Vantage Theory and linguistic relativity

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Abstract

Rob MacLaury's Vantage Theory, VT, models the way in which a cognizer constructs, recalls, uses, and modifies a category in terms of point of view or vantage. Alongside of VT, there is place for the kind of semantic specification found in the lexicon. VT2 [Allan, Keith, 2002. Vantage theory, VT2, and number. Language Sciences 24(5–6), 679–703 (special edn on Vantage Theory ed. by Robert E. MacLaury)] was proposed to preserve a quasi-traditional, comparatively formal semantics while accommodating the importance of viewpoint to meaning. In MacLaury's VT an object or event is categorized relative to the perspective of a cognizer such that VT is a theory of points of view which give rise to categories. VT2 captures the conceptualizations that lie behind the various elements in the cognizer's categorization such that it is a theory of points of view embodied in conceptualizations. In this paper I adopt Adam Głaz's useful concept, Extended Vantage Theory (EVT), to encompass both VT and VT2.

There is an underlying assumption in EVT that categorization reflects human needs and motives, which obviously intersects with linguistic relativity. Humboldt was the originator of the linguistic relativity hypothesis: "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken" (p. LXVI from Humboldt, 1863. Einleitung. *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwickelung des Menschengeschlechts, in Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java*, Erster Band, Druckerei der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin). Humboldt judged that because language and thought are intimately connected, the grammatical differences between languages are manifestations of different ways of thinking and perceiving. The structure of language affects perceptual processes and also the thought processes of speakers. This view passed via Steinthal to Whitney and hence to Boas, who initiated the furore over Eskimo words for snow being incommensurate with English words for snow; but the disparity can be explained as the adoption of alternative vantages.

However, the linguistic relativity hypothesis seems to have language determining vantage instead of it being the language-user who does so – which is contrary to MacLaury's view. I argue that the weak version of linguistic relativity preferred by Whorf allows that while language shapes cognizers to adopt a certain point of view it does not prevent them from adopting a different one, particularly if they become aware of different vantages: this is the route by which languages become mutually intelligible.

I conclude that EVT and linguistic relativity are mutually compatible and mutually enlightening.
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1. Overview

Vantage Theory, VT (MacLaury, 1997), is a theory of human categorization in terms of point of view or vantage. There is an underlying assumption that categorization reflects human needs and motives, which obviously intersects with linguistic relativity. Humboldt was arguably the originator of the linguistic relativity hypothesis: "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken" (Humboldt, 1863, p. LXVI). Humboldt judged that because language and thought are intimately connected, the grammatical differences between languages are manifestations of different ways of thinking and perceiving. The structure of language affects perceptual processes and also the thought processes of speakers. Language mediates world-view such that different world-views correlate with different language structures that no sole individual can change; consequently languages are stable organic wholes. This view passed via Steinthal to Whitney and hence to Boas, Sapir, and Whorf. However, the linguistic relativity hypothesis seems to have language determining vantage instead of it being the language-user who does so – which is contrary to MacLaury's view. On a weak version of the "Whorfian hypothesis" (the version to which Whorf himself subscribed) the basis for classification is the characteristic perceived or believed to be salient in the referent (the figure against the (back)ground). This looks close to MacLaury's notion of vantage, but it is different because VT is a theory of categorization, not a theory of conceptualization. A number of papers in this journal issue presuppose that MacLaury's VT is a theory of conceptualizations, which is but a small step from categorizing; but I do not believe that MacLaury viewed VT in that way. He defined it as "a model of the method that a person uses to construct any category, to use it, to change it, or to recall it" (MacLaury, 2002, p. 494). Therefore, as I argued in Allan (2002), it would be a step forward to add onto VT something like VT2 – which does apply the notion of vantage to conceptualization and the combination gives rise to what Głaz (this issue) usefully refers to as Extended Vantage Theory (EVT), which embraces all these different conceptions of Vantage Theory: it maintains non-discriminatory, analytic, and synthetic viewing along with the standard mechanism of vantage construction through the conceptualizer's selective focus on similarity or difference. EVT and linguistic relativity are mutually compatible and mutually enlightening.

2. Vantage Theory and VT2

MacLaury's VT is a model of categorization in terms of point of view or vantage. Alongside of VT, there is place for the kind of semantic specification found in the lexicon. VT does not replace, but coexists with, semantic descriptions. For example, the semantics of *green* describes the stimuli that in VT give rise to the category green using coordinates and notions of similarity and difference among such stimuli. For instance at the boundaries of blue and green we might get a hue which is green with a touch of blue (for instance Munsell D21) which could be represented as in Fig. 1.

Colour is perceptible only through vision, so a congenitally blind person cannot experience colour at all. They are told about it and have transferred experiences such as that *red* is characteristic of something very hot, *green* is the texture of vegetation. What a person blind from birth understands by a colour term such as *green* is conceptual and analogical, not experiential. Sighted human beings experience colour as light waves reflected from things: *green* is the colour of live vegetation (seen in daylight). If you tell a blind person *A*

Vantages		Dominant		Recessive	
Zoom in		Fixed	Mobile	Fixed	Mobile
	Level 1	*green*	S	*blue*	D
			↙		↙
	Level 2	S	*blue*	D	*green*
			↙		↙
	Level 3	*blue*	D	*green*	S
	Synopses:	*green* SS *blue* D		*blue* DD *green* S	

Fig. 1. The hue of Munsell D21.