

Language

Linguistic relativity: Benjamin Lee Whorf and the return of the repressed

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A contributor to an academic discussion on the internet recently suggested that if you really want to know what your discipline is about, you should ask yourself who its hate figures are, and then go off and read what those people wrote. If X is reviled by all the most distinguished authorities in a given field, if those authorities will go to the ends of the earth to prove that X's views are sheer nonsense, then whatever it is that X has said must be extraordinarily threatening, and in consequence, highly revealing. A careful study of X's work will show what has to be repressed to keep prevailing orthodoxy intact.¹

Though the observation is doubtless applicable to any academic discipline, the commentator in this case was talking about linguistics, a discipline in which orthodoxy is nowadays strong while dissent is marginal. The 'hate figure' who prompted the comment is not a contemporary dissenter but belongs to the era 'BC' (before Chomsky). His name was Benjamin Lee Whorf, and it is remembered chiefly in connection with a controversial theory referred to as 'the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis'.² Whorf's ideas, which developed out of his work on the indigenous languages of America, were never orthodox, but recently in linguistics they have acquired the status of 'that which must be refuted at all costs'. This might seem like overkill, given that Whorf has been dead for more than half a century.³ But the controversy that bears his name has stubbornly refused to die.

The question at the heart of the controversy is: what if our ways of perceiving and understanding the world are determined by the structures of the languages we speak? Scholarly argument rages about whether that really was Whorf's question, or whether his opponents have created a 'straw Whorf' whose crude linguistic determinism is easy to refute. There is also dispute about whether Whorf advanced a 'weak' or 'strong' version of the hypothesis: the strong version is deterministic, the weak version merely relativistic (i.e. structural linguistic differences may influence but do not

determine what we take to be ‘reality’), and arguably more tenable. Others have pointed out that Whorf did not describe his proposal as a ‘hypothesis’ but called it the ‘principle of linguistic relativity’; he was uninterested in positivistic proof, preferring simply to follow an idea where it led. A further complication is that ‘relativity’ seems to have been a deliberate allusion to Einstein. Whorf was clearly interested in physics: one of the claims he is credited with making is that the representation of space and time in certain Amerindian languages is more consonant with what modern physics tells us about the real nature of those phenomena than the grammar of what he called ‘standard average European’.

But while the versions of Whorf that turn up in introductory textbooks and popular sources undoubtedly oversimplify him and may well misrepresent him, the question of what Whorf really said is not what interests me most. I find it more interesting that Whorf has been made to stand for views he may not actually have held, for this surely testifies to the power of the views in question, and to the strength of people’s desire to go on talking about them. If Whorf had not existed it would have been necessary to invent him, and some would say we have done precisely that.

The idea now conventionally attributed to Whorf – that languages influence, shape or, at the extreme, determine what reality is for their speakers – is among the Big Ideas of the twentieth century. It featured prominently, for example, in the postwar intellectual struggle to understand and critique totalitarianism. I do not know if George Orwell was acquainted with Whorf’s writings, but the role he gave to a language – Newspeak – in *Nineteen Eighty-four* resembles the role accorded to language in popular ‘strong’ interpretations of Whorf, while his observations in essays like ‘Politics and the English Language’ have an affinity with ‘weak’ Whorfianism. More recently, a version of the same Big Idea – whoever controls words controls the world – has underpinned the linguistic practices that are placed under the heading of ‘political correctness’ (and also, of course, opposition to PC, which is often represented as a sinister conspiracy to wash out not just mouths but brains as well).⁴

Whorf’s Big Idea remains important to us because it seems to touch on some of the great issues vexing contemporary cultures. One of these is the nature of power, which is no longer believed to grow out of the barrel of a gun, but seems complex, diffuse and often hidden in its workings, with a significant symbolic (which includes linguistic) component. Another salient issue is the extent of human agency: like the increasingly powerful idea of genetic determinism, linguistic determinism, whether Whorfian or neo-Saussurean, is part of a current in late- or postmodern thought that challenges traditional notions of freedom and responsibility. But the

contemporary cultural anxiety to which Whorf's idea is most obviously germane concerns the opposition between universality and relativity or particularity. Are human cultures fundamentally alike or fundamentally different? Which matters more, what unites us or what divides us?

It is Whorf's association with the 'relativity' side of the argument that makes him so intolerable to present-day linguistics. Orthodox linguists today are committed to a strong universalist position: for Chomsky, all human languages are at bottom the same language, constructed from the blueprint that is every human's genetic inheritance. And this is not only an intellectual position, but also an ideological one. For much of this century, linguists have maintained an honourable record of public opposition to racism, ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism: they have consistently argued against the notion of 'primitive languages', asserting that 'all language varieties are equal' in conceptual sophistication, structural regularity and cultural richness. But where linguists once sought to refute the 'primitive language' argument by pointing to ways in which non-European languages were *different* – often highlighting, as Whorf did, aspects of their grammars that appeared more complex than the European analogues – today the argument for linguistic equality is typically based on the postulate of *sameness*. Critics like Steven Pinker and Geoff Pullum charge latter-day Whorfians not only with ignorance but also with racism. So what if Eskimos have a lot of words for snow? Printers have a lot of words for type fonts, but nobody suggests they live in a different world because of it. We only dare to suggest this about Eskimos because we regard them as 'exotic', quite different from ourselves.⁵ Such offensive Othering of other human beings, the argument runs, has no place in modern science. All languages are equal because all are expressions of our essential shared humanity.

I should probably make clear that I believe in linguistic universals, as any linguist trained after the Chomsky revolution must. But I am enough of a dissenter from the intellectual and ideological mainstream of my discipline to find the internet correspondent's comment penetrating: the continuing controversy about Whorf (or at least, about the 'Whorf' we have found it convenient to construct) reveals difference and relativity as the repressed of modern linguistic science. And this is a repressed that will always return. Outside the canons of scientific linguistics, language figures in the cultural imagination as the sign *par excellence* of identity and difference. (One ancient definition of an outsider is someone who does not speak as 'we' do.) Whorf's Big Idea both attracts and repels: we are troubled (though also fascinated) by the 'strong' hypothesis that radically different language systems could produce incommensurable realities, but equally we resist the universalist

suggestion that linguistic differences are merely trivial, superficial or inconsequential.

Perhaps this controversy will never be settled because we do not want it settled. Like 'what is truth?', 'how shall we live?', 'does God exist?', and so forth, the question of language and reality is not generally posed in the hope that someone will come up with a definitive answer. The point of posing problems of this kind is not to find a solution so you can move on to something else; on the contrary, it is to enable conversation to continue on subjects we think important for our understanding of our condition. We deepen that understanding by reflecting on the questions themselves, and the last thing we need is for our reflections to be cut short by a scientist saying: 'but we *know* the answer to that one'. Orthodox linguists believe that Whorf got it wrong. It is possible they are right. But that will not make his Big Idea go away. Whorf raised a question which resonated, and still resonates, with significant contemporary concerns. For that contribution to our cultural conversation it seems likely he will be remembered, long after most of his critics have been forgotten.

Notes

- 1 These remarks occur in a discussion of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (now archived, for those who wish to read it on-line) on the Linguist list, the virtual home of professional linguistics.
- 2 'Sapir' is Edward Sapir (1884–1939), a prominent figure in American linguistics between the wars, and also Whorf's teacher.
- 3 Whorf died in 1941. Born in 1897, he had begun publishing in the late 1920s, but his ideas about linguistic relativity became more widely known when his papers were collected posthumously in 1956 (see B. L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, ed. J. B. Carroll, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1956).
- 4 Feminists in particular can take credit for reviving interest in Whorf with their arguments about the sexism of standard average European grammar. Whereas the reality-defining potential of *words* was asserted by Orwell and others, it was Whorf, the linguist, who had insisted on the importance of grammar with its 'covert categories': obligatory and usually unremarked divisions of reality into, for instance, past and present, thing and process, masculine and feminine.
- 5 Here I am summarising an argument made by Geoff Pullum, who first sets out to explode the myth that Eskimos have a lot of words for snow, then goes on to argue that even if they did it would hardly signify. Pullum's argument is repeated by Steven Pinker in his popular text *The Language Instinct*, which includes a lengthy section taking issue with Whorf. (See Geoff Pullum, *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1991.)