

Experience and culture inform our thinking : Do we all agree?

Alan Thompson

1. Introduction

The Prussian classical philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt, after discovering the exceptional Basque and the even more outlandish American languages, was moved to write, in 1820,

The difference between languages is not only in sounds and signs but in world-view. ... [A language] is not just the means for representing a truth already recognised but much more to discover the truth that had not been recognised previously. ... Thinking is dependent not just on language in general but to a certain extent on each individual language. (Humboldt 1820; cited in Deutscher 2010:135-136)

In stating that language is a 'means...to discover the truth', Humboldt was ascribing to language the role of a tool for thinking, and suggesting that, as all tools, language may influence the shape of what it is used to bring about, that is, thoughts. He wrote later that the real difference between one language and others is 'what it encourages and stimulates its speakers to do from its own inner force' (cited in Deutscher 2010:136).

William Ewart Gladstone, classicist and British prime minister, later in the 18th century and from another perspective entirely, provided what was potentially a concrete, albeit negative, example of language as a 'means...to discover truth', namely, the role of colour terms in enabling people to discover colours. He noticed, in his extensive research into the colour terms employed by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, that very few words to describe colour were in fact used, and that they were used in puzzling ways. *Oinops* ('wine-looking') was applied to sea and to oxen, and *ioeis* ('violet') was employed also for the sea, and further to black sheep and iron. Most puzzlingly, there were no references to anything 'blue'.

Homer had before him the most perfect example of blue. Yet he never once so describes the sky. His *ὀὐρανὸς* [*ouranos*, 'sky'] is starry, or broad, or great, or iron, or copper; but it is never blue. (Gladstone 1858:483)

The only word for blue in Homer's Greek was *kuaneos*, which, though it meant 'blue' in later Greek, must have meant something like 'dark' to Homer, for it was used by him to describe hair, eyebrows, beards, and a dark cloud.

Gladstone wondered seriously about whether language reflected perception. He did not consider the alternative, that it may have been the habitual thinking of the ancient Greeks' culture that was reflected in their language, or that the language, in turn, as an impoverished tool, did not in Humboldt's sense 'encourage and stimulate' the ancient Greeks to discover the truth of the colour spectrum around them.

Later, in the early 20th century, the anthropologist Franz Boas expressed more precisely and positively a relationship between a language and habitual ways of thinking. For Boas, the rules of language, not merely the words, were the most interesting factor: 'Grammar...determines those aspects of each experience that *must* be expressed' (cited, with emphasis, in Deutscher 2010:151). The flurry of studies that followed in the mid-20th century followed this statement (often recalled together with Roman Jakobson's later and more complete formulation 'Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in

what they may convey.’ (Jakobson 1959:236)), comparing what must be conveyed in newly discovered languages (chiefly American languages) to the obligatory categories in the more familiar European languages, and speculating on the effects on ways of thinking, namely, the ‘linguistic relativity’ principle or hypothesis. Edward Sapir, a prominent figure in this research direction, summarised the principle in definite terms.

The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir 1929:207)

A student of Sapir’s, Benjamin Lee Whorf, went further, calling language ‘the shaper of ideas, the programme and guide for the individuals’s mental activity’ (Whorf 1964:212). The suggestion was clear that language may play an even stronger role, not only affecting or influencing an individual’s thinking, but determining or limiting it. This ‘linguistic determinism’ hypothesis attracted great attention and admiration, but was later in the century to become almost thoroughly discredited, mainly because of its own greatest shortcoming, lack of evidence for the determined thought practices that were hypothesised.

Since then, modern researchers and commentators have taken up the questions, Deutscher (2010) and Boroditsky (2010), for example, arguing that there might be some worthwhile ideas to be salvaged from the long tradition of theory from Humboldt to Whorf, and McWhorter (2014), eagerly battling even a muted resurgence of relativistic views.

2. The various claims of ‘linguistic relativity’

When reading side by side the articles and books of the modern protagonists (Deutscher, Boroditsky, McWhorter) the impression is of the proverbial ships that pass in the night. The arguments often miss each other by focusing on different areas of the question. One is left wondering where exactly the disagreements lie, and what more can now be said (if anything) on these issues than was impressionistically suggested by Humboldt nearly two centuries ago.

In this paper my aims are modest. It is not a comprehensive examination of the evidence supporting or disconfirming these claims, but simply an identification of the issues that are in contention, and then a few suggestions that might add clarity to the discussion. For I have noticed, in the series of arguments and counter-arguments, various unwarranted emphases and mis-construals when describing putative opposing views, a few of them almost looking as if they may be deliberate ‘straw men’. I suspect that there may be more common ground than is acknowledged. I also suspect that the real substantive issues may be subtle but fundamental, and that it is important to identify these accurately.

At first, several related claims (and putative claims) need to be carefully separated, and a concept (‘culture’) needs to be at least roughly described.

The concept of ‘culture’ is of course greatly dependent on context, but for the present context (anthropology or linguistics) the definitions given are usually quite similar, even if we go back to a treatise on ‘primitive cultures’ from near a century and a half ago.

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man

as a member of society. (Tylor 1871:1)

In other words, culture is all that can be passed down from generation to generation that is not naturally inherited; or, it is all that can be acquired by an individual from his or her society. Importantly, this includes language.

A definition from a textbook on intercultural business communication from this decade is in the same vein; though it is less all-encompassing, it shares the idea that culture is both symbolic and active.

Culture is the coherent, learned, shared view of a group of people about life's concerns, expressed in symbols and activities, that ranks what is important, furnishes attitudes about what things are appropriate, and dictates behavior. (Varner & Beamer 2011:10)

The table below outlines the several claims—many of which have already been alluded to—regarding the relationships, first between culture (and earlier 'race') and language, and then between language and perception or thought. In the paragraphs that follow, I will note for each claim some of the specific positions that have been stated (in psycholinguistic studies and in philosophy) and, to give a sense of the nature of the disputes surrounding the idea of 'linguistic relativity', some examples of mismatch in the play of argument and counter-argument.

Figure 1: Claims and putative claims of relationships among culture, language, perception, and thought

'linguistic reflection'	'linguistic relativity'	'linguistic determinism'
1. Language reflects 'races' and cultures.	2. Language influences individuals.	3. Language limits individuals.
1.1. A language reflects the perceptual capabilities of a 'race'.	2.1. A language influences the perception of an individual.	3.1. A language limits the perception of an individual.
1.2. A language reflects the habitual thought practices of a culture.	2.2. A language influences the habitual thought practices of an individual.	3.2. A language limits the habitual thought practices of an individual.
1.3. A language reflects the deliberate thought practices of a culture.	2.3. A language influences the deliberate thought practices of an individual.	3.3. A language limits the deliberate thought practices of an individual.

1. Language reflects perception and thought practices.

1.1. A language reflects the perceptual capabilities of a 'race'.

Gladstone, after noting the paucity and (to modern eyes) confusion in the use of colour by Homer, concluded that 'his [Homer's] organ was little trained in the discrimination of colours' (1858: 495). Those who followed up on Gladstone's findings reluctantly settled on similar views. Lazarus Geiger discovered a general paucity of colour (as well as a hierarchy of colour terms) in ancient languages, and suggested anatomical differences, and Hugo Magnus, an ophthalmologist, theorised that sensitivity of the retina to colour developed through practice and improved over generations. These views changed abruptly, however, in the late 19th century when technologically undeveloped peoples around the world were found to have similarly impoverished sets of colour terms (often just 'white', 'black', and 'red') and yet to perform well on colour discrimination tests. It was not their perception, but in their habitual thinking, that many colours

were absent.

1.2. A language reflects the habitual thought practices of a culture.

This is a claim that is almost completely uncontroversial. McWhorter asserts that it ‘would be peculiar’ (2014:x) for a linguist to insist on no relation between, for example, the seven grades of formality in the Thai equivalent of you and the highly stratified nature of Thai society.

One might think that almost any distinctive way of speaking can be considered a reflection of habitual thought, but this is not necessarily the case. There are, indeed, for any pair of languages (especially if they are not closely related), numerous ideas which are expressed very differently in one language than they are in the other—for example, when the idea of eloquence is expressed by Cicero as *pūrē et latīnē loquimur* (‘we speak purely and Latinly’) (Cicero 1902: §1.144), what in English would be represented as a thing (with the noun Latin) is represented in Latin as a manner of speaking (with the adverb *latine*). Differences of this kind, however, cannot be presupposed to be instances of language reflecting culture unless there can be clearly identified an aspect of culture that plausibly makes the language feature indispensable.

1.3. A language reflects the deliberate thought practices of a culture.

Elaborate and ritualistic uses of language, used in governance, religion, and art, would and will naturally reflect the deliberately created institutions and ceremonies of a culture; this claim, then, is also uncontroversial.

However, there are also claims that fairly basic language features reflect deliberate advances in thought practices. Deutscher (2010) suggests that subordination of clauses, in particular the finite complement clause (‘Ubarum didn’t know that [Iribum took the field]’), is a feature of language that was only just evolving in ancient near east languages (such as Hittite, Akkadian, and old Hebrew), due to the increasing complexity in those societies and the need therefore for greater deliberation in thought (for example, to allow precise legal statements). He also states that there is evidence that some languages of very recent simple societies (in Australia and South America) still lack this feature.

2. Language influences perception and thought practices.

The crux of the ‘linguistic relativity’ and ‘linguistic determinism’ hypotheses is that language is more than a reflection of culture’s organisation, but that it is also (in increasing order of robustness) an encourager, an enabler, an influencer, a determiner, or even a limiter of what can be thought in a culture.

2.1. A language influences the perception of an individual.

This claim has been made often concerning especially the realm of colour perception. Winawer, *et al.*, (2007) compared Russian speakers’ and English speakers’ response times in differentiating two shades of blue. When the difference aligned with the two separate Russian colour terms that apply to the blue part of the colour spectrum, the Russian participants were the quicker responders, a result that appears to show an influence on perception (or perhaps on thinking) of a specific language feature.

The ambiguity in whether the measured influences are upon perception or upon a later stage of processing, that is, thinking, is used to advantage by both sides of the argument. McWhorter (2010), for

example, refutes some of the blatant deterministic examples (e.g. of colour terms on *ability* to perceive), and downplays the effects that to him appear small (e.g. the ‘Russian blues’ effect demonstrated by Winawer, *et al.*). The claims that he is dismissing clearly fall into category 2.1. (‘A language *influences* the perception of an individual.’) but he moves on from this position to a position of intransigence regarding claims in category 2.2, subtle examples of obligatory language on habitual thought. Deutscher (2010) appears to accomplish an equal but opposite misdirection when he focuses largely on a few examples of painstaking experiments to establish credible evidence of influence of language on colour perception, and then, on the strength of this evidence, he pivots to examples of influence of language on habitual thought by means of the ‘obligation to attend’ to certain features of the environment, without providing much evidence for the latter.

2.2. *A language influences the habitual thought practices of an individual.*

This category represents the most common type of claims, illustrated in the quotations from Humboldt and Boas above, and echoed by many others. What, in Jakobson’s words, ‘must be conveyed’ in certain languages (for example, in English, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person; and in Japanese, level of familiarity) becomes, through participation in repeated similar communicative events, what speakers of those languages tend to pay attention to.

Claims that languages can influence habitual thought practices are based on a wide variety of features that are obligatory in certain languages:

- Nootka conflation of object and action (roughly, ‘it stones’, for English ‘stones are falling’), leading to attention towards holistic nature of events and away from analytical view of the parts of events (Sapir 1963).
- English attention to agent in the description of events (‘John broke the vase’), versus agent-less descriptions that are more common in Japanese and other languages (roughly equivalent to ‘the vase broke’), leading to memory structures that prioritise agents (Boroditsky, 2010).
- Languages with extensive marking of evidentiality (an extreme example is the Amazon language Matses, where the many equivalents to ‘it passed by there’ have verb forms that encode not only ‘how you learned of the event’, but also ‘how long ago you learned about the event’ and ‘how long ago before that you think the event took place’), leading their users to pay attention to sources and timeliness of information (Deutscher 2010).

The suggestion is also often made about languages that lack a certain feature, for example Chinese lacking a tense system in its morphology, that certain habitual patterns of thinking associated with those features may be lacking (Deutscher 2010; Chen 2010, see below)

2.3. *A language influences the deliberate thought practices of an individual.*

Claims concerning this kind of influence (in the realm of even very conscious and deliberate thoughts), are common in philosophy (see below), but are usually not empirically supported. The influence can be stated thus. The lexicon or grammar of a given language leads its speakers to fit thoughts into certain categories and relations, as for example, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Lysander does when speaking to Demetrius ‘For you love Hermia. For this you know I know’ (Act 3, Scene 2, line 165); so Shakespeare

(through Lysander) assumes, for himself and for his audience, that because there is a word *love*, there is also a monolithic and definite concept matching that word the understanding of which is not assumed to vary among people of one's own culture.

3.1, 3.2, & 3.3 A language limits perception / habitual thought practices / deliberate thought practices of an individual.

These are claims that has not been made seriously, at least not in any concrete sense. McWhorter, in his introduction to *The Language Hoax* (2014), a skeptical reply to the the 'linguistic relativity' hypothesis that accepts but casts doubt on the significance of the 'language influences' claims in column 2 of Figure 1, is especially scathing towards the idea that people without separate words for green and blue cannot see those colours vividly, but there is no serious researcher today who accepts that idea.

Whorf did appear often to be making these types of claims. He reasoned in a famous passage that because the Hopi language does not construe time as different days in succession but as the same day repeated, 'as the return of the same person, a little older but with all the impresses of yesterday, not as "another day", i.e. like an entirely different person' (Whorf & Carroll 1964: 151), a Hopi person would therefore not understand expressions like 'tomorrow is another day'. However, given that the passage occurred in a chapter entitled 'The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behaviour to Language' one cannot conclude that he was making the 'language limits' claim terribly explicitly; he could have been merely claiming that the Hopi would not readily understand such an idiom or the broader time sense behind it.

Philosophers have, understandably, expressed frustration at the inability of thinkers past and present, including themselves, to escape the 'grooves' to which their languages seem to confine them. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world' (2010: §5.6), but most other similar sentiments are written in less absolute terms (Bertrand Russell only cautions that 'language misleads us' and that 'we must be on our guard' (cited in Deutscher 2010: 139)).

3. What counts as evidence?

As the areas of potential influence above, fascinating but speculative, illustrate, it is one thing to surmise that fundamental differences in what language forces us to attend to actually lead us to differ in our habitual thinking about the world, and another to show that this causal relationship actually exists. We need some kind of data that show how people think. This lack of evidence, what Deutscher (2014) has called the disaster of Whorfianism, has taught us the need to show, empirically, that: 1) thought patterns do differ, and 2) it is language that has influenced the thought patterns. (Actually, to demonstrate the second point may not be entirely necessary, but I will take up that argument in the next section.)

Field data vs. artificial interventions

Researchers such as Winawer, et al (2007) and Boroditsky (2010) state a preference for empirical data, and have shown remarkable ingenuity in devising artificial experimental interventions to get it. 'To demonstrate the causal role of language, what's needed are studies that directly manipulate language and look for effects in cognition' (Boroditsky 2010:1). This is disconcerting because what is at issue is whether languages in their cultural milieux have a biasing effect on thought. If it is shown that an artificial

intervention has influence on thought, this may support the language-influences-thought hypothesis but is at the same time meaningless: one can simply reply that this would never have happened in 'the wild' unless it had been a cultural antecedent that caused the language to be the way it is.

Problems with naturally-occurring data

Keith Chen (2012), whose primary interest is economics, gets data in a less intrusive way, by looking at savings behaviours of people who are in economically similar circumstances but use languages with differences in the way they mark time. (His interest is in behaviour, but we can infer that the different behaviours observed are indicative of differences in thinking.) He focused on the specific feature of obligatory future-marking in the grammar (e.g. French presented as a language with obligatory marking, Chinese as a language without). When he had controlled for other variables of social and economic situation (demographics (age, gender), income, education, family structure, religion, etc.), he found that users of 'futureless' languages actually save more of their money. (He also found that they smoke less, are less likely to be obese, and more likely to use condoms). Chen's findings are faulted by McWhorter (2014) for relying on an non-precise distinction between 'futures'/'futureless' languages, and for prematurely concluding that a correlation between language and behaviour implies causation by language on behaviour, when both could plausibly be caused by other cultural factors, which, could produce ways of thinking (e.g., of future as remote/real) that could be prior to or independent of language and behaviour.

4. An artificial separation of culture and language

As seen in the arguments and counter-arguments briefly outlined above, often the proponents on one side or the other get hung up on whether or not the bias (if they agree that there is one) originates in language or in culture, and on which (language or culture) is prior to the other. For example, with reference to the odd practice among the Guugu Yimithirr in northeast Australia of using geographic direction rather than egocentric directions (e.g. 'turn north', 'my south leg hurts') in all situations, McWhorter replies: 'But are these people's languages making them sensitive to direction rather than position--or is it, as almost anyone would intuit, that the culture focuses on direction and thus the language does?' (2010:5).

In reading arguments and counter-arguments such as this, one wonders if many of the arguments would not simply become moot if both sides agreed to a conceptualisation of culture and language wherein the two are seen as symbiotically intertwined, with culture the full set of human actions and thoughts (ways of seeing, thinking, acting, and speaking) language the subset of behaviours (ways of speaking and listening, ways of symbolically expressing and apprehending thought) that enacts the culture? Such a conceptualisation is by no means a novel invention; this symbiosis is a fundamental of many sociological and socio-historical theories, such as the 'practice' in theories of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991), and the relationship between 'talk' and 'social structure' in the field of conversation analysis, as elaborated by Heritage:

Talk-in-interaction ... is the fundamental resource through which the business of all societies is managed, their cultures are transmitted, the identities of their participants are affirmed, and their social structures are reproduced. (Heritage 2001:47)

Certainly two concepts can be separated in our analytical cogitation, just as the acts of giving

and receiving can be so separated. But just as with giving and receiving, they are not in fact separate. Consequently, neither language nor culture should be understood as logically prior to the other, either in their historical development or in their development within an individual. If we consider the development of culture-language using McWhorter's intentionally simplified example—a stratified Thai society and seven words for 'you'—it is obvious that the stratification could not have evolved without words to enact it, and that the words would not have arisen without the stratification that is the occasion for their use. Instead, the culture (social stratification) and language (words for 'you') evolved in an interdependent relationship, each contributing to the gradual development and continued maintenance of the other.

The result of this symbiotic, interdependent evolution of culture-language is a relation that can only be expressed by a shameless tautology: Guugu-Yimithirr, Thai, Matses, English, and Japanese speakers act and think in the way that they do because they have come to act and think in that way (and enact that action and thought in their language). Language, as the means of enactment and of mental representation of that action and thought, will naturally be a conservative force, as Heritage explains above, 'managing', 'transmitting', 'affirming', and 'reproducing' the culture of a society (including the habitual thought patterns), but this does not mean that language is the cause. For the participants in any society, it is the experience in their own cultural activity and thought, including language, enacted in language, that exerts influence on their thinking.

Deutscher insists that, after noting that the geographically focused Guugu Yimithirr children acquire their direction-giving skills early, 'the only imaginable mechanism that could provide such intense drilling in orientation at such a young age is the spoken language – the need to know the directions in order to be able to communicate about the simplest aspects of everyday life' (2010:192). Yet in this very statement he acknowledges that geographical direction-giving is a salient cultural practice, not just a feature of the language which enacts it, but a cultural feature that influences thinking about position and direction. To say that it is solely the mechanism (intense practice through speaking) that influences thinking, ignores the cultural reality behind the mechanism. It appears more correct to say that the cultural direction-giving practice, more than the language that enacts it, is the influential factor.

Most clear evidence of the power of 'speech habits ... [to] create habits of mind' (Deutscher 2010:193) come from cases where the speech habits are tied to a salient cultural practice or feature, as they are in the Guugu Yimithirr example discussed above. To find more convincing evidence that it was specifically or solely the language that had such influence, we would need to find cases where a distinct habit of thought was tied to a linguistic feature that was apparently not derived from cultural factors.

McWhorter suggests that one possible relationship is that between metaphors and habits of thought. He cites a study that compared speakers of languages where time is described by means of length metaphors (English, Indonesian) with speakers of languages that used volume metaphors (Spanish, Hebrew) and found, though well-devised tests, that speakers of time-by-length languages were actually better at judging the time for an object to cover a distance while speakers of time-by-volume languages were better at estimating the time for a container to fill. Here, unlike the case of geographical direction giving, it is the specifically linguistic enactment (i.e., of time), not cultural behaviour (i.e., related to time), that appears to have an effect on habits of thinking.

An even clearer cases for purely 'linguistic relativity' (as opposed to 'cultural relativity') could

be made if a seemingly arbitrary feature (such as pre- vs. postposition of adjectives), or a feature that had become disconnected from its original cultural antecedent (such as grammatical gender) could be shown to influence habits of thinking. Boroditsky *et al* (2003) conducted a study in which German and Spanish speakers were tasked with remembering which personal names (such as 'Claudia' and 'Patrick') were assigned to objects (such as 'bridge' and 'table'), and were found to perform better when the gender of the name matched the gender of the object in their respective languages (e.g. Germans remembered the name assigned to 'bridge', feminine in German, more frequently if the assigned name was feminine). These results suggest that German and Spanish speakers make unsolicited associations with nouns that align with their grammatical gender, but, to date, there seem not to be any more pervasive demonstrations of effects that can be attributed solely to language.

5. Conclusion

Several comments can now be made about how far (or how little) we have progressed in the discussion that began with Humboldt's innocent musings that '[language] encourages and stimulates its speakers.'

Linguists' social responsibility

Both sides must admit attitudinal and reasoned preferences. Each side claims that the other side's view may be partially motivated by humanitarian, not scientific, concerns. McWhorter (2014) approvingly but condescendingly notes that Whorf's description of Hopi reality was an attempt to demonstrate that Hopi thinking was not primitive but merely profoundly different, and further, he suspects that there persists a admirable preference for diversity and multiple world views that continues to energise the idea of 'linguistic relativity', and to impair their scientific acumen. Deutscher (2010), on the other hand, while distancing himself very clearly from Whorfianism, suspects that the the theorists who scoff at and eagerly negate the 'linguistic relativity' principle are overly influenced by a preference for and doctrine of universal linguistic equality.

Disparate versus integrated conceptualisations of culture and language

Also, as dealt with at length above, differences in how researchers and commentators in the two 'camps' understand culture contribute to the disagreement.

If what is brought to mind by the word 'culture' is chiefly the more salient practices and features (and the language practices employed in expressing these features), then it will be easier for both sides, when differences in thinking are discerned, to argue vehemently for their interpretations. Linguistic relativists will focus on linguistic causation, and see the differences as primitive and profound; skeptics will counter that 'it is just the culture' that accounts for differences observed, and that 'all humans are mentally alike' (McWhorter 2014:xx).

If, on the other hand, culture is understood deeply and broadly (as all socially-evolved and learned patterns, categorisations, and behaviour), the idea that this, which includes language as the enactor of culture, can exert an influence on individuals' thinking is not controversial at all. Combining statements 1.2 and 2.2 from Figure 1 near the beginning of this paper, we can phrase it thus: the habitual thought practices

of a culture (often expressed in *and noticed in* language) influence the habitual thought practices of an individual. What is interesting about this rather tautological relationship are the ways in which language plays this culturally conservative role.

Rushing to judgement

But rather than pausing when faced with these tricky distinctions and their implications—differing conceptualisations of culture (and of the ontological status of language in relation to culture) leading to apparently opposed viewpoints on linguistic relativity—the main protagonists rush ahead to overly definite claims. When McWhorter (2014:9) admits that the ‘Russian blues’ experiment reveals an effect of lexicon on either perception or thought, he quickly dismisses the effect as small, without considering whether small significant influences can accumulate to produce important changes in thinking, that is, the question of whether ‘the need to pay constant attention to certain aspects of experience train speakers to be especially sensitive to certain details or induce particular types of memory patterns and associations’ Deutscher (2010:156). Overall, researchers in the field appear to agree that there is not enough empirical evidence to see whether the biasing effects are scattered and near-trivial or pervasive and fundamental. Many researchers such as Boroditsky (2010) recognise a need for more empirical data, but achieve this by means of experiments which demand participants to perform artificial, narrowly-circumscribed tasks, skewing the applicability of their results away from the question of whether systemic features in languages influence habitual thought and towards the question of whether the use of specific language features at a certain time influences specific perceptions/behaviour at that time.

The pressure to make a point

Or, perhaps it is more accurate to rephrase the critique above to say that ‘the main protagonists *seem* to rush ahead to overly definite claims’, for the claims are usually bolder and the criticism more abrupt in the titles and forewords to the books than in the details in the later chapters, when ambiguity of positions is admitted. The subtitle to Deutscher’s 2010 book is ‘why the world looks different in different languages’, but the bulk of the book is concerned with showing the weakness of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Conversely, McWhorter’s book, aggressively entitled, *The Language Hoax*, spends many of its pages admitting that there are good studies demonstrating linguistic relativism. The controversy seems to be generated as much by the publishing imperative to ‘make bold statements or debunk statements decisively,’ as by the considered positions of the researchers.

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