

DO WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

Adriana Sotirova

Foreign Language Teaching Department, Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar”, Varna, Bulgaria
E-Mail: a_sotirova@abv.bg

Abstract. *This paper is concerned with one of the most fundamental questions in linguistics, namely the role of language to shape thoughts and cognition, i.e. to affect directly one’s world view. I allude to some outstanding linguists, proponents of this concept and try to elucidate the fact that being bearers of one culture we cannot come to absolute understanding of another culture, irrespective of the fact that we have a good command of its language. The reason is that cultures and languages are relative in their nature and incommensurate to others. There could be commensurability to some extent, but not complete. With simultaneous learning of a language and culture, we can achieve better results in the acquisition of a foreign language.*

Key words: *language, culture, commensurate, commensurability, linguistic relativity*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rich diversity of human languages in the world leads not infrequently to misunderstandings among people from different cultures. Although language is not the only factor in misinterpreting conveyed information, this paper mainly focuses on the inseparability between language and culture.

One of the fundamental questions in linguistics is whether language shapes our thoughts or whether it is just the medium through which we express them. This question has been debatable ground for centuries and still it is difficult to find the right answer. Theories vary in the question whether language is a mere tool to refer to and to represent objects or whether language can mould thoughts. Different hypotheses have been propounded, supported or refuted over time. Studies of language in relation to culture increasingly prove the interdependence between them and imply that our perception of the world is to some extent determined by the language we speak

However, to reach a final conclusion is a difficult task. Within our scope is only to direct attention to the merits of the hypothesis that culture is affected by language and that complete understanding between different cultures is not possible.

2. DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE GRAMMARS OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

The best approach to this issue is to point the facts. If we consider a simple English sentence, for example, “I lived alone,” we have a tense marking, i.e. the listener or reader is aware that the situation took place in the past, not now or in the future. It is “lived” rather than “live” (for present) and indicator of this information is the verb itself. However, in tenseless languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, the verb cannot be changed

to mark tense. There are no temporal inflections or particles. The English verbs also include markings that point whether the action is completed or is still in progress. In Bulgarian and Turkish, there are special verb forms that refer to the way the speaker acquires the information. The speaker would use one verb form if he/she has witnessed the action and another one if he/ she has been told or read about the event.

In English, there is no grammatical gender distinction, so out of context, “alone” does not indicate whether a man or a woman lived alone. But if we translate “alone” into Bulgarian, the word has to be marked for gender, i.e. to be inflected for gender.

There is a host of grammatical discrepancies among languages, which raises the question, to what extent grammatical distinguishing marks make us perceive the world differently?

Does language tend to define reality differently? And of course, do we fully understand each other?

3. THE RELATIVE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

According to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also referred to as the principle of linguistic relativity, language controls the way people think, consequently, speakers of different languages tend to think and behave differently. It means that their cognitive processes are highly affected by language. To put in Sapir’s words:

“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 representing the same reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with different labels.”
(Sapir, 1929:209)

It is really difficult and challenging to be in the shoes of a native speaker and fully understand him/ her since the pattern of thinking is different. Mother tongue is native speaker’s natural language environment. Since people learn it in their childhood it is their standard, related to behaviour, thinking, and perception. Each native language speaker is not aware of its relativity, which is determined by local life and culture. Language is our second nature, which we “inhabit” and it is not entirely commensurate to the specifics of other languages. The relative nature of a particular language is comprehended only in the light of comparison, i.e. when conducting research or in the process of learning another language. Then different grammatical structures and vocabulary of one language are seen as not fully corresponding to the same structures in another language. As Prof. Gerdzhikov points out:

“The native language which we learn as children is regarded as natural and therefore unconscious in its local convention, although it is a projection of the local lifestyle.”
author’s translation
(Gerdzhikov, 2006: 438)

But not only language, culture itself is relative in its nature. Language and culture are closely intertwined which determines the way we should approach a language.

The spatial and time categories in some cultures are not commensurate with the same categories in other cultures.

3.1. Relativity of the concepts of space and time

Europeans and the bearers of European culture perceive time as linear. Time is a dimension, seen as a sequence of events, leading towards a goal, with its beginning, and an end. The concept of time in European culture is based mainly on the Bible, with the act of creation by God and the end of time - Armageddon. To Hindus and other mainly non-Christian cultures time is cyclical, with eternal repetition of events.

Time is a key concept in European culture. We measure time, segmenting it into different units in order to operate with the concept of time efficiently. The division of time into “minutes”, “hours”, “days”, “weeks”, etc. is not organic to all languages and cultures. Time has also given birth to a lot of metaphors, such as

Time is a thief

Time is money

Race against the clock/ time

Time is a pursuer

Time is a thread

It is quite likely that these metaphors to be incomprehensible to people with different way of perception of the world because they are reflection determined by our Western culture and thinking. The presentation of time as linear (Time is a thread); the race with a limited amount of time to achieve a goal (Race against the clock/ time); time acquiring the status of commodity (Time is money). Most of the metaphors bear the features of a culture with vision of time as a movement from one stage to the next. Besides, they are expression of a highly pragmatic world view.

But time is not a universal human concept. Over the last years, scholars have studied different indigenous cultures and revealed a variety of ways in which people relate to time.

Research conducted by Professor Chris Sinha, of the University of Portsmouth among the Amondawa people in Brazil has shown that time is not perceived by them in the same way as in the Western cultures. The Amondawa tribe in the Amazon has no words for “week,” “month” or “year”; even they have no specific word for “time” (Palmer, 2011). There are also other tribal cultures that do not understand the idea of the clock and its function for them is absolutely useless.

The concept of space is not universal, too. Dr. Lera Boroditsky, Stanford cognitive psychologist, studied the language of the people in Pormpuraaw, Kuuk Thaayorre. She researched the way they talk and think about space. Their language does not include the most common for the Western languages words such as “left” and “right”, “back” and “forward.” Instead, they use the cardinal directions “east,” “west”, south”, “north”. She illustrates this usage with phrases such as “Move the cup to the north northwest a little bit.” And to speak properly means that you have to stay oriented all the time.

But the spatial orientation of Kuuk Thaayorre determines also their perception of time. Dr. Lera Boroditsky tested this idea with her collaborator Alice Gaby. They gave people sets of pictures which showed some kind of temporal progression (pictures of a man aging, a crocodile growing, etc.). People were asked to arrange the shuffled photos in temporal order. When they asked English speakers, they arranged the cards from left to right. Hebrew speakers tended to lay out the cards from right to left. Both groups, in fact, followed the writing direction of their own languages.

But how did Kuuk Thaayorre perform the task?

“.....there was a pattern, just a different one from that of English speakers. Instead of arranging time from left to right, they arranged it from east to west. That is, when they were seated facing south, the cards went left to right. When they faced north, the cards went from right to left. When they faced east, the cards came toward the body and so on. This was true even though we never told any of our subjects which direction they faced. The Kuuk Thaayorre not only knew that already (usually much better than I did), but they also spontaneously used this spatial orientation to construct their representations of time.”
(Boroditsky, 2009)

Lera’s conclusions tend to rehabilitate and prove the validity of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis backing it with empirical evidence. The test implies that the structures in the language of Kuuk Thaayorre affect the cognitive processes and there is direct causality between them.

3.2. Other aspects of relativity in language

Various cultures use language in different ways, so the speakers of a language react, perceive and shape their environment differently. Language can be defined as deficient or abundant in grammar or vocabulary from the perspective of another language and culture, but a language itself is quite sufficient to serve the needs of the community which uses it. It means that linguistic deviations which do not comply with our expectations cannot lead to a conclusion of inferiority or superiority of a particular language - it is mostly a question of different culture.

The linguist, Daniel Everett spent a lot of years living with the Piraha, a tribe in the Amazon in Brazil and we owe him a lot because of the information about their lifestyle and language. The Piraha language is disparate to any other language, let alone to be compared to Western languages. It lacks a lot of linguistic features intrinsic to Western languages making it quite incomprehensible to us – lack of grammatical number and numerals, absence of colour terms, the simplest pronoun system and other distinctive features unique for their culture and language. His study of their language leads to the conclusion that there is no common unifying system of languages. Besides, he proves that the discrepancies between languages may result in failure to understand other people’s cultural dimensions.

The Piraha language contains no grammatical number and numerals and the Piraha tribespeople are not familiar with the concept of counting. Their only words for quantification, equivalent to “a few” and “many”, are ambiguous for an outsider with a different mindset.

It is curious to note that they showed no ability to learn to count despite their willingness. There was no question of any reluctance on the part of the tribe members, on the contrary, but any attempts ended in failure.

“In 1980, at the Piraha’s urging, my wife and I began a series of evening classes in counting and literacy. My entire family participated, with my three children {9, 6, and 3 at that time} sitting with Piraha men and women and working with them. Each evening for eight months my wife would try to teach Piraha men and women to count to ten in Portuguese. They told us they wanted to learn this because they knew that they did not understand nonbarter economic relations and wanted to be able to tell whether they were being cheated. After eight months of

daily efforts, without ever needing to call them to come for class (all meetings were started by them with much enthusiasm), the people concluded that they could not learn this material, and classes were abandoned. Not one learned to count to ten, and not one learned to add 3+1 or even 1+1 (if regularly responding “2” to the latter is evidence of learning) – only occasionally would some get the right answer.”

(Everett, 2005:11).

4. INCOMMENSURABILITY OF CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

It is not possible to discuss the various language-culture-oriented research conducted by different scholars over the last decades. However, most of the results imply that there is a revival of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and to a great extent; different cultures divide the world differently through patterns both within and between words, and through the presence or absence of concepts. Language enforces patterns of cognition which determine different world views of the people from different cultures.

This phenomenon generates some difficulties and frequently misunderstandings between cultures. The more distant is a culture from your own, the more difficult it is to understand it, the more incommensurate it is. Hence, the way people express themselves, i.e. language. There are different dimensions of incommensurability. In language itself, there are untranslatable words determined by their use in a totally different culture. Other terms or concepts are translatable but with a shift of meaning which leads to the conclusion that it is not sufficient to know the meaning of a word or phrase, but to what extent we can transfer this meaning. According to Prof. Gerdzhikov:

“Incommensurability can be reduced to commensurability. However, incommensurability can be presented in a broader (deeper) plan as commensurability. There is incommensurability between Bulgarian and English. For example, the Bulgarian equivalent of “must” corresponds inaccurately to a range of English words: “must”, “have to”, “should”, “ought”, “to be to”. But the semantics of these words is mutually intelligible.”

author’s translation

(Gerdzhikov, 2006:457)

Consequently, profound study of a language has to be in a close connection with the respective culture which will result in enhancing the level of intelligibility.

5. CONCLUSION

Finally, each culture has unique language forms that are closely related to it. By means of language the world is shaped differently in different cultures. There cannot be absolute understanding of another language, because we are all determined by the conventions of our own language and cognition, and because languages and cultures are relatively incommensurate. Switching from one language to other often causes some “distortions” and misunderstandings. One has to cope with cultural obstacles and to be deeply immersed into a language environment to achieve effective and unfettered communication.

REFERENCES

- Everett, D. "Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã", *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 46, No 4 (2005):621-46, accessed March 18, 2014 <http://www-01.sil.org/americas/brasil/PUBLICNS/ANTHRO/PHGrCult.pdf>
- Проф. Сергей Герджиков, д.ф.н., „Философия на езика”, *Съвременник*, 3 (2006): 438–472.
- Sapir, E. "The Status of Linguistics as a Science", *Linguistic Society of America*, Vol. 5, No. 4 1929: 207–214, accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/409588>
- Palmer, J."Amondawa tribe lacks abstract idea of time, study says", accessed February 7, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-13452711>
- Boroditsky, L. "How does our language shape the way we think? ", accessed February 7, 2014, <http://edge.org/conversation/how-does-our-language-shape-the-way-we-think>