

RESEÑAS

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John McWhorter was born and raised in Philadelphia. He received his Master's degree in American Studies from New York University and his Ph.D. in Linguistics in 1993 from Stanford University. Since 2008, he has taught linguistics, American Studies, and in the Core Curriculum program at Columbia University and is currently an Associate Professor in the English and Comparative Literature Department there. McWhorter has published a number of books on linguistics and on race relations, the better known are *Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English*, *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why You Should, Like, Care*, and *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*.

The book comprises 6 chapters. From the very beginning, in the introduction, the author states that his book is not a book in the traditional sense but a manifesto. His basic assumption is that the long-held belief that language shapes thought is wrong. He refutes the notion put forth by Guy Deutscher- that our native language determines a particular world view in the brain-as well as linguistic relativity, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Chapter 1: Studies have shown

In chapter 1 the author states the goal of his manifesto: namely, to show the flaws and dangers of the implication regarding the hypothesis that language shapes thought. For him, not having a specific word in a language does not entail lack of concept. That idea is a social construct fostered by linguists in the past few decades. He provides examples about different indigenous communities which, for example, process direction geographically somewhat differently from the way we do it. This, he argues, is determined by culture and lifestyle. Language plays no role here. It does not structure a "worldview"; rather, this is created by the way different human groups experience life. Culture percolates language at different points, and language reflects a particular culture. This is the most important issue he addresses in the book. At the end of the chapter he says that the study of cultures helps us to understand differences among human beings. Conversely, the study of how language works can give us insight as to what makes all human beings the same the world over.

Chapter 2: Having it both ways?

Here he continues with the long-held belief that what languages are like parallels what their speakers are like. In other words, the thought patterns of a culture somehow correspond to the languages they are couched in. At the same time, he wonders, whether it would be plausible

that cultures influence language rather than the other way around, as stated by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. So, we could have it “both ways”.

According to McWhorter, languages change over time and evolve to support the culture of their speakers. Again, culture rules. He reminds us of Whorf’s assumption that the internal mechanics, the structure, and grammar of a language is deeply rooted in its speakers’ identity which is different from everyone else’s. For example, to be a native speaker of Italian is profoundly consonant with what it is to be Italian. Yet, he sees a kind of feedback loop in that culture and language affect each other in a reciprocal relationship.

Also, the way a vast number of languages around the world work has nothing to do with the variety among the world’s peoples. If we take English, for example, we are aware of the fact that speakers from different countries and cultures use it as their native language. British, Americans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Scottish, Welsh are among some of the linguistic cultural groups. So, in spite of having the same native language, their individual linguistic varieties remain distinct over time. Likewise, their cultural identities are, to a big extent, left unaltered under the influence of the language. Again, the language does *not* change people’s mindset. The variables that can change our thoughts, concepts, and ideas are geography, weather, local traditions, historical and personal events. Many speakers know and use more than one language throughout their lives, and this does not affect their personal and cultural identity. This is the case of the people who are bi or multilingual. Their original cultural identity can be enriched by the foreign languages he/she speaks. The author also mentions “evidential markers”, which are suffixes speakers use in order to convey the idea of tenses, gender, number, or levels of formality. He gives the example of a language from the Amazon called Tuyuca. This language has different versions of the suffixes for past tense, depending on whether we are referring to a male, female, our addressee or ourselves, and so on. In many languages these markers are common but not so in European languages, particularly in English. They are very common in Turkish and the Native American languages of western North America. According to him, the explanation for the existence of evidential markers is quite simple: chance. Likewise, he states that chance is the only real pattern which can be used as evidence for why languages and their speakers are like.

Regarding the differences among languages in the world, he claims that languages differ in the degree to which they do the same thing. They all perform the same linguistic functions and, ultimately, convey the same communicative meanings needed by their specific speakers. There is no reason for a language to have something its speakers don’t need. The workings of a language are not the result of need but happenstance.

Context also plays an important role in human communication. He says that all languages in the world actually express much more than people need. Words go beyond and surpass that basic stage.

The author points out that all languages have their own way of conveying degrees of confidence in truth, since all human beings are cognitively equipped to perceive those degrees and need to express them on a daily basis. At the end of this chapter, he states that what makes the structure of a language magnificent is its independence from folkways, cosmology, and thought patterns.

Chapter 3: An Interregnum: On Culture

This chapter deals with Ethnosemantics, which explores how a word is given different meanings depending on the speakers’ worldview. In this light, Whorfianism can be understood as an attempt to enlarge the ethnosemantic perspective and go beyond intuitive and immediately

demonstrable cases, like those from Mandarin. It is precisely this expansion that his manifesto questions.

The languages from small indigenous groups, he argues, tend to be more grammatically complex than those spoken by a large number of people around the world. Likewise, these aboriginal languages have sounds that are unusual and more difficult to produce. This is explained by the fact that a widely spoken language has to be simpler and easier to learn, particularly for foreign speakers who acquired it after adolescence. A “natural” fact and experience for human beings is to learn a language in childhood – the mother tongue. Any language learnt after that period turns out to be an odd experience, artificial as it were. McWhorter says that, just like most linguists, he has the conviction that human beings have an innate predisposition to use language.

Chapter 4: Dissing the Chinese

The appeal that Whorfianism has for people is basically the notion that speakers of languages different from English pay more attention to certain things than English speakers do. In other words, their minds are linguistically and conceptually focused in a different direction. Yet, what does the specific grammar of a language tell us about the minds of its speakers? The author reminds us that Whorf said that it is possible that the simpler a language becomes overtly, the more it conceals unconscious presuppositions, and the more its lexations become variable and undefinable.

Further on, McWhorter refers to Alfred Bloom when he mentions how highly particular English is in encoding hypothecality. Regarding the heightened sensibilities among Native Americans, Bloom also concluded that when they speak a language and leave much hypothecality to context, our thought patterns are left less attuned to the language than an English speaker’s. What we are dealing with, apparently, is different mindsets which are conditioned by cultural variables rather than linguistic structure.

Linguistic anthropological studies have shown that out-of-context questions are an artifice of educational procedure. This type of question, in general, does not occur in oral cultures, where linguistic exchanges are closely related to the speaker’s context. This can be witnessed, for example, among Chinese speakers.

There is a reference to a study which showed that speakers of languages that assign gender to inanimate objects are prone to assigning the corresponding male or female traits to those objects.

Regarding the issue of being human, having a mind, and using language, the author claims that a goat herder in central Africa is as alive as an accountant in Minneapolis or a shoemaker in Beijing. We are all human beings using language to communicate. Human cognition is the same for everybody everywhere, yet, languages vary enormously from one another.

Regarding tense markers, there are many languages that don’t have them but this does not mean at all that the speakers pay more or less attention to past or present dimensions.

Another remarkable issue is that, apparently, the way people’s grammar works can have an impact on the countries’ economies. So, it turns out that countries with future-marking languages show lower saving rates than those without future markers.

Further on, the author says although languages differ, thought does not. But, if it does, it is conditioned by culture, not grammar.

Chapter 5: What’s the Worldview from English?

In this chapter, McWhorter wonders whether being a native speaker of English makes one think differently from other people. He mentions the varieties of spoken English, and analyses

a real example of Black English he overheard on the subway in Jersey City. He comes to the conclusion that, for this variety of English, there is an alternative way to convey subjunctive mood. He insists on the idea that people think alike; it is the languages that change.

Chapter 6: Respect for Humanity

Here the author says that the visceral appeal of Whorfianism is not scientific. He mentions different indigenous languages, among them Kawesqar from Chile, which have several past tenses – some of which indicate a mythological tense. So, these languages *do* have a marker for abstract thought, contrary to common western belief.

Three problems are mentioned in this chapter: honesty, respect, and accuracy. The first refers to whether all worldviews are noble. The second has to do with the way certain languages have been treated in the past given their lack of gender. The third deals with the issue of how well a language can depict a culture and its nuances. Finally, he says that words follow thought and do not shape it to the same extent that language cannot create culture but talks about it.

CONCLUSION

This book reads easily but, at times, it gets repetitive in its dismissal of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The author makes his point in trying to prove that what structures thought is culture and not language.

Throughout the chapters in the book, McWhorter provides varied and interesting examples from different languages to illustrate his idea regarding people's mindset. He mentions Chinese, Korean, Russian, European languages, and those from indigenous and African peoples. The author is familiar with many languages –most of which are completely unknown to us– which are spoken around the world.

This book –or manifesto– is worth reading in that it sheds new light on the understanding of cultural and linguistic processes the human mind goes through. It is a contribution both for cultural studies and Linguistics.

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