



Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf by John B. Carroll; Benjamin Lee Whorf

Review by: Mario A. Pei

The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Feb., 1957), pp. 106-108

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing](#) on behalf of the [National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations](#)

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students lose when they have had their beginning courses and, upon moving to intermediate and advanced study, come to the conclusion that all the fine writings of the language came centuries ago.

WILLIAM BOLLING FEILD

Westview Junior High School
Miami, Florida

THE BOOK OF THE WILES OF WOMEN. Translated by John Esten Keller. University of North Carolina, Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, Number 27. MLA Translation Series, Number 2. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1956, pp. 60. \$2.00.

The Book of the Wiles of Women, the second in the series of translations published under the auspices of the Modern Language Association, is long overdue—in fact, some seventy years. According to the introduction, the first edition was in 1882 by one Mr. Cooté who did not include passages that he found difficult, incoherent or “unseemly.”

A glance at the frontispiece will convince anyone of the difficulty facing any translator. Dr. Keller has already hurdled this obstacle in his edition of *El Libro de Los Engaños* (University of North Carolina, Studies in the Romance Languages and Literature, Number 20, Chapel Hill, 1953). The passages that are incoherent or obscure are not deleted but explained in notes that show careful research. An example of this is the rebuttal to the Third Counselor's story. Dr. Keller says (p. 56, note 48) that the obscurity of this tale is no doubt due to poor copying or failure to translate correctly from the Arabic on the part of the medieval scribe. What Mr. Cooté may have termed “unseemly” turns out to be in the Keller translation, sprightly with no loss of meaning or decorum.

Dr. Keller in reviewing *The Celestina* translation of Lesly Byrd Simpson (*Hispania*, September, 1955, pp. 377-379) states that “a translator should, by study and reading, project himself into the period from which he translates, and even into the original author's system of concepts.” The introduction and notes of both *El Libro de Los Engaños* and *The Book of the Wiles of Women* reveal the careful preparation with which Hispanist and folklorist Keller faces the actual translation.

First, there are the mechanical devices which he establishes. These, without altering the original concept serve to render smoothly flowing English. They are: a free translation of *dixo*, the only word used to describe speech in *The Book of the Wiles of Women*; the omission of the needlessly repeated *e* (“and”); and modern punctuation that is obvious. An excellent example of all three lies in the following: *E ella dixo:—Este que desides que non fabla me quiso forçar de todo en todo, e yo non lo tenia a el por tal*. This is translated: “This one,” she lied, “who you say cannot speak, tried to violate me utterly, and I would never have thought it of him.”

When the literal translation is acceptable, it is used. Otherwise, the spirit of the line is presented. The following lines illustrate not the word-for-word translation but the thought in nicely moving English: *Avia un rrey en Judea que avia nombre Alcos; e este rrey era señor de gran poder e amava*

mucho a los omnes de su tierra e de su rregno e mantenialos en justia; e este rrey avia noventa mugeres. Estando todas, segun era ley, non podia aver de ninguna dellas fijo. (There was once a king of Judea whose name was Alcos. He was a mighty monarch and he greatly loved the people of his kingdom, ruling them ever with justice. He had ninety wives, and although he had known them all in accordance with his faith, in none could he beget an heir.)

In the introduction where Dr. Keller presents an excellent outline of the development and dispersion of the tales, he points out that their survival is due to the fact that they are basically folk tales. Dr. Nicholson B. Adams in *The Heritage of Spain* (p. 56) says of these lively tales: “It is too bad for lovers of spicy yarns that the argument could not have gone on longer. No wonder the book has lived a couple of thousand years or so.” Whether the tales survive on the basis of folklore or spiciness, the sprightly and excellent translation of Dr. Keller will make them available to a wider circle of readers who will no doubt go on the enjoying for another couple of thousand years *The Book of the Wiles of Women*.

MARGARET V. CAMPBELL

Florida State University
Tallahassee, Florida

Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. Edited and with an Introduction by John B. Carroll. Foreword by Stuart Chase. The Technology Press of M. I. T. and John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1956. Pp. xi+278. Price \$7.00.

At his untimely death in his early forties, Benjamin Lee Whorf had failed to write a single book. His metalinguistic theories have consequently come down to us in a fairly extensive series of articles appearing in various journals (*Language*, *American Anthropologist*, and *Technology Review*, to mention only a few) between 1925 and 1941.

Professor Carroll, a friend and student of Whorf, has performed a signal service to the field of linguistics, as well as a labor of love, in gathering into one volume the more significant of Whorf's writings. His Introduction is a sympathetic but factual biography, with both sides of controversial features presented.

A few of the articles selected by Carroll deal with Whorf's research in American Indian languages, particularly with the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphics. These articles are, to this reviewer, well-done and convincing. The method of decipherment he employs, based exclusively on linguistic evidence, could be applied to “mysterious” languages, like Etruscan, with better results, perhaps, than have attended most such attempts (it is true, of course, that Whorf had modern spoken Maya to check his conclusions, while Etruscan researchers have no modern version of the inscripational language).

There is an article on “Grammatical Categories” which offers an entrancing panorama of a truly universal grammar based on the combination of function, meaning and form, which impresses me as highly reasonable. Another article entitled “Language: Plan and Conception of Arrangement” is so well constructed that it makes one wonder why it is not more widely used by our professional linguists. Another

excellent chapter is that on "Science and Linguistics," particularly for the humility which its closing pages should foster in its readers. "Linguistics as an Exact Science," too, displays a superior order of thought: "The beasts may think, but they do not talk. 'Talk' ought to be a more noble and dignified word than 'think'." From this, Whorf goes on to demonstrate that all our scientific and philosophical lore, however exalted, has to be communicated and spread in terms of language.

To the layman, however, the basic part of Whorf is neither his fascinating Mayan research nor his ingenious views on the grammatical categories. It is rather his "metalinguistics," the sort of thing that has captivated mid-century intellectuals, from Chase to the Society for General Semantics. Here the evidence must rest, as Whorf himself would want it to rest, on purely linguistic considerations.

Stuart Chase in his brief Foreword gives us the kernel of Whorf's metalinguistic theories: "1. All higher levels of thinking are dependent upon language; 2. The structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one understands his environment. The picture of the universe shifts from tongue to tongue."

Everyone admits that culture and behavior influence language. The question raised by Whorf is: "Does the type of language in which the individual speaks and thinks exert a *paramount* influence on his behavior, outlook and culture?" His reply is an emphatic "Yes."

Whorf's background, as brought out by Carroll, presents certain *lacunae*. His specialization was in chemical engineering; his performance at M. I. T. was average. His linguistic interest began with Fabre d'Olivet, who died "avec la réputation d'un fou ou d'un visionnaire." Whorf then delved into comparative linguistics "presumably without any tutoring other than the necessarily brief contacts he may have had with such men as Spinden and Tozzer, and, in addition, J. Alden Mason." Granted that he was a man of extraordinary talent, and that he familiarized himself with several American Indian languages, his all-too-short span of life, largely spent in industrial pursuits, did not permit him to gain the stock of information which would have proved a corrective for the flights of his over-enthusiastic fancy. The fact that he is one of the clearest, most persuasive writers in the linguistic field makes it all the easier to pick out his fallacies.

Whorf envisages language as being not merely of infinite diversity, which it is, but so basically diverse as to give rise to radically different conceptions of the universe. In proof of this, he sets the American Indian languages he had acquired (particularly Hopi) in opposition to a group which he sometimes calls Indo-European, sometimes western European (not quite the same thing; see p. 138), and undertakes to show that the differences in structure are irreconcilable, pointing to equally irreconcilable ways of viewing the single reality of the universe.

Others may point to the similarity in culture and views between primitive Indo-European and American Indian societies, or entrench themselves behind the safe rampart of the non-existence of a Hopi physics (e.g.: Hopi puts into the "past" tense something that happens now but not at this place; what would Hopi do with a distant event recorded now, as it occurs, on TV, or on the telegraph or telephone wires?).

To my mind, Whorf's weakness lies in his failure to realize that within the Indo-European field, considered both historically and geographically, there is vast variation—far more than he admits when he lumps the "western" languages together. Since we are aware of the historical basis for this variation, and are sure of our genetic relationships, we do not overstress it. Yet within the Indo-European field, if we look closely enough, we find most, not to say all, of the phenomena that he ascribes exclusively to Hopi, Apache and Nootka.

Take, for example, the statement (p. 56) that Hopi is better equipped to describe vibratory phenomena than our western tongues. Such variant forms as "flit," "flutter," "flap," or Latin *volitare*, or Italian *svolazzare* do not seem to bear this out.

"It stops getting eaten" is how Whorf translates a Hopi verbal form (p. 61), adding that here the same suffix denotes starting and stopping. What better parallel than Vulgar Latin **fniscit*, originally "he begins to finish"? For the Hopi variants on the same page that betoken hope, does not Indo-European offer subjunctive, potential and optative forms, particularly the last?

Whorf speaks (p. 68) of a distinguishing mark of gender, like Latin *-us* or *-a*. Neither of these suffixes specifically denotes gender; *-us* appears in feminine names of trees, and *-a* in numerous masculine names, both common (*navata*, *agricola*) and proper (*Agrippa*).

For English "I see that it is red," "I see that it is new," Hopi uses different verbs, expressing the different channels of sensation (p. 85). So does French: "je vois que c'est rouge," "je m'aperçois que c'est nouveau"; and even English can shift from "see" to "notice," "perceive," or the like.

The plural in Hopi does not cover the same categories as in English, French or German (p. 138); nor does it in Latin, where *arma*, *folia*, etc. are plural, while their modern descendants are singular. Consider, too, the strange situation of some Slavic languages, where what is apparently a genitive singular follows the numerals 2, 3 and 4.

"Day" cannot be pluralized in Hopi (p. 140). You must say "I left after the tenth day," not "I left after ten days." Whatmough has already pointed out that Latin uses a very similar formula; but even English offers exceptional uses of an apparent singular in certain constructions ("a five-foot wall," "a ten-pound piece").

Apache *ga* means "to be white" (p. 241); so does Italian *biancheggiare*. Apache shows sentences that cannot be broken into subject and predicate (p. 242); how would one then analyze Italian *albaggia* ("dawn is breaking")? *Ni-* means both "I" and "my," according as it is used with a verb or a noun; in Arabic, the forms used as direct objects of verbs may also serve as possessives when attached to nouns (this, to be sure, is not Indo-European, but it is at least a language of the old world; if we must find an Indo-European parallel, how about French *leur* and Italian *loro*, which serve both as indirect object pronouns with verbs and as possessives with nouns?).

The phonemic pattern of English is advanced to prove its complexity of organization (p. 256); but this complex English pattern would prove just as much of a stumbling-block to a Romance as to an American Indian speaker.

"The meanings of specific words are less important than

we fondly fancy" (p. 258), and a Nootka sentence meaning "they each did so because of their characteristic of resembling white people" is offered in evidence, with a single lexation meaning "white-race person" and the rest all grammatical pattern. Quite similar is the building up of subsidiary patterns around an Indo-European root. To cite a modern Italian example, *riparlandogliene* ("speaking to him about it again") is built up around *part-*.

Much is made of the "double" Japanese subject in "Japan, mountain (are) many" for "Japan is mountainous" (p. 264). But this construction does not differ too radically from French "Quant au Japon, il y a beaucoup de montagnes." While on the subject of Japanese, Whorf might have dwelt on the strange impersonal verb of that language (*doko e ikimasu ka*, "Where to is the going?" for "Where are you (or we, or they) going?"); but here, too, Latin shows a parallel: *itur in silvas*, "there is a going into the woods."

The story of William Tell is retold (p. 265), and it is pointed out that English is confusing with "he," "him," "his son," "his bow," "his head," etc., where Algonkian would use two distinct personal or possessive pronouns to refer to the two third-person characters; but Latin does exactly that by the use of *suus* (referring to the subject of the main clause) and *ejus* (any other possible possessor): *Caesar suos milites cohortavit*, "Caesar encouraged his

(own) men"; *Caesar ejus milites cohortavit*, "Caesar encouraged his (some other commander's) men."

To use Whorf's own terminology as expressed on p. 261, one would have to say that his entire demonstration proves conclusively that language starts with reference, then goes on to patterment, and it is at the point of patterment that all languages, including the Indo-European, diverge, some to a greater, some to a lesser degree; but the differences are of degree rather than of kind.

After exhausting Whorf's argument, we are left with a consciousness of the infinite diversity of language (which we had before). The possibility of original genetic relationship, or monogenesis, followed by very long and infinitely complicated mutations, persists. So does the certainty that language is influenced by the culture and activities of its speakers. As for the structure of the language exerting a compulsive force on the speakers, bending their outlook and activities in one or another direction, the question is one of degree. Once firmly established, language patterns our thoughts, since they have to be expressed in terms of the available language. But to the degree postulated by Whorf, his predecessors (including both Max Müller and Edward Sapir), and his metalinguistic followers? That, in our opinion, still remains to be proved.

MARIO A. PEI

Columbia University.

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CENTRAL STATES MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

The Fortieth Annual Meeting of the Central States Modern Language Teachers Association will have a dual session, the first to be held at the University of Illinois, Urbana, April 12-13, and the second at The Ohio State University, Columbus, May 3-4. The following are the officers for the various sections: At URBANA, for French: Chairman, Richard J. Payne, Southwest Missouri State College, Secretary, Marie-Antoinette Martin, University of Chicago Laboratory School, Chicago; for German: Chairman, Helmut Meyerbach, Wright Junior College, Chicago, Secretary, Hazel Vardaman, University of Illinois, Chicago; for Italian, chairman, Marie Varraveto, Austin High School, Chicago, secretary, William F. Hoffman, De Paul University, Chicago; for Scandinavian, chairman, Børge Gedsø Madsen, University of Illinois, vice-chairman, Arthur Wald, Augustana College, secretary, Margaret Swanson, East High School, Rockford; for Spanish, chairman, Fred P. Ellison, University of Illinois, secretary, Donald Yates, University of Michigan; for Teacher-Training, chairman, Elizabeth Michael, Eastern Illinois Teachers College, secretary, Walter Kaulfers, University of Illinois.

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