Linguistic relativity in foreing language teaching: A didactic proposal

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Resumen

El método comunicativo en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras ha propiciado la adecuación de las perspectivas lingüísticas ontogenéticas e históricas a la metodología seguida en el diseño de currículos a todos los niveles, especialmente el universitario. Por ello, el componente cultural, que es inherente a toda lengua, ha adquirido en las pasadas décadas una relevancia antes desconocida. Si bien se han incluido en los planes de estudio asignaturas de cultura y, en algunos casos, como el británico, la obligatoriedad de una estancia mínima de un curso académico en el extranjero, las clases de lenguas extranjeras a todos los niveles continúan, las más de las veces, sin prestar atención a las características culturales intrínsecas a palabras y expresiones. El presente ensayo propone la aplicación del concepto de relatividad lingüística de Whorf y Sapir a la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras para, de ese modo, ofrecer al estudiante una perspectiva cultural.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Relatividad lingüística, realidad cultural, metodología, método comunicativo.

Abstract

The communicative method in foreign language teaching has caused the bias employed in curriculum design —particularly in higher education— to borrow from ontogenetical and linguodevelopmental viewpoints. Therefore,

cultural elements, which are inherent to language, have in the past two decades gained a brand-new importance. While classes of culture and a one-year foreign study —in some instances like British higher education— have been made mandatory, foreign language classes at all levels continue, generally speaking, to neglect the cultural characteristics of words and idioms. The aim of this article is to apply Whorf and Sapir's concept of linguistic relativity to foreign language teaching in order to present the student with a cultural perspective.

KEY WORDS: Linguistic relativity, cultural reality, methodology, comunicative method.

1. Linguistic Relativity Today

Linguists and educationalists alike have recently retaken the polemic regarding linguistic relativity. Although the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is no longer read literally, it has, however, evolved and yielded to a new concept of linguistic relativity. Some have contested Whorf's belief that «users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers, but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world» (Whorf, 1956: 221); e.g. Steven Pinker has made tabula rasa of Whorf's theories and reached the conclusion that they were «radical ideas» (Pinker, 1995: 61).

Pinker casts a doubt upon the veracity and scientific validity of Whorf's explanation of linguistic relativity on the grounds of Whorf's well-known «empty drum» story. Whorf reported on how he noticed the power language exerts on reality when he was working as a fire prevention engineer; his observation in that post led him to claim that language misled workers in their interpretations of the world. One day, for instance, a worker walked by a drum which read «empty». Language, through the signifier «empty», caused the worker to assume that the recipient was empty of gasoline; yet it was, in fact, full of gasoline vapor. The worker threw a cigarette into the empty drum thus triggering off an accident. Pinker denounces those stories which Whorf employed to highlight linguistic relativity, and concludes that «the more you examine Whorf's arguments, the less sense they make». In the particular case of the empty drum: «A drum with nothing but vapor in it looks just like a drum with nothing in it at all. Surely the walking catastrophe was fooled by his eyes, not by the English language» (Pinker, 1995: 60). Nonetheless, the linguistic relativity concept is still interesting to both learners, teachers and theoreticians. Sapir's claim that «Language is a guide to

'social reality'... [that] powerfully conditions of all our thinking about social problems and processes» (Sapir, 1949: 162) has not yet been contested.

Claire Kramsch's contribution to the polemic summarizes the current positions regarding the linguistic relativity principle (Kramsch, 1998: 4-14). Kramsch points out that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was somewhat radical, yet admits that it has in turn shed much light on the understanding of the relations between culture and language. She concludes that «there are cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by seemingly common concepts» (Kramsch, 1998: 13), and that, accordingly, Sapir and Whorf were right in proclaiming that «language, as code, reflects cultural preoccupations and constraints the way people think» (Kramsch, 1998: 14). In their recent study on the issue, John Gumperz and Stephen Levinson adroitly suggested that «every student of language or society should be familiar with the essential idea of linguistic relativity, the idea that culture, through language, effects the way we think, especially perhaps our classification of the experienced world» (Gumperz et al, 1996: 1).

The aim of this brief article is to suggest new ways in which linguistic relativity may help foreign language learning (FLL) —or rather than helping, contribute to diminishing the culture-free language instruction which is causing students to produce a flawed outcome or to misunderstand messages emited by native speakers when they step from theory to practice. This endeavor is not at all aloof, since foreign language teaching (FLT) has for the past two decades focused on the cultural features and particularities of modern languages. Launched by the EU's pragmatic interests, a number of academic programs, e.g. Erasmus, Lingua, Leonardo, etc., have allowed thousands of FL students to experience a foreign culture as a means to gain an optimal proficiency of the foreign language they study. Nevertheless, such efforts have seldom targetted the classroom. With the exception of the native-speaker language assistant, few other cultural features have many teachers introduced in their classes —for whichever reasons. Yet all the institutional efforts might well expand to the classroom in order to turn culture into a predominant trait of FLL in a foreign environment. It is in this sense, I believe, that the concept of linguistic relativity, so debated by sociolinguists, should find its most enthusiastic advocates in educationalists, since in applying linguistic relativity to FLT the teacher will provide the learner with a thorough cultural explanation of words and idioms.

2.   Linguistic Relativity and Foreign Language Teaching

Generally speaking, the advocates of the linguistic relativity thesis claim that: (1) language expresses cultural identity; (2) language embodies cultural

reality; and (3) language symbolizes cultural reality. Indeed the theory, stemming from the realms of sociology, which proves that behavior is dependable on environment rather than on genetic heritage is supportive of linguistic relativity[1]. Whorf's examples, as Pinker has denounced, may be hyperbolic and biased, and his arguments on the grounds of Native American languages may appear decidedly bogus[2]; nonetheless, if behavior is amenable to environment, then the influence of language on behavior leaves no room for doubt.

As Sapir points out, no two cultures are the same, and language predisposes the speakers' choices of interpretation (Sapir, 1949: 162). Linguistic relativity thus turns out to be a teething problem in FLT for if no two societies share the same cultural identity, and cultures condition languages, languages do likewise condition the speakers' perception of the world —Kramsch even declares that «In reality most people partake of various languages or varieties and live by various cultures and subcultures» (Kramsch, 1998: 80).

How can, then, a student of a foreign language understand the target language without being acquainted with its culture? and, how is a foreign speaker's speech accurate when it can convey both denotations and connotations that the native addressee may misunderstand? Decidedly, students must be warned of such connotations. It

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[1] Contrary to the former psychological and genetic theories that had proclaim that behavior is dependable upon person rather than environment, Lewin (Lewin, 1936) was first to proclaim that both person and environment are determing factors for one's demeanor. Lewin's theories were soon applied to pedagogy, particularly by Brunswik (Brunswik, 1957), who pointed out that all phases of the geographic-historic-physical environment participate in all learning process. Subsequently, Walberg (1970) suggested that student's outcome depends entirely on environment. See the many assessments carried out in the 70s (Olson, 1971; Anderson, 1971; Yamamoto et al, 1969). For a recent treatment, see Ardila' (1999b).

[2] Stephen Pinker (Pinker, 1995: 65-66) argues:

Whorf's studies of American languages stregthened his conviction. For example, in Apache, «It is a dripping spring» must be expressed «As water, or springs, whiteness moves downward». «How utterly unlike our way of thinking!», he wrote...

The example of whiteness moving downward is supposed to show that the Apache mind does not cup up events into distinct objects and actions. Whorf presented many such examples from Native American languages. The Apache equivalent of «The boat is grounded on the beach» is 'It is on the beach pointwise as an event of canoe motion.' «He invites people to a fast» becomes 'He, or somebody, goes for eaters of cooked food.'... All this, to be sure, is utterly unlike our way of talking. But do we know that it is utterly unlike our way of thinking?

And concludes (Pinker, 1995: 66):

First Whorf did not actually study any Apaches, it is not clear that he ever met one. His assertions about Apache psychology are based entirely on Apache grammar —making his argument circular...

Second, Whorf rendered the sentences as clumsy, word-for-word translations, designed to make the literal meanings seems as odd as possible.

is connotations that the linguistic relativity concept is particularly concerned with, e.g. when studying colors. The connotations colors convey in English are:

> Black: death; negative; exotic; mysterious; magical; good/bad luck.
> Blue: unhappiness; royalty; pornography; the unexpected.
> Green: envy; immaturity; environmental; approval; permission.
> Red: anger; prohibition; stop; love; socialist; blood; embarrassment; heat
> White: illness; death; purity; weddings; cleanliness. (Haines et al, 1996: 74)

Coming across a black cat is, in England, a sign of good luck, whereas in Spain it would be expected to bring bad luck. Consequently, a superstitious Spaniard who visits a British superstitious person who has black cats would feel extremely uncomfortable where the Briton would feel delighted, i.e. their respective languages will allegedly predispose them to have differing perceptions of the world.

The examples are multifarious. In Spanish culture and language, blue inspires formality and is the most formal color men wear. In England, where blue connotes unhappiness, gray has traditionally been one of the most popular colors for men's suits. In Spain, on the other hand, gray denotes unhappiness and is not worn as much as it is in Britain. These denotations help foreign students learn idioms like «to give black looks», «to be green with envy», or «to see red.» In Spanish, for instance, «to see red» is «ponerse negro» («to turn black»), and whereas many of the above connotations coincide in both languages, others do not, e.g. green —rather than blue—is the Spanish color for pornography, red —rather than green— connotes envy, etc.

It is, hence, indispensable, when teaching idioms like those above, to provide the students with the denotations that help them understand what they are learning rather than just memorizing a list of fixed expressions. Equipping them with list of equivalents obtained through a translation implies reversing to the ancient translation methods and neglecting the communicative approach which is nowadays used by the great bulk of FL teachers and encouraged by the vast majority of educationalists.

3. Using Linguistic Relativity to Enhance Student Performance

Accordingly, FLT theoreticians have endeavored to acknowledge the role of culture in language. Ideally, learning a foreign language should entail being taught the foreign culture concerned, for culture is present in many aspects of language. As

I write these lines I remember accessing *The Guardian* web site recently, on which the link to a section on soccer read «Bigger than Jimmy Hill's Chin.» Obviously, and generally speaking, only Britons, who know Coventry's former player and coach, can catch the actual semantic connotations of the message. Cultural references like this one fill up discourse constantly and are very likely to cause linguistic outsiders (i.e. the speakers of a language who come from outside that language's culture, usually non-native speakers) to miss metaphors, jokes, idioms, etc. The only means to achieve such cultural proficiency is to expose the students to cultural experiences —the most effective means being residence in a country of the target language for as long as possible. The problem is commonly overcome with foreign study programs— in Britain, for instance, language departments have institutional nets ranging from one to over twenty links. However, in some cases, e.g. Spanish or Portuguese universities, only a few selected students have the chance to study abroad. In addition, many of these granted students never succeed in cultural immersion but do prefer to spend their time with other outsiders —thus diminishing the desired effect expected from the experience. Not only do these factors make cultural instruction in FLT a difficult task, non-native teachers may not, in some instances, be fairly acquainted with the foreign culture (Ardila, 1999a: 615-616).

When the FL teacher is a connoisseur of the foreign culture he/she can invert the effect of language relativity for the benefit of teaching: if language conditions the perception of the world, then a first language (L1) implies a perception of the world which differs from the perception obtained when speaking a second language (L2), i.e.

$$L1 \rightarrow world1^3 \qquad and \qquad L2 \rightarrow world2$$

My proposal is that instead of teaching a L2 without paying any heed to cultural references, i.e.

$$L1 \rightarrow L2$$

FL classes would be much more effective and realistic had the following steps been taken:

(1) to analyze the world perception in the L1, and then

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[3] $\rightarrow$ must be read «implies».

(2) to analyze the perception of the world in the L2 in order to
(3) get the terminology in the L2, i.e.

L1 → world1 → world2 → L2

4. Examples

Idioms containing a color may be taught just by providing a list of equivalents. Yet a communicative approach to the issue would place the instructor teaching his/her students the linguodevelopmental history of the term. Teaching Spanish learners of English that blue connotes low social status is but a word-for-word translation, *i.e. blue = obrero* (in sentences like *blue worker = trabajador obrero*). A communicative instructor would rely on the concept of linguistic relativity to explain the reasons why blue has come to stand for the lower class. Following the L1 → world1, the teacher should explain that blue is short form for *blue collar*, a fixed expression forged by the traditional color which the working class used to wear at work traditionally, whereas middle-class workers are associated with white collars (Chambers, 1996: 36). Once the student is aware of world1, the instructor must reach L2 by world2, i.e. he/she must explain the cultural equivalent to «a color that designs social class». World2 would demand that the teacher explains that, in Spanish, there is no color that denotes social class[4]; from that grounds, L2 can be provided.

The vast majority of Spanish instructors of English teach their students the days of the week only by providing a translation of the terminology. This results in most students' failing to remember some days, especially Wednesday, or confusing Tuesday and Thursday. Conversely, my ongoing classroom observation and that of my teacher trainees suggest that when the teacher offers a cultural or ethnosemanticist explanation of these words in the L1, and then explains their cultural equivalent in the L2, the students will be more likely to retain the new words in the L2. (Conversely, one must also be aware of the extra time which is necessary to undergo such a didactic strategy. Perhaps, sometimes, this method might be unfeasible in terms of syllabus timing.) In the case of the days, the Spanish teacher should explain that the days in Spanish derive from the name of a god, and subsequently point out that the days in English are also dedicated to gods; yet the difference lies in the fact that the Spanish language draws from Classic mythology whereas English does from Germanic mythology (with the exceptions of Sunday and Saturday), i.e.

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[4] Of course, blue denotes aristocratic blood —like it does in English. Red, both in Spanish and English, is now employed to denote political bias rathe than social class, and being red implies holding a particular political view of the world, rather than belonging to a particular social class.

L1	World1	World2	L2
Domingo	Day of Dominus or Lord, i.e. holiday	sun day, which is a holiday in Nordic mythology, or *Sunnandaeg*	Sunday
Lunes	Day of the *Luna* or Moon	Day of the moon *Monandaeg*	Monday
Martes	Day of *Marte*, or Mars, god of war	Day of the god of war, Tui, or *Tiwesdaeg*,	Tuesday
Miércoles	Day of *Mercurio*, or Mercury, the messenger god	Day of the messenger god, Woden, or *Wodensdaeg*	Wednesday
Jueves	Day of *Júpiter*, or Jove, chief of gods	Day of the gods' chief, Thor, or *Thorsdaeg*	Thursday
Viernes	Day of *Venus*, goddess of love	Day of the goddess of love, Frig, or *Frigdaeg*	Friday
Sábado	Sabath, «to rest» in Hebrew	Day of the god of time, Saeter, or *Saeterdaeg*	Saturday

As mentioned above, this didactic strategy will obviously take longer than just handing out a list of words for the students to memorize; however, my on going classroom observation suggests that the students will enjoy the class much better and will become interested in both the L2 and the culture2 —and even in their own culture.

Nonetheless, didactic strategies like the above one are not always infallible. Portuguese teachers of English, for instance, cannot employ this example, since in Portuguese days are named following the medieval brevaria custom, i.e. *Domingo, Segunda Feira, Terça Feira, Quarta Feira, Quinta feira, Sexta Feira* and *Sábado*. Furthermore, and incredible as it may sound, some students' lack of historical references may become a serious obstacle: 1 was shocked when, during one of my classes of Language for Specific Purposes at the University of Estremadura and reading a passage on Viking explorations, I found out that only two of my fifty or sixty students knew that the Vikings were Scandinavian. However, I believe such cultural explorations in the FLT class are indeed worthwhile and can be an effective didactic resource in many instances, e.g. teaching such simple and basic vocabulary as the days or the parts of the day.

Cultural realizations are, however, dramatic to produce and understand a coherent message, and this is true not only when employing a highly sophisticated register, but also in a vernacular environment, e.g. when referring to the parts of the day. Some Spanish instructors of English, for instance, teach their students that morning is *mañana*, afternoon is *tarde*, evening is *noche* and night is *noche*. This set of equivalents is certainly ambiguous, not only because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the parts of the day in both languages but rather for cultural reasons related to linguistic relativity. Both meals and sunlight duration establish the parts of the day in the English and the Spanish cultures. The Spanish *mañana* lasts from the time one wakes up until lunchtime, i.e. 2 or 3 p.m. The *tarde* begins after lunch and expands to sunset or dinner: dinner is usually had anytime from 8 through 10 p.m., and the sun sets, with clear skies, between 6 p.m. in the winter and 10 p.m. in the summer (or 5:30 and 10:30 depending on the regions). Most Spaniards still say *buenas tardes* at 9 p.m. if they have not had dinner —these are, however, old-fashioned conventions. The English morning, on the other hand, lasts until noon, which is lunchtime. The afternoon finishes at five, which is dinner time. The evening finishes at bedtime. Besides, sunset times in Britain vary, in clear days, from 4 p.m. in the winter to 8 p.m. in the summer (in northern English counties it can be dark by 3:30 in the winter, and much earlier in Scotland, and even earlier if it is cloudy, which it usually is). Generally speaking, culture affects language, and language conditions time and consequently regulates the speakers' perception of time depending on the particular language they speak.

5. Conclusions

Not only are the parts of the day illustrative of linguistic relativity, moreover they show the relevance of culturally-oriented teaching. The Spanish students who learn a set of equivalents like the ones pointed out above may fail to use the English words accurately —and vice versa. In my observation of Spanish students I have noticed that those who learned the parts of the day through a translation— i.e. most, if not all of them —tend to use night when they should use *evening*[5]. This is because instead of *speaking English* they *translate from Spanish into English*. Never do they encounter any difficulties when they need to translate morning or afternoon, because these words have only one equivalent each —*mañana* and *tarde* respectively. Conversely,

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[5] Bernard Spolsky (Spolsky, 1998: 48) points out, which he does as a means to explanation for the election of night rather than evening, that «co-ordinate bilinguals were assumed to have two meaning systems each with its own set of words, while compound had a single system with two sets of words».

when they have to think of the English word for *noche, night* (the cognate word) comes to their minds before *evening* does.

The misunderstandings that may arise from such inaccurate use of terms are certainly inconvenient, simply because the linguistic relativity concept makes speakers of English understand the parts of the day in a different way than Spaniards do. In my didactic proposal of L1 $\rightarrow$ world1 $\rightarrow$ world2 $\rightarrow$ L2, the teacher should first present the linguistic criteria which regulate the division of the day into its parts in Spanish, then offer an explanation of the division in English and finally give an English word for each of the parts of the day in British society.

Non-native speakers should never organize their speech on the basis of a translation from their mother tongue to the foreign language. If monolingual speakers translate ideas into terms, i.e. turn the signified into the signifier, FLT teachers should endeavor to make their students pass straightforward from a signified onto the signifier in the foreign language, i.e. instead of

signified $\rightarrow$ signifier1 $\rightarrow$ signifier2,

which is the formula many non-native speakers follow to speak the target language concerned,

signified $\rightarrow$ signifier2.

If signifier1 is avoided, linguistic interference will be reduced—or eliminated. This, however, is only feasible if the foreign language is learned according to its cultural and social components, and if the non-native speaker is aware of the denotations and connotations that linguistic relativity confers upon terms.

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