

Theory Reflections: Linguistic Determinism/Relativism

The Theory

The theory of linguistic determinism and relativity presents a two-sided phenomenon: Does the specific language (and culture) we are exposed to in childhood determine, in fact, how we perceive the world, how we think, and how we express ourselves? If this is so, then, it must also be the case that each language (and the culture it represents) necessarily provides its speakers with a specific and differing view of that same world, a different way of thinking, and a different way of expressing. This notion is related to a parallel issue that has existed throughout the centuries—are there also universal absolutes that transcend all linguistic (and cultural) particulars? Recent research suggests there may be elements of both.

Linguistic determinism came to the attention of linguists and anthropologists during the 1930s, prompted by the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf. Using prevailing linguistic approaches of his time, Whorf, who studied indigenous languages, found surprising contrasts with European tongues in terms of how they reflected and spoke about reality (e.g., how they segment the time continuum, construct lexical hierarchies and, in short, encode a different view of the world, or *Weltanschauung*). The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, as it came to be known (Sapir was his teacher), gained increasing attention and prompted the notion of language determinism/relativity. In other words, the language we are born to has a direct effect upon how we conceptualize, think, interact, and express—a direct relationship between human language and human thinking

This notion has remained at the center of a debate for more than half a century. Although most favor a “weak” version of this hypothesis (i.e., that although language plays a role in creating our world view, it is not the total nor the sole determinant), the issue continues to influence approaches to language and cross-cultural education and training. In other words, language (and culture), better termed “linguaculture” (to acknowledge the interplay between both), clearly influence or affect our view of the world (and make speakers sharing a given system intelligible to each other as Germans, Japanese, Americans, etc.). From infancy on, we are engaged in a process of constructing our world view, greatly assisted and encoded within our native tongue and in the specific ways of this tongue. In this sense, language is clearly a very important determinant (and consequently serves as our most fundamental human paradigm). Nonetheless, we are not necessarily caught in the grip of language forever. There are also ways to transcend this paradigm, and they point to the power of developing a second, third, or fourth language and of a cross-cultural experience.

More recent research in linguistics, anthropology, and psychology that have explored the existence of human universals favors a weak version of the hypothesis, pointing to aspects common to all linguacultures despite their incredible diversity and creativity. Whereas, earlier research stressed the different and the exotic, most recent studies also address what human beings share, suggesting that people (across cultures and across races) are also quite alike in many ways. Shared human attributes allow us to be intelligible to each other despite differences. Some examples include Chomsky’s LAD (Language Acquisition Device) based on the hardwiring of the brain, universal components which all languages share, semantic hierarchies and heterarchies, and universal components of world views (for examples, see Bach & Harms 1968, Chomsky 1957, Fantini 1997, and Loux 1976)

Implications

Second language learning and intercultural experiences, then, are especially valuable in providing educational opportunities to go beyond our initial world view paradigm. In Whorf’s words: “a change in language can transform our appreciation of the Cosmos” (Carroll 1956, p. vii), and help us transcend the deterministic effects of our native language-

culture. However, this is not an easy process. It presents both challenges and opportunities. It is not an easy task for a young adult to question, to introspect, and to reconfigure the view of things that he or she has always held.

A case can be made, then, for the importance of intercultural education, study abroad, and exchange programs. These provide individuals with the opportunity to experience directly, holistically, and affectively alternative ways of being in the world, moving the individual from intellectualizing about other languages and cultures to direct experience. Clearly, it is for this reason that many who return from an intercultural sojourn affirm its provocative and educational nature, with comments like: "I learned a lot about my hosts and their culture, but I learned even more about myself." These statements underscore the two-way nature of intercultural learning. In learning about others, we learn about ourselves. By participating in the world view constructed by other speakers in their own language and culture, we confront the view through which we have been enculturated. And in learning about differences, we also learn something about our common humanity despite the great variety of linguacultures that humans have created around the globe.

The intercultural sojourn, then, provides experience that enables development in the four dimensions of intercultural competence: 1) knowledge, yes; but also dealing with 2) our emotions (the affective dimension); 3) developing new ways of doing things, i.e., the skill dimension (like eating, greeting, behaving); and 4) self-awareness ("looking out is looking in"). Of these, awareness is perhaps the most significant dimension of human educational growth and represents the greatest depth that emerges from cross-cultural living. For all these reasons, intercultural experiences are typically transformative, they change the rest of our life.

Through the process of intercultural living, we develop alternatives—new ways of thinking, conceptualizing, speaking, interacting, and expressing. And developing a second language adds significantly to this process. In fact, an intercultural experience without also grappling with the host language and developing some level of expressive ability with it severely constrains the degree to which we transcend the deterministic effects of our native tongue (Bennett 1997, Fantini 1997). To enter into another world view and/or to expand upon our initial one (i.e., to move beyond the singular way that we have always understood the world), requires entering into a different language since language—all languages—encode, reflecting and affecting the culture of their speakers.

What does all this mean for study abroad advisers, foreign student advisers, and language and intercultural educators and trainers? First of all, it signals the immense importance of our work and an even greater imperative for us to guide, encourage, prepare, and develop our students through the kinds of intercultural experiences that ensure opportunities to move beyond (to transcend and expand upon) the effects (strong or weak) of language determinism. It points to the urgency and importance of foreign language study with and without intercultural programs. Clearly, these notions must have contributed to recent policies of the European Union to ensure that all their citizens become minimally trilingual within a few more years; or for China, Korea, and Chile to mandate English for all their students (in addition to other languages). At the same time, ironically, back in the United States, a government-financed survey revealed that thousands of public schools stopped teaching foreign languages during the last decade.

The language-cultural determinism/relativity theory provides clear and urgent cause to ensure that young (and old) Americans also learn about the world in alternative ways. This means learning through someone else's paradigm, and on someone else's terms. International, intercultural educational processes help that to occur—ones that provide a sojourn abroad, individualize the experience, ideally with a homestay, with opportunities for intimate contact with hosts, and for maximizing the development of intercultural competences. This suggests intense field experience, experiential education of the best kind, and grappling with the language-culture of one's hosts. And for those who can't travel across an ocean, ample opportunities also exist for intercultural contact within the United States itself, through contact with international students and others of varied cultural backgrounds.

To maximize the benefits of intercultural contact, abroad or at home, we must

- prepare students adequately and properly,
- provide support throughout the experience,
- process the experience as it unfolds, and
- measure and monitor its impact upon return and beyond.

The process must be direct, experiential (as well as “intellectual”), reflective and introspective, and focus on learning to be and to do on someone else’s terms. In this way, we ensure that students enjoy the benefits of an educational experience that is unequalled, that helps foster intercultural competencies, that helps them to explore how languages-cultures differ and how they are similar, that changes their fundamental approach to the world, and that enriches them for the rest of their lives.

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