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## LINGUISTICS AS A CULTURAL ACTIVITY

John L. Sorenson

Historians and sociologists of science have intimated for years that the supposedly objective activity and data of science are shaped to a significant degree by the setting in which the scientists lived. It remained for Thomas Kuhn<sup>2</sup> some 15 years ago to state the viewpoint in such terms that large numbers of scientists realized the significance of the point: science is a sociocultural phenomenon, not merely an abstract, idealistic search for truth.

My own field, anthropology, came under scrutiny in this self-awareness inducing manner some time ago. In a 1964 paper analyzing the power structure of the American Anthropological Association, I noted the aptness of the name anthropology--the anthropological study of anthropology itself as a sociocultural system.<sup>4</sup> Most recently Roy Wagner has caused tremors in conventional anthropology with a discussion of "the invention of anthropology."<sup>5</sup>

Wagner argues that "an anthropologist calls the situation he is studying 'culture' first of all so that he can understand it in familiar terms, so he knows how to deal with and control his experience... Whether he knows it or not, and whether he intends it or not, his 'safe' act of making the strange familiar always makes the familiar a little bit strange. And the more familiar the strange becomes, the more and more strange the familiar will appear. It is a kind of game, if you will, a game of pretending that the ideas and conventions of other peoples are the same (in one broadly conceived way or another) as our own so that we can see what happens when we 'play' our own concepts through the lives and actions of others.... He invents 'a culture' for people, and they invent 'culture' for him." (5, p. 11) By this view anthropology is mainly a creative or expressive activity similar to the creative representation which an artist puts on canvas; it is definitely not more documentary photography.

Clearly enough, when we ask ourselves the introspective question, what is my profession really up to, the answers can be as disturbing as when one becomes genuinely introspective about oneself. Yet a profession needs to consider these issues lest its participants fail to realize and transcend the implicit constrictors on their perception and thought which bind us all.

The question may then be phrased, why do linguists carry on the activity they term linguistics? What are they up to? Can it be fruitfully interpreted and clarified as a cultural activity?

At one level of consideration these questions could be answered, in part of course, with reference to the social structure in which linguists live and carry on their activity. They are organized in power and status relationships according to a distinct code of values and operational rules.

The fact that the dominant body of linguists are academicians, who operate in an ecological setting in which their quarry is texts has to be significant. (Perhaps the image is more apt that they live like foragers, constantly searching the landscape for a choice, deeply-hidden tuber or a rare fruit to enjoy in a circle around the fire.) Their motor activities are speaking and writing, not doing. Their messages are intended for peers or subordinates concerned only with operating in the structure of roles quite familiar to all of them. Individuals are judged worthy of esteem to the extent that they show that they are rational, logical, critical, orderly, and so on. Success goes not to the strong, the esthetically sensitive, the patient, nor even the verbose, but to the clever, in which cleverness means the ability to play verbal games skillfully with analytical markers moving on a board composed of texts. Rewards, power, followers, supporters, mustering for "war," and the like can be used by analogy to construct a picture giving some insight into what linguists do.

My concern here, however, will be more in terms of a cultural rather than a social structural discussion. What can the world view of linguists, particularly as manifested in their language, tell us about the tendencies and constraints within which they work? Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir are the names which come directly to mind when such an effort is essayed. I suppose, with Sapir, 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." (1, p. 134) a common vulgarization of this position blames Sapir and Whorf with claiming that language determines patterns of thought. That is not what either said. They said "predisposes," and the position seems sound to me. Then let us look at how some language features among linguists indeed seem to predispose certain choices in their interpretations.

Whorf considered that the European languages mainly share a conceptual framework and express an implicit picture of the world which is sufficiently uniform that they can be treated in common. He terms the composite Standard Average European (SAE). His characterization of SAE notes the fundamental nature of the spatial metaphor. Durations, intensities, and tendencies are communicated in terms of spatial extension, that is, size, number, position, shape and motion. Thus long, short, large, light, high, grow, turn, go, come, fall, stop "and so on through an almost inexhaustible list of metaphors that we hardly recognize as such, since they are virtually the only linguistic media available." (1, p. 145)

In particular we emphasize the metaphor of time laid out in a row. We see in our imagination points or "pieces" of time as it were standing in a row or laid out along a path. This image is associated, it would appear, with our civilization's heavy reliance on calendars, records, bookkeeping, clocks, and so on. In turn we place heavy reliance on time as a commodity, rent, interest, depreciation, schedules, and budgets, and perhaps in related manner with birthdays, diaries, and biography.

Another characteristic of SAE noted by Whorf is a form-plus-substance dichotomy. He said, "The SAE microcosm has analyzed reality largely in terms of what it calls 'things' (bodies and quasibodies) plus modes of extensional but formless existence that it calls 'substances' or 'matter'...."

Nonspatial existents are imaginatively spatialized and charged with similar implications of form and continuum." (1, p. 147) Thus for example we speak of a glass of water, a stick of wood, or a flake of snow. The poetic concept of "time in a bottle" is less absurd in SAE, although in some other cultures it would be beyond meaning. Whorf goes on to claim that the form-plus-substance dichotomy has supported traditional aspects of the western European world view--materialism, the mind-matter dichotomy, Newtonian physics, a dualistic view of the universe in general, and perhaps even our concept of discrete social classes. Explanation in SAE demands our dividing indivisible phenomena by a process of abstraction into distinct units or "things"--a moment of time, a pattern of culture, and an utterance of speech. Then we string these units into a "causal" sequence on the assumption that time is "like a ribbon or scroll" on which causes necessarily precede effects. In contrast our limited ability to handle simultaneity is suggested by the vagueness of the terms "correlation," "factor" and "parameter." Caught up in this pattern of sequential thinking, we then manufacture justificatory myths about how difficult it is to understand Einsteinian relativity, and we struggle with the concept of eternity or the possibility that God might simultaneously know "all things".

The naive response from within the framework of our own tradition says, "but that is the way time, space and substance really are." However, the anthropologists long since reported hundreds of alternative world views which do not look at time, space and substance in this way, although the adherents to those competing views are equally confident that their systems are the correct frameworks for expressing "how things really are."

I must reiterate for clarity's sake that I do not believe some "thing" called "language" is determinately forcing another "thing", "culture", along a single path from which there is no escape. The phenomena we term language and culture overlap of course. And while either category exerts predisposing influence on humans and on "each other", rigid determinism is obviously an overstatement.

Is the state of affairs different in other human contexts where language and culture are unlike our own European tradition? Whorf took the example of Hopi as an alternative language and system of categorization. He demonstrated that some of the emphases of SAE which I mentioned above are absent in Hopi, which has its own emphases. Hopi underlines a concern with "preparing." This is connected with the idea of "eventing," in which events are "considered the expression of invisible intensity factors, on which depend their stability and persistence, or their fugitiveness and proclivities." Existents are not thought to "become later and later" in a similar time-moving way; each existent has within it its own mode of duration, whether growth, decline, stability, cyclicity or creativeness. What something is or will be results from preparing with emphasis on that situation rather than on the time relations involved. "An emphasis and importance rests on this preparing or being prepared aspect of the world that may to the Hopi correspond" to the significance which "matter" or "stuff" has for SAE speakers. This mode of thinking leads to concern for "the cumulative value of innumerable small momenta." Thus "to the Hopi, for whom time is not a motion but a 'getting later' of everything that has ever been done, unvarying repetition is not wasted but accumulated." (1, p. 151)

Whether Whorf's discussion of Hopi is precisely accurate is not nearly so important as the fact that both world view and the language in which it is expressed can and do differ from people to people. Major differences seem to exist in the facility in which SAE speakers on the one hand or Hopi speakers on the other are able to consider and express perceptions of a thought concerning various phenomena. Thought worlds or metaphorical sets do differ drastically, and the language media available for considering phenomena in terms of those worlds are not congruent with each other, even though they overlap.

Let us look now at linguistics as an activity and at linguists as in some degree a people sharing a similar view of the world.

One common paradigm of the concerns of linguists says that their overall intent is to provide an explanatory link between speech and meaning--an understanding of the process of moving from the one to the other. Among the more common concepts which are supposed to be involved in this process are the chain composed of phonology, syntax, and semantics. These tend to be seen as a sequence in time, as though humans were digital computers in which process necessarily means sequence. The linguistic view is, further, that almost momentary segments of this sequence can be "frozen," taken out for leisurely dissection in a rational manner, and assigned an ordered place in the sequence. Thus a single text (in the older linguistics, from an external informant; in the newer, from oneself as informant) may be handled logically, rationally, "objectively," and "scientifically," though often with a touch of devoted tenderness or connoisseurship as though one were handling a jewel.

Naturally this sketch of linguistics is oversimplified, as must be the case when one describes any complex activity. Yet Whorf might have noted some interesting predispositions involved here stemming in part from language, had he considered the possibility that his discipline could become the subject of his analysis.

The idea that phonology, syntax and semantics constitute a sequence or row or chain clearly agrees with SAE's tendency to build such a model. That language in practice actually operates by such sequential segments is not demonstrated, probably is not demonstrable, and is intuitively unlikely. (It is just as unlikely as the model of "scientific method" which holds that scientists proceed down the path recognizing a single problem, posing a hypothesis, designing its test, gathering data, applying the test, etc. Anybody who has seriously engaged in science knows that the idealized sequence has about as much relation to what scientists actually do as the story of the stork delivering babies has to do with birth.)

The spatial metaphor is so obvious in the case of "surface structure" and "deep structure" that perhaps no comment is necessary. Surely the difficulty which Chomsky and other transformationalists have had in translating his stimulating, loose metaphor into operational form probably relates to the fact that while we intuitively feel good about the deep-surface metaphor as SAE speakers expectably would, we do not have the linguistic and conceptual tools to explicate it.

Karl Pribram's summary of the new picture of how the brain works offers a way to see the kind of thing we have been missing by sticking too closely to the "natural" SAE orientations. In a recent interview in Psychology Today<sup>3</sup> Pribram notes the futility of previous efforts to understand how the brain integrates images. All the explanations essentially supposed the brain to be a processor of enchaind stimuli/response sequences or at least some type of units. Pribram notes that "Scientists are always trying to be objective, to work with objects and particles and things. But in quantum physics, particles don't act only like objects, they also behave as if they were wave forms." Now development of lasers and the holographic images they permit allows our thinking along new, virtually counter-intuitive lines. (What is more contrary to the basic SAE spatial expectation than a "picture" which allows one to "go around behind it" and still be a "picture?") To think of the brain functioning in some ways like the technology producing these images strains our persisting terminology and routines of thought, demanding "swimming up the stream," as it were.

If we look at the relation of the older, descriptive linguistics to transformational linguistics, we see an incomplete revolution. Descriptive linguistics straightforwardly took an atomistic, partitive, analytic view of its subject, supposing that language could be successfully chopped into pieces as a way to "understand" it. Once we had the phonemes, then came the morphemes, and tomorrow the whole language. The thinking was parallel to that which calls for dissecting a frog in order to understand it. It is all very agreeable to what Whorf considers the predispositions of SAE speakers.

Chomsky felt the need for a drastic revision in the scheme because the former paradigm lacked sufficient power to do what he wanted. Yet to a substantial degree his newer paradigm fell still into the bramble patch of SAE. Thus his "deep" and "surface", the metaphor remaining blatantly spatial.

I have tried to think what would a linguistics be which was cast in thought and language other than SAE. What, for example, would a Hopi linguistics be? I do not control the language so I cannot know, but based on Whorf's treatment of it, we might suppose that utterances would not necessarily be viewed as strings of sound which must be cut into pieces to be analyzed separately. I suspect that if someone were to look in Chinese writings on the nature of language, out of that long tradition of scholarship with a different world view, the rudiments of another linguistics might appear. Perhaps the Arabic tradition too has a basis for a distinct view of language.

I have been talking about culture, essentially, the culture of linguists. Since the entire tradition of modern linguistics has developed among SAE speakers (or else those from other cultures who have been heavily westernized in relation to scholarship), I have necessarily dealt with the European civilization tradition.

I do not wish to press Whorf's ideas as doing more than giving some insights. Certainly the limitations of language can be transcended, but I suspect only at significant cost. Linguists may do well to be alert to

the possibility that they are engaged in a task which is inherently limited by factors which they had not considered. Does the fish know the water?

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