ON GRAMMAR AND REALITY

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Abstract: The search for answers about the connection between language and thought, represented so well by the German philosophers in past centuries all the way down to Wilhelm von Humboldt, and revisited with moderate success by the American linguistics of the 40's, seems to have found an unprecedented enthusiasm in today's cognitive psychology and elsewhere. Outlandish claims about language (native or foreign) are flooding the public space. The present paper focuses on such a claim by Vietnamese-born American Classicist and author Phuc Tran.

Keywords: language determinism, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Neo-Whorfianism, grammatical categories, reality.

That thinking determines language is evident and objectively demonstrable. The reciprocal not so much. The connection between language and thought has been an enduring topic ever since Leibniz, in German philosophy, and was carried on (among others) by American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, in the first half of the 20th century. Sapir's *linguistic relativity*, the so-called weaker version of the hypothesis, was addressed in a paper given by the linguist in 1928. It basically claims that, since we categorize reality with the help of language, in the process of language acquisition a whole view upon the world is also transmitted to us after birth. While Sapir seems to have in mind mostly the vocabulary of a language, Whorf, his student and follower, makes a stronger claim in his *linguistic determinism* according to which grammar shapes our ideas and perception of reality.

The interdisciplinarity of present times has brought about a revived interest in Whorfianism: in her papers and speeches, cognitive psychologist Lera Boroditsky claims that even the smallest aspects of language can influence our perception of reality; thus, in gendered languages, speakers' thinking about inanimate entities would be influenced by the grammatical gender attributed to them, masculine or feminine (it is all the more interesting, then, to see a genderless language, like English, having to take the blame for the binary-gender issue allegedly at the root of today's linguistic/social activism in the U.S.). Experiments on *duration* (also carried out by other scholars, like Bylund and Athanasopoulos) would demonstrate that the way in which we experience time depends on our language habits, therefore it differs among cultures.

Behavioral economist Keith Chen and his Yale team claim to have found a direct connection between one's mother tongue and their money-saving capacity: speakers of languages lacking distinctive morphemes for *tense* in their grammars would experience time as a continuum. Not having sharp distinctions between past, present and future (i.e. the Chinese, who use invariant forms of verbs and indicate tense *only* by adverbs of time) makes speakers fail to dissociate *time* accordingly. Therefore, they allegedly save money more easily in comparison with speakers of languages with rich systems of tense-marking, who see the future as something distant, very different from the present,

inviting one *not* to start saving money (in the meantime I fail to grasp *the logic* of saving money - something that one does *for the future* - if time is perceived as a continuum hence the future is just a fuzzy concept).

While the graphs they present and the factors and variables they take into account in their projects and experiments are quite impressive, one cannot help but wonder when the line between gender and sex, or between tense and time, vanished. When did grammatical categories start being taken for existential ones, when has language started to be seen as a direct means of representation of reality? I have followed the subject pretty closely[1] and noticed a development in the theory: if, originally, the hypothesis referred strictly to one's *mother tongue*, in recent years a pervasive influence on our perception of reality has been attributed to *foreign languages*. All too often do I read in the social media about the promise that, by learning a different verbal system, one can become attuned to realities one never dreamed before and will begin to see the world differently. This may have started out as a marketing strategy, I do not know, but when academics take it up, one becomes alarmed.

One suchlike claim, although 9 years old, got my attention just recently: in a TEDx Conference from 2012, Phuc Tran, a distinguished polyglot, author, and teacher of classical languages, speaks about his struggle in the U.S. as a child-immigrant from Vietnam. He and his parents narrowly escaped death in Saigon back in 1975, and had to adjust to a very different environment and language. Learning the English verbal moods, especially the subjunctive, brought about a new way of thinking, according to the author. Commonly and generally recognised by grammars as functionally opposed, the indicative (mood of factuality) and the subjunctive (mood of potentiality) are nothing but grammatical means of conveying a speaker's attitude towards the utterance, but Phuc Tran sees them as two forces of the real world.

Thus, the subjunctive is like a "time-space dream machine" that allows us to mentally travel into the past and imagine things that might have happened, but also into the future, for things that could happen. He confessed to thinking a lot about what might have happened to their family if they had not fled Saigon, a process unavailable to his father simply because there is no subjunctive in the Vietnamese language to allow for such thinking. And "the indicative does not really allow us to imagine at all". "Alternative realities" are unknown and unreachable to such speakers, constrained by their linguistic systems. They may feel whatever is triggered by such situations, but they do not have the language to express it, says Tran. The good news is that, having to rely on "the indicativeness of Vietnamese", they lack the capacity of "grasping concepts based on possibility", which is where their resilience in the New World came from.

Phuc Tran's teenage depression is attributed to what he terms as "the dark side of the subjunctive": together with hope there came regret, as potentiality goes two ways in time. His TED talk is, according to him, an offering of a grammatical lense through which the audience can view their own world and experience. At the end of it, he

[1] Cuțitaru, Laura Carmen. Why Neo-Whorfian Developments Do Not Work. In **Selected Papers of the International Conference "Constructions of Identity 9".** Adrian Radu & Octavian More (eds.) Cluj Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2019.

mentions the annual Gallup International survey on feelings of optimism among nations, conducted the previous year, 2011, when Vietnam ranked first because the inhabitants did not have „a language to let them obsess over the idea of *could have been*". The most pessimistic one was France, because they speak "a language with two subjunctives". However, that optimism in life cannot be attributed to native tongues can easily be noticed in the same survey: the one issued in December 2019, declared Albania as the most optimistic country (with a net score of 61)[2], while Vietnam dropped (to a net score of 48). The irony is that, in Albanian, the subjunctive mood is well represented: with its four tenses (present, imperfect, present perfect, and past perfect)[3], it surpasses the French one, mentioned by Tran.

His other claims, however, can only be debunked by using commonsense. If we look at the English subjunctive from a native's perspective, we see that English speakers are hardly aware they are using it, since it lacks markers of its own (like verbal endings to signal it). Because most of its forms can be taken for something else (short infinitive or present indicative, for example), ordinary speakers of English, with no linguistic knowledge about moods, when they do meet with utterances like *I wish I **were***, feel them as anomalous, and regulate the language by replacing them with indicative forms: *I wish I **was***; instead of saying *No matter how nice she **may be***, they prefer *No matter how nice she **is***. Possible utterances like *My suggestion that he (should) go...* are hardly used, while equivalents (with preposition and long infinitive, i.e. *My suggestion **for him to go...***) are always favoured. And examples, not from grammar books but from real life speech, could go on, demonstrating that, far from being the all-powerful mood depicted by Tran, the English subjunctive is marginalized to the point of extinction.

The subjunctive cannot take the blame for depression and regret, I am sure the Vietnamese society has its share of negative feelings. That they do not *speak* about them, if this really is the case, doing well in international surveys on happiness, may rather be a cultural thing. Expression of feelings differs among cultures in degree, as it is a matter of social acceptability. American linguist Daniel Everett identified a principle called *immediacy of experience* in the culture of the Piraha tribe in Brazil, that makes these people avoid speaking about those who died. They *can* speak about them, of course, but they choose not to, due to this cultural constraint on their grammar. In the meantime, a superficial observer might conclude they do not have the linguistic tools to speak about the dead. I believe any language provides its speakers with whatever is relevant for them to express, and, if unsatisfied, they can always help themselves to what they need from other languages.

Language is just a tool by which a culture makes itself known to those who learn it. It is obviously the American culture that enabled Phuc Tran to free his thinking and start imagining a future for himself, because freedom and the search for happiness are at the core of this culture. That language *can* influence thought is true, but when we say something like this we must be careful what it is exactly that we mean by *language*. I do

[2] https://iiacss.org/global-happiness-and-hope-index/
[3] https://www.languagesgulper.com/eng/Albanian.html

not believe it can be *langue* (in Saussurian terms) - the mental system, the psychological reality of *langage* -, but only *parole* (speech). Speech does influence our thinking (otherwise propaganda could not work). The hard part of this dilemma, the one that truly makes (Neo)Whorfianism hard to prove *or* disprove, is the mutual dependence between the two: whatever is in *langue* comes from *parole*, and viceversa, and one can only separate them as theoretical notions. The circularity of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (language ↔ thinking) is a reflection of the circularity of these two linguistic concepts.

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