Culture & Communication

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Lecture 4: Linguistic Diversity and Linguistic Relativity

Starting point

Boas' and his students' study of American Indian languages showed both different **ways of encoding information** in a word and **different kinds of information** that was encoded.

The question that his students' asked was: does that make a different for the speakers? Do speakers of different languages have different understanding of the world?

2 Concepts : 2 Claims

1. **Linguistic diversity.**

   Languages differ in <u>what</u> they encode and <u>how</u> they do it.

   (Fields of language typology; comparative linguistics)

2. **Linguistic relativity.**

   There are consequences for the different ways that languages have to encode information (studied by psycholinguists and linguistic anthropologists).

Research on language diversity produced a richer typology of languages

Polysynthetic languages (American Indian languages, e.g., Inuit, Mohawk)

Inflectional language (Greek, Latin)

Agglutinative language (Aymara & Quechua, Bantu languages, e.g., Swahili, Shona, isiXhosa)

Isolating language (Chinese, Vietnamese, where most words are monosyllabic, use tones to convey different meanings)

Polysynthetic language: Mohawk (Iroquoian family, Quebec)

aetewatena'tarón:ni'

a-et-wa-ate-na'tar-onni-'

OPTATIVE-1.INCLUSIVE.AGENT-PLURAL-REFLEXIVE-bread-make-BENEFACTIVE.PRF

should-you.all.and.I-self-bread-make-for

'We should make ourselves some cornbread.'

(from M. Mithun 2004)

The newly acquired knowledge of American Indian languages was put together with previous knowledge of European languages as well as of languages in other parts of the world, e.g., African languages, Asian languages.

Swahili Genders or **Noun Classes**

Here is a complete list of nominal classes in Swahili:

Class number	Prefix	Typical meaning
1	*m-, mw-, mu-*	singular: persons
2	*wa-, w-*	plural: persons (a plural counterpart of class 1)
3	*m-, mw-, mu-*	singular: plants
4	*mi-, my-*	plural: plants (a plural counterpart of class 3)
5	*ji-, j-, Ø-*	singular: fruits
6	*ma-, m-*	plural: fruits (a plural counterpart of class 5, 9, 11, seldom 1)
7	*ki-, ch-*	singular: things
8	*vi-, vy-*	plural: things (a plural counterpart of class 7)
9	*n-, ny-, m-, Ø-*	singular: animals, things
10	*n-, ny-, m-, Ø-*	plural: animals, things (a plural counterpart of class 9 and 11)
11	*u-, w-, uw-*	singular: no clear semantics
15	*ku-, kw-*	verbal nouns
16	*pa-*	locative meanings: close to something
17	*ku-*	indefinite locative or directive meaning
18	*mu-, m-*	locative meanings: inside something

Language as "shaper of ideas"

"... (the grammar) of each language is ... the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade." (Whorf 1956: 212)

"Formulation of ideas is not an independent process ... but is part of particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars." (Whorf 1956: 212-3)

Classification: Gender (arbitrary?)

Italian vs. German

Il ragazzo 'the boy', *la ragazza* 'the girl'

la luna 'the moon' (fem.) *il sole* 'the sun' (masc.)

German :

der Mann 'the man' (masc.) die Frau 'the woman' (fem.)

der Mond 'the moon' (masc.) *die Sonne* 'the sun' (fem.)

Italian vs. English

il leone (masc.) 'the lion', *la tigre* (fem.) 'the tiger'

"Language is at one and the same time helping and retarding us in our exploration of experience, and the details of these processes of help and hindrance are deposited in the subtler meanings of different cultures." (Sapir 1933: 11) (Sapir was Boas' student and Whorf's teacher)

Nouns and Verbs: are they "natural" classes?

"In English we divide most of our words into two classes, which have different grammatical and logical properties. Class 1 we call nouns, e.g., 'house, man'; class 2, verbs, e.g., 'hit, run.' Many words of one class can act secondarily as of the other class, e.g., 'a hit, a run,' or 'to man (the boat),' but, on the primary level, the division between the classes is absolute. **Our language thus gives us a bipolar division of nature.** But nature herself is not thus polarized. If it be said that 'strike, turn, run,' are verbs because they denote temporary or short-lasting events, i.e., actions, why then is 'fist' a noun? It also is a temporary event. Why are 'lightening, spark, wave, eddy, pulsation, flame, storm, phase, cycle, spasm, noise, emotion' nouns? They are temporary events. ... ade."
(Whorf 1956: 212, emphasis added)

Nouns vs. Verbs: a "natural" split?

Nouns = long standing, stable events, things

but *keep, extend* are Verbs about long, possible stable states of affairs

Verbs = temporary events

but *fist, lightening, spark, noise* are temporary events. For example, *fist* is a temporary state resulting from an action, etc. (see Whorf's article)

Tense (past, present, future) encodes when with respect to the "now"

Aspect encodes duration, initiation, completion (continuous, perfect, imperfect, durative, etc.)

Tense-Aspect (TA) in Samoan

(TA) Verb Subject/Agent …   (Verb initial language)

**`ua alu le tama**      `ua = perfect (past but still relevant)

na alu le tama   na = perfective (past and completed, done)

The boy has gone vs. *The boy went*

I watched the move vs. *I have watched the movie*

Tense-Aspect (TA) in Samoan

(TA) Verb Subject/Agent …   (Verb initial language)

e ō lātou   'they go' (Present)
na ō mai lātou   'they went' (Past, PERFECTIVE)
`ua ō lātou   'they have gone' (PERFECT)
na pa`ū le teine   'the girl fell' (perfective, completed action)
**`ua** pa`ū le teine   'the girl has fallen'

`ua timu   'it's raining' or rather 'it has started to rain'
`ua lelei   '(it) is good', '(it's) okay', what just done/said is fine.

Perfect = in the past but still relevant to now

Noun or Verb or both?

pō = 'night (time)'

'ua = PERFECT (recent past, not completed action)

'ua pō = it's starting to be night-time

-gia = suffix, changing valence, (Proto-)Passive (an earlier form)

(Note on Samoan orthography: g= ng= [ŋ])

'ua pō-gia   tātou

Perf night-Pass we-inclusive

'we have been (caught by the) night'

'we have been enveloped by the night'

Samoan name of day becomes verb

Aso 'day' *Sā* 'forbidden, holy, sacred'   (fale sā 'sacred house, church')

Aso Sā 'Sunday' (lit. 'holy day')

mai = deictic particle, action toward speaker, ex. *ō 'go (pl.)' ō-mai 'come'*

What does *'ua Aso Sā mai* mean?

An example from Whorf's work as an insurance inspector

"THE NAME OF THE SITUATION AS AFFECTING BEHAVIOR

I came in touch with an aspect of this problem before I had studied under Dr. Sapir, and in a field usually considered remote from linguistics. It was in the course of my professional work for a fire insurance company, in which I undertook the task of analyzing many hundreds of reports of circumstances surrounding the start of fires, and in some cases, of explosions. My analysis was directed toward purely physical conditions, such as defective wiring, presence or lack of air spaces between metal flues and woodwork, etc., and the results were presented in these terms. Indeed it was undertaken with no thought that any other significances would or could be revealed. But in due course **it became evident that not only a physical situation qua physics, but the meaning of that situation to people, was sometimes a factor, through the behavior of the people, in the start of the fire.** And this factor of meaning was clearest when it was a LINGUISTIC MEANING, residing in the name or the linguistic description commonly applied to the situation."

(Whorf [1941] 1956. "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.")

Example of the meaning of "empty" in English

"Thus, around a storage of what are called "gasoline drums," behavior will tend to a certain type, that is, great care will be exercised; while around a storage of what are called "empty gasoline drums" it will tend to be different-careless, with little repression of smoking or of tossing cigarette stubs about. Yet the "empty" drums are perhaps the more dangerous, since they contain explosive vapor. Physically the situation is hazardous, but the linguistic analysis according to regular analogy must employ the word "empty," which inevitably suggests lack of hazard. The word 'empty' is used in two linguistic patterns: (1) as a virtual synonym for "null and void, negative, inert," (2) applied in analysis of physical situations without regard to, e.g., vapor, liquid vestiges, or stray rubbish, in the container."

(Whorf [1941] 1956. "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.")

The meaning of "empty"

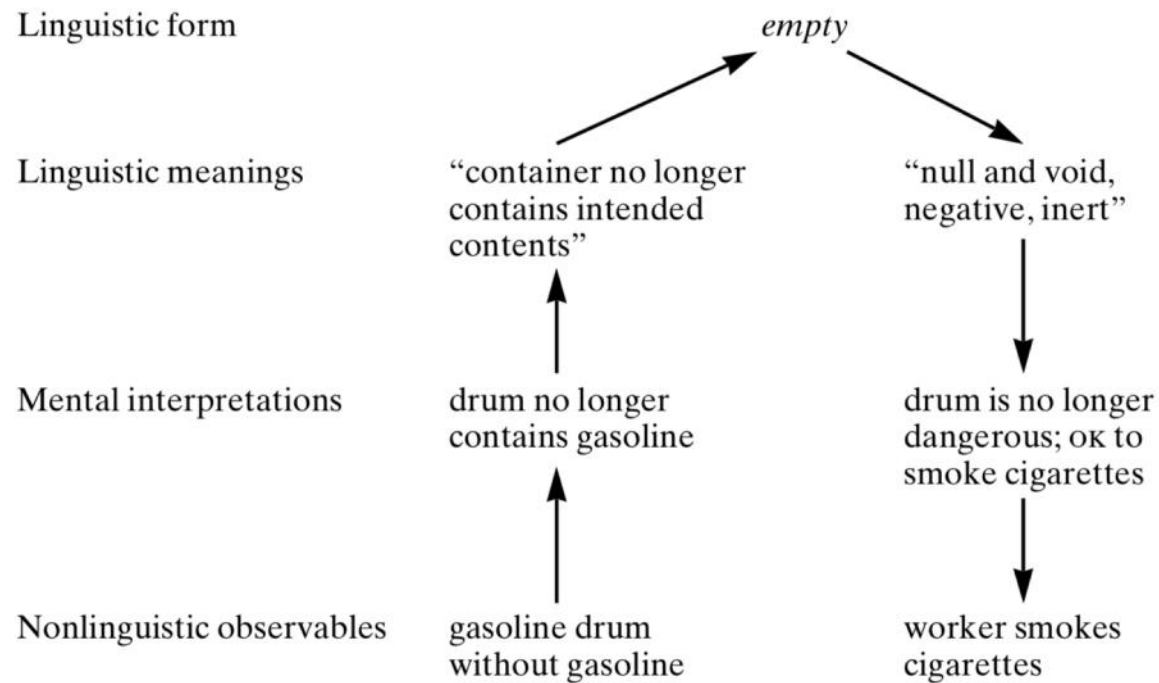| Linguistic form | | *empty* |
Linguistic meanings	"container no longer contains intended contents"	"null and void, negative, inert"
Mental interpretations	drum no longer contains gasoline	drum is no longer dangerous; OK to smoke cigarettes
Nonlinguistic observables	gasoline drum without gasoline	worker smokes cigarettes

Figure 3.1 Diagram of one of Whorf's fire-causing examples

(Lucy 1992a: 50)

Ontology

Ontology = the study of what it means to be something or the conditions for something to exist. ("Language is …")

Ontology of language = the study of the nature of language, what qualifies an entity as (part of a) language. ("This is/is not (a) language")

Ontological commitment = a commitment to study linguistic phenomena as qualities of a particular type of entity. ("Language as …")

3 Ontological Commitments in Linguistic Anthropology

1. Language as a non-neutral medium.

1. Language as action that entails forms of social organization – acts, activities, events, speech genres, etc.

2. Language as expressing and enforcing differentiation – social class, ethnic identity, status, control and domination, ideology.

Critical Consciousness

Speakers do not have the **critical consciousness** to know that they are using the logic of their own language and they can communicate if they have the same linguistic system (e.g., classification) (Whorf 1956: 211)

But linguists do have means of learning from comparing different languages, getting into their logic, ways of encoding information, ways of thinking or viewing the world (Whorf used the word "metaphysics").

Experts' Critical Consciousness

"speakers of a language" are "experts" who take for granted what they do, they find it "natural". (What the philosopher Edmund Husserl called "the natural attitude" – *die natürliche Einstellung*)

Can the limits of our metalinguistic awareness be overcome? Under what conditions?

(See section 3.3.4 of my article on Language as a non-neutral medium).

Reflexivity

Language socialization as a never-ending process

We can become aware of our limits

Review

Think about the general points, the lessons that people like Boas and Malinowski learned and taught the next generation and beyond (Sapir, Whorf)

What did they explore?

Why did they study languages the ways they did?

What did they discover?