LINGUISTIC APPROACH: DOES LANGUAGE SHAPE THOUGHTS?

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Languages differ dramatically from one another in terms of how they describe the world. Each language differs from the next in numerous ways: from obvious differences in pronunciation and vocabulary to more subtle differences in grammar. It is interesting to analyze whether having different ways of describing the world leads speakers of different languages also to have different ways of thinking about the world.

Cross-cultural wordplay.

Let us take the following statement: 'the elephant ate the peanuts'. We must include tense in English to show that the event happened in the past. In Indonesian and Mandarin, indicating when the event occurred would be optional and could not be included in the verb. In Russian, the verb would need to include tense and also whether the peanut-eater was male or female (though only in the past tense.) In Turkish, one would specify (as a suffix on the verb) whether the eating of the peanuts was seen by anyone or if it was hearsay. It appears that speakers of different languages have to attend to different aspects of the world in order to use their language properly.

The Metaphor TIME as SPACE across languages.

In the way languages describe spatial locations considerable cross linguistic differences were noted. Whereas most languages (e.g. English, Dutch, Russian) rely heavily on relative spatial terms to describe the relative locations of objects (e.g. left/right, front/back), Tzeltal (a Mayan language) relies mainly on absolute reference (a system similar to the English north/south direction system). Spatial locations that are north are said to be downhill, and those south are said to be uphill.

Languages also differ from one another on their descriptions of time. While all languages use spatial terms to talk about time (e.g. 'looking forward to seeing you', falling behind schedule'), different languages use different spatial terms. We will look at the following dimensions of space and their

metaphorical influence on time: orientation of the time-line, position of times relative to the observer, and time as motion.

Direction of the time-line. In metaphorising time as space we have to take into consideration that while time is usually illustrated as one line, the time-line, space has three dimensions with 3 axes: a horizontal, a vertical and a lateral axes. We can see these orientations of time in expressions such as ’the weeks ahead of us’ or ’the worst is behind us’. In Western cultures, the front-back orientation dominates in temporary scenes. We do not see a vertical or lateral movement in expressions such as ’this coming week’ or ’the days gone by’, or ’the following week’, we do not imagine a month approaching from above or from the left side. In Eastern languages, on the contrary, for example, in Chinese, the vertical axes commonly conceptualizes time. Earlier times are viewed as ’up’ and later times as ’down’. Thus ’shànyuè’ (up.month) means last month and ’xiàyuè’ (down.month) means next month.

Position of times relative to the observer. The pattern mainly found across languages is that of the horizontal time axes and, especially in Western languages, of the future as being in front of an imaginary observer. The following descriptions of static situations illustrate our standard arrangement with the future in front of us and the past behind us: ’I can’t see the future’, ’troubles lie ahead’, or, ’I am looking forward to seeing you’. As for the past: ’that’s all behind us now’ or ’that was way back in 1900’.

The future may also be seen as lying behind and the past as lying in front of the observer. The logic of this arrangement is that we can ’see’ or know the past but not the future. Scientists found this model in Indian languages Aymara and Toba which are spoken in Peru and Bolivia, respectively. In Aymara and Malagasy, the past is rendered as ’nayra timpu’ (eye time, i.e., ’the time before my eyes’) and tomorrow as ’q’ipi uru (back day, i.e., ’the day at my back’).

A picture worth thousands words.

This picture represents a pair of events that you can understand immediately, probably without talking to yourself at all. Something happens to the boy in the tree, and something happens to his dog. An owl and some bees are involved; the location is most likely in a forested area.

If we examine the grammatical categories interpreted by different nations, we will arrive at very interesting conclusions. The English speaker interprets the activity of the dog as durative, or extended in time, in comparison to the activity of the boy. In a typical English sentence, we might say: „The boy fell off the tree, and the dog was running away from the bees.” In Russian we have a durative form of the verb as well, there are special prefixes, which are used to express duration or single action: бежал – сбежал, убежал; падал – упал. A Spanish-speaker will recognize the durativity of running as well,

because Spanish also has a progressive aspect, as well as an imperfect aspect. Nonetheless, this speaker might also note that the falling of the boy is punctual or completed, since Spanish makes a contrast between perfective and imperfective aspects.

There is a group of languages having no grammatical marking of perfective/imperfective or of progressive, such as German or Hebrew. Hebrew has no grammatical aspect at all; verbs are simply inflected for past, present, or future tense. German has a simple past and present. Neither language has grammatical marking of either progressive or imperfective.

The events of this picture book are experienced differently by speakers of different languages in the process of making a verbalized story out of them. For example, there is nothing in the pictures themselves that leads English speakers to verbally express whether an incident is in progress or Spanish speakers to note whether it has been completed. In addition, there is nothing in the figure to encourage German speakers to formulate descriptions of trajectories or to make Hebrew speakers indifferent to conceiving of events as durative or bounded in time.

Although language is a powerful tool in shaping thought and one's native language plays a role in shaping common thought (how we tend to think about time) it does not completely determine thought, since one can always learn a new way of talking, and with it, a new way of thinking.

Thoughts are embedded in the culture that appears through communication and is expressed by means of language (pronunciation, vocabulary and subtle differences in grammar). Language can be regarded as a mirror of our thoughts. The question is whether our thought is determined by language or language is determined by thought.