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EDWARD SAPIR'S VIEW ABOUT INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY LANGUAGE

Introduction

The search for common attributes of all languages is connected with the search for characteristics which differentiate languages. If some attributes cannot be found in every language, what is cause of this situation? Is it linked up with the origin of language or with users of the language?

People inquire about such matters because the multiplicity of natural languages generates incomprehension and handicaps human communication. The minimum number of languages in the world has been set at 4,000 and the maximum at 8,000. In spite of this people can communicate over communication's barriers which are generated by the multiplicity of mother-languages. But that diversity worries and disturbs. A Danish linguist Otto Jespersen wrote: „An American may travel from Boston to San Francisco without hearing more than one language. But if he were to traverse the same distance on this side of the Atlantic, he would have a totally different story to tell (...) he would then hear perhaps Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, German, Czecho-Slovakian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Greek, and then in Egypt Arabic and a little English (...) He would not have heard of the languages spoken in Europe. *The curse of Babel is still with us*”¹. It means that we have to use more than one language to

¹ O. Jespersen: *An International Language*, Allen & Unwin, London 1928; <<http://www.geocities.com/IAthens/Forum/5037/AlLneed.html>>.

communicate with another man. So some universal language – an international auxiliary language could make whole social communication easy.

This article describes Edward Sapir's views about language, language's connections with nations and, not enough known, views about functions of an international auxiliary language (IAL). Sapir (an American anthropologist-linguist) is known as a coauthor of linguistic relativity hypothesis (more commonly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) but he also wrote about a universal language. The author of this article aims that Sapir's texts describe the idea of IAL which is vital especially today in the time of globalization and international organizations.

There is no doubt due to the enormous significance and conciseness of Sapir's works. It is a difficult task to review all his texts but we can base on his "fundamental" articles which are representative for his work.

This paper poses a thesis that in Edward Sapir's views there are many important, relevant thoughts and opinions which should be taken into consideration in every discussion about an international, universal language.

Linguistic relativity hypothesis

The conception known as linguistic relativity hypothesis has been presented by Sapir in the book *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. He understands language as community's "organizer of experience". A community speaks and thinks in such a language – the language forms the "human world" and "social reality". If the language is used as a tool – which serves realization of some values (values are established in culture), we have to admit that also the language is a culture's product. Such a conception looks like Wilhelm von Humboldt's view on the differences between languages. However, Humboldt gives reasons for differences between languages within the confines of *Volkgeist's* concept. Sapir considers that differences are created by social and economic situation of the society.

Sapir stresses, except this social influence on language, that "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory and they are produced by the so-called «organs of speech»"². In Sapir's conception language is a form of thoughts, in which thoughts congeal and take concrete (linguistic) shape. Language is the first form of human culture and cultural creatures owe their shape and existence to language.

Sapir shows in the article *Language* that at the time the form of language has been established already then language puts a significance into its users: "it is highly important to realize that once the form of a language is established it can discover meanings for its speakers which are not simply traceable to the given quality of

² E. Sapir, *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*, 1939, Chapter I. The Project Gutenberg EBook <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#preface>>.

experience itself but must be explained to a large extent as the projection of potential meanings into the, raw material of experience”³.

Edward Sapir's colleague and student Benjamin Lee Whorf researched on influence of languages on users of those language. He was really interested in grammatical categories, particularly – the category of time. Whorf has presented a hypothesis claiming that differences in languages are one of the reasons for different treatment of time by different nations. He showed it on an example of the difference between European languages and the Hopi language. In the Hopi language time is “becoming later”, it is a relation between events, some are early and others are later. However, we (European languages' users) perceive time as something objective. We think that time is a package of units which we can count and such units have some length and imagine it as a long line.

Such perception of time is distinctly visible in the European science and philosophy. It is observable even in Newton's physics which is considered by most people as consistent with common sense. Whorf considered that dates, calendars, clocks show the influence of language on the perception of time. He didn't contest that relationship between language and life is two-sided. But he emphasized the interaction and influence of language on thoughts. In the article *Science and Linguistic* he wrote: “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 throughout 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”⁴.

Whorf believed that nobody can describe reality entirely impartially: “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”⁵. This view is more radical than Sapir's constatations. Whorf has intensified his teacher's outlooks because (in his opinion) language has an influence not only on perception of the world but also on human behavior.

Linguistic relativity hypothesis has been criticized by many scientists. Because, as it explains, people speaking the same language (often) have different cultures and patterns of behavior. On the other hand, people settled in the same place (and show cultural similarity) often speak different languages. Objection of vicious circle reports hypothesis: Differences of outlook on life are deduced from differences between structures of individual language systems, which are translated it differences of cultures.

³ E. Sapir, Language, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York), 9 (1933).
<http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Sapir/Sapir_1933_a.html>.

⁴ B.L. Whorf, *Science and Linguistic*, “Technological Review” 1940, vol. 42: pp. 229-231, pp. 247-248, (April 1940) <<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/whorf.scienceandlinguistics.pdf>>.

⁵ *ibidem*.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (in Whorf's version) lead to the statement about untranslatability of languages. It means that there is no chance to construct one, universal language. Such attitude discredits the capability of creating a global, international language – we cannot create ideas' catalogue of all languages and rules of juxtaposing them. So there does not exist a capability to impose one language for the whole mankind.

International auxiliary language

Although consequences of the hypothesis show unequivocally that diffusing of new world language is not possible, it belongs to remember that radical version of hypothesis was formulated by Benjamin Whorf. Sapir did not consider that language has such a big influence on activities and reflection. Moreover, he was the first Research Director of the International Auxiliary Language Association⁶ (IALA). Sapir wrote in the mentioned article *Language*: „The logical necessity of an international language in modern times is in strange contrast to the indifference and even opposition with which most people consider its possibility. The attempts so far made to solve this problem, of which Esperanto has probably had the greatest measure of practical success, have not affected more than a very small proportion of the people whose international interests and needs might have led to a desire for a simple and uniform means of international expression, at least for certain purposes”⁷.

Sapir considered that capability to construct such a language really exists and it was not contradictory with his view of language. He even wrote that: „the supposed artificiality of such a language as Esperanto or of any of the equivalent languages that have been proposed has been absurdly exaggerated, for in sober truth there is practically nothing in these languages that is not taken from the common stock of words and forms which have gradually developed in Europe”⁸.

The American anthropologists thought that artificial language must have the status of a secondary form of speech. He knew that each constructed, planned language has to deal with „the great barrier” – no nation neither culture stands behind such a language. Language is inherent from culture. Sapir considered that logical advantages and theoretical necessity of such language should conquer over symbolic function of language. In the paper *The Function of an International Auxiliary Language* Sapir wrote: „An international auxiliary language should serve as a broad base for every type of international understanding, which means, of course, in the last analysis, for every type of expression of the human spirit which is of more than local interest, which in turn can be restated so as to include any and all human interests”⁹.

⁶ Association was founded to "promote widespread study, discussion and publicity of all questions involved in the establishment of an auxiliary language, together with research and experiment that may hasten such establishment in an intelligent manner and on stable foundations" (International Auxiliary Language Association, Outline of Program, 1924, p. 9).

⁷ E. Sapir, *Language*, op. cit.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ E. Sapir, *The Function of an International Auxiliary Language*, (in:) H. N. Shenton, E. Sapir and O. Jespersen, *International Communication: A Symposium on the Language Problem*, London 1931, pp. 65-94 <<http://www.geocities.com/athens/forum/5037/sapir.html>>.

He wrote that such a language must not be characterized by perfectness of mathematical symbolism but it must have approximated form. Sapir knew that a great problem of such a language's spread is forcing it on people – because it is not their *own* language. And as he wrote: „The modern world is confronted by the difficulty of reconciling internationalism with its persistent and tightening nationalisms. More and more, unsolicited gifts from without are likely to be received with unconscious resentment. Only that can be freely accepted which is in some sense a creation of all”¹⁰.

So an international auxiliary language should be accepted on the basis of free choice. It should be a simple language, regular and as logical and creative as possible. In Sapir's opinion, such a language should put minimal demands for anyone who would like to learn it. He wrote that international language should fulfill maximum amount of function. That more, Sapir considered that such a language could be a standard instrument of translation relatively to all national languages. Therefore, he postulated that (new international) language should be a perfect language-parameter (it is similar to standpoint of Walter Benjamin).

In Sapir's opinion, professed inferiority of an artificial language relatively to a national language results from the fact that artificial language is used not so long. He considered that artificial language has many psychological advantages which natural languages lack: “This is the removal of fear in the public use of a language other than one's native tongue. The use of the wrong gender in French or any minor violence to English idiom is construed as a sin of etiquette, and everyone knows how paralyzing on freedom of expression is the fear of committing the slightest breach of etiquette (...) Expression in a constructed language has no such fears as these to reckon with”¹¹.

He known that it is only ideal which can never be reached. But, as he wrote, “deals are not meant to be reached: they merely indicate the direction of movement”¹².

Therefore, it is not possible to affirm that Sapir-Whorf hypothesis discredits creation of international auxiliary language. Only radical version formulated by Whorf (about impossibility of translation) does not motivate to construct such a language. From this point of view, there is no possibility to create language which could be standard language of translation (Sapir) because adequate translation is impossible.

Constructed languages as confirmation of Linguistic relativity hypothesis

If Whorf's view depreciates attempt of constructing an artificial language, then Sapir's articles on the contrary. Therefore, how to evaluate projects of artificial languages which have been made for Sapir-Whorf hypothesis's confirmation?

Such a project-language is *Toki pona* language (the name *toki pona* itself means "good language" or "simple language"). It is a simplified language constructed by Sonja

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem.

Elen Kisa (Canadian linguist) in 2001 which consists from 14 sounds and 118 words and “the grammar, although different from English, is very regular and easy to learn”¹³. The aim of constructing *Toki pona* was demonstration that speaking in this language has an influence on attitude of the mind of its user. Piotr Goldstein in article *Język toki pona jako narzędzie zapobiegania konfliktom – możliwości i przeszkody w kontekście wydarzeń na Bałkanach* wrote that this language could be used as instrument of solving of world conflict.

Toki pona’s grammar is devoid of tenses, declensions, conjugations. Basic 118 words have to allow expressing basic opinion in social communication. However, the author of the project does not recount that all examples presented by her require contribution of interpretation and cannot be apprehended without earliest explanation.

On a discussion forum about *Toki pona* there appear opinions that users of this language have really changed manner of reflection influenced by the usage *Toki pona*. It would confirm truthfulness of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Such argumentation seems to be unserious and unscientific but it shows that problems of Linguistic relativity and artificial languages can be treated commonly. It has to be demonstrated that even postulated confirmation of hypothesis (through usage of artificial language) concerns only version of Linguistic relativity present by Edward Sapir.

Toki pona language had to effect reflection of its users (in the author’s opinion), however, it did not implicate on their activities. Therefore, if such a project would have to confirm rightness of Sapir’s view, then it is not contradictory to the author of *Language* – Sapir induced to construct international auxiliary language.

In conclusion, it is worth stressing once more the importance of Sapir’s article *The Function of an International Auxiliary Language* relativity to other texts of this author. Edward Sapir claimed that language is the most important tool which can be used to understand human culture. He wrote in aforementioned article: „It is the purpose of this paper to try to clarify the fundamental question of what is to be expected of an international auxiliary language, and whether the explicit and tacit requirements can be better satisfied by a constructed language or by a national language, including some simplified version of it. I believe that much of the difficulty in the international language question lies precisely in lack of clarity as to these fundamental functions”¹⁴.

Sapir considered that “the spirit of logical analysis should in practice blend with the practical pressure for the adoption of some form of international language, but it should not allow itself to be stamped by it”¹⁵. The American anthropologist believed that no solution of the international language problem should be solved by international auxiliary language which is more creative in its possibilities and more logical than any of natural languages.

But what language should be *this* language? Sapir did not give us a satisfactory answer. He mentioned Esperanto and – as a Research Director of the International Auxiliary Language Association – Interlingua. His opinion about such a language is rather a wish than a solution. Searching for an international artificial language has been

¹³ Official Toki pona's site: <<http://tokipona.org>>, 12.05.2008.

¹⁴ E. Sapir, *The Function of an International Auxiliary Language*, op. cit.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

lasting continuously for many years¹⁶. Even nowadays there are attempts to construct a language – a better communication instrument of mankind. Edward Sapir wrote about the problem but his views about this, are still not enough known.

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¹⁶ E. Kulczycki, *Utopia języka doskonałego w europejskim kręgu kulturowym*, "Homo communicativus" 2007, 1(2).