“Does Your Language Shape Your Thinking?”

Language: One Sculptor of Human Experience

Does language have power? Words certainly influence our impressions of people and places. They even shape our self-images. As the saying goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will only cause permanent psychological damage” (Lano & Woodley). Language facilitates communication; written and spoken words unite those who speak a common tongue. Conversely, listeners or readers who do not understand the language in use are excluded from the conversation. Furthermore, each language contains idioms, slang, and phrases that do not always have equivalents in other tongues. Does this mean language can limit our perceptions? Benjamin Lee Whorf proposed this theory in 1940 in his article, “Science and Linguistics.” Decades later, another linguist named Guy Deutscher challenged Whorf’s belief that language constrains our perceptions. His article, “Does Your Language Shape How You Think?” seeks to discredit Whorf while promoting his own theory. Deutscher’s ideas help readers see that language is not a “prison house” holding our minds captive (7). Language certainly shapes our perceptions of the world but does not limit them, nor is it the only factor influencing human experience.

Whorf would probably disagree, asserting that his struggle to learn the Hopi language implies that the Hopi Indians have an altogether different way of thinking than English speakers do (Hussein 644). As he wrote, “The background linguistic system …
of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself a shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity” (qtd. in Hussein 644). According to this theory, Chinese speakers should be unable to understand the concept of time because their language uses the same verb form for past, present, and future tenses (Deutscher 2). Likewise, speakers of languages that do not have words for “sadness” or “joy” would not know how to feel those emotions. Can anyone confirm this occurrence in the natural world? Yet some linguists continue to defend Whorf’s theory, explaining that the original hypothesis actually referred to the plasticity of the human mind. Languages under this redefinition would be “possible paths to intellectual expansion rather than worldview determinants” (Hammer 328). This would appear to be a more moderate view of Whorf’s theory than Deutscher originally proposed.

In Deutscher’s opinion, Whorf’s Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis is too imaginative and ill supported (1). What then, is Deutscher’s opinion of language? He believes languages shape human perception. In one example he explains that “various experiments have shown that grammatical genders can shape the feelings and associations of speakers toward objects around them” (3). Many European languages such as Spanish, French, and German attach masculine or feminine genders to the names of specific objects. In Spanish, “bridge” (el Puente) is masculine; in German, “bridge” (die Brücke) is feminine. Deutscher believes there is evidence that these genders affect each group’s perception of bridges. Spanish people are likely to describe bridges as “sturdy,” while Germans might say they are “elegant.” He takes this idea a step farther, suggesting that the nature of these languages could even shape the construction of each
country’s bridges. Although Deutscher admits that evidence of this is scarce, he remains
confident that proof of language’s ability to shape tastes, habits, and preferences may
someday be found (4).

This is not the only evidence Deutscher has to offer. He uses an Australian
aboriginal language known as Guugu Yimidhirr to highlight differences in the speakers of
ethnocentric and geocentric languages. In egocentric languages, locations of objects
revolve around the speaker. English and other Indo-European languages use egocentric
descriptions such as “behind me” or “to the right” to indicate location. Geocentric
languages like Guugu Yimidhirr depend on cardinal directions (north, south, east, and
west) for absolute reference. As one study explains, “Human populations show
differences in how they think about spatial orientation and deal with directions, and these
differences may be influenced by linguistically-based spatial reference systems” (Henrich
68). According to Deutscher, psychological experiments have demonstrated that speakers
of geocentric languages remember the “same reality” differently than egocentric language
speakers. For example, an English speaker faced with opposite-facing rooms in a chain-
style hotel like the Holiday Inn would consider the rooms “identical” because they
contain the same furniture and basic layout. A native speaker of Guugu Yimidhirr,
however, would see two completely different rooms. The bed in one room would be
“North,” while the bed in the other is “South”; each piece of furniture in the room would
be considered in this fashion (Deutscher 6). It seems language has an undeniable effect
on perception.

Should readers therefore assume that language is the ultimate shaper of human
experience? Consider Whorf and Deutscher’s backgrounds. Benjamin Lee Whorf studied
linguistics under Edward Sapir at Yale. Meanwhile, he continued to work at the Hartford Fire Insurance Company. Although he was an amateur, he became one of the most influential linguists of his time (Lavery). In comparison, Guy Deutscher possesses a PhD in Linguistics from Oxford. After receiving his PhD, he remained at Oxford as a research fellow, focusing on semantic languages (Kiper). Amateur or professional, both Whorf and Deutscher could boast better knowledge of linguistics than the average reader of this essay. For this reason, readers should be aware that Whorf and Deutscher’s views are largely from a linguistic perspective, with little or no balance from other branches of science. Deeper research into linguistic theories produces an overwhelming amount of technical jargon. In the midst of potential biases and confusing terminology, readers must dig deeper to assure they are aware of the full picture. That said, language may hold powerful influence over our perceptions, but it is not the only influence.

Readers must consider other factors contributing to our interpretation of reality. Consider emotional expression. As previously established, speakers of different languages acknowledge the same basic emotions. Studies on facial displays of emotion have proven “much evidence for the universality of recognition in the ‘basic’ facial expression of emotions … in a sampling of small-scale societies” (qtd. in Henrich 69). This means two people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can understand each other’s expressions of excitement or frustration without having to speak about them. This is also demonstrated in the global enjoyment of silent films, where actors tell stories without any sound. If people can communicate stories and emotions without speaking, they prove that a foreknowledge of emotions like surprise is not required for communication; rather, it is embedded in human nature.
If emotions are embedded in human nature, readers can assume that no society is entirely sculpted by its vocabulary. Other factors must be considered. Observe the differences between Westerners (e.g. Americans, Canadian, Europeans) and non-Westerners (e.g. Native Americans, Cook Islanders, East Asians). Westerners tend to form individualistic cultures, emphasizing the self. Non-Westerners often form collectivistic cultures that focus on the individual’s relationship to the community. Shown the same image, representatives of individualistic and collectivistic societies will seemingly observe different pictures. Citizens of individualistic societies will observe the main subject’s attributes, apart from the picture’s background. Meanwhile, members of collectivistic societies will consider the object entirely in relationship to its background (Heinrich 70-73). One might consider the community of Guugu Yimithirr speakers as a collectivistic community. Deutscher observes, “it would never occur to us that pointing in the direction of our chest could mean anything other than to draw attention to ourselves, a Guugu Yimithirr speaker points through himself, as if he were thin air and his own existence were irrelevant” (7). Does this mean collectivistic cultures are the result of geocentric languages? Consider Japan, a collectivistic culture whose language is one of the few that rely on egocentric frames as its language of preference (Henrich 68).

Language and environment seem to be separate factors that combine to influence each culture.

A common thread runs through these diverse environments and communities. Whether communities are individualistic or collectivistic, whether they feature egocentric or geocentric languages, their members often share similar patterns of social relationship. Many distinct societies have words for mothers, fathers, siblings, husbands, wives, and
friends (Henrich 69). Some of these relationships were determined by biological factors; every human being is born of a mother and a father. While exact names change with the societies that use them, these relationships do not generate independently.

Does this evidence prove Whorf and Deutscher incorrect? Not necessarily. As linguists, they were merely giving perspectives according to their field of research. Language does shape our perceptions of the world. Nevertheless, Deutscher’s view portrays only one piece of a larger puzzle. His limited position also overlooks the commonalities that tie diverse people together as human beings. We share common features of behavior, motivation, and cognition that cannot be ignored (Henrichs 62).
Works Cited


