



The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Revisited: A Reconsideration of the *Weltanschauung* in an Algerian EFL Context

L'Hypothèse de Sapir-Whorf Revisitée: Reconsidération de la *Weltanschauung* dans un Contexte d'Enseignement d'Anglais en Algérie

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Abstract

Language teaching theorists, unanimously, recognize *de facto* that culture teaching is a vital component of any language course, be it second or foreign. Knowledge of the target culture, awareness of its dominant characteristics and of the striking differences between the target culture and the mainstream culture should constantly be part of a language teaching menu. Thus, considering *a priori* the oft-held view that language teaching consists of the four skills plus culture is at present all too often held to be partially true, yet more deluding than enlightening; culture in the language teaching-learning process ought not to be an expendable fifth skill: an added frill. Additionally, culture teaching should not be restricting, as it were, to a mere passing of information about the people of the target language, and about their general thoughts and worldviews. However, a large load of what is called culture is a sheer social construct, an unmitigated product of self- perceptions and others' *weltanschauung*. This ethno-linguistic dimension, assuming that different languages are likely to lead people to perform different actions because language shapes their worldview, is the nub of our research work. Language-wise, what is the place of this hypothesis, and its pedagogical implications in our Algerian EFL classroom? The answer to the question represents the general lay-out of the present article.

Keywords: Culture, language, language-culture teaching, thought, world-view (*Weltanschauung*)

Résumé

Les théoriciens de l'enseignement des langues reconnaissent unanimement et *de facto* que l'enseignement de la culture est un élément vital dans la composante d'un cours de langue, qu'elle soit seconde ou étrangère. Une connaissance de la culture cible, une sensibilisation aux caractéristiques dominantes et aux différences pertinentes entre la culture cible et la culture dominante devrait, d'une manière constante, faire partie intégrale d'un menu d'un cours de langue. On considérant *a priori*, que l'enseignement d'une langue consiste à développer les quatre compétences plus culture, cette approche est de nos jours une vérité partielle, plus fallacieuse qu'instructive. La culture dans le processus de l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues ne devrait pas être une cinquième compétence optionnelle : un volant ornemental. En outre, l'enseignement de la culture ne doit pas se limiter à une simple transmission d'information sur les personnes parlant la langue cible, et sur leurs pensées et leurs visions du monde. Cependant, une

grande partie de ce qu'on appelle culture n'est qu'une conception ou construction sociale, un produit absolu des self-perceptions et de la *weltanschauung* des autres. Cette dimension ethnolinguistique, supposant que différentes langues entraînent probablement des individus à effectuer des actions différentes parce que la langue agit comme un filtre sur leur vision du monde, constitue l'essence même de ce travail de recherche. Côté langue, quelle place accordons-nous à cette hypothèse, et quelles en sont les implications pédagogiques dans une classe d'enseignement d'anglais en Algérie ? La réponse à cette question représente le plan général du présent travail.

Mots clés : Culture, langue, enseignement de la langue et la culture, pensées, vision du monde (Weltanschauung)

Introduction

Arguably, the relationship between language and culture has aroused widespread interest and led to many studies and debates on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also called the Whorfian hypothesis, as the study of the intimate relations between language, culture, and thought. From an applied linguistic standpoint, this dialectic has found a fertile land in the context of language teaching, and has been the subject of heated debates and controversial opinions in numerous scientific meetings adding a further layer of complexity to the situation. This sparked great interest and active participation in response to the fact that since the late 1960s, language has begun to be viewed in social, pragmatic and semantic terms, *communicative competence oblige!*¹ Along similar lines, the advent of sociolinguistics has given a new impetus to language teaching, not least culture teaching. This hybrid discipline, part sociology and part linguistics, grew rapidly, emerged and ultimately imposed itself as a discipline in its own right. Consequently, in the sixties and seventies, an anthropo-sociolinguistic trend of language in a hip relation to culture and society began to dictate its authority and findings on language teaching theory, influencing considerably language teaching methodology.

1. Triadic Model of Language and Culture

This multi-fold orientation has given birth to the establishment of a standard triptych depicting what language is in relation to culture. The model in question can be summarized as follows:

1. Language is an integral part of culture (and so is culture), and has to be tackled with the same ways that govern our view of culture as whole, i.e. an ethno-linguistic stance ought to be developed by language teachers.
2. Language conveys a cultural dimension and language teaching is out of educational necessity culture teaching. Yet, a word of caution is in order here, in no way, should language teachers see themselves as members of a cultural mission disparaging the cultural background of their learners in favour of the target culture.
3. Language is itself subject to culturally-conditioned attitudes and beliefs that cannot be ignored or discarded in the language classroom. That is, teaching a language is not a value-

¹ The term 'communicative competence' has been defined as "What a person needs to know in order to communicate effectively in culturally significant situations" (Hymes, 1974: 75). Put differently, it is "A person's ability to act in a foreign language in a linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically appropriate way" (Council of Europe, 2001: 9). Yet, does communicative competence stand in a different light today? The answer to this question would lead us to say that, as the adage has it, *that's a horse of another colour*.

free activity and, consequently, language teachers, whether they realize it or not, are, at times, introducing alien patterns of thoughts, values and beliefs to their learners.

1.1. The Whorfian Hypothesis Explained

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, two American anthropo-linguists, showed great interest and involvement in investigating the dialectic relationship between language and culture under the banner of the well-known Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, or the Whorfian Hypothesis, for short. They firmly and convincingly state that our thought processes largely determine the way we look at the world around us. This ethno-linguistic view, asserts, that, “different languages can lead people to different actions because language filters their perception and the way they categorize experience” (Kramsch, 2018: 12).

To be down to earth, the Whorfian Hypothesis can be summarized and made explicit in the following statements:

- The way we speak and use words determines, to a larger extent, the way we see the world.
- Our culture acts as a lens through which we experience the world and develop shared meaning with people around us.
- The language we use is created to respond to specific cultural needs.
- The reality expressed by our use of specific words is the very same reality that is perceived by thought.
- Perception and expression are all too often used alternatively and synonymously in the field of anthropo-linguistics.
- Language is not simply a way of expressing ideas, emotions and desires but is the very thing which shapes those ideas, emotions and desires.
- The real world is to a larger extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group.
- We are very much at the mercy of the particular language we use.

In sum, language is “a method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires”, to use Sapir’s terms (1921), but it is also “a depository of cultural identities”, to use Whorf terms (1956). In *Language*, and in many articles, Sapir presented some of the evidence he had gathered in field work and study to show empirically that there are parallels between language and culture. He pointed out language has no *raison d’être* outside a cultural framework, that is, apart from “the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives” (Sapir, 1921: 207). Whorf, on the other hand, took this step further and strove fiercely to demonstrate on empirical bases the validity of the hypothesis by comparing European and Amerindian languages, with particular reference to Hopi. Whorf was a linguist who developed the linguistic relativism principle and raised interesting, yet controversial issues. In the 20th century he was regarded as the relativist *par excellence*. It has been almost a half of a century since he claimed that the particular language we speak influences the way we think about reality. Thus, and accordingly two people who speak different native languages think in different ways because the language shapes their thoughts and actions.

1.2. Linguistic Relativity

Linguistic relativism suggests that there are certain thoughts we have in one language which cannot be completely grasped by speakers of other languages. The way we think is strongly affected by our native languages². For instance, the French language distinguishes well between two verbs – ‘connaître’ and ‘savoir’, which both mean ‘to know’. From a semantic standpoint, the former denotes to know with the idea to be personally familiar with, to have experienced it oneself; the latter is to know with a sense of having acquired knowledge and skills in formal settings. However, the English language uses one verb, and this blurs both interconnected sides of one process. No doubt, language often reflects the cumulative experience of people in a particular society.

Whorf was well acquainted with physics – ‘relativity’ is the word he consistently used, along with ‘principle’, thus echoing Einstein. He moved from Newton’s determinism, where every event or action is the inevitable result of another preceding event and action, into the holistic approach of systems thinking -- where the system’s constituent parts are interdependent, interrelated and multicausal. What Whorf could suggest to our contemporary EFL teachers is that language and thought and culture are interrelated. Language shapes thinking and reflects culture while thinking and culture shape and reflect language in a mutually interdependent way. There are many cases where a word appears due to culture – “language embodies reality” as Kramsch (2017) put it. For example, the week starts with the day of the moon, Monday, and ends with the day of the sun, Sunday³.

It is worth noting that the Whorfian Hypothesis holds great significance in the field of language education, not least second and foreign language teaching and learning. A tantalizing question is worth mentioning here: what is the place of this hypothesis, and its pedagogical implications in the field of language/culture teaching? In case it holds good, the Whorfian hypothesis could have serious implications for the teaching and learning of languages, namely at the level of lexical codifiability, i.e. the degree to which languages provide words for the description or naming of things, events and facts, experiences and states. It is clear, however, that in language pedagogy, the crux of the problem is rather much more complex, and the degree to which the Whorfian hypothesis proves valid does further cloud the issue. Consequently, we shift focus away from an intra-linguistic and intra-cultural analysis to another issue, involving inter-linguistic and inter-cultural dimensions. Put simply, the language learner should not only study the cultural context (language and culture), but he should be aware of the interaction between language and culture (language in culture) to use Hoijer’s dichotomy.

1.3. Humboldt's Notion of *Weltanschauung*

Language and thought, no doubt, are inseparable and analogically speaking, they are two sides of the same coin. This relationship has been researched by many linguists, sociologists, psychologists and other scholars but with its various aspects it is still open for discussions nowadays. Noam Chomsky points out that “the case of language is particularly

² Formally speaking, French is regarded as the first foreign language in Algeria. Nevertheless, due to the many similarities and affinities existing between French and English at the different linguistic levels, the French language still has a fair share of contribution in the English Language teaching-learning process.

³ The Romans named the days of the week after the Sun and the Moon and five planets, which were also the names of their gods. The gods and planets were Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday were substituted for the names of the equivalent Germanic gods, as English is a Germanic-origin language. However, Saturday (day of Saturn) follows the Roman order and Friday, in the Muslim tradition, the gathering day.

interesting because language plays an essential role in thinking and human interaction". Wilhelm von Humboldt's idea was that language is the result of the mental power of an ethnos. He also emphasized that "thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other." Furthermore, Humboldt talked about *Weltanschauung* to refer to "linguistic picture of the world," a worldview. Each language contains a worldview - a way of conceiving what reality is. People who identify themselves as members of a social group – nation, organization, family, neighbourhood, professional affiliation, etc. - acquire a common way of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. They bring their views, principles and assumptions about the world around them into their language.

The worldview is central to foreign language teaching. Learning a language does not mean only learning words and grammar. It also means that we need to learn the cultural contexts that are embedded in the words; we need to get acquainted with the beliefs, traditions, outlooks and values that give meaning to the world a person lives in. Worldview implies sharing cultural patterns and community perspectives. "Each language sets certain limits to the spirit of those who speak it; it assumes a direction and, by doing so, excludes many others" (1999:245) claimed Humboldt later supported by Whorf. Languages reflect our diverse cultural experiences and language teaching should project them.

1.4. Cultural Competence Vs. Cultural Performance

The question that one might ask here is the following: given that one wants to teach language in such a way that the learners are immersed into its social and cultural meanings, should one then ask their learners to step outside their own socio-cultural construct and put themselves in the native speaker's shoes? As Santoni has rightly pointed, one should "ask our students to try as hard as they can to be someone else, to plagiarize as well as they can all sorts of linguistic and behavioural patterns" (Santoni, cited in Nostrand, 1989 p. 52). Or should we not rather, as Nostrand (1989), Stern (1992), Valdman (2016) and Kramsch (2012) strongly recommend, separate knowledge about the culture (cultural competence) and experience of the culture (cultural performance). These questions still represent the fundamental paradox in language-culture teaching.

2. Culture Teaching Reconsidered

Now, it is quite clear that language use reflects culture and it is impossible to dissociate the two in any real sense. In other words, language and culture constitute, as Kramsch puts it, 'a single universe or domain of experience' (2012, p. 271). During the last decade or so, language teaching theorists have been prompted, however, to reconsider the teaching of culture in foreign language learning. They have noted that, despite the large amount of literature emphasizing the importance of the cultural aspect, culture, in its loose sense, has remained peripheral though most teachers recognize overtly or covertly its importance in relation to language.

Furthermore, the traditional thought in second/foreign language education⁴, as it is viewed now and which is still pervasive, has tended to transmit, through the target language,

⁴ The terms 'second/foreign language teaching' and 'second/foreign language education', and by extension, 'English Language Teaching' and 'English Language Education' respectively, might be semantically and didactically equivalent, but we prefer to use English Language Education in an attempt to be truly educative and to give a broader value and meaning to the language learning process. Language teaching can claim to have social significance, and to contribute to the student's general education by introducing them to cultures other than their own.

a view of the world that covers only the values and cultural insights of the native speaker, that is, culture teaching has been limited to a mere acquisition of a foreign cultural content, an informative and factual type of knowledge that the language learner must accumulate.

2.1. Examples and Illustrations

The Whorfian Hypothesis opens the gate widely so as to assert that virtually all languages do not translate to one another. This point can be made clear by an analysis of a commonly used French expression: 'Bon appétit'. Despite the efforts made by many countries of the former European Economic Community and authors of textbooks on 'hotel English', this has no real equivalent in English. Many of our EFL students are, unfortunately, unaware of the untranslatability of the expression; they all too often use the unusual expression 'Good lunch'. Similarly, 'public school' (elitist, fee-paying boarding schools like Eton, Harrow and Winchester) should never be translated by its nearest but deceptive French equivalent 'école publique'. Therefore, some form of ponderousness and mediation should be welcome before venturing into a too literal word-for-word translation.

Yet, another way in which culture penetrates our semantic structure is in the metonymic relations it entertains with language; some terms might be semantically equivalent, but they have quite different social/cultural connotations in each language/culture. For example, a word like 'friend' is defined as 'person one knows and likes, but who is not a relation', i.e. involving friendship/love; this definition is basically valid for most western cultures and societies. However, in Arabic the word [sadi:q] (friend) involves not only friendship/love, but honesty and faithfulness as well. In sum, many words are assigned culture-specific meaning.

Cultures are, by and large, different in many respects; the same social situation requires the use of a different conversational routine, or the same routine fulfills a different function. Our EFL learners are generally faced with the second issue (same routine: different function). For example, the English routines: 'You're welcome', 'Don't mention it', 'Not at all', 'It doesn't matter' and 'Never mind' may all be translated in Modern Standard Arabic by 'لا شكر على واجب' or 'العفو'. In English, 'Never mind' (i.e. don't worry) and 'It doesn't matter' (to me what you do) can be used to acknowledge an apology and are used by the person addressed to minimize the seriousness of the offence. The expressions 'You're welcome', 'Don't mention It' and 'Not at all' are polite replies to the expression of thanks. However, the Arabic routines 'العفو' and 'لا شكر على واجب' are used as responses to apologies and gratitude respectively, yet in many instances, they are used synonymously. Using the English routines interchangeably hence produces pragmatic errors. Such violations of cultural norms of inappropriateness in interactions may lead to socio-pragmatic failure and breakdowns in communication.

What is more, from a perceptual view point, it is logical to associate conventionally and stereotypically ideas with the object under discussion, for example 'Sunday' and 'Friday' mean 'going to church and mosque' for Christians and Moslems respectively. However, when people are asked if they go to church on Sunday or to mosque on Friday, they have to admit they do not. Therefore, in many instances sociogrammes can only be used to show that members from a specific culture have an image of an object, but more or less systematically associate it with culturally preset-behaviour. The theory can apply to the 'Iron Lady': The Eiffel Tower or the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher?

On the other hand, in Britain people often expect to be addressed by their first names or sometimes their pet names instead of honorific or courtesy titles such as Mr., Mrs., Miss,

Dr. or Pr. (as appropriate). It is regarded easier (and more friendly) to use first names, but our Algerian students may find it strange or even offensive to use first names when addressing their teachers. Some students may find it particularly difficult to address a teacher in this way, because of the seemingly lack of respect involved.

2.2. Kinship: Patrilineal Vs Matrilineal

To add a further layer to the complexity of the notion of semantic structure between Arabic (called here ‘L1’) and English, it is worth mentioning the use of kinship terms and the structure of the extended family. One can assert that a crucial distinction is made in terms of patrilineal vs. matrilineal kin. The following table illustrates clearly such assertion:

Kin formula	English term	Term in L1
Father’s brother	uncle	العم
Father’s sister	aunt	العمة
Mother’s brother	uncle	الخال
Mother’s sister	aunt	الخالة
Brother’s son	nephew	ابن الأخ
Brother’s daughter	niece	بنت الأخ
Sister’s son	nephew	ابن الأخت
Sister’s daughter	niece	بنت الأخت
Father’s brother’s wife	aunt	زوجة العم
Father’s sister’s husband	uncle	زوج العمة
Father’s brother’s son	cousin	ابن العم
Father’s brother’s daughter	cousin	بنت العم
Father’s sister’s son	cousin	ابن العمة
Father’s sister’s daughter	cousin	بنت العمة
Mother’s brother’s son	cousin	ابن الخال
Mother’s sister’s daughter	cousin	بنت الخالة

English and Arabic patrilineal and matrilineal kinship terms.

3. Language in Contact

People have interacted and nations have influenced one another since ancient times. Migrations and invasions through the ages have contributed to the establishment of various friendly, political, economic and military relationships, and inevitably led to the mixing of cultures, ethnicities, races, religions and languages. In this way, languages have always influenced one another in one way or another. These language-in-contact processes are illustrations of periods during which new and unfamiliar ways of living and thinking have been spread regardless of time and space. New habits and customs, religions and technology are concrete examples of cultural behaviours, religious beliefs and technological

advancement which have been propagated in this way and the influence is reflected in the language. As Sapir rightly pointed out, “each cultural [and religious] wave brings to language a new deposit of loan words” (1921, p. 205). The Frenchification, or ‘relexification from French’, to use Graddol’s (2000) terms, of English after the 1066 Norman Conquest is an evidence to explain an anthropo-linguistic fact through a historical event.

3.1. Influx of Anglicisms

With the advent of globalization and the shift of English from the status of an international and language of wider communication to that of a global language, many languages and dialects have adopted, willingly or unwillingly, many English words and expressions. These loanwords, linguistically called ‘Anglicisms’, are often deeply encrusted in the home language or dialect, and to some extent, without the speaker’s knowledge if no warning is made. The Algerian speaker is often not aware of the fact that ‘week-end’ (in bon week-end), ‘tubeless’ ‘design’, ‘showroom’, ‘e-mail’, ‘pressing’, ‘airbag’, ‘lifting’, ‘after-shave’, ‘T-shirt’, ‘pull’-(over), ‘shopping’, etc. are Anglicisms. Yet, for the informed speaker, the use of English loan words can be seen as a sign of snobbism and fashionable integrity. The prestige assigned to the English language in the light of the globalization framework has in effect contributed to the fact that most Anglicisms are used in their original form and in the very meaning they convey.

The societal changes, reflected in the economic development, technological advancement and commercial expansion, undeniably create new needs. It follows that new terms and expressions are also created to refer and designate the phenomena and the products that characterize these new inventions. The study of Anglicisms as a result of today’s globalized world has increasingly attracted linguists and anthropologists’ attention calling into question the validity of the Whorfian Hypothesis. At present, the Hypothesis should be treated with justifiable caution.

3.2. The Glocalization Process

The process of globalization, however, cannot completely overtake the local settings, economy, business, policy, culture, but it rather interacts with them leading to new social and cultural configurations. People are provided with a global frame for a lot of issues, but they still need local solutions since all too often global principles fall short to account for their specific environment. This hybrid global-local hip relationship, called glocalization, to borrow Roland Robertson’s (1992) term, provides new perspectives on a variety of cultural and linguistic issues. The glocalization process involves the blending and adapting of two or more processes one of which is the local one. Globalisation and glocalization are an interdependent process. The problem of simultaneous globalization of the local and the localisation of globality can be seen as the two sides of the same coin.

Global standards have already been proposed in the field of education in many countries all over the world. Approaches, methods and techniques connected with teaching English as the global lingua franca have been established. There is a great amount of relevant knowledge build upon practice; however, there is still a need for modifications for local contexts. Foreign language teaching, English for specific purposes to an even greater extent, is among those fields where each context is unique and requires *ad hoc* course design, teaching and testing based on reliable needs analysis (Brown & Green, 2015; Nunan, 1999; Reigeluth, 2013; Richards, 2001). Globalisation and glocalisation, diversity and universality are the characteristics of the 21st century. Some scholars have long been in a quest for the truth by studying the diversity of things, while others explore the truth by studying

similarities between things. Although these are quite different paths to follow and they lead to different directions, they are both valuable and beneficial to human thought.

Conclusion

Being the global *lingua-franca* nowadays English is spoken by both native and non-native speakers from myriad of countries. Learning English as a foreign language involves not only acquiring the English grammar and vocabulary and gaining communicative skills, but also adopting a new set of values, attitudes, way of thinking, and behaviour. What Whorf is giving us, EFL teachers today, is awareness for multilingualism and diversity of cultures. Building culture awareness in an English class is a challenging task. Cultural competence is a process that develops gradually over an extended period of time. The role of the teacher is not to make students accept a particular culture or behave in accordance with its conventions. Cultural relativism refers to not judging a culture to our own standards of what is right or wrong, strange or normal as well as not judging according to the native-speakers' culture. Instead, we should try to understand cultural practices of other groups in their own cultural context. Revisiting Whorf's ideas is beneficial for EFL teaching in the contemporary world. Although having quite radical views, Whorf could actually draw our attention to this controversial relation language-culture. Reconsidering the cultural relativism principle challenges the mind and opens new horizons in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

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