Whorf and His Aftermath Revisited

Sarin CIUTACU

Abstract

Whorf claims that any thought process takes place within the boundaries of a language, that each language fleshes out a worldview and that the world views structured by languages or, at least, the language families differ greatly. Whorf shrouds his view on world views in a metaphysical mystery which makes up the gist of his epistemic paradigm of cultural relativism. The paper sets out to discuss some of the tenets and conclusions of Whorfs views, unveiling their traces into the contemporary linguistics and philosophy and expounds Whorf's staunch relativistic creed, reviews the arguments against his position and appraises the arguments for a soft version relativistic version of the theory. We call aftermath the array of positions taken up by those who prove and disprove linguistic relativism alike. The author of the paper sets forth his own soft version of linguistic relativism called perspectivism, which permeates the entire linguistic field and is tightly linked up with cognition and cognitive paradigm approaches.

Key-words: whorfianism, arguments, soft relativism, universals, encapsulation, modules, perspectivism.

1. Introduction

The paper expounds Benjamin Whorf's staunch relativistic creed, reviews the arguments against his position and appraises the arguments for a soft version relativistic version of the theory. I call aftermath the array of positions taken up by those who prove and disprove linguistic relativism alike. The author of the paper calls his own soft version of linguistic relativism perspectivism, which permeates the entire linguistic field and is tightly linked up with cognition and cognitive paradigm.

Whorf claims that any thought process takes place within the boundaries of a certain language. He also says that any language fleshes out a world outlook and that the outlooks determined by these languages differ or the language families differ: the greater the differences are among these languages, the greater the differences are in the outlooks or world views. This is the outset of a wide range of theoretical views within
the realm of linguistic relativity hypothesis some endorsed by empirical investigation and some other belied by them.

Whorf himself is not highly consistent with his claims throughout his works. In some instances he merely claims that language influences the world view. In other instances he uses another wording: "Language moulds the ideas, it is the programme and the guide of the individual’s mental activity." His former professor, Edward Sapir, considers that language is imposed upon experience. The upshot thereof is that these differences among languages lead up to incommensurable or mutually incomprehensible world views" (Whorf, 1967).

Whorf even goes to extremes saying that a certain language forces its speakers to think in a certain way and constrains the world views, that a language implies ties that cannot be severed, that these differences lead to unoverridable incommensurability. Sapir claims that we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." But difference of perception yields differences in world views: “the fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent “unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with different labels attached to them” (Devitt and Sterelny, 1999).

2. Arguments in favour of relativism

What the relativists are right about is the fact that the vocabulary of a language impinges upon thought in a certain way. This specific way of action has not been conceptualised yet and, consequently ironically enough, we still do not have the suitable meta-language. The precise way of action still remains shrouded in epistemic mystery nearing the status of a metaphysical "Ding-an-sich".

The perception of colours in connection with colours cognition has been a testing ground for the linguistic relativism hypothesis over the past 40 years. Relativists claim that perception is deemed to be theory-laden as it entails the action of our concepts, norms, beliefs, principles and expectations.

Another argument cherished by relativists says that semantic holism or incommensurability purports that the meanings produced by the uttering of a human being are also framed by the role played by the uttering against the background of his culture. Paul Feyerabend, a philosophical whorfianist, speaking of incommensurable alternative frameworks underlines the fact that: “given the appropriate stimuli, but
different systems of classifications (different mental sets) our perceptual apparatus may produce perceptual objects which cannot be easily compared” (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (SEP), there are another three arguments supporting relativism: normative relativism is best explanation, normative relativism is valid through the nature of justification and the master argument is expounded for normative relativism. The scope of the paper does not allow us to further delve into these details.

Relativists are right at least for the mere fact that we find it more convenient to use ready-made and ready-packed concepts rather than making up new ones. Concepts come into being due to convention or borrowing. The science of terminology deals with lots of such cases. Language exists and impinges upon thought, but it does not precede thought and neither does it hinder thought in an absolute way.

If these Whorfian differences were unoverridable, translation between widely different languages would be impossible. Translation is possible, but it is never a perfect job. Virtually anything can be translated, maybe at the expense of a lengthier paraphrase and at the expense of some unavoidable meaning losses and of some not bargained for gains. This can spell a daunting task for the translator, but it does not spell a mission impossible. However, any attempt at translating poetry is a foregone conclusion in that it is doomed to imperfection.

Whorf holds that syntax structures the way in which we perceive the world. He uses the example of an ad-hoc meta-concept: “Standard Average European” or SAE, which globally describes the European languages evincing hardly any significant cognitive difference among them. Whorf spells out his principles of relativity asserting that “all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe unless their backgrounds are similar or can in some way be calibrated [...] The relativity of all conceptual systems, our included, and their dependence upon language stand revealed” (Whorf, 1967).

By means of this SAE meta-concept, Whorf claims that we reify TIME. We quantify time as we quantify physical objects:” X days” is formally similar to “X’ books; we divide time into: past/present/future. In short, we look upon time as a spatially reified metaphor.

He now turns to Hopi for comparison. Quantification is different, there is tripartition and the temporal markers lend themselves to epistemic interpretation: direct relation, expectation, nomic aspect. This prompts Whorf’s metaphysics: “Western science has not freed itself from the illusory necessities of common logic which are only at bottom necessities of grammatical pattern in Western Aryan grammar (e.g.)
necessities for substances which are only necessities for substantives in certain sentence positions.” This leads Whorf to show his leaning towards descriptive relativism and to hold that some languages yield more precise worldviews than others do. He even claims that Hopi worldview was superior to the SAE worldview.

Whorf claims that there are incommensurable differences between Hopi and SAE. Nothing points out to the utter untranslatablility from Hopi into SAE. Chomsky strongly claims that there are semantic universals common to all languages. Chomsky (1972:27-30) distinguishes between formal universals and substantive universals. The formal universals are “universal rules of logical structure”, i.e. they are overall features typifying the building frames of language. The substantive universals are the “universal categories of conceptual content” seen as the basic elements and components any language includes.

3. Arguments against relativism

If formal universals concern grammar as “they involve rather the character of the rules that appear in grammars and the ways in which they can be interconnected”, the substantive universals seem to refer to semantics as “these concern the vocabulary for the description of a language”. Chomsky also claims that the verbal tenses are surface structure phenomena and throws in another argument, and namely that of the Language Acquisition Device that pleads against relativism (see Chomsky, 1972).

This implies that a child has innate linguistic predispositions which accommodate the rather scarce input from the child’s environment and augment it to an amazingly high output: the child’s ability to speak a certain language, i.e. the acquisition of a very complex internalised grammar. Thus it is from his environment that a child picks up this ability to tell sentences from non-sentences and to understand and produce an unbounded amount of sentences he has never heard before.

It follows that, given the scarcity of the data, one can only attain the right kind of theory (internal grammar) regarding the gathered data only if one has some inborn leanings of inductive nature to construct one theory rather than another one. If we think that any child is a potential learner of any language we are led to admit that this inborn language acquisition device ought to set certain limitations on which of the array of logically possible languages are humanly feasible to learn (see also Lyons, 1977).

If the characteristics of languages are conditioned by these inborn leanings under the spell of a language acquisition device it follows that the wide differences between languages postulated by the hard-line relativists become less warranted. But milder positions on the topic are not thus ruled out.
Leech (1981) puts forward his near-universals referring to features used in semantics. We conclude that the influence of syntax on thought is common-place and is not by far unoverridable. We admit that certain features related to syntax or vocabulary may influence perception or thought. Thus colour perception, classification or long-term memory availability are moot points. The work of E. Malotki (see Malotki, 1983. *Hopi Time: A Linguistic Analysis of Temporal Concepts in the Hopi Language*) proves Whorf's strongest claims to be wrong.

Several arguments as put forward by the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (SEP) speak against relativism. Opponents of relativism say that perception is not completely theory laden, thus introducing a degree factor. They invoke the argument that man has a leaning towards the perception of a thing in a certain manner conditioned by the discipline of one's mind. Man strives to think in a functional, efficient manner. However, they also admit that there are no neutral, 'pure sense data' and that humans fall short of knowing precisely how much bearing perception has on the concepts and beliefs.

Another argument against relativism refers to the epistemic attitude of semantic realism. Following Putnam, one claims that reference and meaning lead an existence also outside the mind. Thus "the meanings of certain words are at least partially individuated by environmental and social factors (something like the chemical structure XYZ)". Putnam means to say that meanings entail the existence of features in an objective, non-relativistic world that makes for the overall sense and thoughts (see SEP).

Other arguments against relativism regard the relation between cognitive architecture and cognitive universals. If these universals come in the form of predispositions or inborn leanings, they cover the domain of language or cognition or culture. Chomsky and Leech have adduced these arguments to speak against relativism or at least against the hard version of it. And last but not least, the opponents of relativism quoting Quine claim that there are no facts of the matter about concepts and beliefs and wonder if there are no concepts or beliefs how clusters of concepts or beliefs can differ on account of their concepts or beliefs and how can such discourse on the relativity of concepts and beliefs take shape (see SEP).

The empirical work done on colour perception and cognition in the past 40 years disproves the strong claim of linguistic relativism. Nothing in the physics of colours imposes certain spectrum segmentations whereas the theory of colour vision bears out the existence of neuro-physiological phenomena in human beings having a bearing on the modes in which humans perceive colours. No similar inborn device that we are aware of exists to guide thought about social issues, e.g., down some pre-
ordained paths. This does not rule out the existence of potential likeness across cultures evinced by the manners in which human beings think about such things but that is unfortunately impossible to derive from the mere study on colour perception and cognition.

4. Fodor’s “modularity of mind”

Fodor (1983) allows for the possibility of linguistic modules influencing thought in unexplored ways as there is no mental modularity for higher mental processes unlike for perception modules.

Modular encapsulation implies that other areas of the brain cannot have a bearing on its inner mechanism even if it does not rule out the fact that these areas can send inputs to the brain and benefit from its outputs.

In *The Modularity of Mind* (1983) Fodor sets out his outlook concerning the mind which sees it in three different modes. First, there are *transducers* – i.e. the senses which connect us to the outer world and with the operations which Fodor leaves out (partly for the motives set forth in a study on 'Methodological Solipsism' in his book *Representations*). Second and third, there are *input systems* and *central systems*, which stand out through their being modular and non-modular systems respectively. Modular systems evince three differentiating features (see also SEP).

First, modules operate with only one kind of cognitive material; they evince specificity for the field implying for example that the auditory input system only deals with representations of objects in the auditory field. Second, when modules “reckon out’ a certain a value for what the output of a transducer represents, they can only fall back on a confined amount of information encapsulated in the module - each module cannot, or cannot easily, reach every bit of background information which might prompt one if, for example, what one hears is a symphony or background noise.

Informational encapsulation permits modules to work very quickly and in a manner in which introspection is unfortunately barred from access. Third, each module has a neuro-anatomical location so that putting out of use of a modularly specialised area of the brain may lead up to the disappearance of that particular kind of ability, as in aphasia. Having these three features in mind, Fodor claims that the perceptual systems and language are modular input - systems.

Moreover, Fodor states that the mind has also central systems, which are non-modular regarding each of the three defining features. Fodor claims against the general assumption in artificial intelligence that central processes of thinking and belief
formation are not specialised to particular subject field, but are rather deemed to belong to general intelligence.

They can fall back on anything the mind encompasses in order to solve an issue or think about an event. Their staple trade lies in their being capable of harnessing the so-called analogical reasoning highly essential in epistemology. Fodor prompts us that they are not situated in a certain brain area implying that there exists no thought centre on the pattern of a speech centre location.

Fodor also claims that we might sometimes be afforded insight into the workings of the input system. However central systems workings deny our possibility of knowing them on account of their highly complex definitions. The situation might spell out why modularisation of artificial intelligence activities involving the central systems seems to be doomed to failure. From the point of view of Fodor, the artificial intelligence specialists have committed errors by “dividing intellectual capacities into quite arbitrary sub-departments” as they lose sight of holism which permeates the central system.

The upshot leads us into another moot point. Fodor considers language as an item among the input systems balking at the view of language processing as an operation relying on inferential processes and background knowledge both on an intensive and extensive basis.

5. Perspectivism as soft relativism

In order to untie the epistemic knot into which such arrays of “for and against” arguments have led us, we suggest a soft version of relativism which is detectable in sundry language domains and which we call perspectivism. We shall only drop a few hints at how we envisage this term.

In this respect we understand by perspectivism a means of gaining access to the world just to quote Nietzsche as seen by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (McCreary, 1995). Man is called upon to grant meaning to the world around him, which is likened to a framework and the very order and interpretation granted by each human being shape a whole host of worlds standing in for what we metaphysically name the real world.

Perspective is with Nietzsche an aperture upon the world where one can act and interpret. Perspective is with Merleau-Ponty the interpretation of the world which is the background against which human beings live. Perspective is a *sine qua non* function of the mind allowing one to perform interpretations.
Let us give some examples. When we analyse and compare various languages we find different word orders in syntax which entail, e.g., different perspectives in using the theme-rheme constructions which, in their turn reveal something about the construal of concepts. The use of passive voice betrays specific pragmatic or discourse strategies and the use of prepositions entails certain perspectives or modes of concepts construal deconstructed through cognitive schemata.

Different semantic features typify different concept construal perspectives or modes in different languages and vocabularies of different languages cast a different perspective on the classification of things. Last but not least, metaphors afford specific insights or perspectives into the construal of concepts in different languages and are the fundamental bricks in cognitive linguistics.

References