

Linguistic relativity and perception article review

[Parts of the World](#), [European Union](#)



1. The Sapir-Whorf theory of language essentially argues that language is culturally-conditioned, and so the way you speak depends on your environment and your experiences and the traditions of your culture. Anthropologists and linguists are particularly interested in the languages of remote and self-contained tribes people because their lack of contact with the developing world allows the study of language at an earlier evolutionary stage of development. However, there are signs that even in European languages culture and background may play a part in the way that some languages perceive the world around them. Motluck (36) examines the gender of certain nouns in German and in Spanish and the associations that native speakers have with those objects. She describes the work that Lera Boroditsky has undertaken with European languages: many European languages classify nouns according to gender, may tell us something about the way these speakers perceive those objects, and it certainly forces speakers of those languages to confront (even if only subconsciously) stereotypes based on gender every time they speak. A good example that Motluck cites (36) is the word for 'bridge' which is feminine in German, but masculine in Spanish. Native speakers were then asked what qualities they associated with bridges: the Germans called them - " beautiful", " elegant" and " fragile" - while Spanish speakers described bridges as " big", " strong" and " sturdy." Thus it could be argued that stereotypical modes of thinking about gender differences are embedded in those languages and affect the way speakers perceive different objects in the physical world, as well as reinforcing patriarchal views of gender difference.

Much of the most recent research on the language of the Pirahã tribe could be used to support the Sapir-Whorf theory. For example, the Pirahã cannot count beyond two; this is not unknown amongst primitive tribes but the Pirahã could not be taught to count beyond two in another language (Colapinto 11). In addition, the Pirahã “accept as real only that which they observe” (Colapinto 13) and therefore have no communal stories or myths or common memories beyond their grandparents’ generation. Above all, and, as we shall see central to the Chomskian view of language, the Pirahã are unable to use recursion. As Colapinto puts it “the Pirahã have this cognitive trait but that it is absent from their syntax because of cultural constraints.” (13)

The Chomskian position is that “a specific facility for language is encoded in the human brain at birth. He described it as a ‘language organ’... that is shared by all languages, regardless of how different they appear to be.” (Colapinto 8). Having made this assertion Chomsky then set about examining many languages in order to define more closely what all human languages had in common. This is of interest because it helps us understand human thought, human nature and human development. However, the theories of Sapir and Woolf were used by some researchers to try to find evidence that proved Chomsky wrong – that, in fact, language is affected by the way we live and also that language alters our capacity for thought. The controversy continues.

2. Motluck’s article is written from an anti-Chomskian perspective, so she is at pains to demonstrate that language does affect thought and she uses

many examples to back up her views. For example, speakers of English do not have to worry about the gender of nouns - which in many other languages is an important, if illogical, means of categorizing them. English speakers have a single pronoun for other people - 'you', but most European languages have different pronouns dependent on intimacy, status, social position and age. English greetings may be fairly universal in the Anglophone world, but in Korea much depends on your relationship with the person whom you are addressing - even when it comes to saying, 'Hello!' In Japanese even the word for the first person pronoun - 'I' - depends on who you are talking to. English speakers have specific words for specific things, but this is not true of all languages: Yucatan, a Mexican indigenous language, defines objects by shape or material. In many languages time is conceived of in spatial terms, but for English speakers time is spoken about as if it were horizontal, while Mandarin conceives of time vertically. Research has shown that some languages have very powerful, vivid verbs (English, Dutch, Russian, Finnish and Mandarin), while some languages (Spanish, French, Hebrew, Italian and Turkish) do not. Motluck (p 38) observes that "Bi-lingual people report that news seems much more dynamic, full of energy when written in a language like English." So it might appear that the language we speak does affect our perceptions of the world and our relationships with other people.

3. Researchers believe it is important to document languages before they stop being spoken, because if it is true that each language offers a unique perspective on human life then as David Wolman writes: "At stake is not only a window into different cultures, but the very diversity of human

thought.” (Motluck 38) In addition, some linguists believe that “ Pirahã may provide a snapshot of language at an earlier stage of syntactic development. Therefore, from this point of view, the preservation and study of Pirahã (and other disappearing languages) can tell us vital things about the beginnings and evolution of human speech and can help solve the intellectual argument between the Chomskian viewpoint and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Works Cited

Colapinto, Tony. ‘ The Interpreter.’ The New Yorker, 16 April, 2007. Web.

Motluk, Alison. ‘ You are what you speak.’ New Scientist, 30 November 2002. Web.