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Language Matters: A Guide To Everyday Questions About Language

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Does language equal thought?

An idea fundamental to cognitive science is that it may be possible to describe our thought processes through some representational system. Whether the appropriate representational system has properties similar to linguistic properties (such as observing similar principles) is an open question that scholars will no doubt be debating for years. Here, however, I'd like to address related questions, ones that I believe we can answer together: Do we think in language? Could we think without a language?

One way to interpret these questions is as follows: Does language construct a mental world that cognitively fences us in? This might well be a familiar question to you since it is frequently debated.

One can also interpret these questions in the most mundane way, the way people do when they say things such as “It’s so noisy I can’t hear myself think”—that is, asking whether human beings think in specific human languages. In other words, do people from Italy think in Italian? Or, given that the Italian language has many dialects, we could break down this basic question into multiple ones such as these: Do Venetians think in Venetian? Do Neapolitans think in Neapolitano? Likewise, do Indians, Australians, Canadians, Americans, Nigerians, and the British think in their own national varieties of English? We can get nicer: Do Bostonians and Atlantans and Philadelphians think in their urban

varieties? With either interpretation, the rest of this chapter aims to convince you that the answer to these questions is no.

I am first going to argue that thought does not require language by giving you instances of thought that couldn't possibly have been formulated in the brain in terms of language. The argument is a little long, so please keep that end point in sight.

Think about living with a toddler. Let me give you five scenarios that I've witnessed—three typical, two just plain wonderful—in which children did not use spoken or sign language. Then I bring out their relevance as a group to the central question of this chapter.

1. A boy plows a plastic truck across frozen grass. Another boy comes over, watches for a while, and then throws a handful of dirt on the first boy. The first boy picks up his truck, takes it to the area behind the swing set, and resumes plowing there.

2. My grandniece is coloring vehemently, and she rips the paper with the crayon. She takes another piece of paper, tapes it over the rip, and continues coloring.

3. A girl in the grocery store reaches for candy at the checkout aisle. Her mother says she can't have it. The girl throws a tantrum. Her mother's cheeks flame, and she gives the girl the candy.

4. Some three-year-olds sit in a line at the edge of a swimming pool, all of them with their feet dangling in the water. A man is teaching them to swim. He takes the first child on one end of the line and dunks him. That boy laughs. The instructor lifts him out of the pool, and the boy goes to the other end of the line. The instructor does the same to the next child, working his way along the line. My daughter, who is terrified of pools, is in the middle

of the line. When the instructor lifts the third child, my daughter reaches both hands into the pool, splashes herself, then runs to the end of the line—with the children who have already been dunked.

5. A boy goes to the beach with his family. The family on the next blanket has a blind child. The two children start digging together. At one point the mother of the first boy calls him over for a snack of carrot sticks. The boy takes his bag to the other boy and holds it out for him. When the blind boy doesn't react, the first boy takes the blind boy's hand (so beautifully covered with sand) and sticks it into the plastic bag. They share sandy carrots.

All of these scenarios give evidence of reasoning on the part of the child and, thus, of thought. Perhaps you disagree with me about one or another, but surely you agree about at least one. Now we are almost ready to approach the question of the relationship of thought to language in these types of scenarios.

But first let's consider one more situation. Consider the case of a hard-of-hearing or completely deaf child born to hearing parents. Often the fact that the child in this situation does not (adequately) hear is not detected until the child is a toddler or older. This is the case because the child exhibits behavior that is typical of toddlers—behavior precisely like that described in the preceding scenarios. That is, deaf children act just like hearing children in these sorts of situations. Yet deaf children whose deafness has not yet been discovered are linguistically deprived. Only after someone recognizes that these children don't hear can linguistic information be given to them—whether in the form of access to spoken language via hearing aids or cochlear implants, lessons in speech reading

(what we used to call “lip-reading”), and/or lessons in vocalization or in the form of teaching the child (and often the whole family) to use sign language.

In other words, long before these deaf children have access to linguistic input, they do think, as is obvious from their thought-demonstrating behavior. There is no possibility, however, that their thought is in a specific human language since they have not even begun to acquire any specific human language.

A similar kind of argument can be made by looking at the studies of Genie, a young girl who was discovered in 1970 in Los Angeles, living in captive isolation that limited both her physical activity and linguistic input (also discussed in chapter 1). At the time of her discovery, she could hardly walk and gave no indication of knowing what speech was. Several researchers worked for years to teach Genie language, and although she never progressed beyond an unsystematic stringing together of a few words, she did manage to talk about the events of her life, including events that had happened prior to her gaining linguistic knowledge. Clearly, these memories constitute thought—thought that was independent of linguistic structure.

Another way to argue that thought is not equivalent to specific language is to consider our vocabulary. If a language has a word for a given concept and another language lacks a word for that concept, does it follow that the given concept is mentally accessible to people of the first language and inaccessible to people of the second? That is, do the two sets of speakers think differently?

In answering this question, consider your own experiences in life. When you meet a new word, are you necessarily meeting a new concept? Let’s say that I ask you to mix yellow and blue paints in varying amounts and put the different colors in a set of bowls.

Along the way, you happen to mix up *chartreuse*, but you don't know the particular word *chartreuse*. If I tell you that the mix in one bowl is called *chartreuse*, all I've done is given you a label. However, you already recognized the concept, or you wouldn't have put it in one of the bowls. That is, unless you are blind or color-blind, the actual qualities of the color precede your labeling of it. To take a more familiar example, in the United States, in voting booths many states have ballots that are punched by machine. The little parts that fall out of the ballot when it is punched are called chads. Before the presidential election of 2000, many Americans didn't know the word *chad*, but they were nevertheless familiar with the concept.

In these types of situations it seems rather obvious that the concept of an object can be understood without a word for that object, but what about a situation in which the concept concerns the identification not of a concrete object but rather of an abstract one?

Let me present two examples, contrasting English and Italian, as we consider whether the vocabulary difference between the two languages reveals a difference in thought possibilities. Italian lacks a vocabulary item corresponding to the English word *privacy*. Are we to conclude, then, that Italians do not understand the concept? Surely this is not a proper conclusion, and a simple observation of Italians' habits reveals this fact. Italians close the door when they use a public bathroom, they do not have sexual relations in public, and they do not ask personal questions of people they are not intimate with. In other words, they respect privacy regardless of the fact that they have no single word denoting that concept. So, although they will use a circumlocution to translate "Please respect my privacy," they understand the concept and communicate it effectively. Indeed, they have an adjective that is translated

as ‘private’; they simply have a lexical gap (from an English perspective) when it comes to the relevant noun.

On the other hand, Italian has the word *scaramanzia*, for which I know no single vocabulary item of English that can serve as a translation. *Scaramanzia* is the superstition that makes us say that the worst is going to happen in order to ward it off. For example, both my sisters had breast cancer, so I told my doctor (among others) that I’m bound to get it. However, my fervent hope is that I won’t, and there’s an ignorant but nonetheless real sense in me that by saying I will get it, I’ve robbed that terrible evil of its power. I’ve been doing things like that all my life, long before I had ever heard the word *scaramanzia*. And now that I’ve described this to you, I’m sure you understand the concept (which doesn’t mean that you share my ignorant attraction to magic), whether you’ve ever practiced this behavior or not. Although most Italians and Americans do not practice this behavior regularly, the fact that people of both cultures understand the concept and occasionally practice it shows that understanding the concept is independent of having a vocabulary item in one’s language that denotes it.

In sum, the presence and lack of the words *privacy* and *scaramanzia* in Italian and English tell us nothing whatsoever about differences between the ways English speakers and Italian speakers think.

Analogous arguments can be made by looking at vocabulary differences in any two languages. German has the word *Schadenfreude*, which is a compound of the root for ‘damage’ and the root for ‘joy.’ *Schadenfreude* is the pleasure one takes in the misfortunes of others. Although you might not have experienced this pleasure, nor might many Germans, you can understand the concept regardless of the fact that English has no such word. Often the villains in soap operas and the like are more hateful because

we recognize that they experience *Schadenfreude*. One language will coin a word for a given concept, whereas another language will not. Scholars of various disciplines (psychology, sociology) might debate the reasons for this, but the important point for us is simply that the speakers of both languages can understand the concept, regardless.

You might argue that the existence of a word for a concept in a given language in some way legitimizes or licenses the concept in that linguistic community. That is, we have a word for it, so the concept must be shared by many and is, therefore, somehow more true or real than it might be without a linguistic label. This could be right. Nevertheless, the licensing of a concept is distinct from the ability to grasp it. In the college where I work, many first-year students enter with the fear that our highly selective admissions committee made a mistake and they don't belong here. We have no single word for this fear (which is shared by first-year students on many campuses, no doubt), but it's easy to recognize and understand.

Vocabulary differences are not the only differences between languages, so we should turn now to other types of differences and ask what they tell us about the relationships between language and thought. Some scholars have argued that a certain population cannot reason in the same way as another population because of syntactic differences between the languages of the two populations. Instead of reporting on that literature (which would require a lengthy discussion), I'll present an analogous situation that has not been widely discussed in this light. We will look again at a contrast between Italian and English, this time focusing on sentence structure.

In English we can say, "John beat the eggs stiff," meaning that John beat the eggs with the result that they became stiff. The word *stiff* in this sentence is called a resultative secondary predicate. In

Romance languages the literal translation of that sentence is not grammatical because Romance languages do not allow resultative secondary predicates in as wide a range of sentence structures as English does. Instead, in a Romance language you'd say something that would be translated literally as 'John beat the eggs until they became stiff' or 'John beat the eggs to the point of (their) being stiff.' A person who holds to the idea that thought is language might try to use this information to argue that Italians, Spaniards, Romanians, French, Portuguese, and speakers of other Romance languages cannot understand the concept of direct result. But that's obviously false. Speakers of Romance languages clearly understand the concept of direct result; they simply have available a different range of sentence structures to render it.

Analogous arguments can be built around other sentence structure differences between languages. For example, some languages express possession by a verb that can be translated as 'have.' Others, however, express it in other ways, such as by stating existence with respect to something else. For example, to express 'I have a sister' in Russian, one would say *u menja sestra*. A word-by-word translation of this is 'with-me-sister.' (Note that there is no verb here. Typically the verb that means 'be' is omitted when the present tense is to be conveyed.) Does that mean that the speakers of the first type of language (including English) have a different sense of possession from the speakers of the second type of language (including Russian)? In particular, do we think of sisters differently? At a certain point, the proposition that structural differences between languages are evidence of differences in conceptual behavior between peoples leads to nonsense. In my opinion, this is one of those times.

Another argument that language and thought are not equivalent comes from the fact that we can speak without thinking. We

do it much too often, are surprised at what we have said, and then correct it. In fact, we can even read without thinking, coming to the end of the page and realizing that we have no idea what we've just read. Sometimes we can read aloud, thus indisputably using our language mechanism, and still think about something else, so that we lose our place in the passage and don't even know what we've read and what we haven't. Similarly, if you've ever heard particularly verbal preschoolers speak, you'll be amazed by their fluency and ability to express even abstract concepts, for example when talking about future events. In the following sentence, for instance, uttered by a three-year-old boy whose grandfather lives in a different country and only gets to visit him once or twice a year, the boy expresses something about a future event, without really having a concept of time: "I'm putting all these things in a bag for grandpa because when he comes and we fix the bench together, we need this." A moment later, the boy could be throwing a tantrum about not being able to go to the playground right that moment but having to wait until a little later, demonstrating that future events are hard for him to integrate into his thinking. It is obvious, then, that preschoolers' reasoning ability lags far behind their speaking ability. This is particularly striking evidence that language (whether in the form of speaking or reading) and thought cannot be one and the same, nor are they even necessarily dependent on each another.

Many more arguments can be brought to bear on the question of whether thought equals language. We could ask whether animals think, and if our answer is positive (as mine is), we must abandon the notion that thought is language since animals do not have language in the sense that humans do (a point discussed in chapter 6). We could ask whether people who have brain disease or injury that robs them of language still think, and if our answer is positive, we must again abandon this notion. However, even

without looking at the vast amount of research on animals and on language pathologies, that is, without looking at research that goes beyond our daily experience, we can debunk certain myths about language simply by looking at the evidence available in everyday life. The myth that we think in specific languages is one of those debunkable myths, as we've already seen.

This conclusion does not minimize the importance of the various relationships that hold between language and thought. Language facilitates the introduction and transmission of thoughts, and a particular phrasing of a concept can give it a slant that offers the listener a new perspective. Sometimes we may not even be quite sure of our thoughts until we put them into language, which is one reason that talking to a confidant when making crucial decisions can be so valuable. Speaking one's mind or writing one's ideas can also help one to recognize the form of a particular rational argument one is developing. Using language can help us in analysis of many types, just as drawing what we saw can help us understand its significance. Nonetheless, the drawing is not tantamount to the act of seeing; likewise, expressing oneself in language is not tantamount to the act of thinking.

Language is like a hanger that we put our thoughts on. When the clothing is in a pile on the floor, it might be harder to recognize it for what it truly is. The structure of the hanger clarifies the structure of the clothing, but clarification of an essence is distinct from the essence itself.

In sum, whether or not we have words for concepts, we can and do entertain those concepts, and some concepts we may never have words for—because they are ineffable.

I want to close with a final consideration, which again connects to daily experience—one I'd simply like to pose. Observe the following conversation between two speakers:

I hate snakes.

Do you remember Mrs. Bicknell?

Our eighth-grade social studies teacher?

Yes.

Sure, I remember her. Why?

Well, when you said snakes, I remembered the day I went to talk to her after school about how my family was falling apart, and she asked me what the matter was and if Patrick had walked some other girl home, and she was so condescending that I just left and walked home alone and saw this twisted stick by the sidewalk, and I said, “You look like a crazy snake. Hello, you crazy snake.” I thought I was alone, but Patrick was walking right behind me, and he said, “I always thought you were crazy, but now I know.”

Oh.

When the second speaker goes into that long speech, you can see how much thought she’s reporting—thought that apparently took place between the first utterance (“I hate snakes.”) and the second (“Do you remember Mrs. Bicknell?”) If all of that thought took place in actual English sentences, it would have had to come at a remarkable speed. In addition, although the production of English in this long thought between the first and the second utterance would be free of speech production—and thus free of the slowness of the speech articulators (the tongue, the lips, the bottom jaw, and all the other parts of the body that participate in speech production)—it is still a stream of silent words, which if spoken would come as fast as a voice recording increased to a continuous squeak. The speed of thought exceeds that of speech, of the fastest fingers typing, and even of a brief, meaningful look. Can

silent language possibly be that fast? Ideally, we should design an experiment to measure the speed of silent language at this point. If we cannot do that, if we cannot devise some way to test whether or not silent language has the characteristics of thought (such as great speed), we are left in an unsupported position.

But even without experimental evidence, we can push the hypothesis—that language and thought are equivalent—to an absurd end by considering the language and thought of Deaf people (by *Deaf* with a capital “D,” I mean people whose primary language is a sign language) with regard to speed. Signs generally take about twice as long to produce as words. So do Deaf people think twice as slowly as hearing people (since they would be thinking in visual signs)? Moreover, some Deaf people have mastered spoken languages. I have such friends, and they speak English at the ordinary rate. So do these Deaf people think at double the rate when they are speaking as when they are signing? The proposal, again, is nonsensical to me.

Thought is thought. Language is language. The two are distinct.

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