

УДК 811.111

І.А. Бокун, ДВНЗ "Українська академія банківської справи НБУ"

UNIVERSALITY VERSUS THE RELATIVITY OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

The article focuses on universality & relativity of human knowledge & suggests another perspective: relative universality.

The question of universality & relativity of human knowledge is primarily important in cognitive linguistics because the main issue here is where language is an expression of thought or shapes thought. It will be also interesting to look at from the perspective of language, mind and culture.

In the experientialist view world comes largely unstructured; it is human observers who do most of its structuring. A large part of this structuring is due to the linguistic system (which is a subsystem of culture). Language can shape and, according to the principle of linguistic relativity [14], does shape the way we think. The special significance of the principle of linguistic relativity lies in the fact that embracing linguistic relativity as our solution to the issue of whether language expresses thought or shapes it puts us on the side of relativity in the great historical and current debate over the universality versus the relativity of human knowledge.

A view of the universality of human knowledge would maintain the "psychic unity of mankind." We share the most significant knowledge about the world in the form of transcendental universal concepts. We have a universal faculty of reason. Such transcendental universal ideas make up the faculty of reason and are innate. Experience, including linguistic experience, is helpful only in triggering the acquisition of universal concepts and principles for their organization. By contrast, the view of the relativity of human knowledge would maintain that our knowledge of the world derives primarily from experience – experience that "is obtained through culturally mediated conceptual schemes, i.e., historically situated, contingent frameworks of meaning and understanding" [2, 169].

Given this split in our thinking about the nature of knowledge, let us clarify the issue further by means of an example. Going through the example will allow us to discuss a number of important issues in the study of language, mind, and culture. Perhaps the most significant of these is the principle of linguistic relativity.

Benjamin Lee Whorf spells out the principle of linguistic relativity in an often-quoted passage [14, 212-213]:

It was found that the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, 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.

Let us now see a specific example of a research program inspired by the principle of linguistic relativity. Stephen C. Levinson and his colleagues did important work that shows that, despite the many rejections Whorf's ideas have received over the years [12; 13], his insights may turn out to be valid after all [8; 9; 10]. Consider the conception of space in different languages. This example is especially interesting because space is a domain that Whorf himself took to be universal (unlike time, which he showed to be very differently conceptualized in English and Hopi). This is what Whorf writes about the conceptualization of "space" [14, 158-159]:

But what about our concept of "space," which was also included in our first question? There is no such striking difference between Hopi and SAE [Standard Average European] about space as about time, and probably the apprehension of space is given in substantially the same form by experience irrespective of language. The experiments of the Gestalt psychologists with visual perception appear to establish this as a fact.

In other words, Whorf did not see any significant difference in the conceptualization of "space" in English and Hopi, unlike in that of time. Moreover, he regarded space as "given substantially the same form by experience," that is, universal. Notice that Whorf's argument (mentioning the experiments of Gestalt psychologists) is perfectly consistent with the experiential suggestion in the mind-body relationship, namely, that the mind is based on the body. Since we are spatial beings, it only makes sense for us to have a self- or ego-oriented spatial conceptualization that is based on "left-right," "in front of-behind," and so on, which are spatial coordinates that come from the human body. If we look at Standard Average European (SAE) languages, such relativist spatial orientations (i.e., relative to human beings) appear to be universal. But is spatial orientation indeed conceived in the same way in radically different languages? John B. Haviland's [4]

and Stephen Levinson's [8] research shows otherwise. Levinson describes a very different solution to the problem of spatial orientation in connection with a radically different language – the native Australian language of Guugu Yimithirr [9, 180]:

Take, for example, the case of the Guugu Yimithirr speakers of N. Queensland, who utilize a system of spatial conception and description which is fundamentally different from that of English-speakers. Instead of concepts of relativistic space, wherein one object is located by reference to demarcated regions projected out from another reference object (ego, or some landmark) according to its orientation, Guugu Yimithirr speakers use a system of absolute orientation (similar to cardinal directions) which fixes absolute angles regardless of the orientation of the reference object. Instead of notions like "in front of," "behind," "to the left of," "opposite," etc., which concepts are uncoded in the language, Guugu Yimithirr speakers must specify locations as (in rough English gloss) "to the North of," "to the South of," "to the East of," etc. The system is used at every level of scale, from millimeters to miles, for there is (effectively) no other system available in the language; there is simply no analogue of the Indo-European prepositional concepts.

This is fascinating, but, more important for my purposes here, does this language have any consequence for the cognitive behavior of its speakers? As Levinson [9, 181] makes clear (based on his own work [8]), the consequences of such a spatial system for cognition are far-reaching:

Every speaker must be absolutely oriented at all times, and when moving must dead-reckon all locations that may need to be referred to, or used as reference points. These cognitive processes can be demonstrated independently of language: Guugu Yimithirr speakers can be shown during travel to be able to estimate the directions of other locations with an average error of less than 140. It can also be demonstrated experimentally that they remember spatial arrays not in terms of ego-centric co-ordinates (like in front, behind, to the left or right), but in terms of the cardinal directions in which objects lie. Thus Guugu Yimithirr speakers appear to think about space in a fundamentally different way than we do.

The use of this "geocentric absolute spatial reckoning system" requires abilities that speakers of SAE languages do not possess as an everyday, natural ability. The Guugu Yimithirr must carry a mental map in their head of everything that surrounds them, with the map aligned for the four quadrants. With the help of such a mental map, they can identify the location of any object with a high degree of precision, far exceeding the ability of speakers of languages that have a relativist system of spatial reckoning.

We can ask how such a system of spatial reckoning can have evolved. This would be a legitimate question since the conception of “space,” as noted earlier, is one of the prime domains that is taken to have evolved from our most basic bodily experience as “ego-centric, forward-looking and -oriented bipedal primates wandering on a planet with significant gravity” [9, 180]. It can be suggested in response that a spatial reckoning system like the one found in Guugu Yimithirr is also motivated experientially – but that its motivation does not come directly from the human body but from the absolute coordinates that characterize the geographic space/environment in which human bodies function. In other words, the human body may underdetermine the particular spatial orientation systems human beings use; nevertheless, such systems are always well motivated and not arbitrary. That the human body plays an important role in establishing and motivating aspects of the conceptual system but may often underdetermine such aspects seems to be a well-established finding in cross-cultural research on language, mind, and culture [5; 7].

Perhaps the best way to term my stance on the issue of universality versus relativity of human knowledge is to use the apparently contradictory phrase “relative universality.” This term was suggested by Z. Kövecses [6, 332]. It is intended to suggest that knowledge and meaning are always relative to some context, even if there is a strong universal basis that underlies them. It seems that universality as regards knowledge and meaning is never complete; and given the manifold and fundamental presence of context in acquiring knowledge and making meaning, it cannot ever be. I will spell out this idea in more detail.

Speakers of different languages and members of different cultures have at their disposal a set of universal cognitive processes by means of which they make meaning. These meaning-making processes include categorization, framing, metonymy, metaphor, figure-ground alignment, force dynamics, perspective taking, attention, mental spaces, blending, and several others. Such processes are universally available for all human beings, but they may not put these processes to use to the same degree. For example, as Ning Yu’s [11] work shows, speakers of Chinese tend to conceptualize some of their emotions more along metonymic lines, while speakers of English tend to use predominantly metaphorical understanding for the same emotions. But we should not conclude from this that Chinese is predominantly metonymy oriented, while English is metaphor oriented. The reverse of this situation may apply in other domains. Jonathan Charteris-Black [1] discusses the conceptualization of the main speech organs (mouth, lip, tongue) for various speech activities in English and Malay. He found that speakers of English primarily make use of metonymies and

speakers of Malay primarily employ metaphorical conceptualization with regard to these speech organs when they talk about speaking. The point is that although the cognitive processes of metaphor and metonymy are available to Chinese, Malay, and English speakers, they do not utilize them in the same way and to the same degree. We have potential universality that is realized partially and differentially in different cultures.

It seems most reasonable for us to adopt a version of relativity that is based on the universality of embodiment. Relativity does not exclude universality in human knowledge and meaning making. *Embodiment* refers to basic bodily processes and action, such as physiological processes, perception, motor activities, and the like [3]. These are all processes that all human beings share. Embodiment provides the motivation for large segments of our conceptual systems. One example is the discovery of basic colors and basic color terms. Berlin and Kay also discovered that the emergence of basic color terms in the world’s languages follows an evolutionary sequence from *black*, *white*, *red*, and so on, to *pink*, *orange*, and *gray*. The basic colors may be at least partially based on universal aspects of color physiology.

A second example is basic-level categorization. Basic-level categorization depends on interactional properties – properties that are based on bodily experience. However, categorization in general and levels of categorization in particular are just as much a matter of culture as they are a matter of cognition. The cultural contexts in which the categorization takes place play a crucial role in why people categorize particular objects and events at particular levels of abstraction.

Metaphors might serve as our third example. Some conceptual metaphors may be universal because the bodily experiences on which they are based are universal. Many of the same conceptual metaphors may reflect certain culture-specific features at a more specific level of conceptualization. Other conceptual metaphors may be entirely based on unique cultural phenomena. However, even those conceptual metaphors that are based on universal embodiment may receive culture-specific meanings in different cultures. The SEX IS HEAT metaphor may be universal or at least widespread due to its obvious universal embodiment, but it seems to possess different cultural meanings in different cultural contexts [5].

Metaphors provide a major source of variation in conceptualizing the world. For example, we saw that it is very common for languages to display alternative ways of conceptualizing spatial relations. As Heine’s work indicates, there appear to be three major alternatives for doing this. In one, differential body parts are used; in another, either the body, environmental landmarks, or the immediate human environment is made use of; and in

a third, the animal body, as opposed to the human body, is the basis of conceptualization. All of these are highly motivated. Spatial relations are conceived in terms of human beings in the center of a humanly interpreted universe. The human being speaking a language uses his or her own body and its relationship to the surrounding natural and cultural environment as a basis to conceptualize spatial relations. Many of our metaphors vary because our experiences as human beings vary and because the cognitive processes we put to use for the creation of abstract thought may also vary.

Bibliography

1. Charteris-Black J. Speaking with forked tongue: A comparative study of metaphor and metonymy in English and Malay phraseology // *Metaphor and Symbol*. – 2003. – № 18 (4). – P. 289-310.
2. Foley W.A. *Anthropological Linguistics*. – Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. – 203 p.
3. Gibbs R.W. *Embodiment a Cognitive Science*. – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. – 106 p.
4. Haviland J. Guugn Yimithirr // *Handbook in Australian languages*. – Canberra: ANU Press, 1979. – P. 27-180.
5. Kövecses Z. *Metaphor in Culture. Universality and Variation*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. – 118 p.
6. Kövecses Z. *Language, Mind and Culture*. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. – 397 p.
7. Lakoff G., Johnson M. *Metaphors We live By*. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. – 387 p.
8. Levinson S.C. *Language and Cognition. Working Paper No. 13*. – Nijmegen: Cognitive Anthropology Research Group, 1992. – 16 p.
9. Levinson S.C. *Relativity in spatial conception and description // Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. – P. 177-202.
10. Lucy J. *The scope of linguistic relativity // Rethinking linguistic Relativity*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. – P. 37-69.
11. Ning Y. *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor in Chinese*. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998. – 205 p.
12. Pinker S. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. – New York: William Morrow, 1994. – 435 p.
13. Pullum G.K. *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax and Other Irrelevant Essays on the Study of Language*. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. – 185 p.
14. Whorf B.L. *Language, Thought, and Reality*. – Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956. – 285 p.

Резюме

І.А. Бокун. *Universality versus the relativity of human knowledge.*

У статті розглянута опозиція “універсальність VS релятивність людських знань”. Запропоновано осмислити цю опозицію в рамках парадигми “релятивної універсальності”.

Рукопис надіслано до редакції 17.12.2007.

Vokun, I. A. Universality versus the relativity of human knowledge [Text] / I. A. Vokun // Сучасна картина світу : природа, суспільство, людина : зб. наук. праць. - Суми, УАБС НБУ, 2008. – С. 49–55.