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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language, by John H. McWhorter

7 August 2014

Kerstin Hoge on a manifesto correcting the view that the language we speak affects how we think

A spectre is haunting public discourse – the spectre of popular Whorfianism.

Named for the early 20th-century linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, Whorfianism (also known as linguistic relativity) describes the view that the language we speak affects the way we think. It is an idea that has received considerable popular interest, leading to the widespread belief that there are as many different worldviews as there are languages. *The Language Hoax* presents John McWhorter's "manifesto" against this position.

By calling his book a manifesto, he places himself in the tradition of revolutionaries and iconoclastic Modernists. Indeed, his agenda goes beyond a scientific rebuttal of popular Whorfianism, since he aims to show not only its empirical flaws but also its political dangers. While the former concern a lack of heft in the cognitive effects of cross-linguistic differences, McWhorter understands the latter to be the exotification of speakers of non-Western languages and thus complicity in the perpetuation of inequality. What is linguistically different from Standard Average European languages, he argues, is fetishised as a defining cultural difference to be celebrated, precisely because speakers of languages other than Standard Average European are not self-evidently considered to be equal to Westerners.

McWhorter is careful to emphasise that he does not dispute that language and culture intersect. As he puts it, "cultures are lived by human beings; human beings have language; hence, language will have words and expressions for aspects of culture". An example is provided by politeness distinctions in pronouns to express different degrees of respect for the addressee. In some languages, such as English, a single pronoun is used to address others, whereas other languages have binary or even multiple distinctions. In languages with politeness distinctions, such as German, it is important to use the right pronoun in conversation, and the patterns of usage are dictated by culturally specific norms (which entails that they can vary across a single language area). Yet cross-linguistic differences in pronoun repertoire do not mean that speakers of different languages necessarily think differently about social organisation and relationships, as evidenced by the fact that the loss of the English two-tiered pronoun system in the 17th century did not prompt a less stratified society.

But wait: if German forces speakers to encode respect to the addressee by pronoun choice, must German speakers not pay attention to aspects of the conversational context, such as the social status of their interlocutor, that English speakers can choose to ignore? It is a plausible hypothesis, first put forward by the psycholinguist Dan Slobin, that when formulating an utterance, speakers organise their thinking in accordance with the linguistic categories that require expression in their language. Slobin's original "thinking-for-speaking" proposal offers a modified, neo-Whorfian relativism: language influences thought by affecting the type of thinking that occurs "online" during the planning and processing of speech.

The suggestion that different languages impose different thinking-for-speaking demands does not equate to the claim that different languages create different worldviews. Thinking for speaking is both more persuasive and less dramatic a hypothesis than traditional Whorfianism; it leaves unanswered whether language has cognitive consequences that extend beyond speech time.

Recent years have seen novel attempts to address the question of whether language has more wide-reaching consequences for thought, with effects of language differences manifesting themselves truly outside language. McWhorter acknowledges the ingenuity of and insights gleaned from such neo-Whorfian experiments, but he remains steadfast in his conclusion that this research has shown only "that language's effect on thought is distinctly subtle and, overall, minor".

He illustrates his point with the frequently cited 2007 study on colour discrimination by cognitive scientist Jonathan Winawer and colleagues. In this experiment, English and Russian speakers were presented with sets of three blue squares, two of which were identical hues. The experimental task was to identify the matching squares as quickly as possible. Unlike English, Russian lacks a single, generic term for blue, and instead has two different words – *goluboy* ("light blue") and *siniy* ("dark blue"). The experiment's aim was to establish whether this colour-naming difference between English and Russian leads to differences in English and Russian speakers' colour perception.

Colour perception studies have formed one of the main strands of the work addressing the existence of linguistic relativity. The results of these studies appear contradictory and inconclusive: some researchers found colour perception to be immune to the ways in which languages differ in their colour categories, while others claimed to have found evidence to the contrary.

Notwithstanding the discrepant findings, the broad academic consensus from the end of the 1960s onwards was in favour of the universalist position. This had two reasons. First, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay discovered that colour naming across languages is not arbitrary but follows an implicational hierarchy, organised around the universal focal colours black, white, red, green, yellow and blue. The finding that there are semantic universals in the domain of colour was explained as the result of a common set of neurophysiological processes, which predicts colour perception to be invariant across speakers of different languages. Second, studies that provided support for the relativist stance were open to criticism on methodological grounds as they elicited subjective judgements in highly artificial experimental situations: asking speakers to group coloured swatches close in hue might see the speakers make a strategic decision to use their native linguistic categories to solve this task, but does not provide evidence for the speakers actually perceiving colours differently.

The "Russian blues" study rekindled interest in colour perception by employing the objective measure of reaction time, investigating whether the fact that two colours belong to two different linguistic categories (as with light and dark blue in Russian) can affect the speed with which the colours are judged to be different. What Winawer found was that Russian speakers had faster reaction times when discriminating two shades of blue that straddled the boundary between *goluboy* and *siniy* than they had for two shades that were equally far apart on the colour spectrum but were classified by the same linguistic colour category. English speakers for whom all shades of blue fell into one linguistic category showed no such effect.

Winawer's study has been unambiguously acknowledged as demonstrating that language can influence perceptual performance, but McWhorter rightly cautions against understanding a 124-millisecond difference in reaction time as a difference in "the way Russians *experience* life". The perennial problem in the debate on linguistic relativity lies with the definition of thought. If understood as a term referring solely to the cognitive processes of perception and memory, evidence shows that thought is influenced by language; if, on the other hand, we understand thought to denote human mental activity and its conceptual products more generally, the linguistic relativity hypothesis is too strong to be validated empirically.

The Language Hoax is a welcome antidote to unqualified Whorfian claims and pronouncements. McWhorter's theory of the sociopolitical attraction of Whorfianism makes for engrossing reading and aligns his book with the utopian and revolutionary spirit of the manifesto genre. In its at times off-topic chattiness, *The Language Hoax* lacks the precision and rhetorical skill of "true" manifestos, but all the same it carries an important message – speakers of the world's languages are united in their way of thinking!

The author



What's it like being a fifth? "I like it a lot," replies John Hamilton McWhorter V. "The first John Hamilton McWhorter was a slave, and I'm proud of the continuity, given the realities of black people's history in the US. Coming in January is Jane Hamilton McWhorter, which is a way of making a 'sixth' through the back door, since she's our second and last child and our first one was a girl, too."

McWhorter, a professor of linguistics at Columbia University, lives in Jersey City, "across the river from Manhattan in the same way that Oakland is from San Francisco, etc. For my purposes, the best thing about Jersey City is that it's as close to Manhattan as Brooklyn but cheaper and quieter. I live with my wife, toddler and two cats."

Was he an argumentative child? "Quite, and certainly that's part of why I write books like *The Language Hoax* - I get a bee in my bonnet and the only way I can exorcise it is by writing a book.

"My teachers before roughly seventh grade probably wouldn't remember me fondly - I thought I knew more than they did. I remember one teacher when I was five telling me that ink was spelled with a k when I was spelling it with a c. I insisted I was right; I had seen signs with 'Inc.' Stuff like that."

McWhorter graduated with a BA in French from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in 1985. Asked what sort of undergraduate he was, he replies: "Well, Rutgers wouldn't quite be where I 'was' the person I 'was' - that was a kind of under-planned interlude. Back then it was largely a party school and I only fit in with a small crowd (the dorm Junot Diaz portrays in his book *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in fact, and he captures it perfectly).

"Plus I took mostly easy language courses there – I had no direction. I 'was' myself at Bard College at Simon's Rock (my first two years), and the descriptors would be nerdy, somewhat obsessive, doing more of the reading than most people, and so on. But then also, if I got bored, I could barely fake it. At the time it was culturally assumed that all sophomores would take physics, to 'learn to problem solve'. I hated it and dropped it halfway through the semester; I only learned 'problem solving' years later when I was a graduate student in linguistics.

McWhorter has been praised as that rare beast, an accessible linguist. Asked if it is unreasonable of us to expect that it should be any easier for the layperson to understand than, say, physics, he observes: "Linguistics is actually more accessible than it would seem. There are aspects of it only a geek could love, as in all fields, but much more of it is potentially interesting to laymen than has been given to the public yet.

"The hardest thing, I've found, is that because all people talk, people tend to assume that they only have so much to learn about language - that a language book is largely going to confirm what they already know or just add on to the familiar. This means that the second you use unfamiliar terminology you're assailed in reviews as 'too technical', whereas a writer on, say, biology isn't interpreted that way as easily.

"So I have learned to avoid saying things like 'intransitive', and also to avoid quoting material in unfamiliar languages

unless absolutely necessary. So in *The Language Hoax*, I largely mention things in languages instead of showing them.

He adds: "But things are getting better. Mark Baker's *The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar* gets across syntax. Guy Deutscher's first trade book got across morphosyntactic change, of all things. Ben Bergen's new book does cognitive linguistics. I'm about to do one that gets across how language change really works beyond just the fact that Latin becomes French, etc."

It has been argued that much of the public discourse about the "correct" use of language is a proxy for anxieties about class, ethnicity, "race" and educational attainment, rather than being simply a restatement of the value of language and literature.

McWhorter says: "Oh, there's no doubt that looking down on people's grammar is one of the last permissible prejudices - it's a handy way to be classist in polite company. I'm sure you could find people's brains pulsating with endorphins as they condemn someone for saying *irregardless*. Race is part of it too - 'It's even worse when *they* do it' - but people addressing that tend to neglect how scorned the language of uneducated whites is as well."

His many forays into print and broadcast media have seen McWhorter tackle a number of contentious issues, and to attract a variety of labels, some of them unexpected. Asked if he is offended when he is described as a neoconservative, he says: "No, just bemused. My political views are now accessible in several hundred columns I've written over the years, and they are quite obviously standard-issue *New Yorker*-reading liberal, save a few unexpected views about race - but none of which are of the 'no more government assistance / pull yourself up by your bootstraps' type.

"But my views would be quite unexpected among that same liberal crowd in 1960 - the centre of racial thought has moved leftward since then. Also, of course, I worked for a conservative thinktank [the Manhattan Institute] for years - but I was working on getting welfare recipients and ex-cons into steady jobs. That's 'conservative'? I thought of it as community uplift.

"But it makes sense that many who see my name under that aegis will assume that I share the politics of Dick Cheney. Who knows that the Manhattan Institute has registered Democrats working for them all the time? Life is messy."

McWhorter has said that that claims for the political import of hip-hop are overstated. But are such arguments any different to most cultural-studies-informed attempts to identify significance in other strands of popular culture, from punk rock to Broadway musicals to country and western?

"My argument on that is pretty meat and potatoes - if we're looking for ways poor black people can get ahead, there is little in the lyrics of hip-hop, even the 'deep' kind, that could actually do that. There was a time when serious people were actually under the impression otherwise; that period ended almost strangely quickly when Obama was elected - maybe that seemed too concrete a black 'revolution' for the dreamier one about hip-hop to exert much of a hold anymore.

"Cultural studies largely tells us what pop culture says *about* the way things are. However, to the extent that it implies that one is doing something real by 'performing' contrary identities, etc., then indeed we are in the zone that worried me about the 'hip-hop revolution' idea of the 1990s and most of the 2000s. Politics takes real work, not performance."

McWhorter has written and filmed courses for The Teaching Company, a for-profit firm offering multimedia content aimed at lifelong learners. Is he keen to create massive open online courses (Moocs)? Does he see them as a positive force for widening participation or a negative neoliberal project?

"I think more to the point is that it looks like Moocs don't work all that well, which dampens any enthusiasm I might have been able to work up for creating them. I have done the Teaching Company sets because I wanted to get my message on language to a wider range of people than just undergraduates, especially in a world where the space for reading from the page is getting ever narrower.

"Overall, I highly suspect that if Moocs and the like are about reaching the poor, then we're on the right track, in that the increasingly orality of culture is even more extreme among people deprived of solid education. I would venture that

for most people on earth, information is more effectively communicated through talk than through text.”

Research and lecturing, or media punditry, writing trade books and delivering a [Ted talk](http://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk) (URL=http://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk) in 2013: which does McWhorter find more fun? “All of those things are fun – I have discovered that doing only one or the other gets dull.

“The sweetest pleasure of all for me is crafting an academic paper, believe it or not, but then, that is read by maybe four people, skimmed by 25, and that’s it. Lecturing is performance, which (in its place!) is a good way to get people interested in what you are interested in. As are conference talks - in general, if you only write, you don’t really exist, especially because most people would rather hear than read (including more academics than we might suspect).

“Trade books are a great way to go beyond the academy, of course, and compensate perfectly for the fact that one’s academic papers are not really read, despite all the work they entail. As for TED – I’m not sure how much impact my talk will have, but it was a great gig, despite that I look a little fat and sleepy in it.”

Karen Shook

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