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Online assignment 2: Does language shape thoughts.

TO HAVE A SECOND LANGUAGE IS TO HAVE A SECOND SOUL

Is language more than just a communication tool? Does it determines our perception of reality and shapes the way we think?

Such arguments about whether or not language shapes thought have gone in circles for centuries, with some arguing that language can't shape thought and others arguing that it's impossible for a language not to shape thought. Some studies have claimed evidence to be affirmative while others have reported evidence to the contrary. In recent years this notion of language shaping thought has enjoyed a considerable resurgence and much new evidence has become available.

Languages vastly differ from each other. Some languages such as English require tense on verbs, while some languages like Indonesian have the same verb regardless of whether the event happened in the past or it is going to happen in the future, while some require tense but they have to be more specific. A language spoken in Papua New Guinea has 5 different past tenses depending on how long something occurred.

In some languages, verbs change depending on the way you completed the task. For example) While an English speaker would say that 'he drank the milk' a person speaking in Navajo would have to use one form of the verb if the person was drinking from an open container(glass) and a different form if he would have drunk from a closed container(bottle) .

Thus thinking about these details leads one to think that if languages are requiring people to pay attention to different things then it is certain that it is shaping our thought process. But it is also possible that people speaking different languages are paying attention to the same things but expressing it in different ways. This seems like a puzzle, which recent psycholinguists claim to have understood somewhat as they claim if this were to be the case then everyone would be paying attention to all of the information that could be encoded in all of the world's languages, which is certainly not true. And they have backed this with experiments.

The most famous experiments that have been done are related to the domain of time and many interesting results have been found out. People's way of referring to time spatially is dependent on whether their native language' script is written from left to right or right to left. The gestures people use for the future and past also depend on the language they speak. For mandarin speakers, the past is up and the future is down, while for an indigenous community living in the Andes's future is behind while the past is in front. In a recent study conducted on a tribe in Australia, they gave a task to the local people to organize a bunch of photographs of a person at different stages of his life. Interestingly those people arranged it differently every time they faced a different direction. This showed that their time axis, unlike others, is fixed not to the body but to the landscape.

But these differences are not only restricted to the domain of time. Different languages have different numbers of color words. The blue color in English can't be put into a single label in Russian. They have different names for different shades of blue and studies have shown that they are able to visually better distinguish between those than an English speaker would. This straightforwardly implies that language can limit our cognitive abilities.

In some languages, all nouns are categorized in a particular grammatical gender. Words of different genders have different sounds, different adjective endings, different pronouns, and even different

verb endings. These genders differ across languages. For example) Sun is feminine in German while masculine in Spanish

So the point to argue again is whether people of different languages relate or think of these things differently based on the gender used in their language, do they take these genders as meaningful? And yes that is, in fact, the case. In a study where researchers asked children to give a voice to an inanimate object, the children did it in accordance with the correct form of grammatical gender used in their native language. A similar thing was noticed when a group of young people was asked to describe a word in adjectives. Not only this, but it has also guided painters and sculptors' personification of art. Michelangelo's portrayal of time with dawn and night as feminine and day and dawn as masculine is a clear example where the gender of personification is influenced by one's native language.

Some languages are more specific towards some particular things. English doesn't distinguish between an event that was an accident or intentional. It is perfectly fine to say for ex) Ali broke the vase whether he did it intentionally or accidentally. But languages such as Spanish focuses more on the event rather than the agent who did the action when it is an accident, and more on the agent only when it is done deliberately. Experiments done by researchers showed this to be true and proved that on witnessing an accident an English speaker is more likely to remember who did it and less likely to remember whether it was an accident or was a deliberate action and just the vice-versa is true for their Spanish counterparts.

Languages apart from the grammatical differences also have varied number systems. A language in Papua New Guinea has a base system of 27, while some languages don't have number words at all. A study was conducted on an indigenous community in the Amazon rainforest namely the ‘Piraha’ who don't have words for numbers. When asked to match the number of 2 different objects they did it by approximation pointing that they don't count at all. This explains that number words are essential tools of thought required to solve even the simplest quantitative problems. And a problem as simple as one-to-one correspondence becomes a nightmare without language.

All of these studies show that language is a key component in the processes of the mind and influences many aspects of human cognition such as space, time, color, and number to name a few. And thus in my opinion it is certain that language shapes thought.