On Contact, Cultural Emphasis, and Linguistic Relativity

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When I was little, I used to think that Tagalog, or at least the Metro Manila dialect I was accustomed to, was deficient. I thought, "Why does it seem like I can't form a complete sentence without resorting to using an English word every now and then?" especially when it came to matters of technology, law, and bureaucracy. This was also before I even learned that many of the words I thought were Tagalog were actually of Spanish origin, or of Chinese, or of Indian (Sanskrit), and so forth (which also points to how well Tagalog has "claimed" them). Perhaps it was due to my own "deficiency" as an imperfect native speaker that I always needed to pull foreign words, or on the flipside, my "proficiency" as a budding bilingual. Still, language contact and borrowing were difficult concepts to grasp as a child, though much less than the fact how languages and speakers were hardly, if not never, really "pure."

Of course, I know now that all languages borrow from or are at least influenced in some manner by the other languages they come in contact with. Contact is the natural state of things now, along with change, although I imagine this was not always the case. Way before the world went global, geographically and culturally disparate prehistoric societies who spoke different languages lived in vastly different environments and thus lived through different experiences. When specific experiences or objects occur enough times to become shared and salient among a community, these language-speaking communities naturally develop lexemes to refer to such things. When these specific experiences or objects recur enough times, we could be dealing already with a culture (although only simplistically speaking). What happens is that cultures have widely different sets of words and vocabulary items from each other, and some domains within the lexicon may reflect what is more salient or culturally emphasized. Basically, the salient features in a community's environment and culture manifest in its language.

This aspect of our cultures and languages is truly fascinating, although sometimes our fascination with other cultures, relative to our own, may lead to exoticism or misguided beliefs about others. Such is the case of "the great Eskimo vocabulary hoax," wherein it was mistakenly believed that the communities in Siberia had a large yet unspecified, even varying, number of words for snow (Martin, 1986). After all, they lived in the frozen tundra, so why wouldn't they? But on a more grounded level, that is why the Eskimo *did* have words for snow. In reality however, the Eskimo lan-

guages merely had morphosyntactic processes that modified roots, like their word for snow, to produce semantic nuances that made it appear like they had many words for snow. Simultaneously, this is why we Filipinos, as inhabitants of an agricultural tropical archipelago to the left of the Wallace Line, have *bangka* 'boat' or *kalabaw* 'carabao' or words for the different states of rice, but not indigenous words for kangaroo, or laptop, or glacier, or snow (until we borrowed *nieve* from Spanish, or *snow* itself).

This does not mean that languages are deficient compared to others because they lack words that refer to certain things, nor does it mean that some cultures are superior, and vice versa. It simply means that our languages adapt to our needs and surroundings; it is constantly attuned to maintain its function of allowing us to talk about what we can talk about. And in this day and age of globalization, the internet, and social media, the question becomes more "what can't we talk about?"

Throughout human history, there have been millions of reasons and causes for cross-cultural-linguistic contact: coincidence, trade, warfare, colonialism, capitalism, and now globalism. In Philippine history for example, trade with Chinese merchants gave us many names for food, kinship, and the like. Spanish occupation profoundly influenced our languages and infused many more concepts and words than we probably realize. And as aforementioned, much of what we use to call new technologies and governmental and bureaucratic processes came under American imperialism and its continuing auspices. These concepts and words were initially absent in the indigenous languages simply because they were absent in the indigenous experience and worldview. And while languages are flexible and powerful enough to describe and refer to these "alien" things using their own lexemes, it is simply way more efficient and functional to just borrow the already existing and probably shorter terms for them.

Moreover, through mass media and the internet, we now have access to swathes of information like never before. We can now expose and even immerse ourselves in different cultures, foreign objects, and other typically inaccessible and unfamiliar concepts. Inter-continental-cultural-linguistic roads can now be crossed without having to be physically built.

At least on the lexical and vocabulary level, we can see how one would be hard-pressed to argue for an "essence" or for the "purity" of any single language, especially in our times. Language contact and borrowing are the norm. At the very least, can we say that general awareness of the co/existence of cultures and languages different from ours is at an all-time high? To borrow the metaphor of historical linguistics' wave model, languages and their variants are, now more than ever, like singular waves criss-crossing and submerging-then-consuming in a vast ocean. And with English emerging as a tidal wave of a global lingua franca, I wonder whether or not a language can "have it all" one day.

This brings into question the popularity of (or widespread misbelief in) the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or linguistic relativity. Simply put: that the language we speak affects the way we perceive, think of, and view the world. Why is this concept so intriguing for the regular person and academics alike? I believe there are several factors. Not only is the concept hard to fully grasp and explain comprehensively; not only has it been largely "folklorized"; not only is it fun to ponder its possibilities; not only is it

fascinating to appreciate difference; not only is it useful to mark this "difference"; it is also relatively easier to leave all the disagreements and misunderstandings of the world to our perceived inherent differences. Yet numerous studies have already debunked the theory from its strong to strongest terms and instead call for a rethinking of the effect of language on cognitive activity and behavior (Gleitman & Papafragou, 2012; Slobin, 1996). Throughout multitudes of various experiments under very controlled conditions, the way our language affects our thought and thinking and behavior was found to be minute, or mere milliseconds worth of difference. The reality is that the language we speak would likely hardly really make a difference in how we think about and see the world.

So no matter how much we want the circular language of the time-traveling aliens in *Arrival* (2016) to be real, we are left with much more uncomfortable truths than "time travel isn't real." For all our preoccupations and speculations with matters of cultural emphasis, along with our exposure to the ways of life of the rest of the world and our awareness of others' sufferings and struggles, maybe we subconsciously subscribe to linguistic relativity because we want to be different from each other. We want to be not like them. But the truth, the salient likelihood, is that we have much more in common with one another than we have differences. While we continue to carry the heavy history of human contact, linguistic relativity offers an alternative to that truth, one which is simply much less unsettling to the conscience.

References

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