

On the relationship between language and thought – a brief introduction in socio-linguistics

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Rezumat:

Oare gândirea influențează limbajul sau limbajul influențează gândirea? Aflați ce spun cercetările recente despre această problemă.

Cuvinte cheie: Limbaj, gândire, concepția comunicativă, relativism lingvistic

Abstract:

Do thoughts influence language or does language influence thought? Find out what recent research shows about this topic.

Keywords: Language, thought, communicative perspective, linguistic relativism

The question of whether language has any influence on the workings of human thought has been puzzling researchers in various fields of studies since the beginning of the 1900s. With the development of interdisciplinary areas that range from neuroscience and robotics to artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology and philosophy of language, the debate on the interaction between language and thought has recently emerged afresh. Is language just a tool we use for communication purposes only? Or is it a mold that shapes what and how we think? The answer to these questions is the key to one of the deepest mysteries of the human race. Once found, it will undoubtedly open up new ground in numerous research fields.

The relationship between human language and thought has mainly been studied along two major opposing paradigms. The communicative conception of language (Carruthers and Boucher, 1998) postulates an independent relationship between language and thought, language being simply a tool humans use to communicate what they think. By contrast, according to the cognitive approach, (native) language has the power to shape the human mind to various degrees, hence the interdependence between language and thought. The latter theory revolves mainly around the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Hoijer, 1954), also known as linguistic relativism or determinism (i.e. language and thought are relative or determinant to one another). After a brief period of popularity in the mid-20th century, it lost most of its ground to Noam Chomsky's thesis of universalism (Chomsky and Ronat, 2011), which defines language as learnable on the basis of a preset cognitive software, present in all children's minds.

In recent years, however, a renewed version of linguistic relativism has come to the fore, weakening the dominant stronghold of the communicative conception of language and blurring the rigid distinction between human language and thought, in the light of experiments conducted via computer simulation (Elman et al., 1996) that indicate the human brain may be endowed with more plasticity (i.e. brain's ability to change throughout the course of life) than previously thought. Based on these findings, neo-Whorfianism postulates that even if language does not radically shape the way we view the world, it still dictates the particular emphasis we place on certain aspects of life, depending on the language we speak, where we speak it and to whom.

An increasing number of socio-linguistic studies and reports testify on behalf of the changes triggered in the mindset of people by the language they speak. There is research that focuses on different ways of expressing time, numbers and spatial orientation in order to pinpoint fundamentally different ways of perceiving these concepts by speakers of different languages (Boroditsky, 2011; Boroditsky and Gaby, 2010; Levinson and Wilkins, 2006). Bilinguals often confess to feeling more uninhibited in their non-native tongue, where they experience an easiness to swear or to say “I love you”, which they completely lack in their first language (Collins, 2016). Studies show that Asian languages like Japanese or Korean, that display more complex systems of expressing politeness than Western languages, are matched by a (collective) mindset that is comparatively more sensitive to the interlocutor than to the speaker, and more focused on the relationship between interlocutors than the Western self-centered (individualistic) view on the world (Yamamoto, 2006).

The interaction between language and thought goes far beyond the theoretic realm of specialized research and manifests itself on a daily basis. Examples are not limited to non-native speakers of English who tend to behave in a more informal manner when using English, given the familiarity implied by the equally formal and informal pronoun *you*. Values are determined, among others, by language. For example, a Romanian language native speaker will tend to be more direct, more self-assertive, more positive about his/her own actions than about other people’s actions in comparison to a Japanese language native speaker who is inclined to be more polite, more self-effacing and humble about his/her own self, and consequently use more negative auto-communication. But when switching to Japanese, the same Romanian will automatically become less direct and more humble than when speaking his/her native tongue, and this transformation is partly the direct result of the complex politeness system embedded in the Japanese language. Some speakers of the two languages argue that learning the other language has made them change their perspective upon the world, making them, for instance, more empathic or more self-assertive. Thus, the interaction between language and thought rings particularly relevant in the current multicultural and multilinguistic environment we live in.

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