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LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR DEWART *

by

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When a linguist is given the singular privilege of responding to a paper by a philosopher of religion, he first finds it necessary to make it clear where his competence so to do begins and ends. In the first place, as a linguist he is a scientist, one concerned with analyzing and describing the structure of language and languages and discovering the relationship between language and the other systems of culture. As such, he is not a philosopher, though, of course, he must operate from a philosophical basis. In this connection, the very foundations of linguistics as a discipline are at present undergoing a searching reexamination, and many of you have no doubt heard of the recent rise of the transformational-generative school at the expense of the older, empirically based, structural-descriptive tradition. This latter, which I espouse, insists that language is a learned and shared, uniquely patterned system of symbols through which human beings interact and hence communicate in terms of their common cultural experience and expectancies. The linguist sees language as the sine qua non of culture, the first and most important culture system, that system through which all the others are reflected and transmitted. Consequently, the rituals by which deities are controlled or propitiated, the body of beliefs that constitute the basis of religious thought and practice and, finally, the means by which man aspires to know and relate to the supernatural—all these are dependent primarily upon language. But it is first necessary for us to note how language works on more mundane levels.

Through the remarkable functioning of language, men are able to originate and bestow meanings upon things and events in the real world and to comprehend such meanings when bestowed by others. This unique way of behaving the anthropologist, Leslie White, calls symboling, and he distinguishes his use of the term “symbol” from his use of the term sign. A symbol he defines as “a thing or event, an act or object, upon which meaning has been bestowed by human beings: holy water, a fetish, a ritual, a word,” while “A sign is a thing or event that indicates something else.” He goes on to point out that, “There are two kinds of signs: (1) those whose meanings are inherent in themselves and their contexts (steam issuing from the radiator of an automobile, geese flying south, jaundiced eyeballs), and (2) those whose meanings are not inherent in their physical structures and situations (the green triangle that means food [on the door of a maze run by a rat in a psychologist’s experiment], the yellow quarantine flag).” Both kinds of signs are learned through and by experience; the second type, though, by the conditioned reflex. White stresses that a symbol must have a physical structure as well as a meaning, or else the meaning cannot enter into our experience, but the relationship between the meaning and the physical structure is purely arbitrary. Furthermore, “The meanings of symbols cannot be

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grasped and appreciated (comprehended) with the senses. One cannot distin-

guish holy water from natural water, or discover the meaning of biting one’s

thumb at someone . . . by sensory means . . . Symboling is trafficking in non-
sensory meanings. And, be it repeated, no animal other than man can have, or be

brought to, any comprehension of holy water or fetishes—or sin or Sunday.”

Though Leslie White rightly sees man as the only animal capable of symbol-

ing, he has very little to say about the actual structure of the symbol systems up-

on which man’s symboling behavior depends. But White is an anthropologist and

not a linguist, and it is the linguist’s job to describe and analyze through the
careful observation of real linguistic behavior the intricate, hierarchically ar-

ranged and integrated systems that each language is and that all languages are.
To paraphrase the first verse of the Gospel according to St. John, “In the word
was the beginning,” and the possession of the uniquely structured modality we
call language is the very essence of man’s humanness and, indeed, that which
places him “only a little lower than the angels.” However long it took language
to develop from the closed sign systems used by the primates and by so many
other of the more highly evolved species, once it came into being, man was
human, and not before. Only through language can there be obtained that con-
sciousness of self that sets humanity apart; other animals know, but only man
knows that he knows. All languages are alike and have always been alike—
perhaps for 2,000,000 years—in possessing a unique design feature, termed
duality of patterning by Professor C. F. Hockett of Cornell.

Duality of patterning means that isolable linguistic events or items that are
the same at one level of the hierarchical structure of language may become
different, or have a different significance, at a higher level, and, conversely,
events that are different at one level may lose their essential contrast-making
power at a higher level and be seen as variants of the same higher-level event. Put
in the simplest possible terms, “sames” may become “differents”, and “differ-
ents” may become “sames”. For example, the t- and d-sounds in “tin” and “din”
furnish the basis of a contrast at the level of the sound structure (phonology) of
English; they belong to two different phonemes, or phoneme classes. But the
same t-sound that is heard finally in the two phrases “my left!” and “I left!”
furnishes the basis for a very different grammatical significance in the second
phrase in contrast to the first phrase. Similarly, the three occurrences of the
z-phoneme heard finally in the phrases “I seize”, “John sees”, “seven seas”,
though the same events phonologically, are quite different events grammatically.

It is apparent, then, that human beings must be able to react to a large num-
ber of these kinds of same/different, different/same events at almost the same
moment, and that the learning of so complex a structured system as a language
must require a uniquely structured brain and a type of learning unique to human
beings. Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist and psychiatrist, calls this deuero
learning, and has described it as the ability to learn that what has been seen as
significant at one level may not be at another, or, to put it more simply, the
ability to learn “what to learn and what not to learn” at various levels or in
various situations. Whatever the marvelous process might be through which we
acquire the control of language, all physiologically normal human beings do, and
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this quite largely below the level of awareness. But all languages, though possessing certain key features of structuring in common, are different systems; each language, so to speak, “punctuates” and “categorizes” experience in a different manner, and thereby speakers of different languages are led to see the world in quite different ways. Each language may be seen to have what that seminal linguistic thinker, the late Benjamin Lee Whorf, called a “favored sentence type”; ours is the Actor-Action-Goal or Result type, that with the subject-verb-complement and/or adjunct in that fixed order. When Dr. Dewart makes his penetrating remarks about causality and predication in languages like English and contrasts English in this regard with Indonesian, he is giving an example of what Whorf called “linguistic relativity” and placing himself in the ranks of those who feel the persuasive power of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. One of the tenets of this hypothesis has to do with the relation between language and thought, though basically it is concerned with the relation between language and our perception of the world. Let Whorf put it for you in his own words:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar and differs, from slightly to greatly, as between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds through our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

And now let me quote the great linguist, Edward Sapir:

Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual. . . . but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which . . . actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience . . . [Meanings are] not so much discovered in experience as im-
posed upon it, because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world.

Thus language defines our experience so that we not only receive impressions of the world through the distorting lenses of our linguistic systems, but we also project upon the "real world", through those same distorting lenses, relationships that are not necessarily there, at least not as our language forces us to talk about them. For example, English, like all Indo-European languages, has an obligatory tense system so that through suffixes or "grammatical endings" the preterite or past tense is distinguished from what we generally call the present tense. This obligatory feature of structure leads to two very interesting results, as far as speakers of Indo-European languages are concerned. First, the necessity of saying, "I dropped the book," with the obligatory ending on the verb informing the hearer that the event has taken place in the past even in those cases where speaker and hearer each observed the exact instant the dropping occurred, makes us inordinately aware of the fact that events take place before and after each other in time. Other languages might quite naturally say something like, "in respect to the book, a dropping", in such situations as that described above, since the time of the dropping was of far less concern than the act of dropping itself. Structural features in languages of our type, therefore, lead us to see events occurring on a time-line, which may be thought of as a sort of road or ribbon stretching "onward and upward" to the future and backwards into the past. The present is seen as a point constantly moving along the time-line and always separating the past from the future.

Now we can see the Actor-Action-Result sentence type as a lineal projection superimposed upon the time-line, and as a result bring into awareness how we unconsciously view the world as a series of events caused or put into motion by some actor or agent in the past in such a way that these prior factors bring about, that is, can be seen to cause, a different result, a totally new situation, at some later time. The way we are given to talk about the world literally forces us to find or to try to find the cause in the past for every event perceived in the present. This compulsion is as logical as "two plus two equals four", which is simply an extrapolation of the formula Actor-Action-Result. Of course, I could fill pages with examples to illustrate our conviction that "Every event has its or a cause", but Dr. Dewarl has already made the point skillfully and convincingly.

In connection with our predications containing the copula, I think it is interesting to note the contrast between our predications and those of languages like Chinese, where, rather than the S is P predication, we have what has been called the Topic-Comment predication. I can remember years ago when a Chinese friend of mine remarked on how strange it seemed to him when we said, "The man is dead," when it was obvious to all that the man was stretched out lifeless at the present moment, had been so for at least some time in the past, and would so remain for a considerable period of time in the future. "And yet," he concluded, "you say 'the man is dead'!" When asked how the Chinese would speak of the situation, he replied, "Man, dead"—that is: topic, comment.

Before concluding, I would like to quote Whorf both on our kinds of pre-
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dications and on causality. In his paper, *Languages and Logic*, he speaks of the atomistic fragmentation of the world of experience we achieve through our type of word-stock fitted into our favored sentence type. He writes, "By these more or less distinct terms we ascribe a semi-fictitious isolation of parts of experience. English terms like 'sky, hill, swamp," persuade us to regard some elusive aspect of nature's endless variety as a distinct THING, almost like a table or chair. Thus English and similar tongues lead us to think of the universe as a collection of rather distinct objects and events corresponding to words. Indeed, this is the implicit picture of classical physics and astronomy—that the universe is essentially a collection of detached objects of different sizes." He illustrates a striking contrast from Apache where our sentence 'It is a dripping spring' would be rendered by three pieces of linguistic structure, none of which would stand alone but which together could be translated into English as, "as water or springs, whiteness moves downward." As to causality, he notes that in the American Indian language, Coeur d'Alene, "instead of our simple concept of cause founded on our simple 'makes it (him) do so', the Coeur d'Alene grammar requires its speakers to discriminate (which of course they do automatically) among three causal processes denoted by three causal verb forms: (1) growth or maturation of inherent cause, (2) addition or accretion from without, (3) secondary addition, i.e., of something affected by process 2. Thus to say 'it has been made sweet' they would use form 1 for a plum sweetened by ripening, form 2 for a cup or coffee sweetened by dissolving sugar in it, and form 3 for griddle cakes sweetened by syrup made by dissolving sugar. If given a more sophisticated culture, their thinkers erected these now unconscious discriminations into a theory of triadic causality, fitted to scientific observations, that might thereby produce a valuable intellectual tool for science. WE could imitate artificially such a theory, perhaps, but we could NOT apply it, for WE are not habituated to making such distinctions with effortless ease in daily life."

Thinking about these striking differences in the way in which linguistic patterns operate so much below awareness and yet with such a tremendous influence on our thought and behavior, a few more quotations from Whorf might be in order. For example, "Natural man, whether simpleton or scientist, knows no more of the linguistic forces that bear upon him than the savage knows of gravitational forces." And, "Actually thinking is most mysterious, but by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language." And again, "Modern thinkers have long since pointed out that the so-called mechanistic way of thinking has come to an impasse before the great frontier problems of science. To rid ourselves of this way of thinking is exceedingly difficult when we have no linguistic experience of any other and when even our most advanced logicians and mathematicians do not provide any other—and obviously they cannot without the linguistic experience." And, finally, "What we call 'scientific thought' is a specialization of the western Indo-European type of language, which has developed not only a set of different dialectics but actually a set of different dialects. THESE DIALECTS ARE NOW BECOMING MUTUALLY UNINTELLIGIBLE."

In conclusion, we direct our attention again to the conflict between science
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and religion, as does Dr. Dewart. The linguist, who is primarily a behavioral scientist, sees science and religion as basically different ways of behaving. In more philosophical terms, each of these orientations toward reality may also be seen primarily as quests for knowledge, differently based but not necessarily contradictory. Again it is the language that we speak that labels each complex approach by the single, atomistic terms science and religion, which we then react to as mutually exclusive, polar opposites, as we do in the case of fact and fiction, democracy and communism, work and leisure, good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral, guilty and not guilty, etc., etc. With our typical predications which insist that S is P or is not P, we find it extremely difficult to perceive any middle ground in the world of reality between the areas of our experience we refer to by our dichotomous terms. What has been termed our "identity logic" is based on our favored sentence type with the verb be in the middle slot, and therefore all of the thinking or behaving that is colored by it must be carefully examined for what it is—that is, specific only to languages and cultures of our type. For example, the Chinese would build a "correlative logic" or a "relational logic" and would emphasize the relation of opposites and the interdependence of dichotomies rather than the separation of events into watertight, dichotomous compartments. The interrelationship between yang and yin in Chinese dualistic philosophy and the pictorial symbol representing this is a striking example. So what Dr. Dewart terms, "the inner division within the collective Western personality" may be exacerbated by Western man's linguistic patterns, and these may lie behind what he calls "the real trouble" which he sees as the "very division between faith and reason, between value and fact, between religion and science, between feeling and understanding, between the objective and the subjective . . ." We have it within our power, then, to gain new insight into the very foundations of our belief and value systems, says the linguist, if only we can see that our thought-ways, like those of all other men, are underscored by our patterns of speech. The study of the relationship between language and culture can lead to more than a mere reconciliation between seeming opposites within our own culture and society and in our relations with other nations as well; rather we can hope for as yet undreamed of integration which will bring wholeness out of our present fragmentation.