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Linguistic relativism and the expression of basic theoretical rationality in Inuktitut

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Abstract

This paper begins by stressing the importance of distinguishing between linguistic relativity whose reality is hardly debatable and linguistic relativism which ultimately holds that language communities are locked within their own worldview, hence their own notions of truth. It then rejects linguistic relativism by asserting the existence of a universal core of theoretical rationality comprised at the very least of the logical principles of identity, noncontradiction and excluded middle. It goes on to show how this theoretical rationality manifests itself in the lexicon of a language differing greatly from English: Inuktitut spoken by the Inuit of Nunavik (Arctic Quebec). The definitions provided by Taamusi Qumaq for three words relating to critical thought are translated for the first time. Other quotes give examples of theoretical rationality in actual usage. Finally, the paper asks why logic as such is accorded little value in the culture Inuktitut expresses. The suggested answer follows Jack Goody, who holds that a long written tradition is required for the rules of formal logic to take hold in language practices. Writing is not just a transcription of the spoken word; it is an intellectual technology which impacts the way speakers use their language.

Keywords

Inuktitut, linguistic relativism, theoretical rationality, critical thought, writing

Le relativisme linguistique et l'expression de la rationalité théorique de base en inuktitut

Résumé

Cet article commence par souligner l'importance de la distinction entre la relativité linguistique, dont la réalité est difficilement discutable, et le relativisme linguistique, qui soutient en définitive que les communautés linguistiques sont enfermées dans leur propre vision du monde, et donc dans leur propre conception de la vérité. Il rejette ensuite le relativisme linguistique en affirmant l'existence d'un noyau universel de rationalité théorique composé au minimum des principes logiques d'identité, de non-contradiction et de tiers-exclu. Il montre ensuite comment cette rationalité théorique se manifeste dans le lexique d'une langue très différente de l'anglais: l'inuktitut parlé par les Inuit du Nunavik (Arctique québécois). Les définitions fournies par Taamusi Qumaq pour trois mots relatifs à la pensée critique sont traduites pour la première fois. D'autres citations donnent des exemples de rationalité théorique dans l'usage réel. Enfin, l'article se demande pourquoi la logique est peu valorisée en tant que telle dans la culture qui s'exprime en inuktitut. La réponse proposée est essentiellement celle de Jack Goody, qui soutient qu'une longue tradition écrite est nécessaire pour que les règles de la logique formelle s'installent dans les pratiques linguistiques. L'écriture n'est pas une simple transcription de la parole, c'est une technologie intellectuelle qui rétroagit sur la façon dont les locuteurs utilisent leur langue.

Mots-clés

Inuktitut, relativisme linguistique, rationalité théorique, pensée critique, écriture

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Linguistic relativism and the expression of basic theoretical rationality in Inuktitut

This paper presents some reflections on the link between language diversity and human thought. It argues against the view of a complete divide between different modes of thinking, supposedly rooted in language. It shows that in Inuktitut, an Inuit dialect which is structurally quite different from Western forms of speech, valid thinking obeys principles that are in fact the universal conditions of mutual understanding. The paper is organized as follows. I will first claim that the concept of linguistic relativism is at odds with the existence of what can be called ‘basic theoretical rationality’. I will then focus on the expression of basic theoretical rationality in Inuktitut. And finally I will try to promote a reasonable answer to this question: why is logical thinking unequally valued by different cultures?

1. Basic theoretical rationality as a limit to linguistic relativism

First of all, it is important to make a distinction between the concept of ‘linguistic relativism’ and the concept of ‘linguistic relativity’. Linguistic relativity is the idea that causal relationships exist between language and thought. It is hard to deny that these relationships do in fact exist. Languages tend to influence their speakers’ thought patterns just as they tend to be influenced by those same thought patterns. Let us give two examples. The Inuit numerical system is very seldom used to count above twenty, and it is a fact that unilingual Inuit language speakers have some difficulty manipulating large numbers. Inuit language speakers have a radically open relation to the future, and it is a fact that the Inuit language does not make a difference between ‘if’ and ‘when’.

Linguistic relativity is not a new concept. For its essay competition of 1759, the Berlin Academy of Sciences sought responses to the question: “What is the reciprocal influence of the opinions of people on language, and of language on opinions?” At roughly the same time, we find Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 1974: 73) writing: “[L]anguages, as they change the symbols, also modify the ideas which the symbols express. Minds are formed by language, thoughts take their color from its ideas. Reason alone is common to all. Every language has its own form, a difference which may be partly cause and partly effect of differences in national character; this conjecture appears to be confirmed by the fact that in every nation under the sun, speech follows the changes of manners, and is preserved or altered along with them”. The concept of linguistic relativity has been well explored by contemporary scholars (see in particular the works of John A. Lucy, e.g. 1992, 1997).

Linguistic relativism is a more extreme notion. It holds that everything in human thought is relative to the language in which it is conducted. In other words, it posits that one’s native language totally determines one’s thought patterns. Since every language is supposed to be unique, this also implies that each speech community has its own distinct way of thinking, both incommensurable to any other and unassailable from the outside.

Linguistic relativism is not a new concept either. Although often presented as a discovery stemming from the pioneering work of Benjamin Lee Whorf in the 1930’s, it took shape in European romanticism of the 19th century, at a time when nation-states were consolidating. Wilhelm von Humboldt ([1836] 1988: 54, 60), for instance, considered language as “the formative organ of thought” (in German: “das bildende Organ des Gedankens”) and claimed that different languages necessarily give rise to different “worldviews” (in German: “Weltansichten”). In the 20th century, a similar conception was elaborated by the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, who defines language as “the house of Being”, explicitly states that “a dialogue from house to house (...) remains almost impossible” ([1959] 1971: 5). Linguistic relativism is

widespread today among people who are fond of cultural exoticism and those who hold nationalist views.

Nonetheless, there is *at least* one aspect of human thought that is obviously not relative to language. It consists of some fundamental principles pertaining to theoretical rationality. (“Reason alone is common to all”, Rousseau said in the excerpt quoted above.) Theoretical rationality is the use of reason in the field of knowledge and belief. It is opposed to practical rationality, i.e. the use of reason in order to decide how to act. Theoretical rationality relies on three principles, in the absence of which there can be no shared thinking in any language or culture. These principles are not ontological realities. They are logical rules, the first rules of meaningful thought, the heart of what can be called ‘basic theoretical rationality’:

- (i) The principle of *identity*: something is what it is; something is itself.
- (ii) The principle of *noncontradiction*: something cannot be both itself and not itself at the same time and in the same sense.
- (iii) The principle of *excluded middle*: either something is or it isn’t, there is no third option.

These principles happen to have been expressed by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, but there is nothing specifically Greek in them¹. This is what Geoffroy E. R. Llyod (1990: 86) underlines in his book *Demystifying mentalities*: “When Aristotle first formulated the principles of noncontradiction and of excluded middle, he evidently aimed to make explicit rules that are implicit in all human communication, the rules, indeed, that state the conditions of intelligible communication”. In fact, one cannot dispute these principles without using them in one’s argument against them. In order to disprove them, one would have to base one’s argument upon them.

Basic theoretical rationality also includes various notions directly connected to the three above-mentioned principles. Identity enables us to think sameness and difference. Contradiction leads notably to the concepts of truth-as-coherence, logical nonsense, truth-as-correspondence, falsehood and lie. The excluded middle is more problematic but is linked to the notion of proof by contradiction.

All in all, the existence of basic theoretical rationality prevents us from accepting linguistic relativism. Speech communities do not live in *completely* different mental worlds.

2. The expression of basic theoretical rationality in Inuktitut

By examining a collection of Inuit words, phrases and quotes, we will now see how basic theoretical rationality manifests itself in the Inuit language. The Inuit language forms a dialect chain stretching from West Alaska across Arctic Canada to East Greenland. Inuktitut is the name of the varieties of Inuit language that are spoken in the eastern Canadian Arctic. The data in this paper come from Nunavik (Arctic Quebec). The Nunavik dialect has been my main object of study for the past ten years. All the data have been checked with native speakers.

1.2. Identity and difference

The expression of identity and difference in Inuktitut usually involves the noun base **atji** ‘copy’ or the relational noun base **asi-** ‘other than’. Two similar entities are designated literally as ‘two mutual copies’. Two identical entities are therefore ‘two exact mutual copies’. When two entities are different from one another, they are said ‘not to be mutual copies’. Alternatively, one entity is said ‘to be other than (the

¹ An anonymous reviewer mentions that Chinese Taoism seems to admit a principle of *included middle*, and refers to a paper by Liang Shao (2012) quoted in Bernard Saladin d’Anglure (2015: 59). It is not possible to address this nebulous debate here.

other entity’). If someone confuses one entity with another, ‘he thinks it is other than (it is)’.²

- (1) **ᐱᑕᑕᑦᑱᑦ**
atji-gii-k
copy-mutual-ABS.3DU
‘(two) similar entities’
- (2) **ᐱᑕᑕᑦᑱᑦᑕᑕᐱᑦ**
atji-gii-llua-k
copy-mutual-exact-ABS.3DU
‘(two) identical entities’
- (3) **ᐱᑕᑕᑦᑱᑦᑭᑦᑱᑦ**
atji-gii-ngngi-tuuk
copy-be.mutual-not-ATTR.3DU
‘they are not the same (two) entities’
- (4) **ᐱᑕᑕᑦ**
asi-a
other-ABS.SG/POSS.3SG
‘(it is) different’ or ‘(it is) another entity’
- (5) **ᐱᑕᑕᑦᑱᑦᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕ**
asi-a-ngu-juri-janga
other-ABS.SG/POSS.3SG-be-think-ATTR.3SG/3SG
‘s/he takes him/her/it for another’

The verb base **katit-** ‘put together, assemble’ can also be used in utterances suggesting that two things are not to be confused.

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (6) | ᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕ
tamakkua
these.abstract.ABS.DU
‘these (two ideas) don’t go together as one’ | ᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕ
kati-rqaja-ngngi-tuuk
assemble-be.able.to-not-ATTR.3DU |
| (7) | ᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕ
tamakkua
these.abstract.ABS.DU
‘these (two ideas) should not be mixed up’ | ᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕᑕ
kati-ti-gatsa-u-ngit-tuuk
assemble-make-what.should.be.Ved-not-ATTR.3DU |

2.2. (Non)contradiction

Although there is no direct equivalent for the word ‘contradiction’ in Inuktitut, the concepts of contradiction and coherence are expressed through a number of phrases. Two noun bases play an important role here, namely **akiraq** ‘enemy’ and **tuki-** ‘meaning, sense’. (The latter comes from a relational noun

² The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: ABS=absolute case; ATTR=attributive mood; DU=dual number; DUBIT=dubitative mood; PL=plural number; POSS=possessor; REL=relative case; SEC=secondary case; SG=singular number; 1=first person; 2=second person; 3=third person; 3_{REFL}= third person reflexive (i.e. third person identical to the main verb third person subject).

2.3. Words, facts and truth

As already emerges from the quotation above, relationships between speech and the real world can be formulated in Inuktitut. Expressing that a statement conforms to reality or not usually involves the verb base **suli-** ‘be true’ or ‘be right’. In spite of an ambiguity between a theoretical and a practical meaning of the base, there are many instances where it obviously denotes the mere absence of a contradiction between words and facts, or in the negative, the mere existence of such a contradiction. In the same vein, Inuktitut has a substantial lexicon of lying, built on the verb base **sallu-** ‘lie’. This can be seen from Lucien Schneider’s dictionary (1985: 337).

- (14) **ᓯᓪᓵᑦᓴᑦ** ≠ **ᓯᓪᓵᑦᓴᑦᓵᑦ**
suli-juq **suli-ngngi-tuq**
 be.true.or.right-ATTR.3SG be.true.or.right-not-ATTR.3SG
 ‘it is true’ or ‘s/he speaks the truth’ or ‘s/he is right’ ≠ ‘it is false, not true’ or ‘s/he is wrong’

- (15) **ᓴᓪᓴᑦᓴᑦ** = **ᓯᓪᓵᑦᓴᑦᓵᑦᓵᑦ** **ᐅᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ**
sallu-juq **suli-ngngi-tu-mik** **uqar-tuq**
 lie-ATTR.3SG be.true.or.right-not-what-SEC.SG say-ATTR.3SG
 ‘s/he lies’ = ‘s/he knowingly says what is not true’

- (16) **ᐅᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ** **ᓵᓪᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ**
uqar-ta-minik **mali-ngngi-tuq**
 say-what.is.Ved-SEC.SG/POSS.3_{REFL}.SG follow-not-ATTR.3SG
 ‘s/he doesn’t act according to his/her words’

Additionally, Inuktitut uses the locational noun base **mitsi-** ‘this side of something ahead’ (as in **qarqaup mitsaanut** ‘toward this side of the mountain ahead’) in order to denote external reality as a foundation for the truth or falsehood of factual utterances. Hence, **mitsiqarniq** ‘the truth, the reality’ is literally ‘the state of having a visible side’. Likewise, **mitsilik** means ‘true’ in the sense of ‘real’ and **mitsiqangngituq** ‘untrue’ in the sense of ‘unreal’. The latter word can also be a verb meaning ‘it has no reality’. Again, let us quote and translate the definition of this verb by Taamusi Qumaq (1991: 321).

- (17) **ᓵᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ** ~ **ᓵᓴᑦᓴᑦ**
mitsi-qar-niq **mitsi-lik**
 reality-have-state.of.Ving.ABS.SG reality-one.that.has.ABS.SG
 ‘the truth’ ~ ‘true, real’

- (18) “ᓵᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ: ᐅᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ ᓴᓵᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ ᐅᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ, ᐅᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦᓴᑦ.”
“Mitsiqangngituq:
uqartaujuugaluaq sunaqangngituq uqausituinnaq, uqausiq atungngituq.”

“It has no reality:
 although it is spoken by someone, it has no object, it is purely verbal, it is a useless speech act.”

The contradiction between words and facts can also appear immediately, as in this case reported by Stanley Annanack (*Ibid.*: 67):

- (30) ΓΡΡΑΓΓΑΓΓΑΓΓΑΓΓΑ ΓΛΙΣ, ΡΡΑΓΓΑ ΔΔΑΔ σσρρσσσσ ρρσσσσσσ ΛΛΓΓσσ.
ΑΑσσσσσσσσ ΔΔσσσσσσσσσσ ΔΔΔΔΔ ΔΔσσσσσσ σσρρσσσσσσ ΡΡΑΓΓΑ σσρρσσσσσσσσσσ.
ΑΑσσσσσσσσσσ ΑΑσσσσσσσσσσ.

**Mikigialiarvisiangungngituq tamaani, kisiani inuit nirivallutut namminiq pijaminik.
Sulingngitumik uqartuqarsimajuq inuiguuq qallunaat niqinginnik kisiani
nirivaliriangit. Tamanna sulingngituq.**

“Trapping is not very good around here, but the Inuit eat mostly what they get from the land themselves. There is a false claim going around that the Inuit now eat only the white man’s food. That is not true.”

3. Why is logical thinking unequally valued by different cultures?

This said, it is hard to deny that logical thinking seems not to be an end in itself in Indigenous societies. The Inuit are no exception. Anyone familiar with their cultural output knows that logical inconsistency doesn’t alarm them as much as it may alarm Westerners. Suffice it to mention the wealth of internal contradictions that pervades Inuit traditional tales, the strikingly fuzzy identification and classification of nonmaterial entities in Inuit ontologies (a fuzziness often lost in structuralist anthropology), and the absence of formal reasoning as a topic of discourse among individual Inuit.

The point here is not to suggest that the Inuit and other Indigenous peoples lack logical thinking skills.³ It is only to state, in the terms of Nicholas J. Gubser (1965: 227) speaking about the Alaskan Nunamiut, that the Inuit “are very concerned with truth, but not truth in the sense of an ideal abstraction”. So the question is: how should we interpret this relative lack of concern with the rules of logic? The argument I am going to put forward is not original, as it follows on the seminal work of Jack Goody (1977).⁴

Goody thinks that anthropologists interested in this question “have tended to set aside evolutionary or even historical perspectives, preferring to adopt a kind of cultural relativism that looks upon discussions of development as necessarily entailing a value judgement [...] and as over-emphasising or misunderstanding the differences [...]” (*Ibid.*: 2). According to him, however, it is very possible to “admit of differences in cognitive processes or cultural developments” (*Ibid.*: 16) without falling into ethnocentric evolutionism.

In fact, the explanation of the difference at stake is not to be found in the deep recesses of the human soul (*Volksgeist*, mentalities, etc.), but rather in the contingent history of language tools, and specifically in literacy. A long tradition of literacy is a necessary condition for the rise of modes of thought bound by formal logic.

Why is that so? Because writing is not just a passive transcription of speech or an artificial memory: it is an intellectual technology which ends up having an impact on the way people think and talk. It creates a

3 Incidentally, note that the much-reviled Lucien Lévy-Bruhl did not make such a claim either. The following passage is worth quoting: “The mentality of these undeveloped peoples [*sic*] which, for want of a better term, I call *prelogical*, [...] is not *antilogical*; it is not alogical either. [...] By designating it prelogical, I merely wish to state that it does not bind itself down, as our thought does, to avoid contradiction. [...] It does not expressly delight in what is contradictory (which would make it merely absurd in our eyes), but neither does it take pains to avoid it. It is often wholly indifferent to it, and that makes it so hard to follow.” ([1910] 1985: 78)

4 As an anonymous reviewer rightly points out, Goody’s thesis has been criticized in particular by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981). But Goody (1987) has responded convincingly to these and other criticisms.

new dimension for reflection, where it fosters abstraction of reasoning as well as logical consistency.

As Goody puts it, “writing [...] made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form; this scrutiny favored the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, skepticism, and logic [...]; the human mind was freed to study static ‘text’ (rather than be limited by participation in the dynamic ‘utterance’), a process that enabled man to stand back from his creation and examine it in a more abstract, generalized, and rational way. By making it possible to scan the communications of mankind over a much wider time span, literacy encouraged, at the very same time, criticism and commentary” (1977: 37).

Let us also read this illuminating excerpt: “A continuing critical tradition can hardly exist when skeptical thoughts are *not* written down, *not* communicated across time and space, *not* made available for men to contemplate in privacy as well as to hear in performance. [...] Here, I suggest, lies the answer, in part at least, to the emergence of Logic and Philosophy. [...] Logic, in its formal sense, is closely tied to writing: the formalization of propositions, abstracted from the flow of speech and given letters (or numbers), leads to the syllogism. Symbolic logic and algebra, let alone the calculus, are inconceivable without the prior existence of writing. More generally, a concern with the rules of argument or the grounds for knowledge seems to arise, though less directly, out of the formalization of communication (and hence of ‘statement’ and ‘belief’) which is intrinsic to writing. Philosophic discourse is a formalisation of just the kind one would expect with literacy. ‘Traditional’ societies are marked not so much by the absence of reflexive thinking as by the absence of the proper tools for constructive rumination” (*Ibid.*: 43-44).

In the case of Nunavik Inuit, one could object that a syllabic writing system has existed for over a century – a system of which the Inuit are rightfully proud. But the fact is that the place of writing in the ecology of communication in Inuktitut remains very limited. The Inuit culture is indisputably an oral culture, especially in the Canadian Arctic.

To conclude, I have tried to make two main points. (i) There is a fundamental restriction to the claim that people with different languages think differently. All human beings, everywhere, irrespective of their language, have the same reasoning faculty. An examination of how basic theoretical rationality manifests itself in Inuktitut demonstrates that the Canadian Inuit are included in this generalization. This may seem obvious, but is still a point worth making in light of the claims that are sometimes made about ‘Indigenous thought’. (ii) It is probably true that ‘the Inuit’ are less sensitive to the logical form of speech than ‘the Qallunaat’ – i.e. outsiders like the author – may be. But there is no need to suppose a deep mental chasm between the two to account for this difference: it can be traced to historical changes in means of communication, specifically the advent of writing, the increased weight of literacy and its cascading consequences.

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