LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND REALITY; SELECTED WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN LEE WHORF

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649624928

Language, Thought, and Reality; Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf by Benjamin Lee Whorf

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, and REALITY

SELECTED WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN LEE WHORF

Edited and with an introduction by
JOHN B. CARROLL

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Published jointly by
The Technology Press of
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
and
John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
New York London

FOURTH PRINTING, DECEMBER, 1959

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 56–5367

Printed in the United States of America

FOREWORD

Once in a blue moon a man comes along who grasps the relationship between events which have hitherto seemed quite separate, and gives mankind a new dimension of knowledge. Einstein, demonstrating the relativity of space and time, was such a man. In another field and on a less cosmic level, Benjamin Lee Whorf was one, to rank some day perhaps with such great social scientists as Franz Boas and William James.

He grasped the relationship between human language and human thinking, how language indeed can shape our innermost thoughts.

> 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.

Indo-European languages can be roughly calibrated—English, French, German, Russian, Latin, Greek, and the rest; but when it comes to Chinese, Maya, and Hopi, calibration, says Whorf, is structurally difficult if not impossible. Speakers of Chinese dissect nature and the universe differently from Western speakers. A still different dissection is made by various groups of American Indians, Africans, and the speakers of many other tongues.

Whorf was a profound scholar in the comparatively new science of linguistics. One reason why he casts so long a shadow, I believe, is that he did not train for it. He trained for chemical engineering at M.I.T., and thus acquired a laboratory approach and frame of reference. The work in linguistics was literally wrung out of him. Some driving inner compulsion forced him to the study of words and language—not, if you please, the mastery of foreign languages, but the why and how of language, any language, and its competence as a vehicle for meaning.

As a writer, I have long been interested in semantics, sometimes defined as "the systematic study of meaning." It does a writer no harm, I hold, to know what he is talking about. Whorf, using linguistics as a tool for the analysis of meaning, has made an important contribution to semantics. No careful student of communication and meaning can afford to neglect him. One might add that no philosophical scientist or scientific philosopher can afford to neglect him. Linguistics, he boldly proclaims, "is fundamental to the theory of thinking, and in the last analysis to all human sciences." He is probably right. Every considerable advance in science, such as quantum theory, involves a crisis in communication. The discoverers have to explain first to themselves, and then to the scientific world, what has been found.

Whorf as I read him makes two cardinal hypotheses:

First, that all higher levels of thinking are dependent on language.

Second, that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one understands his environment. The picture of the universe shifts from tongue to tongue.

II

There is a good deal of competent scientific support for the first hypothesis. The biologist, Julian Huxley, for instance, declares that "the evolution of verbal concepts opened the door to all further achievements of man's thought." Language, observes Whorf, is the best show man puts on. Other creatures have developed rough communication systems, but no true language. Language is cardinal in rearing human young, in organizing human communities, in handing down the culture from generation to generation. Huxley goes so far as to venture that adaptation through the culture, depending, of course, on language, may be displacing the biological processes of evolution. When the next Ice Age moves down, for instance, instead of growing more fur, *homo sapiens* may step up the production of air-conditioning units.

The power to reason constitutes the "uniqueness of man," to philosophers as well as biologists. Unprotected by claws, teeth, thick hide, fleetness of foot, or sheer strength, *homo sapiens* has to think his way out of tight places. It has been his chief weapon for survival.

Probably everyone experiences brainstorms too fast to be verbal. In writing, I frequently have them. But before I can handle such bolts