The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

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Within linguistic theory, two extreme positions concerning the relationship between language and thought are commonly referred to as 'mould theories' and 'cloak theories'. *Mould theories* represent language as 'a mould in terms of which thought categories are cast' (Bruner et al. 1956, p. 11). *Cloak theories* represent the view that 'language is a cloak conforming to the customary categories of thought of its speakers' (ibid.). The doctrine that language is the 'dress of thought' was fundamental in Neo-Classical literary theory (Abrams 1953, p. 290), but was rejected by the Romantics (ibid.; Stone 1967, Ch. 5). There is also a related view (held by behaviourists, for instance) that language and thought are *identical*. According to this stance thinking is entirely linguistic: there is no 'non-verbal thought', no 'translation' at all from thought to language. In this sense, thought is seen as completely determined by language.

The Sapir-Whorf theory, named after the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, is a *mould* theory of language. Writing in 1929, Sapir argued in a classic passage that:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir 1958 [1929], p. 69)

This position was extended in the 1930s by his student Whorf, who, in another widely cited passage, declared that:

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. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf 1940, pp. 213-14; his emphasis)

I will not attempt to untangle the details of the personal standpoints of Sapir and Whorf on the degree of determinism which they felt was involved, although I think that the above extracts give a fair idea of what these were. I should note that Whorf distanced himself from the behaviourist stance that thinking is entirely linguistic (Whorf 1956, p. 66). In its most extreme version 'the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' can be described as consisting of two associated principles. According to the first, *linguistic determinism*, our thinking is determined by language. According to the second, *linguistic relativity*, people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently.

On this basis, the Whorfian perspective is that translation between one language and another is at the very least, problematic, and sometimes impossible. Some commentators also apply this to the 'translation' of unverbalized thought into language. Others suggest that even within a single language *any* reformulation of words has implications for meaning, however subtle. George Steiner (1975) has argued that *any* act of human communication can be seen as involving a kind of translation, so the potential scope of Whorfianism is very broad indeed. Indeed, seeing reading as a kind of translation is a useful reminder of the reductionism of representing textual reformulation simply as a determinate 'change of meaning', since meaning does not reside *in* the text, but is generated by *interpretation*. According to the Whorfian stance, 'content' is bound up with linguistic 'form', and the use of the medium contributes to shaping the meaning. In common usage, we often talk of different verbal formulations 'meaning the same thing'. But for those of a Whorfian persuasion, such as the literary theorist Stanley Fish, 'it is impossible to mean the same thing in two (or more) different ways' (Fish 1980, p. 32). Re*form*ulating something trans*forms* the ways in which meanings may be made with it, and in this sense, form and content are inseparable. From this stance words are not merely the 'dress' of thought.

The importance of what is 'lost in translation' varies, of course. The issue is usually considered most important in literary writing. It is illuminating to note how one poet felt about the translation of his poems from the original Spanish into other European languages (Whorf himself did not in fact regard European languages as significantly different from each other). Pablo Neruda noted that the best translations of his own poems were Italian (because of its similarities to Spanish), but that English and French 'do not correspond to Spanish - neither in vocalization, or in the placement, or the colour, or the weight of words.' He continued: 'It is not a question of interpretative equivalence: no, the sense can be right, but this correctness of translation, of meaning, can be the destruction of a poem. In many of the translations into French - I don't say in all of them - my poetry escapes, nothing remains; one cannot protest because it says the same thing that one has written. But it is obvious that if I had been a French poet, I would not have said what I did in that poem, because the value of the words is so different. I would have written something else' (Plimpton 1981, p. 63). With more 'pragmatic' or less 'expressive' writing, meanings are typically regarded as less dependent on the particular form of words used. In most pragmatic contexts, paraphrases or translations tend to be treated as less fundamentally problematic. However, even in such contexts, particular words or phrases which have an important function in the original language may be acknowledged to present special problems in translation. Even outside the humanities, academic texts concerned with the social sciences are a case in point.

The Whorfian perspective is in strong contrast to the extreme *universalism* of those who adopt the *cloak* theory. The Neo-Classical idea of language as simply the dress of thought is based on the assumption that the same thought can be expressed in a variety of ways. Universalists argue that we can say whatever we want to say in any language, and that whatever we say in one language can always be translated into another. This is the basis for the most common refutation of Whorfianism. 'The fact is,' insists the philosopher Karl Popper, 'that even totally different languages are not untranslatable' (Popper 1970, p. 56). The evasive use here of 'not untranslatable' is ironic. Most universalists do acknowledge that translation may on occasions involve a certain amount of circumlocution.

Individuals who regard writing as fundamental to their sense of personal and professional identity may experience their written style as inseparable from this identity, and insofar as writers are 'attached to their words', they may favour a Whorfian perspective. And it would be hardly surprising if individual stances towards Whorfianism were not influenced by allegiances to Romanticism or Classicism, or towards either the arts or the sciences. As I have pointed out, in the context of the written word, the 'untranslatability' claim is generally regarded

as strongest in the arts and weakest in the case of formal scientific papers (although rhetorical studies have increasingly blurred any clear distinctions). And within the literary domain, 'untranslatability' was favoured by Romantic literary theorists, for whom the connotative, emotional or personal meanings of words were crucial (see Stone 1967, pp. 126-7, 132, 145).

Whilst few linguists would accept the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its 'strong', extreme or deterministic form, many now accept a 'weak', more moderate, or limited Whorfianism, namely that the ways in which we see the world may be *influenced* by the kind of language we use. *Moderate Whorfianism* differs from extreme Whorfianism in these ways:

- the emphasis is on the potential for thinking to be 'influenced' rather than unavoidably 'determined' by language;
- it is a two-way process, so that 'the kind of language we use' is also influenced by 'the way we see the world';
- any influence is ascribed not to 'Language' as such or to one language compared with another, but to the use *within a language* of one variety rather than another (typically a *sociolect* - the language used primarily by members of a particular social group);
- emphasis is given to the social context of language use rather than to purely linguistic considerations, such as the social pressure in particular contexts to use language in one way rather than another.

Of course, some polemicists still favour the notion of language as a *strait-jacket* or *prison*, but there is a broad academic consensus favouring moderate Whorfianism. Any linguistic influence is now generally considered to be related not primarily to the formal systemic structures of a language (*langue* to use de Saussure's term) but to cultural conventions and individual styles of use (or *parole*). Meaning does not reside *in* a text but arises in its interpretation, and interpretation is shaped by sociocultural contexts. Conventions regarding what are considered appropriate uses of language in particular social contexts exist both in 'everyday' uses of language and in specialist usage. In academia, there are general conventions as well as particular ones in each disciplinary and methodological context. In every subculture, the dominant conventions regarding appropriate usage tend to exert a conservative influence on the framing of phenomena. From the media theory perspective, the *sociolects* of sub-cultures and the *idiolects* of individuals represent a subtly selective view of the world: tending to *support* certain kinds of observations and interpretations and to *restrict* others. And this transformative power goes largely unnoticed, retreating to transparency.

Marshall McLuhan argued in books such as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964) that the use of new media was the prime cause of fundamental changes in society and the human psyche. The technological determinism of his stance can be seen as an application of extreme Whorfianism to the nature of media in general. Similarly, the extreme universalism of the cloak theorists has its media counterpart in the myth of *technological neutrality* (Winner 1977; Bowers 1988). My own approach involves exploring the applicability of moderate Whorfianism to the use of media.

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