



Cultural Linguistics and linguistic relativity



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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to scholarly attempts to clarify the claims made by the early proponents of linguistic relativity. It also presents an account of the recently developed area of Cultural Linguistics and outlines how the scope of this multidisciplinary area of research differs from that of studies dedicated to linguistic relativity. For example, while linguistic relativity has been viewed as presenting a 'hypothesis' or a 'theory complex' regarding the relationship between thought and language, Cultural Linguistics offers a theoretical and analytical framework that focuses on examining features of language that encode conceptualisations rooted in the cultural experiences of speakers. The basic premise underlying the approach of Cultural Linguistics is that certain features of human languages are entrenched in such cultural conceptualisations as cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors.

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1. Introduction

Linguistic relativity is commonly defined as 'the claim that the *words* your language gives you determine and *limit* what it is possible for you to think' (Leavitt, 2015, p. 19; see also Wolff and Holmes, 2011). This strong view of the relationship between language and thought has sparked a significant amount of theoretical debate and empirical research over the past 60 years. However, there is no consensus about whether or not the proponents of linguistic relativity, in particular Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, held such a strong view regarding the influence of language on thought. Leavitt, for example, notes that

none of the actual proponents of linguistic relativity made such claim; on the contrary, no language, they insisted, puts limits on what it is possible to conceptualize – while they continued to demonstrate a seductive power of established language patterns to offer easy-to-follow mental paths. (Leavitt, 2015, p. 19)

Leavitt (2015, p. 25) admits, however, that '[b]oth Whorf and Sapir indulged in some language that sounds highly deterministic, and it is these passages that are the most frequently quoted.' In this article, I will examine these passages and attempt to shed some light on the kinds of claims that they give rise to. I will then outline what makes Cultural Linguistics distinct from linguistic relativity. This discussion will be more intelligible if the reader has a basic understanding of the nature of Culture Linguistics from the beginning. I will therefore begin by giving an overview of the development of Cultural Linguistics, and clarifying and exemplifying some of its basic tools.

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2. Cultural Linguistics

Cultural Linguistics is a discipline with multidisciplinary origins that explores the relationship between language and cultural conceptualisations (Sharifian, 2011, 2014, 2015). In particular, Cultural Linguistics explores the features of human languages that encode culturally constructed conceptualisations of human experience. Cultural Linguistics offers both a theoretical framework and an analytical framework for investigating the cultural conceptualisations that underlie the use of human languages. Cultural Linguistics has drawn on several other disciplines and subdisciplines to develop its theoretical basis. In particular, the notion of *cultural cognition* has afforded an integrated understanding of the concepts of ‘cognition’ and ‘culture’ as they relate to language (e.g., Sharifian, 2008, 2011). This notion offers a multidisciplinary understanding of cognition that moves beyond the level of the individual mind and its associated notions, such as ‘mental representation’ (e.g., Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Sutton, 2005, 2006; Wilson, 2005). Cultural cognition is a form of *enactive cognition* (Stewart et al., 2011) that is formed as a result of interactions between individuals across time and space (see also Cowley and Vallée-Tourangeau, 2013). Crucially, cultural cognition is not equally shared by speakers across a speech community, but is a form of (heterogeneously) *distributed cognition* (Hutchins, 1994). Speakers show variations and differences in their access to and internalisation of cultural cognition. Also, cultural cognition is dynamic in that it is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated across generations and through contact with other speech communities. This understanding of cultural cognition is entirely different from the essentialised notion of ‘culture’ that is often associated with linguistic relativity.

The study of cultural cognition has some parallels in several subfields of cognitive sciences. For example, scholars working in the area of complex science, often under the rubric of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), have been seeking to explain how relationships between parts, or agents, give rise to the collective behaviours of a system or group (e.g., Holland, 1995; Waldrop, 1992). Similarly, Cultural Linguistics explores cultural cognition as a complex adaptive system that emerges from the interactions between agents (members of a speech community) across time and space.

Cultural conceptualisations and their realisation in language are at the heart of cultural cognition. Language plays a dual role in relation to cultural cognition: on the one hand, linguistic interactions are crucial to the development of cultural cognition, as they provide a space for speakers to construct and co-construct meanings about their experiences. On the other hand, many aspects of language structure and language use draw on, and often reflect, cultural cognition. Thus, the study of language itself is of key significance to our understanding of cultural cognition.

As a central aspect of cultural cognition, language serves as a ‘collective memory bank’ (wa Thiong’o, 1986) of the cultural cognition of a speech community. Many aspects of language are shaped by the cultural cognition that has prevailed at different stages in the history of a speech community. In other words, these aspects can leave traces in subsequent linguistic practice. In this sense language can be viewed as a primary mechanism for ‘storing’ and communicating cultural cognition, acting both as a memory bank and a fluid vehicle for the (re-)transmission of cultural cognition.

The process of constructing meaning during communicative interactions relies on many factors, such as the contextual resources available to the speakers. However, part of the process of meaning-making relies on the conceptualisations which, on a moment-by-moment basis, structure meaning for individual speakers, and which those speakers often assume to be shared. Linguistic interactions lead to, and in turn rely on, conceptual processes such as a) *schematisation*, or abstracting conceptual schemas from experience, b) *categorisation*, or assigning experiences of various kinds to our pre-established cognitive categories, and c) *conceptual mapping*, or mapping between different conceptual domains. Where the experiential basis for our linguistic interaction is cultural (rather than idiosyncratic and individual, or universal), *cultural schemas*, *cultural categories*, and *cultural mappings* (cultural metaphors) are formed. These may collectively be referred to as *cultural conceptualisations* (Sharifian, 2011). Many features of language index are entrenched in cultural conceptualisations. As such, notions such as cultural schema, cultural category, and cultural metaphor provide fruitful analytical tools for examining features of language that instantiate culturally constructed conceptualisations of experience. Thus, the recognition of cultural conceptualisations and their relationship to language in general together offer the analytical framework for Cultural Linguistics which, in turn, is based theoretically on the construct of cultural cognition. The relationship between cultural cognition, cultural conceptualisations, and language produces the model summarised diagrammatically in Fig. 1.

As reflected in the diagram, various features and levels of language, from morphosyntactic features to pragmatic and semantic meanings, may be embedded in cultural conceptualisations in the form of cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors.

2.1. Examples of cultural conceptualisations

In this section, to offer a better understanding of the analytical tools of Cultural Linguistics, I provide examples of cultural conceptualisations from research on Aboriginal English, a variety of English spoken by Aboriginal Australians. In this variety, everyday words such as ‘family’, ‘home’, and ‘sorry’ evoke cultural schemas and categories among Aboriginal English speakers that generally characterise Aboriginal cultural experiences. The cultural conceptualisations entrenched in these words stand in contrast to those that inform the same terms as they are used by Anglo-Australians (Malcolm and Sharifian, 2002; Sharifian, 2005). The word ‘family’, for instance, is associated with categories in Aboriginal English that move far beyond what is described as the ‘nuclear’ family in Anglo-Australian culture. A person who comes into frequent contact with an Aboriginal person may be referred to using a kinship term such as ‘brother’ or ‘cousin’ or ‘cousin brother’ (Malcolm and Sharifian, 2007, p. 381). The word ‘mum’ may also be used to refer to people who are referred to as ‘aunt’ in Anglo-Australian culture. Such usage

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