

II. REVIEWS

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THE PRINCIPLE OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY:
THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA,
THE EVOLUTION OF SCIENTIFIC THINKING,
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES*

John Leavitt, *Linguistic Relativities: Language Diversity and Modern Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. x + 278, ISBN-13: 9781117558632, Price: £28.90, paperback.

John Leavitt's *Linguistic Relativities: Language Diversity and Modern Thought* is yet another contribution to the debate on the relation between language and thinking. In this review, I deal with those, necessarily selected aspects of the book, that can be considered most relevant to (cognitive) ethnolinguistic research (cf. Bartmiński 2009). It is virtually impossible to include in the discussion all strains of research addressing the relation between language, culture, and the human mind. Therefore, this review is limited to issues within the ambit of cognitively-oriented cultural linguistics, in particular compatible with the tenets of cognitive linguistics.

Leavitt's publication provides the reader with a historical lens through which one traces the history of various views of linguistic diversity and what their development reveals about Western modernity. The overall perspective Leavitt adopts in his book is that of the anthropologist. Thus, the scholar offers a more nuanced approach to the language-mind problem, developing three central arguments that help him uncover the inherent complexity of the relation. First, Leavitt argues that the research in the modern West has been dominated by two interpretations of language differences, traceable either to universalistic or pluralist models of philosophical origin. Treated as binary oppositions, the two approaches either highlighted or downgraded the significance of linguistic diversity. Second, Leavitt posits that, although widely associated with the essentialist paradigm, the work of Boas and

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his students was an attempt to re-examine the issues of linguistic differences in a more comprehensive way. The third aim of the book is to show that, to a large extent, the research carried out since the 1960s has drawn on the oppositions that Boas and his followers wanted to transcend.

Leavitt presents the reader with a history of Western thought, outlining the development of ideas on linguistic diversity from antiquity, through the pre-scientific period of the Middle Ages, to the groundbreaking 17th c., when the conceptions of Descartes, Bacon, Lock, and Leibniz flourished. The work of the first three philosophers laid the foundations for universalism, whereas Leibniz's ideas were decisive for the establishment of essentialism, lending support to the importance of linguistic diversity. While not true opposites in themselves, universalism and essentialism gave rise to the polarization of approaches to linguistic diversity, which, in turn, had a great impact on the emergence of the relevant conceptions in the subsequent stages of the evolution of scientific thought. The two philosophical theories came to function as polar opposites attracting different strains of research into linguistic diversity, conducted by the subsequent generations of scholars. In the following chapters, the author discusses the key developments in the 19th c. debate on language differences. Leavitt goes on to present the work of Boas, Sapir, and Whorf, with the development of their ideas in the 20th century. The author comments on the revival of interest in their theories. The book finishes off with, as Leavitt clarifies, a necessarily selective overview of research in the 1990s. The author also outlines an array of possible applications of Boasian ideas in present-day linguistics.

As already mentioned, Boas and his students wanted to go beyond the constraints imposed by the two (oversimplified) approaches to the problem of linguistic diversity. In combining a historical viewpoint with an anthropological perspective, Leavitt lucidly explains the reasons for ideological distortions behind the thought of Boas and his followers. Indeed, the effort is applaudable in that it restores faith in academic integrity. This is all-important, given that, as Leavitt shows, the opponents of the Boasian camp tended to misinterpret the theories of Boas and his followers. Rather than referring directly to the assumptions behind the work of Boas and his colleagues, they constructed straw-man arguments. In this light, the very title of the book, *Linguistic Relativities*, acquires a somewhat ironic tinge, regardless of the author's true intentions. In a sense, Leavitt's publication also shows that over time, due to scientific progress, any academic theory undergoes verification, whatever authority its author once had.¹

How original are the insights offered by Leavitt in his book? First, a reference must be made to Alford (1981),² where the scholar inquires into the relation between language and cognition by situating the discussion in the context of the history of relativity, in particular in Einstein's version thereof. Some echoes of Alford's argumentation pertinent to the marginalization of the principle of linguistic relativity by its opponents may be found in Leavitt's publication. Yet, the mention

¹ Cf. Heller (1998). When discussing the phenomenon of "intellectual fraud", Heller observes that the lack of integrity in scholarly conduct may in part derive from ignorance, which in its outcome might not differ much from dishonesty (p. 63).

² Cf. also Sinha and Bernárdez 2015.

is rather brief, whereas, in my opinion, invoking Alford's account of how the idea of relativity was developed in physics might have further enriched Leavitt's book with an insightful explanation of how the scientific context could have influenced Whorf's re-conceptualisation of linguistic differences. As with Einstein's relativity, the adoption of the principle of linguistic relativity meant the necessity to reject a privileged point of view from which the linguist was to conduct a comparative analysis of languages.

Nonetheless, Leavitt does deserve credit for presenting the reader not with our present-day perspective on the work of Boas and his followers, but with the viewpoint contemporaneous with the Boasians. The reader becomes a witness of their struggle with the mainstream science of the time. In the final paragraphs of his book, Leavitt invokes Einstein's principle of relativity, contrasting the Whorfian approach with the essentialist stance on linguistic diversity. The author recounts the work of the great physicist, signalling its importance as a point of departure for a more balanced and comprehensive treatment of linguistic differences. The author calls for the rejection of the idea that language-culture-nation may be treated as a self-contained universe that should be kept sealed off from the outside world.

Leavitt's repeated references to Einstein's principle of relativity are a good pretext to address the question of the boundaries of research on the interplay of language, culture, and the mind. Leavitt's book calls for a more in-depth consideration of the nature and status of the present-day linguistics of cognitive-cultural provenance.³ Therefore, the present review would be incomplete if no mention was made of Leavitt's cursory, but nevertheless relatively frequent, invocations of empirical findings concerning the influence of language on thought. In particular, the author devotes a separate section to the problem, bringing up the research by Lera Boroditsky (the conceptualisation of time, space, and grammatical gender). Leavitt refrains from any explicit evaluation of present-day research. Yet, the reader might get a vague impression that the voices of the various contributors to the discussion of linguistic differences are not equally audible. As an anthropologist, Leavitt provides ample space for the quotations from famous figures such as Rabelais or Newton, but the references to the work of modern researchers, including Boroditsky, are rather scanty. The words of Boroditsky quoted on page 10 of *Linguistic Relativities* are taken out of context from a 2002 interview with the psychologist. Another mention of the interview is provided on page 213.⁴ While suppressing the need for the discussion of the psychologist's views, this approach might discourage the reader from verifying the true value of the present-day, empirically-based strands of the language-mind investigation.

In view of this, it may seem that Leavitt feels more comfortable discussing philosophical-anthropological problems, touching on relevant empirical research out of necessity to account for the recent developments in language-cognition research. Yet, modern linguists are not castaways, having no access to the findings of empirical research within and beyond cognitive science. It is reasonable to argue

³ Cf. Bartmiński 2016.

⁴ On p. 213 the author refers to a 2009 radio interview with Boroditsky, but in the References section he mentions the 2002 talk.

that scientific progress verifies any linguistic theory. As a publication that falls within the scope of the history of scientific thought, Leavitt's book could have considered the issue of empirical research in greater detail.

The problem of interdisciplinarity is mentioned primarily because of the conception of the linguistic worldview in the Lublin School of Ethnolinguistics. Importantly, linguists do not need to follow suit and include in their work insights from disciplines as diverse as physics, anthropology, and linguistics. On the other hand, this might allow them to form a broader perspective on the collective conceptualisations of fundamental notions such as TIME and SPACE, or the challenges to human perception on micro- and macro-scale.⁵ For illustration, let us consider some selected examples from the domain of science, as Leavitt does in his book.

In science, it is typically the language of mathematics and visualisations that play the pivotal role in resolving problems, whereas, in this respect, natural language often proves redundant. Apart from the case of Euclidean geometry, one modern approach making use of equations and visualisations is Richard Feynman's conception of diagrams (which *Linguistic Relativities* omits to mention).⁶ Overall, although natural language is the medium of collective knowledge, it does not constitute its sole carrier. Linguists will not be able to evade the question of how collective knowledge is distributed across various resources.⁷ For example, if human cognition is viewed as not only embodied, but also grounded in the physical, as well as the social-cultural environment, one pending question concerns the need to account for the interaction between the language user and the material culture of their community.⁸

In view of this, John Leavitt's book is useful in indicating changes typically occurring in the development of scientific thought. The book is important in that it shows how careful scholars should be when referring to the work of great academic figures. Many founding fathers of scholarly theories should be revered for their outstanding contribution to the edifice of science and humanities, and for allowing others to stand on the shoulders of giants. Yet, at the same time, we should not forget that each of the founding fathers worked within the constraints imposed by the contemporary mainstream, trying to raise to the challenge of their day.

Translated by Katarzyna Stadnik

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⁵ Cf. Polkinghorne 2002.

⁶ Cf. Wróblewski 2006.

⁷ Cf. Stadnik 2015.

⁸ Cf. also Stadnik 2016.

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