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The Relationship Between Language and Thought

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From the moment that children begin to utter their first words, language and thought appear to go hand in hand. That this should be so is not surprising, given that one of the functions of language is to express thought, But the exact nature of the relationship between language and thought is far from straightforward, In this section, we will address the question: To what extent does the language that we speak shape the way we think?

When children are young, the boundary between language and thought is shadowy. When we observe children at play, we find that they often talk to themselves. A five-year-old working on jigsaw puzzle might be heard saying the following:

> Okay, the blue one. Goes here. Now, this one. This one fits here. The rabbit is here. It goes here. Another blue one, here it goes. And where does this one go?

This sort of verbal activity of children is referred to as ***egocentric speech*** **(or self-directed speech)**. Children produce it whether or not they have an audience, and they produce it more frequently when the tasks that they face increase in complexity. So, for example, when children are asked to work on difficult jig-saw puzzles, they produce more egocentric speech than when working on easier ones.
Egocentric speech thus resembles adults' thoughts in more than one way:

> Egocentric speech and thought are self-directed. Egocentric speech and thought become more intense during problem-solving tasks.

In fact, many adults revert to egocentric speech when they have to make difficult arithmetic calculations, for example, It is likely that egocentric speech in children

and thought in adults are related, although the exact nature of the relationship is not clear. The great Russian psychologist Lev Vygosky suggested that egocentric speech is a precursor of thought: as children grow older, speech gradually becomes internalized and turns into thought in the young adult. The process of internalization begins very early, according to Vygotsky, and this accounts for the fact that young children can think, albeit in more limited ways than adults. Whether or not egocentric speech and language are related so directly, there is nevertheless some connection between the development of thought and the development of language in children.

But how tight is the "fit" between language and thought? In particular, to what extent are our thoughts shaped by the way we express ourselves in out native language? Note that Vygotsky's proposal to treat thought as internalized egocentric speech does not necessarily mean that thinking is subservient to what can be expressed in the adult's native language. Once egocentric speech becomes internalized and turns into thought, speech and thought do not necessarily remain similar.

As everyone who has tried to learn a foreign language knows, certain things can be expressed more conveniently in some languages than in others. While one language may have a special word to refer exclusively to a particular object or notion, in another language this object can be described only by using a whole phrase or sentence. For example, in Tuvaluan, a language spoken by the Polynesian inhabitants of a group of islands in the Central pacific, there are different words to refer to many different types of coconut, which need to be described at great length in English. Here are a few examples:

pii: drinking coconut, with little flesh and much water, at a stage when the water is maximally sweet
mukomuko: young coconut with some flesh in it, before it has become too solid
uto: coconut at the stage when its husk can be chewed on and its water is still sweet
motomoto: same as mukomuko, but with firmer flesh
niu: coconut ripe enough for its flesh to be grated
uttanu: mature coconut whose sprout has already 'pierced through the husk and whose water has turned into an edible spongious solid kernel.

Similarly, French speakers often note that English has more words for sounds (*crash, splash, roar*) than French has. The question then arises: Do these differences between languages mean that people from different cultures think differently or perceive the world differently?

In the first part of the century, three great scholars—**Franz Boas** (known as the "father of American anthropology"), **Edward Sapir**, and **Benjamin Whorf**—advanced a theory, that the way people think is determined by the structure of their native language. Their proposal is usually referred to as **the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** (or **the theory of linguistic determinism** or **linguistic relativity**.). Marveling at the intricacies of the structure of American Indian languages (which the average Euro-American had previously considered "primitive" and "inferior"), Boas, Sapir, and Whorf maintained that we are mental prisoners of the structure of the language that we speak natively.

For example, Whorf noticed that in the Hopi language tense (such as past and present) is not a grammatical category as it is in English. Instead, every Hopi statement has to be marked as to whether it is a statement of unchangeable truth (*Water is fluid*), the report of an event that the speaker has witnessed *(I arrived yesterday*), or å hypothesis (*I assume that he'll be here tomorrow*). These categories are marked in the same way that tense is marked in English verbs (*talk* versus *talked*). Whorf maintained that the difference between the structure of Hopi and the structure of English explains certain differences in the cultural character of Hopi society and of Euro-American society. The Hopi, according to Whorf, are typically suspicious of hypotheses and conjectures and are very sensitive to the source of information. Euro-Americans, in contrast, pay much more attention to the passing of time than the Hopi do. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, these differences in the thought patterns of members of the two cultures are a direct consequence of the grammatical, structures of Hopi and English,

While the Sapır-Whorf hypothesis is an attractive one, there are some problems with it. First of all, if thought were determined by language, it would be difficult to imagine how people from different cultural backgrounds could communicate at all. Second, many people in the world are bilingual or multilingual from a very early age. Would we want to say that these people have different "thought compartments" in their brains, each one associated with a different language? Obviously not. Third,

the fact that a particular category does not exist in a language does not mean that native speakers of that language cannot understand (and, hence, think about) the category: the grammatical system marking the source of information in Hopi can be explained in English (as demonstrated in the previous paragraph) even though it does not exist in English grammar. Finally, the lexicons and grammars of all languages share many universal patterns, even though at first glance the languages of the world differ so strikingly from one another. Sapir and Whorf overestimated the variability in the structure of languages,

Today, few scholars take the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis literally. Many linguists take the position that language may have some influence on thought but thought may also influence the structure of language. So the interaction between thought and language is a two-way street rather than an absolute cause-and-effect relationship. Language and thought do appear to be closely connected in various ways. Their interaction is a complex one about which we still have much to learn.

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*Vocabulary

egocentric speech: 자기중심적인 말, 혼자말
revert: 되돌아가다
internalized: 내재화된
fit: 대응, 적합성
subservient: 부차적인
husk: 겉껍질, grate강판에 갈다
intricacy: 복잡함
conjecture: 추측
variability: 가변성, 변동성