



Shelf Life

Does Language Shape Thought?

Maybe. But progressivism certainly shapes John McWhorter's.

By John Derbyshire – 6.23.14

The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language

By John H. McWhorter

(Oxford, 208 pages, \$19.95)

Chinese has an extraordinary number of verbs meaning “carry.” If I carry something on a hanging arm, like a briefcase, the verb is *tí*; on an outstretched palm, *tuō*; using both palms, *pēng*; gripped between upper arm and body, *xìe*; in my hand, like a stick, *wò*; embraced, like a baby, *bào*; on my back, *bēi*; on my head, *dīng*; on my shoulder, *kāng*; on a pole over my shoulder, *tiào*; slung on a shoulder pole between two guys, *tai*....

Every foreign language learner encounters similar curiosities. The question naturally occurs: Since speakers of different languages carve up the world so differently when they speak, do they likewise do so when they *think*? Do they *conceive* of the world differently?

If so, in which direction does the arrow of causation point? Which of the following propositions is the case?

A: Conceptions shape language, or

B: Language shapes conceptions.

Proposition B, that language shapes thought, occurred to many people—Nietzsche, for instance—but is nowadays associated with the American anthropologist Benjamin Whorf. Whorf died young in 1941, but his friends publicized and popularized his ideas, and Whorfianism—most often as “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”: Edward Sapir was Whorf’s mentor at Yale—became part of the common furniture of Western intellectual life in the later twentieth century.

In *The Language Hoax* John McWhorter, Professor of Linguistics at Columbia University, pooh-poohs Whorfianism. This is an odd sort of thing for him to do.

It’s odd for *anyone* to do it. Among scholars of linguistics, Whorfianism was out of favor by the 1960s. My 1987 edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* says of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that: “in its strongest form it is unlikely to have any adherents now.” Why is Prof. McWhorter flogging a dead hypothesis?

Things become even odder as the author reveals himself to us. Whorf’s ideas belonged to the egalitarian reaction against early anthropological attempts to rank peoples, and by extension their languages, as primitive

or sophisticated, less developed or more. The keynote for this reaction was struck in the 1860s by German anthropologist Adolf Bastian, who coined the phrase “the psychic unity of mankind.” Bastian’s student Franz Boas carried these ideas to the U.S.A.; Sapir studied under Boas; Whorf under Sapir.

Of my two propositions above, only B is compatible with the psychic unity of mankind. Proposition A suggests innate mental differences—kryptonite to egalitarians, although reasonable on evolutionary grounds.

McWhorter is himself a keen egalitarian. He *twice* quotes, in scandalized tones, the definition of “Apache” from a Whorf-era edition of *Webster’s Dictionary*: “of warlike disposition and relatively low culture.” I can’t myself see the objection. Ancestors of, say, Victorian Britons had lived in societies very much like the Apaches’. When had ancestors of the Apaches lived like Victorians?

Again, on page 67:

One might expect that complex grammar would be more typical of “advanced” civilizations.

I suppose one might (though there is a good counter-argument in the book, lucidly presented); but why the scare quotes?

Because McWhorter’s egalitarianism is of the most fiercely extreme kind, that’s why. Therein lie his issues with Whorfianism, and the reason for this book. *Whorfianism is not egalitarian enough.*

For one thing, it is condescending.

To scorn diversity is antithetical to egalitarianism. However, to fetishize it, while perhaps seeming progressive, can be equally elitist. Do we feel people as interesting in studied ways ... ultimately because we can’t quite feel that they are our equals just in being human?

Hoo boy, it’s tough to be a progressive! You have to respect other people, but *not too much.*

For another thing, a school of neo-Whorfianism has come up, devising psych-lab experiments that show language shaping thought in tiny ways, under contrived circumstances.

Russian, for example, has different words for “light blue” and “dark blue.” OK: set up an experiment where Russians and non-Russians have to match off blue squares by shade as fast as they can. It’s been done, with all the cross-controls you can think of. Russians do better. McWhorter accepts the results, but labors mightily to show that *it doesn’t matter.*

What then accounts for all those “carry” words in Chinese?

There is an endless variety of life’s nuances that a language may end up marking.... Which ones they mark is a matter not of what its speakers need or what its speakers are like, but chance.

Not only does comparative linguistics not show up differences between peoples, it proves that *we are all exactly the same!*

If you want insight as to what makes all humans worldwide the same, beyond genetics, there are few better places to start than how language works.

Leaving aside the profound ignorance of genetics revealed there, this is just obscurantist. *No need for further research! It's all just chance!*

It's also incoherent. It is true in a trivial sense that human beings, as members of one species, are the same in major structure. So are dogs. That doesn't mean the differences aren't interesting, worth studying, and biological in origin.

It's hard to write a dull book about linguistics, and *The Language Hoax* has many fun facts about obscure languages. Its overall tone, though, is that of a fanatically extreme egalitarian protesting too much.

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