

Thinking and Speaking in Two Languages

BILINGUAL EDUCATION & BILINGUALISM

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Edited by
Aneta Pavlenko

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Acknowledgments

Meret Oppenheim's iconic *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* provides a perfect illustration of the many purposes of this volume. Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup had challenged the canons of classical sculpture and the invisibility of women in art, and showed how even the slightest twist – in this case, the addition of the pelt of a Chinese gazelle – could transform the nature of the most mundane objects and the associations they summon in our minds. In a similar vein, the contributors to this volume question the ingrained assumptions in the study of language and cognition and the invisibility of bi- and multilingual speakers, and show how the application of a bilingual lens reveals new facets of the interaction between languages and cognitive processes in the human mind. I am thankful to the SCALA Group for permission to reproduce this picture. I am equally grateful to publishers who allowed us to reproduce the images in individual chapters.

The work on this volume has been a wonderful journey of learning and inspiration. I thank all the volume contributors whose exciting ideas, superb professionalism and unfailing promptness made my editorial tasks a pleasure and a privilege. I am equally grateful to Rafael Berthele, Scott Jarvis and Monika Schmid, who, together with the authors, contributed their time and expertise to the anonymous peer-review process. Last but not least, I want to thank the Multilingual Matters team, and in particular Colin Baker, Tommi Grover, Anna Roderick and Sarah Williams, who make author–publisher collaboration a truly enjoyable experience.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Bilingualism and Thought in the 20th Century

ANETA PAVLENKO

I still remember it as if it happened yesterday: the unseasonably chilly October morning, the immense line outside the warehouse, and our excitement and anticipation of the treasures we might discover inside. It was the fall of 1992 and my friends and I were first year graduate students in Linguistics at Cornell University, waiting for the opening of Ithaca's famous Friends of the Library book sale. It turned out that true aficionados had camped overnight outside the warehouse on Esty Street and so, for the first hour after the opening, we could only screen the people exiting triumphantly with their brown paper bags full of books, and hope that they were not carrying all the prizes away. Then, finally, we were at the door. Checking the book sale's map, we raced through the crowded floor to the linguistics bookcase and began raiding its holdings. And there it was: a caramel brown binding with golden letters announcing that this volume, published in 1949, contained *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*. Two decades later, I still remember the thrill of lifting the book off the shelf, of finding the *ex libris* of emeritus Psychology Professor Robert MacLeod (Cornell professors regularly donated books to the book sale), of reverently looking through its well-thumbed pages and of coming across this mysterious comment:

To pass from one language to another is psychologically parallel to passing from one geometrical system of reference to another. The environing world which is referred to is the same for either language; the world of points is the same in either frame of reference. But the formal method of approach to the expressed item of experience, as to the given point of space, is so different that the resulting feeling of orientation can be the same neither in the two languages nor in the two frames of reference. Entirely distinct, or at least measurably distinct, formal adjustments have to be made and these differences have their psychological correlates. (Sapir, 1949 [1924]: 153)

These words beautifully captured the disorientation of my own transition from Russian to English and I could not wait to see what Sapir meant by the psychological correlates. But when I scanned the following text, I realized, with great disappointment, that this was just a

cryptic aside in a discussion of the relationship between grammar and the lexicon. I was left alone, like a particularly clumsy Alice, who saw a tantalizing glimpse of another world and then failed to cross through the looking glass. What did Sapir mean? Why didn't he examine the phenomenon of bilingualism any further? What is the relationship between bilinguals' languages and thought? These questions haunted me ever since, but the answers continued to be elusive because, until now, the history of debates about language and thought has been a history of thinking of language in the singular, of disengagement with bilingualism.

The purpose of this volume is to reverse this trend and to begin unlocking the mysteries surrounding thinking and speaking in bi- and multilingual speakers. In doing so, some of the chapters in this collection will engage with the theory of linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The goal of this engagement, however, is to understand the implications of Sapir's and Whorf's ideas for speakers of multiple languages, not to 'prove' or 'contest' the hypothesis commonly formulated as follows:

the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism, stating that people's thoughts are determined by the categories made available by their language, and its weaker version, linguistic relativity, stating that differences among languages cause differences in the thoughts of their speakers. (Pinker, 1994: 57)

I have made the editorial decision to side-step the debates about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis for three interrelated reasons. The first is my deep conviction that the articulation of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the research based on this articulation represent a departure from Sapir's and Whorf's original ideas. In Section 1.3 of this chapter, I will trace the transformation of Sapir's and Whorf's complex arguments into the sound-bite juxtaposition of 'strong' linguistic determinism to 'weak' linguistic relativity and reveal the real authors of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – North American psychologists Roger Brown and Eric Lenneberg.

The second reason for side-stepping the debates involves a limited and limiting set of questions inspired by the Brown-Lenneberg hypothesis, questions that presuppose monolingualism as the norm. Only in the world imagined to be monolingual could one consider the possibility of languages 'determining' people's thoughts, without asking what happens with those who grow up speaking two or more languages, or those who learn other languages later in life. Consequently, instead of reviewing studies easily accessible to the readers, I will provide a historic overview of lesser-known research on bilingualism and thought.

The third reason involves constraints placed on research design by the current articulations of linguistic relativity. Instead of asking when, how, why and to what degree languages may influence cognitive categories and processes, current research privileges investigations of non-verbal behaviors that provide 'true' evidence 'for' or 'against' linguistic relativity. Lucy (1992a), Slobin (1996) and Levinson (2003) criticized this oversimplification and offered convincing arguments in favor of combining laboratory and naturalistic, as well as verbal and non-verbal, tasks in the study of linguistic relativity. Their arguments, however, have not been fully heeded by researchers in psychology, where 'habitual thought' is examined through experiments that measure reaction times to artificial tasks in laboratory conditions (e.g. Boroditsky, 2001; Chen, 2007; January & Kako, 2007; Tse & Altarriba, 2008).

To sum up, then, the present volume as a whole does not aim to take a position on or to provide any evidence 'for' or 'against' the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its current formulation (but see Chapter 2). Rather, it contributes to the scholarship on language and cognition by expanding its range to bilingual speakers as a focus of a systematic and sustained inquiry. This is particularly important because in today's globalized urban environments, it is more and more difficult to locate monolingual speakers of languages other than English (cf. Chapter 2). Unfortunately, some researchers studying language and cognition have not yet come to grips with this fact and continue to perpetuate the illusion of the monolingualism of their participants, while others simply do not know how to deal with the 'messiness' of bilingualism. Thus, the first aim of this volume is to introduce research designs that allow for rigorous examination of language and cognition in bilingual speakers.

Its second aim is to return to Sapir's and Whorf's original focus on everyday life and linguistic thought and to highlight a range of context-sensitive and ecologically valid methods of psycholinguistic inquiry. Consequently, the studies discussed here examine language and cognition, or thinking and speaking, in the bilingual mind across a range of verbal and non-verbal behaviors. The chapter by Athanasopoulos will focus on 'thinking' and thus more directly on the Whorfian ideas, the following two chapters, by Schmiedtová, v. Stutterheim and Carroll, and by Bylund, will involve 'thinking, seeing, and speaking'; the next chapter by Gullberg involves 'thinking, speaking and gesturing'; and the remaining two chapters by Malt and Ameel, and by Pavlenko, 'speaking' and more specifically, 'naming'.

These chapters depart from the usual scholarly genres – they are neither argumentative essays nor empirical studies proper. Rather, the contributors were invited to discuss the programmatic work that they – and their research teams – have been conducting on thinking and speaking in two languages and whose primary results have already

appeared in peer-reviewed journals. Given the fact that these publications came out in a variety of disciplinary fields, and sometimes in languages other than English, we decided that it would be worthwhile to synthesize and analyze – and in some cases reanalyze – the results of the studies, thus engaging in a scholarly dialog that goes beyond a single study at a time.

To provide a social context for these chapters, I will begin by examining what bilinguals themselves say about thinking and speaking in two languages. To provide a historical context, I will then continue with an overview of ways in which the relationship between bilingualism and thought had been conceived of in the 20th century.

1.1 Thinking and Speaking in Two Languages: An Insider's View

One of the ways in which ecological validity is commonly established is to see whether the subject of inquiry is of interest and importance to the population in question. In the case of thinking and speaking in two languages, the answer appears to be a resounding 'yes'. Even the most superficial perusal of immigrant memoirs and bilinguals' autobiographies uncovers a wealth of reflections on thinking and speaking in two languages, with 'thinking' understood broadly as inner speech and as ways of perceiving, conceptualizing and framing objects, actions, events and phenomena.

In my own corpus of autobiographic writing by bi- and multilingual speakers, which includes texts in four languages (English, French, Spanish and Russian) and spans more than a century, these references appear throughout, starting with the turn of the 20th century memoirs of European immigrants who document the process of their assimilation in the USA (Pavlenko, 2004). For instance, Mary Antin, a Jewish woman whose family escaped tsarist Russia, writes joyfully in her celebrated autobiography, *The Promised Land*, that as a student at Barnard College, she 'learned at least to think in English without an accent' (Antin, 1912: 360). For Antin, this does not mean simply reaching a level of proficiency sufficient to express her thoughts – she talks about gaining new concepts, such as privacy (Antin, 1912: 289), and new perspectives, such as women's rights and individual fulfillment (Antin, 1912: 277).

Given the common theme of linguistic assimilation in immigrant and expatriate memoirs, it is not surprising that they paint a very similar trajectory where the new arrival continues to 'think' in the first language (L1) for a while and, only with time, shifts to 'thinking' in the second language (L2). Foreign language knowledge, on the other hand, does not appear to influence the thought process. For instance, Veronica Zhengdao Ye, a Chinese expatriate in Australia, states:

I had a fairly good command of basic English, but it had never influenced my way of thinking and experiencing the world until I moved to Australia. (Zhengdao Ye, 2007: 69)

According to bilinguals' autobiographies in my corpus, it is only when speakers move to the country where the language is spoken that this language begins to exert influence on their thinking, and even then the influence is not immediately apparent. A German immigrant in the USA, Gerda Lerner, recalls that in her first years in the country, she experienced a dissociation between her thinking processes and the language of the environment:

For nearly two years, I managed on that level of crude communication [in English], while my thoughts and dreams went on unperturbed in German. (Lerner, 1997: 35)

A similar reminiscence comes from Jade Snow Wong, who grew up in the USA speaking Chinese:

At this time [second year of college] Jade Snow still thought in Chinese, although she was acquiring an English vocabulary. (Wong, 1945: 132)

Eventually, however, the native language appears to suffer from disuse, and some immigrants, like the Polish-English bilingual, Eva Hoffman, experience what contemporary psycholinguists may characterize as deactivation or inhibition of the L1 and perhaps even language attrition, and the speakers themselves experience as an acute loss of inner speech:

The worst losses come at night. As I lie down in a strange bed in a strange house... I wait for that spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself... Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness. Its words do not apply to my new experiences... (Hoffman, 1989: 107)

For Hoffman, inner speech is the key vehicle of thought and its loss is tantamount to losing an important means of interacting with one's environment, as important as the eyes are to visual and the ears to aural perception:

I understood how much our inner existence, our sense of self, depends on having a living speech within us. To lose an internal language is to subside into an inarticulate darkness in which we become alien to ourselves; to lose the ability to describe the world is to render that world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid. And yet the richness of articulation gives the hues of subtlety and nuance to our perceptions and thought. (Hoffman, 1999: 48)