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LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Annotation: Ways to develop thought, comparing English language with other languages, equivalent of intransitive words.

Keywords: propositional thought, subtract, multiply, divide, grammatical structure, grammatical categories.

Аннотация: Способы развития мысли, сравнение английского языка с другими языками, эквивалент непереходных слов.

Ключевые слова: пропозициональная мысль, вычитание, умножение, деление, грамматическая структура, грамматические категории.

Since language... invariably possesses exclusively an ideational existence in the heads and spirits of men, never a material one even when engraved on stone or bronze and since the force of the languages which are not any longer spoken rests predominantly upon the strength of our own competency to revivify them, to the extent in which we can still perceive them, in the same path there can never be a moment of accurate standstill in language, just as little as in the ceaselessly flaming thought of men. By nature, it is an ongoing process of development under the leverage of the actual intellectual force of the speaker. Two periods which must be unquestionably discerned arise of course in this process: the one in which the sound-creating force of the language is still in growth and living activity; the other in which an ostensible standstill takes place after integral formation of at least the external form of language and then a seeable descent of that imaginative, sensual force follows.

But even from the period of decline fresh principles of life and new triumphant reformations of language can evolve...

The exact fact that language can be used to express our thoughts gives rise to some intriguing questions. How are language and thought related? Can we think without language? Is our thinking molded by the structure of our language? These are very challenging questions, questions that we cannot hope to respond authoritatively without a much better comprehending of human psychological structure than we momentarily have. Conflicting opinions have been amended. The ensuing observance convey no warranty that all linguists or psychologists would concur with them.

If we delineate thought as cognizant mental activity, we can observe primarily that thought or at least assured kinds of thought, can take place absolutely self-reliantly of language. The simplest illustration is that of music. We have all had the experience of being absorbed in listening to an instrumental work or mentally running through a familiar tune. Language is simply not included. The existence of music with lyrics is by all means beside the point. Musical composition is in no way dependent on language, so far as the actual process of creation is implicated and the same would seem to be accurate of multifarious other forms of creative or problem-solving activity. The sculptor at work is in no vital sense guided by language. He may, certainly, receive much of his interaction through language, talk about his creations and even entertain himself with an internal verbal soliloquy as he chips away with hammer and chisel. But such verbalization does not appear to be instrumental in his imaginative activity. There might be myriads of stretches of time during which he is so occupied conceptualizing forms and techniques that words vanish entirely from his thoughts. Much the same is true of a person engrossed in solving a jigsaw puzzle. Suddenly perceiving that two independently completed sections belong together is in no way a linguistic accomplishment, although one

may subsequently exclaim “Aha! This must go over here!” It is thus hard to grasp why some people have maintained that thought without language is impossible. They have probably been construing thought quite narrowly to mean something like propositional thought. If thought is construed too narrowly, the claim becomes a tautology; it is not very informative to learn that thought which involves language is impossible without language.

A further argument for the existence of thought without language is the common experience of wishing to express some idea but being unable to find a satisfactory way to put it into words. If thought were impossible without language, this problem would never arise.

Nevertheless, much of our thought clearly does involve language, some of it in an essential way. The problem of assessing the influence of language on thought, however, deserves to be treated well with great caution. It is all too easy to lament the tyranny of language and to claim that the world view of a person or community is shaped by the language used. Certainly people have sometimes been misled by a blind reliance on words, but we can recognize such cases and set the record straight, if language were all that tyrannical, we would be unable to perceive that it sometimes leads us into error when we are not being vigilant. Moreover, we must entertain the possibility that much of what passes for linguistically conditioned thought is not molded by language at all, there may be a more general human cognitive capacity at play, for which language merely serves as a medium, just as music serves as a medium for the composer’s creative powers.

Scholars generally agree that words greatly facilitate certain kinds of thinking by serving as counters or symbols that can easily be manipulated. We all have a fairly good idea of what arithmetic is; we know how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. We also know the word arithmetic, which serves as a label for this conceptual complex. When we think about arithmetic how it fits into the

rest of mathematics, how it is taught in our schools, whether our children are good at it, whether we like it, how hard it is, we can use the word arithmetic as a symbol in our thought processes. It is much easier to manipulate the word arithmetic in our thoughts than to operate with the entire conceptual complex that this word symbolizes. The use of verbal symbols thus makes thought easier in many cases. One might even argue that some kinds of thinking would be impossible without the existence of these convenient counters to operate with.

What is relation between our thought processes and the structure of our language? Is language a tyrannical master, relentlessly forcing our thinking to follow certain well-worth paths, blinding us to all other possibilities? Is our conception of the world crucially conditioned by the language we speak, as some people have claimed?

These questions can be posed with respect both to words and to grammatical structures.

We have seen that a word can be helpful in forming, retaining or operating with the concept it designates. We have also seen that no two languages match precisely in the way in which they break up conceptual space and assign the pieces to words as meanings; recall that English distinguishes between green and blue while other languages use a single word to designate this entire range of the spectrum and that the Eskimos use a number of words to designate different kinds of snow where English has the single word snow. Differences like this extend throughout the vocabulary and will be found no matter what two languages are compared. Our question, then, is to what extent these differences in the linguistic categorization of experience are responsible for corresponding differences in thought.

Our thinking is conditioned by the linguistic categorization of experience in that it is easier to operate with concepts for which no single term is available. The way in which one's language breaks up conceptual space thus

has at least a minimal effect on thought. But there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that this influence is in any significant way a tyrannical or even a powerful one. We are perfectly capable of forming and mentally manipulating concepts for which no word is available. We can make up imaginary entities at will and if we so choose, proceed to name them. As an illustration, imagine a unicorn with a flower growing out of each nostril. No word exists for such an entity, but it is easy to think about it nevertheless. We could dream up a name for it, but we do not have to.

What about the grammatical structures of a language? Do they force our thinking into certain customary grooves to the exclusion of other possibilities? Do they determine our way of viewing the world, as many scholars have maintained?

Overtly, languages sometimes display very striking differences in grammatical structure. For example, what we express in English with adjectives is expressed in some other languages with the equivalent of intransitive verbs. The word for word translation of the sentence meaning, "The tree is tall" would thus be The tree tall. To say that the river is deep, one would say literally The river deep. Much more commonly, languages differ in the grammatical categories that are obligatorily represented in sentences. One such category is gender. In French, for instance, every noun is classified as either masculine or feminine and in the singular the article meaning "the" appears as "le" if its noun is masculine but as "la" if its noun is feminine.

Grandiose assumptions about one's world view being determined by the structure of one's language have never been shown to be anchored in fact. There is absolutely no reason to believe that the grammatical structure of our language holds our thoughts in a tyrannical, vise-like grip.

It is not really surprising that no such evidence has been found. The claims are based on really very superficial aspects of linguistic structure. If

French nouns are divided into two gender classes while English nouns are not, so what? No valid psychological conclusions follow from this arbitrary, rather uninteresting grammatical fact. If, in your native language, you were brought up to say the equivalent of the flower reds, the river deeps, it would not follow that you lived in an especially exciting mental world where colors were actions on the part of objects, where trees continually participated in the activity of tallness, where rivers stretched themselves vertically while flowing horizontally. These ways of expressing yourself, being customary, would not strike you as poetic, as they strike a speaker of English. You would live in the same world you live in now.

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