

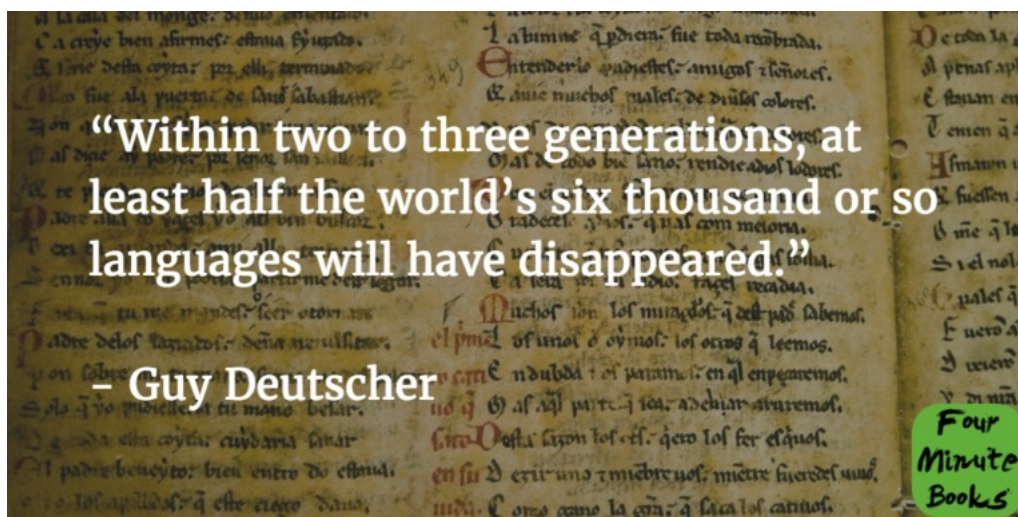
Through The Language Glass Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Through The Language Glass* explains how the language you speak fundamentally alters your reality and how nature, culture and language have all been intertwined all throughout history.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Guy Deutscher is an Israeli linguist, who's dedicating his life to the critical investigation of the origins of human language. There are two main camps in language theory: the nativists, who argue that language evolved mainly due to our anatomy changing (for example our eyes getting better at recognizing colors) and the culturalists, who believe language is a reflection of societal circumstances.

Prior to Guy's book, your opinion was mostly a matter of choosing sides. Now, however, there's a third option: that both are right, and that we need a new theory altogether.

After researching the work of many great linguists before him, Guy Deutscher arrived at some interesting conclusions about how language *really* shapes our perception of the world.

Here are 3 lessons you can learn from looking *Through The Language Glass*:

1. You can estimate how connected a society is by looking at the complexity of its language's grammar.
2. Language changes how we think, depending on the rules it gives us.
3. Nouns with genders are one way in which language shapes our perception of the world.

Ready to learn more about how you think, based on what you say? Here we go!

Lesson 1: You can see how close-knit a society is, based on the grammatical complexity of its language.

It's impossible to say whether one language is more difficult to learn than another. German and Chinese, for example, have a reputation of being hard to pick up, but in reality, this highly depends on what languages you *already* speak.

A lot of Dutch people speak excellent German, for example, because it's not that different from their native language, and it's sure easier for Asians to learn Chinese, than for Americans, who haven't even got similar sounds that they're used to in English.

What you *can* say though, is how complex an aspect of a certain language is, for example its grammatical structure. When Guy did this, he found out that the complexity of a given language's grammar often reflects its social structure.

In general, **the more complex a society gets, the simpler its word and grammatical structure becomes.**

This happens because as societies get bigger, more interactions between strangers occur, and people often have to pass on information without having much context about who they're talking to. More words, specific phrases, dialects and accents are the consequence of this, to make it easier to establish that context with a targeted set of words.

For example, in the sentence "the two went back there" the word "there" refers to a physical location 99% of the time. But in the language of a small island society, "there" might be used not just for places, but also for events, people or even a certain time. If everyone knows each other and the shared context and information is huge, it's easy to infer which of the four meanings the word takes on, but if you're talking to a stranger, that might not be specific enough.

Lesson 2: Depending on what language requires us to say, our thinking changes.

These grammatical rules not just affect how easily we can pass on information, but also how we think in the first place, because they change the requirements the words we speak have to meet.

For example, it's absolutely normal to say "it rains" in English, but in Hebrew, there's no verb for "raining" as an activity. They just say the equivalent of "the rain falls." Similarly, the ancient Nootka tribe of Vancouver Island has no way of saying "the stone falls." Instead, they have a verb for that, saying "it stones down."

The rules of a language change how you express ideas and how you express ideas changes how you think.

Take German, Spanish, or French, for example, all languages in which the gender of nouns for living things is specified within the noun. If I say “mein Mitbewohner” (my roommate) in German, this male version instantly tells the listener that I’m talking about a guy – something you wouldn’t be able to tell from the English version “my roommate,” which is gender neutral and requires more explanation.

Lesson 3: People, who speak languages with gendered nouns, perceive the world a lot differently, depending on those genders.

Interestingly, this effect doesn’t stop at living things. In fact, German has three different noun markers: male, female and neutral, and every noun in the language is assigned one of the three. Spanish only has male and female, and sometimes, the two languages use a different one for the same noun.

For example, the word “bridge” is female in German (“die Brücke”) while it is male in Spanish (“el puente”). When researcher Toshi Konishi investigated how this changes peoples’ perception of the described item in the 90s, he found that **the adjectives people used to describe a bridge matched the gender of the word in both languages**. Germans would say bridges are beautiful, fragile, slender and peaceful, while Spanish people might think that same bridge is dangerous, sturdy, long and big.

This even affects how well you can remember the thing in question, for example a “Barbara bridge” would be easier for Germans to keep in mind, as it’s a female name, while Spanish people could better remember a bridge named “Bernardo.”

Through The Language Glass Review

Through The Language Glass was sure an out-of-the-box read! I had some real aha moments here. Considering most people speak over 15,000 words per day (!), it’d sure be wise to learn more about how your language changes what happens in your brain and what comes out of your mouth, don’t you think? A good read!

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- Why Homer never used the word “blue”
- What the first theory about the evolution of the human sense of color was about
- Why red was the first color described in almost all languages
- The reason some languages use the same word for three different colors

- What happens when a language doesn't use our usual spatial system with left and right
- Why your language changes how you perceive colors

Who would I recommend the Through The Language Glass summary to?

The 18 year old college student with a major in linguistics or sociology, the 29 year old professional translator, and anyone who wants to know more about their own language.