

The Significance of Linguistic Relativity in Chinese Language and Culture Acquisition

Francois Waldeck Rousseau
Kaohsiung Medical University
Email: fwrousseau@gmail.com

doi:<https://doi.org/10.37745/ijahct.14/vol11n1110>

Published March 28,2025

Citation: Rousseau F.W. (2025) The Significance of Linguistic Relativity in Chinese Language and Culture Acquisition, *International Journal of Asian History, Cultures and Traditions*, Vol.11, No.1, pp.1-10

Abstract: *Linguistic relativity is often framed as a constraint, with many studies emphasizing how the language we speak imposes specific patterns on our cognition or predisposes us toward particular worldviews. However, this concept can also be viewed as an asset, as these linguistic predispositions offer unique insights into the cultures of those who speak the language. The acquisition of cultural knowledge is a crucial component of foreign language learning, often overshadowed by the challenges of memorizing vocabulary, mastering unfamiliar syntax, and navigating new phonetic systems. From this alternative perspective, linguistic relativity becomes a powerful ally, providing learners with valuable cultural insights through the language itself. This article examines how linguistic features in Mandarin Chinese can reveal aspects of the culture and thought processes of its speakers, particularly for English-speaking learners. Focusing on key concepts such as perceptions of time, expressions of apology, familial structures, and affective content, the discussion highlights how aspects of the language can enhance cultural understanding in second language learning by analyzing specific examples. Moreover, the article explores how learning another language broadens cognitive and affective horizons by exposing learners to novel linguistic patterns and cultural nuances. It concludes by addressing the challenges and opportunities for further research in this domain, practical implications for second language teachers, and the benefits for language learners.*

Keywords: linguistic relativity, culture acquisition, cross-cultural language learning

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic relativity refers to the impact of language on thought and cognition. The concept has sparked widespread debate and considerable controversy since Benjamin Whorf's seminal 1939 article, *The Relation Between Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language*. A significant part of the controversy revolves around the lack of a clear formulation of Whorf's hypothesis in his original work, leaving researchers to develop their own interpretations to test or refute it. Consequently, two principal interpretations have emerged: the strong and weak versions. The strong version posits that language determines thought, while the weak version suggests that

language influences thought rather than dictates it. Although the strong version has largely been discredited by empirical studies (Heider, 1972; Rosch, 1977), substantial evidence supports the weak version, demonstrating that language can influence cognitive processes (Guiora, 1981; Pavlenko, 1999; Tan et al., 2008).

A critical question raised in Whorf's article is the causal relationship between language and thought: Does language shape thought, or does thought shape language? Whorf argued that language and thought have evolved together in a reciprocal relationship. While habitual language use may reinforce certain cognitive patterns, evolutionary evidence suggests that thinking and cognition preceded language. Language likely emerged as a tool to express and codify thought and experience, rather than as a precursor to them. Beyond the strong and weak interpretations of linguistic relativity, this raises a third, equally compelling question: How does language reflect thought, and what can we learn about a culture by studying its language?

Research into linguistic relativity has historically focused on cognition rather than culture. Only at the turn of the 21st century did bilingualism gain prominence in this field (Cook, 2002; Pavlenko, 1999). These studies hypothesized that bilingual individuals might think differently from monolinguals due to the influence of multiple languages. Empirical evidence has since validated this hypothesis, with studies revealing that learning another language can actively reshape cognitive dispositions and perceptual biases (Bloom, 1981; Boutonnet et al., 2012; Cook et al., 2006; Pavlenko, 2011). Current research inquiries have shifted from investigating whether language affects cognition to exploring how it does so. Bassetti and Filipović (2021) identify two primary research directions: depth, which delves deeply into specific aspects, and breadth, which applies findings across diverse areas of language and cognition. Following this trend, I propose exploring the potential for cultural acquisition through linguistic means.

Addressing this objective requires venturing into underexplored areas of linguistic relativity, including emotions, philosophy, and *Weltanschauung* (worldview). While most researchers have examined how language alters cognitive processes, relatively little attention has been paid to its influence on emotional and affective domains. Aneta Pavlenko's pioneering works (2005, 2006) stand out as notable exceptions. Subtle differences in emotional nuance often underlie linguistic expressions, even when the referents remain identical across languages. These nuances intertwine thought and feeling, shaping worldviews and forming the cultural core of a language.

While such inquiries are inherently abstract and challenging to quantify, they hold practical implications for students of foreign languages, particularly those learning linguistically distant languages. By analyzing language use, learners can gain valuable, albeit abstract, insights into the target culture, fostering cultural awareness and encouraging deeper observation. From a sociocultural perspective, widely embraced in second language acquisition (SLA) theory, linguistic relativity may significantly enhance both language and cultural learning.

In this paper, I aim to shift the focus from the cognitive constraints of linguistic relativity to its potential as an aid for second language and culture acquisition. Drawing from my experience

as a native English speaker learning Mandarin, I explore how linguistic differences can heighten awareness of cultural, cognitive, and emotional distinctions.

However, several caveats must be acknowledged. As a bilingual English-Afrikaans speaker with a background in linguistics and experience in learning multiple languages, my observations may be influenced by prior knowledge and experience. Additionally, my Mandarin studies took place in Taiwan, where the language is widely spoken, providing cultural immersion that may have independently contributed to my cultural insights. This raises the question of whether the cultural understanding discussed here stems from linguistic features or from firsthand cultural experiences associated with the language. Despite these limitations, reflexive and qualitative studies (Elliott et al., 2012) emphasize the value of such observations. With the aim of stimulating further academic interest, I conclude with recommendations for empirical and in-depth studies to validate and expand upon these findings.

Temporal Metaphors and Worldview in Mandarin and English

The concept of time, as perceived through language, offers intriguing insights into the cognitive and cultural frameworks of its speakers. A comparison between temporal expressions in Chinese Mandarin and English provides a fascinating case. Interest in this topic was ignited by Boroditsky's (2001) study, which found that Mandarin speakers responded more quickly to temporal tasks presented using vertical spatial constructs than English speakers, who predominantly conceptualize time horizontally. Subsequent research has produced mixed results: some studies corroborated Boroditsky's findings (Boroditsky et al., 2011; Casasanto, 2008; Yang & Sun, 2016), while others found no significant differences (Chen, 2007; January & Kako, 2007; Tse & Altarriba, 2012). While these studies were empirical investigations into the relationship between spatial metaphors and cognitive performance, my primary interest lies in exploring the cultural and philosophical implications of temporal metaphors, particularly in relation to the worldviews that give rise to these linguistic expressions, with reference to the existential dimensions outlined in the Scale to Assess World View (SAWV) by Ibrahim & Kahn (1987)

In Mandarin, vertical spatial metaphors are often employed to express temporal concepts. The future is frequently represented using the character 下 (xià: down/below), as seen in expressions such as 下次 (xià cì: next time), 下星期 (xià xīng qī: next week), and 下個月 (xià ge yuè: next month)—literally denoting the time, week, or month below the present one. Conversely, the past is indicated using the character 上 (shàng: up/above), as in 上次 (shàng cì: last time), 上星期 (shàng xīng qī: last week), and 上個月 (shàng ge yuè: last month). As a native English speaker learning Mandarin, this vertical conceptualization felt counterintuitive; English rarely employs vertical spatial metaphors for time. The notion of descending into the future initially struck me as fatalistic, suggesting entropy or decline. Yet, this interpretation is tempered by alternative metaphors, such as 明 (míng: bright), which conveys optimism about the future in phrases like 明天 (míng tiān: tomorrow) and 明年 (míng nián: next year). Even after years of studying Mandarin, I occasionally confuse these vertical metaphors, underscoring their cultural specificity.

Curious about whether this perception was unique to me, I conducted an informal online poll involving 30 native English-speaking South Africans with no prior exposure to Mandarin language or culture. Participants were asked to assign vertical directions to represent the past and the future. Without exception, all respondents associated the future with “up” and the past with “down”, diametrically opposing the Mandarin framework.

To explore potential linguistic underpinnings of this intuition among English speakers, I analyzed vertical temporal metaphors in English. For instance, in archaeology, more recent events are often described as “higher” in stratigraphy, such as in the terms “Upper” and “Lower” Palaeolithic. Expressions like “going down in history” imply a figurative distancing from past events. Furthermore, the English preposition “on” denotes both spatial elevation (“on top”) and temporal continuity (“to go on living”), contrasting with the Mandarin equivalent 活下去 (huó xià qù: to go down living).

These metaphors reflect distinct worldviews encoded within their respective languages. Temporal orientation is one of five existential dimensions outlined in the Scale to Assess World View (SAWV) by Ibrahim & Kahn (1987), based on Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck’s (1961) seminal work. The other dimensions include views on human nature, interpersonal relationships, the human-nature relationship, and activity orientation. The divergent temporal metaphors in English and Mandarin suggest broader philosophical differences in how life and existence are conceptualized.

Spatial metaphors often derive from concrete experiences, and natural phenomena offer clues about the origins of these temporal orientations. Downward movement in nature is commonly associated with rivers flowing toward the ocean—a metaphor for time in Mandarin, reflecting a worldview that values humility, conformity, and non-confrontation. This perspective is beautifully articulated in Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*:

上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，處眾人之所惡，故幾於道。
Highest good resembles water. Water benefits creation without contending or striving, settling in places which others spurn. Thus, it closely resembles the way of heaven.
(*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 8; source: <http://www.zhongwen.com/dao.htm>)

In contrast, upward movement in English temporal metaphors may be linked to growth and progress, as seen in expressions like “to grow up”. The corresponding Mandarin phrase 長大 (zhǎng dà: to grow big) underscores a cultural difference in emphasis, with Mandarin focusing on size rather than elevation.

For learners of foreign languages, these embedded metaphors provide valuable cultural insights. Language study is not merely about mastering linguistic forms; it also involves understanding underlying ways of thinking and behaving. Temporal metaphors, though abstract, offer a window into the existential concepts and attitudes that shape a culture. This perspective enriches language learning, transforming it into a journey of cultural and philosophical discovery.

Temporal Metaphors and Worldview in Mandarin and English

The speech act of apologizing and the strategies employed across cultures have been extensively researched, covering various dimensions such as gender differences (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008), goals and situational contexts (Han & Cai, 2010), and cross-cultural comparisons (Rabab'ah & Fowler Al-Hawamdeh, 2020). Additionally, the impact of apology strategies on the hearer, particularly regarding remedial goals, has also been examined (Scher & Darley, 1997). For instance, Han and Cai (2010) explored how situational factors influence face goals in apologies within two national cultures: China and the United States. A comprehensive review of these studies falls beyond the scope of this chapter, however, as none address the topic from the perspective of linguistic relativity and cultural acquisition.

An analysis of how apologies are expressed in English and Mandarin reveals significant cultural differences encoded in the language. Consider the English word “sorry” alongside its Mandarin equivalent, 對不起 (duì bù qǐ). The English term “sorry” shares a root with “sore,” suggesting that the act of apologizing conveys a sense of personal pain or regret for one’s wrongdoings. This notion of emotional suffering in apologies is shared across both Germanic and Romance languages. For instance, the German phrase *es tut mir Leid* translates to “It causes me suffering,” while the Swedish *jag är ledsen* literally translates to “I am sad/grieved.” Likewise, the French *désolé* originates from the Latin *desolatus*, meaning “overcome with grief” or “disconsolate.” In Spanish the phrase *lo siento* literally means “I feel it”, suggesting emotional pain.

In contrast, the Mandarin phrase 對不起 (literally “unable to face”) reflects a cultural emphasis on social standing and personal integrity. It implies that the speaker cannot face the aggrieved party due to a loss of honour or moral standing. Traditionally, this phrase is sometimes accompanied by a gesture of covering the eyes and lowering one’s gaze. While both expressions aim to achieve the same remedial goals, their underlying meanings diverge, shaped by the cultural frameworks that influence language.

The divergence between these two forms of apology lies in the approach to achieving absolution. In English, saying “sorry” traditionally conveys regret and inner emotional pain, whereas in Mandarin, the focus is on the speaker’s perceived loss of honour and standing within a social context. This distinction highlights differences in worldview, particularly in how relationships with others are perceived—a key existential dimension in the Scale to Assess World View (SAWV). Mandarin’s emphasis on face (面子, miàn zi), which represents social reputation and interpersonal harmony, reflects a collectivist orientation. An apology in Mandarin is a means of restoring this harmony by addressing the relational dynamics at stake. On the other hand, English-speaking cultures tend to prioritize individual emotional expressions, aligning with an individualistic worldview.

These linguistic and cultural differences demonstrate how language reflects the values embedded in a society’s worldview. Misunderstanding such nuances can lead to significant cross-cultural communication challenges. For instance, an English speaker who emphasizes emotional regret without addressing issues of honour or social balance may fail to provide the desired resolution in a Chinese cultural context. Conversely, a Mandarin apology may appear

overly formal or indirect to an English speaker unfamiliar with the nuances of face and social harmony.

It therefore evident that apologies are not merely linguistic acts but are deeply intertwined with cultural values and existential dimensions, as outlined by the SAWV. The study of such differences provides valuable insights into how language learners and cross-cultural communicators can bridge gaps and develop deeper cultural understanding.

Kinship Terminology in Mandarin

The numerous distinct terms for family members in Mandarin often surprise learners of the language. The existence of such specific terms highlights deep cultural values and familial hierarchies. In Chinese, the names of family members mostly reflect the exact position of the person on the family tree. There are different names for different members of the family according to their birth order relative to the speaker. For example, the term for an older brother is 哥 (ge), while that of a younger brother is 弟 (di). An older sister is 姊 (jiě), while a younger sister is 妹 (mei). The words for an uncle or aunt would depend on whether it is a paternal or maternal uncle or aunt, on whether they are related by blood or marriage, and furthermore on the birth order of the uncle or aunt relative to one's own parents. The term for a paternal uncle older than one's own father, for example, is 伯 (bó), while a younger brother of one's father is 叔 (shū). A maternal uncle is 舅 (jiù), while the husband of one's maternal aunt is 姨丈 (yí zhàng). These are but a few examples of the meticulous vocabulary invented by Mandarin speakers to refer to family members, in contrast to more generic names used by English speakers. This reflects the very high importance attached to the family, and particularly one's own position in it, in Chinese culture.

In addition, the names for one's maternal grandparents may give us a clue to the strict patriarchal nature of Chinese society. 外公 (wài gōng: maternal grandfather) and 外婆 (wài pó: maternal grandmother) are designated by the word 外 (wài: outside), in accordance with the customary view that a woman leaves her family and join the family of her husband upon marriage.

Interestingly, there has been little research on linguistic relativity in relation to the detailed system of kinship terminology in Mandarin. For me, as a student of the language, this intricate naming system was one of the most striking differences between English and Mandarin, offering profound insights into the cultural values embedded in the language.

Emotional Nuances in Language and Culture

One of the most profound benefits of learning another language is the exposure it provides to a broader spectrum of semantic and emotional nuances—an experience that is simultaneously enriching and elusive. The ability to understand a particular word or expression in a second language (L2) without being able to translate it precisely reveals the acquisition of a specific

emotion or semantic content that was previously absent from one's linguistic repertoire, one that was literally 'not in one's dictionary' before. Learners incorporating such items into their lexicon not only results in improved language proficiency, but also in a more perceptive grasp of certain underlying patterns of cognition, communication, and emotions among native speakers.

Aneta Pavlenko's (2005) seminal work on multilingualism and emotion provides a groundbreaking exploration of the intricate relationship between language and emotions. Her review of existing research demonstrates that languages encode and conceptualize emotions differently, which means that multilingualism contributes to a broadened affective repertoire in individuals.

For example, the Mandarin expressions 討厭 (tǎo yàn) and 欠揍 (qiàn zòu), often used to convey mock displeasure, lack precise English equivalents. 討厭 (literally "to incur or invite loathing") and 欠揍 (literally "to owe a punch") are frequently employed in Taiwan to respond playfully to irksome or cheeky behavior. While English approximations exist, they fail to capture the nuances and the full range of contexts in which these terms can be used. 討厭, for instance, can be directed at inanimate objects, phenomena, or individuals, and its tone may vary from light-hearted to serious. 欠揍, on the other hand, might refer to a person who is not even present or part of the interaction. Consequently, language learners must assign newly conceived semantic and emotional content to these terms in their L2 lexicon.

The various sentence-final particles in Mandarin, such as 啦 (la), 咯 (lo), 耶 (ye), 呢 (ne), 啊 (a) and 吧 (ba), offer further examples of linguistic nuances that defy direct translation. These particles imbue utterances with specific shades of meaning. For example, 啦 (la) is used in an utterance to relieve the perceived tension, seriousness or mistakes in the mind of interlocutor, 咯 (lo) gives the utterance a friendly tone of alerting, warning or admonishing, while 吧 (ba) is an encouragement to compromise, agree or adopt a more reasonable opinion or attitude. English speakers may have similar emotions even without ready-made expressions for them, but with subtle differences in quality - as a result of the words they use to convey similar feelings. And it is by becoming familiar with these different nuances of emotive content that one learns about the culture while learning the language.

Another illustrative example is the Mandarin word 奇怪 (qí guài), commonly translated as "strange". Unlike its relatively neutral English counterpart, 奇怪 often carries a negative connotation, implying disapproval or criticism. For example: 你很奇怪! (Literally: You are very strange!) can carry a very strong rebuke or criticism, similar to "What is wrong with you?" in English. This difference highlights cultural tendencies in Mandarin-speaking societies, such as the value placed on conformity. Recognizing such nuances enables language learners to navigate cultural interactions with greater sensitivity and acumen.

Ultimately, the differences discussed here predominantly reside in the affective domain rather than the cognitive one. Language learners are often acquiring new nuances rather than entirely new concepts. While concrete objects and events can usually be translated to retain their

general meaning, the emotional content conveyed in one language cannot always be replicated in another. It is this newly acquired affective understanding that offers a unique window into the thoughts and emotions of those who use the language in their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

The above examples provide insight into how the phenomenon of linguistic relativity may serve as ally in the process of learning a new language, providing insights that can facilitate deeper cultural understanding. This paper aims to explore the dynamic relationship between linguistic relativity and culture acquisition, drawing from personal experiences of learning Mandarin rather than attempting to present an exhaustive account. It may also suggest areas for future inquiry.

Carrying out empirical experimental research on the topic is an exciting possibility, but it would bring its share of challenges. One significant obstacle is that such studies would often need to focus on learners acquiring the target language in a foreign language setting rather than through immersion. Immersive language learning, while ideal for acquiring both language and culture, risks conflating the impact of linguistic relativity with firsthand cultural exposure. Moreover, prior familiarity with the target culture would need careful control to ensure the validity of findings. Individual learner differences also represent a critical variable. Not all students are predisposed to reflect on linguistic nuances, connect language features to cultural patterns, or express a genuine interest in the target culture. Additionally, designing experiments to quantify subtle and often intangible cultural insights poses inherent difficulties.

For language teachers, however, linguistic relativity offers a rich pedagogical resource, unencumbered by these constraints. Teachers in both second-language and foreign-language settings can focus on specific linguistic features to foster cultural awareness among students. Highlighting connections between language and culture has the potential not only to promote learners' cultural competence but also to make language learning a more reflective and engaging endeavor. Cultural associations can serve as effective memory aids—enhancing vocabulary retention—and as a source of motivation, encouraging students to explore the language further.

These benefits apply to all students of foreign languages, in or out of the classroom. For linguistic relativity is not confined to isolated words or concepts, although some terms may provide more explicit examples. It permeates the fabric of the language—its grammar, word origins, constructions, usages, intonations, and expressions. If a new language were simply a mirror of the learner's native tongue, with identical concepts, emotions, and nuances, learning it would become a mechanical and uninspiring task. What makes language learning fascinating is the culture and thought processes embedded within the language itself. Therefore, while it is true that our language limits us in some ways, as Sapir (Whorf, 1939) suggested, it is equally true that new languages can expand those borders, sensitize us to cultural differences, and expand our habitual ways of thinking and feeling.

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