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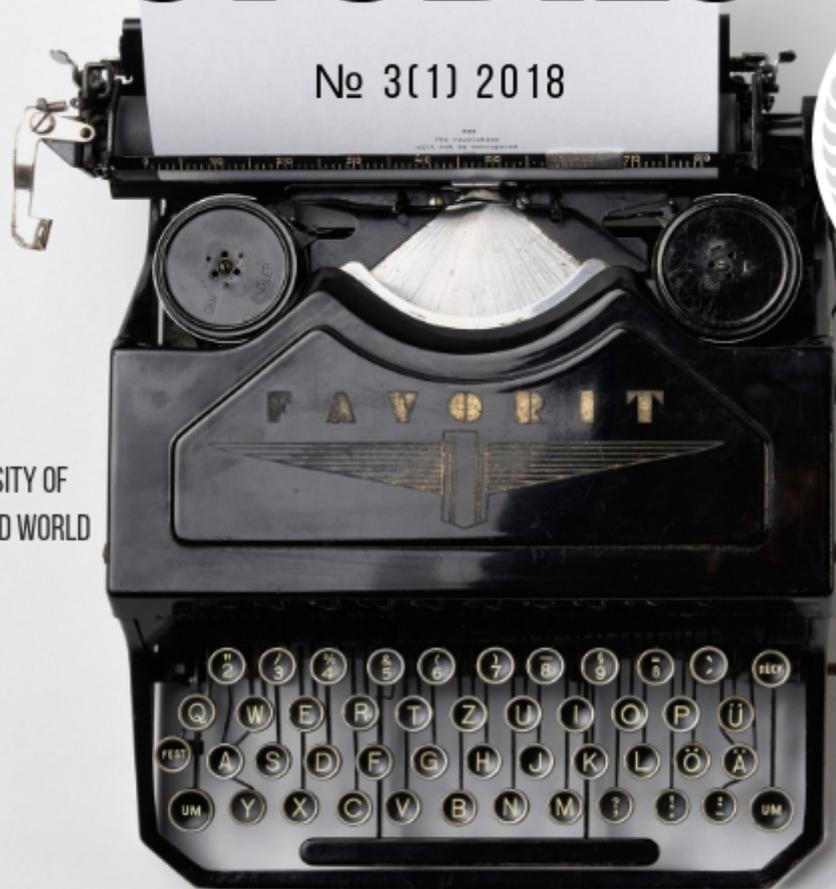
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## LANGUAGE SHAPES THOUGHTS

**Nuradilova T.M.**

MA, teacher Ablai khan UIR&WL Almaty, Kazakhstan

**Mukhamediyar S.K.**

MA, teacher Ablai khan UIR&WL Almaty, Kazakhstan

**Abstract:** The interplay between language and thoughts provokes curiosity in various areas of science. Language and thoughts tend to be considered together because one studied with the help of another. This paper is based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that suggests that language influences how people think. The aim is to seed an idea about power of language over thoughts. The data is focused on language as determining factor in human thinking. However, this idea faces great deal of scepticism which is also included in this paper. The analysis of sources also revealed that thoughts indeed exist as an independent agent. Thus, the paper concluded that even though thoughts are not necessarily determined by language, to some extent language is still involved in thinking process. It is also mentioned that this idea can be useful for people as part of language knowledge.

**Keywords:** language and thoughts, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, linguistic relativity, linguistic determinism

Based on my learning experience as international student I noticed that even when students of different backgrounds and cultures, native languages communicate through the common language (English), it is not always easy to follow each other's train of thoughts and ways of reasoning. It is suggested that their native language might be the reason of differences in their worldview and way of thinking. This paper explores to what extent language causes differences in thinking.

The main aim of this paper is to share an idea about the power of language over thoughts of people. In order to achieve this purpose there are some steps to follow: firstly, this research acquaints you with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis known as hypothesis of linguistic relativism and linguistic determinism. It states that language influence the way, in which members of culture see the world, based on the idea

that language we speak shape the way we think. Secondly, it will analyze this idea from the perspective of some scholars who also studied this question and give examples of support and disapproval. Finally, we might face some controversial opinions on this issue, and in accordance with this, the paper endeavours to emphasize some persuasive points in order to satisfy all the disputing parties.

Understanding of this kind of information is very important from the perspective of for instance translation studies, because translators are considered mediators between speakers of different languages, serving as a bridge between representatives of different cultures. They tend to have some knowledge about the system of the languages in which they are proficient, including how speakers of these languages tend to think. The same thing may refer to diplomats, representatives

of Ministries of Foreign Affairs of any country, external affairs departments in any company or anyone who intends to learn languages.

### **Hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity**

In social sciences, there is a concept, which raises the question: "Does the language shape the way we think?" Though it appears in different definitions, Sapir, anthropologist and linguist, is considered to be the first one who suggested it in the way it is known today: "particular language predisposes certain choice of interpretation", which means adopting particular way of thinking among users of this language (Sapir 1929b: 207 cited in Hussein 2012). His successor Whorf definitely went much far with his identification of this hypothesis. He strongly insisted on language being determining factor in process of thinking. And in case he is right it means that 'world cannot be perceived objectively', which supports Sapir's idea (Hussein 2012: 643). Whorf's radical interpretation of this hypothesis is exactly what is now referred to be known as the Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis, which triggered further flow of discussions and arguments on this issue.

The hypothesis involves two deductions, where one comes from another. First one is called 'linguistic determinism', and it says that language by itself, its lexical sets and grammatical systems are like filter situated somewhere between the speaker and his thoughts identifying how he sees and perceives the world (Catford 1969). Usually it can easily be noticed by language learners that what is said in

one language does not always fit into another. Because of the uncountable differences in languages, including distinctions in their lexicology and grammatical structures, 'no two languages are ever similar enough' to make perfect translation between them possible (Sapir 1929: 162 cited in Hill and Mannheim 1992: 385). This is where the second principle – 'linguistic relativism' - flows out of: if language truly influences the way how people think and there are thousands of languages exist, logical thought can be developed: 'people who speak different languages think differently' (Al-Sheikh Hussein 2012: 642).

### **Language shapes thoughts**

The understanding of this hypothesis depends on how you see language, thoughts and relations between them (Niemmeier and Dirven 2000): whether language is just a tool referring to an object or system constructing mental representation, or whether you can think without a language versus the language tells you what to think, whether you have an ability to think before you learn the language or it comes in the process of acquiring it and others. Though in dictionaries language is identified as "the way of expressing ideas" (Oxford 1995), linguists would tell you that language is more than just that.

On the one hand, there is Sapir (1949) who sees the idea in the following way: in Navaho language and its dialects there are numerous words for 'snow' describing each state of it. It is assumed that users of this language are more sensitive about the concept of 'snow' than those who have only one or

two words for it in their languages, which seems to make sense.

On the other hand, there is Whorf (1956): there were storages for gasoline called drums, but there were also so called empty gasoline drums. At the time when Whorf practiced firefighting the situation was brought to his attention that workers of the facility tend to smoke around empty gasoline drums, which were empty from gasoline, but at the same time contained explosive vapour, which made it even more dangerous. It can easily be concluded that the meaning of the word 'empty' led workers to think that these drums did not carry danger, which brought Whorf to the thought that workers were at the mercy of their language. However, it should not be excluded that knowledge here also has its role: on the one hand, at the same situation I would also be misled by the identifying factor – 'empty', on the other hand it should be assumed that workers of this facility should be better informed in order not to behave so irrationally. However, the examples are not persuasive enough, but the idea is still enclosed.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is being studied from different angles. The strong point on language determinism raises doubts most of the time when people first face it and the possibility to find evidence for it is also challengeable to the same extend. What makes it so difficult to reason the hypothesis is that 'assuming that countless grammatical differences of languages, big and small, could all be reflected in large-scale view of the world' (Catford 1969: 314). Despite the existing scepticism on this part of the hypothesis, there are still

some persuasive research studies in favour of linguistic relativity.

Several of the research studies were conducted with the help of colour identification among speakers of different languages: for instance English language speakers can easily discriminate colours like 'green' and 'blue', while users of languages like Tarahumara where there is only one word for these colours find it difficult to identify the difference with the help of language. According to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis English speakers are supposed to be able to see the differences in colours just because their language tells them so. In addition, other participants of the experiment simply should not be capable of thinking the same way because their vocabulary range does not identify colours. This study included another experiment 'designated to block the hypothesized mechanism' (Kay and Kempton 1984: 65) which goes against the evidence of hypothesis. They added one more colour between 'green' and 'blue', and asked participants to compare greenness and blueness of it and identify if it is closer to 'green' or to 'blue' (Kay and Kempton 1984: 73). This task does not involve naming the colours, and speakers of both languages were able to give common answers despite the alleged difference in thinking that should be in place according to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. It seems to be an example of that language; in this case, vocabulary can confuse some thoughts even if they are similar among users of different languages.

It seems like the name of the hypothesis speaks for itself. The word

'hypothesis' by itself is telling us that it is not a fact, but just a presupposition (Joos 1957: 96 cited in Hill and Mannheim 1992). Due to technological development, researchers are now able to see how language can be involved in human thinking process. Analogous to the mentioned above research was conducted regarding colour identification, and only this time with the help of the electrophysiological studies that can show us what is happening in people's brains. As a result of conducted tests, it was confirmed that identification of the colours were verbal based, because the tasks which required verbal resources involved stimulation in parts of the brain which are responsible for the language use (Regier and Kay 2009). They also involved children to participate, as well as those who were just learning language as representatives of 'non-linguistic creatures' (Bermudez 2003). Even though infants and children are not necessarily a reliable source of information, Regier and Kay (2009: 442) concluded the following: 'since the language is learned, it becomes a decisive factor in the process of our thoughts'. It actually concerned only the matter of learning native or first language by children, nevertheless this conclusion seems not to be applying to those who are learning their second or third languages. It is not clear if people speaking several languages may have larger range of worldview or if their thoughts should switch depending on which language, they are speaking.

### **Existing skepticism**

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is considered controversial, and it has its point. It was very popular in 1950s to try

to repeat and doubt Sapir's and Whorf's reasoning, which seems to be pretty much successful (Schultz 1990: 3-19 cited in Hill and Mannheim 1992). People who questioned this hypothesis to be true almost discredited it at that time. They supported ideas of people like Noam Chomsky who claimed that the 'human language is nothing more than completely evolved system of animal language' (Chomsky 1965 cited in Catford 1969: 310) which seems to be saying that language is nothing, meaningless without ideas in our mind which may be considered as underestimation of language power.

If thoughts keep proving itself as independent from language, it is reasonable to consider human thinking without language. Bermudez (2003) seems to have clear image of it: the idea of 'thoughts' and 'thinking about thoughts' shows an idea that the first one is possible without involvement of a language among so called 'non-linguistic creatures' for example like infants. Another one, 'thinking about thoughts', requires language to be possible, with the help of which the flow of thoughts can be organized. It can be concluded that whatever form thoughts have, in order to be delivered they need to be confined by the rules of particular language. It brings us back to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, because according to Bermudez (2003) thoughts without language are limited. Thus, it can be assumed that even if language does not necessarily determine thoughts, it definitely contribute to enlargement or restraint of its scope.

Once again, it comes to us that there is more power encapsulated in language than it may seem to have. And

it is no wonder, that ‘the idea of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis captured the imagination of generation of anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, as well as members of general public’ for almost a century now (Gumperz and Levinson 1991, 614). And probably this kind of interest in the idea should hold further attention on this hypothesis.

In conclusion, it can be seen that language has some power over thoughts of people. By answering a question ‘how powerful the power is’, this paper is definitely connected to the theme of a conference – ‘Power’. By means of the Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis, it was shown how the idea of language power over thoughts might be understood. However, because of the existing skepticism regarding this hypothesis it is hard to convince that language can determine thoughts. Majority of the studies have a capacity to go against the evidence of the hypothesis, it puts language in weaker position than it could hold. After the analysis of sources, it also appears that thoughts can actually be independent from language. Yet, it is hard to identify what the thinking exactly is, since language and thoughts are used to be considered and even studied together, just because language is assumed means of expressing thoughts.

The idea of the Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis might be useful for people who intend to learn other languages, because there is more than just language knowledge. Some university programs for instance like Translation Studies actually have some introduction into this hypothesis. It is already used as a part of knowledge that learning

languages requires different approaches in thinking and in communication with people with different background.

Despite the limited scope of this paper to just general concept of language, it should actually be considered together with notions like meaning and culture. These are exactly what can be a reason of language having such influence on thoughts, which needs further investigation in future papers. Despite that, I hope this paper includes fair amount of information to seed an idea about what kind a power language can have over thoughts.

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## ЯЗЫК ОПРЕДЕЛЯЕТ МЫСЛИ

**Нурадилова Т.М.**

магистр, преподаватель КазУМОиМЯ им. Абылай хана

**Мухамедияр С.К.**

магистр, преподаватель КазУМОиМЯ им. Абылай хана

**Аннотация:** Взаимодействие между языком и мыслями вызывает любопытство в различных областях науки. Язык и мысли, как правило, рассматриваются вместе, потому что они изучаются с помощью другого. Эта статья основана на гипотезе Сапира-Уорфа, которая предполагает, что язык влияет на то, как люди думают. Цель статьи состоит в том, чтобы заложить идею о власти языка над мыслями. Данные ориентированы на язык как определяющий фактор человеческого мышления. Однако эта идея сталкивается с большим скептицизмом, о которой также говорится в этой статье. Анализ источников также показал, что мысли действительно существуют как независимый агент, на основании чего, был сделан вывод, что, мысли не обязательно определяются языком, однако в какой-то степени язык все еще участвует в процессе мышления. Также упоминается, что эта идея может быть полезна людям как часть понимания знаний о языках.

**Ключевые слова:** язык и мысли, гипотезе Сапира-Уорфа, гипотеза лингвистической относительности

## ТІЛ ОЙДЫ ТОЛЫҚТЫРАДЫ

**Нурадилова Т.М.**

магистр

Абылай хан атындағы Қазақ Халықаралық Қатынастар және Әлем Тілдер Университеті

**Мұхамедияр С.Қ.**

магистр

Абылай хан атындағы Қазақ Халықаралық Қатынастар және Әлем Тілдер Университеті

**Аңдатпа:** Тіл мен ойдың арасындағы байланыс ғылымның түрлі салаларында қызығушылық тудырады. Тіл мен ой әдетте бірге қарастырыда, себебі екеуіде қатар зерттеледі. Осы мақала тілдің адам ойына әсер етеді деген тұжырымдаманы ұсынатын Сепир-Уорф болжамына негізделеді. Осы мақаланың мақсаты тілдің ойға әсер ететін күш бар деген ойды қарастыру және адам ойын анықтаушы фактор - тіл деген тұжырымдаманы анықтау. Сонымен қатар, осы мақала аталған тұжырымға байланысты скептикалық көзқарастарды да қарастырады. Сараптаманың нәтижесінде ойдың тілден тәуелсіз әрекет ету мүмкіндігі анықтады. Қорытындыға сәйкес, тіл міндетті түрде ойға әсер етуші фактор ретінде өз ролін растамағанымен де, тіл әлі де ойлау үдерісіне белгілі бір деңгейде қатысатыны расталды.

**Түйінді сөздер:** тіл мен ой, Сепир-Уорф болжамы