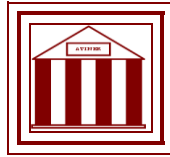


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**B. L. Whorf on Cosmos,
Individual and Language**

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Russia**

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B. L. Whorf on Cosmos, Individual and Language

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Abstract

The name of Benjamin Lee Whorf, an American linguist, ethnographer and a very interesting thinker, is in most cases associated with the so-called ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’. Texts on relationships between language, mind, culture, perception, and experience often refer to that hypothesis and to Whorf as one of the major authors (with Edward Sapir as the other). It goes despite the fact that he is not the person who formulated its fundamental principles in their strong version, such as total linguistic dependence of thought and perception, absolute language non-translatability, etc. Though not being the actual creator of that theoretical construct, he received a sharp criticism in causal determinism.

One of the main reasons for the critics’ misinterpretations of Whorf is that he argued from a non-traditional epistemological viewpoint, involving Einsteinian relativity and quantum theories, Jungian psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, Eastern philosophy concepts and so on. His approach is better characterized as holistic, linking the cosmos and individual. Instead, he was attributed with causal and reductionist ways of thinking. Although Whorf named and stated the linguistic relativity principle, his ideas should not be reduced merely to it. In this paper, I try to show that he was actually concerned not only with the links between language, thought and culture.

The purpose of this study is to explain his ideas within the holistic approach he himself was inclined to. On one hand, in his essays Whorf uses rigorous scientific reasoning and, at the same time, he attempts to paint a broader philosophical picture of the cosmos and our interaction with it, where language, indeed, plays a very important role. Based on linguistic data, he tries to formulate what I would call a significant philosophic message that has a practical temper – (1) we should be aware of the important role that language plays on our cognition especially unconscious usage; (2) study of other language systems and metaphysics concealed in them might contribute to a higher level of our cognition. Besides, he considers a fascinating and quite mysterious question of an inward kin between language and nature.

Keywords: Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, linguistic relativity, linguistic determinism, language and thought, vague concept, Einsteinian relativity, Indian philosophy.

Introduction

One of the most important and enduring issues both in philosophy and linguistics is the importance of language for culture and cognition. A number of scholars have linked themselves with two extreme positions called relativity and universalism, whether rigidly as if one negates the other or moderately choosing one standpoint rather as a focus. Here, a very provoking conception is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. A researcher mostly associated with it is B. L. Whorf.

While his works were written mostly in the 1930s, they are full of interesting and relevant ideas. He formulated the principle of linguistic relativity and wrote a lot about the influence of language on human cognition, especially on thought that has a linguistic character. Along with it, he admitted the existence of non-linguistic thinking as well. As far as I understand Whorf, he did not state that thought and perception are mostly dependent on language. Neither he was dogmatic in claiming of absolute language non-translability.

Here I'm relying on his own essays and on works written by other scholars especially R. Ridington, J. Lucy, P. Lee, D. Alford, J.L. Subbiondo, and others. Their message can be summed up in the way that the previous studies of Whorf largely ignored what he had actually said, that those studies failed to catch the subtleties of his thinking, that Whorf was misunderstood in several aspects.

What can be the reasons for it? As P. Lee rightly pointed out, Whorf's assumptions were "emergent rather than fully developed" and it was in many respects because of his personal circumstances (Lee 1996, p. xvii). He began to explore different language issues as an independent scholar in his youth but his research actually took the form appropriate for linguistic science only after his acquaintance with Sapir, an American linguist who had already become reputed by that time in academic circles. Besides, Whorf preferred to share his most revolutionary ideas only with close colleagues but apparently, he had to publish some of them when he discovered he had serious disease (Ibid.).

Another very significant reason for the misinterpretations could be Whorf himself. As P. Lee put it, Whorf "remains in some respects an enigma to us" (Lee 1996, p. xvi). According to his daughter, he was "a free thinker" (Ibid.), and this characterization could be seen as very important to understand his enigma. Here it can mean free from the limits of one rough paradigm, one narrow approach negating other possible perspectives. Indeed, Whorf is a free thinker who uses both scientific terms and metaphysical constructs. He argues from a non-traditional epistemological viewpoint, which involves Einsteinian relativity and quantum theories, Jungian psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, Eastern philosophy and so on. Whorf draws conclusions about the structure and organization of the mind that have strong affinities with concepts in Indian philosophy as well as modern physics. In his writings, he turns both to Eastern terminology and conceptions and to analogies and metaphors from chemistry

and physics¹. However he tries to avoid a mechanistic approach to reality embodied in classical physics (Lee 1996, p. 6). His theory complex of the mind and language, the individual and nature, based on empiricist data, is deeply philosophical in character.

Language in our Interaction with the World

In the period Whorf published his writings and then after his death, the dominating approach in linguistic and in science in general was that every idea must have been formulated as testable hypothesis with the consequences appropriate for experimentation. He did not explicitly express all his generalizations on language and cognition in such a way. Besides, Whorf himself was critical of positivist science (Ridington 1987, p. 16). Despite that, he was attributed with causal and reductionist ways of thinking². It does not mean, however, that his theory complex should be considered as totally quasi-religious. Whorf certainly uses rigorous scientific reasoning, at least in his special linguistic studies, for example, on Uto-Aztecan languages. One of his generalizations is known as the “Whorf’s law” that is the sound law in the Uto-Aztecan phonetics. He is a recognized expert in this field. A more detailed account on the question of his professional expertise is, however, beyond consideration of this study.

The issue actually appealing to me here concerns his attempts to paint a broader philosophical picture of the world and our interaction with it, where language, indeed, plays a very important role. For illustrations of his ideas, I will take his essay *Language, Mind and Reality*. It is his final work, and there Whorf summarizes very important issues he wants to share with the public. He is explicit in his interest in Indian philosophy and in theosophy. According to his will, that essay was first published in the *Theosophist magazine* in 1942. As he explained in the text, it is because he considered theosophists open-minded to nonstandard ideas (Whorf 1956b, p. 248). Whorf had a deep interest in theosophy and esotericism but these areas were not the only influential sources of his inspiration. Nevertheless, it might have been the theosophical standpoint of the wholeness and interrelatedness of all things that gave Whorf the holistic view on all aspects he studied – language, culture, nature, etc.

As for the picture of our cognition of the world, he, as I see it, argues from the holistic approach where so-called opposites are integrated. The opposites meant here are the conceptions of universalism and relativity. How to integrate them? Extreme universalists say that there are universal cognitive principles

¹Whorf was a chemical engineer by training and profession, and his knowledge of chemistry and physics contributed to his theory complex (Lee 1996, p. xvi).

²One of the main actors of why this hypothesis appeared and got such a name, according to R. Ridington and some other scholars, was Harry Hoijer who convened a conference in 1953 to discuss Whorf’s generalizations about language and culture, for which Hoijer coined the term “the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”. He presented the central idea of it as that language functions as a way of defining experience for its speakers (Ridington 1987, p. 16).

and universal logic for people of all cultures. Thought exists prior to language and independently of it. We do not think in "natural" language, but in a meta-language that comes before verbalization, and this language is sometimes called "mentalese" (Steven Pinker). Extreme relativists can object to it that it is hardly possible to speak about universal cognition, that language affects at least a lot of or even most cognitive processes. It constructs totally different perception and conceptualization of the world. Pushed to limits, such opposites seem to negate each other. Certainly, such extremes are not so often met nowadays, in light of current achievements of cognitive science. Rather, they can be found when a scholar chooses one of these positions as a focus of special research.

According to Whorf, there are different types of thinking, linguistic and non-linguistic in nature. To illustrate that, in his essay *Language, Mind and Reality* he pictures a structure of what in Western culture is called "mind". Here, Whorf involves such metaphysical concepts of Indian philosophy as Nama, Rupa, Manas, etc. Nama (or "name") refers to giving names to parts of our experience. Rupa (or "form") means organization in space. Each language artificially segments the continuous flow of existence in a different way. On the levels of naming and forming, the influence of language and linguistic relativity can be found and fixed, and Whorf actually does it without denying some universal plane of human cognition (Whorf 1956b, p. 253-254).

These levels of naming and forming depend upon a higher level of organization, where in their combination another structure appears. This is the Arupa level, "formless", having no reference to spatial, visual shape, to segmentation of the space. Arupa is a world of patterns "that can be 'actualized' in space and time in the materials of lower levels" but per se they are indifferent to space and time. Whorf links these patterns with "the way meaning appears in sentences" (Whorf 1956b, p. 254).

What is important is that Arupa level is very difficult to contact directly by our ordinary state of consciousness. Our personal conscious "minds" can understand such patterns in a limited way using mathematical or grammatical tools into which words, values, quantities, etc., can be substituted. Whorf says that the higher mind deals in symbols that have no fixed reference to anything (Whorf 1956, p. 255, 259). In this context, I'd like to mention the concept of a "symbolic system of representation" that is being developed in contemporary cognitive studies. It is one of the many levels of non-linguistic system, a system which we probably share with other species.

According to Whorf, we can contact the Arupa level of the "mental" plane in an expansion of consciousness through special practice that can still our linguistic thinking, for example through yoga. The scientific study of language can contribute as well, Whorf says, because it can help us be aware of some illusions imposed by language, it can help us to use language more consciously (Whorf 1956b, p. 264, 270).

To better explain the role of language, Whorf involves the concept of Maya, illusion of our selfhood. Our lower personal mind uses its gift of language to impose Maya or illusion, to make a provisional analysis of reality

and then regard it as final. The mind tricks and misleads us especially by the language we speak (Whorf 1956, p. 263-264).

Not to use language mechanically, Whorf himself uses neologisms in his discourse. He did not want his readers to associate some of his key concepts with already fixed, pre-existing connotations. For example, he introduced the concept of cryptotype and covert categories of language. These categories are not explicitly marked as such in language. Sometimes they act as cryptotypes – categories with complex meaning difficult to catch (Whorf 1956a).

Let's illustrate it with the following example. Modern English marks animacy only indirectly and incompletely. For example, it gives the third person pronouns 'he' and 'she' to some living beings (such as humans). But English gives the pronoun 'it' to which implies inanimate - to plants, trees, insects, and any other beings for whom male/female orientation is not immediately obvious. Such covert or hidden categorization, perhaps, contributes to general image of nature and the universe as inanimate. Typically, we use grammatical categories spontaneously, automatically, unconsciously. They are one of important tools by which language contributes to our modeling of reality.

But it does not mean that one categorial system cannot be translated and understood by the speakers of markedly different language. The speaker can study other language and construct other conceptual systems different from their own. It is possible via universal pre-conceptual structures inherent in our mind, according to modern cognitive studies. It somewhat correlates with the levels of mind described by Whorf in the terms of Indian philosophy.

If we are aware of the role of language in our cognition, it may be a starting point to use it not automatically, to the culture of consciousness. Very significant fact is that “no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation” even while they think themselves most immune (Whorf 1956d, p. 207-219, 214). According to Whorf, the person more or less free in this aspect might be a linguist familiar with many far different language patterns; the grammar of each language is “itself the shaper of ideas, the program ... for the individual's mental activity” (Whorf 1956d, p. 212-214).

Study different conceptual systems, different metaphysics concealed in languages, study languages, at least their structure. It will help you to see the world and yourselves from other perspectives. It is how I see the practical message sent to us by Whorf.

An Internal Kinship Between Language and Nature

Another interesting idea from Whorf's writings deals with the relations between language and nature. In the essay *Language, Mind and Reality* he says that there is an inward kin between them. This idea was for ages well known to various ancient high cultures, for example in India. One aspect of it is the idea of the mantram and of a mantric art. In the high culture it may have a very

intellectual meaning, dealing with the inner affinity of language and the cosmic order. At a higher level it becomes "Mantra Yoga." (Whorf 1956a, p. 250).

As Whorf says, the cosmic picture has a serial or hierarchical character, with progression of levels, the realm of patterned relations. Here Whorf notes a striking similarity to the rich and systematic organization of language. It is a very interesting idea. Let us remind that such a hierarchical structural order of language was discovered in Western science by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the XXth century. But that "truth" was revealed centuries ago in ancient Indian thought, for example, in the Sanskrit grammar by Panini. Contemporary science is very often claimed to "discover" certain truths, unaware that many of them were well-known for millennia (Lysenko 1998, s. 392-393). Thus, Cosmos and language are of somewhat similar character – they have a hierarchical structural order.

Conclusion

Whorf suggested his generalizations about consciousness, its structure, about the way our mind perceives and interprets the environment and about the role of language in it, not for formal testing only. We can admit the possibility that if he had lived longer, he could have tried to formulate his key ideas on language more clearly, for possible testing. But, I think that his task was inherently philosophical, in a sense that he gave some information, some food for thought, to develop it for our personal evolution, because – by the way, in accordance with Eastern metaphysics – only personal evolution of each individual can lead to total enlightenment. To my mind, what we actually need here is the holistic approach – to Whorf's ideas and to the problem of language and cognition.

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