Introduction

Many languages

Human beings form a single species but speak thousands of different languages. Each differs from the others in its sounds, in the words it offers and what they stand for, in how words are built and how they are put together to make sentences. Speaking any language requires mastery of complex practices that take place simultaneously on many levels: a sophisticated choreography of mouth and throat to produce a distinctive set of sounds; an ear that has learned to recognize these particular distinctions; control of some tens of thousands of signs and their meanings, meanings that will be different in their boundaries and often in their centers from those of the signs of any other language; constant manipulation of pervasive grammatical categories that foreground some aspects of experience rather than others. Every one of these practices is carried out either unconsciously or with only the most limited conscious involvement. And every one of them is performed hundreds or thousands of times a day by every speaker and hearer of a given language in a way that is unique to that language.

How much does all of this matter? Does the language spoken affect other aspects of life? Does it affect one's way of thinking, of feeling, of perceiving or constructing the world? These questions have arisen in some form in most periods of history, in most civilizations. But they have been debated in particularly acute and symptomatic ways in what is usually called the modern period in the West, since about the sixteenth century. Western modernity, after all, begins with three more or less simultaneous occurrences, all of which bring many languages into confrontation: the rise of modern nation-states, each with its own national standard to be asserted over a hitherto multilinguistic territory; the rediscovery of the languages and learning of antiquity; and the expansion of European economic and political power over much of the globe.

In spite of its centrality to Western thinking for some five hundred years, the question of linguistic diversity was marginalized in the decades after 1960. This is largely due to the success of unitary theories of human thought: for most cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind, and many linguists, the possibility of

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significant linguistic variation constitutes at best a surface distraction, at worst a
relativist threat to the very knowability of the human mind. Until quite recently cog-
nitive-philosophical books with titles such as *Language and Thought* (Carruthers
and Boucher 1998) have given virtually no space to the specifics of actual human
languages, since what is of interest are "language" and "thought" in general.

Since the mid-1990s, however, language diversity has begun to re-emerge as
a central issue in many disciplines. For every claim that we have identified *The
Language Instinct* (Pinker 1994: just one instinct, the same for every language)
and now know *How the Mind Works* (Pinker 1997: it works the same way
everywhere at all times) there is a new presentation of *Evidence for Linguistic
Relativity* (Niemeier and Dirven 2000) arguing the importance of the relation-
ship between *Language Diversity and Thought* (Lucy 1992a). These debates
have an important intellectual-historical dimension and usually refer back to
the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf and their work
in the 1920s and 1930s on what they called a principle of linguistic relativity.
As originally developed, this is the observation that the characteristics of one's
language can affect other aspects of life and must be taken into account. This is
often expressed by saying that the specifics of the language orient the speaker
in certain ways, representing a distinct point of view. Since the deaths of the
main proponents of the idea (Sapir died in 1939, Whorf in 1941, their mentor
Franz Boas in 1942), debates around the subject have tended to reduce this
very broad issue to the narrower one of possible influences of language on cog-
nition. The "hypothesis of linguistic relativity," "linguistic relativism," or "lin-
guistic determinism," often dubbed the "Sapir–Whorf hypothesis," would in
this view be the argument that language determines or influences thought, and
that since languages are different, people who speak different languages must
think in different ways. Often it is not clear what is meant by thought, nor what
aspects of language are being used to represent "language." But the main prob-
lem with current discussions, in my view, is a lack of historical perspective.

Such a perspective reveals, it seems to me, some persistent patterns. It shows
that the debate over linguistic multiplicity has been at the heart of modern
Western thinking about self and other, the nature of human society and indeed
of humanity, and has always represented an aspect of larger conceptions of
the human mind and of the universe as a whole. The central arguments of this
book will be (1) that in the modern West, the main tendency has been simply to
reject or to adopt the idea that language differences are important, depending
on one's philosophical preference for universalistic explanatory models that
seek causes or pluralist models that seek understanding of hidden essences;
(2) that in spite of usually being identified with the latter position, the work
of Boas and his students represents an effort to rethink problems of language
difference in a more complex way, one that is, to use terms that remain to be
explained, pluralist but not essentialist, an effort that has yet to yield its full

theoretical effects; and (3) that much of the work in this area since the 1960s reproduces the oppositions that the Boasians struggled to get beyond.

While the implications of language difference have been debated for hundreds of years, sometimes with the same examples, even the same terminology, being used again and again, very little of this history is recognized in what is being written now about linguistic relativity.[1]

Here is an example. The editors of the volume *Language Acquisition and Conceptual Development* (Bowerman and Levinson 2001) present two opposed positions on the relationship between language and thought. On one side is the view that

language is a mere … input/output device to a central area of thinking. As Pinker (1994: 82) has put it, "knowing a language … is knowing how to translate mentalese into a string of words and vice versa …". (11–12)

On the other side they cite George Miller from 1956: "the process of recoding is a very important one in human psychology … In particular, the kind of linguistic recoding that people do seems to me to be the very lifeblood of the thought processes" (cited in Bowerman and Levinson 2001: 12). While the authors do point out that questions of this kind go back to Aristotle, they do not note that the two opposed positions presented here – that thinking is an autonomous activity, always the same in human beings, and language is merely a way of externalizing it; or that language, on the contrary, is an integral part of the thinking process – were formulated in almost exactly the same terms by Descartes and Locke on the one hand, and Leibniz on the other, in the seventeenth century. There is a history to be traced here.

The book will concentrate on the writings of the protagonists themselves, their assumptions and strategies, their favorite examples, their surprisingly stereotypical tones of voice. While the book insists on the importance of history and is organized in a (loosely) chronological fashion, my overall perspective is not that of the historian or the intellectual historian, but of the anthropologist. I take it that observed commonalities, broad perduring themes, in modern Western culture, as in any culture, are related to the nature of daily life in modern Western societies; and that these themes, lived and presupposed by most participants in these societies, are formalized and articulated by those whose job it is to formalize and articulate: philosophers, scholars, theorists of various stripes. I take theorists, then, not as tellers of truth or lies, but as key informants, Ogotemmêlis of the modern West (Griaule 1948 [1965]).

Universals and diversity

Some things that are universal about human language are more specific than what one would imagine are requirements for any system of communication.

Some of these universals can be identified by considering any language, others not. Among observable, "evident" universals are the facts that any language allows the speaker to say anything he or she wants to say, with the proviso that some languages may have to invent or borrow words to talk about some topics; that spoken human language is linear, that is, one-dimensional in time, something that distinguishes it from, say, the bidimensionality of a painting; that human languages operate primarily using conventional signs; that every human language has a distinctive multi-levelled architecture in which some tens of non-signifying elements (phonemes) combine to produce some thousands of signs (morphemes), which combine in turn to generate a potentially infinite number of phrases and sentences.[2]

Such universals are available through simple reflection on how we speak, or how anyone speaks. And they can be misleading: recent research on sign languages (e.g., Emmorey 2002) shows that while they are fully functioning multi-levelled human languages, they use more motivated, that is, non-conventional signs than do spoken languages, and can operate in several dimensions at once, thus calling the universality of linearity into question.

Other kinds of universals can be discovered only through historical and comparative examination, and often only statistically. These include, for instance, the identification of strong tendencies in historical shifts in the pronunciation of sounds, one of the great scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century; and the discovery of implicational hierarchies of word order (Comrie 1981). Much of the most important work in cognitive psychology in the last half century has involved the identification of what appear to be innate, universal patterns in human language and thought (for a recent overview, see Carruthers, Laurence, and Stitch 2005–7).

Attempts to explain language universals have generally proposed a shared biological substratum or have looked to universal aspects of human experience in the world. Such explanations are, for the most part, perfectly reasonable and may well be true. In spite of them or on top of them, there remains the fact of linguistic difference. Language as a human faculty manifests itself in the form, and solely in the form, of specific systems, distinct languag*es*, each different from all the others and existing in quite staggering multiplicity. So much diversity may be seen, in fact, as a corollary of the universal fact that any language is largely systematic at many levels. Given the complexity of the basic architecture of any language (a universal), each system is bound to be unique. Coherent and complex systematicity, that is to say, implies diversity. And we simply do not know how far the implications of this diversity go for human cognition, for perception and memory, for aesthetic experience, or for cultural constructions of the world.

One of the most striking universals of language, then, is its diversity – not an unlimited diversity, but a tremendous diversity nonetheless. This contrasts

with the much more limited physical variation of the species. If we try to sub-classify human beings in terms of physical criteria such as blood type, general body form, or skin coloration, we end up with something like half a dozen varieties – not, of course, the same ones in each case. As against this very limited diversity of the species, we have in languages six to ten thousand extraordinarily complex systems, each operating at several levels at once, each with its own way of organizing sounds, naming things, defining, hierarchizing, and ordering its units, each with its own inherent poetics and aesthetics (in the singular or, more often, in the plural), its own jargons, jokes, puns, and idioms. Given that the usual criterion for differentiating one language from another is mutual unintelligibility, each of the thousands of such systems is complete gibberish to speakers of any other – while it's hard to say at what point a learner really knows a language, it's easy to recognize when you don't know one at all.

Not half a dozen, then, but thousands of languages. It's a scandal, and has been felt as one since the Tower of Babel.

The parable of the Martian

The contrast between the opposed takes on linguistic diversity comes out in opposed conclusions to the same parable. At least three authors have proposed the conceit of a linguistically challenged visiting space alien and the degree of diversity he – it's a boy alien every time – would find or expect to find in human languages. Two of these, George Steiner (1975: 50–1) and Claude Hagège (1986: 54–5), see the diversity of human language as a central and important reality. "A deaf, non-literate observer approaching the planet from outside and reporting on crucial aspects of human appearance and physiological behaviour, would conclude with some confidence that men speak a small number of different, though probably related, tongues. He would guess at a figure of the order of half a dozen" (Steiner 1975: 50). For Hagège, beyond six or so main types, the visitor could "deduce the existence of a dozen derived systems, corresponding to what we call dialects, which would be close enough to each other and to the principal languages that their human users would be clearly aware of the relationship" (1986: 55). Instead, of course, there are thousands of languages, and that's the point.

Noam Chomsky, the arch-linguistic universalist of our time, uses the same parable to opposite effect. For Chomsky, what languages share, especially in the way they are structured, is far more important and interesting than the ways in which they differ. This common structuring emerges particularly clearly in studies of language acquisition in children. Chomsky (e.g., 1988: 41–52) has a visiting Martian scientist have a look at human speech behavior as it is mastered by children. His conclusion is that humans speak a single language with many dialects! In the words of the psycholinguist Steven Pinker, "aside from

their mutually unintelligible vocabularies, Earthlings speak a single language" (1994: 232); the single language of Earthspeak has "thousands of mutually unintelligible dialects" (240).

We should note that in standard usage dialects are by definition mutually intelligible forms of speech; the term "mutually unintelligible dialects" is either an oxymoron or a tendentious, which is to say sneaky, way of renaming what linguists have always called "languages." The two opposed morals of the parable show, it seems to me, just how divided we are today on the issue of language diversity. One of the points of this book is to show that this division, with many of its characteristic examples and discursive tricks, goes back (at least) a good four hundred years.

Universalism and essentialism

An overview of arguments on language differences shows the dominance of two opposed overall positions since the seventeenth century: for the most part, Western scholars have either declared such differences to be of little importance, or they have asserted their importance as integral parts of distinctive national or cultural wholes. In the first view, human perception and reason are everywhere and always the same; languages are either merely different ways of externalizing already-formed ideas or variations on deep structures that are universal. In these views, the apparent differences among languages are a matter of surface formulation of something that is universally human. This has been the majority position in the West at least since Aristotle (*On Interpretation*; cf. Trabant 2000b: 29–30). The historically most powerful opposed view has been that language differences signal or determine differences among radically different ways of thinking and conceiving reality, and that in any given case, language, culture, and thinking all express the same unique essence. There are therefore as many different lived worlds as there are distinct languages. Both of these are relatively (if I may use that word) straightforward and simple positions; both are what we might call easy to think. The distinction between them has been recognized repeatedly, although not always in the same terms. For Steiner, for instance, there have been "two radically opposed points of view":

The one declares that the underlying structure of language is universal and common to all men. Dissimilarities between human tongues are essentially on the surface … [this is] the universalist position.

The contrary view can be termed "monadist." It holds that … the actual workings of human speech … are so diverse, they manifest so bewilderingly complex a history of centrifugal development … that universalist models are at best irrelevant and at worst misleading. (1975: 77)

These opposed positions on the matter of language represent local versions of broader ones marking modern Western thought (on such linguistic ideologies,

see Schieffelin *et al*. 1998). As we will see through this book, models of the nature of language and models of the nature of the world have suggested and reinforced each other throughout the modern period.

The philosopher Louis Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1965 [1970]: 186–9) has made the breathtaking claim that all of modern philosophy has recognized only two modes of causality: transitive causality, which operates through chains of events; and expressive causality, by which an essence reveals itself in manifold expressions. Althusser attributes the articulation of the two types of causality respectively to Descartes' mechanism and to Leibniz's monadism, both in the seventeenth century. One's first reaction to this is to ask how it could be anything but a gross oversimplification of four hundred years of subtle and, God knows, complicated philosophizing. Yet it resonates with other dichotomies that keep coming up in Western thought: that between the natural sciences and the humanities; between explanation and interpretation; between approaches that apply general laws to isolated facts and those that seek to reconstruct systems within which contextualized facts come to make sense. The very perennity of this kind of opposition should give us pause.

While this deeper division in Western thinking goes far beyond questions of language, it remains very much about the evaluation of difference. To oversimplify, but surprisingly little: one side seeks universal laws and uniform explanations of particular phenomena. Among the grand philosophies it is associated with the rationalism and mechanism of Descartes, the empiricism of Bacon and Locke, and their unification by Newton. It has dominated the natural sciences and the human sciences that emulate them, including in particular the cognitive sciences. Here, requiring a label, I am calling this set of approaches to the world universalism. The other side has explored multiple distinctive wholes or configurations, multiple worlds if you like, seeking to interpret each case through a unique key or essence. In its stronger expressions it sees each such world as unique to the point of being closed off from all others, what we might call hermeneutically sealed. I see this second view foreshadowed in the Renaissance fascination with diversity, then realized, as Althusser suggested, in the multiple universe posited by Leibniz in the seventeenth century, and I argue that it reached its full articulation with its application to human societies, cultures, periods of history, even the natural world, by Herder and the Romantics in the latter half of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Since then it has dominated the humanities and some of the human sciences and has represented the "humanistic" alternative to "hard" science. Here, again for lack of a better label, I am calling this approach essentialism. While details of the discussion keep changing, these universalist and essentialist positions – and they are positions in all the senses of the term, almost bodily stances, attitudes, implying distinct tones of voice and styles of argument – can be recognized from the seventeenth century to today: cognitive scientists want to be Newtons of the mind, Chomsky

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identifies with "Cartesian linguistics" (Chomsky 1966), symbolic anthropol-
ogists and hermeneuts talk of cultures and traditions as distinctive "webs of
meaning" in metaphors worthy of Herder (cf. Hymes 1974: 120).

An important aspect of this division, one that we will see coming up repeat-
edly across the centuries, is a difference in defining what constitutes language.
For universalist positions from the Enlightenment to Chomsky, since language
is a mere way of expressing thought or the world, the kind of language to be
studied is above all the declarative sentence bearing referential content. For
pluralist and essentialist positions, on the contrary, since each language has a
density of its own, attention must be paid to the uses of language, especially
poetic and aesthetic uses.

Seeking to bring the same "view from afar" to modern Western society that
anthropologists traditionally bring to very different ones, I have argued (Leavitt
1991a, 1996, 2006a) that this universalist/essentialist split might be understood
as a central element of modern Western culture. This is, of course, to presup-
pose that the modern West *has* a culture amenable to anthropological study.

The choice of the terms universalism and essentialism is problematic, and
for a number of reasons. Either term can mean many things, and essentialism,
in particular, sometimes (as, for instance, in Foley 2005) labels approaches
that posit a universal human essence or essence of thought – and so means the
reverse of my usage here. And as I am using them, universalism and essential-
ism are not really opposites. The opposite of universalism would be particular-
ism, and a particularism can abjure general laws and look to the uniqueness of
each situation without seeking to interpret it in terms of expressive wholes. The
opposite of essentialism, for its part, would be phenomenalism, a claim that all
that matters are surfaces and appearances. One point I want to make in choos-
ing such ill-sorted terms is that we are not dealing here with logical opposites,
but with concepts that are merely opposed culturally. They do not need to be on
the same plane or at opposed poles on a single axis: like natural languages, they
are historical constructs, the result of a clustering of ideas around a fairly small
number of salient metaphors or thought-forms, in a process of elaboration out
of images that was delineated by Althusser's most direct precursor, the phil-
osopher of science Gaston Bachelard. This is what is implied in Althusser's
claim: that the modern West has been fascinated either by the image and ana-
logy of chains of cause and effect forming networks of mechanical interaction;
or by the image of individual uniqueness and self-expression, suggesting ana-
logies of mirrors and polished globes, or of that circle whose center is every-
where and whose circumference is nowhere.[3]

The power of these thought-forms comes at least in part from the fact that
they make almost irresistible sense to us given the kinds of lives we lead in
Modernity.[4] The two that we have just posited are centered respectively on
the chain of mechanical cause and effect, which is at the heart of universalist

conceptualizations, and on an image of mirroring or echoing that makes per-
ceptible a hidden source, which is at the heart of essentialist ones. The image
of the causal chain guides our daily practical, effective interactions with most
of the world; that of the reflecting source guides our daily impractical, affec-
tively charged interactions with each other, but also to a degree with our set-
tings, our landscapes, our homes, our arts and music, our cooking and eating,
our games, our passions. These sides of our everyday lives – trying to fix
the machinery of the world, interpreting the expressive surfaces of unique
personalities – offer hard-to-resist analogies that anchor opposed, but not
necessarily opposite, clusters of representations, arguments, and examples.
The fascinating and compelling character of such images, their ability to hold
thinking captive and block the generation of more adequate paradigms, is
what led Bachelard to label them epistemological obstacles or epistemological
blocks (see Chapter 10 below).

Notwithstanding the topic under discussion, and whatever its complexity, it
is, then, easy and comfortable for modern Western thinkers to slip either into a
typically universalist or a typically essentialist mode of presentation and argu-
ment: these are the modes we are offered and that are reinforced by our lived
experience in a particular kind of society. In this book I will be maintaining
that for questions of language and language differences, the work of Franz
Boas and his students at the end of the nineteenth and during the first four dec-
ades of the twentieth century represents a third option, constructed through the
refusal to adopt either of the available thought-forms and through a search for
different metaphors. Particularly with its development of the notion of linguis-
tic relativity, Boasian linguistics constitutes a radical reposing of the question
of language differences. This theoretical revolution remains virtually unrec-
ognized today. As we will see, most participants on both sides of the current
language debates identify Boasian linguistics and anthropology as one more
expression of what I am calling essentialism, while Boas's own approach has
been presented as totally atomistic, culturally holistic, or as a weird hybrid of
the two. There is some historical truth to all of these characterizations: the fact
that such apparently mutually exclusive readings could all have some validity
should alert us that there is something more complicated going on here than
essentialism, atomism, or mere hybridity.

Beyond the great divide?

Within the debates about language diversity, both sides can muster some strong
evidence. Much human thinking appears to be non-linguistic, involving vari-
ous sensory modes; many people without the ability to speak can still think
just fine. It is clear from experimental evidence that small children function
at very sophisticated levels before they learn language, drawing on non- or

prelinguistic perceptual and cognitive capacities. The universalist position is also bolstered by the facts that translation across languages is a general practice, that *something* is being translated, and that, as I have said, all human languages share important and sometimes surprising traits.

On the other side are the sheer facts of linguistic diversity: the fact that the speaker of a given language is constantly producing and receiving distinctive sound patterns, deploying distinctive signs and senses, creating syntactic structures based on unique architectures. Since no system can have a different sign for every discriminable element of experience, any language requires the grouping of such elements into categories of "the same thing," and so presupposes the forging of analogies that may be quite different from one system to another. Similarly, organizing signs into sentences requires the use of grammatical categories, which can differ among languages, meaning that speakers of different languages may *by this very fact* be turning their respective attention many times a day to quite different aspects of experience. The fact that an English speaker is locating herself in a constantly re-evoked temporal frame through the tenses that are a required part of her verbs, that a Kwak'wala speaker is locating himself in a constantly re-evoked spatial frame through locative particles that are a necessary part of his sentences, that a speaker of Wintu is required to tell how she knows every single thing she says through data-source markers that are a required part of *her* verbs – the fact that I have had to choose between two genders in composing these lines – that this is happening, between speaking and listening, many times (has anyone ever counted?) every day of one's speaking life, surely cannot be discounted.

Indeed, for many people it seems intuitively right that speaking a different language means "thinking" differently or inhabiting a different "world"; for some, this is lived as a personal experience. "I feel," writes the linguist and anthropologist Paul Friedrich, "that American as against British English, and English of any major dialect as against Russian, and both languages as against the Tarascan language of Mexico constitute different worlds. I note that it is persons with experience of foreign languages and poetry who feel most acutely that a natural language is a different way not only of talking but of thinking and imagining and of emotional life" (1986: 16). In a 2002 interview, the psycho-linguist Lera Boroditsky put it:

[T]hese questions of whether or not languages shape thought tend to be very obvious to people out in the world who speak more than one language. You ask any bilingual and they say "Of course language shapes thought; I think completely differently in my two languages." (Boroditsky 2002)

If this is an illusion, it is one that has yet to be explained in a satisfactory way.

The examples of lexical categorization and obligatory grammatical categories that I gave above come straight out of Boas. The Boasians, while often