

“Men imagine that their minds have the command of language, but it often happens that language rules over minds.” Francis Bacon. Discuss the extent to which language directs or even controls the way we think. Refer to at least one of the theories about the link between language and thought, and consider the issues raised by our discussion of translation and different languages.”

*“What do you read, my lord?” Polonius asked. And with all the method that was in his madness Hamlet scornfully replied, “Words, words, words.”*

Though this was in the beginning of the seventeenth century, till today realists like the eponymous Shakespearean character, Hamlet, continue to speak of *words* in the same condescending stress. Even though its concept is often dismissed as a simple matter, the fact is that the intricacies concerning the magic of words and how they affect us are something that linguists have been trying to decipher for decades<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly, human behaviour and personality are primarily formed by the nature of words, otherwise known as language. Ever since the outmost antiquity, every sort of the human community uses some form of language, same or different. Whether we are aware of it or not, the art of language plays a major role in our daily survival and existence. Aldous Huxley writes in an article called ‘Words and Their Meanings’ (1940) that *“Without language, behaviour is nonhuman”*. Interestingly enough, this is true. Without language, how would man have been able to develop skill, knowledge and wisdom from others, including those of past generations? Look at the evidence: Gorillas, for example. There may be some true intellectual geniuses among gorillas, but because they have no conceptual form of language, their thoughts and attainment cannot be traced. Thus, we tend to shelve them as simian beasts of a lesser intelligence.

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<sup>1</sup> Huxley, Aldous, *Words and their Meanings* (Ward Ritchie Press, 1940).

A man named Ludwig Wittgenstein once said “*If we spoke a different language, we’d perceive a different world*”. Through this arises many questions; are our thoughts directly related to particular words and symbols called language? Can language affect or even control the way we think? Maybe even what we know? The fact is yes – language has power beyond what most of us imagine. The question is now, to what *extent*?

In the most basic definition, language could be described as a means of communication by labelling thoughts with words. The concept of thoughts, however, is less easy to define. We all know what thoughts are – we process them everyday. Then why is giving this common practice a meaning is so difficult? So I will therefore take a definition of thought invented by Oxford professor Max Muller, who claims that the essence of thought “*consists in a bringing together of mental images and ideas with deductions therefrom, and with a corresponding power of detaching them from one another*”<sup>2</sup>. Hopefully through these definitions, we might acquire a vague idea on how we are able to simplify why language is necessary for us to think. Without language, our perceptions of senses and experiences would be useless. Our ability to think is futile without labels to apply our process to. Without particular labels, we wouldn’t be able to identify the differences between different objects – a pencil would be the same as a pen. We would also be unable to describe an object. If I saw a pencil, I could not say that it is thin, long, pointy, or wooden. So even if I was thinking about a pencil, I would not even *know* it was a pencil without calling it a pencil and being able to describe it as thin, long, pointy, or wooden. It is language that helps us organize reality into certain fragments to force it within the limits of understanding. In many cases it is just the environment around us being abridged to numbers and theories, e.g. Temperature. We can now see that language offers us justification of our experiences and is a major factor affecting our thought. Though the relationship between the two is tricky in theory, in practise it is unbelievably simple.

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<sup>2</sup> Butler, Samuel, *Thought and Language* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1925).

So can language really determine how we perceive the world around us? In one sense, of course not. If we all live in one world, how is it possible for two people in the same world to perceive different worlds? The world will remain as is, no matter what language the observer uses. A potato will be a potato in every language. *However*, what about the French that call a potato a “*pomme de terre*” (meaning ‘apple of the earth’ in English)? While the label ‘potato’ indicates what it is, the word “*pomme de terre*” illustrates its characteristics. Here is genuine evidence that languages of various cultures do tend to control our knowledge and intelligence of certain aspects<sup>3</sup>. Not only do languages control knowledge, but values as well. A study was done a few years ago to prove this on Japanese/American women who were both fluent in Japanese and English. The interviewees were questioned about their families, friends and lifestyles in English first. Then separately in another session, were asked generally the same types of questions in Japanese. Surprisingly, the results of the study depicted a significant difference in the answers from the Japanese interview and the answers from the English interview. The Japanese interrogation inclined value towards family and friends while the English meeting leaned mostly towards material possessions; this compared of the exact same people!<sup>4</sup> From this we are able to conclude that the value of a label (which varies from culture to culture) is interrelated to our personal values, which once again emphasizes the extent to which language controls and directs the way we think.

There must be several formal theories that help argue the way thought depends on language. One of the most famous of these theories is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.<sup>5</sup> The Sapir-Wharf Hypothesis offers a clear representation of thinking developing from Language. This controversial hypothesis was developed by Linguist and Anthropologist Edward Sapir along with

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<sup>3</sup> Dennett, Daniel C. The role of Language in Intelligence. [Online] Available: <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/rolelang.htm>, 4/12/04.

<sup>4</sup> San Fransisco Public Library. Japanese Americans. [Online] Available: [www.library.ca.gov/assets/acrobat/japanese.pdf](http://www.library.ca.gov/assets/acrobat/japanese.pdf), 5/12/04

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, Bill, Gifford, Wendy and James, Suzanne. Language for Theory of Knowledge, 2004.

his colleague and student, Benjamin Whorf. Their discoveries came down to two basic prepositions: Linguistic Determinism – language determines thought (known as the stronger version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis), and Linguistic Relativity – a difference in language equals a difference in thought (known as the weaker version). Sapir-Whorf also attempt to validate that each culture will have its own view of the world. Though I have not stated these in theory till now, I have mentioned these points in previous paragraphs. However, to provide evidence for *their* theories, Sapir-Whorf observed Inuits' relationships with snow, which is an important part of the latter's day-to-day lives. Thus, because of their culture, there are several (in fact, 27) different names for snow altogether in the Inuit language. This is supported by Carroll and Casagrande (1958), who studied Navaho children and determined that they were better at form recognition than American children since Navaho has different words forms for various kinds of object. A recent study by psychologist Peter Gordon conducted a study of a Brazilian Tribe whose language did not numerically rise above two. "There are certainly things that we can think about that we cannot talk about. But for numbers I have shown that a limitation in language affects cognition," claims Gordon.<sup>6</sup> There are many more studies and experiments that provide empirical evidence for the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

By now, we have given numerous reasons behind the power of language. We know that language facilitates us to organize reality into our frame of understanding; we know that language controls our knowledge, upholds our values, and shapes our personal thought... What does language *not* do? It seems that language is an integral part of our lives and there would be a lack of civilization today without it. Language's role in thought is not completely vital, but it obviously exists to make our lives amazingly easier than they would have been if language was absent. To put it simply, a man named Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed that "Language is the

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<sup>6</sup> Bieber, Celeste. Language may Shape Human Thought. [Online] Available: <http://www.newscientist.com/news/news.jsp?id=ns99996303>, 5/12/04

blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow”<sup>7</sup>. Based on our indications, it is interesting to think that by limitation of vocabulary, we are able to discipline other aspects as well. Presently, mankind’s quest for knowledge is only barred by limitations of language and its control over what we can and cannot know. Language is needed to think about and interpret everything that we experience and edge into perspective – including this essay. Have you ever heard the phrase, “*Money makes the world go round?*” Well *money* seems to have great competition; it is essentially *language that makes the world go round*. Can you imagine how your life would be today without language? It’s Impossible.

### Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> Huxley, Aldous, *Words and their Meanings* (Ward Ritchie Press, 1940).

<sup>2</sup> Butler, Samuel, *Thought and Language* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1925).

<sup>3</sup> Dennett, Daniel C. The role of Language in Intelligence. [Online] Available: <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/rolelang.htm>, 4/12/04.

<sup>4</sup> San Fransisco Public Library. Japanese Americans. [Online] Available: [www.library.ca.gov/assets/acrobat/japanese.pdf](http://www.library.ca.gov/assets/acrobat/japanese.pdf), 5/12/04

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, Bill, Gifford, Wendy and James, Suzanne. *Language for Theory of Knowledge*, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Biever, Celeste. Language may Shape Human Thought. [Online] Available: <http://www.newscientist.com/news/news.jsp?id=ns99996303>, 5/12/04

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, Oliver Wendell. Quotes about Language. [Online] Available: <http://www.quotegarden.com/language.html>, 6/12/04.

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# Theory of Knowledge

## Essay

### Language

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