Linguistic Relativity in SLA

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Linguistic Relativity in SLA
Thinking for Speaking

Edited by
ZhaoHong Han and Teresa Cadierno

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Preface

As we were putting finishing touches on this volume, the news broke that Flight 1549 crashed in the Hudson River, New York. Our attention was instantly diverted by an outpouring of online and offline news reports and commentaries to the breath-taking drama that had unfolded, in particular, the pilot's miraculous landing of the aircraft on the river, saving 154 lives. As we glanced over the reports, our eyes halted on the following lines and the similar wording:

> Many on board and watching from the shores were shocked that the aircraft did not sink immediately. Instead, *it floated, twisting and drifting south in strong currents*, as three New York Waterway commuter ferries moved in. Moments later, *terrified passengers began swarming out the emergency exits and into brutally cold air and onto the submerged wings of the bobbing jetliner*, which began taking in water. (*New York Times*, January 16; emphasis added)

Piqued by our interest in linguistic relativity, we turned to *El País*, a Spanish newspaper, and found several descriptions, and much as expected, none with the level of detail with respect to manner of motion or with such elaborate and compact path description as the above (see italics). The Spanish descriptions tend to contain a greater number of path verbs than manner verbs and abound in static descriptions of the scene rather than descriptions of the trajectories per se. The two paragraphs below illustrate these tendencies. The first paragraph includes several path verbs (*dirigirse* 'head', *volver* 'return', *amerizar* 'land on water') and one cause-of-motion verb (*evacuar* 'evacuate'), with manner information provided only by means of the periphrastic construction *quedó flotando* 'remained floating'. The second paragraph illustrates the tendency to provide static descriptions:

> La nave, un Airbus A320 que se *dirigía* a Carolina del Norte *volvía* al aeropuerto de La Guardia (Nueva York-USA) tras golpearse con unos pájaros, según las primeras versiones, *amerizó* de forma controlada y *quedó flotando* sobre las aguas. – Los pasajeros *han sido evacuados* por las salidas de emergencia. – Todos han sobrevivido, según la autoridad aeroportuaria (*El País*, January 15, emphasis added)

('The plane, an Airbus A320 that was *headed* to North Carolina *returned* to LaGuardia Airport (New York-USA) after crashing against some birds, according to early versions, *landed on water* in a controlled way and *remained floating* on the water. – Passengers were evacuated via emergency exits. – All have survived, according to airport authority')

Las imágenes emitidas en directo por canales de EEUU han mostrado a varias personas con chalecos salvavidas *sobre las alas del avión*, esperando a ser rescatadas por barcos que han rodeado enseguida el aparato (*El País*, January 15, emphasis added)

('The images broadcast live on US channels showed several people with life jackets *on the wings of the plane*, waiting to be rescued by boats that have surrounded the plane')

Apparently, the linguistic effects are pervasive: As we see from the above examples and also as has been amply documented elsewhere (e.g. Slobin, 1996a),[1] different languages predispose their speakers to view and talk about events differently. An obvious question, then, for us and indeed, for the entire second language acquisition (SLA) field, has been this double-barreled question: To what extent does a prior language (L1) affect the acquisition and use of a second language, and more profoundly, to what extent does the conceptual system that comes with the L1 affect the development of another compatible with the L2?

Precisely, this book investigates linguistic relativity in SLA. The essential idea of linguistic relativity, that is the idea that language affects the way people think, has been around for centuries, dating from the work of Roger Bacon in the 13th century and of the German 18th-century philosophers Machaelis, Herder and Leibniz, but it gained prominence in the work of the German Romantic philosophers of the 19th century, especially in the writings of the German educator, linguist and philosopher von Humboldt (1767–1835). In the 20th century, the main line of research into this hypothesis moved to America with the development of Boasian anthropology and the work of Sapir (1884–1939) and Whorf (1897–1941). (For detailed information about the historical background of the hypothesis, the interested reader can consult Gentner & Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Lucy, 1992a.) The modern-day version of the idea is the so-called Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis has a strong and a weak version. The strong version stipulates that language *determines* cognition; that is, it assumes that speakers' thoughts can never be free from the constraints imposed by the language they speak. The weak version stipulates that language *influences* cognition; that is, it claims that the specific structure of a language influences its speakers' non-verbal habitual thought, routine ways of attending to, categorizing, and remembering objects and events (Lucy, 1992a).

The notion of linguistic relativism has fascinated scholars from a variety of disciplines, including, but not limited to, philosophers, psychologists, linguists and anthropologists. Over the centuries, the strong version of the hypothesis has lost ground to the weak version. As Pinker states, 'there is no scientific evidence that languages *dramatically* shape their speakers' ways of thinking' (Pinker, 1994: 58). The weak version has, in the last decade and a half, incited a great deal of empirical research by linguists, cognitive psychologists, psycholinguists and anthropologists (e.g. Boroditsky, 2001; Gentner & Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Levinson, 2003a; Lucy, 1992b; Lucy & Gaskins, 2001; Pederson *et al.*, 1998). According to Gentner and Goldin-Meadow (2003), recent interest in the hypothesis can be traced to three major themes: (1) the work carried out by prominent cognitive linguists such as Talmy, Langacker and Bowerman, who have demonstrated the important differences in how languages partition the world; (2) the development of a series of theoretical arguments, which include the revival of Vygotsky's (1962) claim of the important role of language in children's cognitive development and Lucy's (1992b, 1994) influential empirical research on the cognitive effects of classifier grammars; and (3) the move from a focus on color to the study of new domains such as space, motion, time, number, gender, theory of mind and the nature and function of objects versus substances.

Research along these lines has provided compelling evidence of the effects of language on thought. As Hunt and Agnoli have noted:

> Models of cognition developed after Whorf's day indicate ways in which thought can be influenced by cultural variations in the lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of language. Although much work remains to be done, there appears to be a great deal of truth to the linguistic relativity hypothesis. In many ways, the language people speak is a guide to the language in which they think. (Hunt & Agnoli, 1991: 377)

Similarly, Slobin (2000) asserts that there are 'non-dramatic' influences that deserve scientific attention.

The field of SLA has seen some work on linguistic relativity, conceptual and empirical, on and off over the last 30 years and the work has concerned target languages such as German, Russian, Spanish and English by learners from a variety of L1 backgrounds (e.g. Kaplan, 1966; Kellerman, 1995; Lado, 1956; von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987; Weinreich, 1953). The last few years, however, have witnessed a notable increase of interest in linguistic relativity; more studies have invoked, or framed themselves along the lines of, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, and have specially based their work on Slobin's thinking-for-speaking hypothesis (for reviews, see Cadierno, 2008; Odlin 2003, 2005, 2008a).[2]

The purpose of this volume is to capture and substantiate an emerging interest among SLA researchers in Slobin's thinking-for-speaking hypothesis (1987, 1996a), a weak form of linguistic relativism, which suggests that the extant language system may operate online to influence articulation of experience. The hypothesis has received extensive support in first language, crosslinguistic research (for brief reviews, see Cadierno, this volume; Hasko, this volume; Stam, this volume), but its relevance for second language research has not been explored until recently (Kellerman, 1995; see also Cadierno, 2004; Cadierno & Lund, 2004; Cadierno & Ruiz, 2006; Han, 1998, 2004). This volume assembles seven studies, all employing the thinking-for-speaking hypothesis as (part of) their conceptual framework, although the acquisition issues dealt with herein vary from study to study.

Chapter 1 (Cadierno) addresses the impact of L1 inter- and intra-typological proximity on the way L2 learners of Danish talk about motion events, in particular, boundary-crossing events. Chapter 2 (Hasko) is driven by a similar concern. More specifically, it examines the question of whether it is possible for advanced L2 learners of Russian to fully acquire the target language thinking for speaking, as it relates to the obligatory marking of unidirectionality and non-unidirectionality of motion in motion talk. Chapter 3 (Stam) assesses the extent to which long-term experience with the target language leads to restructuring of the L1-based thinking-for-speaking pattern in L2 English verbal description and gesturing vis-à-vis motion events. Chapter 4 (Coventry, Valdés & Guijarro-Fuentes) investigates whether language (Spanish versus English) affects implicit recognition of spatial relations. Chapter 5 (Stringer) raises and examines the issues surrounding glossing in crosslinguistic syntactic analyses, as a result of lexical relativity, and their implications for SLA. Reporting findings from a small-scale study, Chapter 6 (Ekiert) tackles the problem of consistent omission of articles in certain discourse environments among native speakers of Polish learning English as the L2. Chapter 7 (Han) provides an in-depth investigation, by virtue of a longitudinal case study, a prevalent problem in adult SLA, namely, inadequate command of grammatical morphemes and its oft-manifested persistency and variability. Chapter 8 (Odlin) concludes the volume by reflecting on the studies in relation to conceptual transfer, contemplating definitional issues and providing an outlook for the linguistic relativity research in SLA.

Disparate as they are for their samples and methodology, the studies overwhelmingly claim to have found artifacts of L1-based thinking for speaking in L2 production (including gesturing). From these studies it appears that Slobin's thinking-for-speaking hypothesis not only has validity for SLA, but it also holds the promise of offering a parsimonious account for a number of SLA conundrums, such as the recalcitrant nature of select influences of native language, inter- and intra-learner variable

acquisitional outcomes, fossilization and even seemingly random alternation of target-like and non-target-like behaviors (see e.g. Han, this volume). For the latter, extant accounts have been many, yet piecemeal and incongruent.

A paramount gain from the present collection of studies is that it has driven home the tasks confronting future research: in order to establish the thinking-for-speaking hypothesis as a contending theoretical approach to resolving outstanding acquisitional problems, it is imperative to form a consensus among researchers on the operationalization of the construct of 'thinking for speaking', to ascertain the types of data that are the most pertinent and, by the same token, the kinds of measures that are the most sensitive to tapping thinking for speaking (see Coventry *et al.*, this volume, for an insightful discussion), and last but not least, to tease out thinking for speaking from potentially confounding factors such as learner proficiency, context and +/− language-mediated cognition.

The studies reported in this volume raise numerous interesting questions for future research, of which five are particularly worth noting:

(1) To what extent is restructuring of L1-based thinking for speaking possible in SLA?
(2) What learning conditions, including pedagogy, are likely to spur changes?
(3) Given the right conditions, what changes are inevitable and what are not?
(4) What contributions do individual difference variables (e.g. aptitude, memory, motivation and personality) make to the extent of restructuring possible?
(5) How does L1-based thinking for speaking influence L2 input perception and comprehension?

Due to its pioneering nature, this book is best suited for use as a textbook for theme-based graduate seminars in SLA, as a reference for bilingualism and SLA researchers, especially those whose work is concerned with crosslinguistic influence, and as a general reader for those interested in language acquisition, the relationship between cognition and behavior, and the second language production process.

This volume would not have been possible without the dedication and hard work of its contributors, to whom we owe our respect and gratitude. We also want to take this opportunity to thank Vera Regan for her insightful and constructive comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. And finally, we wish to acknowledge Carly Tam for her assistance with the index.

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