

The Method of History and Linguistic Relativism

Danielle Scheil

Abstract

This paper presents a critique of Collingwood's method of history based on the theory of linguistic relativism. Collingwood's proposed method of history (MOH) is an interpretative method used to gain insight into historical events based on the re-enactment of the thoughts of past agents in one's own mind. The theory of linguistic relativity is employed to highlight the difficulty of obtaining accurate and reliable knowledge through the MOH. This difficulty arises due to the fact that conceptions of reality are shaped by language. Historians will not be able to re-create past thoughts because the vast changes in language over time will have caused alterations in the way thoughts are formed. Therefore, linguistic relativism will cause discrepancies between the original thought of the past agent and the historians' critical re-enactment of the thought.

Introduction

In this essay, I argue that although Collingwood's method provides insightful contributions to historical knowledge, it cannot be entirely accurate and reliable due to linguistic relativism, i.e. the theory that an individual's perception of reality is shaped by the language that one speaks. In Section One, I will outline Collingwood's method of history and highlight the innovative strengths in his approach. In Section Two, I introduce linguistic relativism and explore how

our thoughts and conception of reality are affected by language. Section Three presents my critique of Collingwood based on linguistic relativism. The final section will focus on the challenge of reconciling Collingwood's method with the evidence that our thoughts and conception of reality are formed by language. I will argue that linguistic relativism strictly undermines the accuracy of Collingwood's method of history.

Section I: Method of History

One of the principal claims in Collingwood's method is that history is the study of the mind. He maintains that for the human mind to achieve knowledge of itself one must actively engage in historical analyses. This is founded on the belief that man desires self-knowledge, particularly of his own reason and thoughts, and yet past attempts to gain an understanding of understanding have been unsuccessful.

The field of historical knowledge is the study of human beings and organizations of the past. It involves critically interpreting records of the past, written or unwritten. The main aim of the historian is to analyze these expressions of thought of past human beings through the reconstruction of historical events.¹

An important distinction in Collingwood's method of history (MOH) is the theoretical division between the outside and the inside of an event. The outside of the event is everything which can be observed or witnessed in terms of action. The inside of an event pertains to the thoughts and motivations of the actor or actors who carried out such actions. Once a historical phenomenon has been discovered, the historian's central task is to delineate the inside of the event. That is to say, to discover the thoughts expressed in the event.

For a historian to discover the process of thoughts that motivated an event,

¹ Collingwood emphasizes that the field of historical knowledge is not extended to natural processes. It is concerned only with history as it pertains to rational expressions of behaviour. For instance, a man acting on intuition alone is not in the scope of analyses. Neither is a man who is acting only to fulfil an 'animal instinct,' such as sleeping or eating. By stipulating intentional action as the focus of study, there is an implicit assumption that man's actions are outward expressions of his thoughts.

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he must envision the situation in his own mind. This involves mentally reconstructing the details of an event and imagining the possible reactions of the agent under those circumstances. The historian is trying to discern the motivations of the individual and re-think past thoughts. This process of re-enacting past thoughts requires active participation and critical reasoning. Essentially, in doing so, the historian is bringing past thoughts into the context of his own current knowledge and beliefs. Collingwood is not claiming that historical thinking is completely value-neutral. Rather, he asserts that, 'all thinking is critical thinking' (Collingwood, pp.26). When a historian reconstructs historical thought he is at once analysing and criticizing it.

Collingwood further claims that this method allows the mind to obtain knowledge of itself, as historical thinking involves coming to understand the mind's past cognition. By re-thinking thoughts of the past, the mind comes to understand the reasoning process that it has inherited. The mind also comes to realise its limits if it cannot make intelligible an event in the past. In the proceeding sections I will argue that this further claim undermines the merit of MOH and renders this method vulnerable to the critique of linguistic relativism.

Section II: Linguistic Relativism

The theory of linguistic relativism (LR) maintains that the language an individual speaks affects their perception of the world. LR is based on the observation that human beings have communicated using thousands of different languages, each with unique properties; for example, distinct grammatical structures and vocabularies. To communicate properly using such languages, the speaker must conform to the respective linguistic rules. For example, if I wanted to say 'the dog ate the Christmas cookies,' I must use the correct verb tense to indicate that the event happened in the past. In Russian, the verb must also indicate the gender of the cookie-eater. Moreover, in Turkish, a suffix is added to the verb to communicate whether the speaker witnessed the event or if it is only rumoured. Each language is riddled with these subtle complexities that force the speaker to remember unique elements of reality (Boroditsky, 2003).

Yet much further evidence is required to conclude that languages actually impart

different cognitive abilities. Researchers embarked upon testing this hypothesis and have discovered compelling empirical evidence that supports linguistic relativism. These researchers have established that cross-linguistic differences shape temporal ordering and representations of space and objects. Furthermore, our native language influences other fundamental aspects of perception such as remembering the causality in a chain of events and our ability to retain new information (Boroditsky, 2003). An example which was established over two decades of empirical work revealed that individuals who are required to communicate using absolute cardinal directions have a heightened sense of direction. Absolute cardinal directions indicate spatial relationships using north, south, east and west, whereas relative spatial terms are those such as left and right. Certain languages always require the speaker to use absolute cardinal direction, for example by saying, 'the presents are to the east of the Christmas tree.' Individuals who rely on these languages are remarkably better at navigating unfamiliar environments and have a far superior sense of orientation (Gaby, 2010). Their linguistic requirements have enforced and sharpened this cognitive ability.

Researchers have established that language influences many fundamental elements of human cognition. The complex interrelation between language and thought indicates that individuals' mental lives differ much more than previously assumed. Linguistic relativism maintains that speakers have profoundly different conceptualizations of the world based on the requirements of their language.

Section III: Insight

The critique presented in this section will argue that the method of history does not provide accurate knowledge of the past because of linguistic relativism. Collingwood asserts that we can gain historical knowledge through the re-enactment of the past by uncovering the process of thought behind events. This claim in itself is not unrealistic. Through the use of archival records, empirical data and historical facts, it is reasonable to assume that the historian could envision himself in a given situation. Then, imagining the potential

emotions and desires that might be felt under those circumstances is a simple act of human empathy. The historian is very likely to recreate many of the same thoughts that were experienced by the original agent. Although there is no way to validate the correctness of the historian's hypothesis, one must be careful about being overly critical. Since delineating the inside of an event is important for historical knowledge, Collingwood's method could still provide ground-breaking insights for explaining the occurrence of past events.

However, it is dubious that MOH enables us to establish that the particular thought imaginatively reconstructed by the historian and the original agent came about through the same cognitive process. For instance, both individuals could have come to the same thought through entirely different methods of reasoning. To say that the historian is capable of having the same thought by means of human empathizing is a much weaker assertion than to say he gained an understanding of the actual mental process behind it. The theory of linguistic relativity demonstrates just how unlikely this is.

Language leads individuals to be attentive to specify elements of reality and dictates which aspects are worthwhile to remember. The focus of an individual is unconsciously shifted onto the factors which are important for later communication. In this way, individuals of different languages are led to perceive different aspects of the world around them. When a historian attempts to recreate past thoughts in his mind, he is inherently biased by his native language. The details which he seeks out in his mental re-enactment will be unique from those observed by a speaker with a different vernacular. If individuals are encoding different details into their mind, then surely this biases their perceptions of a situation.

Suppose we are a historian interested in the event of Leon Trotsky's death in the 1940's. In this scenario, the outside of the event is that he was brutally murdered by a Stalin henchman after he was exiled to Mexico. What remains to be determined is the inside of the event; the actual thoughts, desires and motivations of the Stalin henchman. To begin to understand this event, the historian gathers all the relevant historical data. It is already known that Leon Trotsky was the first commander of the Soviet's Red Army. He was also openly in opposition to Joseph Stalin which is what led to his eventual exile from Russia.

Given this historical knowledge, there is already a solid framework to construct the potential motivations of Stalin's henchman. The historian also knows that henchmen are typically political radicals who are faithfully supportive of a campaign and willing to commit crimes for their cause. This information further focuses the list of the potential desires that motivated the action. Through careful reasoning and research, the historian can begin to discern the thoughts that are expressed in this event. However, what the historian will be unable to do is conceptualize the world in the same way as the Russian henchman did.

Leon Trotsky was murdered with an ice pick. However, there are many differences across languages that blur the categorization of this object, creating distortions in how individual speakers conceptualize an ice pick. For example, the grammar boundary between objects and substances is not consistent across languages. In English, objects have a separate plural and singular form while substances do not. Objects can also be counted whereas substances required a unit a measurement to indicate an amount. So for instance, you could say 'one ice pick or two ice picks' but would have to say 'one pound of metal or two pounds of metal.' In Yucatec Mayan, these distinctions do not exist and all nouns require a unitizer. Furthermore, the shape or form of the object must be specified. This means that 'one ice pick' translates roughly into 'one sharp long unit of metal.' By talking about objects as if they were substances, native Yucatec Mayan speakers have been empirically shown to pay much closer attention to the materials that fabricate an object (Lucy & Gaskins, 2001). Another difficulty is the grammatical gendering system that many languages have. Individuals' mental perception of objects is actually prejudiced by the gender which the object has been assigned. Several studies have shown the depth of these biases for how individuals describe and related to objects depending on their grammatical gender (Boroditsky et al., 2013).

These linguistic subtleties have a profound effect on how people perceive events. The historian will not be able to think in the same manner as an individual from another native language. Our cognitive processes and mental lives are greatly influenced by language, yet these predispositions remain imperceptible to us since they are so inherent in the way we have come to think. If the historian comes to a same thought as the original agent but through a different cognitive process, can this still be considered accurate knowledge? Through the

same reasoning with which I asserted that we cannot come to know the mind because of linguistic relativism, I maintain that we also cannot come to accurate knowledge.

Collingwood stated that the historian has certain cultural or value biases that that will cause him to critically analyze past events. So biases are not in themselves a problem for the method of history. However, linguistic relativism goes much deeper than this by actually altering the process for how individuals form thoughts. I have illustrated how language requirements alter an individual's cognition. The influence of language is observed in everything from determining which elements of reality a speaker attends to and remembers, to actually sharpening specific mental skills, and even determining how the speaker relates to space and time. Linguistic relativism is not a simple bias that can be accounted for in Collingwood's method of history, it is rather an entrenched mental structure that influences how we form thoughts.

Section IV: Problem of Reconciliation

One might object that if all historians study events and past agents which share their native language, then she can completely eliminate the problems related to LR. However, this objection seems to overlook how profoundly and rapidly languages change. With each generation, perceptible shifts in a language occur; new words are invented, or original meaning attached to an old word, pronunciations drift and the grammatical structure progresses (William, 2010). The accumulation of changes over long periods of time (e.g. several generations) transforms the language into something arbitrarily distinct. Additionally, the same language but spoken in two independent cultural environments will not necessarily share the same changes. The language will become linguistically estranged between the two cultures until eventually the dialects become incomprehensible to the other. The historian researching back through the decades will be confronted by these profound transformations to his native language which he will have to interpret.

This reveals a deeper, more fundamental problem that linguistic relativism causes for the method of history. In Collingwood's method, the historian is

critically evaluating the thoughts of a past agent. The historian knows that many past beliefs have now been proven false and that individuals of the past held many irrational beliefs. When the historian re-enacts past events, he is also criticising them through his (allegedly) more advanced epistemic beliefs. The historian is supposed to form a judgement on the thought's intelligibility and correct for the inaccuracies in it. This method is radically different from the approach necessary to study foreign languages. If an individual wants to interpret a foreign language, they must assume that there is an underlying coherence and a rational meaning in the message being communicated. The principle of charity maintains that to interpret a foreign language we must grant that the speaker has approximately true beliefs (D'Oro, 2004). These two methods posit fundamentally different assumptions about the rationality and reason of the agent being studied. These underlying assumptions illustrate why linguistic relativism and the method of history are incompatible.

Section V: Conclusion

This paper aimed to highlight one of the central difficulties in attaining historical knowledge through MOH. The method of history is an attempt to gain an understanding of past events through the study of historical thoughts. Through a process that appeals to historical records as well as human empathy, the historian will be able to discern some of the beliefs and desires held by the past agent. Interpreting the thoughts expressed in past events is a fundamental stage in developing historical understanding. Yet, Collingwood took his claim too far. He maintained that by re-thinking historical thoughts, the mind can acquire accurate and reliable knowledge of past events. This assertion relies on the assumption that the cognitive process is sufficiently similar between the historian and the past agent.

The principle of linguistic relativity undermines this claim as it demonstrates the complex interrelation between thoughts and language. An individual's perception of the world is profoundly influenced by their native language. These profound differences in the mental lives of individuals imply that even if a historian comes to the same thought as the original agent, it will be through an

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entirely different reasoning process. I maintained that this cannot be classified as accurate knowledge. Moreover, when an individual wants to interpret a foreign language, they must assume that there is rationality and consistency in the underlying message. This is fundamentally different than the historian whose task inherently involves critically analyzing the rationality of a thought. This implicit difference in methods demonstrates that linguistic relativity and the method of history cannot be reconciled to gain accurate knowledge.

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Danielle Scheil is a Canadian student doing her Masters degree in Philosophy and Economics at the University of Bayreuth. Her passion however is the environment and she is deeply engaged in environmental ethics and issues around climate change. She hopes to pursue her PhD in Environmental Studies (as well as start an animal rescue for senior dogs!). Aside from this, she is passionate about languages which helped spark the inspiration for this paper.