrassment.”

**16. Lagom (Swedish)**
Maybe Goldilocks was Swedish? This slippery little word is hard to define, but means something like, “Not too much, and not too little, but juuuuust right.”

**17. Pålegg (Norwegian)**
Sandwich Artists unite! The Norwegians have a non-specific descriptor for anything – ham, cheese, jam, Nutella, mustard, herring, pickles, Doritos, you name it – you might consider putting into a sandwich.

**18. Layogenic (Tagalog)**
Remember in *Clueless* when Cher describes someone as “a full-on Monet…from far away, it’s OK, but up close it’s a big old mess”? That’s exactly what this word means.

**19. Bakku-shan (Japanese)**
Or there's this Japanese slang term, which describes the experience of seeing a woman who appears pretty from behind but not from the front.

**20. Seigneur-terraces (French)**
Coffee shop dwellers who sit at tables a long time but spend little money.

**21. Ya’arburnee (Arabic)**
This word is the hopeful declaration that you will die before someone you love deeply, because you cannot stand to live without them. Literally, may you bury me.

**22. Pana Po’o (Hawaiian)**
“Hmm, now where did I leave those keys?” he said, pana po’oing. It means to scratch your head in order to help you remember something you’ve forgotten.

**23. Slampadato (Italian)**
Addicted to the UV glow of tanning salons? This word describes you.

**24. Zeg (Georgian)**
It means “the day after tomorrow.” OK, we do have "overmorrow" in English, but when was the last time someone used that?

**25. Cafune (Brazilian Portuguese)**
Leave it to the Brazilians to come up with a word for “tenderly running your fingers through your lover’s hair.”

**26. Koi No Yokan (Japanese)**
The sense upon first meeting a person that the two of you are going to fall in love.

**27. Kaelling (Danish)**
You know that woman who stands on her doorstep (or in line at the supermarket, or at the park, or in a restaurant) cursing at her children? The Danes know her, too.

**28. Boketto (Japanese)**
It’s nice to know that the Japanese think enough of the act of gazing vacantly into the distance without thinking to give it a name.

**29. L’esprit de l’escalier (French)**
Literally, stairwell wit—a too-late retort thought of only after departure.

**30. Cotisuelto (Caribbean Spanish)**
A word that would aptly describe the prevailing fashion trend among American men under 40, it means one who wears the shirt tail outside of his trousers.

**31. Packesel (German)**
The packesel is the person who’s stuck carrying everyone else’s bags on a trip. Literally, a burro.

**32. Hygge (Danish)**
Denmark’s mantra, hygge is the pleasant, genial, and intimate feeling associated with sitting around a fire in the winter with close friends.

**33. Cavoli Riscaldati (Italian)**
The result of attempting to revive an unworkable relationship. Translates to "reheated cabbage."

**34. Bilita Mpash (Bantu)**
An amazing dream. Not just a "good" dream; the opposite of a nightmare.

**35. Litost (Czech)**
Milan Kundera described the emotion as “a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one’s own misery.”

**36. Luftmensch (Yiddish)**
There are several Yiddish words to describe social misfits. This one is for an impractical dreamer with no business sense.

**37 & 38. Schlemiel and schlimazel (Yiddish)**
Someone prone to bad luck. Yiddish distinguishes between the schlemiel and schlimazel, whose fates would probably be grouped under those of the klutz in other languages. The schlemiel is the traditional maladroit, who spills his coffee; the schlimazel is the one on whom it's spilled.

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