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How Main European Languages Conceptualize the Social. A Case of Linguistic Relativity

Abstract

The language of sociology, unlike that of mathematics, is not protected against the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as it may reflect some peculiarities of ethnic languages in which masters of social thought wrote their treatises. When sociologists try to identify the domain of social phenomena, they may well invoke the meanings of the counterparts the English adjective "social" has in their native languages. But do there always exist counterparts? Some historical issues (the Greek-Latin origin of *sociologie*, Weber's decision to replace *Gemeinschaftshandeln* with *soziale Handeln*) justify the claim that two attributes, known in the English speaking world as *social* and *common*, are central to sociological discourse. In this paper we discuss four patterns of co-existence of these two concepts in main European languages: (i) the Byzantine pattern (Greek and East Slavic languages) in which the social is reduced to the common (*koinós*); (ii) the Latin pattern (Latin, Romance languages and English) with *sociale* and *commune* as distinct but complementary concepts; (iii) the German pattern, turned into a theoretical distinction by Tönnies and Weber, with *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* functioning as opposite categories; (iv) the West Slavic pattern where both adjectives etymologically grow out from the common root.



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