

## A critical review on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

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### Abstract

Every language is assumed to be structurally and culturally unique. The relationship between language and thought has long been discussed by scholars since Plato's time and various hypotheses have been made concerning it. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis including Linguistic Determinism and Linguistic Relativity, the most provocative one, suggests that the way we perceive and categorize reality is completely or partly determined by the language we speak. This paper aims at leading learners to have a better understanding of the relationship between language and thought and further gain a better experience of second language acquisition by conducting a critical review on this hypothesis from several aspects as following. Toward this end, a general introduction to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis will be given by the author, furthermore the disadvantages and advantages of the hypothesis will be discussed. Finally also attention will be paid to the arguments challenging its validity. Hopefully, it is expected to shed light on foreign language teaching and learning in China.

**Keywords:** the sapir-whorf hypothesis advantages disadvantages arguments

### 1. Introduction

“Learn a new language and get a new soul.” This Czech proverb indicates that there has to be some connection between a language and the way people think, behave and perceive the world around them. This relationship between language, thought and reality has always been a fascinating subject for linguists and philosophers. Special attention was paid to it in the 20th century when Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf published their opinions to this subject. Whorf forms the main part of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, because he was introduced by Sapir to his general approach to linguistics and then extended it in his beliefs. The term “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” was first introduced by J.B. Carroll and states in general that a human's language shapes his perception of reality or in other words, that the world as we know it is largely predetermined by the language of our culture. Occurring differences between languages do also represent the basic differences in the worldview of different cultures. Based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, this paper aims to explore the relationship between language and thought by giving a critical review on this hypothesis from three aspects of disadvantages, advantages and arguments respectively.

### 2. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The relationship between language and thought seems like a miraculous mystery which has attracted numerous philosophers, psychologists and linguists to mediate the problem and carry out researches on it. The scholars like Johann Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt put forward the idea that different people speak differently because they think differently, and that they think differently because their language offers them different ways of expressing the world around them. Based on the previous studies, the American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir (1929) and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940) <sup>[6]</sup> proposed a very influential but also extremely controversial theory that has

ever been made in the study of the relationship between language and culture, namely, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Thereafter, Whorf proposed the notion: “our language helps mould our way of thinking and, consequently, different languages may probably express our unique ways of understanding the world” (as cited in HU,2001,p.146). Based on this notion, for one thing, language may determine our thinking patterns, which is the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—Linguistic Determinism; for another, language may influence relatively but not determine our thinking patterns, which is the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis---Linguistic Relativity.

### 3. The disadvantages of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis means that the decisive effect of language on thought has been grossly overstated. That is to say, all languages determine all the thoughts, and different people who speak different languages have their own different thoughts or thinking patterns. In fact, In the light of Marxism, the decisive factor which determines people's consciousness is first of all the social existence. In the class society, people are classified by the economic position in the society, then form the different world view. If language really determines our worldview, there will be no class at all and the class struggle will disappear by itself. Besides, the language system does not necessarily provide specifics of one's world views. On the one hand, people speaking the same language may have different world views; On the other hand, people speaking different languages may have similar political, religious and philosophical views. Even one language can describe many different world views. Therefore, we can't fail to notice that it's not really true to say that language determines our thought. That is, the strong version of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or better known as Linguistic determinism has long remained a highly debatable point.

#### 4. The advantages of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Although the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, that posits language determines the way we think, cannot hold water, yet the weak version does have advantages. Language does exert great influence on our thinking and culture. A language helps to reinforce certain ideas and beliefs, making them salient and pushing them into the foreground of attention, and it facilitates us to express our emotions. The weak version, supported by the findings that there are cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by seemingly common concepts, is generally accepted nowadays. The way a given language encodes experience semantically makes aspects of that experience not exclusively accessible, but just more salient for the users of that language. In short, the theory of linguistic relativity does not claim that linguistic structure constrains what people can think or perceive, only that it tends to influence what they routinely do think, which makes us realize that language reflects cultural preoccupations and that how important context is in complementing the meanings encoded in the language.

#### 5. The arguments against the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

There are three main arguments against the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which have challenged the validity of this hypothesis. The grammatical structure is the first one, since the syntactic system of a language and the perceptual system of the speakers of that language do not have the kind of interdependent relationship that the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis claimed to have. Many grammatical features of a language are purely superficial aspects of linguistic structure. The second one goes to the translation, as there is no real translation and it is impossible to learn the language of a different culture unless the learner abandons his own mode of thinking and acquires that of the target language according to the strong version of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Actually, successful translation can be made between languages. For example, the conceptual uniqueness of a language such as Hopi can nonetheless be explained in English. The last one belongs to the process of second language acquisition. According to the hypothesis, languages have different conceptual systems, if it is true, then someone who speaks one language will be unable to learn another language because he lacks the right conceptual system. However, since people can learn radically different languages, those languages couldn't have different conceptual systems. Thus, the above-mentioned three arguments against this hypothesis manifest that there are many deficiencies or doubts under this hypothesis which need us to do further study and verification.

#### 6. Conclusion

There is no unanimous conclusion about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. However, in general, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has strong as well as weak points. It is quite plausible that language influences the way of thinking and the culture, but the hypothesis exaggerates the decisive role of language but ignore the social and culture factors of language, thus it arises many argumentations. To sum up, in spite of its disadvantages, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis does have great significance. It has stimulated considerable discussion and experimentation on the relationship between language and culture, and their pioneering work in these relatively uncharted

areas of linguistics has helped to shape the course of future research. Based on Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, many researches have proved that language has a close relationship with culture and the way people perceive. The great influence it has on foreign language teaching cannot be neglected. It is a good way of learning a foreign language along with its thinking pattern and cultural background. With this idea in mind, English teaching in China still needs to be improved. Even though there are limitations, it is also hoped that it will contribute to the foreign language teaching and learning in China.

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