**Sapir, Edward (1884-1939)**

Linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir is one of those thinkers whose fame has been increased but his full achievement somewhat underrated through association with just one idea. This is the ‘Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis’, jointly credited to Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), according to which – on the received interpretation – the syntactic and semantic structures of language determine the conceptual and referential structures of thought. In that case it would follow that speakers of different languages have different ontologies and inhabit different worlds, to the point where – if those differences are radical enough – there is simply no possibility of translation or mutual comprehension. This thesis seems to have been pushed much harder by Whorf whose version of it has been subject to vigorous criticism. Sapir advanced a qualified form, as the conclusion of extensive research by a thinker whose work spanned the fields of linguistics, philology, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology and philosophy of language. Educated at Columbia, where he was a student of Franz Boas (1858-1942), Sapir participated in extensive fieldwork across numerous contexts of ethno-linguistic research, focusing particularly on the Amerindian cultures of United States of America and Canada, including a classification system for indigenous languages in North America. Where Whorf took the categories of thought to be *determined* by language Sapir took language to *influence* thought, and to do so in ways that did not – for the most part – preclude reciprocal understanding. His work thus stands on its empirical-theoretical merits and does not fall prey to the kinds of philosophical critique directed at Whorf’s wholesale relativist claim.

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**List of works**

Sapir, E. (1949) *Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. D. Mandelbaum, Berkeley: University of California Press.

**References and further reading**

Koerner, E. F. K. (ed.) (1983) *Edward Sapir: Appraisals of His Life and Work*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.