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A Mind for Language: How Language Shapes Our Reality

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A Mind For Language: How Language Shapes Our Reality

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I. Introduction: Some Words on Words

To write of language is an unusual activity, for it is to describe something by, through, and with itself. Language explaining language, this is a logical description with a seemingly inevitable tautology being its necessary conclusion. That language is a such a commonplace fixture of our daily existence many may never truly consider it, define it, or attempt to pin down all its far-reaching associations. However, in considering the extent to which those associations of language influence our lives, the activity of questioning what language is, how it affects us, seems a question tantamount to any other in philosophy or psychology.

It is the intent of this thesis to not just synthesize the material of the fields of psychology or philosophy into cohesive definitions of language and self, but to furthermore pragmatically apply what seem to be the disparate subjects of philosophy and psychology to construct an argument whose aim it is to conflate language and self as different words for the same term .

With this project in mind and given what are supposed to be the broad natures of those subjects which it attempts to grapple with, an introduction to the most basic ideas of what it is which will be explored herein might now be developed. What follows could be thought of as a road-map, intended for the investigation of language, which will help to clarify not only the general direction of the materials addressed following this introduction, but will also establish the importance of the concern directed at merging self and language.

To the reader familiar with even a very fundamental introduction to the subjects of language or self, in either the fields of philosophy or psychology, the undertaking of describing these terms seems huge. Therefore the importance of the previously mentioned road-map is quite clear, without it is easy to follow a thread of thought beyond the point to which it is relevant. For further clarity, as well as for a sense of cohesion, the format of the following introduction makes

use of the same structure as that which is applied to the entirety of this project. This is organized as follows: section two presents some initial thoughts on language and self; the third section, describes the terms of language, whereas the fourth one describes those of the self and a fifth section then deals with the general interactions and observations of the interrelatedness between these terms, to finally have a conclusion which highlights the main insights of the inquiry (a brief appendix with some remarks on poetry follows this thesis).

To be clear, my background and academic interests in the fields of philosophy and psychology play a significant role in the development of the ideas in this paper, and indeed of the thesis, for my original intention, and one which I believe I succeed at, is to combine the opinions and authors from both fields in a way that they could strengthen one-another. It is my intent from the onset and throughout this thesis to not only defend the view advanced by Sapir and Whorf of linguistic relativism, but to extend their thesis with an application of Heidegger, to conflate the terms of language and self. Ultimately, I believe this endeavor is one which is not successful, but which also yields significant implications for further thought on the philosophical relevance of linguistic relativism.

II. Preliminary Words on Language and Self

To begin with a general introduction to the subject of language one might be struck by the thought that, on the face of it, language seems a human activity as natural and automatic as breathing. It is easy to be led to the conclusion that there must be some biological necessity for language, that it is some evolutionary birthright. That the typical reader's worldview has been informed at a time of a tremendous confluence of media awareness about humanity; the exposure to a broad spectrum of languages which are associated with the global human tribe seems to indicate a biological innateness to language.

Indeed, that one is not consciously aware of humans without language it is an easy conclusion to make that humans have been articulated with the aim of language. Yet, to take the time to follow these thoughts through one might see language, from a purely biological perspective, as nothing more than a complicated interaction of specialized organs, completing tasks which their faculties are suited to, but for which they were not intended.

The vocal chords, the teeth, the tongue, even those centers of the brain so commonly associated with language use and production, their purpose were not evolved primarily to produce language. It is the purpose of the vocal chords to communicate¹, the teeth to bite, the tongue to help one eat, and the brain to control those faculties necessary for survival.

Thereby, the reflexive definition of language, is as nothing more than a highly evolved tool, a synchrony of flesh that is a faculty for communication. Yet as beautiful and simple as this description seems, it disregards those other abilities of language of which humanity has intimate knowledge, those abilities that serve no observable evolutionary purpose. These Darwinian

¹ A distinction is made here between communication and language, a functional difference which is developed at greater length in a section of this thesis devoted to a language definition on page 12

outliers, stir the soul, make one yearn, evoke imagination. Those things that make language seem all too “unevolved” to possibly be considered mere communication, create for it, a class of it’s own: Language.

The distinction classified between language and communication which has been purposed, elevates the ability of language as something, which is capable of more than communication, although that is perhaps its original, or fundamental, function (Harley, 9). This additional facility of language, that of inspiration or imagination, might be, for the sake of brevity, shorthand to poetry²; for the poetic inclination of language speaks, not of something, but to it.

Considering now that it is the purpose of ensuing sections to address more completely those definitions regarding language, the project of this section might further be directed to what is it that language might poetically speak to. To be more specific, that the purpose might now be to acquaint the reader with a brief background of what is termed the self .

The typical everyday conception of self could be understood as a consciousness separate from others, and other things. As a stipulative definition this is adequate for our purposes, although those concerned with any objections which might now be leveled against it should be reassured that this definition will be extended when it comes time for self’s development and application in the section devoted to its subject³. Self, as it is defined by that psychology and philosophy which lend themselves to language’s description, is a state of being in the world where one is aware of one’s individuality, yet recognizes a certain interrelatedness between self and other. These two categories of existence are emphatically similar, and indistinct, that which is separate being made separate by conscious distinction. That this conception arrests any move

² For further consideration poetry the reader should refer to the appendix on page 37

³ See page 19

to merge the analogous terms of language and self may become a cause for concern at the point at which it becomes the goal to attempt to address this aim. However, it is interesting to note that with the understanding of self that this perspective affords there is a reality constantly in flux, with self at the eye of the storm, dictating what is without.

Already the definition of self might show certain signs of tension at being placed in a category of its own, for the way in which it is described is only by a means of that which is other from it. Furthermore, the stresses thus identified are those that are not unique to the description given here, for the need for a description of self is as necessary for any description given to language. Rather, these are observations that undercut an issue of interrelatedness which will become increasingly difficult to mitigate further on in more substantive sections dealing with these terms as more distinct from one-another.

The development of a section which investigates the interrelatedness of the terms of language and self is now not only timely, but indeed, as is evidenced by the previously established road-map, proves to be the crux of what it is which will be hashed out in the course of this inquiry. That even those necessarily brief descriptions of language and self already presented might expose a symbiotic relationship between the two would seem to highlight the underlying importance of the thesis given to studying their interrelatedness, as well as their possible confluence.

Philosophy concerned with language seems determined to argue either side of the case made as to language and self's similarities, for Heidegger would make the case that, "We explain it [language] by recourse, to something internal" (Heidegger, 190), a statement which acknowledges the interrelatedness of language and self while also establishing their distinction from one-another. Considered in greater detail, that language is the means by which the self is explained to itself or others it is also the case that language is explained by reference to the self,

which, while circular, also supports the claims made of an interrelation between those terms (this circularity is not necessarily nefarious as the ensuing will show). Similarly, setting aside the philosophy of language and instead turning to the analytical school concerned with language's psychology, there is a very similar reticence to entirely defining language and self by means of each another. Whorf, one of the fathers of linguistic relativism, statement that, "Man thinks in language." is a move that implies a similar interrelatedness and distinction; for as humans are proposed to need language to be, they also need to be in order that there would be language (252).

However, that there seems a tacit acknowledgment of the significance of language to self, or self to language, the outcome of a study of their relationship indicates that they are, at the very least, co-occurring and symbiotic, if one might not be the outright cause for the other.

Irrespective of any claim made now as to a potential for co-causation, both philosophy and psychology seem in agreement that language is unarguably fundamental in shaping not only ones personality but also one's thought (Harley, 9). Both philosophical and psychological literature on the subject of language evidences a perennial interest in the implications language has for human reality, a viewpoint that sees language "as the formal vesture of [our] inmost thoughts and sentiments" (Sapir, 209). This claim, as well as many others like it, reinforce the notion that the language one uses, grows up with, or to which one is exposed has a formative effect on shaping the way one understands oneself and the reality (Harley, 9).

To return to the commonplace conception of language is to see that language is something which is no longer distinct from ideas of its relation to the self; that it might now be regarded as a tool, a means to the self's identity and expression. Similarly, it should also be recognized that the converse is true, that is, that self seems unidentifiable without a language.

This interrelation between the terms of language and self becomes an introduction to

language relativism, that idea advanced by Whorf that, “the linguistic patterns themselves determine what the individual perceives in his world and how he thinks about it” (Hojjer, 47) The immediate implication of any sort of linguistic relativism seems to not disturb the balance which has been struck between language and self because the terms of language and self have been clarified as distinctly separate since their symbiotic dependence on each-other is still manifest.

However, further analysis of linguistic relativism's claims begins to upset the traditional perspective that sees humans as masters of a language tool. The conception of a worldview shaped by language extends much further for relativism about language, it is not merely just a method for understanding the world, it may be the only method. Whorf's assertion that, “those who easily and fluently use the intricate systems of language [and] are utterly blind and deaf to the very existence of those systems... ” explains , by means of the fact that language predicates all else, the reason behind the assertion of language's dominance over what is typically considered its causation, the self (256).

Philosophical ideas of language and self-interrelatedness follow a development similar to that of language relativism. Heidegger's observation of language is that, “we are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word aloud” thereby making his claim one of the logical reducibility of language to operations of thought, if not also of the self (Heidegger, 187). That this might further be tied to a philosophical defense of linguistic relativism, the reflection upon the relationship of language and self seem to follow the same process of co-creation of one-another, in much the same manner as has already been described by Whorf.

The outcome of the claims of linguistic relativism is, at least primarily, that language and thought are consistently interrelated. Even with the basic groundwork of an introduction alone a charitable interpretation of language relativism exemplifies just how fundamentally language

affects the way in which one perceives the world, thinks of the world, or becomes self-conscious. In order to address completely the implications of a linguistic relativism charity cannot be assumed for all the terms that are described as components of this thesis. Thus, that an introduction to the purpose and possible conclusions of this proposal have been made, the project of defining those terms which constitute its foundation might begin with a treatment of what is intended and encapsulated by the critical term of language.

III. Linguistic Disquisitions: what is language?

A summary literature review of the subject of language will inform the casually interested reader of a rich field that is steadily expanding. That the direction of this thesis dictates the direction of our interests helps us to avoid being bogged down by those subjects which are irrelevant to our concerns, but as further direction, the road-map developed in the introduction by which the terms of language, self and linguistic relativism might be described is a method which will also be applied in this section.

To begin by describing what language is commonly considered might be to construct a definition which follows in a manner that is most agreeable to as many perspectives as possible, something which would read as: "Language is a convention of symbols and rules that enable communication" (Harley, 8). That this definition is denuded of all connotations to either the field of philosophy or psychology is a calculation made with the intent that a description of language could be developed which would harness the perspective of psychology and philosophy to collaboratively define language.

Language, presented as it is now, is an idea which is almost a blank slate, and so the project of further defining the terms of its definition, that of symbols, rules, and communication, might be the clearest means to arrive at a functional definition of language; whereby the further goals of the overarching thesis might be addressed.

Symbols, the initial components in the conceptualization of the definition of language presented, are contextually identified by the name language gives them, that of words (Harley, 9). The necessity then, of the inclusion of symbols rather than words in a linguistic definition ,

arises from a sympathetic recognition of the multiplicity of perceptions which become fixed in the activity of naming reality's features⁴, an action somewhat avoided by the use of symbols.

This necessity of the symbols of language to explain multiple perspectives are principally explained by means of a reference to Edward Sapir, a co-author of Whorf's linguistic relativism, whose views postulate that "to become communicable it [reality] must be included in a certain category which, by tacit convention, human society regards as a unit." (Vygotsky, 6). The implication contained in this quotation is that language is both a poor tool for parsing and describing reality, and also it is the only tool available for an approximation of reality's description.

Thus language, as a function of the component of symbols or words, could be understood as a structure which offers glimpses of the indescribable complexity which its modeling attempts to project. The addition of rules into the originating language definition is as a further means by which language's symbolism may be generalized and simplified to a structure that fosters the use of symbols in accordance with one-another to convey meaning of a meta-symbol, or a more complete idea of language.

Finally, the project might now be to clarify of the term 'communication,' which has been clearly encapsulated as a component of language, rather than as an analogous term. Communication's constitution is similar to that of its parent term of language, but differs in that it uses both the symbols and rules of language to convey intention. The functional difference seems to be that communication is not aware of a meaning beyond that which it intends to convey. Examples of this particular relationship are witnessed in the descriptions of poetry which are developed in the appendix, summarized here as the difference between the

⁴ Existential concepts, such as Dasein and Being, which are concerned with subjective relativism are especially sympathetic to the view of language thus developed. For further material consider Heidegger's essay titled *Language*, see bibliography

communication of ideas that a surface reading offers and the grappling with the meaning of the poem which language attempts. For, that communication may not convey the entire picture intended by the poem, language's extrapolation of a personal meaning is still entirely dependent on its comprehending the superficial content of the poem.

Thus, language's definition might be summarized as a function of components that avoid fixed definitions; generalizing symbols to the point where a single word is the potential for metaphor. However, that the description and definition of language have been established, very little yet has been said about the ontology of language's source, something which should be considered, for the investigation of this issue might also apprehend linguistic interaction or causation by the term of the 'self.' This analysis of language's origin, which began in the course of the introduction of language, is recapitulated as firstly an examination of the biological as the factitious foundation of language. The shift is now from the philosophical or psychological investigation into a consideration of the biological, for it is in the biological structures wherein language and self seem housed.

Given the construction of the body, the function of that which is fundamentally orchestrated to be a conditioned instrument for survival; communication beyond that capacity which ensures evolutionary dominance seems of little concern to the survival of an ape (Greenspan & Shankney, 129). Indeed it is no small task to explain away those components that give humans language by their necessary purposes, none of which seem to be evolved with considerations for language first. Indeed, the human activity of language, seems no mere biologically engendered faculty, but is instead an evolutionary eccentricity.

However, the view expressed, that language is not an evolutionary mechanism, but rather an amalgam of disparate functions, is one to which objections can be leveled. As a counter to a claim of biology's superfluity to language's development or substantiation the contemporary

example of language loss and recovery of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor offers an opposing perspective which also extends a potential for language and self-interrelation.

Dr. Taylor, a neuroanatomist who suffered a debilitating stroke that effectively shut down the left side of her brain⁵, is a living example of language recovery made possible through a cognitive restructuring. Conscious throughout her stroke, and subsequent reacquisition of language, Dr. Taylor gradually regained her left-brain functions over the course of 8 years, but describes her initial loss of access to the language centers of her brain as peaceful, “a silent mind” (Taylor). As she lost those faculties that allowed her to use language Dr. Taylor self-reported a simultaneous loss of distinctness, a loss of her sense of self (Taylor).

From the evidence of this example it seems a legitimate inference to suggest that language and self are, at the very least, co-located biologically; for their deep-seated interrelatedness seems too great a coincidence to be merely chance. However, as it is the project here to develop a more clearly articulated perspective on the origins of language, the outcome of examples which indicate a biological imperative for the reacquisition of language could also be taken to say something of the innateness of language.

The claim for an innateness of language holds that there is a certain cognitive predisposition to the development of a language or that, “possession of human language is associated with a specific type of mental organization.” (Chomsky, 62). Although a premise has been raised which indicates that language may be innate to cognitive biology, the implications of such a theory indicate that this is merely a predisposition, that language must still be learned (Chomsky, 64). Thus, the incorporation or further pursuit of innateness are subjects which are fundamentally irrelevant to the pursuits of establishing either the cause of language or self, for it

⁵ For those unfamiliar with brain structure, the left side of the brain, in addition to being considered the portion concerned with logic and fact retrieval, is also that which contains those areas of the brain associated with language use (Harley, 74).

is not the aim herein to investigate whether language is a human activity, but rather it is the project to question whether language is an activity that makes one human.

The confluence of language and self is a subject which is reified, that is made more real, by means of an application of linguistic relativism, the hypotheses of which lend itself to the proposition of a interrelation of those terms. The functioning of language, as described by Whorf, is that, “each language performs this artificial chopping up of the continuous spread and flow of existence” (253). Those hypotheses of linguistic relativism advance a theory of a perceptual linguistic relativity, that one’s reality is conceptualized through language. Although conceptualization alone does not necessarily imply the thesis of relativism, the functional manner in which language becomes interwoven with the term of self does.

Explained as such, the outlines of the manner in which language is utilized are clarified and made distinct. Linguistic relativism, with the incorporation of the prevailing view of language, establishes the generalized symbolism of language as a filter, juxtaposed between self and reality as the only means by which internal or external states may be communicated (Whorf, 251).

Furthermore, the communication made possible through language of or to that internal state of self, is commonly considered the only method available for the self’s expression. For that, “the individual’s experience resides only in his own consciousness and is, strictly speaking, not communicable.” is only a rejection of any attempt to make a linguistic description of the self mere communication of its complexity (Vygotsky, 6). This position is recapitulated in Heidegger’s proposition that “No one would dare to declare incorrect, let alone reject as useless, the identification of language as audible utterance of our inner emotions...” (191).

Understood as such, linguistic relativism compounds a relationship only between language and thought, which establishes them as conflated terms. Yet there are clear implications

for the manner in which linguistic relativism might be applied to considerations of the self, for although language might be considered, initially, an interlocutor between self and reality its association and merging with thought infer an internalization of those rules and symbols of language onto the mechanism of thought itself (Sapir, 218).

The description of self as interrelated with language is one which might be revisited when it comes time to define what is described as self, more important to the concern of defining language are the implications linguistic relativism has for the definition of language. Linguistic relativism substantiates the view that, "Language and thinking are not straightforward or the same from person to person" (Whorf, 252), the issue of defining language is that the terms by which it becomes defined are necessarily recursive, the conclusion of which is that language is defined by itself, "language is language" (Heidegger, 188).

The irony of defining language by itself is that there is no apparent method by which to define language without itself, for that linguistic relativism collapses the terms of language and thought it seems impossible to express a description that is not a tautology. However, that language has been described as a symbolic generalization of reality, to define language by itself would be a move to make those slick syllables stick to themselves, evidencing that to define language by itself is almost to avoid defining language altogether.

As a consequence of the development of ideas of linguistic relativism, any attempt now to accurately describe the internal complexity of the self seems apprehended by language's monopoly on expression. Furthermore, that in the course of its explanation linguistic relativism conflated language and thought, due diligence in defense of self might attempt to reject the approximation of those terms, as the applicability of language to thought might also be taken to imply that language could further be conflated to the idea of self.

However, thus far, self has been expressed only by means of its functioning through the

manner which it is understood by language. This observation undercuts the need to address more fully the 'self' as a term which is potentially distinct from that of language.

IV. Disquisitions on the Self: What is the 'Self' Without A Name?

In progressing now to the project of describing and defining self the immediate impression which is presented is that it seems as though the self has already been described, to a certain extent, in the process of outlining the characteristics of language. As a method to incorporate the material previously developed, this section might follow an internal structure similar to that of this thesis overall, that is of the description of language, self, and their concordance.

Now that the self has been implicitly and explicitly described through language, a definition of self might begin with that idea which is central to directing a focus from language to self. Initially, and throughout its description, language's ability to describe the self is something qualified by the explicit limits put on language in its capability to completely describe the self. The perspective as to language's inability to describe the self, is compounded in statements about its limits, "It is well to remember that the emotional aspect of our psychic life is but meagerly expressed in the build of language⁶" (Sapir, 217), or furthermore, Whorf's view that "the tremendous importance of language cannot, in my opinion be taken to mean necessarily that nothing is back of it" (Hoijer, 50) this 'back of it' being what has so far been described as the self. As Hoijer proposes in his analysis of Whorf's statement the thing "in back" of language is also without it (Hoijer, 50).

That the self is something more complex than can be described by even the finite terms of a symbolic linguistic expression, makes the project of defining the self the sort of undertaking which can only succeed through application of that finite terminology to make metaphor which

⁶ Emotion here is generally considered a part of the self (Harley, 123)

speaks not at but to the subject it describes through a sort of poetry⁷.

Therefore, to begin to define self by terms other than its direct interaction with language one becomes reflectively aware that the self seems a perpetual thing, yet also something which is only apparent in the way in which it delineates one's reality. In this manner the self truly does not seem all that distanced from language's operations, for that, "Each language performs this artificial chopping up of the continuous spread and flow of existence in a different way" (Whorf, 253), seems a description analogous to that which descriptions of the self consider.

Indeed, the self seems identified by that which it is not, for it is conscious of other people, other things, those fixtures of its existence such as the cars on the road, the leaves falling from the trees. The self is aware of their features, the way they are comported in its world; their colors, smells, shapes and sounds, also their relationships, how they affect the self.

Yet, it seems that even the means by which one attempts to avoid language's ordering and influence on the self is muddied by that "artificial chopping" which seems unavoidable in the use of language (Whorf, 252). The project of avoiding language in thinking about self might then not be possible, in that the structure herein requires a working through of language. To further consider claims made by Whorf that, "Thinking also follows a network of tracks laid down in the given language," one is confronted by the milieu of language as something which inhabits the thoughts about the self if not also any part of the self which can be reflected upon (Whorf, 256).

However, one does not require merely the word of a linguist to present this idea. Indeed, it has been observed already that whatever it is that is meant by the self, the self, in becoming self-conscious, uses words in its self-description. Furthermore, the point is made that there is a sort of internal dialog occurring within oneself, one's consciousness is stirred, it self-reflects,

⁷ Considerations of the ability to speak to the self, poetically, are addressed in the appendix

assigns meaning, words. But the project here is not merely to give description of linguistic relativism, but also to provide counter-arguments which might ultimately strengthen the linguistic relativity which is encountered here.

From the description of 'self' as something which observes and delineates its reality one might thus be drawn to consider the self analogous to language. For those authors already sourced in the section on language, as a rejection of the move which carries relativism through to all concerns of self, offer description of the self as other from language. The treatment of Whorf's writing by Hoijer attributes that there are "processes which are prior to linguistic patterning" (Hoijer, 50), a distinction also made by Heidegger "Language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man's being" (Heidegger, 187) as closest to, but still distinct from, the self. The distinction of self and language is staunchly defended by the authors who influence linguistic relativism, although a interrelation between those terms is also acknowledged, a relationship which now might be further examined.

That the self is a material which is beyond language, behind the curtain, creates an overwhelming issue which follows from the manner in which it makes language and self distinct; that is, that, as language and self are supposedly distinct the issue becomes one, not of avoiding tying descriptions of self to linguistic processes as before, but of now being able to truly use language to define something which, it is claimed, exists without language. And yet, this does not mean that any project to define the self is doomed to futility, only that if an attempt is made to consider the self one must carefully define the context for that which is to be considered, and indeed the means by which that consideration is made.

That the tool for considering the self, thought, has been conflated with the term of language renders the evidence it provides only as capable of describing the self as any similar application of finite techniques to describe an infinite idea. To further the content of this claim

reference is given here to Whorf,

“Thought follows a network of tracks laid down in a given language, an organization which may concentrate systematically upon certain phrases of reality, certain aspects of intelligence and systematically discard others featured by other languages. The individual is utterly unaware of their organization and is constrained completely within its unbreakable bonds.” (Hoijer, 50)

Thus, that the message elucidated from the content of Whorf's statement speaks to a restriction of the world-view available to the self, is a issue for describing the self which becomes significantly more problematic by the further limits placed on language.

Consequently, the idea that the infinite complexity of the self cannot be described by the finite tool of language is taken further; impoverishing the defense that language could at least hope to accurately describe the symbols of the self. Linguistic relativism, of the sort which has been accepted in the analysis of terms thus far, is made more personal, in that Whorf's statement exposes the necessarily restrictive inability of language to comprehend the unfamiliar (Hoijer, 50). This renders the project of describing language not only one which is necessarily incomplete because of the descriptions finitude thought of by language, but one which now also seems, due to the predication of language, something which may not even be personally witnessed.

Yet, despite the qualifications of Whorf, one might do well to not blindly accept this viewpoint, and to seek personal evidence of the suppositions made by linguistic relativism. Yet, the evidence seems stacked against a move to disprove the deep-seated relativity of language; for means of example one might make use of the linguist's tool of a simply conducted lexical priming task. Ask a participant to give answers to the simple arithmetic of $5+5$, $4+6$, $21-11$, 2×5 , $9+1$, (all of which have the answer 10) and follow up by asking what aluminum cans are made of. The knee-jerk response should be for the participant to give the answer “tin” as the material from which *aluminum* cans are made, because of the lexical priming made by the repetition of

the phonetic neighbor of “ten”. The lexical priming done here of which there are many similar examples indicates just how subtly language might change the way one's thoughts are ordered in a manner similar to the method Whorf describes.

Certainly the notion that the experience of reality is restricted or impoverished by the use of language is problematic, but so far the notion has been one that language is simply a way of coming to the world. Yet in considering the whole of what it is that linguistic relativism purposes the implication is not just that language changes the modes of thought, but that language also changes the capabilities of the self, as its being the only means to the self's expression.

This argument is made more persuasive in that there already exists factual evidence that language gives cause to a rewiring of biological structures. One needs only to consider Broca's or Wernicke's areas to see a specialization there, informed by a linguistic need. Indeed, to reference back to the prior example of Dr. Taylor's co-occurring recovery of language and self the evidence to language's capacity to effect physiological changes might indicate that the sort of metaphysical restructuring of the self that linguistic relativism makes the case for is not just possible, but likely.

Certainly the sort of neuroplasticity with concern to language seems to support the view of linguistic relativism, but it should be noted that although cases of a cognitive restructuring of the sort described are somewhat common there are exceptions to the rule, those situations which detract somewhat from the support this offers linguistic relativism.

However, just that there now exists a pertinent example to the potential for language to affect the self one might also consider potential counter-arguments to this claim, for the self is not something which goes undefended from linguistic relativism, even by the language relativists themselves. For that language is a tool for describing self, much in the way intended here, since as Heidegger writes, “We encounter language everywhere. Hence it cannot surprise

us that as soon as man looks thoughtfully about himself at what is, he quickly hits upon language too, so as to define it by a standard reference to its overt aspects” (187). This is now to revisit the prior claim made as to the distinction of self and language, that although “man looks thoughtfully about himself” he uses language to generalize experience “to define it by a standard reference to its overt aspects”. Additionally, language is also, “a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of [...] consciousness” (Whorf, 251). Defended by means of those ideas which see a distinction between self and language the understanding of self, as it stands now, has been only moderately enhanced by the treatment it has been given herein. Yet there is no loss of traction in these ideas, for language is a vehicle even more clearly defined by the analysis which was intended to be made of the self, for to gain perspective affords the recognition that self has, perhaps been as defined by language as it ever could be, either in the course of five or 500 pages. For the quality of those things which language can say of the self are not enhanced by the quantity of words which are given to describe it.

Thus, to summarize a perspective of the project as it now stands the self and the opposing concept of reality are channeled and understood by themselves, and one-another, through the medium of language/thought. Consequently, with language and self now defined by their antithetical requirement of each-another the project of this thesis would seem to conflate those terms into one.

V. Exploring the Relation between Language and Self

Throughout this thesis we have struggled with providing distinct descriptions of either language or self in ways that these terms are not related back to the other term for either causation or meaning. Yet as we have attempted to not refer to the other term we have found that this has become increasingly difficult, not only in our own writing, but also in the course of our literature review as well.

The problem identified is one which seems more pronounced from the psychological perspective, in that the differentiation on language from self is near as to being nonexistent as it makes no difference, something which might seem a failing from a school of thought so concerned with the self or psyche. From this psychological perspective we might recall Whorfian relativism of the sort which substantiates a thesis that: “The world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds” (Whorf, 213). Whorf’s claim might be further understood as holding language as something which constructs one’s theories of the world, which is to say that language holds influence on the manner in which one’s theories are constructed. But with the qualifier, for Whorf, that language does not absolutely constrain those theories (Devitt & Sterelny, 200-201).

The implications Whorf’s relativism had on contemporary thought is something that pioneered a psychological paradigm shift, popularizing a notion that the self and language co-occupy the same metaphysical space, something seen through in the prior example of neuroplasticity. Yet not only does Whorf express the idea that language is a filter by which we perceive reality, his thesis extends the interrelatedness of language and our perceptions to a

much deeper level than the mere superficial comprehension of sense-data, for while, “[language] is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience”, it forces a structural shift in our cognitions whereby, “[thought] follows a network of tracks laid down in a given language” (Hojjer, 50).

The full psychological implications for this gestalt approach towards the interrelated relationship of language and self is enhanced and exaggerated by Edward Sapir, who outlines a similar view as to the construction of self as well as language, that is that “Language and our thought-grooves are inextricably interrelated, are, in a sense, one and the same...” (218).

The calculating reader might notice the emphasis placed on thought, with the seeming implicit assumption from linguistic relativists that thought is a practical approximation of the self. Certainly thought seems integral to our concepts of self, both philosophical and psychological, but to merely acquiesce that thought is made through language, and thereby purpose that the self is similarly constructed, would seem a move that supposes a great deal without providing much evidence to back its claim.

However, it is not as though these ideas have been developed in some sort of a vacuum. The philosophy that we have investigated in the preceding sections has seemed generally agreeable to a conception of linguistic relativism.

In the course of building our thesis of language and self's co-occurrence linguistic relativism might be thought of as a tool or building block for the foundations of our goals. Although, as we have observed, there is still a distinction made between self and language, the collapse of categories of thought and language seems to make the further association of language and self all the more readily available, given the explicit and necessary ties between self and thought.

To take these premises to their logical conclusion would certainly seem to benefit our

thesis, and yet it would seem that all of what we are basing any sort of a tentative conclusion upon is made through a trust of the relativist position that language and thought are indistinguishable terms, an argument which seems so substantive that we have yet to consider an opposing view. However, now that we intend to more thoroughly depend upon the assertions made by linguistic relativism we would do well to examine the strength of what may become the core of our foundation as well as any objections which might oppose its claims.

To begin, we might recall the central theme of language relativism, something which we will no doubt have become familiar with by now, this position describes language/thought relativism as that “language shapes our ideas rather than merely expressing them” (Hoijer, 47). Further, Sapir and Whorf both describe language's rules and methods as synonymous with those ways in which thoughts operations precede, making metaphor where language is the track by which our train of thought is carried forth.

Yet in encapsulating all of our potential for thought by means of an imperative claim that thought is a language operation we might see a very strong anti-relativist counter-argument beginning to develop, principally one which explores the possibility of non-linguistic thought.

By means of the very definition and claims made by linguistic relativism with concern to thought's capacity beyond language, that is of there being no thought which can be related without language, the initial move of abject denial for the possibility of non-linguistic thought would be a crippling blow to this objection if not for the fact that personal examples of seemingly non-linguistic thoughts can be presented.

The objection to the assertion that language and thought can be conflated might utilize any number of commonplace examples of thought which seems to bypass what language relativists would consider an unavoidable structure. For the purposes herein the strongest possible example of non-linguistic thought might be the individual who experiences

synesthesia⁸. The experience of the individual with synesthesia is not simply about thoughts with pictures, or colors to sounds, but about a mixing of the senses, an indistinctness to the delineation supposed definitive. Furthermore, the sensation of everyday thought is understood differently, words or numbers are perceived as colors.

The individual's case of synesthesia something which is quite non-linguistic in its expression, for the ideas it presents seem to not need language for us to conceive of their happening. If we are to consider the further implications of the individual listening to a piece of music and expressing a synesthetic response of seeing colors as the piece progresses it might appear that language is completely removed from this thought.

Certainly these seems a valid objection, the example seems thought-like, and in a manner which also appears to be without language. Indeed, if we were to leave this objection merely thus the display of such common non-linguistic examples of thought generally could be said to cripple the relativist claim as to language's supposed monopoly on the scope and ability of thought. If there can be thoughts without language, than the entire claim that this thesis attempts to make might now have made an enemy of language relativism, for the refutation of thought without language would be just as much a blow to the conjugation of self and language as it is to the language relativist's claim.

However, those examples of non-linguistic thought previously considered might not be as much of an objection as an initial investigation might suppose. Certainly those happenings of synesthetic thought and experience suggest that there might be a comprehension which is attainable without language. Herein would the description of these "thoughts" become manageable and readmitted into a language relativism, for it would seem that the happenings of

⁸ Synesthesia, a condition in which one type of sensory stimulation creates perception in another sense. Commonly manifest in a sensation of color in response to sounds, a reinterpretation of sense-data (Britannica).

visual thought is only non-linguistic on the cusp of its comprehension, that is immediately before it is processed and made linguistic by our thinking of it.

Thus it seems that non-linguistic thought is only that which has not been thought of, and therefore not really thought at all. To unpack this statement somewhat, non-linguistic thought seems nothing like thought in the manner commonly understood, for with non-linguistic thought it becomes impossible to refer or to address the ideas conceived of by these means without linguistic thought.

This seems true of any occurrence which is not reflected upon, these activities are merely happening without language at their conception, at the moment we *think* of them they become linguistically framed. Their happening is given language by its being thought of, by its being filtered through the processing which understands the world through language.

What is the visual thought without the association of shape, color, sound, and any other characteristics by which they comport themselves in the world. Indeed, what are these terms at all unless conceived of through thought, through language. They may only become substantive by their being categorized into means of comprehension via language. That the individual possessed by synesthesia sees colors in the music they hear means nothing of to them until it is conceptualized, identified, categorized by their thought, by their language.

Furthermore, without a linguistic framing of what we have purposed to call non-linguistic thought, those ideas non-linguistic thought describes are as though they do not exist, for as they are not differentiated, they do not pass into our I until we have comprehended them through language.

Thus thought and language seem rationally stripped of anything which might be conceived of without language, reasserting that “thought is nothing but language denuded of its outward garb.” (Sapir, 223) and further reinforcing the union of these terms which were

challenged by the proposal of a non-linguistic thought.

That linguistic relativism has outlined a means that purposes thought and language as structurally and categorically interdependent, the final move of this thesis would seem to require a similar reduction, this time of thought into self, thereby of language into self. Yet, so far, rather than purposing that self and language are co-occurring, it seems that what we have said is more along the lines that language is how we come to know either the self or the world.

In reviewing all the material covered thus far it seems that little ground has been gained, for the metaphor which sees ego and world at opposite poles with the lens of language between the two is no different than that which was originally proposed by language relativism. Yet as a necessary function of it's becoming the foundation of its further questioning of a deeper language relativism, this perspective of the unity of thought and language has been greatly strengthened.

Consequently, in attempting to conflate the term of language into the fundamental fiber of the self this confluence may become more readily achievable by the project now simply being one of equating self to thought. That thought is defined as an activity of the mind or self, the description of thought as a component of self seems not altogether problematic.

To return to the description of language as that middle point by which the world is translated and focused onto the I of the ego, and by which the I's intention could be communicated to the world, seems to present a concept of a functional split between those terms of self and language. This clear delineation between language and self is as much accepted by Whorf, "My own studies suggest to me that language , for all its kingly role, is in some sense a superficial embroidery upon deeper processes of consciousness" (Hoijer 47) as it is by Heidegger, "The intimacy of world and thing is not a fusion. Intimacy obtains only where the intimate – world and thing – divides itself cleanly and remains separated in the between of world

and thing, in their inner, division prevails...” (195) The problematic implication thus becomes one that suggest that these views run counter to the argument of this thesis, which is to say that their opinion is one which sees a functional division between the self and language.

Thus, the proposal of this thesis may be far more radical than it might first appear, for to merely imply that thought and self are the same is a project which is undertaken by simply drawing together the happenings of thought and self, hardly a revolutionary idea. However, with the introduction of language there is still an immediate and unclear resistance, the reasoning for which may be clarified once this hypothesis as to language and self's confluence is seen through.

There are many ways to associate thought and self, and indeed citations from any number of textbooks which we could offer up as evidence to support a claim that these terms are dualistic notions of a unity (Harley, 29). Yet although the terms of language and thought are so consistently exchanged as for there to be little difference between the two, at least for the purposes of this thesis, there is still the sense that to not address the more strongly opposed combination of *language* and self would be to leave any ensuing claims open to certain criticism of this undefended position.

Functionally, it seems that the self is entirely dependent upon language for its conception, for to become self-reflective it must place itself in a position external to its own. The only positions which have been developed by Heidegger, Sapir, Whorf or any other, and from which vantage point the self might inspect its comportment, exist at a distance from which the self must make any reflective considerations through the previously described lens of language.

In either sense, the foothold from which self begets a defining perspective is only one from which language is necessary. Yet this assertion has to do battle with those stipulations for the language relativism of Whorf “the tremendous importance of language cannot, in my opinion be taken to mean necessarily that nothing is back of it, of the nature of what has traditionally

been called 'mind'⁹." (Hoijer, 50). At best this reveals that Whorf gives a certain preference to the self as somehow functionally non-linguistic, at worst this approach would cripple the potential for Whorf's development of language relativism into a philosophical argument, one which could become an absolute dismissal of non-linguistic reality.

Regardless of the intention of Whorf's elevation of the self to that of a non-linguistic entity, the perspective it advances is one which is now indefensible given how language's relation to thought has been thus developed. For, that we have already undergone the seemingly less radical move of establishing language and thought's interrelatedness by a dismissal any non-linguistic thought, an application of the same method would yield the same effect to those terms of language and self.

Thus, with a simple reapplication of a viewpoint constructed through language relativism it seems the aim of this thesis has elegantly, if somewhat simply, presented itself. However, that language and self have been rationally equivocated it might become apparent that this can no longer be the simple conclusion of the development of the tool which brings about such confluence of language with thought and self, for there is still one bastion as of yet unexamined by language but which is explicitly hinted at throughout an examination of Heidegger, Whorf and Sapir, this wordless realm is the world.

In merging the terms of self and language, the language-lens by which the world was categorized becomes integrated with the self, removing what might have been regarded as a sort of barrier between self and the world, combining not just self and language but self and world.

If this seems utterly too quick, the slight of hand might be examined in greater detail. To clarify, if the same application of language is applied to the world as it was to the self it seems that language and reality might similarly collapsed. As language is how one categorizes and

⁹ Mind for Whorf is analogous to our term of the self (Hoijer, 50-52)

understands the world, that is through its delineation and parsing that Whorf and Chomsky referred to, the application of this language tool dismisses any reality which is non-linguistic simply because it cannot be expressed (Whorf, 253; Chomsky 56). For linguistic relativism builds a case that there is no more a method to understand the world without language than there is to understand the self/thought without language (Harley, 27).

That so much has been said in support of linguistic relativism it would seem bad form to not give a charitable presentation of an objection which is leveled against the sort of total linguistic relativism which is purposed herein. An objection to the sort of conclusion which linguistic relativism poses might take the form that rejects the assertion of linguistic relativism which conflates language and the reality. This much follows from Devitt and Sterelny's view, which argues that "imposition of experience is one thing, imposition on the world is another" (202). This key idea of a thesis opposed to linguistic relativism accepts the description given here of a filter of language, and rejects the further application of linguistic relativism's "imposition on the world".

However, to understand linguistic relativism in this way, indeed to take the message of this thesis as one which sees an imposition of linguistic relativism on reality, is to misunderstand the way in which *this* linguistic relativism is intended. Certainly, a specific sort of linguistic relativism could said to operate in the manner Devitt and Sterelny describe, a hard sort of linguistic relativism, this being the sort of linguistic relativism which sees language as whole (meta-language perhaps) and its methods, as strict immutable definitions of reality, something which would be true if linguistic relativism's claim was made to extend pass the point of natural language. Yet what has been described in the linguistic relativism we have developed is a much softer stance, namely that the language of symbols is a participation between individual and reality, only something which functionally predicates our comprehension not as something

which forms the physical materials of our existence beyond ourselves.

Thus, the distinction between the sort of linguistic relativism of a natural language vs. that of a meta-language of the sort Devitt and Sterelny reject is that natural language is participatory. Meta-language is the sort of structure which imposes itself on the world, on the self, on reality as a whole, but the natural language which our linguistic relativism explores is as much transformed by us as we are by it. To acknowledge the linguistic relativity that shapes our thoughts, to reflect upon the necessity for thought and perception's transformation to become communicable through language, the only conclusion which it seems possible to make is the one which we have come to; that is as language is our only way of understanding reality, language is our reality.

VI. Concluding Remarks

As a sort of conclusion there is a newfound honesty in the perspective originally proposed which saw language as a lens, and it is this idea which now comes full circle (albeit not circularly). That the borders between self, language, thought and reality have been broken down to expose an underlying unity does nothing to impoverish the original perspective of a language lens. Indeed, not only does this metaphor remain functionally sound, but also it serves as an excellent illustration of how language structures one's reality. With the unified composition purposed by the culmination of this research the outcome of this thesis' project creates for itself a new conception of reality; one to which the division of language from reality becomes possible only in the manner by which language itself comports its structure.

In reflecting upon the content of this thesis the perspective which is developed seems double-edged, for as the significance of the material outlined is made more clear, the intent, that all its distinction and delineation is discordant with its thesis becomes more apparent. That linguistic relativism can be applied to the point where its structure merges with all of individual reality is a significant concept, and there is little doubt in my mind that it is one to which there are any number of objections which may be leveled. My conclusion then is not that the thesis I have developed has tied up all the loose ends, but that it has surely made linguistic relativism relevant to philosophy in a way that, even if it is opposed, will develop a critical questioning of the distinction of language, self, and reality.

From personal experience we know that the lens of language can either be very clear or very dark, some applications of language appear more or less muddied by their phrasings, but with the newly developed understanding of language there comes the certainty that language can only ever say as much as it does, for there is no other way to understand reality. Language is the

alpha, it is the omega. Language is God.

APPENDIX

Early on poetry was suggested as a means or method by which language's capabilities beyond communication was developed, and it is this thought which should be further developed here. I would propose that communication speaks of something, in that it is purposeful, 'pick up the book', 'the sky is blue' there is little which can be extrapolated from these acts of *communication*. On the other side of things there is language. Language communicates, yes, but it can speak to something more than by mere command or questioning, we infer and hypothesize because of language. These are big claims to make, but given an example, of poetry perhaps, it becomes sufficiently easy to think of the difference in this way.

"Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow."
— Robert Frost¹⁰

In Robert Frost's poetry there is a communication of ideas, we comprehend a third party observing a stranger's corps of woods, he is watching it snow, etc. Were we given to doing so we could go through this poem line-by-line and dissect the information communicated in it, but to do so would be to miss the meaning.

What meaning would be missed? With poetry, perhaps more so than with any other written or spoken phrasing, there is an assumed agreement that what happens between the lines of poetry is more important than those words which string the thoughts together. It is as much the mood conveyed as it is the content. Similarly, although it is much less readily apparent; there is a reading between the lines to language, something which extends beyond communication. This unrestricted imagining is borne out of the very relativity of language itself, for while

¹⁰ 189

language is a social animal it is made possible by those individuals who participate in its use and being.

Thus, by understanding language as participatory we can comprehend that while Robert Frost may write *of* things, he also writes *to* them, *to us*. I believe the *us* to which he writes is the self, the soul, the unconsciousness (if we need to put it in psychological terms). When we speak to something we, as Martin Buber might put it, recognize the “I thou” relation. This is an idea not dissimilar to those thinkers we will be looking to for inspiration throughout the course of this examination of language.

Yet, how does language, through poetry, speak to something, speak to the truth? It would seem that poetry, with its explicit acknowledging of the moves and mood of language, of its nature to be defined, side-steps the finality of understanding by being defined by that one thing which language cannot understand; itself. Poetry is a participation through language, it is a bridge from the internal to external, a wormhole through categories and structures, most significantly, it is a meta-symbol; a combination of those loosely defined materials called words strung together to speak to something which cannot be described.

Only through poetry can we have a subsisting definition of any experience which remains as indistinct and organic as ourselves and the world around us. We might again consider poetry, this time as a description of emotion which is ineffable to language definitions, but which poetry can speak both of and to.

Having a coke with you

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irun, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne
or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona
partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt
partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches
partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary
it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can be anything as still

as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it
in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth
between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles
– Frank O'Hara¹¹

With O'Hara's poem we have the example of how language can transmute identity to become a happening that is truly eternal, defiant, as though its construction was not built with the concrete words of narrow definitions. We should not lambast language, for language is, and to imagine a world without it is to imagine no thing. We can rest easy in that it seems that through certain methods we can escape those claustrophobic definitions which make our world too small.

It seems that if words can be made to work as they do in poetry the self, the I, is removed from the equation, and all strict delineation of the word falls away. The I is allowed to see itself, not through the supposed God's-eye view that language mightily defends, but as something indistinct. Circular although this understanding might be we need not be concerned by it's recursivity unless it is an issue of regress. That language and self seem co-causing need not bother us greatly, for there is no necessity for anything external to give them meaning, they are contained, organic, and symbiotic.

¹¹ 360

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