
Benjamin Lee Whorf: Lost Generation Theories of Mind, Language, and Religion by Peter C. Rollins

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pended between linguistic critique and the shamans: his remarks on sexism belong to the former, his comments on status place him in the ranks of the latter.

The precept that the linguist's task is to describe (latterly, explain) without getting involved in values is challenged by critical linguistics. I believe that it is a principle which derives from the tyranny of the linguist's distinctive concept of language, autonomous language. One can see the roots of this concept in the struggle to achieve an independent discipline within the structures imposed by western academic institutions. Perhaps now that the departments are established, the nervous defensiveness can be sufficiently overcome for the concept to be critically examined, and, in Engels' words, "broken through."

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PETER C. ROLLINS, *Benjamin Lee Whorf: Lost generation theories of mind, language, and religion*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Popular Culture Association, University Microfilms International, 1980. Pp. x + 91.

Wincing slightly at the word "Religion" as I picked up Rollins for the first time, I looked over the table of contents and the preface: he had actually done what I myself had dreamed of doing - he had interviewed Whorf's widow, he had paged through Whorf's diaries, unpublished essays, short story, and novel, gleaning previously unknown tidbits for a new generation of linguists and anthropologists trying to understand Whorf. Here would be the first manifestation, written by a Harvard historian, of the current revival of interest in Whorf. My final verdict,

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however, echoes a statement made by Iain McCleod: "History is too serious to be left to historians."

Why is there this revival of interest in Whorf? Olschewsky (1969: 739) remarked a decade ago, "To the extent that the Transformational-Generative thesis is reinforced by investigation, linguistic relativity theses will be weakened." It is obvious that the dramatic reversals suffered by the MIT school during the past decade, which have thrown the theories and methodologies of linguistics into leaderless confusion, have unerringly brought about a new curiosity regarding the linguistic relativity principle and Whorf's innumerable other insights.

It is crucial to recognize the approach an author uses in approaching Whorf. Rollins tells us in his Preface (ix) that he is attempting to apply historical interpretation to Whorf's published and unpublished writings. This approach allows him to make the following statement, which fairly sums up his interpretation of Whorf:

That Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity would place more emphasis on irreconcilable differences between languages and cultures was directly related to the difference between a social scientist like Boas and a man of metaphysical prepossessions like Whorf (55).

This is hardly the kind of balanced assessment of Whorf one finds in, for instance, Hymes (1964: 119): "It must be remembered that he stressed linguistic relativity that it might be transcended."

Rollins promises to give us a new view of Whorf, "the untold story"; unfortunately for those of us interested in current unity-of-science and consciousness issues, Rollins projects an archaic dichotomy of science and religion onto Whorf and demands we view Whorf's work as more religious than scientific:

The untold story of Benjamin Whorf - explored for the first time in this intellectual biography - involves his search for a way to reconcile his faith with historical and scientific developments of the early twentieth century (5).

The resulting conflict between science and religion was thus perceived by Whorf as irreconcilable (64).

Because Whorf identified man's needs for emotional expression with his own hunger for belief . . . (67).

A major caveat is to beware this pigeonholing of Whorf's creative urges as religious in opposition to scientific. Beyond Rollins's strangely emotional interpretation, what else is the book about?

Overview of chapters. In Chapter 1, "The Intellectual Pilgrimage of Benjamin Whorf," Rollins, after misstating the linguistic relativity principle (see below), compares Whorf's New England upbringing with that of Emerson,

Thoreau, and Whitman, calling Whorf a latter-day Transcendentalist because of his fascination with the vitality and power of language. Rollins says that Whorf's later articles, like Boas's, are clearly aimed at checking a smug confidence in the superiority of Western science, urging a greater development of our sense of perspective.

Chapter 2, "The Class of 1920: Were All Gods Dead," describes the cultural milieu in which, as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, the gods were dead and traditional values were lost. Whorf, until now a traditional WASP sure of his cultural traditions, began expanding his intellectual base.

In Chapter 3, "Scientific Revolutions: Fighting with Darwinism, Flirting With New Physics," a Whorf in flux is apparent from the unpublished works Rollins surveys. Whorf's "Why I have Discarded Evolution" shows him critically examining various doctrinal accretions such as Hutten's hypothesis of uniformity and Spenser's picture of evolution as going from simple to complex structures (thus violating the principle of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics). Whorf here echoes (consciously or not) a famous statement by Humboldt when he says "The establishment of a form sets up a resistance to further elaboration of a form,"¹ and that scientists had not discerned that special force which maintains forms. Next we see a description of three papers on physics in which Whorf was working out a "fundamental unity of gravity, matter, and light" decades before quantum physicist Jack Sarfatti interpreted $E = mc^2$ to mean that "matter is gravitationally trapped light".² And finally we see "The Newtonian Room and the Christian Rosebush," wherein an ill man, drowsily drifting in and out of dreamtime, surveys the intellectual changes in Western thought from the Victorian Newtonian worldview to that of indeterminacy, relativity, and quantum insights into nature.

Chapter 4, "*The Ruler of the Universe: An Unmarketable Novel of Ideas*," presents an overview and portions of Whorf's rejected novel, which as well as being an elaboration of his short story, also attempted to achieve a new understanding of the notion of "original sin" and expose the symbiotic connection between science and war.

It is in Chapter 5, "Whorf's Study of Language: Can a Social Science Hold Metaphysical Insights?," that Rollins's superficial understanding of the history of linguistics, and the pigeonholing which demands that things be either science or religion, causes massive failures of illumination. I will return to this chapter momentarily.

Chapter 6, "Whorf's Famous Articles: The Harmony of Science and Faith," begins by surveying the distribution of Whorf's articles after his death, but misses his greatest early impact in the 1941 volume dedicated posthumously to Sapir, *Language, Culture and Personality*, which contained the "Habitual" article. Rollins surveys major themes in Whorf's final four articles, pointing out that "Language, Mind, and Reality" abounded with metaphors because Whorf

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wished to communicate a sense of how it felt to perceive the interlocking patterns which connected the three referents of the article's title.

Finally, Chapter 7, "Transcendental Linguist," attempts to ram home the religious implications of Whorf's life-history and, not stopping there, traces superficial parallels between Whorf and Noam Chomsky: both started with religious and specifically Old Testament interests, both were against the marriage between science and war technology. "Is the leader of the most recent revolution in linguistics also in pursuit of 'intelligence and bliss'?" is the zippy finale on page 91.

Problems. I would have liked to recommend this book without qualification to all readers interested in Whorf, but I cannot. Though interesting, this book would not be appropriate as an introduction to Whorf. It is suitable only for those readers who will not be misled by the strawman arguments, emotionally loaded language, simplistic dichotomies, and a comparison-and-contrast style of writing which continually pits poor Whorf against someone else Rollins likes better.

What Rollins has succeeded in doing, by negative example, is point out to us exactly what is needed by the scholar who wishes to understand the real Whorf:

- [1] A knowledge of the basic insights of gestalt psychology, which appear everywhere in Whorf's work;
- [2] an understanding of philosophical phenomenology (i.e., Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), which, as did Whorf, rejects both rationalism and empiricism in favor of Humboldtian and gestalt (holistic) insights;
- [3] an understanding of the revolution in modern physics, brought about by contemplating the wave and field aspects of reality, and which led directly to gestalt notions in psychology;
- [4] a basic understanding of the history of linguistic thought – especially the profound influence of Humboldtian thought through Sapir on Whorf, and the centuries-long relativity-universals debate which separates Whorf and Chomsky more deeply than Rollins's parallels would suggest to the uninited.

Beyond that, there's always the problem of wading through all the linguistic, psycholinguistic, anthropological, and other critiques of Whorf in the literature, most of which are as suspicious of Whorf's scientific status as Rollins seems to be.

I've pointed out elsewhere (1978) that because of the accretions of misinterpretation that have been loaded onto Whorf's rather innocuous "linguistic relativity principle," most critiques battle a strawman and never address the principle itself. By concentrating on side issues, critics never tackle the real problem of how languages and thinking are related. Rollins here is no exception, as we see when we examine his treatment of relativity in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 and the Whorf Hypothesis. Rollins's major theme throughout the book concerns Whorf's lifelong religious and philosophical interests and the effect they may have played in his linguistic approach.

Whorf's first exposure to the study of language was through works of 19th Century theorists whose interests in language were patently religious. Throughout his subsequent work in linguistics, Whorf may have refined – but he never repudiated³ – the ideas of the 19th Century pioneer linguists who introduced him to the subject (7).

Rollins, it seems, has made a religion out of science, and does not like heretics. In Chapter 5 he follows up with some backyard gossip meant to raise the hackles of any "devout" scientist:

In his introduction . . . John Carroll admitted that 'Whorf's early interest in linguistics stemmed from one in religion,' but Carroll was extremely apologetic about the connection; he described it as an eccentricity which Whorf outgrew. Possibly because Carroll felt that he might alienate readers . . . he did not mention that Whorf was a serious follower of Theosophy from around 1924 . . . until his death in 1941 (47).

Rollins informs us that Theosophists, like Transcendentalists, have traditionally placed the investigation of language at the center of their philosophical concerns, and that Whorf's reading list for 1924–5 included two volumes by Theosophists Fabre d'Olivet and Max Müller ('Language is not outside the mind but the outside of the mind. Language is very thought and thought is very language.'), both opponents of positivism and sensationalism.

The rest of this chapter explores Boas and Sapir as respectable role models in contrast to Whorf, all the while evincing shallow understandings and muddled reasoning regarding basic issues of linguistics and anthropology. Rollins follows up on his misstatement of Whorf's relativity in Chapter 1 ("This famous theory is a statement of linguistic relativity taken to an extreme of linguistic determinism") by contrasting his interpretation of Sapir with his interpretation of Whorf:

Sapir saw the relationship of language to culture to be extremely complicated . . . If Whorf's hypothesis means anything at all, it is that there is a one-to-one relationship between them (65).

This is all very true, as I have pointed out elsewhere (1978), only so long as the so-called "Whorf Hypothesis" is a distinct entity created by critics, having nothing whatever in common with Whorf's principle of linguistic relativity, but being instead a post hoc composite of four major doctrines, called "determinism," "perception-shaping," "nontranslatability," and "circularity."

Whorf stated and named, in honor of Einstein⁴ as well as Sapir, the principle

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of linguistic relativity. Neither he nor anyone else ever stated or named a "principle of linguistic determinism."⁵ Rollins refers to relativity as a *principle* once, calls it a *theory* four times and a *hypothesis* eleven times. Are scientific labels such as these so readily interchangeable? More pertinent, how can responsible social scientists justify the way they consistently and arbitrarily rename Whorf's principle a hypothesis, add to it a liberal dose of determinism, experimentally test the quasimixture, and then pronounce unfavorable results - "at least for the extreme case," which nobody ever advocated in the first place?

Throughout the book Rollins accuses Whorf of holding and promulgating the Whorf Hypothesis doctrines found solely in the critical literature written after his death. It is necessary, therefore, that we call for a voluntary moratorium on the use of the phrase "Whorf Hypothesis" altogether: if we mean Whorf's principle, let's call it by name; if we want to discuss determinism, let's find out who actually advocated it and give credit where credit is due! Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf speak of mutual interdependence of language, thinking, and culture, with language changing more slowly than the others and therefore active over longer historical periods; it is only the critics who feel compelled to reduce this historical and temporal relationship into a causal deterministic one.

Rollins seems strangely unaware of the fundamental trends in the history of Western thought, and therefore gets himself hopelessly entangled in complex and subtle issues which have befuddled even some who make linguistics their profession. Although we are grateful to have much of the new information on Whorf which Rollins presents, a more balanced assessment would have made the presentation more palatable.

Please note the following errata: (p1, ln2) hypotheses"/hypothesis"; (p3, ln10) manufactures/manufacturers; (p10, ln15) lazer/laser; (p29, ln6) three-dimensional time and space/[perhaps] four-dimensional spacetime; (p51, ln3 from bottom) or/of; (p55, ln4) a sea change/? [perhaps an unfamiliar idiom?]; (p57, ln6) that/to which; (p59, fn) there is no such quotation in Sapir, p432, nor anywhere else I can find; (p51, ln12 of quotation) Yogq/Yoga; (p89, ln7) Wilhelm von Humboldt (1857-1913)/Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835); (p89, ln17) stray quotation mark before footnote number 4.

NOTES

1. Cf. Humboldt's "Each language sets limits to the spirit of those who speak it; it assumes a certain direction and, by doing so, excludes many others."
2. All this must have seemed heady stuff to Rollins, who assures us that we live within the bounds of "three-dimensional space and time," and that "the scientific community is concerned only with [the] supposedly trivial occurrences within our three-dimensional world. Only mystics, fundamentalists, and positivists are interested in questions of more transcendental importance."
3. Rollins may be referring, obliquely, to the way Chomsky plundered Humboldt for his analytic insights but repudiated his holistic or "general" approach, dismissing it as "romantic." At any rate, Rollins missed Whorf's characterization of Fabre d'Olivet as mingling, unfortunately, his metaphysical and religious insights with his linguistics (1956: 75).
4. See Alford (1981) for information regarding the way Einstein's special geometry-and-thinking

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case applies to the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf general language-and-thinking question, as well as a 1941 radio speech in which Einstein tackled the linguistic relativity question.

5. Nor can I locate any statement regarding another phrase Rollins takes for granted, the "principle of simple cultural relativity."

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LANGUAGE SITUATIONS

MICHAEL CLYNE (ed.), *Australia talks: Essays on the sociology of Australian immigrant and aboriginal languages*. (Pacific Linguistics, Series D, No. 23.) Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1976. Pp. viii + 244 + 14.

Australia is a stratified, multi-ethnic society, despite its reputation as a White enclave in the Antipodes and its mainstream monocultural ideology of egalitarianism and antiauthoritarianism. The present volume includes papers that treat some sociolinguistic aspects of its diversity with particular attention to Australian English varieties (not mentioned in the title), the languages of immigrants in contact with English, and Aboriginal languages, (including Aboriginal English). Michael Clyne's introduction gives a brief overview to orient the reader to this diversity. Most of the papers were intended for a special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, but length precluded its publication there, and we may be grateful to *Pacific Linguistics* for publishing it. Several are student papers, and many are also shorter versions or revisions of papers published elsewhere.

Eagleson's "The Evidence for Social Dialects in Australian English" has the modest goal of identifying some characteristic features of Sydney workingclass