Linguistic Relativity and Linguistic Determinism: Idiom in 20th Century Cornish

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1   Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Jenner (1904: xi) wrote,

> Why should Cornishmen learn Cornish? There is no money in it, it serves no practical purpose, and the literature is scanty and of no great originality or value. The question is a fair one, the answer is simple. Because they are Cornishmen.

In spite of serving "no practical purpose, during the course of the twentieth century, the numbers of Cornish speakers has slowly but steadily increased. It would seem that there is a further raison d'être for a living Cornish language today if it entails a unique world view that reflects Cornish culture. In this paper, I set out to determine the extent to which the Cornish language reflects Cornish culture, the extent to which the Cornish language entails a particular world view, and the extent to which being able to speak Cornish effects the way that one thinks.

2   Language and Thought Processes

Language is not just a means of communication. Our culture and even our thought processes are inflenced by language to some degree. The notion goes back to the nineteenth century scholar, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). Humboldt equated language and thought exactly in a hypothesis that has become known as the 'Weltanschauung' (world-view) hypothesis. In Humboldt's opinion, language completely determines thought and thought is impossible without language.

> *Der mensch lebt mit den Gegenständen hauptsächlich, ja...sogar ausschliesslich so, wie die Sprache sie ihm zuführt.*

> Humans mainly live with objects... even exclusively so, as language conveys them.

2.1   The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

In the first half of the 20th century, language was seen as important in shaping our perception of reality. This was mostly due to Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf who said that language predetermines what we see in the world around us. In other words, language filters reality - we see the real world only in the categories of our language.

This has become known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It starts from the premise that everyone has a fundamental need to make sense of the world. We impose order on the world in order to make sense of it and language is the principle tool available to us for organising the world. Sapir (1956) expresses it thus,

> ... the real world is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Whorf (1956) goes on to say,

> We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

In support of these views, Sapir and Whorf examined the differences between English and several other languages. They found that in Eskimo, for example, there are many words for 'snow': 'falling snow', 'snow on the ground', 'hard-packed snow', and so on. In Aztec, on the other hand, there is only one word used to represent 'snow', 'cold' and 'ice'. But it was not only simply with differences in vocabulary with which Sapir and Whorf were concerned. They were also interested in differences in structure. A case in point is that the Hopi language does not include any concept of time seen as a dimension. Realising how vitally important the concept of time is in Western physics, Whorf suggested that a Hopi physics would be radically different from English physics and that a Hopi physicist and an English physicist would find it virtually impossible to understand one another.

3   Non-equivalence & Surrogate Equivalence

In the vocabulary of Cornish, as in every language, many lexical items are found that are language and culture specific. From the mining industry we get the Cornish word *atal* meaning 'mine waste'. From the fishing industry we get *beetia*, 'to mend fishing nets'. From Cornish cuisine we get *foogan* and *hogan* for types of 'pastry cake'. *Racca* refers to 'a traditional Cornish pub tune session'. *Troyl* refers to 'a traditional Cornish dance gathering'. *Furry* is a particular type of processional dance that is done in Cornwall.

4   Interlingual Synonymy and Lexical Anisomorphism

Of course there are some Cornish words which have complete translation equivalence with their English counterparts. *Bara*, for example, is always translated into English as 'bread', and 'bread' is always translated into Cornish as *bara*. However, complete

isomorphism between pairs of translation equivalents tends to be the exception rather than the rule. For example, the English noun, 'book', is always translated into Cornish as *levar*. But *levar* may be translated into English as either 'book' or 'volume' (i.e. one of a set of books). One has only to browse through any bilingual dictionary to observe that this kind of lexical anisomorphism is very common.

5 Linguistic Relativity: Language as a Conceptual System

The notion that distinctions encoded in one language are unique to that language alone is known as linguistic relativity. According to this theory, there is no limit to the structural diversity of languages.

A typical example is the semantics of colour words. When we perceive colour with our eyes, we are sensing that portion of electromagnetic radiation that is visible light. In fact, the spectrum of visible light is a continuum of light waves with frequencies that increase at a continuous rate from one end to the other, each colour gradually blending into the next; there are no sharp boundaries. In other words, there are no distinct colours like red and green in nature.

Like many other creatures, we possess the visual apparatus for discriminating colour differences, in terms of gradations of hue, brightness and saturation. But in addition, unlike animals, we have the apparatus for categorising these colours verbally. In other words we are able to place a particular shade in one 'pigeon-hole' rather than another.

We impose boundaries when, in English, we talk of green, blue, grey, brown and red. It takes little thought to realise that these discriminations are arbitrary - and indeed in other languages the boundaries are different. This can be seen in the comparison of some English language colours with their counterparts in Cornish.

Colours are not objective, naturally determined segments of reality. Language guides us in seeing the spectrum in terms of the arbitrarily established categories that we call colours. In other words, the colours we see are predetermined by what our language prepares us to see.

These examples show that the language we use, whichever it happens to be, divides not only the colour spectrum, but indeed our whole reality, which is a 'kaleidoscopic flux of impressions', into completely arbitrary compartments.

6 Interlingual Hyponomy: Convergence and Divergence

There is divergence when a lexeme, contrasted with the lexical units of the target language, must be divided into several sub-meanings. There is convergence when two or

more sub-meanings with their lexical units correspond to one and the same lexical unit in the target language. For example, the Cornish word, *nyedga*, can be translated into English as 'swim', 'float' or 'fly'.

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            / swim \
                    \ nyedga en dowr
nyedga <---- float  /
            \ fly -------- nyedga en ebbarn
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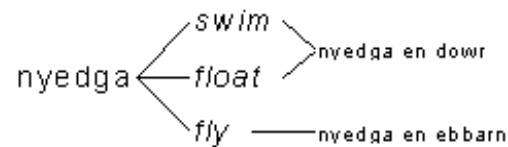
Some speakers of Cornish have sought to disambiguate by introducing the neologism, *nuevya*. They then use *nuevya* to translate 'swim' and *nyedga* to translate 'fly. In this manner, the semantic structure of Cornish can be made to mirror that of English. However, it might be argued that this is unnecessary since the particular sense of *nyedga* can usually be determined from the context.

> Yesterday we went to the beach to swim.

> Last year we flew to Majorca for our holidays.

Furthermore, *nyedga* can be disambiguated, if necessary, by additional information.

> *nyedga en dowr* (i.e. *nyedga* in water)

> *nyedga en ebbarn* (i.e. *nyedga* in sky)

The fact that it is possible to disambiguate the Cornish expression in this manner shows that language does not completely determine the way that we think.

7   Lexical Anisomorphism

Although language does not completely determine the way that we think, the way that a language reflects a particular worldview is evident when we compare the contiguous set of words in Cornish that relate to the semantic field of LAND with their translation equivalents in English. Two phenomena are evident. Firstly as in the case of colour terms, there is overlapping meaning. Secondly there is a general tendancy to convergence from English to Cornish.

pow
county
shire
province
region

brou
nation

glaze
kingdom
country

tereath
land

earth

teer
ground
territory
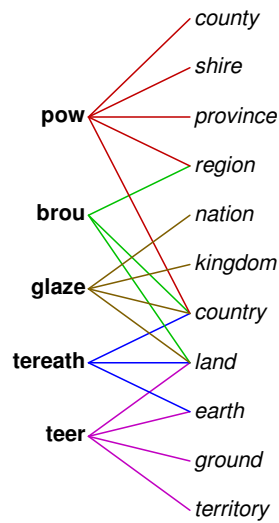
A general tendancy to convergence from English to Cornish comes as no great surpirise. Cornish-English dictionaries contain roughly between 9,000 and 16,000 main entries, whereas the 2nd edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains about 290,500 main entries.

Convergence between English and Cornish does not, however, invariably operate in this direction. The English word, 'hill', may be translated as *meneth, bern, brea, bryn, ryn, ambel*, *garth, mulvra* or *godolgh*. *Meneth* is used to refer to Cornwall's higher peaks, such as Roughtor and Brown Willy, or, outside of Cornwall, to mountains. *Bron* means 'breast' as well as hill. *Brea* is used to refer to the most prominent hill in a district.

Bryn is starting to fall out of usage. *Ryn* refers to a 'hill' in the sense of projecting ground, or a steep hill-side or slope. *Garth* is used to refer to a long narrow hilltop. *Ambel* refers to the side of a hill. *Mulvra* refers to a round-topped hill. *Godolgh* is a very small hill.

hill
mena/meneth
bern/bron
bryn
reen
ambel
garth
mulvra
godolgh

valley
nans
golans
tenow
coom
deveren
glyn
haunans

The English word, 'valley', may be translated into Cornish as *nans, golans, tenow, coom,*

deveren, glyn, or *haunans*. *Golans* refers to a small valley. *Tenow* refers to low ground or a valley bottom. *Coom* is a tributary valley. *Deveren* refers to a wet valley or a valley with a river. *Glyn* is a large, deep valley. *Haunans* refers to a deep valley with very steep sides.

Since Cornwall is a place that abounds with hills and valleys, it is not surprising that Cornish has developed many words in this lexical field. A particular world view is evident here, one that tends to make finer distinctions than English and reflects local topography. It would appear that a Cornish speaker who uses this full range of vocabulary to describe the landscape, actually views the landscape differently from an English speaker who does not speak Cornish. Thinking in Cornish, then, is to some ecxtent different from thinking in English. I am not suggesting that language completely determines thought. Nevertheless there seems to be a link between language and thought and the Cornish lexicon reflects that which is inherent in Cornish culture.

Tourism is very much a twentieth century phenomenon in Cornwall. So the ways in which the English word 'tourist' may be translated into Cornish are particularly relevant. There are seven possible Cornish translation equivalents for 'tourist': *vyajyer, tervyajyor, tornyas, havyas, gwandryas, touryst* and *troillier*. Their morphological derivation reveals how they semantically differ from one another. The notion of tourists as people whose presence in Cornwall is temporary, is reflected in *tornyas* which derives from *torn* (occasion, time) and *-yas* (agency noun ending). *Havyas*, from *hav* (summer) and *-yas*, specifies the time of year when tourists are particularly prevalent in Cornwall. The notion of tourists as people who are in transit is reflected in *gwandryas, troillier* and *vyajyer*. *Tervyajyor* has pejorative connotation especially if it is perceived as a blend of *terva* (to make a tumult) and *vyajor* (someone on a journey).

vyajyer	*vyaj* (journey) + *-yer*
tervyajor	*ter* (fervent) + *vyajor* or *terva* (make a tumult) + *vyajor*
tornyas	*torn* (occasion, time) + *-yas*
havyas	*hav* (summer) + *-yas*
gwandryas	*gwandra* (wander, roam) + *-yas*
touryst	
troillier	*troill* (a spin, trip, tour) + *-ier*

8   Language and Gender

The way in which gender is depicted in the Cornish lexicon shows certain marked biases,

in particular with regard to professions. The various Cornish dictionaries provide us with Cornish words for masculine fishermen, farmers and doctors. It is assumed that doctors are necessarily male and that nurses are always female. The name of the political party, *Mebyon Kernow*, translates as "sons of Cornwall"; there is no mention of Cornwall's daughters. Of course, it is not a prerequisite that Cornish be used in this way. It is possible to create feminine forms, such as *pyskadores* and *medheges*, to translate 'fisherwoman' and 'female doctor'. The feminine suffix, *-es*, can be removed from *clavyjores* to create *clavyjor*, 'male nurse'. Nevertheless, since Cornish grammar has no neuter gender, it is somewhat difficult to refer to occupations in a way that includes both sexes. If one wants to translate the English sentence,

<div align="center">Nurses report to the doctor</div>

into Cornish, one is obliged to say something like,

<div align="center">*Clavyjorion ha clavyjoresow a dannvon dhe'n medhek po medheges.*</div>

Masculine		Feminine	
fisherman	*poscader*	**fish-wife**	*gwreag an puscas*
	dean an puscas		*gwerthores an puscas*
farmer	*tyack*	**farmer's wife**	*tyeges*
doctor	*methak*	**nurse**	*clavyjores*
			mageres
			norys
			mammeth
Sons of Cornwall	*Mebyon Kernow*		

9 Syntax

Syntax is another area in which Cornish differs from English. The English sentence,
<div align="center">'I am a doctor'</div>
can be translated into Cornish as either,
<div align="center">*Methack o ve*</div>
or
<div align="center">*Me ew methack.*</div>
These all have the same referential meaning. However the two different Cornish translations entail a difference in emphasis. *Methack o ve* has the sense, 'I am a **doctor** (not a nurse)'. Whereas, *Me ew methack* has the sense, '**I** am a doctor (not you)'. Of course in spoken English this difference in emphasis is conveyed phonologically, by placing a stress on the appropriate word. But in written English it is much more difficult. One has to resort to a rather convoluted structure such as 'It is I who am a doctor'.

Methack o ve ── I am a doctor

Me ew methack ──

Jory a garaTamsyn ── Jory loves Tamsyn / Tamsyn loves Jory
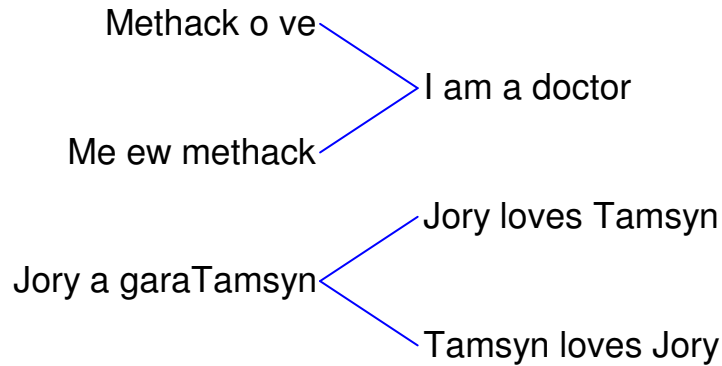
The flexibility of word order in Cornish can also lead to ambiguity. For example,

Jory a gar Tamsyn

can mean either

'Jory loves Tamsyn'

or

'Tamsyn loves Jory'.

10 Number

Morphology is another area in which Cornish structures meaning in a different way from English. This is evident in the way that nouns are inflected for number. The Cornish noun can take up to five possible forms: singular, plural, collective, singulative and dual. Thus the Cornish word, *ger* ('an utterance'), has the singulative form, *geren* ('a word') and the plural forms, *geryow* and *gerennow*. The collective form, *hun* ('sleep'), also has a singular form, *huneys* ('a sleep'). *Luef* ('a hand') has both a plural form, *lufyow* ('hands'), and a dual form, *dyulef* ('a pair of hands').

Singular		Plural		Collective		Singulative		Dual	
		dowrow / dowrennow	waters / water-places	*dowr*	water	*dowren*	a water-place		
		geryow/ gerennow	words	*ger*	an utterance / a phrase	*geren*	a single word		
huneys	a sleep			*hun*	sleep				
		gwedhennow	trees	*gwyth*	a wood	*gwedhen*	a tree		
		newlennow / newlow	clouds of fog / fogs	*newl*	fog	*newlen*	a cloud of fog		
luef	a hand	*lufyow*	hands					*dyulef*	a pair of hands

This dual form of the noun was originally restricted to parts of the body that occur in pairs. But during the twentieth century it has spawned a number of neologisms in Cornish. Thus *diwros* (literally a pair of wheels) is used to translate 'bycycle'. From this, the verbs, *diwrosa* ('to cycle') and *diwrosya* ('to go on a cycle tour') are derived. Similarly *dewweder* translates 'a pair of glasses' or 'spectacles'. *Dewdhen* (a pair of people) translates 'a couple'. *Dewbries* (literally 'a pair of spouses') refers to a married couple. The adjective, *diwyethek* (*diw-* + *yeth* + *-ek*) translates 'bilingual'. And from *diwyethek* the noun *diwyethogeth* ('bilingualism') is derived.

11.1 calque

Another way of creating neologisms is to calque. A calque is a type of borrowing, in which the morphemic constituents of a word borrowed from another language are translated item by item into equivalent morphemes in Cornish. A good example of a calque from English is *dydh-tardh*, 'daybreak' . Note how this calque follows English syntax. The usual Cornish syntax would have given *tardh-an-jydh*. Normal Cornish syntax is followed in the calques *Aberfal* and *Aberplymm* for 'Falmouth' and 'Plymouth'. *Gwirbryntyans* ('copyright') is an interesting calque insofar as its elements are not accurate translations of their English counterparts. *Gwir* signifies 'right' in the sense of 'true' or 'truth'. The 'right' in 'copyright' signifies 'entitlement'. In other words, if one holds a copyright, one is entitled to make copies. The Cornish word for 'entitlement' is *pewas*. Furthermore *pryntya* refers specifically to 'printing' and does not cover other forms of copying. One might have expected *dasscryf-pewas* as a calque for English 'copyright'. Not all calques borrow from English. *Aval-dor* (potato) is a calque on the French, *pomme de terre*.

English multiword idiomatic expressions are frequently calqued, especially in conversational Cornish. Thus we find expressions such as:

onen da!: 'nice one'

kudenn vyth: 'no problem'

heb grev: 'no problem'

yskynnewgh 'gas dewros: 'get on your bike'

bos kompes gans: be even with

maga feri avel hok: as high as a kite

effeyth chi gweder: greenhouse effect

Not all idioms are necessarily calqued from English though.

hager dowl: rotten luck

ny wrav fors: I don't care

ny settyav gwelenn gala: 'I don't care a straw'

tewlel dhe skoell: treat wantonly, carelessly cast aside

ty a'n pren: you'll catch it

gwellha dha jer: cheer up

ny'm deur: it does not concern me

ny vern: it is of no concern

gul anvri dhe: show disrespect for

yn trogel: in the flesh

kavoes/settya dalghenn yn: get a grip on

12 Conclusions

It may be concluded that being able to speak Cornish does not determine the way that one thinks. However, it is clear that the Cornish language does entail its own unique worldview and this can have an effect on the way that Cornish speakers think. As the vocabulary of Cornish increases, semantic convergence from English to Cornish will decrease and Cornish will, to some extent, become more like English in the semantic structure of its lexicon. Whilst Cornwall retains its own distinct culture, as in the case of its traditional music and dance, the Cornish lexicon will continue to reflect that. As the way of life changes and old industries change or disappear, words that are specific to those industries will fall into disuse. New industries, such as tourism, however, demand new vocabulary which, as we have seen , may be semantically structured in a different manner from English to reflect a Cornish cultural perspective.

13 Bibliography

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