Anna Jedynak

ON LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM

There are some misunderstandings and misinterpretations concerning linguistic relativism (abbreviated here as LR), a view originally put forward during the twenties by Sapir and Whorf in their research on various ethnic languages. LR states that some languages are radically different and, consequently, so are worldviews commonly shared by the users of these languages, and that these visions cannot be correlated. Hence, the following questions arise: Which of these visions – if any – is the “true” one? Do the different cognitive viewpoints corresponding to different languages mutually exclude one another and is a universal cognitive perspective impossible? Or, does LR find some languages untranslatable only because they are too simple and only suitable for speaking about disparate domains of life? If so, would it be possible to make them translatable by enriching them, thus approximating them to the universal object language? The aim of this paper is to consider these problems.

1. What does Linguistic Relativism Claim

The very word ‘relativism’ can be used in a stronger or weaker sense. Let us consider moral relativism as an example:

(MR₁) In the weakest sense, relativism sometimes means that people coming from different societies adhere to different moral norms, which shows the natural and cultural conditioning of these norms. This descriptive statement is empirically verifiable (though evidence is stronger for its first part than for the second one).

(MR₂) In a stronger sense, one may add that moral norms adhered to by people from different societies are sometimes mutually inconsistent. This analytical statement is linguistically verifiable.
Thus both statements (MR\(_1\)) and (MR\(_2\)) are decidable. None of them expresses any controversial philosophical view. One can question if they really represent relativism as they only contain a pure description of human beliefs, their conditioning and mutual analytical relations.

(MR\(_3\)) In a still stronger sense, one may add that people in different societies – adhering to different moral norms – are simultaneously right. It is this statement that represents relativism in its fullest sense and sometimes gives rise to strong objections. However, it is only controversial when thesis (MR\(_1\)) is strengthened to thesis (MR\(_2\)). Then, it says that people adhering to mutually inconsistent norms are simultaneously right and, consequently, that these norms are equally good. Thesis (MR\(_3\)) is neither empirically nor analytically decidable, for it evaluates people’s moral beliefs.

In the same way one can distinguish three versions of cognitive relativism, of which only the third one fully deserves to be called relativism. And, analogously, the following three versions of LR can be distinguished:

(LR\(_1\)) Some languages spoken by various ethnic groups differ considerably, not only in terms of the sound of words, but, most importantly, their meaning and the worldviews commonly accepted in those societies differ as well. This is because language influences the way people perceive and interpret the world.

(LR\(_2\)) Moreover, it is impossible to harmonize or correlate the worldviews in question. Acceptance of one of them excludes the possibility of accepting another one.

(LR\(_3\)) Among languages influencing various views, there are no better or worse ones – all of them are equally good.

Contrary to other types of relativism, LR is usually presented in its weakest version. Why is it so? It is because weak versions of moral or cognitive relativism are well documented and only the strongest one is controversial. However, in the case of LR the controversy already appears in the weakest version, expressed in thesis (LR\(_1\)), which can be presented as a conjunction of the following two statements:

(LR\(_{1a}\)) Some languages spoken by various ethnic groups differ considerably, not only in terms of the sound of words, but, most importantly, their meaning; the views commonly accepted in those societies differ as well.