

Linguistics and ‘The Linguistic Turn’: Language, Reality, and Knowledge

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## Linguistics and 'The Linguistic Turn': Language, Reality, and Knowledge

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**1. INTRODUCTION.** The majority of linguists remain unfamiliar with what has been called 'the linguistic turn', a theoretical development integral to postmodern social theory, which has been prominent in many of the humanities. This is partly because linguistics as a discipline resembles a 'hard' science in various respects, and hence has maintained a certain theoretical distance from the other social sciences. Nevertheless, language is a central theme for both linguists and postmodern scholars, and significant claims about it are centrally associated with the linguistic turn. We can, therefore, ask whether these theoretical implications should be of concern to linguists, and what sort of input linguists can make to this discussion.

In a nutshell, the linguistic turn refers to a theoretical shift on how the relationship between reality and representation (or 'signification') is viewed. Whereas the familiar modernist paradigm regarding scientific endeavor delineates a clear boundary between the (human) subject conducting the study, the object of study, and the language used to describe it, postmodernists have put into question the separability of all three of these. In particular, representation is not thought of as simply reference to or description of reality, but rather, signification acts are argued to play an integral part in constituting the perception of the object, or perhaps the object of representation itself.

This paper, then, seeks to address two questions: 1. How do linguist notions of linguistic determinism compare with postmodern positions about language and reality? 2. What perspectives can linguists take on the postmodern claim that language is an inescapable component of the foundations for scientific knowledge?

**2. 'LANGUAGE'.** It is useful to start by clarifying how the term 'language' is understood by linguists and postmodernists.

In contemporary linguistics, much of the focus has been on finding regular patterns in the **structure** of natural human languages — sound systems, words, phrases and sentences<sup>1</sup>. These generalizations are sought in linguistic data, i.e. occurring or occurrable bits of human languages, making linguistics a fundamentally empirical discipline.

By comparison, postmodernists are almost exclusively concerned with the **function** of language rather than its structure, with the exception of its semantic or semiotic structure. Whereas linguists typically characterize the function of language as a tool for interpersonal communication, postmodernists have a broader conception of communicative function, seeing language as necessarily involved in important ways in the socialization of individuals with respect to how social norms, political values, identity roles, and so on, become part of who people are.

Furthermore, for linguists, instances of **language use** are more often than not thought of as the actual utterances that are produced, while postmodernists tend to focus on the fact of the act or process of signification. As a point of similarity, however, both postmodernists and linguists have included as part of their concern

with language the names or labels that are given to phenomena and the influence these have on how we understand the phenomena.

To summarize the main notions from both disciplinary approaches, we have 'language' considered as:

a. Structure.

b. Instances of use, including —

(i) acts of speech (utterances)

(ii) acts of labeling (entities, phenomena, etc.)

(iii) acts/processes of representation or signification.

This paper will focus on 'language' in the senses of *b*, looking in particular at claims made about labeling (in Section 3) and about representation/signification (Section 4). In Section 3, a comparison of the discussions in linguistics and postmodern theory will shed light on the fact that linguistic determinism does not mean the same in each approach. Furthermore, in Section 4, a consideration of why languages have the characteristics they do will suggest that postmodernism's attack on modernist epistemology and the role it accords to systems of signification are fundamentally problematic for linguistics.

**3. LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND REALITY.** This section sketches out ways that the relationships between language, thought, and reality have been conceived of, a sketch that will involve a certain degree of simplification for the sake of expository simplicity.

To begin, consider a "naive" or "commonsensical" view of these relationships, namely that there are things or phenomena out in the world, we perceive them, and we talk about them through language. This is the familiar modernist episteme, sometimes called objectivist metaphysics, and is diagrammed in Fig. 1:

[1] Modern episteme (objectivist metaphysics)

perceived by                      coded by  
**reality** -----> **cognition** -----> **language**

A key characteristic of postmodernism has been its challenges to modernist epistemology and the validity of scientific objectivism on various accounts. In this vein, it is argued that language does not merely code a reality that exists independent of it, but rather, language is one of the ways by which that 'reality' comes to be seen as real. With respect to the relationship between language and reality, then, the directionality is the opposite of what the modernist episteme assumes, and language reflects, if anything, the workings of *power* in society [Fig. 2]:

[2] Postmodern position on language and reality

work through                      constructs  
**sociopolitical forces** -----> **language** -----> **(perception of)**  
**reality**

A number of linguistic anthropologists have applied aspects of postmodern social theory to their research. For example, Susan Gal argues in [3] that **linguistic behavior** does not merely reflect a speaker's social identities — categories such as class, gender, and sexuality — but helps construct (i.e. create) them.

[3] ... the categories of *women's speech*, *men's speech*, and *prestigious* or powerful speech are not just indexically derived from the identities of its speakers. Indeed, sometimes a speaker's utterances create her or his identity. These categories, along with broader ones such as *masculine* or *feminine*, are created within social groups... (Gal 1995, italics in original)

A related claim, as, for example, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1995) assert, is that the **labels** that languages have for social categories create those categories as realities for speakers, rather than merely naming preexisting concepts:

[4] Language is a primary tool people use in constituting themselves and others as 'kinds' of people... Social categories and characterizations are human creations; the concepts associated with them are not preformed, waiting for labels to be attached, but are created, sustained, and transformed by social processes that importantly include labeling itself. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995)

These quotes recall the linguistic determinism that Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf explicated earlier this century (and there have been a number of recent studies and reexaminations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis within linguistics, e.g. Lucy 1992; papers in Gumperz & Levinson 1996). The passages in [5] and [6] below express the now-familiar claim that how we understand a "reality" outside of our minds is influenced by the language that we speak — the vocabulary, grammatical categories, and syntactic structures that it has.

[5] To pass from one language to another is psychologically parallel to passing from one geometrical system of reference to another. The environing world is the same for either language; the world of points is the same in either frame of reference. But the formal method of approach to the expressed item of experience, as to the given point of space, is so different that the resulting feeling of orientation can be the same neither in the two languages nor in the two frames of reference. (Sapir 1924)

[6] 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 of our minds. (Whorf, 1956: 213)

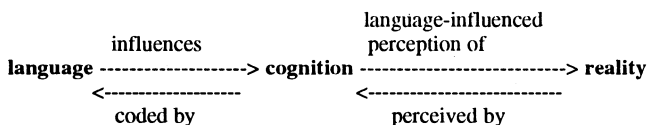
Sapir and Whorf differed on whether there is a fixed reality independent of human perception, but expressed similar ideas about how different languages can by their influence on cognition lead to different experiences of the external world, a position that is represented in Fig. [7].

## [7] Sapir-Whorf linguistic determinism position



Since, actually, the majority of linguists sympathetic to some version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis also subscribe to the validity of the modernist conception, Fig. [7'], combining [1] and [7], is probably a more representative summary of the position of these linguists.

## [7'] Combined modernist/Sapir-Whorfian position



Comparing this diagram with the postmodern position summarized in Fig. [2], three differences can be noted. Firstly, the role of the mind or cognition tends to be backgrounded in postmodern views (hence the parentheses around 'perception of' in Fig. 2), often with no clear distinction drawn between claims about language determining the perception or understanding of the world, and language constructing reality itself. This point will be discussed further in Section 4.

Secondly, the quotes of Gal in [3] and Eckert & McConnell-Ginet in [4] illustrate a somewhat more dynamic version of linguistic determinism, in that it is language use, and language use as social process, that is posited to be constructing what is perceived as reality. Traditional interpretations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in contrast, focus on the linguistic items and structures in a language.

Thirdly, in looking at semantic fields, both linguists and postmodernists have offered explanations about how **culture** contributes to what items are found in language, along the lines that languages code what is 'culturally relevant', but there is a clear difference in how 'dynamic' a perspective of culture is taken. Linguists, at least traditionally, have had a fairly apolitical, non-dynamic conception of society and culture. Consider the following passage from Sapir, listing the lexicalized terms that Paiute, a Native American language of the Southwestern U.S., has for geological features:

[8] ... divide, ledge, sand flat, semi-circular valley, circular valley or hollow, spot of level ground in mountains surrounded by ledges, plain valley surrounded by mountains, plain, desert, knoll, plateau, canyon without water, canyon with creek, wash or gutter, gulch, slope of mountain or canyon wall receiving sunlight, shaded slope of mountain or canyon wall, rolling country intersected by several small hill-ridges. (Sapir 1949a: 91, in Bonvillian 1993: 54)

A linguist is apt to cite data like this to argue that Paiute speakers happened to live a particular lifestyle in a particular habitat which made distinguishing those formations culturally important; hence, we can say that language, reflecting culturally relevant aspects of the natural environment, comes to have labels for them, and these labels then influence how such 'realities' are perceived by speakers, with lexicalization helping to crystallize aspects of the perceptual world as entities in the mind.

In comparison, consider the passage in [9] from the French social theorist Michel Foucault, where he argues that what counts as 'truth' is subject to the dynamics of power in society:

[9] Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only under multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1972: 131)

Hence, for example, in his (1978) consideration of why the West has the concepts of sexuality ('homosexual', 'heterosexual', etc.) that it does, Foucault's position is not that such types of categorization merely happen to reflect culture; rather, cultural forces of sociopolitical power are crucially implicated in the production and maintenance of what is taken as knowledge, truth, or reality. Hence, culture, working partly through language, has a productive power that enforces the categories that language contains.

To summarize, although we see basic similarities between the classic Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on linguistic determinism and postmodern positions about language and reality, there are also a number of important differences. Linguists, unlike postmodernists, do not reject the modernist episteme, while postmodernists, unlike linguists, do not always clearly figure in the place of perception or the mind as separable from either language or reality. Also, the postmodern position attributes a more dynamic role to both language, in articulating how it shapes reality through use rather than just by virtue of vocabulary and grammar, and to culture, as something which is not just passively reflected by language but which intertwines with power relations that are integral to the determination of 'reality'.

4. LANGUAGE AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS. Another, perhaps more fundamental, difference in approaches is that linguists have not looked just for purely culture-dependent explanations to account for why languages have the items and structures they do, since linguists (from both generative and functional perspectives) are typically interested in generalizing across languages. The main types of explanations for cross-linguistic similarities that have been offered are summarized below:

1. The innateness hypothesis, which underlies generative linguistics, proposes that there is a biologically programmed knowledge of grammar (linguistic structure) common to speakers of all languages.

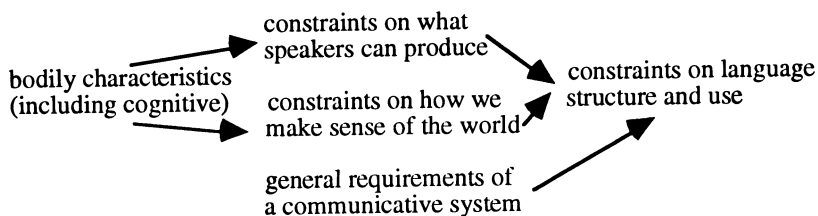
2. The common communicative functions of language, which, being sensitive to constraints on the human perceptual, articulatory, and cognitive apparatuses, are proposed to explain why certain kinds of linguistic patterns — morphosyntactic,

phonological, and phonetic — are more frequent in language data (e.g. Croft 1990; Mayerthaler 1988; Maddieson 1984).

3. Certain characteristics of the human body are argued to shape how we perceive and understand the world, and hence what we code in language. The classic studies are those by Brent Berlin, Paul Kay and their colleagues (Berlin & Kay 1969; Kay & McDaniel 1978) in establishing near-universals of lexicalization patterns for color terms that can be traced to shared aspects of human neurophysiology. Also, cognitive linguists such as G. Lakoff (1987), Talmy (1988), and others have argued that characteristics of our bodies and minds crucially influence how we experience the world, reflected not just in patterns of lexicalization but also those of metaphorical extension.

These explanations are diagrammed in Fig. [10].

[10] Linguistic universalist explanations for language characteristics



Thus, for various areas of linguistics, the human body serves as an epistemological ground, i.e. a basis for explanation. Hence, with respect to the tension between linguistic relativism and universalism, many linguists would argue that linguistic determinism can be taken only so far, since surely there is not a unidirectional causality of language on perception of reality; rather, the non-linguistic world, for example in the form of our bodies, comes to shape language as well. However, the tenability of this position is challenged by two prominent postmodern claims:

1. There is no natural human body which is not already 'inscribed' or marked through with the cultural.

2. There can be no grounds for human knowledge outside systems of signification.

How these discussions relate to relevant areas within linguistic theory will be explored in the following two subsections.

**4.1 THE HUMAN BODY.** The concept of the 'natural', or more specifically, the nature-culture dualism, is part of a broader critique on binary oppositions that postmodern theory has identified and attacked. This section focuses on one strand of this discussion within postmodern feminist theory with regard to the human body.

Scholars such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz have sought to reconcile, on the one hand, the physicality or materiality of the body with, on the other hand, the rejection of the nature-culture and mind-body dualisms as well as the postmodern tenet that nothing is comprehensible outside of language. Sophisticated postmodern discussions of the body are careful not to claim that everything can be reduced to language or to effects of language. However, at the

same time, Butler and Grosz argue that the physical body, its materiality, cannot be thought of or understood outside of signifiatory systems:

[11] ... the body is neither brute nor passive but interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. [...] [The human body is not] a precultural, presocial, or prelinguistic pure body, but a body as social and discursive object, a body bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power. (Grosz 1994: 18-19)

[12] Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, [...] but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e. reduced to one another, and yet never fully exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical or fully different. (Butler 1993: 69)

Grosz (1994) argues that the body has been equated with nature, and the mind with language, in ways that fail to recognize how these supposed dualistic opposites interact. She appeals for new terminology in talking about human bodies and subjectivity that goes beyond the mind-body dualism, suggesting the expressions 'embodied subjectivity' and 'psychic corporeality'. These terms are not unlike similar expressions that have arisen within cognitive semantics, which in certain respects is quite consonant with some parts of postmodernism. For example, G. Lakoff (1987) has argued for rejecting both objectivist metaphysics and the mind-body dualism, criticizing formal model-theoretic semantics for relying on an objectivist philosophy that there is a disembodied, 'God's-eye' point of view from which to attain the truth. Instead, in explicating the thesis of 'functional embodiment', Lakoff argues that what humans perceive and how we interact with the world depend crucially on our very humanness — the way our bodies are, the way our cognitive structures and processes are.

On the other hand, Lakoff explicitly denies that rejecting objectivist metaphysics leads inevitably to rampant relativism, because human beings, despite their differences, share certain commonalities of physicality and cognition. Hence, cognitive semantics is still grounded epistemologically in the specifics of the body, and for this reason remains fundamentally distinct from postmodern theory, which questions the possibility of a human body that is independent of 'language' (referring to systems of representation). This position derives from a more general argument about the role of the signifier in originating meaning, which we explore in the next sub-section.

**4.2 THE DERRIDEAN SIGNIFIER.** The writings of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, attacking both the content and method of Western philosophy and science, have become key works of postmodern theory (e.g. 1978, 1976, 1973). In his considerations about language, meaning, and reality, he seeks to subvert the major underpinnings of both phenomenology, which locates meaning in interior consciousness, and structuralism, for which meaning arises in the relations between the units of a signifiatory system. The following paragraphs give the briefest of summaries of some of the relevant ideas.

One central Derridean critique concerns what he terms "the metaphysics of presence" in Western philosophy, which assumes that we are able to perceive reality in an immediate way (i.e. without mediation). Instead, Derrida argues that perception happens in the unconscious, which is inaccessible, so that we can never derive meaning from perceptual processes; rather, all reflective or conscious



encounters with the world occur via the mediation of re-presentations, and hence, all knowledge is necessarily linguistic.

Derrida also draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's (1989 [1916]) discussion about the linguistic sign. Saussure argued that meaning is produced in both the formation of signs as entities consisting of both the signifier (e.g. the word) and the signified (the concept), and in the oppositions between elements in a signifiatory system. Whereas linguists have tended to unproblematically accept these Saussurean concepts, Derrida pushes Saussure's point that signifier and signified are indissolubly bound, and hence rejects the possibility of meaning or concepts existing independent of language. Derrida also develops the Saussurean notion of oppositional difference into his theory of the 'trace', making a complex argument that the meaning or significance of a signifier resides in what is absent as well as what is present with respect to its relationship with other signifiers in the signifiatory system. The crucial point here is that Derrida denies the possibility of meaning existing independent of signification.

Butler accepts Derrida's position about the impossibility of human conceptualization outside of language, and goes on to make the argument in [13] that positing something, such as the human body, to be extralinguistic (i.e. independent of signifiatory systems) is an impossible paradox, since any such act of positing is always an act of signification itself, and such an act will then become part of ('constitutive of') the concept. Therefore, nothing is material without being linguistic, at least as focuses of human contemplation.

[13] The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action... To posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition. (Butler 1993: 30, italics in original)

There are two different types of objections that can be made to this argument. The first is concerned with having a metalanguage to talk about phenomena, which Butler appears to be refusing to allow. If every propositional speech act about some phenomenon then makes that phenomenon 'linguistic', then it is unclear how much content this sense of 'linguistic' retains or whether it allows Butler to make a theoretically meaningful point about the presence of language in the material body. For example, Butler's assertion in [13] presumably means that the act of making the proposition, 'Unconscious reflexes such as the heat recoil reaction are non-linguistic' would by virtue of its signifiatory character make those unconscious reflexes which the proposition mentions 'linguistic'.

There are also logical problems associated with the strong anti-naturalist position that Butler takes. Language (meaning here any system of signification) evolved within the context of the particular bodies that humans (and proto-humans) had, so that we may surely be able to identify bodily characteristics which preceded the development of language as extralinguistic.<sup>2,3</sup> In a related vein, Butler has also been criticized for being anthropocentric in not taking into consideration that non-human animate beings also have bodies, and it is unclear how language or systems of signification would construct or interact with the materiality of their bodies (Cheah 1996).

What many would argue to be a central problem in Butler's position, and Derrida's, comes back to their view of perception. Recall from Section 3 that the place of perception in the postmodern conception of linguistic determinism was somewhat unclear, and Derrida, for one, explicitly claims that 'there never was any "perception"' (1973: 103); what postmodernists deny is not the existence of some real world, but our ability to (consciously) experience it non-linguistically.

Arguments against this position have come from various directions, but contemporary linguists are typically not philosophers of language, and this paper will not try to summarize this discussion. However, let us just mention one critique which seems to fit in well with what linguists would find theoretically coherent, offered by Dillon (1995), a phenomenological philosopher who faults Derrida for 'semiological reductionism' (reducing everything to signs and their effects). Dillon makes two arguments which are summarized briefly here. Firstly, he argues that language which does not refer to anything outside of language would, from a logical standpoint, ultimately fail to be meaningful; however, we don't find language to be meaningless, and the reason that words can derive meaning from other words is because words do ultimately refer to the world (i.e. something outside the system of signification). Secondly, given that non-human animals are able to perceive and in some way understand the world, it is anthropocentric to argue that meaning derives only from signifiers, an argument related to one we have already mentioned by Cheah (1996) in critiquing Butler's discussion about how language constructs the body.

Linguists, then, may accept Derrida's claims that neither classical phenomenology nor structuralism are adequate to account for how language means, but are apt to reject the argument that perception cannot be discussed as part of the equation of deriving meaning. As we have seen in earlier sections, the human body plays a foundational, epistemological role in linguistic theory, and part of this role includes its mediation between language and the external world through perceptual processes. Hence, it should be clear that a Derridean position would be untenable to linguists, even those sympathetic to some version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or to a Lakovian explication of cognitive semantics.

**5. SUMMARY.** These theoretical incompatibilities notwithstanding, we should not conclude without noting that there are aspects of postmodernism which many linguists would find appealing. One, as discussed in Section 3, is the rejection of a strict classical objectivist metaphysics by cognitive linguists such as Lakoff (1987). Another is that, in their attack on privileged discourses of knowledge, postmodernists often call for a plurality of perspectives to replace the application of one dominant worldview to everything, something which Rajagopalan (1993) notes has certain parallels with disagreements in various disciplines about the degree to which data should be treated on their own terms or worked into an existing general theory. Hence, in linguistics, more descriptivist-oriented scholars may welcome this general philosophy against theoretical chauvinism.

What we have seen here, however, is that the postmodern position on the relationships between language, reality, and knowledge diverges on several accounts from one which most linguists generally assume. In addition, postmodernists have put into question a concept of the natural that is separable from culture and language, something which linguistics relies on in fundamental ways. This paper has highlighted such differences between the two approaches, showing that sharing the common theme of 'language' has not meant the presence of basic theoretical commonalities. More recently, a number of linguists, particularly

within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, have applied theoretical and political insights from postmodern theory in their work (e.g. see papers in Hall & Bucholtz 1995); how far and fruitfully such integrations can be taken must, however, be a question for another paper.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In social theory, 'language' often refers not just to natural human languages, but also to images and various other forms of representation. Also, the term 'discourse' in postmodern discussion is sometimes used interchangeably with 'language', but may encompass an even broader range of phenomena, including bodies of texts associated with particular recognized fields, various characteristics of social institutions such as the law, and other meaning-carrying aspects that characterize social organization (e.g. the use of physical space). These more extended uses of the term 'language' will not be explicitly discussed in this paper, since they have little or no intersection with uses of the term by linguists.

<sup>2</sup> While Butler concedes that materiality is implicated in language (see [12]), her reasoning is that this is because the sign is itself material in terms of its realization (e.g. as sound); however, as Eagleton (1996) notes, if even the sign is considered to be material, it is unclear how useful this sense of 'material' is.

<sup>3</sup> At a recent (1997) talk entitled 'Naked', about the relationship between the evolution of vision and the development of art in human culture, Elizabeth Grosz, if I understood her correctly, made a similar point in criticizing some feminists for refusing to acknowledge that before there was culture, there was biology (i.e. vision preceded art).

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