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Bi-/multilingualism and the perceptions of the gender of objects

ABSTRACT. The newest research confirms the 'weak' version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, according to which the language we speak influences to some extent the way we think. At the same time, it has been shown that the conceptual representations of reality which have been shaped by the mother tongue from birth play a significant role while using an L2 (L3 etc.), especially when it is weaker than the L1. The present article describes one such conceptual domain – the (non-linguistic) categorization of objects according to their perceived gender, which is influenced by the grammatical gender of their names.

Keywords: linguistic relativity, conceptual transfer, nominal gender, L2 and L3 learners, bilinguals and multilinguals.

1. INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. [...] The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

(Edward Sapir 1929/1985: 10)

[U]sers of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of 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.

(Benjamin Lee Whorf 1940, reprinted in Carroll 1956: 221)

The linguistic relativity hypothesis – the statement that the language we speak influences our cognition, thus shaping our perceptions of reality – has been with us for decades (and indeed for centuries, if we take into account the thoughts expressed by such thinkers as Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt), re-appearing in different versions and evoking heated debates (cf. Gumperz and Levinson 1996a: 3–7; Penn 1972; for a critical overview of the early studies see Lucy 1996). Nowadays, the so-called ‘weak’ version of the hypothesis is cautiously accepted and some recent research studies have shown the existence of language-specific ways of perceiving, understanding and categorizing reality, both mentally and emotionally (although, on the other hand, there *are* linguistic and conceptual universals).

The results of some early colour studies, which show that the linguistic categories people have in store affect the recognition and classification of colours (Gleason 1961), are supported by newer research (Roberson 2005; Winawer *et al.* 2007)¹. There are also experiments which show cognitive differences related to cross-linguistic differences in expressing spatial relations and time, in describing modes of motion, shapes and substances, or in counting (for an overview, see Boroditsky 2003; Gumperz / Levinson 1996; Roberson 2005). Another finding, which is relevant to the present study, is that people tend to perceive reality depending on the grammatical gender of nouns in their native (or most fluent) language. Thus, more and more researchers agree that ‘[l]anguages bias their speakers towards focusing on events in certain ways, requiring them to think before speaking’ (Kellerman 2001: 188).

Not only work in psycholinguistics and anthropological linguistics, but also neurolinguistic research shows that the conceptual system is language-dependent. As described by Michel Paradis (2004: 195–203), the nonlinguistic cognitive store, which is distinct from but connected to the linguistic neurofunctional entity (consisting of one language system in a monolingual mind and two or more language subsystems in a bi-/multilingual mind), contains a set of concepts which is originally built through experience, but later shaped, reorganized and extended in accordance with the lexical semantics of the acquired language(s). Thus, in a bilingual mind, ‘[t]he concepts evoked by a word and its translation equivalent will differ to the extent that their lexical semantic organization differs in the two languages’ (*ibid.*: 199). Therefore, nowadays the question is not *whether* linguistic relativ-

¹ The often quoted research by Rosch Heider, whose results have been widely interpreted as supporting the notion of universality of colour categories, has recently been re-interpreted as consistent with linguistic relativity (see Roberson 2005:3–4).

ity is a valid assumption; 'the central problem is to illuminate the degrees of language difference, and the ways in which semantics and cognitive categories and processes interact' (Gumperz / Levinson 1996b: 24).

In spite of the recent revival of interest in linguistic relativity, the number of research studies dealing with the influence of language on thought is still relatively scarce. This is probably because it is not easy to recognize and compare the non-tangible human concepts and measure to what degree cross-linguistic differences are reflected by conceptual differences. Here, bi-/multilingual (and bi-/multicultural) people can provide the researcher with valuable insights – 'only a bilingual person can compare subjective experiences linked with the use of different words, different expressions, different languages' (Wierzbicka 2004: 95). It turns out that plurilingual people undergo a change in their emotions, roles or even personality traits which accompanies a switch to another language (Panayiotou 2004; Pavlenko 2005; Ramírez-Esparza *et al.* 2006; Wierzbicka 2004).

2. CONCEPTUAL TRANSFER

Whereas fluent bilinguals or multilinguals (ambilinguals) communicating in one language activate a language-specific set of non-verbal mental representations of reality (similarly to monolinguals), this is often not the case with L2 (L3 etc.) language learners. Non-native language use by the latter is usually characterized by the activation of conceptual representations which do not quite correspond to their linguistic meanings.

The conceptual system is shaped from birth on by the semantics of the native language. With the acquisition of each new language, the conceptual system is reconstructed and extended. However, this is largely the case with languages which have been acquired² as a result of authentic communication in naturalistic settings and contacts with the non-native cultures. As Kroll and Stewart (1994) show, a language which has been acquired at a lower level of proficiency (typically a foreign language learned at school) may have much fewer links to the conceptual store than the mother tongue. This is because non-native (non-dominant) language meanings are typically acquired via the native (dominant) language translation equivalents and related concepts. We can find support for this statement in several studies which show that the transfer of meaning in L2 (L3 etc.) acquisition takes

² In the present paper, for stylistic purposes, the terms 'learn' and 'acquire', as well as their derivatives, are used interchangeably.

place mainly from a native or dominant language (e.g. Chłopek 2009; De Angelis / Selinker 2001; Dentler 2000; Ringbom 1987). This means that the relationships between L2 (L3 etc.) items and conceptual representations may be predominantly of the subordinate kind (Weinreich 1953) – the production and reception in a non-native language mostly evokes non-verbal mental representations specific to one's L1. This is often unrecognizable on surface, for example when a Polish learner of German and a German native speaker discuss topics such as dogs, family or freedom without any communication problems; however, in spite of the apparent mutual understanding, these speakers may be thinking and feeling differently about these notions. The activation of concepts that are not specific to the language currently in use is called conceptual transfer.

A lot of psycholinguistic research studies have been carried out in the field of cross-linguistic influence, which has been often narrowed down to the transfer from the mother tongue to the second language. The recent interest in third or further language acquisition has also prompted research into interactions between three or more languages in the same mind (e.g. Cenoz / Hufeisen / Jessner 2001; Dentler / Hufeisen / Lindemann 2000). However, research studies show that transfer at the conceptual level is also a common phenomenon, especially in the context of foreign language learning. So far, this kind of transfer has been investigated mainly with L2 learners/users (for an overview, see Jarvis / Pavlenko 2008: 122–148); hardly any research into this issue has been conducted in the context of third or additional language acquisition/use.

3. NOMINAL GENDER AND GENDER PERCEPTIONS

There are a large number of languages which, unlike English, are characterized by nominal categorization. Some languages have two noun categories – masculine and feminine (e.g. French and Italian), common and neuter (e.g. Swedish) or animate and inanimate (e.g. Basque), and some have three – usually masculine, feminine and neuter (e.g. Polish and German). There are also languages with more than three noun classes (the famous but nearly extinct Dyrbal language has four noun classes).

In the languages with nominal gender categories, nouns are sometimes marked for gender by suffixes (e.g. in Polish, words with the *a*-ending, such as *książka* – 'book' and *zebra* – 'zebra', are typically feminine) and articles (e.g. in German, *der/ein Hund* – 'dog' is masculine, *die/eine Katze* – 'cat' is feminine and *das/ein Pferd* – 'horse' is neuter), and often appropriate mor-

phological and lexical adaptations must be made within a sentence (see Table 1.). This means that language users must attend to the grammatical gender of nouns, in order to speak correctly.

Table 1. Examples of nominal-gender-specific morphological and lexical adaptations in Polish (with literal translations into English)

Masculine	Mały zeszyt leżał na stole. On był czerwony. (‘A small notebook lay on the table. He was red.’)
Feminine	Mała książka leżała na stole. Ona była czerwona. (‘A small book lay on the table. She was red.’)
Neuter	Małe pióro leżało na stole. Ono było czerwone. (‘A small pen lay on the table. It was red.’)

In the case of the masculine-feminine-neuter distinction, which is of interest in the present study, grammatical gender is arbitrarily ascribed to nouns denoting objects, events, phenomena, animals and abstract ideas. The gender of nouns denoting humans usually agrees with the natural gender, with nouns referring to young children often being neuter³. Of course, there are exceptions, e.g. the German noun *Mädchen* (‘girl’) is neuter. In his famous essay, Mark Twain describes, in a humorous way, this apparently unconnected with reality – or at least superfluous – characteristic of ‘The Awful German Language’:

Every noun has a gender, and there is no sense or system in the distribution; so the gender of each must be learned separately and by heart. [...] In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl.

(Mark Twain 1880/2007: 232)

Even though the gender of a noun does not affect its semantics, it may be hypothesized that, depending on the grammatical gender of the nouns denoting particular things, monolingual people really perceive some of these things as having male or female features. ‘Since many other grammatical distinctions reflect differences that are observable in the world (the plural inflection, for example), children learning to speak a language with a grammatical gender system have no a priori reason to believe that grammatical gender doesn’t indicate a meaningful distinction between types of objects’ (Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2003: 64) – especially if, learning one lan-

³ But for example the Polish language distinguishes between *dzidziuś* and *dzidzia* – ‘baby boy’ and ‘baby girl’, respectively.

guage only, they have no occasion to compare languages and discover the arbitrariness of nominal gender assignment (*ibid.*: 64–65). It is also possible that they transfer their gender perceptions on languages acquired later in life (this may be strengthened by the commonly used method of memorizing target language meanings via native language equivalents; see e.g. Kroll / Stewart 1994). Moreover, it is highly probable that if another language dominates over the native one, this language becomes the ‘conceptual donor’.

There are some studies which prove that *monolingual native speakers* are influenced in their perceptions of objects and even abstract notions by the grammatical gender of the words which name them (see Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2003: 65–66). For example, in one early study, Russian respondents were asked to personify days of the week; the personifications were consistent with the grammatical gender of the names of the particular days (Jakobson 1966, described in Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2003: 65).

There are also cross-linguistic studies using *bilinguals*. For example, Phillips and Boroditsky (2003) asked a group of Spanish speakers and a group of German speakers, who were proficient in English, to rate the degree of similarity between objects and animals on the one hand, and people (males and females) on the other, which were shown to them in unlabelled pictures. The words for the objects and animals had opposite grammatical genders in Spanish and in German (e.g. the German equivalent of *toaster* is masculine and Spanish – feminine). The experiment was conducted in English, in order to avoid activation of the participants’ native languages. The respondents tended to perceive objects in agreement with the grammatical gender in their L1s: grammatically feminine objects were perceived as more female-like and grammatically masculine objects were seen as more male-like. The experiment was later repeated with a verbal interference task added, in order to avoid the possible bias in the experiment results caused by the subjects subvocally naming the objects. The results obtained were similar.

Boroditsky, Schmidt and Phillips (2002, qtd. in Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2003: 69–70) asked Spanish and German speakers with L2 English to describe different objects using adjectives. The names of the objects had opposite grammatical genders in German and Spanish. Like in the previously described study, the entire experiment was conducted in English. The subjects consistently described objects with grammatically feminine names in their native language using more ‘feminine’ adjectives and objects with grammatically masculine names in their native language using more ‘masculine’ adjectives. Thus, for example, the word *key*, whose equivalent is masculine in German and feminine in Spanish, was described by German speakers as ‘hard, heavy, jagged, metal, serrated, and useful’, and by Spanish speakers as ‘golden, intricate, little, lovely, shiny, and tiny’ (*ibid.*: 70). These results show

that the authors may be quite right in saying that, 'depending on grammatical gender, different (stereotypically masculine or feminine) aspects of objects may become more or less salient in the representations of those objects. For example, if the noun that names a toaster is masculine, then perhaps its metallic and technological properties may become more salient; but if the noun is feminine, then perhaps its warmth, domesticity, and ability to provide nourishment are given more importance' (*ibid.*: 69).

One of Phillips and Boroditsky's (2003) research studies was conducted with *L3 users*, i.e. Spanish-German bilinguals with a high English proficiency. Just as in the (above-mentioned) experiment conducted with Spanish and German speakers competent in English, the subjects were presented with unlabelled pictures of objects and animals (whose names have different grammatical gender in Spanish and German) and humans (males and females) and asked to rate the degree of similarity between them. The obtained results showed a high positive correlation between the Spanish/German 'gender agreement' of the responses and the subjects' relative proficiency in Spanish or German. This means that the language a person is most proficient in is the one which most strongly shapes their mental representations of the world. (Variables such as having been born in a Spanish- or German-speaking country or the length of language use played a lesser role in the participants' responses.)

In my own research study (Chłopek 2007), I tried to recognize the perceptions of the gender of objects by Polish users of L2 German learning English as an L3. The subjects were 114 students from two departments of German Philology in Poland. They had acquired German at a high level of proficiency (ca. B2-C1) and English at a lower level (from ca. A1 to ca. B1⁴). The control group consisted of 55 students from an English Philology Department who had acquired English (their L2) at an advanced level (ca. B1-B2). The students with competences in other languages were excluded from the experiment. The respondents completed a questionnaire in three versions (in Polish, German and English), during three different lectures, with a 1- to 2-week time distance between each completion. They were asked to give their own perceptions of the gender of different things, by marking the nouns listed alphabetically on the questionnaires using the abbreviations for 'male', 'female' and 'no sex' in the language of the questionnaire. The words had been chosen so that they would probably obtain different responses from monolingual speakers of Polish, German and English (e.g. *zegar* – mas-

⁴ According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001).

culine, *Uhr* – feminine, *clock* – neuter). The main finding of the study confirms other research results: people's perceptions of the gender of things are influenced by native (or dominant) language gender categories even when they communicate in another language. However, the respondents also tended to perceive a lot of objects as having neither male nor female features, or perceived them contrary to expectations (e.g. some of the control group's responses showed a German-like bias, even though these students knew no German). This suggests that people's perceptions of the world may be partially independent of any language. What is interesting, the transfer of mental constructs was not prompted by the formal similarity between the words in different languages (e.g. L2 *Tomate* – L3 *tomato*). This indicates that this kind of transfer is induced by lexical semantics, with the exclusion of the formal level. I also concluded that the perceptions of some things may be more influenced by grammatical categories than the perceptions of other things (for example, 35.5% students decided *a ball* was feminine and as many as 77.2% students considered *a star* feminine – both in accordance with the Polish grammatical gender). Finally, it turned out that, compared to the L2 learners' responses, the L3 learners' responses were characterized by a greater variety and unpredictability. This suggests that L3 learners, who usually have a higher level of metalinguistic awareness than L2 acquirers (Jessner 2006), and hence more often realize the arbitrary nature of the relationship between a linguistic sign and its referent, tend to perceive reality in a more objective, language-independent way.

In line with the above-described research results, I often observe, in my work as a teacher of English as a third (or further) language, errors which may be a result of nominal gender transfer. For example, the source of the error below is most probably the masculine gender of the Polish noun *kot* ('cat') together with a related concept. Since the example comes from a grammar (fill-in-the-gaps) test, there was no reference to a particular male cat. Also, because the Polish reflexive pronoun *się* is not marked for gender, loan translation (transfer at the lexical meaning level) was probably not the source of error.

*The cat is washing himself. (Polish: 'Kot się myje.')

Boroditsky, Schmidt and Phillips also wanted to know whether the way people perceive the gender of objects and phenomena is only grammatically conditioned, or if *cultural* differences play some role as well. In order to answer this question, they designed a series of experiments which proved that English native-speakers are able to look for and discover (imaginary) similarities between members of (artificial) nominal categories (Phillips / Boro-

ditisky 2003: 931–932; Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2003: 73–74; Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2002, qtd. in Boroditsky / Schmidt / Phillips 2003: 71–72, 74–75). Of course, it must be kept in mind that speakers of a ‘genderless’ language cannot really begin to perceive objects as having gender as a result of a few learning sessions. Nonetheless, these experiments point to the existence of the human mental capacity to meaningfully classify objects into one or another category, which is probably just what happens in the mind of a speaker of a nominal-gender language. As for the *culture-specific* perception of gender: It is undeniable that nominal gender is an inherent part of language, not culture. But it is equally undeniable that language and culture are intertwined – culture is incorporated into language and language, by influencing the way of thinking of a group of people, affects their culture. The lunar deity was either a *god* or *goddess* and in many modern languages the noun for ‘moon’ is either *masculine* or *feminine*. The Polish personification of *death* is a *female* with a scythe and the Polish noun *śmierć* has feminine gender.

4. POSSIBLE RELIABILITY PROBLEMS

It must be kept in mind that the above-mentioned study results should not be treated as absolute indicators of gender perceptions. The ways that the respondents complete their tasks may be subjectively biased. Some concepts and their verbal representations may be individually marked by personal experiences involving men and women. Moreover, the stress placed by language teachers on the memorization of grammatical gender (for example during German classes) may result in students’ overemphasizing this feature of nouns. Some of the participants in my experiment may have even explicitly thought of grammatical gender while working on the questionnaires. As Boroditsky, Schmidt and Phillips (2003: 67) write, some respondents may acquire a strategy of completing a task of this kind by following the nominal gender divisions. Finally, it is also possible that some of the above-mentioned research results are partly the effect of the covert influence of linguistic categories. Indeed, even if a task is non-verbal, linguistic information processing may still take place. Both psycholinguistic (Hermans *et al.* 1998; Van Hell / Dijkstra 2002) and neurolinguistic (Thierry / Wu 2007; van Heuven *et al.* 2008) research studies show that even in a strictly monolingual context another language which is present in the mind may be subconsciously activated.

5. CONCLUSION

All in all, there is some convincing evidence that language – and in this case: grammatical gender categories – influences to a certain degree people's conceptual representations of the world. Fluent bi-/multilinguals are able to activate appropriate conceptual representations depending on the language in which they name objects (coordinate bi-/multilingualism; Weinreich 1953). In the case of unbalanced bi-/multilinguals (or L2, L3 etc. learners), the concepts specific to one's most proficient language (typically the mother tongue) are often activated even when another language is currently in use (subordinate bi-/multilingualism; Weinreich 1953).

On the other hand, as my study (Chłopek 2007) suggests, at least some (adult) people's mental representations of reality are not influenced by the grammar of their language. It is possible that cognitive development 'frees' people's minds – to some extent, of course – from the framework of language. Since the L3 learners' responses were more varied and unpredictable than the L2 learners' responses, it is also possible that learning a new language, which increases one's metalinguistic awareness, contributes to the development of the ability to perceive reality in an objective, language-independent way. The results of my experiment also indicate that people's perceptions of some things may be more influenced by grammatical categories than their perceptions of other things.

There is no doubt that there is a need for further research into the relationship between language and thought, conducted with language learners/users by means of both verbal and non-verbal tasks. It is interesting what other mental constructs are transferred during second, third, and further language acquisition and how this transfer depends on factors such as, for example, language distance, learners' stage of cognitive development, proficiency in each of their languages, activation threshold for each of their languages or formal (classroom-based) vs informal (natural) mode of L1, L2, L3 etc. acquisition. Only a comparison of a large number of research results can throw light on the scope, type and conditions of conceptual transfer in non-native language use.

In conclusion, it must be said that the knowledge about the language-thought relationship and the conceptual transfer ought to contribute to the improvement of foreign language teaching methodology. Since fluent and coordinate bi-/multilingualism is achieved thanks to authentic communication leading to a high level of proficiency, foreign language teachers ought to help their learners achieve high fluency mainly through communicative tasks which make use of authentic texts (written or spoken) and enable them contacts with the native speakers of the target languages and their cultures.

This is the only way that leads to *full* mutual understanding – on both the linguistic and the conceptual levels – in communication with the native speakers of the acquired language.

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