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# Linguistic 'Pictures of the World' or Language 'in the World'? Metaphors and Methods in Ethnolinguistic Research

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# LINGUISTIC *PICTURES OF THE WORLD* OR LANGUAGE *IN THE WORLD*? METAPHORS AND METHODS IN ETHNOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Badania etnolingwistyczne zdobyły w ciągu ostatnich dwu dekad znaczną popularność. Najważniejszą formułą metaforyczną określającą główny przedmiot tych badań jest „językowy obraz świata". W związku z tym, iż powstają obecnie projekty studiów komparatystycznych na dużą skalę, warto być może rozważyć, czego takie ujęcie etnolingwistyki nie uwzględnia. Wizualna metafora obrazów implikuje, że mówiący są w stanie wyjść poza świat i patrzeć nań (oraz nazywać go) z zewnątrz. Artykuł omawia dwie konsekwencje tej metafory, które mogą przysporzyć problemów. Po pierwsze, wyizolowanie języka ze świata ludzkich działań, którego język wszak jest częścią, prowadzi do przyjęcia kognitywistycznego modelu znaczenia jako oddzielnego strumienia komunikacji. Taki model nie pasuje do codziennego doświadczenia przezroczystości języka. Po drugie, wyizolowanie języka z życia sprzyja stosowaniu metod „bezczasowych" oraz studiom nad słowami wyabstrahowanymi z sytuacji, w której zostały one użyte (jeśli nie wyjętymi z kontekstu). Przyjmując takie metafory i metody, możemy stracić z oczu znaczną część tego, co jest istotne dla języka potocznego — przedmiotu badań etnonauki.

Ethnolinguistic research attempting to reconstruct "linguistic pictures of the world" has gained substantial popularity over the last two decades. The prominence of this research in several European countries has brought to the fore the question: How can "linguistic worldviews" be studied in such a way that the results can be compared across languages? This question is being addressed within the Ethnolinguistic School of Lublin, where a large-scale comparative project is taking shape (Bartmiński, 2005, 2006, in press). As Bartmiński argues, four types of decisions have to be made in order to delimit the topic sufficiently to make it researchable, and the results comparable:

1) The *tertium comparationis* has to be determined. According to Bartmiński, words, concepts, or objects can all fit the purpose.

2) A linguistic register has to be chosen for comparison. Comparing everyday talk in one language with ritual formulas in another has often lead to the exoticisation of the "other" language (Bloch, 1989). Bartmiński suggests the comparison of everyday language, since it is the fundamental register in each speech community.

3) The object of the study has to be delimited. This requires an agreement within a team of researchers — the project initiated by the ethnolinguistic school of Lublin might focus on social auto- and heterostereotypes, spatial and temporal concepts, as well as names for values.

4) Finally, the data to be collected have to be determined. These traditionally involve information on the language system (taken from dictionaries and grammars), as well as collections of texts and, if available, corpora. Bartmiński also suggests the investigation of speaker intuitions with the use of questionnaires.

Before embarking on a large-scale project such as the proposed comparative investigation of linguistic worldviews, it might be worth reflecting on what this conceptualisation of ethnolinguistic research excludes. How does the metaphor of the "picture of the world", associated with words in the form of ideational "snapshots", bound our enquiry? Does it do justice to intuitions about the significance of particular languages for the shape of our thinking and acting?

In taking up this issue, I would like to use my personal knowledge of living a multilingual life as the starting point. On the basis of my experience, I do have a feeling that events take different courses in my different languages. Emotional discussions with my wife take a different course depending on whether they take place in Polish or in German. Questions from a German work colleague receive an answer, while questions from an English colleague lead to "banter" — even if not very skilfully conducted on my part. Hence, life takes different courses in different languages.

At the same time, I cannot say that I ever encounter different "worldviews", or "pictures of the world", in the different languages I live in. It never happens that I think, when talking in English to a colleague: "I have just thought differently here than I would have in German". Or: "I have a different view of this concept than I would have in German". If living with different languages involves different "thoughts", or different "pictures of the world", it does so only upon reflection. While living in a second language, the language is transparent — everything just goes its "normal" course.

I wonder, therefore, whether the visual metaphors of "linguistic worldviews" or "pictures of the world" fully do justice to the significance of language diversity, as it is attested by the experiences of bilinguals (Besemeres, 2002; Pavlenko, 2006; Wierzbicka, 2004). The main methodological contention that I wish to make is that the meaning of words in, and for, everyday activities is different from the meaning of words as they are reconstructed through the researcher's reflection and

interpretation. However, the methods of ethnolinguistic research, briefly alluded to above, heavily rely on reflection (the researcher's or an "ordinary" speaker's) as well as interpretation of texts (songs, poems). What both these methods have in common is that they take language out of its situation of everyday functioning — even when they leave it in the linguistic "context". By doing this, they give the language under investigation a detached, timeless quality that is does not normally have. The main body of this essay will aim to show that the focus on methods that involve "detaching" procedures corresponds to and is supported by entrenched ways of thinking about the "linguistic picture of the world". But first, let me give you an example which might illustrate why I feel that the significance of language diversity is not appropriately captured in the metaphor of pictures.

## Discussing expectations in Polish and German

When my wife and I started living together, we would sometimes have conversations about differences in our expectations regarding daily life. Typically, these discussions-cum-arguments would concern the consideration shown for the other. To take a fictive, but entirely realistic, example: Imagine I had been in town to deal with some chore that had been bothering me; maybe there was a form that I had to turn into my bank office. Upon coming home, my wife would point out that she also needed to get something done in town; say, there was a parcel for her waiting to be collected from the post office. Clearly, I could have done this since I was in town anyway — if only I had thought of it. The crucial adjacency pair of such conversations would look like this:

(1)

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Me: | *No* | *nie* | *myślałem* | *o* | *twojej* | | *paczce.* |
| | PART | not | think-PST–1SG | PREP | your | | parcel |
| | I didn't think about your parcel. | | | | | | |
| Wife: | | *Przykro* | *mi* | *że* | *nie* | *pomyślałeś.* | |
| | PART | sorry | to me | that | not | think-PST–2SG | |
| | And I'm sorry that you didn't think (about it). | | | | | | |

From here, the conversation would go downhill.

Only later did I realise that, in these moments, I was really speaking German, just using Polish words. Specifically, I was understanding the Polish *przykro mi* ('to me it is *przykro*'; Wierzbicka (2001, p. 340) suggests "it is painful to me" as a literal translation) as being the same as the German *tut mir leid* ('it does me pain"). The German *tut mir leid* can only be used to express remorse for something bad that was done by the speaker — in which case it is similar to the English *I'm sorry* — or as an expression of compassion, as in the English *I'm sorry for you.*

In the described situation my wife was clearly unhappy with me, so *tut mir leid* could only be understood as an ironic statement, something like: *I am sorry (for you) that you weren't clever enough to think about this.*

*Przykro mi* is indeed used in situations of expressing remorse or compassion, and the dative construction of both *przykro mi* and *tut mir leid* probably led me to "using" both in the same way. What I had not realised at the time was that *przykro mi* also has a use that would simply not be expected in German. It can mean something similar to English *I feel hurt*. That is, it is possible for me to feel *przykro* both because of bad things that I have done to somebody else (*I'm sorry*) and because of bad things that somebody else has done with respect to me (*I'm hurt*). To express a feeling of *przykro* means to bemoan a perceived lack of good feelings between two people (Wierzbicka, 2001). In sum, while I took the response *przykro mi* to be cold and ironic, it was really an appeal to mutual warmth.

This little anecdote might serve as an example of a cross-linguistic misunderstanding. However, I feel that regarding it simply as a misunderstanding misses some crucial facts that I want to focus on in the present discussion. Note that we were still relatively successful in our activity of discussing expectations: both of us were clear about what it is that we are doing (namely, discussing expectations). Both of us understood at least that my wife would like me to think of her chores as well as mine, and that I was not really happy with such an expectation. Both of us understood that we were both unhappy with the other's expectations. The use of the word *przykro*, rather than "expressing" a self-sufficient meaning, was part of a further structuring of this activity. In a conversation between two native speakers of Polish, it would have led the discussion towards confirmations of mutual warmth. In our conversation, it led towards an argument, because I reacted to it as to an expression of hostility. It feels inappropriate to say that my wife and I had different, incommensurable, "pictures" of *przykrość*. If this was the case, we would hardly have been able to make any sense of what each other was saying. It seems more appropriate to consider our verbal exchanges as one dimension of a larger, meaningful situation.

The crucial thing illustrated in this example is the complete transparency of language as a part of activities. The only reason I started reflecting on the situation, and eventually understood why things were taking a bad turn, was that something unpleasant was happening, and that there seemed to be some systematicity to the downhill turns some conversations took. In the situation, the word *przykro* did not attract interpretation. The event, or activity, that was "there" for us at the time was a discussion about expectations, about what each of us should or should not be expected to do. For me, it seemed normal to be thinking primarily about my individual responsibilities. For my wife, it was clear that anything that any of us had to do was part of our shared obligations. Clearly, I did not "think" at the time

about any of the facts used to explicate the use of *przykro mi* and of *tut mir leid* above: I did not think about dative constructions, the range of contexts of the two phrases etc. When I "took" *przykro mi* to mean something like *tut mir leid*, this does not mean that I "interpreted" it as such, there and then, but rather that I reacted to the situation as if my wife had said *tut mir leid*. I was absorbed in our attempt to find a common ground concerning (the limits of) mutual expectations.

Nevertheless, it does seem appropriate to say that the course of this attempt was built by our languages. We moved through the conversation according to the trajectories of different semantics. This, to me, seems to be the fundamental way in which language plays a role in a person's life: many of the activities that we concern ourselves with are structured linguistically and take a course that is constituted linguistically. It seems to me that this fundamental level is missed when we restrict our ethnolinguistic research to reconstructions of word-meanings outside of the activities that these words are part of.

This methodological restriction in turn is supported by the metaphors that ethnolinguists use to grasp linguistic meaning — metaphors which restrict language to a kind of "intellectual tool".

## Metaphors for meaning

Words seemingly "automatically" direct our activities, so far as these are linguistically constituted. *Przykro mi* as part of the activity of discussing mutual expectations directs this activity towards the problematisation of mutual care and concerns. Intuitively, the same activity in German seems to be directed linguistically towards the highlighting and defending of "borders" of individual responsibility (including responsibilities towards the other). But what does it mean to say that linguistic constructions (such as words) "function" like that?

According to Wierzbicka, cultural keywords, such as *przykro*, are associated with "scripts" (2005) or "scenarios" (2001) which define their meaning. In order to properly use and understand the word, one first has to know this meaning. Wierzbicka (2001, p. 343) argues that the following "cognitive scenario" is associated with the word *przykro*:

(2)
*Bylo mi przykro*
(a) I felt something bad
(b) because I thought:
(c) someone did something
(d) Because of this someone else could think
(e) "this person doesn't feel anything good towards me"

The theatre- or film-metaphors of "scripts" and "scenarios" suggest that these have a primacy with respect to actual behaviour: first the actor has to learn the script, then he can act it out. Presumably, these terms have entered Wierzbicka's thinking not directly from the realm of theatre and film, but through research in the cognitive sciences: the idea that observable behaviour is a "surface" phenomenon that is caused by "underlying" intentions is an idea that is so entrenched in psychological and philosophical thinking that it has become virtually "obvious" in the discourse of cognitive science. The concept of scripts was introduced into this context by AI researchers (Schank & Abelson, 1977) in an attempt to model meaningful activity in a computer system: since acts are meaningful as parts of larger activities, the "underlying" cognitive system must "know" about these activities in order to cause the right acts. "Scripts" were envisaged as a level of "underlying" representation that informs the representation of specific concepts so as to guarantee meaningful acts.

The important point in our discussion is that the talk of scripts firmly places the discussion of cross-linguistic differences in a "cognitivist" context: the difference between languages is that different languages are accompanied by, or rather cause, different "thoughts". Furthermore, these thoughts are "located" in the mind of the speaker: in "the cognitive system", in scripts, concepts, stereotypes, or scenarios. To communicate verbally, then, means to relate the outside "forms" of language to inner representations, the results of which will be meaning and understanding.

The metaphor of the "linguistic picture of the world" has a very different provenance within academic discourse. Its genesis is related to the Kantian notion of *Weltanschauung*, which has been translated into English as *worldview*, and the idea of a *linguistic worldview* has been developed in German 19th century philosophy, in particular by W. von Humboldt, who used the term *sprachliches Weltbild* (*linguistic picture of the world*). The visual metaphor of a *linguistic worldview*, or *picture of the world*, inevitably draws the attention to the "cognitive" aspects of language — to the ways in which language supposedly makes its speakers "see" the world in a peculiar way, that is, perceive, categorise, and interpret it.[1]

In essence, to have a *worldview* requires that the person can step out of his world and have a good look at it. However, this type of meta-thinking appears more characteristic of the time-intensive "theoretical practice" (Bourdieu, 1977) of academics than the activity of everyday life that such specialised practices are based upon. In ethnolinguistic thinking about the significance of language diversity we therefore find the same reliance on temporal detachment from life that is also

[1] This focus on language as a tool for the intellectual "treatment" of the world is not restricted to research which has taken visual imagery as its leading metaphor. For example, according to one of the more famous quotes from Whorf, the significance of language diversity lies in the fact that languages vary in the ways they "dissect" the world (Carroll, 1956, p. 212).

characteristic of the "timeless" research procedures described earlier. Sure enough, the metaphor of the "picture" is appropriate in some contexts: there seems nothing wrong with saying that Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* paints a certain picture of German family life in the 19th century. This is appropriate because the text of the novel exists as an object to be reflected upon. In the same way, we can, and sometimes do, treat words as objects of reflection. But is this the fundamental way in which words figure in human lives? It sounds much less appropriate to talk of, for example, the "linguistic picture of the world of the child". Fundamentally, language is a transparent aspect of life, and as such very much unlike a good picture.

Both the metaphors of "scripts" or "scenarios", and the metaphor of the "linguistic picture of the world", embody ways of thinking about (linguistic) meaning as something that involves a degree of indirectness. Being engaged in meaningful activity, according to these metaphors, means to behave in ways that first become "calibrated" in the places where the meaningful stuff happens: in the speakers "mind", which carries the scripts, scenarios and stereotypes that together constitute the linguistic picture of the world. These representations are not themselves part of the world in which (linguistic) activities take place — they live in a remote sphere of thoughts.

In this respect, these metaphors conceive of language as a "code" that is separated from the world. However, this idea is in fact not at all consistent with the intuitions of ethnolinguists. For example, Lublin ethnolinguists emphasise the togetherness of linguistic and other aspects of meaningful activities by calling these other aspects "with-linguistic" (*przyjęzykowy*) rather than, as is usual, "non-linguistic" (Bartmiński, 1996). Still, the detachment of language from meaningful activities, and of "linguistic meaning" from "non-linguistic meaning", is deeply entrenched, and can survive even outright rejections of the idea of language as a "code':

(3)

"A language is not a code for encoding pre-existing meanings. Rather, it is a conceptual, experiential and emotional world" (Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 102).

Although Wierzbicka rejects the code-metaphor, she does talk of language as "a world", rather than part of "the world" which also includes people, places and activities. But the idea of language as a separate world, with linguistic meaning as a separate kind of meaning, seems implausible. For example, note that the interactions between my wife and myself were not entirely meaningless — they just did not take the course that we would have hoped. If linguistic meaning was a separate "stream" of communication, the breakdown of understanding would have been complete. The fact that this was not the case indicates that understanding might be better thought of as a goal that can be reached through communication, rather than

as a condition of the "functioning" of individual words and utterances, depending on the matching of form with representation.

The issue of the theoretical detachment of linguistic meaning from situated activity notwithstanding, the intuitions expressed by Wierzbicka on the basis of her personal knowledge of living a bilingual life go beyond the cognitivist notion of language as a "carrier of thoughts". Still, the metaphors of scripts and scenarios which she uses in her analyses stay firmly within these boundaries. Why is this so?

## The debate on "Language and Thought"

The dominant metaphors of ethnolinguistics highlight the role of language in "thinking", where thinking is understood as a self-contained activity in the person's mind: A detached, reflective activity most reminiscent of scientific, theoretical practice. To be sure, the example provided above does show the "influence" of language on thinking: in a Polish speaking life, in which appeals for mutual warmth, care and consideration are woven into many activities, speakers develop the skill to constantly think about the other: their worries and needs, their chores, etc. In this sense, speaking has a long-term significance for the development of "thinking-about-others" as a type of skill. But this is quite different from the cognitivist notion of thoughts as prerequisites for meaning.

Cognitivist metaphors also tend to portray linguistic meaning as an individuated entity: a script, scenario, stereotype or image linked to the form of language by "association". The focus on "thoughts", and the individuation and separation of "linguistic meaning" have been the terms for debating the significance of language diversity in 20th century linguistics, and arguable earlier.[2] Understanding linguistic meaning as a self-contained representation, and thinking as a reflection that uses representations, has led to the consideration of three possible relations between "language and thought". Firstly, thinking might be going on "in" language. This intuition seemed to be not too far from the minds of ethnolinguists working before the rise of cognitive science. However, the idea that thinking happens "in" a language that it cannot get out of proved intuitively uncompelling — clearly, it is not the case that all speakers of a common language think the same. The remaining alternative therefore seemed to be: language and thought are two largely independent types of representation, or code. Some preferred to think that language mainly "expresses" thoughts, others that there is also some influence in the other direction: that language can "restructure" thought. What is common to these approaches, and embodied in the detachment of linguistic meaning from meaningful

[2]Heidegger criticised Humboldt as the main proponent of an instrumentalistic notion of language, but some commentators have regarded this criticism as unjustified (see Wohlfart, 1996).

life, is the conviction that the "serious business" of thinking and understanding is essentially non-linguistic.

How deeply entrenched these terms of the debate still are in contemporary linguistics is illustrated by the curious situation that has arisen in recent research on "linguistic relativity". The idea that language is important for the ways in which people lead meaningful lives is now being addressed by studying people engaged in tasks that are hardly meaningful, while making sure that they don't use language. The best known example is probably research on spatial "frames of reference" (Levinson, 2003): speakers of some languages locate objects and places by using "absolute" terms, such as "north" and "south", rather than "relative" terms, such as "left" and "right". Levinson and colleagues aimed to test whether speakers of these languages think about spatial location in absolute terms, in addition to talking like that. In a typical task, speakers were asked to memorise the order in which toy cows were placed on a table, and to recreate the same order after being rotated 180 degrees. Speakers of "relative" languages predominantly recreated the order so that it was the same in relative terms, whereas speakers of "absolute" languages chose the "absolute" solution. The aim was to demonstrate that it is not "just" spatial language that is absolute for some speakers, but also spatial thought. The logic of the experiment depends on the questionable assumption that humans memorise the order of toy cows without using linguistic terms, i.e. in a *non-linguistic* way.

The separation of language from meaningful activity means that the debate has become trapped between universalists who claim that thinking "really" happens in a set of universal concepts (Fodor, 1975; Pinker, 1994) and relativists who claim that the "language of thought" is influenced by the "surface" language of the community (Levinson, 1997).[3] In this way, recent research on "linguistic relativity" both over- and understates the significance of language diversity: it overstates it in so far as it cannot entirely get away from suggesting a determining role of language, foreclosing an understanding of the essential openness of language to mutual understanding; and it understates it insofar as it necessarily focuses research efforts on areas of life that are most amenable to non-linguistic experimentation, such as object location (Majid, Bowerman, Kita, Haun, & Levinson, 2004), object individuation (Lucy, 1992), or colour (Davidoff, Davies, & Roberson, 1999).

The best way out of the trap might be to recognise that the problem of language determinism vs. universal concepts is an artefact of separating linguistic meaning from meaningful activity. If understanding is the goal of communicative situations which are inherently meaningful, and language is one aspect of the structuring of these situations, we need to attend not only to the guiding role of language (which it fulfils in diverse ways across speech communities), but also to the openness of

[3]With the derived option of trying to combine the two, as in the work of Wierzbicka (e.g., 1996).

linguistically constituted activities for understanding. Language can help us to go beyond conventions and social expectations — to change our worlds. The reason is precisely that language is a part of human life. Linguistic forms are material parts of the world that we share, and they are meaningful *as part* of the world. Ochs (1996) provides the example of female leadership talk, which has introduced not simply a new way of talking, but a new way of being a business leader. The reason that such innovation is possible is that language is only one aspect of meaningful activity. Crucially, an unusual form of leadership talk is still identifiable *as* leadership talk, because of the situation (it is 10 am on a workday, I know that she is my boss, I am standing in her office...). I would expect that in order to understand bilingual experience, we need to understand the openness of language to the situation as well as its guiding role. The universalists' fear of the idea of "language determining thought" is without foundation — not because languages are all the same, or because language diversity is irrelevant, but because language is a part of human life which happens in a shared world. This is not simply to reiterate the common statement that the "context" somehow adds meaning to the linguistic "core" meaning, or "selects" the appropriate meaning among a number of pre-existing ones. Rather, we might say that language provides structure to a meaningfulness that is already there in the situation.

## Methodological implications

In the above sections, I have attempted to formulate my feeling that the metaphors most commonly employed in ethnolinguistic research lead us to miss some of the significance of language for living diverse lives. If there is some merit to these arguments, what could they mean for the methodology of comparative ethnolinguistic research? Let us again consider the four types of methodological decision laid out by Bartmiński.

1) Tertium comparationis. A possible type of *tertium comparationis* not mentioned by Bartmiński are activities (*clarifying expectations*, *booking a hotel room*, *changing nappies*). For example, organising and clarifying mutual expectations in a relationship is a kind of activity that people across the world have to engage in. It should therefore be a viable basis for cross-linguistic comparison. Although this activity is clearly linguistically constituted, it would be difficult to link it to particular words, concepts, or objects.

2) Linguistic register. The argument provided above supports Bartmiński's suggestion to focus on everyday language as the central register in each speech community.

3) Topic area. The focus on activity need not lead to redefinitions of the topic area. However, taxonomically defined topics such as "space" or "time" would

need to be restated according to their relevance in everyday activities. For example, there are clear differences in the ways in which Polish and German families leave the house together. The temporal coordination of this complicated activity takes recourse also to language — although the language accompanying and structuring this activity need not contain particular "temporal words" such as "time" or "now".

4) Data. My methodological argument has focussed on the need to study language as part of the situation that it helps structuring. The "timeless" methods well established in ethnolinguistics could be accompanied by observational, video-taped data, which make it possible to leave the language in its finite world. Until recently, it was difficult to capture the evanescent nature of spoken language. Even when conversations were recorded, it would have been difficult to take the richness of the situation into account in analysing language, and communicate the results of such an analysis to the scientific community. These technological reasons for neglecting observational research in ethnolinguistics are quickly giving way. Of course, the simple availability of a new technology does not mean that it should be used. However, I think that observational research, which allows us to take seriously the contention that the situation of speaking is "with-linguistic" (*przyjęzykowa*) (Bartmiński, 1996) rather than *non-linguistic*, might give us a fuller "picture of the linguistic world".

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## LINGUISTIC *worldviews* OR LANGUAGE *in the world*? METAPHORS AND METHODS IN ETHNOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Ethnolinguistic research has gained substantial popularity over the last two decades. A leading metaphor for the focus of these research efforts is that of the "linguistic worldviews". As large-scale comparative projects on linguistic worldviews are taking shape, it might be worth reflecting on what this conceptualisation of ethnolinguistics excludes. The visual metaphor of pictures implies that speakers can step out of the world and view (and also name) it from the outside. Two problematic consequences of this metaphor are discussed. Firstly, the detachment of language from the world of activities of which it is a part leads to the adoption of a cognitivist model of linguistic meaning as a separate stream of communication. Such a model is inconsistent with the experienced transparency of language in everyday life. Secondly, the detachment of language from life supports the use of "timeless" methods, the study of words outside of their situation (if not "context") of use. Adopting these metaphors and methods, we might miss large parts of the significance of language for everyday life — the object of ethnoscience.