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THE LIMITS OF MY LANGUAGE ARE THE LIMITS OF MY WORLD

“The limits of my language are the limits of my world” is quoted from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s early philosophical work. The peculiar genius of Wittgenstein is that he was able to consider meaning not as something abstracted from human behavior, but as something deeply enmeshed within any given social context. In other words, the languages and the value systems we adhere to are lively expressions of the nature and development of a given human community, and by no means exist transcendent of the context in which they are used.

Wittgenstein realized that our behavior and language coalesce in such a way that the patterns of our language are what dictate the nature of our experience. The very way that we interact with, and react to, the world and each other on an immediate and visceral level is completely dependent upon the meaning, usage, structure, and grammar of the language in which we think and communicate.

Therefore, we shape our language according to what objects and events surround us. At the same time it shapes us. Our language depends on the country we live, the occupation we choose, people we meet and mix with, books we read, hobbies we get involved in.

As for linguistic point of view, one of the most fascinating questions is whether and how much language influences thought. The idea of linguistic relativity is associated mainly with the writings of B.L. Whorf and E. Sapir, two American linguists who postulated the hypothesis in the early 20th century. The “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis” was motivated by the world’s vast linguistic diversity. Whorf himself investigated several exotic languages and came to the conclusion that the make-up of a language strongly influences the way its speakers think about the world.

One of the most prominent researchers attacking this question nowadays is L. Boroditsky at Stanford University (USA). The gold standard of psycholinguistic studies on linguistic relativity is now finding non-linguistic cognitive differences in speakers of different languages.

Recent work with bilingual speakers attempts to distinguish the effects of language from those of culture on bilingual cognition including perceptions of time, space, motion, colors and emotion. Researchers described differences between bilinguals and monolinguals in perception of color, representations of time and other elements of cognition.

A study from the University of Granada, Spain, and the University of York in Toronto, Canada, found that in comparison with monolingual children, bilingual children develop a better “working memory”, which saves, controls and updates information for a short time period. The “working memory” plays an important role in a wide variety of activities, like mental calculation (remembering numbers and working with them) or reading comprehension (association ability, processing successive pieces of information).

Why is this topic relevant? We believe that knowing different languages makes the world wider and broadens a person’s opportunities. Up to Isabelle Barth O’Neill, Professor of Arts, Culture & Communications at Bordeaux University, France, “Language diversity is an open door to others. A door which stays open to discover and enjoy the culture of others and who they are...”

Multilingualism is an asset for acquiring cross-sectoral key skills, for improvement of performance in thinking, learning, problem-solving and communicating. Creativity and innovation are conditions for employability, competitiveness and the development of an entrepreneurial spirit. It is the way to explain the complex added value of multilingualism and its positive effects on individual, social and economic developments – making use of existing regional resources – and to use them as a motivation for language learning.