

**Penny Lee**

***The Whorf Theory Complex: A Critical Reconstruction.***

Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996. [Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science. Series III, Studies in the History of the Language Sciences, 81]. xix + 323 pp. ISBN 90 272 4569 X (Eur., Hb.). ISBN 90 272 4570 3 (Eur., Pb.)

“[ . . . ] it is wrong, all wrong”. Pinker’s condemnation of the concept of linguistic relativity known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is typical of the sneering attitude of many towards Benjamin Lee Whorf, one of the prime whipping-boys of introductory texts on linguistics. Lee’s book defends Whorf against such summary judgements, which are presented as the combined result of cursory reading and Whorf’s ‘visionary’ style. By careful examination of Whorf’s work, including a number of unpublished writings examined for the first time, she presents a picture of a network of interrelated, mutually supportive ideas which, as a whole, form the theory complex of the book’s title. Lee is clearly trying to right the damage done by the oversimplifications of the past, and the reviewer hopes his summary of the main points will not distort the ideas she so carefully presents.

The book is well laid out, with the text simultaneously falling into natural sections and forming a flowing, coherent whole, complemented by the extensive bibliography. In addition, the inclusion as an appendix of the little-read ‘Yale report’ allows the reader to sample first-hand an extensive example of Whorf’s writing.

The first, introductory chapter falls into two equally useful sections. The first summarises his career; as well as providing a background, it also makes the reader aware of Whorf’s activities outside of the field, important parts of his life which influenced his ways of thinking and style of writing. Throughout the book, the reader sees how these often gave Whorf a novel perspective on his subject matter, whilst at the same time underlying his tendency to be rather esoteric; this latter trait occasionally infuses Lee’s style also, although this adds more to the charm than it subtracts from clarity. The second section of this gives an overview of the theory complex, sketching an outline to be filled in by the chapters that follow.

Chapter two discusses the notions of patternment and linguistic thinking, which Lee believes to form the ‘hard core’ of the theory complex. Perhaps the crucial point of this chapter is that Whorf claimed only that it is the ability to talk which is distinctive about human cognition; specifically, he did *not* claim that *all* conceptual activity is linguistic, nor did he claim that language functions *only* to facilitate conceptual activity. Throughout this chapter, and indeed the book as a whole, Lee carefully interweaves quotes from Whorf, along with her explanations and analyses of his ideas, with those of his forebearers, contemporaries and successors. The reader must therefore be mindful of whose version of a particular conception of language is being discussed at any given moment. Nevertheless, such careful reading is worthwhile, as one can then appreciate both the context in which Whorf was writing, essential if one is to avoid the misunderstandings which Lee shows to have dogged much discussion of Whorf’s writings. In addition, Lee is keen to point out that Whorf’s notions of patternment and entrenchment have their echoes in more recent

thinking, in particular connectionist models of cognition; this is an intriguing parallel, which one may hope will be explored in greater detail in future.

The third chapter elucidates the theory of linguistic relativity, perhaps the most well-known and misunderstood areas of Whorf's work. Essentially, what he argued is that perceptual processes make a set of 'isolates of experience' universally available, from which human beings selectively make meaning by extracting patterns of salience or coherence; different societies will do this in different ways, and their selection of 'isolates of meaning' will be reflected in their languages. Chapter four discusses covert categories and cryptotypes, the meanings of such categories. This chapter, whilst worth reading in its own right, gives the impression of being an aside which the author felt should somehow be included. Hence here the theory complex breaks down somewhat, and it is significant that covert categories and cryptotypes are not mentioned in the summary of the complex at the end of the first chapter.

In chapter five we return to the main stream of the complex with an examination of the related topics of abstraction and universals. Lee is keen to point out that, in keeping with Whorf's dynamic conception of language as a whole, abstraction is first and foremost a process, rather than the result of such a process. Her discussion of Whorf's views on universal greatly benefits from the clear distinction drawn between experiential, conceptual, and linguistic universals. As mentioned above, Whorf argued that we all have access to the same stock of isolates of experience. These potential conceptual universals need not be actualised; if they always were, then there would be no question of linguistic relativity. Lee argues, however, that some isolates of experience may, due to their salience, be universally realised as concepts, and that they could then become linguistic universals by being manifested as linguistic elements. This point, she concedes, is not made explicitly by Whorf, being part of Lee's reconstruction; it does, however, mesh well with Whorf's ideas, as is typical of the comparison and skilled interweaving of ideas from a variety of sources throughout the book.

The final chapter tackles probably the most daring aspect of Whorf's thinking, that of the benefits of awareness of the patterns of thought embodied in different languages, and the improvements it could bring to individual cognitive abilities, scientific thinking, and intercultural understanding. These points are discussed in detail and argued for convincingly on the whole; Lee concludes with a whole-hearted embrace of this most humanistic side of Whorf, her tone containing much of the passion of that of her subject.

All in all, this book strikes a fine balance between expository simplicity and the complexity of the ideas in question and the context in which they were formed. As such, this book an informative contribution to the history of linguistics, and also to current linguistics, since the better understanding of Whorf's writings which it provides sheds light, as Lee points out, on many areas of research, both current and potential.

Anthony Parry-Jones, *Oxford*