You Are What You Think Analysis

Language and Thought

In his article, "Does Your Language Shape How You Think?", Guy Deutscher challenges Whorf's hypothesis holding that language determines thought processes in humans. The hypothesis which has been debated over by linguistics, psychologists, and the likes, for years, is now receiving renewed interest due to new research being conducted. While Deutscher rejects the notion that our mother tongue is a 'prison house' that constraints our capacity to reason, he does admit that language does affect and is affected by the way we think, and it is this more moderate approach to Whorf's hypothesis which this essay will explore. While language does not completely limit our thought, it does play a crucial role in constructing our reality.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was first introduced in the works of linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, in the early 20th century. The hypothesis supports the assertion that the way we conceptualize the world and our cognitive processes are a direct product of our language. In his writings, Sapir notes,

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and
that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. (Sapir, 69)

Sapir is clearly identifying people as being "at the mercy" of the specific language they speak, as if people are held hostage by their mother tongue. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis went even further into suggesting that if a certain word did not exist in a language, then the people speaking that language would not be able to mentally grasp the concept the word is describing. This was supposedly proved by studies conducted by Whorf among the Hopi, where he summarized that since they did not have similar words to describe time as English speakers do, consequently they do not interpret the concept of time as others as well. While the hypothesis did in fact stir a lively scientific discussion in the matter of linguistics, it ultimately was rejected by most for lack of scientific proof.

Nonetheless, the concept of language affecting thought was not completely abandoned. A more moderate approach to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has come to life in the form of Linguistic Relativity, the idea that language affects, but does not limit, the way its speakers think. It is important to note the differences of these two approaches, as discussed in an excerpt from Chandler's book: "The emphasis is on the potential for thinking to be 'influenced' rather than unavoidably 'determined' by language; it is a two-way process, so that 'the kind of language we use' is also influenced by 'the way we see the world'" (Chandler). After all, if a word does not exist in a particular language, it shouldn't mean that the speakers of that language cannot understand the meaning of that word. For example, the word 'sadness' does not exist in Tahitian, but does that mean Tahitians never get sad? Deutscher would say no. And he would also agree that languages do have a hand in shaping the way people understand the world around them, and
that they do so in "significant and often surprising ways" (Deutscher, 1). With this in mind we might ask, by what ways does language shape our thought?

One of the examples used in Deutscher's article is of an incident where a young boy from Bali is sent to learn dance at a different village. The people of Bali rely primarily on geographical coordinates when speaking, so when the boy was sent to a different village, he might have been disoriented and did not recognize the geographical coordinates that were so familiar in his native village. Consequently, he could not take directions from the exasperated dance instructor. It is obvious that the geographical coordinate system that the Bali dancing boy used had hindered his ability to receive instructions from the teacher, but this example is a very specific and situational one. The boy did know how to dance, and if he were instructed in his native village, he would more than likely excel at the instructions given to him. However, there are other cases where the same geographical coordinate system does not impede, rather facilitate a greater understanding of the world surrounding its speaker. Such is the case of the Guugu Yimithirr.

People speaking Guugu Yimithirr are compelled, from a very young age, to pay attention to everything around them. They do this so they can be aware of their geographical orientation at all times. In conversation, a Guugu Yimithirr speaker will say, "The rock is just south of where you are standing." They do this without stopping to think of their relative location to the cardinal directions, rather knowing (from years and years of constant practice) where they are at any given time. Deutscher believes this to mean that people speaking Guugu Yimithirr style languages are experiencing the world differently. He writes, "It is not easy for us to conceive how Guugu Yimithirr speakers experience the world, with a crisscrossing of cardinal directions..."
imposed on any mental picture and any piece of graphic memory. Nor is it easy to speculate about how geographic languages affect areas of experience other than spatial orientation” (Deutscher, 7). Lera Boroditsky goes further into such speculation, "People rely on their spatial knowledge to build other, more complex, more abstract representations. Representations of such things as time, number, musical pitch, kinship relations, morality, and emotions have been shown to depend on how we think about space” (Boroditsky, "How Does Language”). While these speculations have not been proven, there is growing scientific data pointing to their validity.

One example of such research done is by Daniel Slobin, who has studied the relationship between learning different languages and the organization of information, in both adults and children. In an experiment he conducted in the 1980’s the results point to a strong correlation between language and thought:

In a cross-linguistic survey of children's narrative strategies using pictures as stimuli, Slobin and his colleagues found that from an early age children who speak different languages talk about identical pictures quite differently, in a way that seems to reflect habitual ways of encoding experience in their languages… Slobin endorses the Whorfian position that languages are not neutral coding systems, but instead are "subjective orientations" to experience (Hill, 14).

While Slobin wouldn't completely agree with Whorf's hypothesis that language restricts people's world view, he would agree that language shapes our reality. His more moderate view, commonly known as "Thinking for Speaking", is in direct contrast to Noam Chomsky view of language acquisition as independent of cognitive process ("Dan Slobin").
Another example of how language may shape the way we think is evident in research done with grammatical gender languages. In these languages, such as Hebrew, Spanish, German, and French, the speaker must assign genders to inanimate objects, not only people. This comes in contrast to languages such as English, where speakers refer to inanimate objects as "it". There is no apparent reason why grammatical gender oriented languages assign a female gender to one object, and a male gender to another. And what is furthermore interesting to note is that in some languages the genders for the same objects are reversed. One possibility for how speakers of grammatical gender languages might learn the genders of objects is that they focus on a masculine or feminine property of that noun. Researches now show that:

Once gender connotations have been imposed on impressionable young minds, they lead those with a gendered mother tongue to see the inanimate world through lenses tinted with associations and emotional responses … Do the emotional maps imposed by a gender system have higher-level behavioral consequences for our everyday life? Do they shape tastes, fashions, habits and preferences in the societies concerned? (Deutscher, 3-4)

While it is impossible to answer those questions with absolute certainty, there is yet more data suggesting the answer is yes.

In his article, Deutscher claims that the differences in how people speak are a result of what languages consistently oblige us to think about. Does the language we speak oblige us to think about, and treat others differently? Growing evidence now shows that it does. Boroditsky describes how language changes the way people perceive and judge others. She writes, "Hebrew-Arabic bilinguals were tested either in Hebrew or in Arabic using a standard measure of implicit ethnic bias. When tested in Hebrew, bilinguals showed more favourable implicit attitudes toward
Jews than when they were tested in Arabic. That is, even something as basic as how much you like or do not like others depends on the language in which you are asked" (Boroditsky, "Language: Statements"). In light of this information, it might be concluded that the language we speak also affects our beliefs and ideologies.

But our mother tongue doesn't only affect the way we think about our world, it also affects our actions. Since "language embodies an interpretation of reality" (Lucy, 4), that reality might be perceived differently by speakers of different languages, and it is this interpretation that causes people to behave differently in their daily lives. Persuasive evidence for this was shown in a recent set of studies performed in Sweden and Finland. The results showed that "occupational accident rates are substantially lower in Sweden than in Finland and among the Swedish speaking minority within Finland despite working in the same regions with similar laws and regulations" (Lucy, 13). It was found that the "Finns organize the workplace in a way that favors the individual worker over the temporal organization of the overall production process. Lack of attention to the overall temporal organization of the process leads to frequent disruptions in production, haste, and, ultimately, accidents" (Lucy, 14). Indeed, it is startling to think that the language we speak plays a role in our potential for occupational accidents.

Nonetheless, the most compelling evidence that the language we speak strongly influences practically every aspect of our lives comes in the form of research done regarding different languages and the brain. In years of research done, it was concluded that when different languages are spoken, different areas of the brain are used. In The Effects of Language on Thought, Faccone et al. contributes these results to the fact that:
Different languages use different tools, and thus they require different mental and physical processes. An example of this is the Spanish language, which uses the temporal cortex for reading and writing abilities. The differentiating factor is that Spanish uses phonetic scripts, unlike many other languages (1989). This does not mean that non-Spanish speakers cannot use that part of their brain, just that their language does not facilitate the use of that region (Faccone).

So if the different languages we speak affect different areas of our brain, is it that far-fetched to say that they might also influence our thoughts, perceptions, and actions? Probably not.

As shown above, language is a cognitive process that unconsciously shapes our life in practically every aspect, from our perception of space and objects, to our behaviors and thoughts towards others. When learning a language, we do acquire certain habits that construct the way we see the world. However, this does not mean that language restricts us in any way, rather it facilitates a variety of understandings and interpretations of the world in different cultures. While the consequences of this fact are hard to measure, it is important to keep in mind that with time, research will provide answers to the dazzling possibilities of the effect of language on our lives. As a bilingual, I sometimes experience the world through the lenses of two very dissimilar languages, both Hebrew (my mother tongue), and English. Do I interpret the world differently when speaking one language over the other? Given the information above, I would have to say, yes.
Works Cited


