

La Relativité linguistique dans *les Lettres d'une Péruvienne* de Madame de Graffigny

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Project Thesis (or hypothesis)

The book *les Lettres d'une Péruvienne* displays examples of the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis in the way that the principle character, Zilia, uses her own language background to critique French society, especially as she learns the language more fluently.

Background

The Sapir Whorf hypothesis is a controversial linguistic theory often divided into two camps- linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity. This analysis follows relativist argument that language is not a rigid guide, but an influence on the structure of a culture and society (Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*).

Author

Françoise de Graffigny published *les Lettres d'une Péruvienne* in 1747. Though excluded from the classical French literature canon, her writing has been rediscovered and championed as the voice of the educated and independent woman of the 18th century. De Graffigny uses Zilia to critique French society from an outside perspective and defend the position of an independent woman in French society.

Key Findings (or Conclusions)

- Zilia's home culture influences her perceptions of France when she first arrives, specifically in her description of the lack of virtue in the French.
- The *quipos*, or system of writing with knots, shows the limitations that come with trying to use one's own language to describe words in another person's language.
- For the portion of the story where Zilia did not understand French, her interpretations of French behavior were influenced by her own customs.
- As she grew to understand French, her ability to critique French society grew, and she disapproved greatly of their shallow mannerisms.
- She particularly disapproved of their attempts to convert her from her home culture and religion to Catholicism, and she critiqued their hypocrisy in writing about virtues and behaving the opposite.
- Zilia's perception of love is also informed by her culture, and while she engages in conversation with her French friends about this, she staunchly defends her perception of faithful love, even when her betrothed Prince Aza of the Inca's becomes Catholic and marries a Spanish courtier.

Sources and Acknowledgements

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