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The practical utility and explanatory adequacy of applied linguistic relativism[1]

Helen Lauer
Professor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy & Classics University of Ghana.
helenlauer@yahoo.com

Abstract A critical, deflationary analysis is offered of two recently popularised applications of linguistic relativism. The first application concerns the defence mounted *via* linguistic relativism for national single-language policy, on the assumption that a linguistically homogeneous society is more likely to engender national stability than one which is multi-lingual. Empirical data are assembled that contradict in several ways the argument underlying this social engineering initiative. A second application of linguistic relativism purports to explain economic underdevelopment in certain language communities as a consequence of their dysfunctional beliefs about time. Philosophical work done in analysing the conditions required for 'radical interpretation' is marshalled to demonstrate the incoherence of attempting to explain apparent differentials in rates of national economic development worldwide as a function of linguistic relativism.

Keywords: Single-language policy, Radical interpretation, Mbiti, Time, National development

0. Introduction

The impact of language upon thought and social behaviour has re-emerged as a topic in applied philosophy – in part because of the expansion of multi-lingual communities through escalating migratory patterns worldwide; and in part because of the financial interest of multinational corporate elites whose markets and fields of operation are expanding frantically across linguistic divides (Nekvapil and Sherman 2013). In consequence, consultants and experts have been marshalled to apply

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[1] The author is indebted to anonymous reviewers of *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del linguaggio* for their invaluable criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

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philosophical extensions of linguistic relativism, in order to provide a scientifically sound basis for social engineering, and in order to explain all sorts of contemporary problems including ethnic violence, religious extremism, social instability, and economic underdevelopment. I mean 'linguistic relativism' to refer, in a rough and ready fashion, to the family of strong determinist theses claiming that a speaker's first language influences beliefs, and thereby all behavioural dispositions, to such an extent that two participants inhabiting different language groups might exhibit incommensurable beliefs and intentions through their speech and intentional actions. Such applications are made by political scientists (Horowitz 1998, 2000; Huntington 1993; Kaplan and Baldauf 1997), by social philosophers (Connor 1972; Gyekye 1997) and by intercultural metaphysicians (Kimmerle and Diagne 1996: 11-24; Tiemersma 1998: 16).

In this paper I do not challenge the heuristic significance of the data issuing from neuro-psychological experiments displaying linguistic relativism, as interpreted by developmental linguists (Anyidoho 2012; Boadi 1976: 81), cognitive linguists, anthropologists, and learning theorists (Özgen and Davies 2002; Roberson *et al.* 1999, 2000). I do not quarrel with the value of these results for embellishing the art and theory of translation (Chandler 1995). Nor do I dispute the impact of evidence gathered from observing cross cultural perceptual and conceptual contrasts which have inspired reappraisals and revised statements of Sapirian and Whorfian hypotheses (Kay and Kempton 1984; Lucy 1996; Koerner 2000).

Instead I am concerned with applications of such results which are designed to deliver social policy advice and socio-economic explanations. For instance, linguistic relativism appeals to advocates of national single-language policy. Some socio-linguistic engineers have assumed that a single language programme could "move the entire society in some direction deemed 'good' or 'useful' by the government" (R.B. Kaplan and R.B. Baldauf 1997: xi). In what follows, section 2 will consider the underlying assumptions presupposed by social engineering programmers recommending a single national language policy in the interest of national stability. I dub this practical proposal LD_1 and argue that it commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness by regarding the manifest disparities between distinct languages that are presumed to couch different conceptual frameworks – their semantic, phonetic, syntactic characteristics – as central to the causes of social strife existing in the communities in which those languages are used. Certainly there is no disputing that the politics of identity and hegemony are mediated through language. However, I will build the case that what matters crucially in societies that host disaffected groups prone to violence is neither the number of languages spoken in that society nor facts about its dominant languages, but rather what is said and done to marginalize those groups by members of other groups with greater political and economic influence. LD_1 is not a causal theory; it is rather a counterfactual conjecture, based on the presumption that social harmony is likely to be achieved through linguistic unification; but this does not cohere with evidence ready at hand. In section 2.1, I will point to incidents in political history which reinforce the adage that an admirable nation-building goal in itself cannot justify whatever means might be employed to achieve it. In section 2.2, I will suggest that LD_1 is based upon a fundamental confusion of anecdotal correlation with causal connection.

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Another example of the apparent serviceability of linguistic relativism has been claimed in its purported explanatory power. In section 3, I will consider the way linguistic relativism has been used to explain national economic underdevelopment. I dub this explanatory thesis LD$_2$, whose proponents observe that in Africa where languages radically differ from the Indo-European group, individuals are carrying beliefs about time which cause behaviour that plainly seems to be economically dysfunctional (Kimmerle 1996, 1997). More recently, the temporal-linguistic link has been reinforced by data contrasting the way Mandarin and English speakers depict time (Boroditsky, 2001).

LD$_2$ actually comprises two corollary claims: (i) Speakers of different languages with radically different roots inherit radically divergent ways of thinking about time – I will call this *the language specificity hypothesis.* And (ii) different ways of thinking about time which are dominant in distinct linguistic communities are causally responsible for the differential in their respective rates of economic development – I will call (ii) simply *the causal hypothesis*. The problem with the LD$_2$ thesis which I will demonstrate is that these two corollaries cannot survive in tandem. In asserting the impact upon perceptual content made by an individual's linguistic (therefore conceptual) scheme, Sapir Whorf's hypothesis (1970 [1956]) presupposes a setting of 'radical' translation that philosophers of language have since scrutinized with great care.[2] Davidson ([1973] 1984: 190) makes specific reference to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its presupposition that there is a substrate of experience given by nature which is then transformed by language for different speakers in mutually non-translatable ways. I will employ Davidson's analysis of the 'radical interpretation' scenario in section 3.1 to show why LD$_2$ may be either trivial or self-refuting.

1. Building national stability through single language policies

Some attempts at language planning by governments arise in response to public pressure fuelled by the abundance of research revealing that the harmony or dissonance between the languages used in school for instruction of children and the languages used at home significantly impact the rate and depth at which children learn. Statistically this is very well documented in Ghana.[3] As argued by linguists in West Africa and elsewhere in contemporary educational contexts of post-colonial societies, "there are many reasons why [first language] should be given an important place as the language of instruction in the early years of school" (Anyidoho 2012: 1502; Boadi 1976: 81). Suppose one eliminates non-linguistic factors such as teachers' discriminatory attitudes and class prejudice towards pupils that are not fluent in the language of the regionally dominant group. Then it only takes common sense to appreciate that if the instruction and communication about any topic is conducted in a language familiar to the learner, the imparting and receiving of new ideas, concepts, principles and information will be easier than trying to master ideas

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[2] Davidson famously discusses in several landmark essays (1984) the inherent interdependence of a translator's own beliefs and meanings with those of the speaker whom he is interpreting, as did Quine (1970) before him and Root after (1986). See also Grandy (1973).
[3] Language planning as a means of behavioural change is articulated in: D. Ager (2001), R. Baldauf Jr. and A. Luke (1990), R.L. Cooper (1989), H. Haarmaan (1990), D.E. Ingram (1979), J. Lo Bianco (1997, 1987), W. Egginton and H. Wren (1997), A. H. Omar (1998), H.F. Schiffman (1996), L.S. Senghor (1948).

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in a language with which the learner is unfamiliar. Corroborative results are detectable from cross-cultural IQ testing (Opoku 2012). Thus the language one uses clearly will determine how well one embraces novel concepts and applies new information. However that is very different from suggesting that the language one uses will determine how one reasons or how well one is able to think. And it suggests that governments of multi-lingual societies should support several languages for tutelage, not to enforce only one.

On the other hand, a government serving a multicultural society which is intent upon political stability need not be concerned with the thought processes and dispositional aptitudes of its school-age children, but only with the degree of compliance, the outward indicators of respect for law and order. But it is not obvious that getting people to share a common language is either essential or sufficient to individuals' feeling invested in their local status quo, or that linguistic unity will ensure that minority groups will be compliant with authority to maximize central state stability. Obvious or not, influential political philosophers (Connor 1972; Huntington 1993; Gyekye 1997) have presumed that radically divergent linguistic traditions can breed intractable misunderstanding in multicultural societies. They reason that if everyone in a community spoke the same language, then the community's members would understand one another better and so be more inclined to feel tolerant and to behave civilly towards each other than if they continued to speak different languages. Hence it has been proposed since the African Independence movement of the 1950s and 1960s, that a government's preparedness to institutionalise a nationwide single-language policy will thereby exhibit the central state's commitment to "consciously and purposively build . . . a cohesive cultural identity" (Gyekye 1997: 89) in the interest of building national stability. But this viewpoint remains widely contested (e.g. by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2000).

1.1 Challenges to socio-linguistic engineering
Harmonious living and mutual tolerance are conspicuously common in many nations where the major sub-groups do not share any language in common. In contrast, there are a few nations on the globe where English dominates an exceptionally homogeneous linguistic population, but none of these communities are particularly serene for that reason alone. North America, for instance, is perhaps the largest land mass that is mono-linguistic. Yet the United States is a notoriously violent nation, fraught with tensions explained from a range of political perspectives. As will be spelled out in section 3, it would be methodologically problematic to keep other factors constant in order to single out the existence of linguistic deviations throughout a population as chiefly responsible for its chronic social conflicts. But even in sociological folklore, linguistic deviation from the norms of American English is seldom picked out as a central factor held responsible for that nation's endemic instability. On the contrary – correctly or not – it is because of the widely held presumption – correct or not – that English sustains a pervasive violent-inducing influence upon America's homogeneous public imagination, that a popular movement has campaigned to ban 'Gangster Rap' from commercial TV, radio, and Internet in order to quell the escalation of street crime throughout American cities. It is argued that the popular music industry has capitalised with great success on the fact that the 'Bloods' and the 'Crips' of South Central Los Angeles, for instance, are both English-speaking. By pasteurizing the discourse of disaffection into commercial

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products for mainstream consumption, this new entertainment genre has been said to intensify the hostility that fuels gang wars, creating a glamorous veneer of covert prestige and tacit approval for disenfranchised and denigrated youth expressing their outrage broadcast in English throughout urban ghettoes all across the nation.[4] On this view, the monolingual nature of commercial music does not reduce ethnic group hostility, but rather exacerbates it.[5] The analysis of America's social unrest remains a highly politicized subject; as is the more general functioning of hegemony as a multi-dimensional provocation for group violence, treated from a wide range of perspectives by sociologists, educationists,[6] developmental psychologists, economists and political historians.[7]

Nonetheless proposals retain currency that offer to ameliorate nation-wide social conflicts by engineering a single national language policy, because it is presumed that group membership norms which affect group conflict are mediated through language. This basic assumption pervades otherwise disparate theories of social conflict. On the social identity model, designed to correct Talcott Parsons' (1951) classic internalisation theory of social behaviour, the rational choices of individuals that sustain intra-group cohesion and inter-group conflict do not issue from any fixed set of early-indoctrinated convictions about themselves. Instead, group identity arguably follows from perceiving what others believe is the proper thing to do. On this model, group behaviour is presumed chiefly to be guided by norms in order to attract approval and uphold status (Cancian 1975: 105-109). Such shifting perceptions and anticipations of other people's value judgments, opinions and dispositions are affective as the products of interpretation under mutual reinforcement. If this view is correct then membership norms which result in group conflict are likely to be passed between generations and among cohorts whether it is one language or many which gets spoken by the groups engaged in conflict.[8]

1.2 Confusing correlations with causal connections

There is no gainsaying that people speaking different languages correlates with their living and thinking in characteristically distinctive ways, according to divergent cultural norms. Just by paying close attention to an individual's use of language, sociolinguists are able to infer a great deal about a speaker's regional upbringing.

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[4] See Joseph P. Vermette, "Ban Gangster Rap: Petition to U.S. Congress and Canadian Parliament." <http://www.petitiononline.com/antirap/petition.html> accessed September 28, 2008.

[5] A careful scholarly reflection on the philosophy underlying affirmative action legislation as a reparative measure to quell contemporary racial economic bias is provided by Appiah (2011); the role of race consciousness in the analysis and perpetration of injustice is ably reviewed by Appiah and Gutman (1996). In reaction, D'Souza (1995) enlists many social scientists in his analysis of the racism narrative as a doctrinal distortion of American history in a misguided apology for contemporary economic disarray.

[6] Both Samuel Bowles (1975) of the United States and Ivan Addae-Mensah (2000) of Ghana have made extensive empirical analyses in studying the ways higher education exacerbates class stratification if it is left without the corrective of aggressive affirmative action policies to offset the enrolment bias that favors the rich and well connected.

[7] See e.g. Stephen Gill (ed. 1993) There is a wide range of political narratives accounting for today's ethnic conflicts by appeal to particular historical circumstances rather than *apriori* principles of human identity. See for example Mamdani (2003).

[8] Many sociologists prefer the rational agency model of conforming to norms over Parson's theory of an internalisation process for explaining social action. See Becker (1963), Goffman (1967), Berger and Luckmann (1966).

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From this information it is possible to make remarkably reliable conjectures about a person's economic class, social status, ideology, even religious beliefs – all by noting the speaker's intonation, word choice, and use of idioms. But even so, sociolinguists do not usually subscribe to the mistaken idea that it is the language itself which causes its speakers to think and act as they do. Clearly, what is insinuated about a person's identity or stated overtly within a particular language L can motivate sanguinity or alienation, as the case may be. But the power of speech does not follow from the fact that the words are conveyed in a single language L, rather than translated from L to another language M. It is rather the content of *what* is said in L to a person whose first language is M which can incite her to violence rather than complacency. The fact that people have been forcefully deprived of their mother tongue M and pressed instead to speak L exclusively will impact adversely on their sense of integrity, their confidence in mainstream L-speakers, and their relations with other second language speakers of L in their neighbourhood, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2000) has addressed for decades.[9] It is the long term coercive enforcement, together with the humiliating imperialist denigration of one's earliest and most intimate mode of self expression which does the damage to one's integrity – if indeed damage is done – not any morphemic or lexical contrasts between the languages themselves.

More generally, the sources of inequity that provoke violence are not so much a matter of who speaks the dominant language in a society, but rather what those who are dominant language-speakers do with the power that they have. As Michel Foucault (1972: 68) observes, the rules for "the appropriation of discourse" in a class stratified society limits access to the levers of institutional and social control to privileged groups that maintain dominance over other groups. But the appropriation of discourse that Foucault famously highlighted is accomplished through legal restrictions on who has entitlement to speak, who is granted the ability to understand a specialized corpus of formulated statements and doctrines, and who has been granted the certified capacity to incorporate that discourse into institutional policies and practices. The exercise of this exclusionary restrictive power by liberal ruling elites is why some progressive activists regard deliberative democracy as inherently conservative and systematically discourages formal means of justice from serving disenfranchised and marginalised social groups. These analysts observe that the very processes of consensual democracy and the procedures of collective bargaining rule out the voices of those most disadvantaged by the status quo, by deriding and disqualifying their delivery as too shrill, inarticulate, irrational, and lacking in the necessary emotional detachment to engage in legitimate negotiation through rational public discourse (Fung 2005, Lance 2005, Sanders 1997). These dynamics of political power between social sectors is essentially a discursive phenomenon. But its exercise by some groups and its deprivation experienced by others persist whether there is one language in common use among them or many.

Language is a central component of social identity, but sharing a language in itself need not entail sharing much else. It is clear that a common language can be of bureaucratic service without touching the attitudes and beliefs of its speakers one way or the other (English in India, for example). In some cases the language of one

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[9] Most recently in his contribution to the Opening Plenary Session of the African Literature Association 32nd Annual Conference: *Pan-Africanism In The 21st Century: Generations In Creative Dialogue.* Accra, Ghana, May 17-21, 2006.

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group is adopted by another whilst very crucial traditions are not affected at all. For example in Ghana, West Africa, there are Guan people in the hills of Akwapem who speak Twi, a matrilineal tongue, but their inheritance network remains staunchly patrilineal as is the custom in Eweland from where they migrated. To learn why this is so, we have to study Guans' history of Akyem conquests and the controversial circumstances under which Twi speakers came to settle among the Guan in the hills north of Aburi,[10] not the nuances of Akwapem Twi phonology. Similarly for the Banda people living on the border of Asante and Brong Ahafo who also speak Twi but do not recognise a Queen mother in their royal courts.[11] Nor are they likely to warm gradually to conventional Asante state customs as Twi is spoken over many more generations.

Language is a poor indicator of identity in many places you look. English in the capital of Ghana does not identify you as an Englishman; and no one speaking French in Haiti or the Ivory Coast today would thereby be presenting himself as a Frenchman. Speaking Arabic in Northern Sudan today does not flag you as an Arab. Arabic is a particularly interesting case with respect to the fallacy of linking sectarian violence to language as a vehicle of discord. For Arabic, like English, further illustrates that language holds no restrictive monopoly over what people think and feel about themselves and others. Arabic speakers have held diverse and changing opinions about their language use and its implications over recent times. Speaking Arabic used to attract prestige because it is the sacred language of Islam, spoken by the Prophet Muhammad. But the version of Arabic that was once universally associated with high status is nowadays avoided by many Nubians in Northern Sudan as by many Algerians, Moroccans, Northern Egyptians and Tunisians, who wish to disassociate themselves from the vilification to which Sauds and others in the Middle East are subjected through Axis of Evil rhetoric purveyed by satellite media. This suggests that it is not only the beliefs inherited by sharing a linguistic heritage that determines the conflicts that children will grow up with; it is also beliefs *about* the people sharing a language in a multi-lingual community which can be linked causally to the discord they will inherit.

It is a truism that ethnic conflict is multi-faceted, deeply complicated, and historically specific – whereby enforcement of a *lingua franca* by a central state power has been known only to exacerbate violent defiance of a central state power. Stringent enforcements of official language policies have been key to protracted conflicts in response to hegemonic oppression all over the world (e.g. in Quebec, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Tibet, the former Republic of South Africa, and the current legislation banning Spanish in the USA).

Notwithstanding, proposals to harness and converge community loyalties through a single language-in-use have been forwarded as a means of stabilizing newly emerging democracies over the last fifty years in Africa. It is assumed that the bonds of identity and clan loyalties that are sustained within immediate neighbourhoods and extended through a shared language can be transformed into broader, more

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[10] I am grateful to Dr. E. Ofei-Aboagye, Director of ILGS, for details of history, socio linguistics and political identities in Akuapem, in conversation, July and September 2006.
[11] I owe this point to Professor K. Antsu-Kyeremeh in conversation; and for confirmation to Professor R. Addo-Fenning, Legon, September 2006.

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ecumenical images of belonging to a shared nation. One example is Kwame Gyekye's ideal of building a 'meta-nationality', "consciously and purposively pursued" (1997: 163), since improvement of the human condition cannot be left to just happen by itself like tree growth. On Gyekye's view, good nation-building involves exposing and dissolving the myths that buttress ethnic categories, to make way for a more functional sense of fellowship and inclusion, with 'meta-national' identity reinforced as an upper bound (Gyekye 1997: 99, 103-105, 107). The concern raised here is that history does not demonstrate this can be accomplished through language policy; nor does history indicate unification is impossible to accomplish while sustaining and celebrating the multilingual complexion of a community.

Language has been found to serve a unifying social role in ways quite contrary to the effort to install linguistic homogeneity. Some religious traditions rely for their integrity upon maintaining a fixed language of sacred discourse and scholarship (e.g. Arabic for the *umma* of Muhammad, or Pali for the Theravada Buddhist tradition). Group cohesion sometimes depends upon preserving an arcane language although the vast majority do not even understand when verses are repeated in Pali by religious experts in highly ritualised contexts, and certainly ordinary men cannot speak or write the language themselves. Harmonious living is familiar among groups that do not share any language, e.g. in Ghana where the number of languages spoken today varies from 34 to 54, depending upon how one defines 'language' (Kropp-Dakubu 1997: vi)[12].

In the exceptional cases where English does predominate throughout a country, e.g. the United States, violent incidents per capita are far more frequent than in multilingual Ghana. As was discussed in section 2.1, people speaking different languages may do each other harm because of the erroneous beliefs they harbour about each other, and because of the norms prevailing historically in their communities which are followed by individuals to win group acceptance, to attract overt or covert prestige, and to gain competitive advantage in the labour market. There is no evidence to support the assumption that the prevalence of different languages in itself is among the many circumstantial and historical reasons neighbours have for sustaining uncivil behaviour and violent turf wars.

2. Analytic obstacles to linguistic relativism as a causal hypothesis

Consider now LD_2—the thesis that posits (i) members of every language community are affected in the way they experience and think and perceive everything. In particular, the divergent ways that people speaking language A and those speaking language B think about time affects their productive behaviour significantly, so that (ii) over generations this linguistic divergence is causally responsible for their respective societies A and B to develop economically at different rates.

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[12] Nine of these are supported as official languages whose maintenance through linguistic research and support of radio stations, and printing of official information such as health advice and electoral ballot sheets is financed by the Ghana Government. About 60% of the population is minimally English-literate, although the Ghana Government declares English its official language, and it remains the dominant language of instruction. http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/languages.php Accessed September 19, 2013.

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If we entertain LD$_2$ then the question arises: which of the beliefs referred to by corollary (i) of this explanation should we regard as linguistically idiosyncratic? Presumably if the causal hypothesis (ii) is compelling and non-trivial, it is because some of the interpreter's beliefs, e.g. about global economic injustice, are veridical in some linguistically neutral sense. That is to say, the regional economic differentials to which LD$_{2(ii)}$ refers and purports to explain are objective features of the world. Surely the strife and disarray labelled 'underdevelopment' in Africa which contrast so starkly with the affluent lifestyles enjoyed by many people in G-8 countries, are not features of our given environment that "we dissect . . . along lines laid down by our native language" (Whorf [1956] 1970: 212). Otherwise there would be nothing morally objectionable with encouraging an individual who experiences egregious economic stress in an impoverished country simply to reconceptualise his glass as half full by gaining fluency in an international language.

On the other hand, it is a commonplace that people's perceptions of 'underdevelopment' are not uniform: people's sense of being demoralised by extreme poverty is affected by their aspirations and their expectations for economic reform. And it is another commonplace that such aspirations are in turn affected by people's awareness of alternatives, e.g. through exposure to videos and newsfeeds – via cinema, satellite, and the Internet – depicting the easy affluence enjoyed in regions of the world remote to them geographically or socially. Likewise, people in affluent societies regarding unfamiliar economic conditions abroad are influenced by stereotypical media images. Indeed everyone's judgments about their own and other peoples' material standards of living are shaped in part by their upbringing, in part by exposure to a flurry of current opinion and a steady flow of conventional aphorisms provided by their own immediate cultural milieus.

If descriptions of contrast as facile as these are all that the language-specificity hypothesis amounts to, then the hypothesis is a truism (Williams 1972: 31-33). No one will disagree that trends in belief of all sorts within and between cultures and generations are detectable, even as one person grows older the phenomenon of time appears to change for that person. Differences in attitude, habit, and expressions used to describe time can be identified as 'typical in language community A' and 'unprecedented in language community B'. But so what? Spotting trends is a great distance from finding evidence that certain metaphysical beliefs borne of one culture are not available for reflection and revisable from within another.

On a somewhat stronger, non-trivial interpretation, the language-specificity hypothesis seems to suggest that the rift between African and Western metaphysical beliefs poses some difficulty to be overcome for those whose linguistic and cultural background poorly prepares them for an orientation to time that originates in cultures where the pressures of twenty-first century post-industrial economics are taken in stride. But on a careful reading, if the LD$_2$ hypothesis suggests that there is some kind of problem for individuals who are linguistically divided from the concepts needed to improve their economic condition, then the solution lies in the very expression of the problem. For in order to avoid incoherence, a background framework about possible orientations towards time must be accessible from all the linguistic vantage points within the scope of reference denoted by the LD$_{2(i)}$ language-specificity hypothesis. That is to say, the different orientations towards time posited by LD$_2$ "make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system

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on which to plot them" (Davidson [1974] 1984: 184).[13] Yet LD$_2$ attributes very specific, causally significant deviations in thoughts about time to agents inhabiting radically different language systems. The following section explains why this poses a problem of incoherence for LD$_2$.

2.1 Radical relativist claims are self-refuting

Suppose that my concept of time imposed upon me by my language A cannot be recognized by anyone else whose different concept of time was inherited by another language B. Suppose further that the language-specificity of beliefs about time is interpreted to mean that no one can understand time as it is comprehended in languages other than those in which they have gained fluency. Then neither of us could make sense of any elaboration of the culture-specific differences between time$_A$ and time$_B$ orientations, since according to this radical relativist interpretation neither of us can understand any view of time other than our own. In that case there is no telling whether the proposed contrast has been accurately portrayed or indeed whether it actually exists at all. What could decide whether my beliefs about time$_A$ were different from someone's beliefs in culture B except our both witnessing a contrast emerging in the descriptions of time offered to depict both our views? How could anyone verify whether the rendering of our conceptual differences has been accurately portrayed? If we can understand the language-specificity hypothesis on such a strict interpretation, then it cannot be true. If it were true, then we shouldn't be able to understand it. Hence the very articulation of linguistic polarities presupposes an inter-lingual medium of description which undermines the claim that one pole of the contrast is inaccessible to adherents of the other (Davidson 1984: 184).

This analysis highlights an important fact which is inherent in the very existence of inter-linguistic contrasts, and one that will be elaborated in the concluding section; viz. that language participants are able to appreciate contrasts between alternative views of time and are able to form evaluative opinions about them.[14] This defeats the proposal that adherents at one pole of a linguistically determined conceptual dichotomy are somehow incapable of their own accord to appropriate the linguistic apparatus that is endemic to adherents at the other pole. The formulation of the language-specificity hypothesis presupposes that individuals who comprehend it are neither prohibited nor indisposed by any *a priori* or logical force, nor by any inherent limitation peculiar to their linguistic heritage, to think any number of ways about the future. To avoid self-refutation, the language-specificity hypothesis implies that we need not be stuck or driven to hold our linguistically inherited concepts of time, insofar as we can create or become aware of existing alternatives. This is unobjectionable, unless one wants to presume that linguistically determined beliefs about time in some way have inhibited Africans from accessing the conceptual tools required for economic development to take off – as LD$_{2(ii)}$ asserts. But that cannot be the case, if the language-specificity hypothesis is not going to collapse into self-refutation. This is why it seems that the two corollaries (i) the *language-specificity*

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[13] Michael Root (1986) develops this point further in his interpretivist theory of the mental.

[14] Comparable conclusions have been drawn on strictly empirical considerations e.g. by Kay and Kempton (1984: 77) in their synoptic review of decades' experimental evidence indicating the linguistic relativity of colour perception: "linguistic differences may induce nonlinguistic cognitive differences but not so absolutely that universal cognitive processes cannot be recovered under appropriate contextual conditions".

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hypothesis and (ii) the *causal hypothesis* concerning our beliefs about time cannot both be asserted consistently in any non-trivial way.

3. Conclusion

We have examined two prototypes of how simplified versions of the thesis of linguistic relativism have been applied by political scientists, social engineers and philosophers.

In section 1 the practical efficacy of linguistic relativism was considered as it has implicitly provided the basis for national single language policies. Practical utility of a thesis depends upon sound means-end reasoning. In the case of the prototype policy considered here, the intended goal of encouraging the harmonious stabilizing effect of speaking one language appeared inchoate and unlikely; moreover it was pointed out that this end would not justify the potential harm done if the means entails a government enforcing a single-language policy throughout a multi-lingual community.

Then the explanatory adequacy of linguistic relativism was examined in section 2 as it has been enlisted to account for why economic development programmes yield such egregiously different effects in Africa and in the West – in part this would also account for the unrest and political disarray of these regions, insofar as economic distress is a root cause of instability. So we considered the thesis that economic underdevelopment in African sub-regions is a function of linguistic practices that determine Bantu-speaking people's failure to think of a future dimension of time as long term and indefinite, thereby hampering their ability to engage in long term planning and delayed gratification – proposed once by Weber (1905) as key to the rapid expansion of industrial affluence in the West. Mbiti (1969: 26-28) is standardly attributed as the first to propose this controversial thesis, and he did so at the time Whorf's Hopi-time hypothesis was widely received (Hallen, 2009). Contemporary phenomenologists and social philosophers continue to explore the corollaries that African beliefs about time are linguistically determined and that these beliefs are causally responsible for shortfalls in the way Africans go about enacting and executing economic policy. But it was shown by dissecting this hypothesis in section 2.1, that if it is taken literally then it is not coherent: the causal hypothesis breaks down because it is not possible to isolate and identify some observations about economic conditions as linguistically neutral reports of the way things are, whilst sustaining that other observations such as the phenomena of time are wholly dependent upon one's linguistic heritage. So although it is a truism that different ways of describing time may vary across language communities, the stronger claim that such varied notions of time are radically incommensurable between cultures was shown to be self-refuting. Indeed if that claim were strictly true, no-one would be able to understand it: unless we are participants in a linguistic heritage responsible for the deficient sense of time ourselves, we should not be able to appreciate what the proponent of LD_2 is referring to by a sense of time without any long term future dimension; and if we are members of such a language community then according to the thesis we should be unable to understand what we are missing.

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In sum, two applications of strong linguistic relativism have been reviewed here – one was a practical policy proposal, the other an explanatory hypothesis. They were both demonstrated to be dependent crucially upon determinist assumptions that appeared to be contradicted by empirical considerations in one case, and logically incoherent in the other.

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