RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on the Relationship Between Language and Thought Based on Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

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Jianmei Dong[1,*]

[1]*Xinjiang University of Science and Technology, China*

Abstract: Since ancient times, the problem of language and thinking has puzzled those major scholars in philosophy, psychology and linguistics. Although this is a historic and complex problem, the author has discussed and made further thinking on the relationship between language and thought under the enlightenment of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. As the Bible says, "all things work together." To avoid some deficiencies of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, such as the fuzzy definition of thinking and studying language and thought only from the language perspective, the author explores the relationship between language and thought from a whole perspective. Through analyzing some terms and making a further classification of different thoughts, it is apparent to see that, to some extent, language has nothing to do with thought, and that both language and thought have more or fewer influences in several aspects of each other. And then after the discussion on the relationship between language and thought, it is concluded the following three kinds of relationship which are: firstly, the language determines or influences thought; secondly, thought determines or influences thought; thirdly, the extension of thinking goes beyond the boundary of language. In this paper, the author summarizes those three relationships between language and thought, and it is hoped to be helpful to relevant research in the future.

Keywords: Language, Thought, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

1. Introduction

When it comes to the relationship between language and thought, no one can avoid mentioning the famous hypothesis——Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Its originator is the American anthologist and linguist Sapir and he makes a clear explanation of the principle of this hypothesis in his essay "The Status of Linguistics as a Science" (1929). Whorf based on what Sapir holds makes further progress and delivers his viewpoints on language and thought in his essay "Science and Linguistics" (1940). Actually, this term, "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" is first proposed by American linguist Carroll in the 1950s after Sapir and Whorf passed away (Liu, 2013). Although there are a number of debates about this hypothesis, there is still no consensus. So this article is going to discuss three kinds of relationships between language and thought on the basis of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

2. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

2.1 Linguistic determinism

Linguistic determinism states that our language helps mould our way of thinking and, consequently, different languages may probably express a speaker's unique ways

of understanding the world(Hu, 2011). In other words, language may determine our thinking patterns. To some extent, it is an extreme point on language.

2.2 Linguistic relativity

Linguistic relativity states that similarities between languages are relative, and the greater their structural differentiation is, the more diverse their conceptualization of the world will be. Compared with linguistic determinism, linguistic relativity is a quite comfortable one to explain the relationship between language and thinking, and it is also more accepted by most scholars.

3. Basic concepts

3.1 Language

Language is a system of arbitrarily chosen, conventionalized, vocal, graphic or gestural symbols, serving the needs of verbal communication among members of a given community or society. What makes human beings different from animals is the main language. Saussure distinguishes the competence of the speaker and the actual phenomena of utterances as language and parole (Hu, 2011). In his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Chomsky discusses that a language user's underlying knowledge about the system of rules is called his linguistic competence. Performance refers to the actual use of

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Corresponding Author: Jianmei Dong
Xinjiang University of Science and Technology,
China. Email: dongjm1199@163.com

language in concrete situations (Chomsky, 1965). Therefore, there exist two kinds of language: one is conscious language and the other is unconscious language.

3.2 Thought

The term "Thought" covers a number of different types of mental activity, and lies in the province of cognitive psychology (Hudson, 2000). And another distinctive feature is that we human beings can solve complex problems by means of some thinking processes such as perception, analysis, judgement, and logical inference etc. As to thought, Sapir and Whorf never give an explicit explanation, for which is not the focal point for them but language is. Hence, views on thought vary from person to person, and so does the relationship between language and thought.

Based on logic, the author falls thought into two parts: one is logical thought and the other is non-logical thought; meanwhile, the non-logical thought also includes perception, memory, abstraction, analogy and etc. At first, it is logical thought that mainly develops accompanying with Math; language is just the most efficient tool for it to demonstrate what it is. And then, perception, actually, has nothing to do with language. Lastly, the rest terms as memory, abstraction and analogy are closely related to language and thought. With the cooperation of language and thought, human beings can categorize objects and finally construct a concept in our minds.

4. Relationships between language and thought

4.1 Language determines or influences thought

As Chart 1 displays, we human beings first recognize the outside objects by means of perception, and then categorization through language, next in terms of memory making a deep impression to form a system of conscious language; at any time when we need to convey some ideas with expressions, we just judge from what we have memorized in our minds and make a selection accompanying with logical inference to express. This is the construction of parts of thought under the constraints of language.
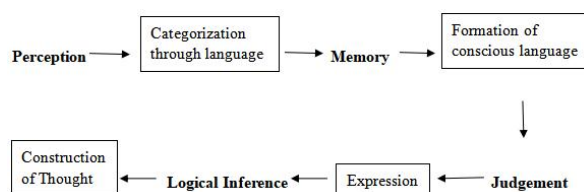

Chart 1: Processes of Determination from Language to Thought

To some extent, the limitations of language limit our description of things, thus it limits our thinking mode of reasoning. For example, the ambiguity and implication of Chinese results in the construction of Chinese thinking which is featured in fuzzy thinking and spiral thinking. In contrast to Chinese, the conciseness of English sentence structure and the accuracy of tense lead to the construction of linear thinking and accurate thinking (Zhao, 2017). Compared with English, Russian has a more kaleidoscope of syntactic structure. But owning to the accuracy of Russian with six different cases working different functions, it wouldn't confuse us much more to

understand it. So that means Russians and Russian learners can build a clearer and more precise thinking model.

4.2 Thought determines or influences language

As for this view, there is nothing to do with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis because neither Sapir nor Whorf merely paid much attention to thought. But we can't ignore the great achievements made by Vygotsky, a famous former Soviet psychologist, who has studied the relationship between speech and thought. He holds the view that before the age of two, the development of thought and language was carried out separately, and until the age of two, they come to merge into a new form. Thought becomes speech, and discourse becomes more rational. So the mind is served by words as if people were speaking by thought (Chen, 2011) .

As Chart 2 displays, our thinking model limits our language expression, so we select expressions which we can search in our mind and describe the outside world by using those conscious words. This is the construction of our cognition. Therefore, from this perspective, language is not so much universal as the universality of our cognition.
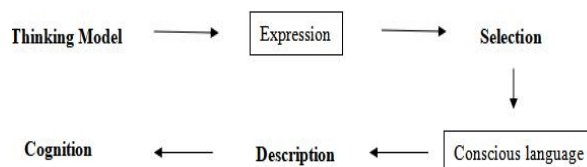

Chart 2: Processes of Determination from Thought to Language

Take the description of colour as an example. As for a person whose native language just has three words "black", "white" and "red" to describe the whole colourful world, in spite of there being no corresponding word to differentiate red and orange, it doesn't mean they really think red and orange are identical in their minds. It is just their three colours thinking model that determines their expression for colours just have three words and then based on their own judgement and selection they utter "red" for both red and orange. Meanwhile, in the future, whenever they come across an orange, they would utter "red" to describe it with no hesitation. This immediate reaction depends on nothing but their thinking model.

4.3 Some thoughts are beyond the control of language

There are some thoughts beyond the control of language. The boundary of language is not the boundary of the mind. The extension of thinking goes beyond the limitations of language and also expands our perception and vision. For instance, even though Russian nouns have accurate case classifications such as indirect case (the 3rd case) and direct case (the 4th case), Chinese and English learners whose native language has no such precise classification will still be able to process such relations. For example,

Russian: Антон купил ему **сыну** *футбол*.

English: Andon bought his **son** *a football*.

Chinese:

ān dōng gěi tā ér zi mǎi le yí gè zú qiú
安 东 给 他 儿 子 买 了 一 个 足 球 。

It is apparent that the Russian sentence has a clear distinction between a direct case and an indirect case. The Russian word "**сыну**" is the 3rd case of "**сын**" working as an indirect case in the sentence. However, in Both English and Chinese, there is no such clear distinction, so they just choose "**son**" and " 儿 子 " those two words without any change to work as an indirect case. As to the direct case "*футбол*"," *football*" and " 足 球 ", it seems that there is no change. But if there is another animal noun such as "*кот*" (a male cat) replacing the word "*футбол*" there must be some change into "*кота*". Nevertheless, as it turns out, people with different and fuzzy grammar structures can also process those clear and precise structures. In this case, it shows that there really exist some thoughts which are beyond the control of language.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, under the enlightenment of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the author has discussed and made further thinking on the relationship between language and thought. To avoid some deficiencies of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, such as the fuzzy definition of thinking and studying language and thought only from the language perspective, the author explores the relationship between language and thought from a whole perspective. And it is concluded the following three kinds of relationship between language and thought are: firstly, the language determines or influences thought; secondly, thought determines or influences thought; thirdly, the extension of thinking goes beyond the boundary of language. In the study of the relationship between language and thought, it is warmly welcomed that there are more and more scholars doing research on the interaction and interrelation between language and thought.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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