

# On Language Use: A Theoretical Treaty on the Workings of Language.

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## *Abstract*

*This paper reviews past and current theories on language use and proposes an alternative perspective on how to view language. The senses are at the forefront of language creation. A given stimuli will initiate one or more senses thus sending signals to the mind, which continues the language process often resulting in some speech output. The language model presented has a linear directionality: sense → image → thought → speech act. Each of the elements is dependent upon one another, but language can occur at any point beyond the stage of sense. At the point of a speech act, language universals must be considered to help choose a workable framework in which to analyze speech acts and utterances. Moreover, language can only be understood in terms of contact with the outside world in relation to ones prior experiences, thoughts, and images. Concepts in language such as speech act, image, and utterance are revisited and redefined to accommodate the theory presented.*

“I think therefore, I am”. French philosopher Rene Descartes (1984) reasoned that his existence was based on an ability to think. However, what does it mean to think? Is thinking a necessary predecessor to language, or is there something else that precedes thought? Einstein was said to have thought in images or pictures<sup>1</sup>. This raises another question: what are the characteristics of a mental image? Furthermore, does the image precede or follow the thought? Much of what we have read and studied in class has centered on defining language from a perspective of utterances or speech acts<sup>2</sup>, and some discussion about thought in language. In our class discussion about speech acts, Sarah brought up a thought-provoking comment on the role of images in language (Alamoudi, 2010). The first question that came to my mind was: what sparks an image in the mind? The answer to what generates an image, I believe, should have a universal component, and it would operate on an unconscious level in the mind. The answer to the beginning of language<sup>3</sup> use, I believe, is the senses: touch, smell, sight, taste, hear, and possibly intuition. The

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<sup>1</sup> Arguments have been made that Einstein’s ability to think in images is attributed to a unique growth pattern in his brain. An autopsy on Einstein’s brain showed that the Sylvian fissure was largely absent, and therefore an expanse in the parietal lobes may have created a more efficient communication system between neurons (Abraham, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>In this paper, I do not differentiate between *utterance* and *speech act*. In the most basic form, they are simple stringed words which are spoken by an individual.

<sup>3</sup> The definition of language I propose is general and widely encompassing: *Language is a system of communication*. It can be a speech act, sign language, a gesture, body language, writing, a painting, a sculpture, or even a chess game. In short, it is any form of communication generated by a human or an animal intended for oneself or others.

role that these senses play in relationship to images, thoughts, and speech acts is fundamental in understanding language use and language competency.

Most of our senses are essential to social interaction. Hearing and sight are used as mechanisms to gather input; the brain then processes the input, and will generate some type of output. For those who are impaired and lack the capacity to hear or see, other senses may compensate. A blind person can use the sense of touch for input, running fingers across an object, or maybe someone's face to create a mental picture of an object or person. A deaf person could compensate by using sight to read the lips of a speaker, and understand a given utterance with the same competency as a person who has the ability to hear. Intuition is a more abstract sense, often referred to as the sixth sense. Intuition involves knowledge of the world, which relies on instinct (e.g. maternal instincts, twins who are aware of the sibling's thoughts or feelings), and is separate from the other senses. Consider for a moment a person who is devoid of all senses. There would be a complete absence of input, and without input, there cannot be language. However, if just one of the senses is operable, language is possible. The beginning of all language and social interaction, I believe, is the ability to sense.

The senses gather input and from the input a mental image is created. The image that is constructed in the mind is a combination of the input just received and the previous input from one's past experiences and contact with the world. Moreover, from identical input, distinctive images may be produced from one person to another. To illustrate, consider the following utterance: "You have a lovely wife and daughter." A guest may offer this compliment to an American man upon leaving his home, and the American may likely form an image, or series of images, of a guest praising him for choosing a beautiful wife as his bride, and raising a charming daughter. The same compliment offered to a Middle Eastern Muslim man may trigger an image, or series of images, of the guest attempting to have a sexual encounter with his wife and daughter. Clearly, culture plays an integral role in the image constructed from one individual to another. Edward Sapir spoke of an "auditory image", which necessarily precedes speech (Sapir, 1921, p.15). However, where Sapir states that "sound is replaced by the visual image", I propose that any of the senses may generate (not replace) a mental image (Sapir, 1921). Moreover, I believe that the image resembles more a mental picture, or series of mental pictures, of an event, rather than an "image of an articulation which corresponds to sound" (Sapir, 1921). From the mental image, as I have described, comes the thought.

Once the mental image is shaped, a thought reflecting the mental image is formed and the mind begins preparing for the next stage of language: output. The thought is strictly an internal mechanism, and may operate on a conscious, subconscious, or unconscious level. At the conscious level, we may offer a handshake to communicate a greeting or salutation, or just say "hello". Often when a person has repeated a certain speech act, such as a speech or lecture, the speaker operates on a subconscious level speaking to an audience without consciously thinking about what is being said. The unconscious realm of thought may occur in dream states. In an unconscious state, sleep talking can take place, and is at times intelligible and other times not. That being said, all three states of thought (conscious, subconscious, and unconscious) have an unconscious component. The neurons in the brain fire despite our control, and we could not order our neurons to stop firing in the same manner as a conscious command to stop speaking. The dilemma with thought is that it is abstract and cannot be studied empirically. It is also limited in terms of communicating to others, unless Man, someday, evolves to use telepathy. Therefore, what often proceeds thought is the stage in language which produces a communicable output: the utterance.

A thought may materialize into an utterance, and it is at this point that empirical evidence may be used to better understand the processes of language. Theories into the operations and proper analyses of speech acts are numerous. Is a grammatical approach suitable where we speak of subjects, direct and indirect objects, topic markers, and predicates? Or should we look at thematic relations between the actors such as agent, patient, experiencer, theme, goal, etc. where verbs are associated with a number of theta-roles (Gruber, 1970)? Or should utterances be viewed as a product of pre-existing rules which undergo transformations from deep to surface structure (Chomsky, 1965)? Or is there a plethora of pre-existing rules to which everyone has access, and is ranked in terms of salience according to one's language, dialect, or idiolect (Prince & Smolensky, 2004)? There are a number of theories on how one should go about analyzing utterances to explain language use. The argument for an innate mechanism that allows us to take our thoughts and transform them into speech acts is credible. However, the matter of a deep and surface structure filled with transformations, or a system of ranking which guides the structure of language, I find analogous to Hollywood's portrayal of reality.....much art and little matter. To investigate the use of language in terms of speech acts or utterances it may be best to begin with language universals:

1. We have five (possibly six) senses, the ability to think, and the ability to speak.
2. We are self-reflecting and social creatures, and, therefore, target our utterances towards one another, and sometime towards ourselves.
3. There are various registers in language which are determined by social customs and hierarchies.
4. We have the capacity towards creativity and unpredictability.
5. There are a number of intentions in the use of language (e.g. convince, entertain, direct, inform)
6. Acquiring an additional language after fluency in the native language(s) is considerably more difficult.

Considering universals #2, #3, and #5 it seems most logical to analyze utterances from a perspective of thematic relationships. The speech act itself is dependent upon the social context, the relationship between the actors, the communicative intention of the speaker and listener, and the immediate physical/environmental surroundings. Thus, language use and competency may be better understood by investigating relationships of Man to Man, Man to Nature, and Man to himself. Observing, noting, and documenting the interactions and utterances of these relationships in a wide variety of social context may provide a clearer understanding of the complexities of language.

To understand the operation of a model (e.g. language model), one should consider the *modus operandi* from beginning to end. If phases in the operation of the model are ignored or set aside, for whatever reason, there is a risk that the conclusions drawn on the nature of the model are rendered faulty or incomplete. The language model I propose, in the form of a general framework, contains the following hierarchy: 1) sense creates an image 2) image triggers a thought 3) thought may conclude in a speech act. As described earlier, there are numerous ways to express a thought other than speech acts, including the decision to internalize the thought. Descartes believed that thought defined Man's existence, and intimated that language began with thought. Thought, I believe, has an important function in language. However, there is a catalyst which instigates the thought process. Perhaps a more suitable maxim is *I sense, therefore I am*.

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