

Linguistic relativism and the basic expression of rationality in Inuktitut

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This paper presents some reflections on the link between language diversity and human thought. It argues against the view of a complete divide between different modes of thinking, supposedly rooted in language. It shows that in Inuktitut, an Inuit dialect which is structurally quite different from our Western forms of speech, valid thinking obeys principles that are in fact the universal conditions of mutual understanding.¹ The paper is organized as follows. I will first claim that the concept of linguistic relativism is at odds with the existence of what can be called ‘basic theoretical rationality’. I will then focus on the expression of basic theoretical rationality in Inuktitut. And I will finally try to promote a reasonable answer to this question: why is logical thinking unequally valued by different cultures?

1. Basic theoretical rationality as a limit to linguistic relativism

First of all, it is important to make a distinction between the concept of ‘linguistic relativism’ and the concept of ‘linguistic relativity’. Linguistic relativity is the idea that causal relationships exist between language and thought. It is hard to deny that these relationships do in fact exist. Languages tend to influence their speakers’ thought patterns just as they tend to be influenced by those same thought patterns. Let us give two examples. The Inuit numerical system is very seldom used to count above twenty, and it is a fact that the Inuit have some difficulty manipulating large numbers. The Inuit have a radically open relation to the future, and it is a fact that the Inuit language does not make a difference between ‘if’ and ‘when’.

Linguistic relativity is not a new concept. For its essay competition of 1759, the Berlin Academy of Sciences sought responses to the question: “What is the reciprocal influence of the opinions of people on language, and of language on opinions?” Roughly at the same time, we find Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 1974: 73) writing: “[L]anguages, as they change the symbols, also modify the ideas which the symbols express. Minds are formed by language, thoughts take their color from its ideas. Reason alone is common to all. Every language has its own form, a difference which may be partly cause and partly effect of differences in national character; this conjecture appears to be confirmed by the fact that in every nation under the sun, speech follows the changes of manners, and is preserved or altered along with them”.

Linguistic relativism is a more extreme notion. It holds that everything in human thought is relative to the language in which it is conducted. In other words, it posits that one’s native language totally determines one’s thought patterns. Since every language is supposed to be unique, this also implies that each speech community has its own distinct way of thinking, both incommensurable to any other and unassailable from the outside.

Linguistic relativism is not a new concept either. It is often presented as a discovery stemming from the pioneering work of Benjamin Lee Whorf in the 1930’s. But it took shape in European romanticism of the 19th century, at a time when nation-states were consolidating. Wilhelm von Humboldt ([1836] 1988: 54, 60), for instance, considered language as “the formative organ of thought” (in German: “das bildende Organ des Gedankens”) and claimed that different languages necessarily lead to different “worldviews” (in German: “Weltansichten”). In the 20th century, a similar conception was elaborated by the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, who defines

1 I am grateful to Nancy Etok and Raymond Boyd for helpful discussions and comments.

language as “the house of Being”, explicitly states that “a dialogue from house to house (...) remains almost impossible” ([1959] 1971: 5). Linguistic relativism is widespread today among people who are fond of cultural exoticism and those who hold nationalist views.

Nonetheless, there is *at least* one aspect of human thought that is obviously not relative to language. It consists of some fundamental principles pertaining to theoretical rationality. (“Reason alone is common to all”, Rousseau said in the excerpt quoted above.) Theoretical rationality is the use of reason in the field of knowledge and belief. It is opposed to practical rationality, i.e. the use of reason in order to decide how to act. Theoretical rationality relies on three principles, in the absence of which there can be no shared thinking in any language or culture. These principles are not ontological realities. They are logical rules, the first rules of meaningful thought, the heart of what can be called ‘basic theoretical rationality’:

- (i) The principle of *identity*: something is what it is; something is itself.
- (ii) The principle of *noncontradiction*: something cannot be both itself and not itself at the same time and in the same sense.
- (iii) The principle of *excluded middle*: either something is or it isn’t, there is no third option.

These principles happen to have been expressed by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, but there is nothing specifically Greek in them. This is what Geoffroy E. R. Llyod (1990: 86) underlines in his book *Demystifying mentalities*: “When Aristotle first formulated the principles of noncontradiction and of excluded middle, he evidently aimed to make explicit rules that are implicit in all human communication, the rules, indeed, that state the conditions of intelligible communication”. In fact, one cannot dispute these principles without using them in one’s argument against them. In order to disprove them, one would have to base one’s argument upon them.

Basic theoretical rationality also includes various notions directly connected to the three above-mentioned principles. Identity enables us to think sameness and difference. Contradiction leads notably to the concepts of truth-as-coherence, logical nonsense, truth-as-correspondence, falsehood and lie. The excluded middle is more problematic but is linked to the notions of vagueness and proof by absurdity.

All in all, the existence of basic theoretical rationality prevents us from accepting linguistic relativism. Speech communities don’t live in *completely* different mental worlds.

2. The expression of basic theoretical rationality in Inuktitut

By examining a collection of Inuit words, phrases and quotes, we are now going to see how basic theoretical rationality manifests itself in the Inuit language. The Inuit language forms a dialect chain stretching from West Alaska across Arctic Canada to East Greenland. Inuktitut is the name of the varieties of Inuit language that are spoken in the eastern Canadian Arctic. The data in this paper come from Nunavik (Arctic Quebec).

1.2. Identity and difference

The expression of identity and difference in Inuktitut usually involves the noun stem **atji** ‘copy’ or the relational noun stem **asi-** ‘other than’. Two similar entities are designated literally as ‘two mutual copies’. Two identical entities are therefore ‘two exact mutual copies’. When two entities are different from each other, they are said ‘not to be mutual copies’. Alternatively, one

3. Why is logical thinking unequally valued by different cultures?

This said, it is hard to deny that logical thinking seems not to be an end in itself in indigenous societies. The Inuit are no exception. Anyone familiar with their cultural output knows that logical inconsistency doesn't alarm them as much as it may alarm us. Suffice it to mention the wealth of internal contradictions that pervades Inuit traditional tales, the strikingly fuzzy identification and classification of nonmaterial entities in Inuit ontologies (a fuzziness often lost in structuralist anthropology), and the absence of formal reasoning as a topic of discourse among individual Inuit.

The point here is not to suggest that the Inuit and other indigenous peoples lack logical thinking skills.³ It is only to state, in the terms of Nicholas J. Gubser (1965: 227) speaking about the Alaskan Nunamiut, that the Inuit “are very concerned with truth, but not truth in the sense of an ideal abstraction”. So the question is: how should we interpret this relative lack of concern with the rules of logic? The argument I am going to put forward is not original, as it follows on the seminal work of Jack Goody (1977).

Goody thinks that the anthropologists interested in this question “have tended to set aside evolutionary or even historical perspectives, preferring to adopt a kind of cultural relativism that looks upon discussions of development as necessarily entailing a value judgement [...] and as over-emphasising or misunderstanding the differences [...]” (*ibid.*: 2). According to him, however, it is very possible to “admit of differences in cognitive processes or cultural developments” (*ibid.*: 16) without falling into ethnocentric evolutionism.

In fact, the explanation of the difference at stake is not to be found in the deep recesses of the human soul (Volksgeist, mentalities, etc.) but rather in the contingent history of language tools, and specifically in literacy. A long tradition of literacy is a necessary condition for the rise of modes of thought bound by formal logic.

Why is that so? Because writing is not just a passive transcription of speech or an artificial memory: it is an intellectual technology which ends up having an impact on the way people think and talk. It creates a new dimension for reflection, where it fosters abstraction of reasoning as well as logical consistency.

As Goody puts it, “writing [...] made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form; this scrutiny favored the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, skepticism, and logic [...]; the human mind was freed to study static ‘text’ (rather than be limited by participation in the dynamic ‘utterance’), a process that enabled man to stand back from his creation and examine it in a more abstract, generalized, and rational way. By making it possible to scan the communications of mankind over a much wider time span, literacy encouraged, at the very same time, criticism and commentary” (1977: 37).

Let us also read this illuminating excerpt: “A continuing critical tradition can hardly exist when skeptical thoughts are *not* written down, *not* communicated across time and space, *not* made available for men to contemplate in privacy as well as to hear in performance. [...] Here, I suggest, lies the answer, in part at least, to the emergence of Logic and Philosophy. [...] Logic, in its formal sense, is closely tied to writing: the formalization of propositions, abstracted from the flow of speech and given letters (or numbers), leads to the syllogism. Symbolic logic and algebra, let alone the calculus, are inconceivable without the prior existence of writing. More generally, a concern

3 Incidentally, note that the much-reviled Lucien Lévy-Bruhl did not make such a claim either. The following passage is worth quoting: “The mentality of these undeveloped peoples [*sic*] which, for want of a better term, I call *prelogical*, [...] is not *antilogical*; it is not alogical either. [...] By designating it prelogical, I merely wish to state that it does not bind itself down, as our thought does, to avoid contradiction. [...] It does not expressly delight in what is contradictory (which would make it merely absurd in our eyes), but neither does it take pains to avoid it. It is often wholly indifferent to it, and that makes it so hard to follow.” ([1910] 1985: 78)

with the rules of argument or the grounds for knowledge seems to arise, though less directly, out of the formalization of communication (and hence of ‘statement’ and ‘belief’) which is intrinsic to writing. Philosophic discourse is a formalisation of just the kind one would expect with literacy. ‘Traditional’ societies are marked not so much by the absence of reflexive thinking as by the absence of the proper tools for constructive rumination” (*ibid.*: 43-44).

In the case of Nunavik Inuit, one could object that a syllabic writing system has existed for over a century – a system the Inuit are very proud of. But the fact is that the place of writing in the ecology of communication in Inuktitut remains very limited. The Inuit culture is indisputably an oral culture, especially in the Canadian Arctic.

To conclude, I have tried to make two main points. (i) There is a fundamental restriction to the claim that people with different languages think differently. All human beings, everywhere, irrespective of their language, have the same reasoning faculty. An examination of how basic theoretical rationality manifests itself in Inuktitut demonstrates that the Canadian Inuit are included in this generalization. This may seem obvious, but is still a point worth making in light of the claims that are sometimes made about ‘indigenous thought’. (ii) It is probably true that ‘the Inuit’ are less sensitive to the logical form of speech than ‘the Qallunaat’ – i.e. outsiders like the author – may be. But there is no need to suppose a deep mental chasm between the two to account for this difference: it can be traced to historical changes in means of communication, specifically the advent of writing, the increased weight of literacy and its cascading consequences.

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Abstract

This paper begins by stressing the importance of distinguishing between linguistic relativity whose reality is hardly debatable and linguistic relativism which ultimately holds that language communities are locked within their own worldview, hence their own notions of truth. It then rejects linguistic relativism by asserting the existence of a universal core of theoretical rationality comprised at the very least of the logical principles of identity, noncontradiction and excluded middle. It goes on to show how this theoretical rationality manifests itself in the lexicon of a language differing greatly from English: Inuktitut spoken by the Inuit of Nunavik (Arctic Quebec). The definitions provided by Taamusi Qumaq for three words relating to critical thought are translated for the first time. Finally, the paper asks why logic as such is accorded little value in the culture Inuktitut expresses. The suggested answer follows Jack Goody, who holds that a long written tradition is required for the rules of formal logic to take hold in language practices. Writing is not just a transcription of the spoken word; it is an intellectual technology which reacts on the way speakers use their language.