

THE MALAY LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD-VIEW OF ITS SPEAKERS

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The from beginning I would like to immediately state that I consider language and thought as two different systems. I accept the general position held by Chomsky (1965, 1967, 1968, 1969 and elsewhere) that language and thought or world-view are autonomous systems. This is necessary for the sake of the smoothness of our discussion on the topic of this paper since, as Lambert (1977:15) points out, "it is difficult to dislodge deep-seated belief that culture and language have profound influences on cognitive processes." Although Levy-Bruhl's thesis (1910), for example, that the thinking of "primitive peoples" differs in substance and structure from that of more "civilized" peoples and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1921 and 1941 respectively) of linguistic relativity which stresses the validity and importance of each language as a determinant of its speaker's world-view or thinking have been severely criticized, nevertheless Haugen's prediction (1977) that in one guise or another Whorf's ideas are here to stay seems to be true as evidenced by the recent publication of Tham Seong Chee's *Language and Cognition – An Analysis of the Thought and Culture of the Malays* (1977).

To make what I mean easier to follow let me quote Tham's conclusion (1977: 135) as follows:

Linguistic development and cognitive development are mutually interacting processes. This means that neither the linguistic nor the cognitive capacities of a language are fixed The Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis had been to lay stress on the role of language as *a major determinant* of cognitive style. This proposition has been adopted as the basis of this study (italics is mine).

From the above quotation it is clear that Tham is still desperately trying to convince his readers that he can indeed analyse the thought and culture of the Malays by analyzing the Malay language. But, fortunately, he contradicts himself when he says (1977:135):

However, difference of 'background linguistic systems' cannot be regarded as a reflection of inherent differences in cognitive processes nor it is (as Levy-Bruhl had attempted to claim) a reflection of the existence of a logical hence superior as against a pre-logical hence inferior mentality. *The underlying cognitive processes (reasoning, thinking and classifying) of individuals in different cultures are similar* (italics is mine).

From the above it is clear that while Tham believes that language is a major determinant of cognitive style, he at the same time also believes that the underlying cognitive processes of individuals in different cultures are similar. I think that if

language is a major determinant of cognitive style it is language that determines the underlying cognitive processes, so it is quite impossible for these processes to be similar while languages are different. When Tham says that the underlying cognitive processes of individuals in different cultures are similar, he contradicts himself again when he says that "this has led to the need to develop the language [the Malay language] as an effective symbolic system for cognition and categorization". Thus, for Tham language is a symbolic system for cognition and at the same time the cognitive processes of individuals are basically similar.

There is a danger in relating language to cognitive processes or cognition and in saying that language is a vehicle or major determinant of culture. For example Tham says (1977:18) that "the process of cognition in Malay seen from the point of view of its symbolic use, entails two considerations. First of all, categories found and are used to transmit ideas, intention, and meaning are taken from the rural scene or are the end results of rural observations and experience. Secondly, such categories are transmuted to the symbolic plane when a higher level of meaning is alluded to or intended". The idiomatic sayings of Malay Tham uses to illustrate his point must have been created many thousands of years ago by the old ancestors of the present Malays. Since these old ancestors must have lived in rural areas (because understandably they did not have urban areas at that time), they undoubtedly must have created categories according to this rural observation. If they had urban experiences I am quite positive that they would have created urban categories as well. If this fact reflects any view concerning reality, it is at best one that was held by the presumably primitive rural ancestors of the present Malays (cf. Haugen 1977). The present Malays do not usually use the old idiomatic sayings in everyday conversations except the most popular ones such as 'kambing tua' (old goat), 'pukul rata' (denoting averaging) because they are still useful and relevant in modern times. So how can one analyze the thought and culture of the present speakers of Malay by analyzing the old idiomatic sayings they do not even know let alone use in everyday conversations? Even if they use them they have absolutely nothing to do with their cognition! All we can say about the old idiomatic sayings of Malay is that the old ancestors were really literary geniuses as reflected by the beauty and correctness of the sayings they created, such as the ones Tham mentions (1977: 19): 'buaya darat' (land crocodile) denoting a person who is inclined to cheat others, 'ketam batu' (stone crab) denoting somebody who is very mean, 'kambing tua' (old goat) denoting any aged person who still desires to marry young girls, etc. Tham's analysis may imply that the cognition of the present Malays is rural (and this is exactly what Whorf hypothesis purports) and this kind of implication is dangerous because non-Malay speakers may be reluctant to learn Malay because they do not want their way of thinking to be rural especially when they live in urban areas (cf. Carroll 1963).

To adopt the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as the basis of any study on the analysis of the thought and culture of the Malays as Tham has done is completely illegitimate and erroneous and it is indeed a waste of time to do so. It is highly improbable that we can detect any physical resemblance between language structure

and thought structure. The relation between the two is absolutely abstract (cf. Chomsky 1965, 1967, 1968, 1969 and elsewhere; Macnamara 1977). Macnamara, for example, assumes that thought is comprised of concepts and operations that are also abstract with respect to the form of any sensory input. I have also assumed (1977, 1978, 1979) that these concepts are made up of experiences, ideas, relationships and processes, all of which makes up our knowledge of the world, which is quite distinct from our knowledge of language. Language is not primarily a means used in the process of thinking but only a means of thought to convey its messages (the results of the processes of thinking) from one person to another and by so doing our knowledge of the world will accumulate. Borrowing Vygotsky's term (1962) I have referred to this process of thinking as 'wordless thought' (Simanjuntak 1977, 1978, cf. Vendler 1977) because language is indeed unnecessary in the process of thinking. In other words language is not indispensable in the processes of thoughts, without it thought processes can take place (Descartes in Haldane and Ross 1968:69; Vendler 1977; Macnamara 1977; cf. Chomsky 1966 and elsewhere).¹ In 1977 (Simanjuntak 1977) I used the term "inner language" following Vygotsky's "inner speech" (but not Vygotsky's sense of the term) to refer to this "wordless thought" in order to differentiate between this term and the term "outer language" (the term I use to mean "natural language"). However, in 1978 (Simanjuntak 1978) I thought that the term "innate language" would be the better term for this, because our propensity to think, that is to organize our knowledge of the world is innate, and also in order to avoid confusion with Vygotsky's term. I considered this differentiation between "innate language" (wordless thought) and "outer language" (natural language) as a break-through in linguistics because it enables us to avoid devastating misunderstandings in what we actually mean when we use the word "language".

In order to make myself clear on this point, that is on "wordless thought", let me give some straightforward examples which, I am sure, all of us must have naively noticed or probably experienced. When I was about 11 years old I used to gamble with my playmates using marbles or candlenuts (hardnuts) instead of money. We used to play all kinds of games from card games to dice games . . . and to chess games for marbles or hardnuts which we could sell to other kids when we won. One of these playmates of mine was deaf-mute, he was congenitally deaf and dumb. Even the atomic bomb he could not hear which means he did not have the outer language (the natural language: our mother tongue), but he had the innate language (wordless thought) because it is innate. In other words he could think just like anybody else, he could communicate with himself in the innate language. How can I tell that he could think? Simple! He could count; for example when we tried

¹ Actually this debate is an old tale: Plato says that thinking is talking silently to oneself (In Hamilton and Cairns 1963:895-96) whereas Aristotle says that spoken words are only the symbols of mental experience (In McKeon 1968:40). Both Ryle (1949) and Wittgenstein (1953) reject wordless thoughts.

to give less marbles than we should he found out immediately and he knew how many more he was supposed to get; he could also multiply. He could play any game even the most complicated card games or chess. Most of the times we other kids were outwitted by him. We all admired him immensely, and he was quite aware of his superiority in the games over us, because he used to laugh aloud jubilantly when he outmatched us. (cf. Lenneberg 1964 for other examples with abnormal persons).

Another example is the case of an amnesiac with a complete loss of memory that everyone of us, I think, must have seen in the movie or read in a novel. He does not remember his own name, where he comes from or where he lives, whether he is married or not: he does not remember anything about the past, but his ability to talk is intact. In other words his knowledge of the world is lost but his knowledge of language is preserved. This will tell us that the two kinds of knowledge are subserved by different parts of the brain, and this in turn will tell us that language is an autonomous system. To bolster this up we can consider the aphasic syndromes in which either the ability to understand or to produce language is lost but the knowledge of the world is intact.

The empiricist camp has reverted to the Platonic position in its efforts to survive. The empiricist has related thought to language in that thought is impossible without language, that is the processes of thoughts are carried out in language. By this the empiricist claims that he can say something about thought since language (in this case speech) is observable. To make it more logical and attractive the empiricist adds that language is culturally learned (not acquired!), and since culture is observable so is thought through language. This kind of philosophizing is indeed attractive, especially to Whorf, a student of Sapir, and Sapir was a student of Boas, and Boas was of German origin, despite the efforts made by Thurstone (1923), Chomsky (1959), Piaget (1967 and elsewhere), and Vygotsky (1962) and many others to dethrone the empiricism. Boas is under the influence of von Humboldt who says (1820-1838:60) that "Man lives with his objects chiefly . . . — one may say exclusively — as language presents them to him. By the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it . . . ". Since, according to the followers of von Humboldt, the German language is the most logical language in the world, then the Germans are mentally superior: thus Germany is 'uber alles'.

Actually this Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been directly or indirectly severely criticized, as has been mentioned above, by Lenneberg (1953), Greenberg (1954), Piaget (1955), Langacre (1956), Chomsky (1957), Black (1959), Hall (1959), Fishman (1960), Brown and Lenneberg (1961), Vygotsky (1962), Carroll (1963), Diebold (1965), Hymes (1966), Miller (1968), Herriot (1970), Chafe (1970), Adams (1972), Penn (1972), Labov (1972), Haugen (1977), Vendler (1977), and Macnamara (1977) to mention only a few. So it is indeed true that Whorf's insights "are certain to reappear in one guise or another, as they have over the past two centuries" (Haugen 1977:11). This is what I have noticed in Tham's book, even though he tries hard to be neutral by citing opposing views which, unfortunately, makes his own views contradictory. For another example he (1977:12) also quotes

Levi-Strauss (1966:2) who says that “the use of more or less abstract terms is a function not of greater or lesser intellectual capacity, but of differences in the interests – in their intensity and attention to detail – of particular social groups”. Then to contradict Levi-Strauss and thus himself, Tham says that “It [his book] will attempt to gauge the linguistic and non-linguistic, especially cultural motivations that shape the formulation of such structures and forms [linguistic categories, semantic structures and taxonomy]. It will attempt to relate the main Sapir-Whorfian propositions to the realm of categorization in Malay in order to clarify some of the problems relating to concept formation”. I think if we accept Levi-Strauss’ thesis that the use of abstract terms is a function of differences in the interests of particular social groups we simply cannot apply the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to the realm of categorization in a language in order to understand the structure of cognition of the speakers of that particular language. If language really has something to do with concept formation or cognition or world-view or mental outlook (*Weltanschauung*), how come the Hopi (Whorf’s example for comparison with English) do not have true word for “room” when they have rooms in their houses? (Hall 1959). The fact is that different languages have different ways of expressing the knowledge of the world, such as possession or ownership, pronouns, verbs, colors, kinship, etc. Whorf himself admits that between different languages there is no correspondence in ways of expressing ideas. But this does not necessarily mean that the differences cause differences in the ways different peoples think. However, if peoples do differ in their ways of thinking “it is more likely to have arisen from social and historical factors which have nothing to do with language” (Carroll 1963:19). As an illustration let us compare the kinship term distribution in Malay, English, Toba Batak, and Tagalog.

	Malay	English	Toba Batak	Tagalog
Elder brother	abang	brother	anggang	kapatid
Younger brother	adik*		anggi	
Elder sister	kakak	sister	ito	
Younger sister	adik*			

* *adik* may refer to either younger brother or younger sister.

If we relate language to concept formation or cognition we will be inclined or somewhat forced to conclude that the concept formation of the Malays is better than that of the English, and that of the Tagalog is worse than that of the other three. But, of course this conclusion is utterly false. Are the differences in quality of snow invisible to the English while they are visible to the Eskimo?

Actually Chomsky, Piaget, and Vygotsky have a common adversary, namely empiricism and thus Whorf hypothesis in every shape and form (cf. Inhelder 1977). While Chomsky destroyed the notion of linguistic relativity (1957) and verbal

behaviour (1959) at one stroke respectively, both Piaget and Vygotsky have devoted several years of epistemological argumentation to the defeat of empiricism and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. All the environmental resources do not suffice to account for the child's spontaneous creativity, which is indispensable and intrinsic to the formation of language and thought during the first years of life. Chomsky, Piaget, and also Vygotsky do not confine themselves to analyzing the observable forms of language and thought as Skinner (1957) and Whorf have done, but they have sought to analyze the underlying structures. The only basic difference between them is that Chomsky talks about innate ideas and an abstract language acquisition device independent of the general cognitive domain whereas Piaget considers all cognitive acquisitions, including language, to be the outcome of a gradual process of construction starting with the evolutionary forms of biological embryogenesis and culminating in modern scientific thought (cf. Inhelder 1977). Vygotsky acknowledges a pre-intellectual stage in speech development and a pre-linguistic stage of thought development both of which later cross, "where upon thought becomes verbal and speech rational." (1962:114). However, by "verbal" Vygotsky refers to what he calls "inner speech" which is quite distinct from "outer speech". The structures of the two kinds of speech are different. "Inner speech is speech for oneself; external speech is for others." (1962:124), Vygotsky's inner speech, however, must not be construed in the Platonic sense (see footnote 1), because the words used in inner speech are not the same as the words used in outer speech.

In conclusion, I may restate here that a language does not reflect in any form or determine the world-view or the culture of its speakers. In other words, the learning of a particular language does not mean the inevitable adoption of the culture and way of life of the speakers of that language or the inevitable revision of the culture and the mental outlook of the language learner to accommodate the culture and world-view of the speakers of the target language. As Carroll puts it (1963:19):

The contrasts between languages do not add up to differences in mental outlook or *Weltanschauung* nor is any world-view inextricably bound up with any particular language . . .".

Carroll also has dispelled the unfounded fear that the spread of English as a world language will inevitably spread the American [and of course, the British, the Australian, etc.] culture and way of life. He advises us that "For practical purposes . . . then, we may be well advised to abandon the notion that languages impose world-views on their speakers or that a language tends to reflect a world-view of its own." (1963:11). I would as well like to advise those people in this particular region or elsewhere who are now in the process of learning the Malay language that the Malay language does not in any way or form reflect the world-view or the "*Weltanschauung*" of the Malays or will not in any way or form affect or modify their world-view. Our knowledge of language, according to Chomsky, involves the ability to process speech in terms of form classes and combinatorial rules which are not given in the physical speech signal. Languages are intertranslat-

able. Any message in any language can be expressed in any other language. This means that languages are basically similar in their deep structures and only peripherally in their surface structures that they are a bit different. The use of certain words denoting aspects of certain environmental resources in certain expressions or idiomatic sayings to express certain ideas may only reflect the social and ecological conditions of the creators of the expressions or idiomatic sayings and this has nothing to do with the thought or cognition of the speakers of the language as a whole.

Just for the sake of adding some more clarity to my arguments let me rephrase my words (1977:28; cf. 1978) as follows:

Man has been, ontogenetically and phylogenetically, predetermined to be communicative beings. Thus, genetically, man has been prepared for two types of communication, intrapersonal communication (wordless thought or innate language) and interpersonal communication (outer language or natural language), just like man has been genetically prepared for walking. Wherever you put a child, when he is mature enough for walking he will walk without being taught to do so. Wherever you put a child, in perfect isolation, when he is mature enough, he will communicate with himself in innate language, because he has been genetically equipped and preprogrammed for intrapersonal communication. Also, wherever you put a group of children, in complete isolation on an island without any outer language spoken around them, they will one day when they grow up create a new outer language for themselves, because they have been genetically predetermined to get engaged in interpersonal communication. So, language is a mere but not the only means of interpersonal communication. However, language (the outer language) can also be used for intrapersonal communication especially by children during their egocentric speech (cf. Piage 1926), but this stage immediately disappears at school age when wordless thought takes over again the role of thinking (cf. Vygotsky's inner speech which begins at school age to replace egocentric speech, 1962). Actually, outer language is a very imperfect and incomplete transcoded form of innate language for conveying what one really "says" (meaning: thinks) in innate language from one person to another, that is why we sometimes do not know how to say what we really mean or think. Thus, it is really a waste of time to try to analyze the structure of thought or the world-view and the culture of the Malays by analyzing the 'pantun' (quatrain), the 'peribahasa' (proverb), and other forms of the Malay language. I think, the world-view of the speakers of the Malay language may best be analyzed through the historical and socio-ecological aspects of the Malay culture (thus, not the basic structure of the culture) and this can be better studied ethnographically as has been suggested by Hall and Freedle in the study of culture in general (Hall and Freedle 1975).

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