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The logic of making points by using exotic linguistic examples in the humanities and social sciences

Abstract. *The present paper investigates the usage-patterns of examples of “exotic” linguistics examples within the discourses of humanities and social sciences. On the basis of two case-studies: Huron-examples and Eskimo-examples, the analysis compares the academic attitudes and practises of the 18th and 19th century paradigms of social thought, with the relativist standpoint characterising the mainstream 20th century traditions. The references to North American Indian languages within the Western scholarly literature are treated as examples representative of the entrenched approaches towards the cultural, ethnic and linguistic Other.*

Keywords: *racism, relativism, linguistic examples, Huron, Eskimo*

Introduction

According to a widely circulated, yet, likely apocryphal account, John Maynard Keynes is supposed to have quipped: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”. Such an approach would only seem fair, so far as there exist anything resembling a reasonable consensus as to what the facts really are. In fact, reaching such understanding often enough presents great difficulties both in theory and, perhaps even more annoyingly, in empirical practice. The present paper has no ambitions to touch upon the challenges of the former kind directly, i.e., the following considerations will not be devoted to the question of what (and

in what way) constitutes knowable reality, or how anything can be known about it. In a sense, however, my aim is to address some of those theoretical problems from the bottom-up perspective; namely, by way of examining selected case studies of “facts” being referenced within the discourses of the Other in the discourses of the Western social sciences since the Enlightenment period up until the present. More specifically, my analysis will be concerned with “linguistic facts” used as examples within the various discourses of social sciences, which reference those “facts” without having a principal interest in them, but merely for the sake of making other theoretical or ideological points. In other words, the aim is not to investigate the changing perspectives and paradigms within those branches of linguistics and anthropology which actually study the mentioned languages and their speech communities; the analyses are focused on secondary (and, in a sense, even tertiary) referencing, i.e., such uses of interdisciplinary examples derived from the linguistic accounts of “exotic” peoples which are meant to make points that only loosely relate to the subject matter of those examples and are merely used as passing references based on often indirect knowledge of secondary sources.

The empirical focus of my considerations would be placed on cases derived from one prominent family of “linguistics examples,” namely, those referring to North American Indian languages. When it comes to the study of academic hearsay and its malleability with respect to changing paradigms of thought and fashionable opinion, references to North American Indian languages present a very attractive object of inquiry. Firstly, it is important to note that the history of the accounts of North American Indian languages¹ and their functions is closely interrelated with the history of western modernization and colonization, as well as, on the other hand, with the rise of relativism and the later post-modern post-colonial awareness. The tribes of the New World served as a principal object of missionary, colonising, and anthropological interests for many centuries following initial encounters. Secondly, the “exotic” otherness of those languages – relative to the linguistic pattern of the Indo-European family – made them ready sources of examples enticing through strangeness. Their attractiveness would come from their structural eccentricity, which would provide them with attention-grabbing curiosity, while at the same time ensuring that for the most part they would in fact be employed by scholars who lacked even a basic knowledge of the languages. The properties commonly deemed “exotic” from the European point of view comprise grammatical features at all levels of linguistics structure: phonological (e.g., consonant inventories, phonotactic complexity), morphosyntactic (e.g., polysynthesis, nominal classification), lexical (e.g., degree of differentiation in selected semantic fields). Thirdly, and this point is closely intertwined with the previous two, the combination of “centrality”

¹ The article is a result of a research project carried out at the Faculty of English and the Institute of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University, funded by the Polish National Science Centre (grant 2012/07/B/HS2/00449).

and “exoticism” made the examples drawn from North American Indian languages very flexible and versatile, and thus easily shapeable to underscore whatever other point the authors would choose to make.

It is also important to note that the “exotic” otherness of those languages has also been consistently valued positively since mid-20th century, as in cultural relativism, and negatively, as in the preceding racist doctrines of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The racist and relativist interpretations occur in what can be seen as an almost complementary historical distribution, with the former constituting the mainstream line of thinking from the late 18th until the early 20th century, and the latter clearly on the rise from the early 20th century and becoming strongly predominant after 1940s. In spite of diametrically opposed value-standpoints, both of these kinds of interpretations do share certain characteristics in that they tend to disregard the actual linguistics complexity of the referenced languages, share similar life-cycles involving a transformation from a relatively unbiased linguistic origin to an interdisciplinary misinterpretation with clear ideological characteristics, which in turn demonstrates the malleable nature of linguistic evidence in the face of strong theoretical convictions.

Validity of those general points will be made on the basis of two such contrastive examples: the racist references to Huron, and on the other hand, the relativist examples based on Eskimo. Other cases could also be examined, for instance references to Cherokee verbs served a similar purpose to the Huron examples,² but the particular choice of the two examples has been made on the basis of their well-established and typologically representative nature. In the discourses of the racially-tinged humanities of the 18th and 19th centuries the Huron examples played as big a role as the Eskimo-snow examples in the relativist discourses of the 20th century.

1. Discourses of primitive cultures, minds and languages

The history of accounts and descriptions of the languages of North American Indians exhibits a close relationship with the history of Western colonisation and modernisation, as well as with the development of Western reflexion upon the causes, courses and outcomes of those processes (one of whose principal forms came in the rise of social sciences). The initial accounts of North American Indian languages appeared in the context of the pre-scientific missionary linguistics, i.e., primarily pragmatically motivated projects aiming at helping the Christian missionary activities reach effectively across the language barriers of the New World. Examples of such early descriptions include, for instance, John Eliot’s grammar of

² Cf. M. Kilarski, *Cherokee classificatory verbs: Their place in the study of American Indian languages*, “Historiographia Linguistica” 36(1)/2009.

Massachusetts (1666) and Jean de Brébeuf's accounts of Huron (1635). These missionary accounts offer highly detailed and original linguistic coverage, displaying awareness of the distinct structural properties of the languages, as well as of their essential independence from the received models of Latin grammars. They are also notable for their relative lack of overt value judgements, which seems to stem from their empirical nature and primarily practical motivations. Certainly, one must bear in mind the "need for caution in reading historiographies of missionary linguists that reproduce assumptions about the autonomy of religious faith, and consequently elide powerful shaping contingencies."³ Nevertheless, missionary linguistics had little direct and systematic impact on the later developments in the European views of the North American Indian languages. Irrespective of the relative strengths of those early accounts, most of the 17th century missionary-linguistic accounts suffered from lack of dissemination and had a limited impact on subsequent formation of academic disciplines and debates within Western humanities and social sciences.

In the meantime, the successful conquest and colonisation by European settlers and the resulting predominance of their languages, which the indigenous tribes would increasingly be expected to learn, meant that the initial pragmatic and empirical drives behind the early missionary-linguistics would slowly fade away, being superseded by an ethnocentric outlook of the dominant Euro-American culture:

The Euro-American attitudes were, for the most part, justified by the images that best suited their cause: the crushing took the form of genocide, the scorn and neglect took the form of isolation and relocation, and the embrace and passion took the form of overt paternalism. The Indian was judged by most to be incompetent, backward, and incapable of managing their own affairs, and our early forefathers set up a colonial structure in which the Indian was forced into a hostile form of dependence.⁴

Overtly negative attitudes started to predominate in the 18th century in references to the indigenous languages, at the time of their growing marginalization. 19th century interpretations of linguistic examples mostly served to demonstrate the correctness of racist doctrines regarding the supposed cultural and cognitive primitivism of the indigenous communities. The notions of the inferiority of native languages were strongly rooted in the academic circles:

The concept of superiority, and the categories "lack" and "absence," were so strongly rooted in scholarly European thought that the notion of equality between languages or an unbiased understanding of unfamiliar language structures was hardly possible.⁵

³ J. Errington, *Colonial Linguistics*, "Annual Review of Anthropology" vol. 30/2001, p. 22.

⁴ J. Trimble, *Stereotypical Images, American Indians, and Prejudice*, in P.A. Katz (ed.), *Eliminating Racism*, Springer, New York 1988, pp. 181-182.

⁵ E. Nowak, *First descriptive approaches to indigenous languages of British North America*, in A. Burkhardt, H. Steger, H. Wiegand (eds.) *Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science*, Walter de Gruyter, New York 2000, p. 976.

Motivations for the shift from those aiming at understanding to racist can be found both in the Enlightenment thought and in the romantic movement. In spite, and in a way also through the seemingly elevating notion of the Noble Savage, the discourse of the Enlightenment would often openly exclude Indians from the civilized status, a representative example can be found in D'Alembert and Diderot's Encyclopaedia reference to Hurons – "savage people of America in New France [...]. The language of these savages is guttural and very poor, because they only know very few things. Like each nation of Canada, each tribe and each village of the Hurons bears the name of an animal, apparently because all these barbarians are convinced that humans come from animals."⁶ When it comes to the romantic movement, the most often cited words on the topic would typically come from the works of Herder, but suitable examples can also be found in Hegel's lectures:

America has always shewn itself physically and psychically powerless [...] the aborigines [...] gradually vanished at the breadth of European activity [...]. The weakness of the American physique was a chief reason for bringing the negroes to America [...]. For the negroes are far more susceptible of European culture than the Indians, and an English traveller has adduced instances of negroes having become competent clergymen, medical men [...] only a single native was known to him whose intellect was sufficiently developed to enable him to study, but who have died soon after beginning, through excessive brandy-drinking.⁷

Opposition to these sentiments was offered in early 19th century by such scholars as Peter Stephen Du Ponceau and John Pickering, and in isolated cases in late 19th century. In spite of some such dissident views, 19th century interpretations were dominated by negative stereotypes postulating a strict correlation between linguistic structure and the perceived underdevelopment of indigenous communities.

One key feature of those racist approaches to the "facts" about North American Indians came in the form of an explicit disinterest in the peculiarities of their actual characteristics. There were certain general points about them which were seen as argumentatively useful and therefore worth exploring, but for that sake they only really would need to be painted with decisively broad strokes. As William Robertson put it in his highly influential late-18th century book on the history of America: "it would be highly improper to describe the condition of each petty community, or to investigate every minute circumstance which contributes to form the character of its members. Such an inquiry would lead to details of immeasurable and tiresome extent. The qualities belonging to the people of all the different tribes have such a near resemblance, that they may be painted with the same features."⁸ It was the general type that was of any interest, not the individual characteristics – and this

⁶ L. de Jaucourt, "Hurons, The," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor 2002.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, London 1861, pp. 85-86.

⁸ W. Robertson, *History of America (Vol. II)*, London 1800, p. 53.

was a principled decision rather than an expedient one in the face of data scarcity. What Robertson claimed was not that the diversity could not be properly accounted for, but that any such meticulous elaboration was simply not worth the effort. It seems important to emphasise that this attitude stood in direct contrast with the earlier accounts typical of the era of exploration and missionary linguistics, when

Native Americans were less often described as a single “race,” for there was no agreement that these peoples formed a single stock. Although the exact origin of New World peoples was a great mystery, most scholars agreed that the Americas had been populated by a number of different nations [...]. Europeans of the Renaissance and seventeenth century certainly viewed New World peoples as uniformly “savage,” exceptions being made for the relatively “civilized” peoples of Mexico and Peru. Yet [...] writers generally showed a lively interest in the differences between the appearances, government, and manners of various American “nations.”⁹

The facts on the ground were only vaguely relevant for the big picture of the Other and his place – regardless of whether the Savage were to be seen as as noble or not. Still it seems important to note that there was not a one-step push towards a fully-blown racist world-view, but rather that many small steps were taken on a slippery slope. While the approach taken by Robertson and other enlightenment era “conjectural historians” did not boil down to racial stereotyping pure and simple – theirs was a climate of opinion still imbued by the idea of universal human nature – it did nevertheless prove easily amenable to subsequent racist readings. Racial differences were something that authors such as Robertson would notice and try to explain in terms compatible with universalist principles, yet, “we need to see that simply by examining racial difference they laid the groundwork for what would eventually become an interrogation of the eighteenth-century assumption that the human subject of science was by nature everywhere the same.”¹⁰ Only small discursive steps had to be taken from approaching the human nature as something uniform and thus seeing the “primitive people” as representing a picture of what the “civilised people” must also have looked like before all their civilising progress to contending that perhaps those socio-cultural differences are not mere diachronic quirks but rather that they are strongly expressive of significant distinctions with respect to the innate mental capacities.

Mixing history and biology can indeed produce a noxious mix:

Scientific racism accomplished the „biologization of history” [...] by equating the cultural hierarchy under the idea of progress with the physical and mental differences popularly believed to exist among human groups. Certain counter-assumptions about the common origin of the human species and the significance of the environment prevented most

⁹ N. Hudson, *From ‘nation’ to ‘race’: The origin of racial classification in eighteenth-century thought*, “Eighteenth-century Studies” 29(3)/1996, p. 248.

¹⁰ M. Poovey, *A History of Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, p. 225.

eighteen-century thinkers from carrying racist thinking to its logical extreme as a science, but the growing belief in the polygenetic origins of human life, the transformation of the idea of progress into social and biological evolution, and the scientific study of comparative anatomy all persuaded most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social scientists of the racial differences among nations and peoples and especially between civilized and primitive peoples of the period.”¹¹

Thus, primitive societies, i.e., among other things undifferentiated and unsophisticated, were presented as strongly correlated with the primitivism of the minds and tongues of its members. The collective nature would be explained by the individual (in)capacities, and vice versa.

The nature of the derogatory references of North American Indian languages within the racist discursive frame can be readily demonstrated on the basis of “Huron examples” – one of the great stocks of references supporting the discourses of native primitivism. One should in fact actually note that the very term “Huron” was not even one that the speakers would use with respect to themselves: “it was imposed upon them by the French, much as so many other names were forced upon indigenous peoples by Europeans and other colonizers.”¹² Already the early descriptions of Huron were instrumental in shaping the notion of “primitive” languages and their lexical and structural properties: “The absence of labials in Huron and Iroquoian languages generally constituted a standard example of phonetic properties of primitive languages in 19th-century accounts of the languages and customs of American Indians”¹³. Before venturing towards the exposition of the latter points, concerning the supposed linguistically-determined cognitive handicaps of the Huron, it seems important to demonstrate what apparent deficiencies of the language itself did the 18th and 19th century scholars have in mind, and what empirical foundations for those judgements seems to have existed

The image of Huron as a prototypical “primitive” language was based on such real or assumed features as lexical and grammatical simplicity, deficiencies in the phonetic inventory, as well as a supposed incapacity for abstract and rational thought, deduction and categorization. Those criticisms started already with the very early accounts. Thus, Gabriel Sagard Théodat (1632) dismissed Huron grammar as “confused and imperfect,” while Jean de Brébeuf (1635) provided an empirically well-informed and accurate but judgmentally negative account of the missing labials: “This is probably the reason why they all open their lips so awkwardly, and why we can scarcely understand them when they whistle or when they speak low. As they have hardly any virtue or Religion, or any learning or government, they have consequently no simple words suitable to express what is connected

¹¹ R. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, Vintage Books, New York 1979, p. 56.

¹² J. Steckley, *Words of the Huron*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Ontario 2007, p. 23.

¹³ M. Kilariski, K. Dziubalska-Kołodziej, *On extremes of linguistic complexity*, “Historiographia Linguistica” 39(2-3)/2012, p. 284.

with these.”¹⁴ While the broad picture of Huron language and culture painted by Brébeuf cannot be judged prejudiced and inaccurate, much less certainly than that of Théodat, the suggestions of supposed linguistic primitivism correlating with acknowledged socio-cultural underdevelopment of the community were ripe with future consequences, and open to disparaging interpretations.

Such derogatory referencing of Huron did in fact become mainstream in the 18th century. For instance, in his highly influential book *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, James Burnett, Lord Monboddo (one of the founding fathers of modern comparative linguistics) wrote of the Huron language in a way that succinctly combined apparent matter-of-factness with patronising denigration:

Even the labial consonants, such as B, P, M, which appear to us to be of such early pronunciation, being among the first that our children learn, the nation of the Hurons cannot articulate [...]. The reason of which is, that there is one organ of pronunciation, which the Hurons does not use at all, namely, the lips, for he always speaks with open mouth.¹⁵

Furthermore, Monboddo would also point to other examples derived from Huron, e.g. its supposedly deficient vocalic character and length, and present them as exhibiting constitutive properties of primitive languages. Another example of Huron linguistic primitivism, and one of more general interest than the narrow bounds of academic speculation can be found in the account of Marie-Angélique, a feral child whose case was highly publicised in France and England in the 18th century. Even though her exact ethnic origins remained unknown, as she was brought to France from Canada as a child and then left alone in this foreign land due to a sudden death of her caretaker, which led to her to drift into the woods and live in the forests before being captured in Champagne in what was described as state of savagery at roughly the age of twenty years old. In the most famous contemporaneous account of her story, the authors identify her as Huron on the basis of her memories of how her original, primitive language sounded like: “Huron is just such a language [...] namely, cries in the throat, a little broken and articulated by some guttural consonants, with very little use of the tongue, and none at all of lips.”¹⁶ Interestingly, Lord Monboddo is supposed to have interviewed Marie-Angélique and considered her case to be among the most interesting that he had ever encountered.

Leaving any supposed sympathy for Marie-Angélique aside, the picture of primitive minds operating a primitive linguistic code was well established in Monboddo’s accounts on the basis of Huron examples. Even though this was not exactly what available sources were supporting, he had a point to make and a se-

¹⁴ R. Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Pageant, New York 1959, p. 117.

¹⁵ J. Burnett, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, vol. 4, Edinburgh 1776, s. 180.

¹⁶ C.-M. de la Condamine, *An Account of a Savage Girl, Caught Wild in the Woods of Champagne*, Edinburgh 1768, p. xiv.

lective approach to the descriptions of Huron were perfect to make it: „take the example of Huron, for Monboddo one of the most primitive languages on earth: small vocabulary, no abstract terms, no grammar, no clear articulation” – an interpretation of this sort was based on the account of Sagard, while disregarding other less prejudiced accounts such as that provided by Brébeuf – “according to whom Huron was anything but primitive. Monboddo did not know them or did not want to know them [...] Monboddo needed was a very, very primitive language, a first language.”¹⁷ The primitivism of the language as such, roughly generalised from the “poverty” of phonemic inventory, fitted well with the concept of how progress entails evolving towards ever greater complexity and abundance.

This kind of narrative would then be seamlessly weaved into a picture of stage-by-stage evolutionary progress, whereby the “primitive” languages of the uncivilised Others could be presented as preserved life-pictures of the Western past: “Amerindian languages were held to be different from English; they were held to represent an early stage of linguistic evolution — a stage which Europeans had left behind.”¹⁸ It was not the “linguistic primitivism,” however, that would constitute the main point of interest for the humanities and social sciences at large, but rather its cognitive and cultural corollaries represented by the life-forms of the “primitive societies.” One key cognitive correlate of the “primitive” nature of Huron was the supposed incapacity for abstraction, generalisation and categorisation ascribed to its speakers, which in itself was but an exemplification of a belief widely held with respect to all or most indigenous peoples. After all, few care truly about phonemic inventories, but if it were to serve as indicative of other more fundamental cultural and cognitive deficiency – this would move the game to a quite different discursive level.

The juxtaposition of concrete with abstract languages presupposed a division of languages into two broad groups “According to the mental propensity towards concreteness and abstractness possessed by the various human races, and exhibited by them in their languages.”¹⁹ Concreteness in this account amounted to inferiority stemming from a low level of development, often described by way of an analogy to the speech of children, i.e., one that is conceptually restricted to terms referring to objects and events available in sensorial experience. In a predictably patronising way, the supposed concreteness of whole language families presented an obvious point to score in the discourse on the inferiority of primitive societies: “This incapacity to express abstract relations is strongly indicated in the American

¹⁷ R. Schreier, “*Savage*” *Languages in Eighteenth-Century Theoretical History of Language*, in E. Gray, N. Fiering (ed.), *Language encounter in Americas: 1492-1800*, Bergham Books, New York 2000, p. 322.

¹⁸ M. Lauzon, *Savage eloquence in America and the linguistic construction of a British identity in the 18th century*, “*Historiographia Linguistica*” 23(1-2)/1996, p. 124.

¹⁹ G. Oppert, *On the classification of languages in conformity with ethnology*, “*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*” 13/1884, p. 37.

languages, and indicates that they diverged into their special type at a very low level of human speech. [...] All this indicates a very primitive state of language, in which every expression had its immediate and local application, and each utterance told its whole story.”²⁰

While one would not take Charles Morris at his word nowadays, as he was firmly cast outside of the mainstream cannon of the history of thought, he in fact had not been far detached from the received knowledge of his day. The concrete nature of “primitive” languages was supposed to serve as one of the chief reasons for the lack of progress of the “primitive” peoples, as they were seen as deprived of the capacity for intellectual speculation, invention and even of the very desire to know anything transcending their immediate experiential horizons. To use an example from one of the most classic works of 19th century sociology, a succinct and eloquent exposition of this line of thinking can be found in Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Sociology*:

Evidently this absence of desire for information about new things, which characterizes the lowest mental state, prevents the growth of that generalized knowledge which makes rational surprise, and consequent rational inquisitiveness possible. Lacking ability to think, and the accompanying desire to know, the savage is without tendency to speculate.²¹

The supposed lack of abstract terms in primitive languages was typically embedded in the problems of cross-cultural translation of terms across communities of widely divergent practical considerations. Given the implicitly (and often quite explicitly) assumed European predominance along the trajectory of human progress, it was obvious that any perceived difficulty in grasping any of the crucial aspects of the Western way of life would naturally be seen as demonstrative of some degree of mental ineptitude of the non-Western peoples: “the languages were frequently said to be deficient in so-called abstract terms, typically in reference to European abstract terms for European cultural items, physical and metaphysical.”²²

The perceived deficiency of abstract thinking was frequently further associated with supposed incapacity for making clear moral distinctions between good and evil, combined with moral decadence, general sluggishness, lack of social values and capacity for organization. This can be readily illustrated by a quotation from another of the Victorian stalwarts – Edward Burnett Tylor: „From this we see it to be true that the original myth of the two brothers, the White One and the Dark One, had no moral element. It seems mere nature-myth, the contest between Day and Night [...] Yet [...] the Huron mind had already come to the rudimentary con-

²⁰ Ch. Morris, *The Aryan Race; Its origin and its achievements*, S.C. Griggs & Co, Chicago 1892, pp. 197.

²¹ H. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1, Williams and Norgate, London 1882, p. 89.

²² J. Steckley, *White Lies about the Inuit*, Broadview Press, Ontario 2007, p. 71.

trast of the Good and Evil entity.”²³ Again, however, it is Spencer that provides an elegantly phrased justification for the obviousness of the interrelation between the lack of capacity for abstraction and the inferior moral status of the “primitive man”: “the savage has no distinct ideas of right and wrong in the abstract. The immediate pleasures or pains they give are his sole reasons for classing things and acts as good or bad.”²⁴ Thus, if one is bound to sensorial concreteness and incapable of appreciating abstract moral principles, then quite clearly one’s morality could not be expected to go beyond the animalistic calculus of pleasure and pain.

The Huron-examples did not all come in one form, but there was a clear common denominator to their usage, which seems also applicable to the broader application of “linguistic examples” in the 18th and 19th century humanities and social sciences. The linguistic content of the examples would typically prove of little interest, and their importance was reduced to the argumentative effect they could have in reinforcing the general narrative of the nature of the primitive peoples (as opposed to the civilised Europeans). The authors would also show remarkable ease of transition from referencing “facts” about languages to postulating generalising and definitive remarks on the individual cognitive capacities as well as collective cultural properties of the speech-communities. The example fitted the discourse, and this in turn further perpetuated the legitimacy of its usage.

2. Discourses of cultural and linguistic relativity

While references to Huron were popular in the era of racially tinged perspectives, as an example of the allegedly primitive nature of the language – and often also of the mind – of what was then seen as the primitive people, the Inuit term for snow became one of the most popular exemplifications of linguistic and cultural relativism. It seems hard to underestimate the fundamental value shift, which occurred in the first decades of the 20th century:

The emergence of relativism at about the turn of this century was associated with a Copernican shift in both the Western worldview and the Western sense of self-identity. Western thought about where our civilization stood in the total gamut of human societies underwent profound change...”²⁵

Within the late-modern paradigm of thought the major linguistic and cultural differences between communities would still be emphasised but, in clear contrast to the racist take on difference, these would be treated as expressive of something

²³ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology*, London 1873, p. 293.

²⁴ H. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1, Williams and Norgate, London 1882, p. 47.

²⁵ E. Hatch, *The Good Side of Relativism*, “Journal of Anthropological Research” 53(3)/1997, p. 380.

inherently and idiosyncratically valuable. What is more, the multiplicity of possible culturally conditions perspectives came also to be seen as precluding any one of them being in any way favoured with respect to understanding the others:

Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation [...] Is reality not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind?²⁶

Just as Huron, Eskimo languages exhibit features which make them both interesting and difficult to comprehend, even in theory. Most notably, Eskimo languages are polysynthetic, i.e., allowing for many morphemes to combine into long sentence-words. Polysynthetic languages express lexical and grammatical meanings in ways seemingly “exotic” from the point of view of the speakers of European languages. One of the main points of incompatibility consists in the huge differences in terms of how much grammatical information, in the form of derivative and inflection morphemes, can be contained within words. The differences are so vast that the very notion of a word taken from languages such as English seems hardly applicable to languages such as Eskimo. This makes them very different, and thus interesting, while too difficult to study without much effort and prior training, which typically guarantees that only very few would ever be able to actually attempt to check the empirical facts of the case. This invites stereotypical, formulaic usage: “Irrespective of their morphologically nuanced character, the Eskimo words for snow have been predominantly referred to in terms of metaphorical constructs rather than empirical accounts. As a result of the highly stylized use of the example, their actual semantic and morphological complexity became largely irrelevant.”²⁷ In this respect, relativist references to Eskimo-snow, used as a certain key-word construct with desired argumentative effects, are not so very different from the earlier stylized references to Huron.

It seems important to note that polysynthetic characteristics had actually played a major part within the underlying arguments of the racist concept of the primitive mind being incapable of abstraction and bound to the concrete. Eskimo words for snow did not feature in such arguments, but Eskimo words for fishing did, even if these examples were not amongst the most popular of the 19th century stock. Still, in the era dominated by the relativist paradigm those features were provided with an entirely different spin – one where the supposed super-abundance of words for snow in Eskimo served as example-proofs of a range of ideas starting from the richness of indigenous culture that is inappreciable for outside observers to strong views on linguistic determination of culture and cognition. Most importantly perhaps, they

²⁶ M. Herskovits, *Cultural relativism: perspectives in cultural pluralism*, Random House, New York 1972, p. 15.

²⁷ P. Cichocki, M. Kilarski, *Eskimo words for snow: the life cycle of a linguistic misconception*, “Historiographia Linguistica” 37(7)/2010, p. 346.

made their way to countless textbooks and introductory undergraduate lectures as one of the stock anecdotes exemplifying the importance of understanding cultural and linguistic difference.

Origins of the snow-example are, on the one hand, reasonably clear, and yet, complex and telling as well. It is usually accepted that the example was first used by Franz Boas in *Introduction to The Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911), where it served as an illustration of the arbitrary categorization of language: Boas contrasted morphologically simple terms in English (water, liquid) and Eskimo (terms for snow and seal) with derivative forms used in Dakota. However, references to snow-terms are understood to have come into general circulation chiefly due to the popularization by Benjamin Whorf article “Science and Linguistics” (1940), where the usage of the example was meant to serve as an illustration of the principle of linguistic relativity. In the article, Whorf emphasized the usefulness of linguistics as a branch of natural science (where linguistics was meant to belong due to the unconscious nature of its object of inquiry), and advocated the idea that there can be no absolute standard for comparisons between languages as well as that language acts as “the shaper of ideas.” This strong view of linguistic determinism – later framed as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – is perhaps most succinctly expressed by Whorf’s statement that “formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages.”²⁸ Thus, given that cognition follows idiosyncratic lines drawn from the particular linguistic categorisation systems underlying the mind, and no particular system of categorisation can be held to constitute an objective frame of comparison, what follows is “a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.”²⁹ Whorf illustrates the principle with a series of examples from English and American Indian languages, these famously include the Eskimo words for snow: “We have the same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, wind-driven flying snow – whatever the situation may be. To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow.”³⁰ While the “Science and Linguistics” article was published in 1940, and reprinted in edited collections throughout the next decade, the ideas of linguistic relativity together with the snow-example truly set off with the 1956

²⁸ B.L. Whorf, *Science and Linguistics*, in J. Carrol (ed.) *Language, Thought, and Reality*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 1956, pp. 212-213.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

reprint of Whorf's article in *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, edited by John Carroll. This influential posthumous collection popularized not only linguistic relativity but also the snow-example as one of its crucial exemplifications, whose rise to prominence may have been unexpected, due to the minor role it played in the article "Science and linguistics" which was the only place where it featured, however, the rise does not seem at all accidental thanks to its straightforward, readily accessible to non-linguists, and yet very powerful persuasive impact.

One should point out, however, that while Whorf is presumed to have taken the snow-example over from Boas, the often quoted source of this borrowing put the example in quite different context. In the *Introduction to The Handbook of American Indian Languages* the Eskimo example appears in the section on "Differences in categories in different languages," where Boas points to the presence of different means of categorization, which can involve the use of independent and derived forms: "the groups of ideas expressed by specific phonetic groups show very material differences in different languages, and do not conform by any means to the same principles of classification."³¹ In this original context, the argumentative emphasis was put on stressing the influence of social practice on culture on linguistic categorization processes, i.e., "the chief interests of the people."³² The primary point consists in the consideration of ways in which a community's culture and social practices may partially determine the shape of its language. This "primacy of practice" reading was not the most prevalent one in the subsequent history of the snow-terms example, yet, it was far from marginal. One prominent example can be found in an early discussion of the theoretical implications of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis provided by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who chooses not to question the empirical validity of the claim concerning the abundance of snow-words, while striving to subvert Whorf's interpretation by proposing to treat linguistic categorization as derivative of social practice: "The Eskimos are said to have some thirty different names for "snow," doubtless because it is vitally important for them to make fine distinctions while, for us, these differences are negligible. Conversely, we call machines which are only superficially different, by the names of Fords, Cadillacs, Pontiacs, and so forth, while for the Eskimos they would be pretty much the same."³³ In choosing to spin the issue in this way, Bertalanffy moves back to the original position held by Boas, yet, he actually seems unaware of the origins of the example going beyond Whorf's article. The argument of the primacy of social practice over language was considered sufficient by the adherents of realism as

³¹ F. Boas, *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, vol. 1, Smithsonian Institution, Washington 1911, p. 21.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 26.

³³ L. Bertalanffy, *An Essay on the Relativity of Categories*, "Philosophy of Science" 22(4)/1955, p. 260

a means of resisting the relativist implications of Whorf's examples. A succinct and recent formulation of this position can be found in Margaret Archer's book *Being human: The problem of agency*, where Archer uses the snow-example to emphasize the dependent status of language: "The numerous Inuit words for snow encode differences between impactable and powdery substances and only proliferate among a population which has a practical interest in such matters."³⁴

The snow-example proved highly versatile, being used as evidence of cultural and linguistic relativity, the determining role of language in thought and perception as well as the dependence of categorization on the environment. Most commonly, however, it would morph into a figure of speech used to sensitise readers to the importance of distinctions between different communities: "If we assume that sociology, its conceptual and theoretical structure is a reflection of characteristic social experiences, life conditions of people, then national or regional sociologies may also differ in their typical concepts. Benjamin Lee Whorf demonstrated that the Eskimos have numerous concepts allowing subtle distinctions between varieties of snow, and the African nomads, for varieties of sand in the desert (Whorf, 1957)."³⁵ This quotation seems representative of the generic uses of the multiplicity-of-words examples, somehow accredited to Whorf, who in fact only made a passing reference to Eskimo snow-words, but did not mention any varieties of sand terminology in his writings. In this reading the relationship between the linguistic categorisations and the cultural representations is not a strict and strong one, what is claimed overtly amounts to little more than Boasian "chief interests of the people" having some bearing of categorical inventories. Yet, in usages of such sort, there is also typically some special importance attached to this relationship and that the conceptual differences may have some vague causal effects of their own. In the context of relativist cultural theory this boiled down to the conviction that "language constructs and organizes our sense of reality. When a European gazes at a snowscape and sees only snow, an Inuit, with over fifty words for snow, sees a very different landscape. What this demonstrates to a structuralist is that the language we use permits us to conceptualize the world in different ways."³⁶

The empirical validity of the snow-example has not been seriously challenged until mid-1980s, when Laura Martin published the critical exposition *Eskimo words for snow: A case study in the genesis and decay of an anthropological example*. According to Martin's account the popularity of the snow-example should serve as a "cautionary tale that serves to remind us of the intellectual protection to be found in the careful use of sources, the clear presentation of evidence, and, above all, the

³⁴ M. Archer, *Being Human*, CUP, Cambridge 2000, p. 27.

³⁵ P. Sztopka. *One Sociology or Many?* in P. Sujata, *The ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions*, Sage, London 2009, p. 23.

³⁶ J. Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Pearson Publishing, New York 2006, p. 274.

constant evaluation of our assumptions.”³⁷ In this view, the widespread dissemination of the snow-example sprung from the fact that coming from a language family whose properties few actually understood it could be both vague enough to serve multiple purposes and persuasive through its mysterious exoticism. While Martin’s exposition primarily focused on issues of empirical validity, the debunking of the myth quickly took a much more ambitious form, i.e., an integrated in an attack on Whorf and linguistic relativity in Pullum’s “The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax” (1989) and Pinker’s *Language Instinct* (1994). Impact of the latter seems strongest, broadest and most enduring due to the best-selling character of the book. In factual terms, Pinker’s exposition of the snow-example follows the outlines of Pullum’s attack, mentions Martin albeit in a way that also seems to be derived from Pullum’s narrative, however, his arguments go beyond debunking and deriding academic sloppiness, as he treats the Eskimo-case as a part of a more general assault against linguistic relativism. Pinker draws a number of conclusions from his treatment of the snow-example, alongside some other questionable anthropological data-points, but one of his key challenges is a normative one, whereby he ascribes a paradoxical ethnocentricity to the relativist position. In his view, the relativist anthropology, while anti-ethnocentric in principle does actually inherit the old ethnocentric, patronizing way of thinking: “Linguistic relativity came out of the Boas school, as part of a campaign to show that nonliterate cultures were as complex and sophisticated as European ones. But the supposedly mind-broadening anecdotes owe their appeal to a patronizing willingness to treat other cultures’ psychologies as weird and exotic compared to our own.”³⁸

While the snow-example was not hotly defended, even though some critical discussion of the debunking was performed both from theoretical and empirical standpoints, linguistic relativism was of course not something to be simply discarded, and in this context the problems with the example had to be somehow explained away. One such prominent attempt was made by Anna Wierzbicka in her 1997 book *Understanding Cultures through their Key Words*. Her argumentative position is set by the quotation from Dell Hymes, underscoring the importance of the snow-example for the anthropological investigations of culture: “Since before Boas first mentioned four Eskimo words for ‘snow,’ anthropologists have taken elaboration of vocabulary as an indication of the interests of particular cultures and of differences among them.”³⁹ After stating the importance of the principle illustrated by the example, the dubious veracity of the example itself is actually acknowledged, although the claim is advanced that this does not in fact change the

³⁷ L. Martin, *Eskimo words for snow: A case study in the genesis and decay of an anthropological example*, “American Anthropologist” 88(2)/1986, p. 241.

³⁸ S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, William Morrow and Company, New York 2004, p. 64.

³⁹ D. Hymes, *Language in Culture and Society. A reader in Linguistic Anthropology*, Harper and Row, New York 1964, p. 167.

general picture: “the validity of the general principle of “cultural elaboration” would seem to be unassailable. Some illustrations of the principle have not stood the test of time.” In this damage-control mode, Wierzbicka denies any larger intellectual importance of the debunking of the snow-words example, especially not one casting any falsifying doubt upon the principle which it was meant to demonstrate: “Yet not only some of the illustrations but even the principle of cultural elaboration itself has recently come under attack, although at times the attackers seem unable to make up their minds as to whether it is false or, rather, a boring truism.” This is meant to directly counter Pinker’s *Language Instinct* attack – Wierzbicka does mention Pullum’s “Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax,” but her knowledge of the paper clearly comes from Pinker – and the main line of defence comes in questioning whether anything should follow from a debunking of one example, i.e., in Wierzbicka’s view a falsification of one example does not have any further importance for the validity of the general theory concerning the correlations between linguistic categories available to a particular speech community and its culture. In any case, she points to other similar examples: “If someone finds it boring that, for example, the Hanunoo language of the Philippines has ninety different words for rice [...] that is their problem. To those who do not find the comparison of cultures boring, the principle of cultural elaboration is of fundamental importance.”⁴⁰

When concerned with the truth value of linguistic relativism as a research paradigm, Pinker uses the Eskimo-example within an indirect attack strategy, whereby he distinguishes between a strong version of linguistic relativism, which he promptly reduces to absurdity, and then proceeds to show that the only conceivable version that proponents of the hypothesis are willing to defend under critical scrutiny is a weak one, focused on the peculiarities of the lexicon rather than grammar. In fact, he considers the weak version of the relativity hypothesis not to be a proper form of linguistic determinism at all: “The idea that Eskimos pay more attention to varieties of snow *because they have more words for it* is so topsy turvy (can you think of *any other reason* why Eskimos might pay attention to snow?) that it’s hard to believe it would be taken seriously were it not for the feeling of cleverness it affords at having transcended common sense. Not only does a Whorfian explanation of Eskimo words for snow reverse cause and effect, but it exaggerates the depth of the cognitive difference between the peoples involved in it in the first place.”⁴¹ In other words, what Pinker would probably have said, had he chosen to address Wierzbicka’s challenge directly would be that whatever the number of Hanunoo terms for rice may be attested to be is most likely a misunderstanding, and in any case of no theoretical importance.

⁴⁰ A. Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through their Key Words*, OUP, Oxford 1997, pp. 10-11.

⁴¹ S. Pinker, *Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*, Viking, New York 2007, pp. 125-126.

The clear focus of the comparison is placed on the interpretative variability in the context of shifting ideological as well as theoretical conditions with respect to the utilisation of linguistic examples. The snow-example fell on the fertile soil of the constructivist and relativist climate of opinion, which became predominant in the late modern humanities. Additionally, the so-called “linguistic turn” not only reinforced the idea of reality as necessarily linguistically mediated, but also raised the prestige of references to linguistic findings. In this context the Eskimo words for snow seemed too obvious and intuitive to be questioned. One should also take into account the implications that the example seemed to entail, especially in the context of providing what seemed like a scientific proof for both relativism and constructivism: “[Whorf] took the sense of the determining power of language to its logical extreme in attesting that the language at the disposal of speakers did more than merely predispose certain possibilities on reality but contained within it the only worldview available to speakers of that language.”⁴²

Conclusion

The misunderstandings resulting from the use of linguistic anecdotes in extra-linguistic context point not only to methodological difficulties arising from cavalier treatments of secondary sources of linguistic discourse in a variety of contexts, but also relates to the disputes over changing assumptions normative humanities, in particular concerning the nature of the relationship between language, culture and cognition. The rise and fall of the racist spin was not caused by any “empirical” motivations, there was nothing new about the Huron that was discovered and changed the discursive landscape. The turning point in the treatment North American Indian languages in general, came with the rise of Boasian criticism of racist anthropology, and 20th century references were dominated by the relativist narrative, i.e., the specific or idiosyncratic linguistic features came to be seen as inherently valuable and indicative of associated cognitive and cultural richness. While this paradigm change involved a new interest in the empirical descriptions within linguistics, references to the languages in the social sciences did not become much better informed. The shift away from racism seems to stem mostly from sources largely exogenous to the linguistic material. The Eskimo words for snow constitute a prototypical modern example of a sloppy approach to linguistic data and neglect of primary sources. More generally, the accounts of Eskimo over the past century illustrate the persistence of misconceptions concerning American Indian languages and, more generally, “exotic” languages, which are still prone to prejudiced accounts among linguists, social scientists and philosophers, even though they are no longer treated as “primitive.” While the snow-example has been

⁴² D. Mac Giolla Chríost, *Language, Identity and Conflict*, Routledge, London 2003, p. 12.

interpreted in diverse and often contradictory ways, the relativist reading remained the mainstream interpretation. It would go to far to claim that the racist treatment of linguistic examples was just like the relativist – there were significant differences in this respect, which went beyond the opposite value judgements – but on the basis of the comparison of the Huron and the Eskimo examples one can point to some common points of convergence: both examples were used without much concern for their linguistic content, both gained and retained their popularity due to their good fit with the discourses they helped to perpetuate, and they both exhibited the lasting persuasive allure of the “exotic” linguistic reference.

