



THE LANGUAGE HOAX

WHY THE WORLD LOOKS THE SAME IN ANY LANGUAGE

JOHN H. McWHORTER

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS A manifesto. I will oppose an idea about language that took hold among certain academics starting in the 1930s, and of late has acquired an unseemly amount of influence over public discussion as well. This is the idea that people's languages channel the way they think and perceive the world.

You may be familiar with it. Among memories of your readings over the past ten years, for example, may dwell Amazonian tribespeople described as unable to do math because their language doesn't have numbers. Or you may have read about people who have the same word for *green* and *blue*, who we are to imagine not perceiving the difference in color between a leaf and the sky as vividly as we do. The whole idea is a kind of ongoing promo from the worlds of linguistics, anthropology, and psychology, the ad jargon typified by the subtitle of Guy Deutscher's *Through the Language Glass*, "Why the world looks different in other languages."

The notion is, for better or for worse, mesmerizing. Just think—what we speak is what we are. We are the language we speak.

This is true, of course, to an extent. A take-home insight from the idea that language channels thought is that a language's words and grammar are not just a random constellation, but are the software for a particular culture. No one could deny that there is some truth in that. In Thai, there are different words for *you* according to seven different grades of formality, and to not use them is not to be Thai, unless you are a child or new to the language. To pretend this has nothing to do with the highly stratified nature of Thai society in the past and present would be peculiar.

Vocabulary also reflects cultural concerns and not only in obvious areas such as technology and slang. Few people could be truly intrigued that we have names for computer components and salty terms relating to things like dating and social mores. However, quieter things say more than we always notice. Once, while staying at a hotel in the Bahamas I noticed a rather lovely cat gliding around outside. A Caribbean I was with said, "Oh, that must be the hotel cat." That is, a cat who lives more or less around the place and serves as an unofficial mascot. I had never heard of a hotel cat. It would never occur to me to put "hotel" and "cat" together, and in fact, to me part of the essence of the hotel experience would seem to be an absence of cats.

However, that my friend would mention a *hotel cat* suggested that the relationship between felines and hotels was different depending on where I was. Even a detail in the way he said it gave away that he was referring to something culturally entrenched: he didn't accent it as "hotel CAT," but as "ho-TEL cat." If you think about it, the second way of saying it means

hotel cats are, as one says these days, “a thing.” Think of how we say ICE cream rather than iced CREAM—as one did when it was a novelty, or CELL phone rather than cell PHONE—as I recall people saying in the early 1990s. In two-word expressions, the accent tends to shift backward when something becomes “a thing”—that is, culture! From the Caribbean man’s one utterance—and not even a foreign one—I learned that mascot cats at hotels were a component of the local culture.

But the “language as thought” idea refers to much more than what qualifies it to its speakers as “a thing.” We are to suppose that the way a language’s grammar works, and the way it applies words to even mundane objects and concepts, shapes how its speakers experience life in ways far beyond desserts and gadgets. Hotel cats—sure, but what about a language that gives you a whole different sense of time than anything we can spontaneously imagine, even if we are from the Bahamas?

★ ★ ★

This all became a going concern with Benjamin Lee Whorf’s proposition in the 1930s that the Native American language Hopi has no way to mark time—no tense markers, no words like *later*—and that this corresponded with the Hopis’ sense of how time and the world work. English obsesses with placing events in the present, past, or future, Whorf argued, in contrast to a language like Hopi with no present, past, and future. In Whorf’s sense of Hopi, present, past, and future are in essence the same, corresponding to the cyclical sense of time in Hopi cosmology. Thus it’s not by chance that Hopi has no equivalent to English’s between *walk*, *walked*, and *will walk*: it’s about thought

patterns. Culture. In Hopi, whether it's about yesterday, tomorrow, or right now, you just walk.

Whorf was a fire inspector by day, and perhaps coming to linguistic study from the outside made him more likely to come up with out-of-the-box insights than would a card-carrying linguist. Because of Whorf's pioneering role in the field of linguistics, the whole idea has been coined *Whorfianism*, or the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*—Edward Sapir was a mentor of Whorf's who found the idea similarly compelling—or, among academics, *linguistic relativity* and *linguistic determinism*.

Under any name, the idea that grammar channels people into thinking of time as cyclical is catnip. Even a well-fed hotel cat would eat it up. Or a college student, such as the one I once was. I got a dose of this version of Hopi linguistic anthropology in 1984, and it is now the sole thing I remember from the class, except that we read some of *The Last of the Mohicans* and that the teacher—a Tom Petty lookalike—seemed ineffably sad.

Whorf, however, wasn't, and he had an agenda, laudable in itself. He wanted to show that people dismissed even by the educated as "savages" in his time were as mentally developed as Westerners are. His was an era when, for example, none other than the *Webster's Second New International Dictionary*, cherished as a staple of the proper middle-class home, defined Apaches as "of warlike disposition and relatively low culture."

Yet, as with so many tantalizing and even well-intentioned notions, this conception of the Hopi language turned out to be wrong. Hopi marks time as much as anyone would expect a language to, with good old-fashioned tense markers and plenty of words for things like *already* and *afterward*. Furthermore,

attempts over the next few decades to reveal Native Americans as cognitively distinct from Westerners because of mental filters exerted by their languages never bore fruit.

For example, if in Navajo, there are different words for *move* depending on whether it is one, two, or several people doing the moving, does that mean that Navajos have a thing about moving as central to existence? Linguist Harry Hoijer thought so in the 1960s. His overall career was invaluable in documenting fascinatingly complex languages on the brink of extinction, but he, a disciple of Edward Sapir as Whorf had been, was open to Whorfianism to an extent not uncommon among Native American language specialists of his time. When it came to Navajo, he linked its proliferation of *move* verbs to Navajos' nomadism in the past, and even to figures in their mythology "moving" to repair the dynamic flux of the universe.

But wait: what about all of the other languages in the world that also happen to get particular about going and moving? In Russian how you say *go* is so complicated that whole books are written about it and it's one of the last things nonnative learners manage to get right. The word is different depending on whether you walked or rode, and then after you have that figured out, it is different depending on whether you came back after you went, in addition, all of the forms are irregular. Yet nomadism is not exactly central to the Russian soul, and the last time I checked, Russians' interest in repairing the dynamic flux of the universe seemed rather low.

Yet beyond obscure academic journals it's easy to miss how poorly the Whorfian idea has fared scientifically. Of late

especially, popular books such as Daniel Everett's *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*, Deutscher's *Through the Language Glass*, well-publicized studies by Stanford psychologist Lera Boroditsky, and other works have established a Whorfian meme in public discussion. It is easy to suppose that one of the most interesting things about language is that people whose languages assign genders to inanimate objects perceive those objects as meaningfully more male or female than speakers of English (how things marked neuter fit into this I have never quite understood), or that Russians are more meaningfully sensitive to the difference between dark blue, light blue, and green than Koreans, who have a single word that covers both blue and green.

* * *

Crucially, a connection between language and thought does exist. The problem is how that connection has percolated into public discussion, reminiscent of how the rumor mill magnifies the blip into a cataclysm. For example, the ideas about gender and colors, plus some other intersections between language and thought, have been studied by a new generation of researchers with a much more measured approach than Whorf's. Their experiments are clever and elegant, and only the most rabid skeptic could deny that their work has shown a connection between language and thought. Yet most would consider it a fair assessment that the work of this cohort, often termed the "Neo-Whorfians," has shown that language's effect on thought is distinctly subtle and, overall, minor. Not uninteresting—but nevertheless, minor. This, however, is not the easiest conclusion to get excited about outside of academia,

and unsurprisingly, the public gets a rather spicier take on the issue.

To be sure, both Deutscher's and Everett's books actually argue that language's effect on thought is modest, hedging the issue as responsibly as we would expect of academics. Both are well aware that the classic formulation of Whorfianism is hopeless. Everett's point is, in fact, more that culture can shape language—essentially an extension of the *hotel cat* phenomenon—than the other way around. By the end of his book, Deutscher even spells out that “Color *may* be the area that *comes closest* in reality to the metaphor of language as a lens,”—italics mine—making clear that overall, evidence for “language as a lens” has been elusive. *Through the Language Glass* is so thorough in outlining both the failure of early Whorfianism and the deeply modest results of Neo-Whorfianism that it is, in essence, a gorgeously written chronicle of an idea that didn't pan out. Truly gorgeous: the prose is the written equivalent to foie gras or, if that's not up your alley, key lime pie.

However, the problem is that the media, as well as the public, *want* the idea to have panned out. The language-as-thought idea vibrates in tune with impulses deeply felt in the modern enlightened American's soul. Ethnocentrism revolts us. Virtually as penance for our good fortune in living in a wealthy and geopolitically dominant society, as well as for the horrors we have perpetrated on so many groups in the world, we owe it to the rest of the world to stress our awareness that the less fortunate are our equals. We Westerners are “so white”—a cultural self-condemnation that would baffle a Western time traveler from as recently as 1960. We look with a

certain envy at the vibrant diversity, and even authenticity, of the rest of the world.

Attractive, then, will be the idea that each language is its own mind-altering cocktail. All of us are seeing, as it were, different colors (“Man, the colors! The colors!”). Just imagine all of the untapped ideas and perspectives out there among peoples we generally hear too little about, as well as among ones we see every day. We Westerners have learned our lesson: we are only one way of being human, and not the best one, much less the most important in the grand scheme of things. Under Whorfianism, everybody is interesting and everybody matters.

Under this impulse, the general impression from the media coverage of the relevant books, their blurbs, and what readers are therefore led to seek in them (or assume is in them) is that language does channel thought in a dramatic way, and that this is a fascinating new discovery from experts on language and related subjects. Deutscher’s and Everett’s books, for example, are primarily known as books that show that language shapes thought, not as gingerly explorations with tentative conclusions. That misimpression is easy to fall into. A valedictory passage such as Everett’s that “We all possess grammars of happiness—our identities and our cultural cloaks,” warmly memorable, exemplifies the aforementioned catnip. The cozy “cloak” analogy suggests—and imprints—a snuggler bond between language and thought than Everett actually subscribes to.

Or, more were exposed to Deutscher through a widely read op-ed summary of his book than through the book itself, and

in that piece we learned that humans “acquire certain habits of thought that shape our experience in significant and often surprising ways.” But there is a short step between this and Whorf’s idea that while Western language led to the insights of Isaac Newton, Hopi grammar suggests the next step in science, “a NEW LANGUAGE by which to adjust itself to a wider universe”—and the layman could easily fail to even perceive the step at all.

There are questioning voices, to be sure. For example, Steven Pinker artfully deconstructs the dramatic readings from the Neo-Whorfian studies in a section of his magisterial *The Stuff of Thought*. However, as this is but one of myriad insights in Pinker’s cornucopia of a volume, the books and articles focused solely on “language as a lens” make the louder noise.

Not that the louder noise is even a crude one. Even Whorfianism’s biggest fans regularly disown the old-time “Hopi” version. It is typical—seemingly almost required—to quote founding linguist Roman Jakobson, whose verdict was that “languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey.” The insight is that languages do not saddle speakers with blinders preventing them from perceiving what their vocabularies and grammars happen not to call attention to. Yes, one language forces one to speak gender, such as English with *he* and *she*; many languages have one word that covers both men and women. Yes, another one forces one to speak social hierarchy, such as Thai and all of those ways of saying *you*, or even European languages like French with the difference between familiar *tu* and formal *vous*. Yet, one *can* say anything in

any language. Even people new to the topic often come up with this basic insight on their own.

However, within the cultural context of our times, so hungry for confirmation that grammar is a pair of glasses, the Jakobson quote lends itself readily to a less temperate interpretation than Jakobson intended. Sure, anyone *can* say anything—but couldn’t those things that a language *must* convey constitute a “world-view,” fascinatingly distinct from our own? We can know that all people *can* think the same things, while also hoping that there is some magical degree to which they in fact do not. “Surely the question is worth asking...” one might hear—and it has been asked, for almost eighty years now. The verdict has long been in, and yet the impression persists that there remains a question to be asked—in *perpetuo*, it would seem.

Nominally we are fascinated by a question as to *whether* language influences thought in a significant way. However, in the way the question is framed and reported on, there reigns a tacit assumption that the answer to this question cannot be no.

However, the whole notion that how someone’s language works determines, in any significant way, how they see the world is utterly incoherent, and even dangerous. Therefore, I have two goals in this book.

One will be to complement the opposing case from psychology, such as Steven Pinker’s, with one from linguistics, showing why this idea of languages as pairs of glasses does not hold water in the way that we may, understandably, wish it did. This becomes clear from a perspective encompassing the world’s languages rather than just a few at a time, upon which

we see how Whorfianism forces us into endless contradictions, unwitting disparagement of billions of the world's human beings, and even cartoonish perspectives about ourselves. We will see that a broader perspective on languages makes one glad that the Neo-Whorfian studies don't support the "language as a lens" theory any more than they do—glad to an extent that if they were more supportive, you would likely consider the public better kept in the dark about it.

Then second, not only does a full representation of how languages work show how utterly unworkable the idea is that Language X makes its speakers see and feel "a different world" than speakers of Language Y, but in the end, the embrace of this idea is founded on a quest to acknowledge the intelligence of "the other," which, though well intentioned, drifts into a kind of patronization that the magnificent complexity and nuance of any language makes unnecessary. It is a miracle when any one of the world's six billion persons utters a sentence, quite regardless of whether it signals how they "see the world."

Our impulse to identify and celebrate what we call *diversity* begins as noble, but it is too little acknowledged how dangerous this quest becomes. Besides the alarmingly fine line between diversity and diorama, more than a few whom few of us could break bread with today have found the "language as a lens" idea attractive. Take the intransigent ultranationalist German historian Heinrich von Treitschke. Prussophile, xenophobic, and nakedly anti-Semitic, he was given in the late nineteenth century to insights such as "differences of language inevitably imply differing outlooks on the world." You can imagine the kinds of arguments and issues he couched that

kind of statement in, and yet the statement itself could come straight out of Whorf, and would be celebrated as brain food by a great many today. “Surely,” after all, “the question is worth asking...”—yet somehow, we would rather von Treitschke hadn’t, and find ourselves yearning for thoughts about what we all have in common.

In that vein, my message is not a negative one in the end.

The other goal of this book will be to show that we can vibrantly acknowledge the intelligence and sophistication of indigenous peoples in another way: by stressing that all humans are mentally alike. Languages viewed in a worldwide sense show this much more clearly than they reveal six thousand distinct “worldviews” and point us to the larger and ultimately more useful truth. Language is a lens indeed—but upon humanity much more than upon humanities. Here’s why.