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## Strong Linguistic Relativity: A Continental Sense of Language and Being

Ava Totah  
atotah1@lion.lmu.edu

Brian Treanor  
*Loyola Marymount University*

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### Recommended Citation

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Loyola Marymount University  
University Honors  
Program

STRONG LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY:  
A CONTINENTAL SENSE OF LANGUAGE AND BEING

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Ava Totah

4 May 2022

In the 1930s and 1940s, American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf collected data on the language spoken by Native Americans from the Hopi Tewa Reservation in Arizona. He paid particular attention to grammar that described events and processes, arguing that “the Hopi language contains no reference to ‘time’” and can thus explain their particular behaviors and culture.<sup>1</sup> Whorf’s main arguments were built from the ideas of his mentor, Edward Sapir, who claimed that each language expresses a distinct social reality.<sup>2</sup> Both linguists revived the importance of the interaction between language and thought to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, generally positing that the “characteristics of one’s language can affect other aspects of life and must be taken into account.”<sup>3</sup> Though the two never co-authored any works (nor did they formally state a hypothesis), this principle of “linguistic relativity” is popularly termed the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

#### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The influence and importance of language has been a highly debated topic among philosophers and neuroscientists alike. Despite varying theories of its origin or purpose, it is generally agreed upon that language plays a fundamental role in human life and is one of the most unique aspects of humans as a species. Because of its highly variable nature, language functions as a tool for communication, social and personal identity, and entertainment. Therefore, there is little disagreement when it comes to the *existence of* a relationship between language and culture, while the nature of that relationship remains the primary focus of linguistic debates.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin L. Whorf et al., *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2012), 74.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Sapir, “The Status of Linguistics as a Science”, *Language* 5, no.4 (1929): 209.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Leavitt, *Linguistic Relativities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

Seeing as language seems to define or heavily characterize human life, it is no wonder that this relationship has been studied for well over 2,000 years. In particular, it has become a primary facet of philosophical study, especially following the birth of analytic philosophy, or the “linguistic turn,” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Continental philosophy, which is often defined in contrast to analytic philosophy, regards language as an inextricable part of its studies, such that traditions like phenomenology and hermeneutics consider language necessary for our experience of the world. In fact, at the root of these traditions is an emphasis on direct, lived experience as opposed to the objective image posited by the empirical sciences.<sup>4</sup>

It is here we notice that most of our linguistic study supports what Stanley Deetz calls “representational, derivative view[s] of language”<sup>5</sup>; though they have produced many important insights, these views are essentially limited because they approach language as an object and are unable to grasp the primary language experience that makes them possible. Phenomenology, as a study of pre-predicative experience, lends itself greatly to this direct experience of language, going so far as to posit that “all conscious knowledge, conscious content, is already housed in language.”<sup>6</sup> This implies that a comprehensive study of language (and consequently, its relationships to other aspects of human life) must involve phenomenological consideration.

Indeed, approaching language and its connections from a scientific viewpoint would remove them from our lived experience, and it seems inadequate to speak of something so intrinsic to our experience from an outside perspective. Rather, we must conceive of a linguistic subject, a “native consciousness,” that “announces its lived reality, without

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<sup>4</sup> H. J. Pos, “Phenomenology and Linguistics,” trans. Robin M. Muller, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 31, no. 1 (2010): 35.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Deetz, “Words Without Things: Toward a Social Phenomenology of Language,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59, no. 1 (1973): 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

observing it as if a spectator”<sup>7</sup>; such an approach creates a much larger realm for the study of language, culture, and thought. Through this, we can acknowledge that continental philosophies such as phenomenology and hermeneutics may serve us better in our linguistic investigations, at the very least by virtue of their expansive nature. The *experience* of language – and derivatively, various languages – can provide us with a much more comprehensive understanding of its effects on our thought and cultures.

#### “STRONG” LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

So, we return to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and linguistic relativity. Linguistic relativity can be divided into two versions: the strong hypothesis and the weak hypothesis. The strong hypothesis, often called *linguistic determinism*, states that “language *determines* thought...the particular language you speak rigidly structures your thought in an inescapable manner.”<sup>8</sup> The weak hypothesis states that language only *influences* thought and decisions. Linguistic determinism (and consequently, Sapir-Whorf) is generally thought to be implausible by modern linguists. There is simply not enough evidence to support it, and the notion that language absolutely determines thought would imply that if I do not have a word for something in my native language, I simply cannot conceive of it. On the other hand, the weak hypothesis struggles to maintain a connection that is more than trivial; while our native language certainly interacts with our thoughts and worldview, it is not to a meaningful enough degree to warrant the discussion of a causal relationship.

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<sup>7</sup> Pos, 37-8.

<sup>8</sup> Laura M. Ahearn, “Language, Thought, and Culture,” in *Living Language* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 69.

Somewhere between the two versions lies a solution. In this essay, I seek to articulate a “third option” that is (a) plausible and (b) non-trivial<sup>9</sup> in some regard. That is, while our native language does not determine our experience in an *absolute sense*, there are differences in experience associated with each language, and at least some of these differences are non-trivial. I will term this third option “strong linguistic relativity,” imagining it somewhere *between* linguistic determinism and weak linguistic relativism. I believe that phenomenology and, by extension, modern hermeneutics imply a significant connection between thought and language, and that they have quite a lot to contribute to questions of linguistic relativism. I believe that these continental philosophies lend themselves to “strong linguistic relativity” because they suggest that one’s native language influences one’s being-in-the-world in at least some non-trivial ways.<sup>10</sup> At the very least, we ought to consider how our experience of particular languages could imply an influential relationship between language and thought.

#### HERMENEUTICS AND PHENOMENOLOGY AS BASES

Modern hermeneutics has grown to encompass more than just the interpretation of religious texts; in fact, many contemporary philosophers have noted the universality of interpretation and the value of the hermeneutic lens. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, it is precisely this universal nature of hermeneutics that places it “before” all other experiences of the world. Gadamer’s conception of hermeneutics is as a “conditionedness of our being.” The human experience of the world is of one always already interpreted, “into which experience

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<sup>9</sup> By non-trivial, I mean significant. The weak hypothesis of linguistic relativity is often seen as trivial because simply claiming an influence between language and thought is seen as a given. My theory of strong linguistic relativity seeks at least some influences that cannot be called trivial.

<sup>10</sup> Here, I would like to note that the examples I introduce later in this paper (see: “Greek and Chinese” and “Erazim Kohák...”) are meant to illustrate situations in which a hermeneutic contemplation of the relationship between language and worldview is *suggested*. I am not of the correct field to claim *direct causation* in these examples, but I do believe that they warrant closer attention, particularly through the hermeneutic lens.

steps as something new.”<sup>11</sup> Interpretation is not simply something that we *do*; it is also, so to speak, something we *are*.

The understanding of this experience is conveyed through the medium of human “linguisticity,” which “carries *everything* within it...because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of ‘understandings.’”<sup>12</sup> Gadamer argues that language in general (i.e., language *qua* language) binds understanding, but he is sure to add that he doesn’t think this leads to linguistic relativity. Interestingly, here it seems as though he is thinking of linguistic *determinism*, as he accentuates that there is no “captivity”<sup>13</sup> within a particular language; however, in terms of my proposition, this small distinction between the two versions of linguistic relativity makes all the difference. While Gadamer himself makes a point to denounce linguistic determinism, he simultaneously notes that “we live wholly within a language.”<sup>14</sup> This particular stance emphasizes precisely what I mean by “strong linguistic relativity”: recognizing the *influence* of one’s particular language on their worldview rather than a *constraint*. It’s clear that Gadamer believes that this influence – the connection between language, understanding, and hermeneutics – is significant enough that there will be some non-trivial ways in which language can shape worldview.

Paul Ricoeur’s work on translation is underscored by his developments as a hermeneutic philosopher, particularly considering the idea that there can be no ethically neutral translations. We dream of a perfect translation – to “gain without losing” – that we can

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<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 10-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Here Gadamer is referencing the previous notion of linguisticity “carrying” everything with it; this capacity to carry everything creates the “universality” of human linguisticity, thus leading to a limitlessness within language. Linguistic determinism states that there *is* a captivity within each language, thus the comparison.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 15-6.

never quite achieve.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we continue to translate. Ricoeur speaks of the difficulties that the translator faces in serving “two masters: the foreigner with his work, the reader with his desire for appropriation.”<sup>16</sup> Translation inevitably results in a “double betrayal,” in which neither party can be satisfied with the results. The mother tongue is betrayed in the sense that its sacredness is diminished; the language of the reader is betrayed because it will never perfectly capture the original meaning.

This double betrayal is mirrored by the fact that we *desire* to translate, past mere usefulness. It seems that this desire stems from broadening horizons, new discoveries, *understanding*. We seek to understand that which is foreign to us, not only for our technical progress but also for our intellectual and philosophical growth. It is no wonder that Ricoeur agrees with Steiner’s quote in *After Babel*: “to understand is to translate.”<sup>17</sup> The paradox of translation, then, comes from the often-impossible test of the foreign and our incessant desire to translate nonetheless.

Ricoeur argues for a “linguistic hospitality” that can moderate the imposing nature of this translation enigma, one in which we acknowledge the fact that we can never achieve a perfect translation. By undertaking this linguistic hospitality, the translator finds contentedness in his work; he assumes the irreducibility of the two languages and “can translate differently, without hope of filling the gap between equivalence and total adequacy,” just as he would in telling a story.<sup>18</sup> It seems that Ricoeur is called to this solution because he sees the inherent difficulty in moving through a world that *demand*s translation and the necessity for a more ethical theory of such.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 10.



From here, we can shift to the theory of strong linguistic relativity. Ricoeur's analysis states that the difference between languages is so great that pure translation between them is impossible. Going so far as to claim the "betrayals" of both the author and the reader implies – quite intentionally, I believe – that there are non-trivial aspects of each language, particularly when it comes to the worldview obtained through each. Though it would make much more evolutionary sense to have a universal language,<sup>19</sup> we have a multiplicity of languages that we inherently desire to translate – to understand. This emphasis on the diversity of languages (and the impossibility of the dream of perfect translations) suggests that the particularities in one's native language are significant enough to result in noteworthy differences in one's being in the world.

Both Gadamer and Ricoeur – some of the two most prominent hermeneutic philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – display tendencies towards this conception of strong linguistic relativity. We see that both understand and emphasize just how essential language is to our understanding of the world and one another, in such a way as to suggest that each language has at least some non-trivial influences on its speaker's worldview. It is in this interpretive and language-based sense that hermeneutics lends itself to the theory of strong linguistic relativity.

Phenomenology, as briefly discussed earlier, seems to strongly imply ways in which language is built into and even possibly precedes existence; therefore, extending this to particular languages is not so difficult. Martin Heidegger, who is also well-known for his contributions to phenomenology and hermeneutics, conceives of language as "involved in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

being, the very nature of revealed self and things in the World,” such that words are a “Worldly point-of-view.”<sup>20</sup> Naming something involves “taking a stance” on how it is understood. This conception of language implies that one’s native language, in expressing the appearance of the World, would have some non-trivial impact on her thought and experience of the world around her.

We can similarly see how the phenomenologist’s idea of language disclosing the World leads to the possibility of strong linguistic relativity. If language, among other things, is what expresses the World to us, then we could reasonably suppose that a particular language would express the world in a way that is different from another language. Further, if language constitutes experience, then our individual experiences could be constituted by our native languages. The phenomenological account of language, with so much of it rooted in direct experience, lends a number of insights to strong linguistic relativity, such that its emphasis on the constitutive nature of language begs us to consider how each language could influence our worldviews.

#### GREEK AND CHINESE

In *On Translation*, Ricoeur notes a relationship between ancient China and ancient Greece as presented by French sinologist François Jullien. Jullien believes Chinese to be the “absolute other” of Greek: “knowledge of the inside of Chinese amounts to a deconstruction of what is outside...i.e. thinking and speaking Greek.”<sup>21</sup> In such a relationship, the strangeness that belongs to each side implies at least some non-trivial differences between the language itself and the understanding of the world possessed by its speaker.

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<sup>20</sup> Deetz, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, 36.

Chinese verbs do not have “tenses”, at least in the same sense that Greek languages do, because they are not conjugated. Past and future can be indicated through adverbials (i.e., “today” or “tomorrow”) but the verbs themselves remain the same regardless of the intended time. Jullien, whether correctly or not, concludes that this lack of tenses is due to the fact that Chinese does not have the Aristotelian conception of time that Greek does. However, he speaks of what exists “in place” of Greek time in the Chinese language, which for him is communicable only through Greek/French words that ordinarily have no philosophical meaning. Ricoeur uses this as an example of “constructing comparables”, within which we find the untranslatable *meaning*.<sup>22</sup>

This example does not occupy much of Ricoeur’s time, but it opens a world of possibilities in the hermeneutics of linguistic relativity. If we examine the meaningful differences between languages like Chinese and languages like Greek, we can relate these to the general worldviews held by those native speakers. Although this is only circumstantial evidence, a relationship between a culture’s primary language and its conception of the world begs to be considered.

China has an extremely diverse set of living languages, with the most common belonging to the Sinitic family. Today’s predominant language is Standard Chinese – a dialect of Mandarin – spoken by about 70% of the population. As mentioned before, Chinese has a much different morphology than the Indo-European languages, such that tense and voice are not revealed through verbs. If not for adverbs and syntax, the temporal aspect of Chinese is essentially missing from the grammar.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

As with language, China is just as diverse in its religio-philosophical traditions. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have largely shaped Chinese culture over the years; however, the most widespread system of beliefs is categorized as Chinese folk religion, which encompasses a variety of overlapping cultural practices and behaviors that are bound to local communities, and which seem to pervade every aspect of social life. Due to the influence of these “three teachings” of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, there are some aspects of Chinese religion that appear to be present in all particularities, or at least provide a basis for them.

Confucianism supplies much of China’s focus on rituals, familial respect, ancestral worship, and self-discipline. In contrast, Taoism brings far more spiritual elements into the mix, emphasizing a sort of “non-action” or becoming one with the true nature of the world. Buddhism introduces personal development and reincarnation to encourage meditation and to seek “nirvana”.<sup>23</sup> In all three, the focus on one’s present (and personal) life is underscored; time becomes relative and, somehow, a-linear.

This becomes clearer when we consider our “absolute other”, Greek. More broadly, we can even consider Indo-European languages *in general* since they all share many of the same characteristics. These languages conjugate verbs to represent tense, person, and the like. Time is indicated through a particular verb form or morphology, such that a verb often needs nothing else to convey tense.

Culturally, Europe is and has been dominated by the Abrahamic religions, with Christianity being the primary belief system. While there are differences between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – and even between the varying sects of each – all three religions are

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<sup>23</sup> National Geographic Society, “Chinese Religions and Philosophies,” *National Geographic Resource Library*, August 19, 2019.

monotheistic and conceive of God as the Creator. Also common to the Abrahamic religions is a teleological view of history, which implies a finality or end purpose on a linear time scale. These religions confirm a God who created the universe and who will one day intervene at the Last Judgement. These Abrahamic religions have largely shaped Western culture, such that people tend to relate their actions with an obedience to God and Divine Law; especially in Christianity, this translates to a focus on eternal reward in the afterlife. Here, it is especially important to note that this linear view of time has been preserved even for those who explicitly reject religion.

Thus, when comparing Chinese and European languages, we can see a correlation between verb conjugation and cultural views of time. Standard Chinese does not modify verbs to indicate time, such that isolated actions do not have a sequential element; Indo-European languages *do* modify verbs to indicate time, such that there is a (verbally) linguistic difference between past, present, and future actions. Chinese culture is primarily dominated by folk religions that focus on the present moment; European culture is dominated by Abrahamic religions that stress a beginning and an end. It's worth noting, then, that languages that conjugate verbs tend to be associated with cultures in which temporality is conceived in linear terms, whereas languages that do not conjugate verbs tend to be associated with cultures in which temporality is a-linear or even circular. From a hermeneutic perspective, this suggests a possible relationship between one's native language and their worldview.

#### ERAZIM KOHÁK AND THE GRAMMAR OF ANIMACY

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a botanist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, an Eastern Woodlands tribe located in Oklahoma. In her 2013 book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she

combines her scientific and Indigenous knowledge of nature to produce a more joyful relationship with the Earth. Though the book focuses on the world of botany, Kimmerer makes it a point to weave her own experiences and her people's culture into her exploration of the living world.

She mourns the endangerment of the Potawatomi language, which she herself does not speak fluently: “the words that praised creation, told the old stories...rests today in the tongues of nine very mortal men and women.” There is something important and deeply profound that she fears will be lost with their passing. At a yearly tribal gathering, Kimmerer quotes a great-grandmother: “‘The language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world.’”<sup>24</sup>

Now, there is clearly a stronger implication at the heart of this section: that of cultural assimilation, white supremacy, and the damaging nature of colonialism. Kimmerer recognizes both the negative and positive aspects of the European ecological tradition, but ultimately shifts her focus to the intricacies of the Potawatomi language that are absent from even the rich vocabulary of English.

She notes how she struggled with the sheer number of verbs in Potawatomi, especially coming from the particularly noun-dominated world of English, and more specifically, the technical world of science. Looking through an Ojibwe dictionary – a language closely tied to Potawatomi – she discovers just how many *things* are considered as verbs rather than nouns, and a realization occurs:

A bay is a noun only if the water is *dead*...But the verb *wiikwegamaa* – to *be* a bay – releases the water from bondage and lets it live...*This* is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up around us...This is the grammar of animacy.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Robin W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2013), 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

Kimmerer's classification heralds an important result. Almost everything "natural," everything not man-made, is considered animate in Potawatomi. In contrast, the vast majority of these things are inanimate, and named with nouns, in English; here, the resulting distance between the subject and the object practically *allows* us to disrespect nature.

In 1984, Erazim Kohák published *The Embers and the Stars*, a beautiful philosophical analysis in which he reminds us to "recall" our position in nature as the bearers of meaning, which we have buried beneath theories of dehumanization and aloneness. Central to his inquiry is a description of the world in more "personalist" terms, such that "humans cannot conceive of the world as an absurd play of blind forces, yet retain the confidence of their own humanity."<sup>26</sup> He argues that we must adopt a personalistic ethic, in which we recognize reality "as Thou" and respect all beings "simply because they are."<sup>27</sup>

Here, we see a specific respect for the world around us starting to take root, particularly as a result of the inherent dignity of boulders and chipmunks alike. Conceiving of the natural world in Kohák's personalist terms encourages a better relationship with the nonhuman because it reminds us that we are not alone on a spinning rock of dead matter. Instead, as Kimmerer puts it, we can imagine a reality full of beings that we "speak of as persons worthy of our respect"<sup>28</sup> through this grammar of animacy.

And here, possibly, is where we supply strong linguistic relativity. It seems that nominal languages like English tend toward an anthropocentrism and an objectification of nature; whether culturally or linguistically, we see how much of a difference it makes to

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<sup>26</sup> Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 125.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>28</sup> Kimmerer, 58.

Kimmerer to conceive of the world as living rather than as dead. In contrast, a verbal language like Potawatomi animates previously inanimate things and draws the human experience closer to the experience of the rest of the world. Because they are inclined to this more animate view, it is much easier to respect and integrate with nature in a personalistic sense, as Kohák suggests. After all, by virtue of our existing in the world, we are faced with the ultimate question: will we conceive of the world around us as personal, or will we conceive of and treat it as impersonal?<sup>29</sup> Either answer has profound impacts on our experience of the world, which is far from trivial.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Kimmerer's experience with the animating Potawatomi language and Ricoeur's understanding of the paradigm of translation are both moments in which the particularities of language (i.e., the difference between *languages*) can<sup>30</sup> have noteworthy impacts. In each, factors of the language should be considered along with factors of the worldview possessed by its speakers. However, the goal is not just to point out examples that could very well be simple coincidences; rather, these examples are moments in which the hermeneutical and phenomenological natures of language and thought are revealed.

Approached in this way, the hitherto controversial notion of linguistic relativity can be approached with a lighter air. Neither the restrictive linguistic determinism, nor the minor weak linguistic relativism, "strong linguistic relativity" supposes a hermeneutic and phenomenological understanding of the influence of language on being-in-the-world. In this

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<sup>29</sup> Kohák, 124.

<sup>30</sup> Again, I would like to reiterate my hesitation to draw strict causal lines between language and thought. Rather, I aim to show moments where this connection should be considered.



sense, it becomes more theory than hypothesis, more a matter of interpretation of the world than an objective, causal relationship. This understanding of linguistic relativity would produce at least some non-trivial connections between one's language and one's thought, in such a way that avoids the problems of the initial Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. At its core, the experiential nature of language (and *languages*) serves as a beacon for the possibility of strong linguistic relativity; at the very least, when we consider language in this way we must also consider the ways in which a language could influence thought and culture. Additionally, making sense of these connections would add to the already existing hermeneutic conception of language and translation, as well as our understanding of the infinite amount of narratives that make up our existence in the world.

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