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# THE LINGUISTIC IMAGE OF THE WORLD

Language is used for more than just communication – it is a tool for interpreting the world around us.

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We all experience the world primarily through our senses. We draw upon our capacity for sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch to create mental images of the reality around us. We should bear in mind, though, that there are other, less direct ways of understanding phenomena taking place in the world. The most fundamental of these is the language we use (primarily speech, secondarily writing). This is because language is an innate model of human communication and therefore the most important source for developing conceptualizations – our mental images of all phenomena, relations, categories, and objects, not only in the real world, but also in any imaginary or invented one. The words we use (the building blocks of sentences and texts) convey the content that they do (their meaning) by referring to concepts that exist in our minds (or that emerge there “on the fly”). Central to this approach, therefore, is addressing the notion of meaning – attempting to answer the questions of how people conceptualize the world, how they understand it (how they create images of the world in their minds), and what they think or mean when they use a specific word.

## Perception

Once seen solely as an abstract system of signs used to convey information, language is now treated by contemporary linguistics as part of the mind (cognitive linguistics) and as a subsystem of culture (cultural linguistics). This is because language encapsulates the whole system of concepts and cultural patterns that are associated with a specific community and reflect its culture, experiences, achievements, values, and traditions. Therefore, language is used not only to communicate – it is primarily a tool for interpreting reality that, in a certain (non-deterministic) way, imposes and defines an image of the world, reinforcing certain social values and specific forms of human contacts. Moreover, language, the system of mental concepts (the human mind), and the cultural conditions surrounding humans inform one another, constantly engaging in various complex interactions.

Therefore, this concept of the “linguistic image of the world” (also known as the “linguistic worldview” or “linguistic picture of the world”) is a crucially important, perhaps even the most important category in ethnolinguistics. Definitions of this concept may vary. However, there is no doubt that the linguistic image of the world is a summary and compilation of everyday human experiences and the meanings, norms, values, perceptions, and attitudes towards reality – both the material reality and the spiritual or mental reality – adopted and accepted by a given community. What all existing definitions of the linguistic



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image of the world have in common is the general assumption that language is a cultural filter through which a given community perceives, categorizes, and evaluates the world. The linguistic image of the world can therefore be seen as “storehouse” of collective experiences, a linguistic repository of knowledge about humans and culture.

In simple terms, the linguistic image of the world is a supra-individual (social) interpretation of reality that exists in the form of a structure of various concepts in the mind and is expressed at various levels of language. Although each of us may define a specific word (give it meaning) in slightly different way, it must be stressed strongly that the linguistic image of the world comprises the most widespread and prototypical understanding, the one that is most strongly established in social awareness. For example, the linguistic image of a *cat* (the main attributes of meaning ascribed to this animal) will be slightly different for different people. A farmer who cultivates crops will likely see the efficient extermination of rodents as the one of the main attributes of a cat. A resident of a large city, in turn, will see it more as a cuddly animal and favorite family pet (hunting of rodents being less of a relevant feature). Finally, a zoologist will see a cat primarily as a predatory mammal. Therefore, we can see that the image of a cat established in language may include various elements (semantic attributes), but we should stress again that the linguistic image of the world comprises the most widespread meanings and therefore the socially established ones. The linguistic representation of a given concept (such as a cat) becomes a stable part of the linguistic image of the world, if the concept being verbalized (together with its typical, most frequent semantic attributes) becomes universally recognizable and shared by many speakers of a specific language.

## Interpretation

We can therefore see clearly that the linguistic image of the world is a colloquial interpretation of reality, viewed from the commonsense philosophical perspective of average language users, reflecting the mentality of such users and corresponding to their points of view and their needs. Hence, this perspec-

tive is always strongly anthropocentric and ethnocentric. It must be noted, though, that such colloquial, commonsensical rationality is a necessary (basic) foundation of the linguistic image of the world, yet not the only one. This image can be expanded and modified by various other types of rationality, above all by scientific and creative (artistic) rationality. An important role here is also played by the sociocultural contexts in which specific language users function (as exemplified above by the potential conceptualization of a cat by a farmer, a city inhabitant, and a zoologist). Such contexts also impact strongly on the understanding of reality, and by the same token on images of the world as expressed in language, via words and sentences. Therefore, the elements that make up the linguistic image of the world vary not only within various social communities, but also within ethnic groups – nations. Different societies have different norms, cultural patterns, and ways of thinking, acting, and even feeling (also those reflected in language). Some words play special roles in a given culture: they name specific concepts and therefore speak volumes about a given ethnic group because they capture not only its attitude towards tradition, but also its national “self-identification” by showing the phenomena, objects, and behaviors that are crucially important in the understanding of the world for a given society. In the Polish language, for example, these may include both solemn words,



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such as *Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna* (God, Honor, Country), and ordinary ones, such as *bigos* (hunter's stew), *pierogi* (dumplings), and *kotlet schabowy* (breaded pork cutlet).

Consequently, the linguistic image of the world is the firmly established (if not to say fossilized) image of the world in a specific language, one that is historically motivated and legitimized, supra-individual, universal, standardized, and based on shared cultural foundations and colloquial rationality. Here, however, we might ask a certain question. Since the linguistic image of the world is a fundamental cognitive-linguistic lattice, a sort of linguistic-cultural matrix, can we actually talk about variants of the linguistic image of the world, its peculiar concretizations, textual materializations? The answer is: yes, of course. From the perspective of semantics (the scientific study of meaning), the linguistic image of the world can be treated as an overarching, fundamental concept with the widest possible scope. It could be described as comprising the following variants as subordinate categories: discursive images, media images, and textual images of the world. However, I would like to stress that discursive, media, and textual images of the world must not be treated as *opposites* of the linguistic image. Rather, these variants are interrelated and together comprise a system in which they merge, as well as motivate and legitimize one another.

### Interrelated variants

A *discursive* image of the world is a particularization of the linguistic image, its concretization at a given point in time – always made from certain points of view, mainly ideological (worldview-related). This is because discourses are social systems of knowledge, thinking, and speaking. Various subjects speak out in these concrete discourses as forms of social debate, representing convergent or divergent interests and



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Further reading:

Bartmiński J.,  
*Aspects of Cognitive  
 Ethnolinguistics*,  
 trans. A. Glaz, 2009.



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perspectives, and by the same token systems of values. Discourses are the very spaces where points of view become polarized, which impacts directly on the process of understanding reality, that is to say, of creating discursive images expressed in language.

A *media* image of the world is another variant of the linguistic image. It is an actualization of the linguistic image of the world, which functions as a key attribute of the media and the messages they convey. Since it is difficult to completely comprehend today's cultural reality, the media have emerged as the primary means of explaining the complex phenomena taking place in the world. This is because all media construct perceptions of reality, create its images and have a large (perhaps even the largest) impact on social awareness, organize public opinions and cultural and social memory, and evaluate the phenomena taking place in the world – generally speaking, they wield an enormous amount of influence over the system of attitudes and beliefs of participants in modern-day culture.

In turn, a *textual* image of the world exists in a specific text and is therefore the most concrete and individual actualization of the universal, generalized linguistic image of the world. It is primarily an individualized, inventive, and creative (often artistic) concretization and modification of the components of the linguistic image of the world. It is an innovative, formal or semantic transformation of language that serves to create new concepts or semantically reinterpret existing ones. Importantly, however, all creative uses of language (textual images of the world) must be based on the general language – and thus on the general linguistic image of the world. Otherwise such texts would be incomprehensible to or rejected by a wide audience. In this way, each textual image of the world refers to an overarching conceptual and verbal organization, namely the linguistic image of the world, just as the linguistic image of the world becomes concretized in individual texts (individual textual images of the world). ■