

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Does the language you speak reformat your thoughts?

(Dr Beena Rani S, Associate Professor of English Education

NSS Training College, Changanasserry, Kerala)

ABSTRACT

The debate over this issue of the relationship between thought and language still remains inconclusive. Thought is universal and independent of language. Thought and speech of a speaker of one language can clearly be expressed by a speaker of another language. The main use of language is to transfer thoughts. Language can reformat the sensibility and thoughts of another person without any physical interaction. In that way, it is nothing but a brain surgery without spilling blood. Language neither creates nor distorts conceptual life. Evidently thought precedes language which is a form of expression. There are certain limitations of languages and hence humans cannot express all that they think. Recent studies suggest that the language one speaks can counter influence the content and character of one's thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that language is basically a partial outer manifestation of thoughts. The question is whether your language affects how you think. People tend to say that whatever be the language, thoughts in your mind are the same. But the recent research on this question begs to differ. Learning to speak a different language fluently can change a person to think through a different viewpoint. Language is not the only factor affecting thought. It is a story of mutual influence and webbed relation. But even when your language influences your thoughts it germinates fresher thoughts, in that way thoughts always remain primary and fountain spring of language.

Language of thought theories

The very first language that children acquire always has deep connection to their culture and community. Thought and language have independent origins. It is around two years that thought and language combine together to produce mental thought. Mental activities are displayed in the basic structure of language; and hence the intellectual development results only internalizing language. But words by themselves do not shape the way we think. Infants have a language-independent system that facilitate thinking about objects. The concepts thus formed give meaning to the words children learn later. Our knowledge of other languages raises another set of questions. Sometimes we people are, bilingual or multi lingual. Do you think that your friend thinks differently, if he/she fluently speaks more than one language depending on which language is being spoken?

There are umpteen words that can not be translated from their original language into other languages. For instance we can take the word *saudade* that originated in the 15th century, when Portuguese sailors travelled

to Africa and Asia. Those who were left behind tried to express the emptiness and fondness they felt using the word *saudade*. This particular word in the long run was used to express many meanings like nostalgic memories, yearning, fond memories, the feeling of loss and hope. There is no word in English that could combine all the previously mentioned emotions in a single term.

English does not have a single word to express all these emotions. So what? It does not follow that the English man can't feel each of them separately or collectively. Language is a made-up thing. Thoughts and emotions are self-generated. Shortages and deficiency in language does not indicate the absence of corresponding thoughts. The same emotion can be described differently by different people at different times. This gives the impression that thoughts are primary and they had existed well before the development of language. Language can represent thoughts, not the other way around.

When we say, *I don't know what to say or how to say*, we mean that the thoughts we mention are too deep and complex to be conveyed through the medium of language. Language is not confined to oral or verbal language alone. Our body plays a crucial role in conveying messages. Each linguistic expression has associated body languages and gestures to supplement and it is hard to differentiate which causes the other. When we say words like *big, huge or large*, our body most often, acquires the body language and gestural mode of bigness. The same happens when the word *small, tiny, meagre* are uttered. *Assent, dissent, frustration* etc. have corresponding body movements and gestures which are repetitious in character.

It is interesting to note that one can't spontaneously say the word *small* with the typical body gesture associated with the delivery of the word *big* or the other way around. This underlines the fact that the thought is primary and language, both body and verbal, are conscious ventilations. Whether language corresponds to the actual thoughts is another question. When people act, their verbal and body language may have nothing to do with what they feel or think inside. Simple feigning to Machiavellian deception, human beings are able to fool fellow beings and other organisms by planned omissions and commissions. If one is able to fake and feign easily to fellow beings, the direct link between thought and language is heavily obscured. That means language involves a lot of manipulation and editing on its way to the translation of thoughts.

When we merge thought and language there are two possible issues. It can be seen that mental functions originate from the social surroundings and children use language for some time before the transition from external to internal speech takes place. Egocentric speech results when a child uses acquired language to organize and plan her/his own activities. Eventually it becomes the inner speech or pure thought.

The language of thought hypothesis (LOTH) advocates that thinking evidently is possible using mental language. *Mentalese*, the mental language resembles oral language in many respects: it contains words that can combine into sentences; the words and sentences are meaningful; and the meaning of sentences depends on the meanings of its component words and the way those words are combined. To site an example, there is a *Mentalese* word for whale that denotes whales, and another *Mentalese* word for mammal that indicates mammals. These two words can combine into a *Mentalese* sentence viz. whales are mammals, that expresses the meaning that whales are mammals.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, started their study regarding this topic in the 1940's. They wanted to find out how the language habits of people in a particular community encourage other members of the same community to describe language in a specific manner (Sapir, 1941/1964). Sapir and Whorf proposed that language determines thought. It would be of interest to note that in some languages there are many words for expressing the feeling of love. However, in English we use the word 'love' for expressing all the feelings related to love.

Language of thought theories generally fall into two categories. The first viewpoint is that the language of thought is innate, known as mentalese. The other view holds that the language of thought is not innate, but is natural "learned" languages. The innateness theory proposed by Noam Chomsky falls into this category of mentalese. Steven Pinker and Jerry Fodor also approved and advocated the theory of mentalese. Vygotsky, who was a pioneer in the field of language and thinking, believed that culture plays an important role in determining thought. The work of Whorf and Sapir, Carruthers also represent the alternative view, that our thoughts are constructed from the words and sentences of natural language.

Language and thought was studied as a connected function by Vygotsky and found out the connection between words and thought and how both could lead to expansion of knowledge. His work was unnoticed in the United States for many years. Vygotsky strongly believed that language determines thought by making use of the linguistic tools of thought and other socio-cultural experiences of the child (Vygotsky, 1934). Cognitive skills and patterns of thinking are never decided by inherent factors, but are assumed to be the products of the activities practiced in the society where the individual is brought up.

The language of thought hypothesis (LOTH) was a famous hypothesis during the late medieval period, but it was seen to have lost its importance soon. It appeared again in the twentieth century through the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, Duns Scotus and many others. William of Ockham gave the first organized treatment of mentalese in his *Summa Logicae* (c. 1323) by precisely verifying the meaning and form of various expressions.

Language of course influences the way we think, an idea known as linguistic determinism. One study showed the differences in the manner in which English and Mandarin Chinese speakers speak and think about the notion of time. English speakers showed a tendency to talk about time using words that explain changes along a horizontal dimension, such as, "the train is *running behind schedule*" or "*ahead of his times*", "*behind the times*". Though Mandarin Chinese speakers also described time using words indicating horizontal dimensions, it was common to use words associated with a vertical arrangement. They tend to describe 'past' as being "up" and the future as being "down." It is evident from these that the distinctions in language translate into differences in performance.

Yet, language does not completely determine our thoughts. Our thoughts are far too flexible for that. But habitual uses of language can influence our habit of thought and action. There are certain linguistic conventions connected with cultural values and social norms. In English there are pronouns which are used

to represent the speaker and listener of a speech in English. These pronouns cannot be dropped if used as the subject of a sentence. In the sentence, “I went to the theatre yesterday” is correct but is not accepted in standard English if the pronoun is dropped. But in languages like Japanese, pronouns can be dropped from sentences.

Many people associate their language with their identity. Language can show us what values its speakers share. For instance in Kazakh language there are a range of words for horse meat. This allows us to understand that the Kazakhs hold this food in very high regard. The existence of a great number of Russian words related to the process of drinking vodka may give us some understanding of how this is a custom valued in their society.

CONCLUSION

Thoughts, emanated as a neural discharge, is the fountain point and language which ventilated is the end result. Language undergoes a plethora of cerebral manipulations en route to its ultimate ventilation. Yet, language counter influences the way that we think. We always have to create new ways to represent our thoughts as well as to create new concepts based on those already existing. We are able to think of the same concept in different languages and translate the same idea in any language existing in our world. Though language is an outer manifestation of thoughts, according to recent studies, there is a circular relationship between language and thoughts. It is a story of mutual influence. But even when your language influences your thoughts it creates new thoughts, in that way thoughts always remain primary and source of spark.

Reference

1. <https://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/academic/article/760671/Does-Language-Drive-or-Reflect-Thought>
2. [https://www.researchgate.net/post/Thought comes before language or thought and language are interdependent processes](https://www.researchgate.net/post/Thought+comes+before+language+or+thought+and+language+are+interdependent+processes)
3. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/language-thought/>
4. <https://srwyatt.tripod.com/languagethought.htm>
5. <https://medium.com/@sheamatthewfisher/language-and-thought-e57279b8fcbc>
6. Deutscher, G. (2010). “Does Your Language Shape How You Think?” *New York Times*.
7. Gentner, D., Goldin-Meadow, S. (2003). “Whither Whorf.” *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.