Does Language Reflect Society or Vice Versa?
The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Linguistic Determinism

David Rear

Abstract

This paper explores the debate within sociolinguistics over the relationship between the language we speak and write and the social context in which such language is used. There are two broad positions that have underpinned the discussion, but, as this paper will show, neither of them is free of assumptions or over-generalisations. On the one hand, kinship terms, address forms, and phonological variation have all been seen as evidence of society's dominant role; and on the other, the study by Whorf of Native American cultures has put forward the notion of 'linguistic determinism'. There are fundamental weaknesses in each view, and for that reason a third, milder idea has been suggested, that of language mediating thought. This is a more convincing argument, but again is not without difficulties. A second issue arising from the debate must also be addressed, that of agency versus structure. To what extent does society and social context determine our use of language or, conversely, how far can our use of language shape the social context?

The Social Construction of Language

It has been argued that kinship terminology reveals how the categories of relations which are distinguished reflect the social construction of reality for a particular culture speaking a particular language (for example, Romaine 1994). In the language of the Seminole Indians of Oklahoma and Florida, for instance, the same term is used for relations as diverse (to English speakers) as father, father's mother's sister's son, and father's father's sister's son's son. The kinship terms of the Njamel tribe of Australia are constructed partly on the concept of 'moiety', which divides the tribe in two halves. No term will mix together relatives from different moieties (Hudson 1996). Moreover, the concept of 'father' itself may differ from culture to culture, depending on who the society regards as responsible for the social personhood of the child.

There is little doubt that kinship terms are to some extent social constructs, but it has been shown that they are also grounded in more fundamental, biological concepts. Lounsbury (1969)

proposed reduction rules that can be applied to all known kinship systems and which vastly reduce the degree of relativity between them, suggesting universality on the basis of genealogy, age, and sex. Although relativists have challenged this idea by arguing that kinship itself is a social construct, they are still faced with the fact of the small number of well-defined kinship systems found in the languages of the world. It must be concluded, then, that while socially defined categories such as moiety may supplement biological foundations they may not supplant them.

A second level at which language appears to be socially constructed is that of discourse, seen, for example, in address forms. Foley (1997) compares their use in Australia and the Muslim society of Wolof. Whereas the relatively egalitarian society of Australia permits the use of 'mate' in many (but not all) contexts, the stratified culture of Wolof demands greetings based on social inequality. The lower-class speaker must initiate the conversation, ask questions, and speak faster and in a higher pitch. Brown and Gilman (1960) concluded from their study of Western languages that pronoun use (T/V) was governed by two semantics, 'power' and 'solidarity'. During the feudal era of around 1800, the power semantic was the dominant force, but in the present century, as society seeks to break down social barriers, solidarity has become more important. Subsequent studies in America and Quebec (as detailed in Fasold 1990) have largely borne out these findings, although their use of questionnaires as the primary method of data-collection must be questioned for their reliance on subjects' intuition.

A third level is that of variation within phonology. Speakers' use of linguistic variables have been correlated consistently with their demographic characteristics of class, race, gender, and age. Labov's study of the New York speech community (1966) revealed a correlation with the pronunciation of 'th' and social class. In Norwich, there were similar findings for the practice of 'h'-dropping (Trudgill 1974). Women were found to use more standard forms than men and to hypercorrect more. Gumperz (1958) found similar linguistic variables in his study of the caste society of Khalapur village in northern India. The higher castes made a phonemic contrast between /a/ and /u/, whereas the 'untouchables' used /a/ everywhere. There was even a contrast within the untouchable class.

However, these quantitative studies have been sharply criticised in recent years for their implicit assumption that correlation equals explanation. The categories to which they assign speakers — sex, age, ethnicity, and class — are in need of investigation themselves (Cameron 1990). They do not take into account the differences *within* the categories. Can women all be classed as a single homogeneous group? Moreover, they do not reveal what is taking place at a micro level. To state, for example, that 'men interrupt more than women' fails to recognise that the outcome of that interruption is determined in its course, in real time, and may be affected by factors quite distinct

from power or status, such as loudness of voice（Schegloff 1987）. When explicit explanations are offered, they tend to be couched in vague 'ad-hoc' theories, like 'identity' and 'social networks'. 'Identity' is a troublesome and ill-defined concept. It cannot be seen as monolithic and autonomous, existing prior and independent of language. The 'social network' theory, as espoused by Milroy （1980）, fails to explain *how* linguistic norms are enforced by one's peer group（Cameron 1990）.

There is also an assumption that language somehow evolves to suit the needs of society, whereas in fact there are complex and sometimes contentious processes at work. Cameron takes the example of sexist language, showing how the introduction of gender-neutral words and the restriction in the use of the generic masculine pronouns came about through feminist debate and campaign. She goes on to say that language change is itself a social change. The elimination of generic masculine pronouns 'changes the repertoire of social meanings and choices available to social actors'（1990: 90）. Language is a constraining structure, which can alter or reinforce our ways of thinking.

This, however, is a dangerous leap. Although she presents the second point as a logical progression from the first, it actually involves a rather large assumption, no less controversial than the one quantitative sociolinguists were guilty of, namely that language can shape thought.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

This idea has been taken from the work of Sapir and Whorf, who, in the strongest form of their argument, maintained that differences of linguistic structure cause the speakers of different languages to 'see the world' in different ways. 'The background linguistic system…of each language is…itself the shaper of ideas….We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language（Whorf, quoted in Carroll 1956: 212）. Whorf studied the linguistic structure of the Native American language of Hopi and contrasted it to Standard Average European（SAE）. SAEs distinguish between things that must be counted（stones, mountains etc.）and those that do not（water, fire etc.）. They also have a definite time structure – past, present, and future. Hopi, on the other hand, only counts object-like entities（rather than abstract terms like 'day' or 'week'）and stresses whether events can be warranted to have occurred, to be occurring, or will occur. Therefore, they see the world as an ongoing set of processes where time is not apportioned into fixed segments, while Europeans regard almost everything as discrete, measurable, and recurrent.

The problem with such an argument is clear. It is circular and unprovable. The Hopi language is structurally different from SAE, therefore their thinking is structurally different. How do we know their thinking is structurally different? Because their language is structurally different. There have

been attempts to prove it, but usually with limited success. Carroll and Casagrande (1958) compared English and Navajo speakers to test whether the Navajo verbs of handling, which show the shape of the object to which they are applied, affected their performance in a 'triad sorting task'. They discovered that the Navajo speakers did indeed pay more attention to shape than English speakers from the same background, but when the test was later run in Boston the same correlation was found between middle- and working-class children, suggesting that education and the kind of toys children play with have influence too. Lucy (1992) studied Yucatec Maya in Mexico and found that grammatical differences in plurality affected their performance compared to English speakers in a test involving pictures. This appears to show that language can determine thought, but without similar tests that take into account upbringing, education and other social variables the results remain inconclusive.

There are other difficulties with the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. If language determines our thought (and, therefore, our concepts), it should be impossible to translate between them. But the very fact that Whorf was able to explain the structure of the Hopi language shows that this is not so. Some concepts may be more 'codable' in certain languages, but every language provides its speakers with a metalanguage that allows users to overcome predispositions. Cognitive abilities do not vary, it is only the need for certain expressions that varies. For example, some Papuan languages of New Guinea have only a few basic numerals, but they can easily innovate or borrow new ones when they become necessary, such as for counting 'kina', the national currency (Foley 1997). A second difficulty is that of bilinguals. They are able to speak two or three structurally diverse languages without, presumably, perceiving the world differently (Stubbs 1997).

Language Mediating Thought

These weaknesses in the determinism have led scholars to suggest a 'weak' version of the argument. Rather than determining thought, language is said to be one of a number of factors that can 'mediate' it. 'Language provides names for categories, and so helps to set their boundaries and relationships; and discourse allows these names to be spoken and written frequently, so contributing to the apparent reality and currency of the categories' (Fowler 1991: 94). Stubbs (1997) gives the example of racist discourse. A student newspaper in Germany in a criticism of recent right-wing activities collected fixed expressions which had become used with increasing frequency – 'Fremdenhass' (hatred of foreigners), 'Scheinasylanten' (sham political asylum seekers), and 'Kulturelle Uberfremung' (cultural infiltration by foreigners). These words do not create thought, but they 'crystallize thoughts, make them easy to refer to, presuppose the existence of such things

and facilitate stereotyped reactions' (Stubbs 1997: 366). In an American court case concerning a doctor who had performed a late abortion, lawyers negotiated the different connotations of terms such as 'foetus', 'male human being', 'male child', and 'baby boy'. It is impossible to say exactly what effects these terms would have on the jury, but it was assumed by all parties that there would be some effect.

This idea has been supported by proponents of 'critical discourse analysis'. Fowler (1991) has analysed ostensibly unbiased news articles which, through their use of language, actually project certain points of view. Sexist terms, like the generic masculine pronoun, address forms (Mrs or Miss) and extra morphemes or words to denote femininity (lady doctor, poetess), can through their repeated use 'reinforce the distinct gender categories by making them seem the normal thing' (1991: 103). In the 'great egg scare', newspapers used highly emotive words — 'danger', 'hazard', 'panic', 'war', 'hysteria' — and grammatical constructions (by placing, for example, the emotive words at the head of noun phrases) to hype up the salmonella outbreak. At the same time, egg sales plummeted, almost crippling the industry.

Fowler is careful not to directly correlate the plunge in egg sales with the emotive language of the newspapers, and therein lies the difficulty with the theory. Although the idea is sensible, it is impossible to separate language from other contributing factors and therefore it is impossible to say for sure that language *is* a contributing factor. To what extent is it the language itself that influences our thought rather than the authority of the institution or person who uses it? The egg scare took off because of the intervention of Edwina Currie, a member of the British government. Her statement was then seized upon by the media and turned into a major headline. If they had then presented the story 'neutrally' by merely quoting Currie's own words without the embellishing emotive language, would the reaction of the British public have been any different? Did readers of The Sun react differently from readers of the Times? It is impossible to say, because each group was being influenced at the same time by other social factors. What is clear, however, is that the 'panic' and 'hysteria' the newspapers were claiming was happening was *not* actually happening. This shows firstly that the newspapers were biased, and secondly that their hype was not powerful enough to create it.

Nevertheless, lack of unequivocal proof does not of course destroy a theory. Empirical studies have been made which, although they are unable to control every possible variable, do offer convincing evidence of the power of language to mediate thought. Loftus and Palmer (1974) showed subjects a video of a traffic accident and posed the question 'How fast were the cars going when they hit each other?' When they altered the word 'hit' to stronger terms like 'collide' and 'smash', they were given higher estimates of speed. They also asked if there was any broken glass (there

wasn't) and found that if they used the word 'smash' they were more likely to get an affirmative answer. The word 'smash' often collocates with other words such as 'bottle' and 'windscreen' and thus encodes stereotypes and shared assumptions (detailed in Stubbs 1997).

Agency versus Structure

This leaves the fourth aspect of the debate to be considered: the constraints society places on the use of language and the power of speakers to use language to alter those constraints. Hymes (1972) put forward the famous view that speakers need 'communicative competence', that is the competence to communicate appropriately within in a given speech community. He summarised this into the acronym SPEAKING, covering such factors as setting, the relationship between speaker and listener, key, and the norms of interaction and interpretation. These may all vary cross-culturally. The Apache of North America, for instance, demand silence from both sides when two strangers meet; the people of Roti in Timor, on the other hand, regard silence as a form of distress, confusion, or dejection. Choice of topic may be constrained also, in the form of taboo. Taboo is a way society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behaviour believed to be harmful, in a moral or physical sense, to its members (Wardhaugh 1992). It may also change as society becomes more or less liberal.

However, it is not always clear whether the language used is being created by the situation or vice versa. This can be seen in code-switching among bilinguals. In the Ymas village studied by Romaine (1994), speakers are fluent in both Tok Pisin — the major *lingua franca* of Papua New Guinea — and the Ymas vernacular. The village councillor, Andrew Andikapan, always uses Tok Pisin when conversing with the villagers to emphasise his social position but at home with his mother switches to the vernacular. However, if he is angry with her, he frequently uses Tok Pisin to signify his temporary emotional distance from her. In an example given by Foley (1997), during a conversation between a brother and sister in a store owned by the brother, the sister used the vernacular Luyia in the hope of a hand-out ('I would like something else, but I've no money') while the brother continued to speak in the more business-like Swahili to rebuff her, showing her that he was treating her as a customer. In these two examples, the separation of the two languages appears to be a social construct but the speakers were able to use their choice to determine the nature and tone of the particular situation.

It has been suggested that our social 'identity' is partly shaped by the way we use language in differing contexts. Bucholtz concluded from her study of nerd girls in an American high school that linguistic practices 'work in conjunction with other social practices to produce meanings and identities' (1999: 220). Through negative identity practices — avoidance of slang, connected speech

processes, and non-standard syntax —and positive identity practices — use of formal vocabulary, puns, and word games — they actively reinforce their separation from other groups within the school. Carrie, a peripheral member of the nerd group, attempts to enter the conversation by shifting her speech to a more formal register: 'Is anybody here knowledgeable about（.）the seeds on top of bagels?' But later, her use of the slang word 'bootsy' invites ridicule from the other members and she quickly moves away. 'The use of the formal register is strategic, not a mechanical result of membership in a particular social category'（Bucholtz 1999: 219）. We may question how it is possible to separate strategic utterances from unconscious ones, but still the 'communities of practice' theory is a convincing one. It points to the power of language to mediate society at a local level, but also emphasises that language is only one of a number of social practices that do so. By looking at discourse at a micro level, we may come closer to seeing exactly *how* language produces social change rather than simply assuming that it does.（Whether we can then apply it to a more macro level, however, is another issue.）

Conclusion

The debate over whether language reflects society highlights some of the problems in the field of sociolinguistics and indeed any social science. It is very easy to make assumptions in the face of data and it is very easy to see through those assumptions, but it is far harder to prove that the assumptions are either right or wrong. Labov and the quantitative sociolinguists discovered correlations between speakers' positions in society and the way they spoke, but then assumed, or explained only vaguely, that the former must necessarily be causing the latter. This was rightly disputed by Cameron and others, but it was difficult to make convincing counter-arguments without assuming that the opposite was true. This came close to the linguistic determinism of Sapir and Whorf. Their argument seemed untenable when tested empirically and led to a third, weaker version, that language could mediate thought. This appears an acceptable compromise and there is no evidence as yet that contradicts it; but what is still lacking is a theory that explains how or why language influences thought and to what extent it can be separated or compared to other social factors. The discourse analysis of the 'communities in practice' may offer some clues, but it is still far from providing an answer. Perhaps the answer is that there is no answer: society, language, and thought are such complex and nebulous concepts in themselves that understanding the intricacies of their inter-relationships requires more tools than we are as yet able to provide.

References

Brown R. & Gilman A. (1960). The pronouns of power and solidarity. In Sebeok T. (ed.): *Style in Language* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 253-76

Bucholtz M. (1999). Why be normal? Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society 1999: 2*

Cameron D. (1990). Dymythologising sociolinguistics: why language does not reflect society. In Joseph J. & Taylor T. (eds.): *Ideologies of Language*. London: Routledge, 79-93.

Carroll J. (1956). *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Carroll J. & Casagrande J. (1958). The function of language classification in behaviour. In Mccoby E,, Newcomb T. and Hartley E. (eds.): *Readings in Social Psychology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Gumperz J. (1958). *Language in Social Groups*. Standford: Standford University Press.

Fasold R. (1990). *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Foley W. (1997). *Anthropological Linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Fowler R. (1991). *Language in the News*. London: Routledge.

Hudson R. (1996). *Sociolinguistics (2nd Edition)* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hymes D. (1972). Models of the interaction of language and social life. In Gumperz J. & Hymes D. (eds.): *Directions in Sociolinguistics: the Ethnography of Communication*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Wilson, 35-71.

Labov W. (1966). *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Loftus E. & Palmer J. (1972). Reconstroction of auto-mobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory. *Jounal of verbal hearing and Verbal Behavior,* 13, 585-589

Lounsbury F. (1969). Language and culture. In Hook S. (ed.): *Language and Philosophy*. New York: New York University Press, 3-29.

Lucy J. (1992). *Grammatical Categories and Cognition: A Case-Study of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Milroy L. (1980). *Language and Social Networks*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Romaine S. (1994). *Language in Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schegeloff E. (1987). Between macro and micro: contexts and other connections. In Alexander J. et al (eds.): *The Micro-Macro Link*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 207-236.

Stubbs M. (1997). Language and the mediation of experience: linguistic representation and cognitive orientation. In Coulmas F. (ed.): *Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Trudgilll P. (1974). *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wardhaugh R. (1992). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics (2nd Edition)*. Oxford: Blackwell.