



Language, Culture and Worldviews by Twentieth-Century Anthropologists

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Abstract

The relationship between language and culture has long been a focal point in the field of linguistic anthropology. Wilhelm von Humboldt initially proposed that each language possesses a unique structure that influences how its speakers perceive and interpret the world. Edward Sapir later expanded upon this concept, suggesting that the language spoken by a society profoundly shapes its members' understanding and experience of their surroundings, with different linguistic systems offering distinct cognitive frameworks. Building on Humboldt's hypothesis and Sapir's ideas regarding the interplay between language and culture, we seek to explore several fundamental questions, such as: Does the language of a people influence the way they think and perceive reality? Is the worldview of a community encoded in its language and structured by its grammatical system, thus making it unique? As the study of language use in social contexts continues to attract theoretical attention, contemporary linguistics has focused on the functions of language beyond simple communication. For example, transformational linguistics posits that the primary function of language is reference: to make statements about the world, thereby framing and shaping the way individuals understand and engage with their environment. Language, as an essential aspect of human communication, not only reflects but also reinforces the cultural diversity that underpins human existence and societal structures.

Keywords: language, culture, world, anthropologists

1. Introduction

Among the most famous anthropologists of the twentieth century, are Margaret Mead, Franz Boas and Eduart Sapir. Mead was a student of Franz Boas. Boas is regarded as the "father of American anthropology." He immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth century from Germany. He was greatly influenced by the adherence of his parents, especially his mother, to the ideals of the failed socialist revolution in Germany of 1848.

According to his daughter, religion did not play an active role in family life (Franziska Boas 1972). Regarding this in the Nation, Boas wrote:

The background of my early thinking was a German house in which the ideals of the 1848 revolution were a living force. (Franz Boas 1938a).

In a letter to his sister Tony, Boas would write: *I am and I will remain, an unsuitable idealist - and for that you and I should thank our mother.* (Franz Boas 1886: 79).

His uncle, Abraham Jacobi, was imprisoned in Germany for his revolutionary activities; from where he immigrated

to the United States embarking on an important career as a physician¹. He offered tremendous help to his nephew, enabling him to be employed at the American Museum of Natural History of the United States after emigrating from Germany (Adler 1918;)

Margaret Mead died in 1978, holding the position of the world's most famous anthropologist. Margaret Mead's work was groundbreaking in its emphasis on a holistic view of human life, recognizing that aspects such as food production, politics, child-rearing, and social structures are all deeply interconnected. She viewed these elements not as isolated facets but as parts of a complex web that shapes human behavior and societies. Mead believed that understanding diverse cultures was essential to gaining a full appreciation of human nature and that such diversity should not be seen as something to fear or avoid, but rather as a valuable resource that can offer insight and wisdom. By studying and learning from the wide array of cultural practices across the globe, she was able to challenge conventional notions and offer new perspectives on what it means to be human.

Mead's approach was marked by an openness and respect for the people and cultures she studied. She emphasized the importance of empathy in the field of anthropology, striving to understand people in their own terms, rather than imposing external judgments or assumptions. Her fieldwork, particularly in Samoa, provided critical insights into the nature of adolescence, gender roles, and societal norms, challenging many Western ideas about universality in human development. Beyond her research, Mead applied her findings to modern life, using them to address contemporary social issues, from child-rearing practices to the impact of cultural change in a rapidly evolving world. Her work, characterized by warmth, empathy, and a deep respect for cultural diversity, continues to resonate today as it offers valuable lessons for understanding the complexity of human societies and the importance of embracing diversity.

Edward Sapir, born to an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, moved to the United States at the age of five. He later studied under the renowned anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University and became a central figure in the field of linguistic anthropology. Sapir focused much of his work on the languages of indigenous peoples in the western United States. He argued that language plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals perceive and understand the world, and he examined the intricate relationship between language and culture.

In his influential works, *Language* (1921) and *Language, Culture, and Personality* (1949), Sapir explored how the structure of language reflects cognitive and perceptual differences across cultures. He believed that linguistic differences could offer insight into how people from different cultures think and view the world. Beyond his academic contributions, Sapir was also a poet, essayist, and composer, earning a reputation for his literary skills and his ability to communicate complex ideas with clarity and elegance. His interdisciplinary work continues to influence both the fields of anthropology and linguistics.

2. Language and Its Social Use

The ways in which language is used to communicate in social situations are increasingly becoming the focus of theoretical interest. The theory of transformational linguistics assumes that the main function of language is the referential one, which means that it allows you to make statements about the world, although it can be said that the "world" is left out.

Linguistic theory has dealt more with the relationship of sentences to each other than with finding the most appropriate ways of speaking.²

Linguists have constantly had to deal with the world to which the language refers. For this the indicators³ present us with information only about situations in the real world. The moment such a question is asked; it becomes clear that language does not simply make statements about the world or raise questions about it - whatever they may be.

We use the act of speaking to fire, give directions, commands or instructions.⁴ Keesing will express that magical utterances, curses and oaths can be thought of by speakers to make greater changes in the world or in relation to spirits. (Keesing 1979: 81 14-36)

It has been increasingly observed that sentences that are the same in meaning are not interchangeable or interchangeable,⁵ but are sentences that fit very different contexts of social relations. In many languages, changes in the

¹ Jacob hospital in New York takes his name

² We would like to explain that it is referred to the sentences which have the same meaning, but different order as in the case of: Andy threw the ball = The ball was thrown by Andy.

³ Lexicons like here, there, refer to points in space, while then and now, moments of time, thus referring to space and time

⁴ As in the cases: I declare you a man and a woman! You can kiss the woman! Until the end of time!

⁵ As in the cases: Would you please open the door? – Open that damn door!

pronoun system are used to express formality or respect. There may be (let's put it bluntly, there are) different vertical dialects within a language, which may be appropriate for different classes and social levels, which speak to the inferior or superior status of the speaker, but not only that. . They also talk and show about different situations.

Particularly important are the dialectal patterns presented in non-western countries. Let's take two concrete examples.

To use the Javanese language in a particular situation, you have to choose one of three levels of speaking style: a) the lowest, which is harsh and formal, as in the case of *Open that damn door!* B) The highest, that is more elegant and formal as in the case of *Would you please open the door?* C) medium - *Can you open the door?* (Keesing & Strathern, 2008: 41)

There are other ways to make a situation even lower or even higher, as in the case - *Would you have trouble opening the door, please!* Situations and ways of communication - reference which vary from one culture to another and from one language to another. So what patterns or levels a Javanese speaker chooses to use depends on his or her social status.

The choice, in fact, can / should be made by the interlocutor and their communication situation.

Wanting to further our discussion with a focus on language, culture and their intercultural perspective, we are bringing an example addressed by Geertz (1960: 249)

*Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?*⁶

It is completely transformed when it comes to different levels of Javanese language. Thus the same word for both levels - the lowest and the highest - is cassava.

Early in his career, Clifford Geertz criticized the scientific models commonly used in social sciences, rejecting causal determinism. Instead, he embraced hermeneutics, arguing that culture is made up of the meanings people use to make sense of their lives and guide their actions. He believed interpretive social science should focus on understanding these meanings.

Looking to bring water to the Geertz mill, we can say that when it comes to language or culture or, language and culture, we face a variety of code difficulties. Thus our theory of speaking Albanian differs greatly from the theory of speaking of others, although this is not something that is not known or expected. And in this context, codification or decoding can materialize in the handshake or the kisses that are given, even down to the number and the case of why they are given. To make this situation more comprehensible to us or let us say closer to us, linguists have proposed that this be resolved taking into account dialects and idioms, as separate versions of the linguistic characteristics of each.

Thus, to make the discussion more understandable we can say that the Albanian language is an abstract model of a language, an idealized standardization as well as a mixture of both as it includes special dictionaries for electricians, mechanics, physicists and so on. .

Linguists have therefore found it necessary to consider the variety of codes when it has had to interpret different kinds of problems. Anthropologists, on the other hand, will pay attention to the dissemination of cultural models of reality within the communities they study.

3. Language as a Cultural Functions and not Biologically Inherited

Lecture / speaking are such a familiar feature of everyday life that we rarely stop to define it. Even that is, it feels as natural to man as walking or breathing.

However, upon reflecting for a moment, it becomes clear that the perceived naturalness of speech is, in fact, a misleading and false impression. Unlike walking, which feels instinctive and effortless, the process of mastering speech is far more complex and culturally influenced. While walking is a natural biological function, the acquisition of speech is a learned skill that requires much more than just innate ability. In the case of learning to walk, culture—defined as the set of

⁶ Are: *apa/ napa/ menapa*
you: *kowé/ sampéjan/pandjenengan*
going: *arep/adjeng/badé*
to eat: *mangan/neda/dahar*
rice: *sega/sekul*
and: *lan/kali jan*
cassava: *kaspé*
now : *saiki/ san ikil samen ika*

social practices and traditions—does not play a major role because the child is born with the biological tools necessary for this skill. These tools include the proper muscle structure, nervous system adjustments, and physical development that guide the child toward walking.

On the other hand, language acquisition is far more influenced by cultural and social factors. Speech is not something humans are born with in the same way they are born with the ability to walk; it must be taught, practiced, and reinforced within a particular cultural context. Through interaction with others and exposure to the language used in their community, children gradually learn to understand and use language. This process is shaped by the social environment, cultural norms, and the specific language being spoken. Therefore, while walking is a natural, biological function, speech is a culturally mediated skill that requires social input to be fully developed.

The development of muscles and the corresponding nerves in the human body can be seen as primarily adapted for movement, particularly walking and similar activities. In a true sense, humans are naturally inclined to walk, not just because adults teach them to do so, but because their bodies are biologically prepared from birth, or even from conception, to handle the nerve energy and muscle adjustments required for walking. In essence, walking is an inherent biological function of humans.

As with language, this does not happen. Of course it is true that in a sense the individual is predestined to speak, but this is entirely due to the circumstances that he was not born simply in nature, but in the lap of a society that is secure, reasonably, sure to guide her to her traditions.

In *Language an introduction of the study of speech* (1921: 5), Sapir emphasizes that while society ensures a child learns to walk if they survive, it's not the same for learning to speak. Speech, unlike walking, requires learning the specific communicative system of a society, which involves cultural teaching rather than biological development.

Or, try to move the newborn out of society the environment in which he has come to a completely foreign environment. He will develop the art of walking in his new environment in the same way he would have developed it in the old environment.

Walking is a universal human activity that only varies slightly from person to person, while speech, by contrast, is shaped by the specific language and cultural environment of an individual, making it unique to their society.

Its variability is involuntary and unintentional. Speaking is a human activity that changes when we pass from one social group to another, because it includes the historical heritage of the group, the product of continuous social use. It changes like the whole creative endeavor - not so consciously, perhaps, but no less than the religions, beliefs, customs and arts of different peoples. Walking is an organic function, instinctive speech is non-instinctive, and it is an acquired, "cultural" function.

Human culture depends largely on the human capacity to create languages, so structuralism anthropologists have argued that cultural meanings are composed within contrasts. This does not mean that all forms of classification should be taxonomic, as there may be common cross-cultural patterns that transcend these common taxonomies. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956: 240) has argued that languages structure views on the world. Language, Whorf notes, (1956: vi) is the best display man makes. Other creatures have developed similar communication systems, but not real languages.

On the other hand George Philip Lakoff and Mark Johnson in the 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By* have emphasized the importance of metaphors in expressing experience. They emphasize that we should compare linguistic communication with non-linguistic communication. We must remember that cultural and linguistic knowledge are distributed in a distributive manner and that changes in codes need to be considered within the broadest limits. The book suggests that metaphor is a tool that enables people to use what they know about their direct physical and social experiences to understand more abstract things like work, time, and mental activity and feelings.

Lakoff and Johnson, however, confess that ideas about the relationship between metaphor and the ritual of speech have "flowed" from the anthropological tradition of Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz and others. (1980: xi- xii). In the introduction to the first chapter, they will point out that metaphor for most people is a tool of poetic imagination and a kind of rhetorical "flourishing" - a matter of the extraordinary, more than part of ordinary language. Metaphor, however, is typically seen as characteristic of language itself, a matter of words rather than a matter of judgment or action. For this reason, many people think that they can do it perfectly without it (without metaphor). We - Lakoff and Johnson go on - have found that on the contrary, that metaphor has penetrated into everyday life, not only in language but also in judgments and actions. Our ordinary conceptual system, in the sense that we all think and act, is deeply in its metaphorical nature. (1980: 3).

So, following this stream of discussion, we can say that there is a fact that has often attempted to hinder the recognition of language as a purely conventional system of vowel symbols, which has enticed the minds of the majority by attributing to them instinctive bases it does not really possess. But on the other hand there is a difference between the

involuntary feeling and the normal type of communication of ideas that are spoken, which most of the time, is built and functions on metaphors. Speech / language as we mentioned above is really instinctive, but also non-symbolic at the same time.

In other words, the sound of pain or the sound of joy, as such, does not show emotion, does not stand aside, as it were, and declares that some emotion is being felt, expressed or not metaphorically.

The discussions from prominent voices in cultural anthropology suggest that language is what sets humans apart from all other creatures. Every known human society has had a language, and while some nonhuman animals can communicate in complex ways, none of their systems approach the depth and versatility of human language. Unlike animals, the transmission of complex and varied information is not essential to their daily lives. Additionally, other forms of communication lack many of the features of human language, such as the ability to talk about events that are not happening at the present moment. It is hard to imagine a human society without language.

Similar to culture, another key human trait, language is marked by unity in diversity: while there are many languages and cultures, they are all fundamentally the same because they stem from human nature, which allows for such diversity. Language is deeply intertwined with literature, politics, daily human interactions, and, even more so, with ethnic culture.

This article, however, focuses not only on the structure of language but also on its use in human society. It approaches language primarily from a linguistic perspective, exploring what we have learned about language and culture over the past two centuries. Linguists study individual languages and linguistic behavior to uncover the essential properties of human language within specific cultural contexts. Through this work, they aim to reveal fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. The significance of language extends beyond its structure and is essential to nearly every aspect of human life.

4. Conclusions

The most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century put forward their hypotheses on the configuration of language as a very important cultural enterprise, which can be learned only within its cultural circle.

Sapir, as an honor to the best representative of this relationship defends the thesis that language is not learned instinctively, as can happen with the walker, but within its cultural environment. It is within this environment that the way of communication is born, which according to Lakoff and Johnson is called a metaphorical language which feels and shows the nuances of the development of culture. Following the same line of logic Whorf will take the discussion to another point considering languages as structuring on views of the world.

Each of the anthropologists, whether Boas, Mead, Malinowski, Strauss or Turner, Geertz or Sapir, emphasizes language as an expression of culture and culture as its food, emphasizing the fact that the language of a people shapes the way of thinking and perceiving things

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