

Application and Early History of Linguistic Relativity from Boas to Whorf

Ștefan Ghiran, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași

Abstract:

Linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, has seen much debate in the academic circles throughout history as to its exact formulation, its purpose or its validity. The idea that one's mother tongue conditions one's worldview and its wider implication, namely that it may also shape one's culture, intrigued at best and enraged at worst scholarly minds. This paper aims to look back in history to those responsible for the genesis of such an idea, specifically Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, identify a framework around the climate which allowed for it to flourish, draw on their works connected to it and attempt to find an application valid both then and now.

Key-words: primitive, diversity, cultural studies, linguistics, linguistic relativism

American linguists were by no means the first ones to deal with the philosophy of language and the connection between language and thought. However, they were the first to propose theories so alien to the European model, oftentimes challenging it, that they forced scholars everywhere to reconsider the views on language and linguistics as a domain. One such example is the birth of transformative-generative grammar, which profoundly changed both the approach to language studies as well as the view thereon by shifting the focus from structure and form to the deeper layers of language. Linguistics became fertile ground for exploring ideas intuitively, not merely in a mathematical fashion (R. Lakoff 15), "where the linguist makes use of his native-speaker intuition and makes up the kind of examples that he needs for exemplification of a particular theorem" (Koerner 106). This view was only possible however, due to a much earlier and still very much debated theory. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, also known as the theory of linguistic relativity, postulates, in short, that the worldviews of different cultures are strictly dependent on and influenced by the languages they speak.

This idea brought much debate among academic circles immersed in the study of language, causing a rift that essentially split them into three main categories. The first is formed of those who dismiss its merits completely and attempt to debunk it; the second are those who embrace it and look for variations and applications into their many domains; and finally the third, a most reserved category, agree that there is a connection between language and culture and that they inform one another, but do not feel the need to declare allegiance to either of the previous groups. One of the main reasons for such polarized opinions is the lack of consensus on what the theory actually is. Because of the wording of the main body of texts the hypothesis is based on, the interpretations vary so widely that both Koerner and Joseph, two major scholars with an impressive body of work in American Linguistics, felt compelled to quote one of their peers, Max Black: “an enterprising Ph.D. candidate would have no trouble in producing at least 108 versions of Whorfianism” (qtd in Joseph 72, Koerner 41).

Indeed, there seems to be a heated debate as to what this hypothesis means and perhaps more importantly, what its legacy ought to be. While opinions regarding the validity of the hypothesis prove to be highly divergent, its origins are somewhat clearer. The first mention that needs to be made here is what any scholar at least remotely interested in the subject readily agrees upon, and that is that neither Sapir nor Whorf named it as such and that neither of them claimed it as their own. Further, neither gave formulations of the hypothesis as it is known today. Whorf himself “saw his work as deriving from Sapir and Boas” and the “record of continuity is in fact much longer. Going back, of course, to Wilhelm von Humboldt” (Hymes qtd in Koerner 54). While “there is no indication that Whorf ever referred to Humboldt in his writings, published and unpublished” (Koerner 53), there is indeed a clear thread of ideas, Whorf’s among them, in the realm of interaction between language and thought. John E. Joseph makes significant contributions to this particular thread, (en)listing a small army of other possible sources that may have inspired Whorf. Among them, solely naming a few of the most prominent, William Dwight Whitney, Bertrand Russell, William Dexter Willson, and Charles Kay Ogden.

Even if these scholars did not always agree in their formulations, the close connection between language and thought is evident in their work. Approaching the notion of relativity, according to E.F.K. Koerner, there were also “suggestions that Whorf took his term from Einstein” (50). Beyond

questioning the origins of these ideas, Koerner and Joseph's impressive research and subsequent bodies of work do one more major service to the academic world. They provide a historical frame for those times, as well as offer irrefutable proof that, particularly since the beginning of the 20th century, there was a climate of interest in which such questions could flourish. In its turn, this climate could have its roots traced in the much earlier philosophies of the 18th and 19th centuries, which further means that these scholars were not a splinter cell among the rest but that they were part of a mindset not at all isolated on their own continent. Without desiring to downgrade the individual merits of these undoubtedly great scholars by any degree, one could resort to a quote used by Suzette Haden Elgin when discussing a variation of Whorf's hypothesis: "It is well known that all sorts of hitherto unrecognized facts about the grammar of English came to light with the advent of transformational grammar. Looking back on the period, one can say with confidence that the discovery of these facts in no way depended on the discoverer's theoretical orientation; they could have been arrived at by ANY perceptive speaker of English. But they were not, until a particular theoretical framework was supplied, which provided the background that threw details into sharp relief." (G. Lakoff qtd. in Elgin, "Review" 942)

Indeed, this seems to be generally applicable in terms of language studies and in the realm of ideas. Another element worth mentioning is that these early 19th-century thinkers concerning themselves with language and thought had, in their vast majority, come in contact with indigenous peoples and had dedicated their efforts to studying their languages, predominantly in the Americas and Oceania. Such a contact determined some to follow a line of inquiry considered to come in contrast with that of the students of Indo-European languages across the Atlantic, principally due to the approach and conclusions reached. A good example of this was the very hypothesis currently under scrutiny, quite controversial at the time of its inception, but which does in fact come in completion of the old studies. For all their diligence and tremendous effort, the work of European scholars was characterized by its predilection to viewing the world through their own perspective and compare these new cultures and languages to their own. The incontrovertible proof of this was the very choice they made when naming these cultures "new" and "primitive". Here is where the studies of Boas, Sapir, and Whorf do indeed diverge from the norm, in that they do not merely attempt to understand and defend these cultures but rather

make a case of changing the view of the “old world” upon this “new” one. This divergence will be dealt with in the last part of the paper; for now suffice it to observe the influence indigenous languages had on the thought and philosophy of these scholars. The reason for this has perhaps to do with a form of linguistic relativity theory *avant la lettre* on the one hand, as one may speculate that the contact with and exposure to a new culture and language does influence and even change the perception of the student of said language if they come from an entirely different culture. Yet on the other hand, it is much more sensible to notice that it was far more scientific and connected to the method applied.

The Proto-Indo-European scholars, upon creating and developing their study of ancient languages, were able to rely on a vast volume of written records, histories, etc. Thus, their systematic method already had a certain tradition and history behind it from ages past. American anthropologists and linguists found themselves faced with a complete lack of any such sources and no written material whatsoever, aside from what little missionaries were able to provide, which was not necessarily up to the academic standard of the time. Attempts had been made to apply European systems to the Indigenous languages. However, it soon became abundantly clear that this would not be viable and that no true objective understanding of the specificities of the Indigenous circumstances could be attained through European and Eurocentric systems. According to Sapir, it became clear “that phonetic law and analogical levelling are the only satisfactory key to the unravelling of the development of dialects and languages from a common base” (Sapir 67). Thus, rather than approaching the Native communities as though they were aliens out of the fold, Boas, Sapir, and Whorf quickly realized that in fact they themselves were the aliens, and instead of trying to force these rapidly disappearing languages into the European mold, they endeavored instead to try and preserve them, understand their cultural contexts, and furthermore, create an altogether new method (Joseph 16). This new method, “known as ‘distributional’ because it classifies elements according to the environments in which they appear” (Joseph 55) led inevitably to new conclusions, outside of the Eurocentric scope. Cultures everywhere, micro and macro, construct themselves as a struggle between a dominant force and the rest. This is especially true in the case of colonialism as present and evident in the Americas. By refusing to engage with this dominant in any way, as they neither went against it nor followed

it religiously, the American linguists were able to access these new perceptions provided by the understanding of the cultures studied. They were informed by an active attempt at interdisciplinarity, as Edward Sapir clarifies in his *Linguistics as a Science*, Sapir making connections between the field of linguistics and other fields such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and even literary studies: “It is the main purpose of this paper [...] to point out some of the connections between linguistics and other scientific disciplines, and above all to raise the question in what sense linguistics can be called a ‘science’ [...] Unless he is somewhat unimaginative [the modern linguist] cannot but share in some or all of the mutual interests that tie up linguistics with anthropology and culture history, with sociology, with psychology, with philosophy, and, more remotely, with physics and physiology.” (67- 68)

This multi-angle approach allowed them to create the method they needed for the analysis of the raw data collected from the field through direct interaction with cultures otherwise seen as primitive up until that point in history. In what follows, we will exemplify the attempt at objectivity by looking at relevant parts of the works of the pioneers of this distributional approach to the study of languages and cultures.

Franz Boas

Franz Boas was born, raised, and educated in Germany. He moved to the United States as an adult and reshaped his career path from physics and geography to anthropology and linguistics, leaving behind one of the most significant legacies the turn of the 20th century gave American Cultural Studies (Stocking 1). Not a linguist by trait but an anthropologist, he did insist upon the importance of the languages within the cultures they belong to and, furthermore, the relevance of studying the languages of Indigenous peoples in order to be able to truly understand their context. One of the many things that make him stand out among the scholars contemporary with him is his insistence on making a strong point for race as indeed a social construct, thus going against the already established elitist, and at the same time incomplete, understanding of some of Humboldt’s concepts. Humboldt’s own studies of language tended to hierarchize languages based on their construction but even more than that, based on his own personal linguistic preference and affinity as to the perfect structure of a language (Humboldt xxix). However, in his

conception, this ideal language had been Sanskrit; today's languages, be they Sanskritic or Indo-European, all European major languages included, being mere incomplete echoes of it, watered down by the passing of time (Joseph 9). Yet the understanding came down as "inferior nations have inferior languages and their inferiority is prior to their languages" (Humboldt xxxii). Undoubtedly it was received as such by his European readership, who, as much as he himself was, were conditioned by their times, marked by a rise in nationalism worldwide, particularly in the "Old World", to believe in a decidedly European superiority. It needs mentioning, however, that it has been proven that these allegations of a beginning of racism in Humboldt had been "lifted out of a context which in fact establishes the intellectual superiority of the very people he is supposedly defaming" (Joseph 8). Regardless of his intentions, the climate was thus that his work strengthened Eurocentrism, and this is precisely where Boas' work becomes extremely invaluable, not just for the American context but globally, even to date. His interest in the study of American languages does not overtly condemn racism. Nevertheless, the unbiased approach to his study and the proof of a large variety of seemingly distinct combinations between physical aspect, mental capacity, language, and cultures render it impossible to assert that a group may be superior to another worldwide. The comparative study of these rich languages in relation to one another is an attempt to build a proper "classification", which is but the first step in the understanding of culture and of humanity as a whole: "Therefore, classification is only a means to an end. Our aim is to unravel the growth of human language, and, if possible, to discover its underlying psychological and physiological causes" (Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* 213).

Boas systematically analyzes the issues brought on by the classification of humankind, showing without a shadow of a doubt that the most relevant point is the reference from which this classification is done: "We recognize thus that every classification of mankind must be more or less artificial, according to the point of view selected, and here, even more than in the domain of biology, we find that classification can only be a substitute for the genesis and history of the now existing types. [...] Thus, we recognize that the essential object in comparing different types of man must be the reconstruction of the history of the development of their types, their languages, and their cultures." (Boas, *Introduction* 14) Introducing this point of reference, he effectively relativizes the absolutist belief that one point of view is superior to another based on certain

facts and makes it clear that said point of view is subjective to the category it belongs to. As he proves in the Introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, Indigenous languages do in actuality have a corresponding history, irrespective of it not being written down, as was the case in European cultures. These languages are extremely varied, differing from one another to great extent, and yet they do seem to belong to the same linguistic families, related to one another in spite of apparent phonetic, lexical, and morphological differences. Such variety cannot happen by accident (Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* 204) and certainly does not happen in an “inferior” society. Furthermore, the implication of a language belonging to a society deemed less sophisticated or unable to express abstract ideas, in the way the European understanding of it goes, is not by any means an indication that the individuals of this society are less intelligent: “the fact that generalized forms of expression are not used does not prove inability to form them, but it merely proves that the mode of life of the people is such that they are not required; that they would, however, develop just as soon as needed” (Boas, *Introduction* 65-66).

The second aspect, which is strictly connected to the quote above as well as linguistic relativity, is the relationship between language and thought. In these terms he is rather reserved and does not offer any philosophical postulation as to the influence of one upon the other alone, but rather returns to one of his points of interest, which he did study rather intensively — culture : “Thus it would seem that the obstacles to generalized thought inherent in the form of a language are of minor importance only, and that presumably the language alone would not prevent a people from advancing to more generalized forms of thinking if the general state of their culture should require expression of such thought; that under these conditions the language would be moulded rather by the cultural state.” (Boas, *Introduction* 67)

Whether individual thought is shaped by or rather shapes the language is not necessarily the core of his proposed view. What is clear is that not knowing a language does not prohibit the acquisition of either alien concepts or new languages, for that matter. The individual is then subject to and perhaps mildly conditioned by their culture, yet not entirely constrained, as, should the need arise, they may indeed create or adapt the language for their needs. As such, the work of Franz Boas focused not on judging the position of the Indigenous peoples and languages within a hierarchical ranking system of humans and their cultures but instead

eliminated such a hierarchy completely and saw each group as comparable to itself and the needs it had. At the same time, in addition to this, he believes that language, thought, and culture are indeed inevitably related to one another on a need-to-have basis.

Edward Sapir

Edward Sapir, an American linguist and a student of Boas, went deeper into the study of various Indigenous languages. In keeping with the tradition and method proposed by Boas, Sapir's view on languages is an arguably objective one, based on intense and careful study, decidedly doing away with any preconception or prejudice connected to the "savagery" or "primitivism" of the people speaking the language. To begin the discussion on objectivity in this study and lack of European-imposed norms, one need not look any further than his paper.

Language:

"Language is felt to be a perfect symbolic system, in a perfectly homogenous medium, for the handling of all references and meanings that a given culture is capable of [...] the content of every culture is expressible in its language and there are no linguistic materials whether as to content or form which are not felt to symbolize actual meanings whatever may be the attitude of those belonging to other cultures." (Sapir, *Language* 6)

Taking what Boas mentioned regarding the potential of a language, which has nothing to do with any assumption about the mental capacity of its speakers, to further add new content, Sapir now makes it clear that a language is its own entity, irrespective of the perception of those not belonging to that language, thus strengthening the insistence on "differences between 'high' and 'low' cultures or saturated and emergent cultures" as indeed "exaggerated" (Sapir, *Language* 19) and thus not allowing it any potential space in academic studies. He even goes a step further and alludes to the issue of a less than objective study in saying: "It used to be fashionable to contrast in a favorable sense the 'chemical' qualities of such inflective languages as Latin and Greek with the soberly mechanical quality of such languages as Turkish. But these evaluations may now be dismissed as antiquated and subjective. They were obviously due to the fact that scholars who

wrote in English, French, and German were not above rationalizing the linguistic structures with which they were most familiar into a position of ideal advantage.” (Sapir, *Language* 24)

Unfortunately, even during Sapir’s time there were such scholars who considered languages belonging to so-called “uncivilized” peoples as inferior, but this is precisely where the value of his work proves incontestable. If one’s method is to be scientific, then such prejudices based on race and one’s own inclinations or biases towards it cannot be permitted a place within research, lest the result thereof be tainted by it. A culture and a people must not and cannot objectively be classified if the purpose of this classification is meant not to reveal knowledge but to build gilded cages and label people as “noble savages”. Very little if any value may be found in such a study, as has been proven time and again by researchers of Sapir’s caliber.

The second aspect approached here has to do with Sapir’s position on the relationship between language and thought, and more specifically with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In this sense, we will quote his paper *The Status of Linguistics as a Science*, published in 1928 (Joseph 72). There are quite a few relevant passages, referenced by scholars who wrote extensively on Sapir, but in order to form a basic idea as to this train of thought, we will refer to the following: “[...] the network of cultural patterns of a civilization is indexed in the language which expresses that civilization. [...] Though language is not ordinarily thought of as of interest to students of social science, it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. [...] [humans] are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. [...] Even comparatively simple acts of perception are very much more at the mercy of the social patterns called words than we might suppose. [...] we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.” (Sapir, *Status* 68)

All these come in a context in which Sapir makes a case, as is apparent from the very title, for linguistics as a science. Evident from the attitude he espouses, other papers such as *The Grammarian and His Language*, alongside other works signed by his peers, at the time these papers were published, linguistics was not seen as one of the leading “hard” sciences outside their circles, barely being considered a science at all, in spite of the systematic and laborious

efforts of its pioneers. In fact, the first *International Journal of American Linguistics* was founded and published in 1917 by Boas, and “just seven years later, the founding of the Linguistic Society of America signalled the fact that a critical mass of linguists now saw themselves as sharing a national identity, even though the distinctiveness of American linguistics was still in the early stages of emerging on the level of theory” (Joseph 15-16).

Without this identity clearly defined then and with the field still in its infancy, it is not unthinkable to suggest that its proponents wrote not only to expose the world to their discoveries but also to simultaneously popularize it. Such a twofold purpose seems to arise from Sapir’s paper quoted above, and the categorical tone in regards to the fate of cultures nearly predestined by language may be accounted for in this manner. Sapir’s desire was to make sure that the segment of readership dedicated to other fields of study understood the key role that language and linguistics carry with them. Indeed, such a major defining factor cannot be easily dismissed from any academic shape that cultural studies may take.

Returning to the primary meaning of the text and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, these lines depict the “strong form” of the principle, that of linguistic determinism, not relativism. Out of context and only at first glance, Sapir’s paper seems to suggest that societies are doomed to an inescapable circle of repetitions because of the languages they speak. Paradoxically, these paragraphs seem to go against the idea forwarded by both Boas and Sapir, as seen above, that a language can reshape and expand should cultural needs arise. On close analysis, however, the two come together to form a complex view of humankind. Undoubtedly, at least until confronted with any new culture, all humans know reality as presented to them and indeed, Sapir does say “we see [...] as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir, *Language* 6) but he never says that this is final. If we add to this his opinion that “new cultural experiences frequently make it necessary to enlarge the resources of a language” (Sapir, *Language* 6) it becomes clear that there is neither paradox, nor determinism, and that Sapir merely visits two aspects that in fact work together in turn to shape a larger variety of human experiences.

Benjamin Lee Whorf

Benjamin Lee Whorf, a student of Sapir, is sometimes seen as a “fire prevention engineer by vocation and a linguist by avocation” (Penn 9), as in a culture of academic purity, his interdisciplinary formation was oftentimes dismissed and used as an argument to discredit his efforts in the field of linguistics. Unfortunately, during his time and even later, there were those who only saw the engineer part and mistook the “avocation” one as a dabble in matters for which Whorf was not trained and thus could not be taken seriously. To the credit of Julia M. Penn’s quote above, she does not fall in this category, but on the contrary investigates his life and work thoroughly, showing that he was in fact a much more complex figure for those who took the trouble to look further into his life, his linguistic “hobby” being far more than a mere whim. One other such author, Penny Lee, states in her *Whorf Theory Complex*: “by the time he died Whorf was well published although he had not been able to write the book [...] he had planned. He made a name for himself in Aztec and Mayan linguistics, publishing in these fields into the last years of his life. He regularly gave talks to professional and lay audiences on linguistic matters” (Lee 12). Adding to this the year he lectured at Yale as a replacement for Sapir during the latter’s sabbatical, the fact that cognitive scientists and linguists still debate his work, and the fact that he did all his research and wrote all his papers while keeping his day job as an engineer all throughout, one may be persuaded to believe that there was more to him than entertaining an idea of leisure time with advanced crossword puzzles. Critics aside, however, his contribution to building upon ideas already explored by Boas and Sapir is undoubtedly rich.

The approach to Indigenous languages proposed by Whorf may be inferred from the following paragraph, which follows after an in-depth analysis of verb aspects in Hopi: “The Hopi language veracrypt to deal with such vibratile phenomena than is our latest scientific terminology. This is simply because their language establishes a general contrast between two types of experiences [...] The Hopi aspect-contrast which we have observed, being obligatory upon their verb forms, practically forces the Hopi to notice and observe vibratory phenomena, and furthermore encourages them to find names for and to classify such phenomena. As a matter of fact the language is extraordinarily rich in terms for vibratory phenomena and for the punctual events to which they are related.” (Whorf 55-56)

What these vibratory phenomena are in modern science is of secondary importance here, and so is whether other linguists have challenged this theory of the presence of multiple verb aspects that forces the Hopi into this niche. What is relevant is that it sums up Whorf's general position on Indigenous languages. After carefully analyzing various aspects of the languages he studied, he firmly believed that they were by no means inferior to the modern language, merely different: "many preliterate ('primitive') communities, far from being subrational, may show the human mind functioning on a higher and more complex plane of rationality than among civilized men" (Whorf 81). Further, and with this we may transition into the relativity principle, this difference offers an entirely distinct worldview, which in turn accounts for a different way of life, easily observable in these peoples with such diverse cultures. The following passage is often quoted in support of this principle, while simultaneously being the closest Whorf came to formulating a hypothesis: "We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (Whorf 214). In an attempt to clarify this position, he writes in another paper: "What I have called the 'linguistic relativity principle', which means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars towards different types of observations and different evaluations of extremely similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." (Whorf 221)

Still, the main issue, as with Sapir's approach to the same matter, remains. The formulation leads more towards determinism than relativity, even if one accepts the relative worldview as opposed to the universal. Thus, the worldview, instead of being unique across humankind, becomes dependent upon one's native language. This determinism leads once more to the apparent paradox found in Sapir and much clearer and more present in Whorf. If one is conditioned from birth into a limited understanding of the surrounding world, then one cannot attain a wider view. Yet, the same as in Sapir, it is clear that this determinism is not absolute but merely the statement of a fact observable by comparing cultures with widely different linguistic systems. This can indeed be overcome, even though not to the point of complete objectivity in one's view of the world, by learning some of these new systems and their functionality, as "the person most nearly

free in such respects would be a linguist most familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems. As yet, no linguist is in any such position" (Whorf 214). Summing up the two lines of inquiry for Whorf, he too attempts to be as untied from the biases imposed by the Anglo culture as possible in order to observe the Indigenous cultures and languages from as objective a standpoint as one can achieve, all the while recognizing the influences and limitations one might encounter due to one's own native environment.

An Application of Linguistic Relativity

Already mentioned several times, one of the prime applications of linguistic relativity is the objective look upon cultures from their own point of reference in an unbiased manner. What inevitably follows is that there are no *primitive* languages. Due to the typically Eurocentric, colonialist mentality, the term carries with it at least one demeaning sense, that of inferiority, as immediately evident when looking at dictionary definitions. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines "primitive" as follows: "**1** belonging to a very simple society with no industry, etc.: *primitive tribes, primitive beliefs* **2** belonging to an early stage in the development of humans or animals: *primitive man*" **3** very simple and old-fashioned, especially when sth is also not convenient and comfortable SYN crude: *the methods of communication during the war were primitive by today's standards. The facilities on the campsite were very primitive.* **4** (of a feeling or a desire) very strong and not based on reason, as if from the early period of human life: *a primitive instinct.*" ("Primitive", *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

Based on these definitions, it is not uncommon to refer to "primitive" as "basic", "unevolved", "archaic", "uncivilized", "less than". The major issue that arises with these possible synonyms is that they make way for a hierarchization of cultures, languages, and peoples, where technological advancement inherently presupposes superiority. As such, not only are peoples of old considered primitive, but the same is valid for those with no technological prowess, as today's civilization understands it. By extrapolation, the languages these peoples use are considered rudimentary precisely because of the lack of terminologies and/or concepts that would accommodate the needs of a technologically advanced society. It is of utmost importance to note here that the notions of *simple*, *early*, and *not based on reason* in the dictionary entry, which in essence are

neutral, invite such interpretations due to the inevitable cultural load and due to what history and contemporaneity impose on them. *Convenient* and *comfortable* standards of living today necessarily imply that acceptable opposite terms be *sophisticated*, *modern*, and *rational*, just as supposedly neutral as the others, and yet just as culturally charged. Benjamin Whorf writes in one of his essays, “sense and meaning does not result from words or morphemes but from patterned relations between words and morphemes” (Whorf 67). Exactly such a relation, or “rapport” as he calls it later on in the same chapter, is the cause of an inequitable and perhaps even limited view of cultures and languages deemed primitive. It may be said then that neither of these words hold any judgment on their own, so then the semantic conundrum lies with the point of reference which in the case of today’s society is itself and its own needs. Thus, this society imposes a meaning with a rather derogatory valency on an otherwise neutral term due to the lens it employs. In doing so, it offers another term, *evolution*, as a cure for primitivism. If primitive means the incipient stages of evolution, then the later stages in which humanity finds itself are the more evolved ones, therefore superior.

Following the logic above, an analogy may be drawn here using the stages of human life as a parallel. In its infancy, the human may be considered primitive, and as an elder, the same human is in the ultimate stages of evolution. The two stages, however happen in the lifespan of the same human being, who cannot be at once primitive and evolved. What happens in this analogy then may be called *maturing*, not evolution. No individual refers to infants as primitive humans. They are simply humans with different needs, expectations, and desires. Returning to the notion of primitive cultures and languages, it does not follow that they are in another stage of maturity, but that they are merely distinct. So, the evolution process is indirectly connected to technological advancements that make life *convenient* and *comfortable* but more importantly, it is also connected to the way in which language evolves, the proof being the change in meaning of the word primitive itself.

As an adjective, the term primitive has its etymological roots in Old French *primitif*, meaning “original” and Latin *primus*, meaning “first” or “the first of its kind” (“Primitive”, *Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* 370). Therefore, there is no relation with regards to civilizations and their development. However, as the dictionary shows, the meaning changed to the point

that it now refers to *primitive tribes*, and the reason behind this change has to do with the change of the point of reference. These cultures and languages are no longer in relation to themselves but to a new one. Because this new one is the conqueror, a certain bias intervenes and the “first” which has no binary connotation whatsoever, now becomes the “less developed” one in a cultural and colonial powerplay. Languages follow the same pattern, the conqueror being much more comfortable with their native language and imposing it over the perhaps odd- sounding one. The reasoning was that since the native language of the colonialist is much easier to learn by the colonialist, then it must be just as easy to teach by the “primitives” and if they cannot learn it, it means they are limited and undeveloped. Evolution in this particular case, that of the meaning of the word *primitive*, is not a superior stage but a metamorphosis of the semantic structure exacted by the society that used the word to cover its own bias.

In order to understand a culture, its complexities and intricacies, and even more, in order to appreciate the full potential of a language, such biases must first be seen and then renounced. Judging today’s societies and cultures by juxtaposing them to earlier ones and finding them superior, or vice versa, imposing today’s needs and expectations on an earlier one and finding it inferior, means denying their needs and imposing on them the conclusion that others would be better equipped to grasp what their needs are. Thus, it is obligatory that each culture be observed in relation to itself and its individuals. Likewise, each language is to be judged in relation to the culture it serves. Keeping in mind two of Edward Sapir’s quotes from *Language* already mentioned (pages 6 and 24), language is indeed a “perfect symbolic system” for the cultures that speak it, encompassing all their needs of linguistic expression.

Should the need for expansion arise in order to accommodate new ideas both abstract and concrete, new technologies, cultural elements, etc., it will, and its speakers will inevitably find a way. The absence of certain linguistic elements simply indicates that the culture speaking the language has no need of them and does not denote inferiority. Having proven then that a culture is only to be viewed through its own standards, and likewise, a language is to be analyzed by the way in which it presents its culture without any outside factors; in other words, a language is relative to the culture using it, we may agree with Sapir that any language is perfect in this respect. This relativisation of worldviews and more, this type of application of linguistic relativism

empowers a world in need of understanding diversity rather than dismissing or deleting the “other”. It is all the more relevant today in an ever-expanding global village filled with clashing interests and cultures, which strives to accommodate as much of its elements as it can. This more than a century-old blueprint may serve as a guideline on how the coexistence of cultures and languages may be pursued to the benefit of all.

Works Cited:

Boas, Franz. *Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages: Pt. 1*. Shorey Book Store, 1971.

Boas, Franz. *Race, Language and Culture*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996.

Boas, Franz, and George Ward. Stocking. *The Shaping of American Anthropology: 1883-1911*. Basic Books, 1974.

Boas, Franz, and George W. Stocking. *A Franz Boas Reader: the Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911*. The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989.

Elgin, Suzette Haden. *Language Imperative: the Power of Language to Enrich Your Life and Expand Your Mind*. Diane Pub Co, 2000.

—. *Language*, vol. 58, no. 4, 1982, pp. 940–43. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/413973>. Accessed 07 Feb. 2022.

Hoad, T. F. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Hornby, Albert Sydney. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Humboldt, Wilhelm von. *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on*

the Mental Development of the Human Species. Edited by Karl Ameriks, Desmond M. Clarke.

Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Hymes, Dell. *Language in Culture and Society: a Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. Harper & Row,

1964.

Joseph, John Earl. *From Whitney to Chomsky: Essays in the History of American Linguistics*. J. Benjamins,

2002.

Koerner, E. F. K. *Toward a History of American Linguistics*. Routledge, 2011.

Lee, Penny. *The Whorf Theory Complex: a Critical Reconstruction*. J. Benjamins Pub., 1996.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Penn, Julia M. *Linguistic Relativity versus Innate Ideas: the Origins of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in German*

Thought. Mouton, 1972.

Sapir, Edward, and David G. Mandelbaum. *Edward Sapir: Culture, Language and Personality*. University of

California Press, 1961.

Sapir, Edward. "The Status of Linguistics as a Science." *Language*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1929, pp. 207–14. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/409588>. Accessed 07 Feb. 2022.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee., et al. *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of* -. M.I.T. Press, 1967.