

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT: THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract: The relationship between language and thought has long been a topic of great interest in the field of linguistics, especially in psycholinguistics. Herder, Humboldt, Trendelenbury, Sapir, Whorf, Gui Shichun, Lian Shuneng, and Bao Huinan are some of the well-known scholars who have conducted research on the relationship between language and thought. With regard to the relationship between language and thought, there are three main viewpoints. The first group of scholars, represented by Sapir and Whorf, supports linguistic determinism. This study finally concludes that the preferred relationship between language and thought should be that they are independent but interactive.

Key words: Sapir and Whorf, philosophy, Humboldt, Herder, linguistic determinism, Lev Vygotsky, pre-linguistic phase.

The relationship between language and thought has long been taken seriously in varying academic fields from philosophy to psychology and anthropology. In the early 18th century, neo-humanism emerged in Germany. The representatives in the field of linguistics include Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm Von Humboldt. Herder held that how a nation thinks determines how its people speak, and how people speak determines how they think [1]. Humboldt carried forward and developed Herder's idea and later formed a systematic linguistic philosophy. Humboldt believed that a language is the external embodiment of a nation's spirit; a national language reflects the national spirit; each language creates a fence around its nation, thus people are restrained by their mother tongue and its world outlook. In short, Herder and Humboldt held the same view that language determines thought. Based on Herder's and Humboldt's idea, Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf raised their viewpoints on the relationship between language and thought the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis embodies linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity. Linguistic determinism consists of "strong" determinism and "weak" determinism. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis opened the gates for linguistics and psychologists to further investigate the relationship between language and thought [2].

After Sapir and Whorf, many linguists and psychologists also devoted themselves to the study of the relationship between language and thought. With their efforts, “strong” determinism and linguistic relativity in Sapir-Whorf hypothesis have been proven to be indefensible. Many scholars have put forward proofs to disprove these extreme views in Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; for example, Eleanor Rosch’s categorization in cognitive linguistics, Georges Mounin’s translatability in translation, Greenberg’s markedness theory, Herriot’s and Hockett’s codability, as well as Berlin’s and Kay’s research on people’s memory and response to focal colors. The purpose of this article is to probe into the right relationship between language and thought. By studying relevant theories from various scholars, this article agrees with the influence of language over thought, as indicated by early scholars like Sapir and Whorf, but refutes the extreme viewpoint of language determinism in Sapir-Whorf hypothesis from several points, then proves the independence and mutual influence of language and thinking, and finally concludes that the preferred relationship between language and thought should be that they are independent but interactive.

From the perspective of phylogenic development, Lev Vygotsky suggested [3] that language and thought have different genetic roots and the development of language and thought does not reach a parallel but often cross each other. Contemporary cultural-anthropological and psychological research showed that there might exist a pre-linguistic phase in the early human society, where human thought is referred to as behavioral and imagistic thought. Similarly, Vygotsky and Piaget assumed that there exists a preintellectual phase in children’s verbal language development and a pre-linguistic phase in their intellectual development [6]. Slobin hypothesized that “children begin the language-learning process with a starting set of universally shared meaning” and “all children arrive at the learning stage with a language-making capacity that constructs similar early grammars from all input languages; the surface forms generated by these grammars may vary since the materials provided by the input languages vary; however, the basic notions that first receive grammatical expression remain constant across all early grammars and are independent of the input languages” [4]. Goldin-Meadow suggested that “the components of the motion events that a deaf child conveys in gesture can be inferred to as those of children’s pre-linguistic thought” [5]. Therefore, based on the above evidence, some scholars came to the conclusion that thought comes before language, and that language and thought are mutually independent. Furthermore, studies of cognitive neuroscience on aphasics also concluded that consciousness and thinking do not completely depend on language. Aphasia can only influence the extended consciousness; it does not weaken the core consciousness. Even without the involvement of language, aphasics could still generate some kind of nonverbal conscious activity with images. Therefore, the research on

cognitive neuroscience challenges traditional psychological ideas, where consciousness functions can be both, unified and relatively independent. In short, language and thought are independent to each other, and thus language does not determine thought.

Sapir demonstrated that a linguistic symbol can easily transfer from one kind of organ to another kind of organ and from one kind of technology to another kind of technology. Therefore, only sound is not the basic fact of language. The basic fact of language lies in the classification of concepts, their structure, and their relations. As a structure, the inner side of language is the thought. The world reflected by the language of different nations is not the same. Different languages reflect different thoughts and thought perspectives of varied nations. For example, in English, Chinese, and Japanese, there are four seasons in a year, whereas in Tagalog, there are only rainy and arid seasons in a year. This is because in the eyes of the Englishmen, the Chinese, and the Japanese, a year has colorful and various seasons, and they view the year and the world through a colorful lens, whereas in the eyes of the Tagalog, a year is monotonous and lacks vitality, and they view the year and the world from a monotonous perspective. Their languages reflect different understandings of the world, thoughts, and thought perspectives. How thought influences language can be reflected in the complexity of a nation's language. The more valuable something is to a nation, the more detailed the language is in representing it. Taking the Eskimos as an example, snow matters a lot to the Eskimos since it is closely related to their life and production; therefore, there are many terms that can be used to describe all kinds of snow, such as "falling snow," "slushy snow," [6] "wind-driven flying snow," and so on; these terms are convenient for the Eskimos. On the other hand, since snow is not that important to the Englishmen, there is only one word to represent this natural phenomenon, which is "snow." The more significant something is to a nation, the more people will think about it and pay attention to it, resulting in a more detailed language representing it, and vice versa. In short, thought influences language.

Conclusion

Language and thought are closely related. The relationship between language and thought has raised intense discussions and disputes among scholars since early times. Tracing back from Herder and Humboldt to Sapir and Whorf, and to many other scholars in modern times, their ideas and opinions have evolved and developed. Beginning from Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and their theory of language determinism and language relativity, this article agrees with the influence of language over thought but refutes the extreme viewpoint of language determinism since language and thought are mutually independent and thought has an overwhelming influence on language.

Therefore, the preferred relationship between language and thought should be that they are independent but interactive.

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