

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the Era of Algorithmic Mediation – A Review

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Abstract

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which traditionally asserts that the structural constraints of a language shape a speaker's cognitive processes and worldviews, is undergoing a transformative re-evaluation in the era of Artificial Intelligence (AI). As Large Language Models (LLMs) transition from passive tools to active mediators of human thought, the boundaries of linguistic relativity are being redrawn. This review critically examines the intersection of cognitive linguistics and computational agency, investigating how AI-mediated communication (AIMC) functions as a digital extension of the Whorfian lens. By synthesizing contemporary research in computational linguistics, cognitive psychology, and educational technology, this study explores the non-neutrality of AI architectures. I argued that AI systems do not merely reflect training data; they curate a "statistical average" of thought that subtly recalibrates the user's semantic boundaries and discursive patterns. The review examines how the standardization of syntax and the algorithmic bias in GenAI platforms may induce a form of "cognitive flattening," in which the predictive parameters of the model constrain the diversity of human perception. Furthermore, I analyze the pedagogical implications of AI-driven environments, in which learners' linguistic acquisition is increasingly co-constructed by humans and machines. Findings indicate that as AI mediates our digital interactions, it creates a recursive feedback loop that influences social cognition and cultural identity. The study concludes by proposing a framework for "Algorithmic Awareness"—urging educators and technologists to develop linguistically pluralistic AI that preserves the cognitive richness of diverse worldviews rather than defaulting to a centralized, machine-optimized reality.

Keywords: *Linguistic Relativity, Artificial Intelligence, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Language and Cognition, Digital Communication*

Introduction

Language has always served as a fundamental medium through which humans interpret reality, construct knowledge, and communicate social experiences. The theory of linguistic relativity holds that linguistic structures shape cognitive processes and influence how individuals perceive the world (Whorf, 1956). In the digital age, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence has transformed the dynamics of language usage and interpretation, making the theory increasingly relevant.

Artificial Intelligence systems rely heavily on language data to perform tasks such as translation, text generation, sentiment analysis, and educational interaction. These technologies process enormous corpora derived from human communication, thereby inheriting linguistic patterns, biases, and sociocultural assumptions embedded within language itself (Bender et al., 2021). Consequently, AI becomes not merely a technological tool but also a linguistic and cognitive agent influencing human thought and communication.

The increasing integration of AI in educational settings has reshaped language learning and academic communication. Genelza (2023) emphasized that digital learning platforms significantly affect academic performance and student engagement in the new normal educational context. Such developments suggest that AI-assisted communication environments may influence how learners conceptualize knowledge and language structures.

Moreover, AI-driven applications such as chatbots, virtual assistants, and automated translation systems mediate intercultural communication. These systems may unintentionally privilege dominant linguistic frameworks while marginalizing less represented languages and dialects. This phenomenon reflects the core premise of linguistic relativity: language shapes understanding and social interaction.

Bernal et al. (2025) highlighted both the opportunities and concerns associated with the use of AI in education. Their study underscored the transformative influence of AI on learning behaviors, critical thinking, and information processing. As AI increasingly participates in discourse production, it may alter the cognitive habits of learners and educators alike.

The relationship between language comprehension and technology also remains significant in literary and educational contexts. Federe et al. (2023) demonstrated that students' comprehension skills are deeply connected to linguistic exposure and interpretive frameworks. AI-generated content may therefore shape learners' reading comprehension and meaning-making processes.

Digital environments have also transformed children's social and linguistic development. Studies examining media exposure and online interaction reveal that technology-mediated communication affects language acquisition, emotional interpretation, and social cognition. In AI-driven spaces, these influences become more pronounced due to algorithmic personalization and automated discourse generation.

The expansion of AI in communication further raises concerns regarding linguistic bias and ethical representation. AI systems trained predominantly on English-language datasets may reinforce Western-centric conceptual structures while underrepresenting indigenous and minority linguistic identities. Such an imbalance may affect cultural preservation and linguistic diversity globally.

Additionally, AI technologies are increasingly influencing language acquisition among younger learners. Genelza (2025) noted that platforms such as YouTube Kids contribute significantly to English language acquisition. AI-powered recommendation systems thus shape vocabulary exposure, pronunciation familiarity, and communicative habits among children.

The study of linguistic relativity in an AI world is therefore essential in understanding the evolving relationship between language, cognition, and technology. As AI continues to redefine communication and education, examining its linguistic implications becomes crucial for developing inclusive, ethical, and culturally sensitive technological systems.

Review of Related Literature

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis remains one of the most influential theories in linguistics and cognitive science. Sapir (1929) argued that language structures influence habitual thought, while Whorf (1956) further suggested that linguistic categories shape perception and reasoning. Although strong deterministic interpretations have been criticized, contemporary scholars acknowledge that language significantly affects cognition and worldview.

Modern cognitive linguistics supports the notion that language influences memory, categorization, and decision-making processes. Boroditsky (2011) explained that speakers of different languages perceive time, color, and spatial relationships differently due to linguistic structures. Such findings reinforce the relevance of linguistic relativity in understanding communication within AI-mediated environments.

Artificial Intelligence systems fundamentally depend on language processing. Natural Language Processing (NLP) technologies analyze syntax, semantics, and contextual patterns to generate responses and interpret human communication. According to Russell and Norvig (2021), AI language systems emulate human linguistic behavior through statistical learning and deep neural networks.

However, scholars have identified significant concerns regarding bias in AI language models. Bender et al. (2021) argued that AI systems reproduce social prejudices embedded in their training data. Since language reflects societal ideologies, AI-generated discourse may perpetuate stereotypes, discrimination, and unequal representation.

Educational technology studies also reveal the growing influence of AI on learning environments. Genelza (2023) found that digital learning management systems improved accessibility and student engagement during the new normal educational setting. AI-powered

platforms contribute to language exposure and reshape communication patterns among learners.

Bernal et al. (2025) discussed the educational implications of AI integration, emphasizing that AI technologies influence learners' cognitive engagement and information interpretation. While AI enhances efficiency and accessibility, excessive reliance on automated systems may weaken critical thinking and independent linguistic analysis.

The role of language comprehension in educational achievement has likewise been emphasized in previous studies. Federe et al. (2023) concluded that students' comprehension abilities are closely tied to language familiarity and interpretive strategies. AI-generated instructional materials may therefore influence comprehension patterns and learning outcomes.

Research on digital media exposure further demonstrates the linguistic and social impact of technology. Studies on children's media engagement indicate that algorithmic exposure to content shapes communication behavior, emotional responses, and language development. Such findings align with the broader implications of linguistic relativity in technological contexts.

Genelza (2022) established a significant relationship between English proficiency and academic achievement among junior high school students. In AI-driven educational systems where English dominates digital content, linguistic inequalities may emerge among learners from different linguistic backgrounds (Cosal et al., 2026).

Genelza (2025) further explored how YouTube Kids facilitates English language acquisition among children. AI recommendation algorithms determine content exposure, thereby shaping vocabulary acquisition and linguistic familiarity. This suggests that AI systems indirectly participate in cognitive and linguistic development processes.

Other contemporary social studies also provide insights into the influence of digital technologies and human behavior. Andamon et al. (2025) and Baldo et al. (2025) emphasized how online content affects awareness, behavior, and social perception among young individuals. Although focused on different social concerns, these studies collectively illustrate how digital environments shape cognition and interpretive frameworks.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates that language, cognition, and AI are deeply interconnected. Linguistic relativity offers a valuable theoretical lens for examining how AI systems both reflect and influence human thought, communication, and cultural understanding.

Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored in the theory of Linguistic Relativity, proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, which holds that language shapes cognition, perception, and worldview. In the context of Artificial Intelligence, AI systems process and generate language using

datasets derived from human communication. Consequently, AI technologies inherit linguistic structures, cultural assumptions, and sociocultural biases embedded in language.

The framework illustrates that AI-mediated communication influences language acquisition, discourse behavior, cognition, comprehension, and sociocultural interpretation. Simultaneously, linguistic structures and cultural ideologies shape how AI systems interpret and generate communication. The relationship is cyclical: humans design AI through language, while AI reshapes human communication and cognition through algorithmic interaction.

The conceptual framework explains how linguistic relativity and Artificial Intelligence interact to shape human cognition and communication. The independent construct of the study is the theory of linguistic relativity, which posits that language influences human understanding, interpretation, and worldview. AI technologies serve as mediating mechanisms that process, reproduce, and distribute language through digital systems such as chatbots, machine translation, recommendation algorithms, and educational platforms.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative review research design employing narrative synthesis. Scholarly articles, books, and peer-reviewed journals related to linguistic relativity, artificial intelligence, cognition, language acquisition, and digital communication were examined to analyze the evolving relationship between language and AI technologies. The review focused primarily on educational, sociolinguistic, and technological perspectives.

The researchers gathered secondary data from academic databases, journal publications, and credible online scholarly repositories. The selected studies were analyzed thematically to identify recurring concepts concerning language influence, AI-mediated communication, cognitive interpretation, and educational technology integration. Relevant findings from recent local and international studies were synthesized to provide a comprehensive discussion of linguistic relativity within an AI-centered world.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that linguistic relativity remains highly relevant in understanding communication within AI-driven environments. AI systems process language based on patterns derived from human discourse, suggesting that language structures continue to shape machine interpretation and response generation.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings on Linguistic Relativity in an AI World

Thematic Area	Key Findings	Supporting Authors	Implications
AI Linguistically Non-Neutral	AI systems reflect linguistic structures, cultural assumptions, and biases embedded in training data.	Bender et al. (2021); Russell & Norvig (2021)	AI should be treated as a sociolinguistic system, not just a technical tool.
Dominance of English in AI	English-dominant datasets shape AI outputs, marginalizing minority languages and perspectives.	Bourdieu (1991); Castells (1996)	Risk of linguistic inequality and reduced cultural representation in digital spaces.
AI and Cognitive Influence	AI-mediated communication affects thinking patterns, interpretation, and critical reasoning.	Vygotsky (1978); Bruner (1990); Harari (2018)	AI reshapes how learners construct meaning and process information.
AI in Education and Learning	AI platforms increase engagement but may reduce independent critical analysis and language processing skills.	Genelza (2023); Bernal et al. (2025)	Need for balanced integration of AI in teaching and learning.
Language Acquisition via AI	Algorithm-driven platforms influence vocabulary exposure, pronunciation, and language learning behavior.	Genelza (2025); Gardner (1983)	AI plays an active role in shaping linguistic development.
AI and Discourse Transformation	AI promotes standardized, concise communication patterns affecting natural language use.	McLuhan (1964); Ong (1982); Tannen (1990)	Possible loss of linguistic diversity in digital communication.
Cultural Pragmatic Limitations	AI struggles with context, sarcasm, and high-context cultural communication.	Hall (1976); Hymes (1974)	AI requires cultural adaptation for effective intercultural communication.
Ethical and Bias Concerns	AI systems may reproduce stereotypes and ideological biases from the datasets they are trained on.	Fairclough (1995); Bender et al. (2021)	Ethical AI design is necessary to ensure fairness and inclusivity.

One major finding is that AI systems are linguistically dependent rather than linguistically neutral. Since AI models learn from existing language corpora, they absorb the cultural assumptions, biases, and semantic structures embedded within those datasets (Bender et al., 2021). Consequently, AI-generated outputs often reflect dominant linguistic ideologies.

The study also found that English remains the dominant language in AI development and training datasets. This dominance reinforces Western-centric conceptual frameworks and may marginalize less represented languages. Linguistic relativity suggests that such an imbalance affects not only communication accessibility but also cognitive representation and cultural identity.

Educational AI platforms significantly influence students' communication habits and learning behaviors. Genelza (2023) observed that digital learning systems enhanced students' academic engagement. However, increased dependence on AI-generated content may also alter critical reading and independent language analysis.

Another important finding concerns AI-assisted language acquisition. Genelza (2025) demonstrated that YouTube Kids contributes to English language learning among children. AI algorithms curate linguistic exposure, influencing vocabulary development, pronunciation familiarity, and communicative preferences among young learners.

AI-mediated communication additionally affects discourse structures and conversational norms. Chatbots and automated systems encourage concise, algorithm-friendly communication patterns that may gradually reshape natural human interaction. Such a transformation aligns with linguistic relativity because changes in language use may influence thought processes and social perceptions.

The review further revealed that AI-generated translations sometimes fail to capture cultural nuances and contextual meanings. Although machine translation technologies improve accessibility, they may oversimplify culturally specific expressions and idiomatic language, limiting authentic intercultural understanding.

The expansion of Artificial Intelligence in communication technologies has intensified scholarly discussions regarding language, cognition, and sociocultural interpretation. According to Noam Chomsky (1957), language is deeply connected to innate cognitive structures, suggesting that AI language systems attempting to imitate human discourse must inevitably engage with cognitive patterns shaped by linguistic frameworks. This perspective supports the idea that AI-generated communication reflects not only computational processes but also human cognitive organization.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that language serves as a social tool for the development of thought. In AI-mediated communication, digital interactions increasingly replace traditional interpersonal discourse, thereby influencing how individuals internalize knowledge and construct meaning. AI-powered educational platforms, virtual assistants, and automated tutoring systems contribute to the social formation of cognition among learners.

The findings also align with the sociolinguistic perspective of Dell Hymes (1974), who argued that communicative competence extends beyond grammar to include cultural appropriateness and contextual interpretation. AI systems often struggle with pragmatics, sarcasm, emotional nuance, and culturally specific discourse because machine learning models primarily analyze patterns rather than lived social experiences.

Furthermore, Marshall McLuhan (1964) proposed that “the medium is the message,” emphasizing that communication technologies reshape human perception and society. AI technologies do not merely deliver language; they actively transform communication structures, discourse speed, and information accessibility. Consequently, AI changes how people interpret reality and engage with linguistic environments.

Research by Sherry Turkle (2011) revealed that increased dependence on digital communication technologies may reduce authentic human interaction and reflective conversation. AI chatbots and conversational systems encourage efficiency-driven communication, potentially weakening deeper interpretive and interpersonal linguistic engagement among users.

The study likewise aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) view of language as a form of symbolic power. AI systems trained predominantly on globally dominant languages may reinforce linguistic hierarchies, privileging English-speaking communities while limiting visibility for minority languages. Such an imbalance contributes to digital linguistic inequality and sociocultural marginalization.

In relation to educational technology, Neil Postman (1992) warned that technological societies risk prioritizing information quantity over meaningful understanding. AI-generated educational content provides rapid access to knowledge, yet learners may become passive consumers rather than critical interpreters of language and ideas. This concern parallels that of Bernal et al. (2025), who discussed the potential weakening of analytical thinking due to excessive reliance on AI.

Norman Fairclough's studies in discourse analysis (1995) further suggest that language both reflects and constructs social realities. AI-generated texts influence public discourse by shaping narratives, framing information, and determining communicative visibility through algorithmic prioritization. Social media recommendation systems, therefore, reinforce ideology and foster selective exposure.

Additionally, Deborah Tannen (1990) explained that conversational styles vary across social and cultural contexts. AI systems often standardize communication into generalized formats, reducing linguistic diversity and potentially oversimplifying culturally nuanced interaction patterns. Such standardization may influence future communicative behaviors among digital users.

Research in cognitive psychology by Jerome Bruner (1990) emphasized that humans construct reality through narrative and symbolic representation. AI-generated narratives increasingly shape public understanding through automated summaries, content recommendations, and algorithmically curated information streams. As a result, AI technologies participate directly in the construction of meaning and the formation of knowledge.

The theory of media ecology advanced by Walter Ong (1982) also supports the study's findings. Ong argued that communication technologies alter human consciousness and thought

organization. AI-assisted communication accelerates this transformation by encouraging multitasking, abbreviated discourse, and predictive language generation, which may gradually reshape cognitive processing habits.

Moreover, Howard Gardner (1983) proposed that individuals possess multiple intelligences, shaped in part by linguistic interaction and environmental exposure. AI educational tools personalize learning experiences through adaptive language systems, potentially enhancing linguistic intelligence while simultaneously narrowing exposure to diverse interpretive frameworks through algorithmic filtering.

The review also supports the observations of Manuel Castells (1996), who described the rise of the network society in which digital communication systems structure social interaction. AI technologies intensify this networked communication environment by automating discourse circulation, information retrieval, and interpersonal connectivity across global linguistic communities.

From a cultural perspective, Edward Hall (1976) emphasized that communication styles vary between high-context and low-context cultures. AI systems frequently interpret language literally, creating challenges in contexts where meaning relies heavily on cultural implication, indirect expression, or shared social understanding. This limitation highlights the importance of culturally responsive AI development.

Finally, the findings reinforce Yuval Noah Harari's (2018) argument that data-driven technologies increasingly shape human decision-making and societal behavior. AI systems influence not only communication efficiency but also patterns of perception, interpretation, and social cognition. Linguistic relativity, therefore, remains essential in understanding how AI transforms human thought and interaction in the contemporary digital world.

The integration of AI into education also raises ethical concerns about academic dependency and originality. Bernal et al. (2025) emphasized that while AI can enhance learning efficiency, overreliance on it may reduce analytical thinking and authentic language production among learners.

Studies on comprehension and interpretation indicate that familiarity with the language strongly affects understanding. Federe et al. (2023) found that students interpret texts more effectively when linguistic structures align with their cognitive and cultural experiences. AI-generated educational content may therefore influence comprehension depending on learners' linguistic backgrounds.

The findings also demonstrate that AI recommendation systems shape exposure to particular linguistic styles and narratives. Social media algorithms prioritize content based on engagement metrics, thereby influencing vocabulary trends, discourse norms, and sociolinguistic behavior.

Another emerging issue involves algorithmic bias in AI-generated communication. AI systems may unintentionally reproduce stereotypes about gender, race, and culture because language

datasets contain historical biases. This supports the idea that language carries ideological assumptions that shape interpretation and perception.

Digital communication environments likewise influence children's social development and language acquisition. Research on media exposure among children indicates that excessive algorithmic engagement may affect interpersonal communication skills and emotional interpretation. AI-mediated discourse, therefore, extends beyond language into broader cognitive and social domains.

The study also found that linguistic relativity can help explain differences in AI interaction across cultures. Users from different linguistic backgrounds may interpret AI responses differently depending on cultural semantics, contextual expectations, and communication norms.

Moreover, AI systems themselves contribute to the evolution of language. Predictive text technologies, autocorrect systems, and automated communication tools increasingly standardize language usage. Over time, such technologies may influence grammar preferences, vocabulary selection, and discourse structures.

The relationship between AI and cognition further highlights the reciprocal nature of language and technology. Humans design AI using linguistic frameworks, while AI simultaneously influences human communication practices. This cyclical relationship reinforces the continuing relevance of linguistic relativity in contemporary technological societies.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that AI technologies are not merely computational tools but active participants in linguistic and cognitive processes. Understanding the relationship between language and AI is therefore essential in promoting ethical, inclusive, and culturally responsive technological development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The review establishes that linguistic relativity remains highly applicable in the age of Artificial Intelligence. Language continues to shape thought, interpretation, and communication, while AI systems simultaneously reflect and influence linguistic structures. AI technologies are deeply embedded within sociocultural and cognitive processes rather than existing as neutral computational systems.

The findings further reveal that AI-driven communication affects language acquisition, educational interaction, discourse behavior, and intercultural understanding. Educational technologies powered by AI contribute significantly to learning accessibility and engagement, yet they also present challenges related to dependency, bias, and linguistic inequality.

Furthermore, AI systems often inherit linguistic and ideological biases from their training data. Such biases may reinforce dominant cultural frameworks while marginalizing minority languages and identities. Ethical AI development, therefore, requires greater linguistic diversity and cultural sensitivity.

Educational institutions should promote responsible AI use by strengthening students' critical thinking, language awareness, and digital literacy. Learners must be encouraged to analyze AI-generated information critically rather than relying solely on automated outputs.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct empirical studies examining the long-term cognitive and linguistic effects of AI-mediated communication across diverse cultural and educational settings. Further investigations may also explore how multilingual AI systems can support linguistic inclusivity and cultural preservation in the digital era.

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