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# Review of John Lucy, *Language Diversity and Thought*

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**Abstract**

In this volume Lucy provides an incisive review of American literature on the linguistic relativity hypothesis, and a provocative reformulation of it. Lucy is comfortable in each of the major disciplines relevant to the language and thought debate - anthropology, linguistics, and psychology - and he provides a comprehensive reassessment. He also provides clear, balanced discussions of the difficult issues involved.

**Comments**

> But perhaps we will have fulfilled the same function and opened up some others, if we claim that what persists here is a *demand in and for language*, a 'that which' which prompts and occasions, say, within the domain of science, calls to be explained, described . . . exercised, mobilized, put to sleep . . . a site of enactment. . . . To insist upon this demand, this site as the 'that without which' no psychic operation can proceed, but also as that on which and through which the psyche also operates . . . the psyche's site of operation. . . . the constitutive demand that mobilizes psychic action. (p. 67; original emphasis)

The above quotation offers the delightful implication that psychology need not be confined to defining itself solely as what psychologists do or have done. Rather, Butler's book intimates that in a deepening of the project of social construction one may encounter, in the interstice between representation and its remainder, particular structures that are essential elements of psychological research and theory.

### Reference

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.

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### Does Grammar Shape Thought?

JOHN LUCY, *Language Diversity and Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 328 pp. ISBN 0–521–38797–3.

In this volume John Lucy provides an incisive review of American literature on the linguistic relativity hypothesis, and a provocative reformulation of it. Lucy is comfortable in each of the major disciplines relevant to the language and thought debate—anthropology, linguistics and psychology—and he provides a comprehensive reassessment. He also provides clear, balanced discussions of the difficult issues involved.

Lucy shows the limits of the two major approaches to the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Psychologists and psycholinguists assess thought passably, but do not adequately formulate the linguistic or the comparative issues. They generally conclude that language does not influence thought. Anthropological linguists do better with language, but use inadequate conceptions of thought. They often conclude that language strongly influences thought.

Lucy attends to the plausible intuitions on both sides, and shows how each gets carried away with its limited view. The psychologists arrange their studies such that language could not possibly influence thought. Lucy discusses 'refutations' of the linguistic relativity hypothesis that use experiments conducted only in English, focused on objects defined through the English category system. The anthropologists' formulations guarantee that language will influence thought, because they operationalize 'thought' using linguistic objects like vocabulary.

To reformulate the problem, Lucy uses the American anthropological linguistic tradition—specifically Boas, Sapir and Whorf. Boas brought from Germany the idea that language classifies experience. Speech must group objects in order to communicate intelligibly. Sapir extended this insight—by describing the systematicity of grammars, and by proposing that grammatical categories shape speakers' habitual thought. Whorf refined Sapir's grammatical analyses, and described how a *pervasive* grammatical tendency can support a certain world-view.

Drawing on Whorf, Lucy provides a plausible formulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis: *diverse languages influence the habitual thought of people who speak them.* He also explicates Whorf's hypothesis that 'linguistic analogies' guide thought. As Sapir noted, grammars group certain objects together. Count nouns like 'dog' can be pluralized and take an indefinite article. Mass nouns like 'mud' cannot. English speakers must put nouns into one group or the other, and they may *conceive* of the denoted object accordingly. 'Culture', for instance, was a mass noun for most of the 19th century, but it has changed into a count noun. It changes our thinking if we conceive 'culture' as similar to a substance, instead of a discrete object. Whorf proposed that such grammatically based analogies guide thought.

Despite the plausibility of his reformulation, Lucy's insistence on an *empirically testable* hypothesis may cause problems. By insisting on an independent measure of thought, Lucy posits a realm of thought independent of language.

> Of course, categories of language may not be readily distinguishable from categories of thought in ordinary behavior. Nonetheless, it is important that there be a clear analytic distinction between linguistic categories and cognitive categories so that the influence of the former on the latter (if any) can be detected and identified. (p. 264)

This makes methodological sense. And Lucy clearly recognizes the limitations of his formulation. Nonetheless, positing an independent thought realm could keep us from exploring interesting language–thought relations. Significant thought processes depend on public symbol systems like language. We should study richer areas of thought, where the language permeates the thinking, and not limit ourselves to areas of thought that might be separable from language.

Lucy acknowledges this problem. He claims that we must *first* demonstrate the influence of language on thought using independent measures of thought, and only then go on to the interrelations. Lucy does succeed in the initial project. He clearly reformulates the linguistic relativity hypothesis and, in the companion volume entitled *Grammatical Categories and Cognition* (1992), he provides empirical evidence to support it.

Lucy clarifies another central issue—the 'calibration problem'. In comparing the cognitive impact of two languages, analysts must have a vantage-point. Does any point stay stable across languages? Psychologists, and even most anthropologists, generally rely on 'reality'. They take for granted that certain objects, like color, are the same for everyone and provide a stable ground for comparison. But these supposedly universal objects are construed from a western perspective.

As Lucy points out, this approach assumes that language does not influence thought in those areas used for comparison. But how can we keep ethnocentric assumptions out of our comparisons? Lucy offers a preliminary solution.

We do not need an objective description of reality to make comparisons across linguistic communities. This is fortunate, since no direct classifications of reality exist. But we do need a neutral metalanguage—one that does not assume one language's categories. Lucy claims to find a neutral metalanguage in universal linguistic taxonomies. All languages have certain types of noun phrases, for example, and languages differ systematically in noun phrase structure. Certain segmentations of the world—like the distinctions between speaker, addressee and audience, those between inanimate and animate objects, and non-discrete and discrete objects—seem to be universal. Elaboration upon such linguistic universals, according to Lucy, could yield a neutral metalanguage for comparing languages and their cognitive effects.

Grammatical taxonomies should help us explore the linguistic relativity hypothesis, but we must attend to other issues as well. Calibration seems a problem partly because Lucy assumes reference to be language's primary function. By construing language as a system for picking out categories of objects, and thought as a process of manipulating propositions about those categories, we generate problems of incommensurability. We seem to have, across individuals and cultures, systems of categories that do not match.

But language functions to do many things other than refer. Both speech and thinking generally occur in practical contexts. Grammars themselves are inextricably hooked into interactional contexts (Silverstein, 1976). So are thought processes (Lave, 1988), and language-use (Levinson, 1983). Within verbal practices categorization is *accomplished*, as much as systems of categories are applied.

From this (admittedly undeveloped) perspective, the problem of language and thought becomes a question of how speech and thought intersect in particular verbal practices, and how diverse languages influence the concepts used and constructed in those practices. Lucy's formulation of the problem is cleaner than this. But his focus on grammatico-semantic categories and non-linguistic thought could obscure the most interesting aspects of linguistic relativity. He does an excellent job at clearing the ground and clarifying the issues, but subsequent examination of speaking and thinking will need a more contextualized account of both.

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