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The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and the Contemporary Language and Literary Revival among the First Nations in Canada

Introduction

Whorf spoke of "a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (Whorf 1956: 214). A contributor to the *Linguist* chat room discussing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis comments that "[t]he view that one's world view is determined by the language one speaks is nearly universally accepted by educated people who aren't linguists." This certainly seems true of First Nations peoples. Mi'kmaq writer Marie Battiste writes: "Aboriginal languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. They provide distinctive perspectives on and understanding of the world ..." (Battiste 2000: 199). This view that language and cultural consciousness are related is held by the settler cultures as well as by Aboriginal peoples in Canada–an obvious example being Quebec sovereigntist attitudes to French. Indeed, the grounding of national identity in national language dates at least as far back as the mid-eighteenth century (see Gumperz and Levinson 1996: 1-18). In a local Vancouver newspaper account of the Aboriginal language revivals in Canada, English is depicted as both the modernizer and the colonizer: "English is vibrant and powerful, endlessly complex. It has the ability to assimilate new concepts and generate new forms. It is, in fact, a bit of a bully" (Scott 2001: 17). Minority languages are depicted as inherently resistant, with features that are difficult to assimilate into English: "But English cannot absorb all the idiosyncrasies of the Sechelt language" (Scott 2001: 17). The languages and their associated cultures are rightly depicted as inextricable. The debate between those who believe language and culture are inextricable and those who do not is important for understanding the move towards Aboriginal language revitalization in Canada, because the beliefs of everyone in Canada, not just those of the scholarly experts or the remaining speakers, affect the future of Aboriginal languages.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Today

As Randy Allen Harris notes in *The Linguistics Wars* (1993), the dominant school of linguistics in North America is founded on the ideas of Noam Chomsky. Chomsky posits that all human brains are hard-wired for language, and although this hard-wiring must be triggered by exposure to an actual language, the underlying hard-wiring provides all languages, however varied, with some important "super-rules." Thus, the possibility of a universal grammar exists, which can be discovered by comparing languages, and this constitutes the paradigm in which many linguists work. As Harrris says, however, "Chomsky defines linguistics in a way that leaves recalcitrant data on the extreme periphery, ... that leaves the aesthetic elements of language in some cold and distant stretch of the galaxy ... [and] ... in a way that draws on literary criticism as a negative example ... (Harris 1993: 246). Steven Pinker, in his best-selling Chomskyan account of linguistics, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (1995), gives an overview of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In a chapter, he argues that "[p]eople do not think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in a language of thought," which he terms "mentalese" (81). He states that "[l]inguistic relativity came out of the Boas school, as part of a campaign to show that nonliterate cultures were as complex and sophisticated as European ones. But the supposedly mind-broadening anecdotes owe their appeal to a patronizing willingness to treat other cultures' psychologies as weird and exotic compared to our own" (Pinker 64). For Pinker, linguistic relativism is "wrong, all wrong" (Pinker 67). He makes it appear not only unscientific, but also colonizing, to assume that there might exist important language-based differences among cultures.

George Lakoff, a dissident student of Chomsky's and a "leading figure in the most rapidly expanding linguistic approach of the last decade, cognitive grammar" (Harris 1993: 247), devotes a chapter of his *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* to examining Whorf's theories and contemporary tests of them. He concludes that "detailed empirical studies have convinced me in a way that Whorf's cursory studies did not, that these [Amerindian] languages differ from English and from each other in the way they conceptualize spatial location. These differences are largely differences in conceptual organization" (Lakoff 1987: 334). He continues,

> Whorf was right in observing that concepts that have been made part of the grammar of a language are used *in* thought, not just as objects of thought, and that they are used spontaneously, automatically, unconsciously, and effortlessly ... I am convinced by Whorf's arguments that the way we use concepts affects the way we understand experience; concepts that are spontaneous, automatic, and unconscious are simply going to have a greater (though less obvious) impact on how we understand everyday life than concepts that we merely ponder. (Lakoff 1987: 335)

John A. Lucy, in "The Scope of Linguistic Relativity: An Analysis and Review of Empirical Research" notes that "[w]e still know little about the connections between particular language patterns and mental life–let alone how they operate or how significant they are" (Lucy 1996: 37). He accounts for the paucity of empirical research on the tendency of both physical and social scientists to disregard the symbolic aspects of language and to carry on "as if language had ... an unproblematic 'mapping' relationship to perception, cognition, emotion, social interaction, etc." (39)

Dan Alford gives a stirring account of the misrepresentation of Whorf's ideas, arguing that deterministic linguistic theories can be connected to Newtonian physics, while Whorf read Einstein's theory of relativity and connected to it his thinking on language. Whorf, according to Alford, "from his acquaintance with physics, moved from Newtonian monocausal determinism as an ideal into systems thinking–where sometimes the opposite of one profound truth is another profound truth, where everything is INTERdependent, multicausal, interconnected: Language shapes culture while culture is shaping language; language shapes thinking while thinking is shaping language" (*Linguist List* 1995). Alford also examines the ideas of the late David Bohm, author of *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980) and former Professor of Theoretical Physics at Birbeck College, London, who examined the disparity between widespread Western world views and the way in which quantum theory sees the world. Interestingly, at this time, Bohm had apparently not heard of Sapir, Whorf, or Amerindian languages. However, he argues that

> the subject-verb-object structure of modern languages implies that all action arises in a separate subject, and acts either on a separate object, or reflexively on itself. This pervasive structure leads in the whole of life to a function that divides the totality of existence into separate entities, which are considered to be essentially fixed and static in their nature. We then inquire whether it is possible to experiment with new language forms in which the basic role will be given to the verb rather than to the noun. Such forms will have as their content a series of actions that flow and merge into each other without sharp separations or breaks. Thus, both in form and content, the language will be in harmony with the unbroken flowing movement of existence as a whole. (Bohm 1980: xii)

And just in case you take the last phrase as implying he thought that this existence as a whole could be clearly defined, he notes that "my attitude from the beginning [has] been that our notions concerning cosmology and the general nature of reality are in a continuous process of development" (xiv), which accords with the view of movement in quantum mechanics as "discontinuous, not causally determinate and not well defined" (xv). Before he died in 1991, Bohm had discovered that some Amerindian languages in fact did work the way he had proposed as a new way of using language.

What follows outlines ways in which researchers are now examining linguistic relativism. In *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson examine how metaphors embedded in language affect worldviews. For example, the idea that time represents a resource holds true in Western capitalist culture because "our culture happens to have a great many institutions that reify the Time Is A Resource and Time Is Money metaphors" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 164) including time clocks, payment by the hour, appointment books and deadlines. They note that "Cultures in which time is not conceptualized and institutionalized as a resource remind us that time in itself is not inherently resourcelike. There are people in the world who live their lives without even the idea of budgeting time or worrying that they are wasting it" (165). From a different perspective, Dan Slobin argues that "research on linguistic relativity is incomplete without attention to the cognitive processes that are brought to bear, *online*, in the course of using language" (Slobin 2001: 2, his emphasis). Thus he notes that different languages require speakers to remember different information. We are familiar with the difference between English and French in the treatment of the second person (a difference found in many other languages). English pronoun choice does not tell us anything about the speaker's relationship to an addressee or to others in a narrative, while the French speaker's choice between familiar "tu" or more formal "vous" does. Some languages, Slobin notes, do not permit speakers simply to say something was behind something else, but rather "use absolute systems, in which, for example, one would say, 'There's a rabbit north of the tree,' or 'seaward from the tree,' rather than 'behind the tree'" (21). Thus people using particular linguistic systems become habituated to noting and remembering particular aspects of the social or physical world. Slobin points out, "It is unlikely that people experience events in their lives differently because of the language they speak. But events quickly become part of a personal narrative, and then language can begin to shape those memories" (21).

Several of these writers have examined the ethical consequences of our attitudes to language. Lakoff speaks against the idea that if we accept linguistic relativism, we are faced with ethical chaos: "Conceptual relativism of the sort that appears to exist does not rule out universal ethical standards of some sort–at least as far as I can determine. Nor does it seem to tell us very much about what such standards should be. However, a *refusal* to recognize conceptual relativism where it exists does have ethical consequences. It leads directly to conceptual elitism and imperialism–to the assumption that our behaviour is rational and that of other people is not, and to attempts to impose our way of thinking on others" (337).

Indeed Lucy makes the case that testing the ideas of linguistic relativism can lead us to insights about the ways in which our own naturalization of Western standard languages can blind us to certain ethical positions:

> Bloom, Cohn, Bourdieu, and others have noted that although this [Western] mode of rationalized, decontextualized discourse achieves certain advantages in terms of scientific theory construction, it brings concomitant disadvantages insofar as it separates speakers from sensitivity to actual situations. Such an alienation from concrete realities can result in failed ethical engagement and moral action in the world. The crucial point in this, of course, is that this mode of orientation to the world is now richly embodied in the lexical and grammatical structure of the language itself–especially in the standard language of the dominant class strata. And as Whorf noted long ago, speakers will, quite predictably, take the elements of their language as "natural" and "given" in the world. (61)

The history of linguistic imperialism is the whole focus of Alistair's Pennycook's *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (1998), which argues that views of English as a language are carried in a discourse of colonialism that sees English as the language of progress, reason and modernity (compare the newspaper comment I cited at the beginning of this paper as well as Parakrama 1995).

Although a great deal more can be (and has been) said on linguistic relativity versus universality, perhaps Deborah Cameron's remarks on this issue can provide perspective on why this discussion is valuable:

> Like "what is truth?" "how shall we live?," "does God exist?" and so forth, the question of language and reality is not generally posed in the hope that someone will come up with a definitive answer. The point of posing problems of this kind is not to find a solution so you can move on to something else; on the contrary, it is to enable conversation to continue on subjects we think important for the understanding of our condition. We deepen that understanding by reflecting on the questions themselves, and the last thing we need is for our reflections to be cut short by a scientist saying: "but we *know* the answer to that one." (156)

First Nations Writers and Language Beliefs

One does not have to speak a language fluently, or even know more than a few words, to deploy it to reveal one's cultural affiliations and legitimate one's right to assert cultural difference. Thus, Thomas King uses Cherokee headings in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994), even though he himself does not speak the language. That Tomson Highway uses Italian musical terms as section headings in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1999) asserts something else: that a fluent Cree speaker can also master the complexities of classical music. The political message of both authors is the same: we can master modern Western culture and claim our traditional culture at the same time, asserting a freedom to choose denied them by those who apply tests like the

so-called "pizza test"–you eat pizza, so you can't be Indian. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, one White character challenges Eli, a Blackfoot:

> You guys aren't real Indians anyway. I mean you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor."

> That's my profession. Being Indian isn't a profession.

> And you speak as good English as me.

> Better, said Eli. And I speak Blackfoot, too. My sisters speak Blackfoot. So do my nieces and nephew. (141)

Marilyn Dumont, a descendent of Gabriel Dumont who fought with Louis Riel against the encroachment of a Protestant English-speaking state at Red River, says of English, "it's had its hand over my mouth since my first day of school" (54) and turns around the usual insistence that standard English be the norm:

> my father doesn't read or write
> the King's English says he's
> dumb but he speaks Cree
> how many of you speak Cree?
> correct Cree not correct English (54)

Eden Robinson's first fiction collection, *Traplines* (1996), showed no evidence, apart from the title and the author's picture, that she is Aboriginal. She explicitly wanted to avoid the trap that awaits First Nations people in contemporary Canada: Either you are a traditional Indian, born on a trapline (as Tomson Highway actually was) or a modern pizza-eating Canadian. Her next novel, *Monkey Beach* (2000), asserts that she can be both. This novel is framed by the Haisla language: On the first page, Lisamarie wakes up to hear the crows who "sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake I hear them speak to me in Haisla. La'es, they say, La'es, la'es" (1). It is as if her world speaks Haisla, even though she does not have more than a fragmentary knowledge of it. Her grandmother tells her stories and she thinks "[b]ut to really understand the old stories, you had to speak Haisla. She would tell me a new Haisla word a day, and I'd memorize it. But, I thought dejectedly, even at one word a day, that was only 365 words a year, so I'd be an old woman by the time I could put sentences together" (Robinson 2000: 211). Her grandmother teaches her the word for an especially sweet blueberry that means "blueberry with white mould on it"–slightly disgusted, she tastes it. From then on, instead of throwing those berries out as spoiled, she sees that they are better than the others. These flips in perspective are the result of her learning to categorize differently through another language. At the end of the novel, she has a vision of her dead relatives: "They are blurry, dark figures against the firelight. For a moment, the singing becomes clear. I can understand the words, even though they are in Haisla, and it's a farewell song" (373-74). Tomson Highway writes from a modern Cree perspective,

where the aircraft landing in a remote northern community is described as landing "in flawless Cree" (187) and where conversations between the Cree characters and the ostensibly Cree-speaking priest make clear that "on matters sensual, sexual and therefore fun, a chasm as unbridgeable as hell separates Cree from English" (190). He repeatedly connects linguistic gender with sexuality. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, his character Gabriel says "if Native languages have no gender, then why should we?" (298). Many of his characters are gay–others are ambiguous, and his Trickster is sometimes gay. Certainly the Cree, like many other Native North American cultures, permitted, even encouraged or celebrated, a much wider range of sexual roles than traditional Western culture (Roscoe 1998). However, this has not been linked specifically to language. Will Roscoe, in *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, notes that "knowledge of berdaches' anatomical sex was never denied, and the sexual acts performed with them were recognized (with distinct terms) as different from heterosexual acts" (10). He also notes that "few [Western theorists of sexuality] have ever considered cross-cultural evidence; many show a marked disinclination for empirical evidence of any kind. Consequently, certain elements of Western beliefs and epistemology have been essentialized as universal features of human societies" (5). Presumably, more work on the connections between language and sexuality in Cree and other Native North American cultures might well support the connections that Highway asserts.

Language Beliefs and Language Revitalization

At one time I was rather skeptical about the promotion of language revival for the First Nations in Canada. At a little over 3% of the population (2001 Census, www.statcan.ca), Aboriginal people (defined as Indian, Inuit and Metis people of Canada, under the 1982 Constitution Act) are a small group. It seems language revival might simply work against pan-Aboriginal political action and continue a long history of "divide and conquer" tactics used against them. I believed in translatability and shared the resistance of many Chomskyan linguists to the idea that speaking a different language meant that one held a different world view. I noted that the Queen, a Jamaican taxi driver and I were all first language English speakers, and yet clearly held very different world views. I also felt the insistence of some First Nations speakers on language as a test of authenticity offensive– "If you don't speak Ojibway, you aren't Ojibway." Finally, I felt that the time and energy expended on language revival might be better put to use on a more direct attempt to change the colonial power structure. However, lately, I have begun to change my mind.

At the University of British Columbia, located on traditional Musqueam territory, we are now offering courses in the Musqueam dialect of Halq'eméylem, the Coast Salish language spoken from Yale to Vancouver, and on Vancouver Island from Malahat to Nanoose. The English words for

coho, sockeye–types of salmon–and for Sasquatch, come from Halq'eméylem. It has three dialects: only around a dozen speakers of all three survive. Tragically, the odds of reviving the language to the point that it becomes a first language for anyone ever again are minuscule, since the counterexample of Hebrew required a set of cultural and historical conditions that are unlikely to be replicated (see Harshav 1993). Nonetheless, Hebrew survived due to a wide range of uses that had great symbolic, religious and political importance, and it seems likely that the many endangered First Nations languages in Canada may survive to serve a variety of similar cultural purposes.

Already I have noticed that First Nations people do not announce that they are from a particular cultural group as they once might have done, but simply use a phrase in their language as a powerful assertion of cultural and political affiliation which identifies and legitimates simultaneously. For many, the process of learning their language provides healing of a traumatic break in families and communities caused by the imposition of English at residential schools. The actual process of language renewal means that Elders who are speakers become an even more precious cultural resource and integrates a huge amount of disconnected anthropological and linguistic research back into community life. For example, at Musqueam, there is now a website where one can hear the voices of people dead for many years telling stories that are used in the language program. Halq'eméylem is already being used more in ceremonies. Old ways of praying (holding hands), gesturing (raising both hands, palm up, from the elbows, in thanking others), and speaking in public are all now being revived or expanded. Halq'eméylem also now appears on fridge magnets, mouse pads, and calendars, produced in the community in order to integrate the distinctive alphabet used for the language into daily life. Students break down at graduation ceremonies as they try to explain how important the chance to take the course is to them, and their parents and grandparents are also taking them. The force of this use of one's indigenous language connects to Deborah Cameron's point about the importance of using non-sexist language, even though, as some have argued, this is unlikely in itself to change the thinking of sexist people:

> [T]he movement for so-called "politically correct" language does not threaten our freedom to speak as we choose, within the limits imposed by any social and public interaction. It threatens only our freedom to imagine that our linguistic choices are inconsequential, or to suppose that any one group of people has an inalienable right to prescribe them. (33)

In using their language, First Nations people assert their right to choose what language they speak against a history that forced them to speak English.

At the political level, the insistence on the need to teach the traditional language allows for better justification to the dominant society of the need for First Nations control over education from day care on up. In Canada, in fact, much of the work of making this argument has already been done by Quebec sovereigntists. This connection of sovereignty and language is almost inevitable in Canada–and a powerful political tool to legitimate identity at both the community and personal level.

Arguments derived from linguistic relativism can also be used in land claims. Just as Slobin notes that some languages require absolute orientation with respect to the directions or some physical aspect of the landscape, so Keith Basso notes of the Navajo (quoting Harry Hoijer) that "[e]ven the most minute occurrences are described by Navajos in close conjunction with their physical setting, suggesting that unless narrated events are spatially anchored their significance is somehow reduced and cannot be properly addressed" (Basso 1996: 45). The same is true of the Western Apache; he remarks "[l]osing the land is something the Western Apaches can ill afford to do, for geographical features have served the people for centuries as indispensable mnemonic pegs on which to hang the moral teachings of their history. Accordingly, such locations present themselves as instances of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called chronotopes. As Bakhtin describes them, chronotopes are 'points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse'"(Basso 1996: 62).

It is the job of humanists, those who believe language has functions beyond one-to-one mapping between word and thing and who believe that equality does not mean that everyone should become the same (that is, like us) to continue to examine how language connects to culture without assuming that standard English is the place to start. For First Nations peoples, that is too much like the perspective of colonial administrators. Of course it is far more time-consuming to study languages comparatively, but it is not a waste of time for those who believe in the importance of working transculturally.

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