

## Linguistic relativity and objectivism in Ayn Rand's "The Anthem"

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### **Abstract**

Dystopian fiction generally evokes images and phenomena that belong to an imagined and fictionalized future. However, they derive from political or social situations belonging to the present. The exaggeration of these situations in a potential future serves as a warning for the reader. Sapir and Whorf suggest that language, as an integral part of the society, influences perception through controlling thought. This control is realised through banning the words that indicate certain concepts. Without the words, the concept vanishes and it does not exist for the person speaking the language that has banished the concept. This cognitive linguistics theory, referred to as Linguistic relativity, widens the gap between language and perception. This hypothesis is very helpful in the literary analysis of dystopian fiction since it can expose how characters interact with their own societies. This article aims at exploring the linguistic model of Relativism in Ayn Rand's "The Anthem". The novel is set in an unspecified time in the future where freedom and individual rights have been obliterated and the usage of the word "I" is forbidden. This dystopian world is mostly built upon linguistic manipulation and the application of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is very important for an overall complete understanding of the characters.

**Keywords:** *linguistic relativity, objectivism, dystopian fiction, cognitive linguistics, American literature*

### **Introduction**

Dystopian fiction challenges the reader in several senses. It is very thought-provoking and stimulating demanding a great level of concentration, since it aims at recognising reality from the point of view of a distant future time. Language in general and linguistic manipulation in particular, give an important contribution in the projection of the reader's thought and mental reality construction. The present work aims at analysing how language is implicated in and works in the process of reality construction. The theory

of linguistic relativity, also known as linguistic determinism, will work as the framework of the analysis of Ayn Rand's dystopian novel "The Anthem". Rand's choice of language also reflects her objectivist ideas, which are another main issue treated in this paper.

### **The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**

The linguistic relativity principle (also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) conveys the idea that cognition is manipulated by language. Thus, they suggest that the concepts and cultural categories inherent in different languages affect the perception and thought of the people speaking these languages and this results in a behaviour that differs from that of speakers of other languages. According to Roger Brown, language can both limit and determine thought. The idea derives from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is based on the work of German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, who considered language as the main expression of a nation's spirit. (Brown, 1967) This theory, also worked as the basis for the Sapir and Whorf study. Whorf, especially, has since been the primary proponent of the principle of linguistic relativity. He declares that: The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf, 1956) In its most extreme version 'the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' can be described as consisting of two associated principles. According to the first, linguistic determinism, our thinking is determined by language. According to the second, linguistic relativity, people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently.

### **The philosophy of objectivism**

Objectivism is a philosophy developed by Ayn Rand herself. It prevails all of her novels and she has also lectured and written about it to a great extent. She identifies five pillars that make up the concepts of this philosophy. The

first is metaphysics, which refers to any events where there is no human intervention. Thus, it includes everything that happens out of the will of human beings. According to Rand, success lies in the identification of the codes of nature in order to dominate it. The second component of objectivism is epistemology or the methodology of attaining knowledge in order to change the metaphysically given. It also explains how humans can control nature and according to Rand, this can be achieved only through knowledge and reason because: reason improves its knowledge level from perceptual level that animals also have to conceptual level that peculiar to him by integrating the perceived material to abstracts and concepts". (Rand, 1984) The third point of the philosophy for Rand is ethics. Ethics is the set of values which leads to choices. She defines it as: "the system by what humankind can decide what is true and what is wrong; what is good and what is bad". (Rand, 1984) It is interesting to notice that Rand believes that there is no controversy between reason and ethics because for her ethics is rational. The fourth point of objectivism is politics, particularly, political authority. Rand believes in capitalism, which she considers as the basis of individual rights. In her view, every political authority, or government should secure and protect the people's rights. The fifth and final view of this philosophy is art, or as Rand states it "the recreation of reality in accordance with the artist's metaphysical value judgments". (Rand, 1984)

### **An analysis of "Anthem"**

Like most dystopian fictions, *Anthem* presents a society in which a central authority attempts to impose its views upon subjects through linguistic determinism. The latter has fulfilled its aims as far as possible. The novel is set in a distant future, where anyone caught using individual pronouns was put to death. That is why they are completely absent from the text. This leads the depressingly named protagonist, Equality 7-2521, to see himself as cursed as he is able to think for himself, a characteristic viewed as unspeakably heretical in the society where absolute submission to the collective bans any kind of individuality. Here we can witness one of Rand objectivist ideas, the one connected with her trust in individual rights and the power of the individual. Her work reflects her belief that any collectivist society fundamentally relies upon coercion, to the point where such coercion is undoubtedly true that things can exist without being named or recognised. However, in the *Anthem*, the issue is more abstract and complicated since it does not involve physical realities only.

According to Rand, ideas do not exist if there are no words to express them. This statement completely mirrors the Sapir- Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity. This is the struggle of the protagonist, Equality 7-2521, who later on in the text names himself Prometheus. He has recognised the notion of individualism and is trying to shed light on it. The woman he loves, named by him Gaea, has also realised this, as illustrated by her speech while trying to express her individual feelings:

*"We love you." But they frowned and shook their head and looked at us helplessly. "No," they whispered, "that is not what we wished to say." They were silent, then they spoke slowly, and their words were halting, like the words of a child learning to speak for the first time: "We are one... alone... and only... and we love you who are one... alone... and only." (Rand, Anthem, 1966)*

She is clearly searching for the so called "Unmentionable Word", the "I". Considering this fact, we can come to the conclusion that linguistic determinism has been fully implemented but has only partially fulfilled its mission as both the main protagonists have come to realise the existence of the concept. This means that they have been able to find and identify the epistemological code and have dominated the metaphysical aspect of the phenomenon.

As far as ethics is concerned, Rand seems to reject the famous ideas of Plato and tends to lean towards the moral ideas of Aristotle. She even negatively mirrors some principles discussed by Plato in *The Republic*. (Long, 2012) For instance, the deterministic prohibition of the word 'I' is a natural progression from Plato's proposal that all citizens of his utopian republic should say 'mine'. The rejection of Plato's principle leads Long to the belief that she supports Aristotle's proposition that any attempt to "give a community the same degree of unity as a single individual is doomed to disaster". (Long, 2012) Moreover, *The Republic* presents many ideas implemented by the Communist leadership in Russia, Rand's country of origin, so the linguistic determinism described in the *Anthem* is an analogy with the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union. Just like in the novel, the leading ideology of the USSR was anti- individualism.

Ambiguity and the usage of euphemisms is another example of linguistic manipulation. So, the prison where the main character is retained and tortured is named as the 'Palace of Corrective Detention'. The incredible is that he manages to escape simply by strolling out of his unlocked and unguarded cell. This suggests the conformity and obedience imposed by the linguistic determinism. His desire to discover the concept of individualism (though not the first to discover the word "I"; he recalls

having seen a man burned at the stake for having become aware of the existence of the Unmentionable Word) made him move beyond the limits imposed by the society. This plot point presents the essence of linguistic determinism to the reader: mental control so complete and inescapable that physical restraints are unneeded, even upon prisoners condemned to torture or death. However, through the protagonist's behaviour the reader can also grasp the objectivist idea that knowledge and reason can bring human cognition from the perceptual level (owned by all animals) to the conceptual one.

## Conclusions

This article is an attempt to analysing *The Anthem* based on the theories of Linguistic Relativity and Objectivism which in the novel are intertwined with one another. As far as Linguistic Relativity, the findings show that the theory is fully implemented in the text, since the society in question tends to manipulate thought through the banning of individual pronouns. The rejection of individualism and the orientation towards collectivism is a characteristic of dictatorship societies. This is also the case of the fictionalised setting of the Anthem. However, this implementation tends not to be successful since there are characters that realise the concept of individualism and look for the words to express it. The failure of the concept of Linguistic Relativity in this particular text, is due to Rand's believe and application of the philosophy of Objectivism. Objectivism is based on the power of the individual and relies on knowledge and reason over the metaphysical. The characters of Equality 7-2521 and Gaea challenge the forces that go beyond the control of human beings and identify the epistemological code that leads to their existential discovery.

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