

# Perception and language essay

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Nathan Ghion March 16, 2011 TOK homework Perception and Language essay " We see and understand things not as they are but as we are. "

Discuss this claim in relation to these two ways of knowing: perception and language. Before analyzing why " we see and understand things not as they are but as we are" in relation to perception and language, we need to know the definitions of perception and language. Perception can be defined as the ability to use the five senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch to know something whereas language is a complex and dedicated form of intentional communication that is capable of infinite creativity which involves arbitrary signs and articulated sounds. Language is a way of knowing that would not exist if it wasn't for perception because through language, we communicate our thoughts and these thoughts are based on our perception of the world. When we perceive something through one of our five senses, nerves relay a message to our brain and we then make sense of what we have just perceived. Therefore, language is merely a way of communicating our perceptions to others and through language; we gain knowledge by hearing or reading the perceptions of others. What we perceive is affected not only by what is there but also by who we are biologically, personally and culturally. Depending on our attitude toward something, we perceive it differently in that if we have a negative attitude towards something, we perceive it negatively. As an example, let's examine how a deaf man, a blind man and a mute would perceive a dog. The blind man would be able to feel the dog with his hands and tell you the shape of the dog so he would know what the outline of the dog looked like but he wouldn't be able to tell you details such as its color and its facial expression. The deaf man would be able to tell you everything there is to know about the dog except the sound

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it makes when barking and the mute guy would perceive everything about the dog but he would have to write it down for you because he can't talk. To continue with this analysis of the dog, a person who comes from a culture where dogs are considered bad luck might only be able to perceive the negative qualities of the dog such as its sharp, brown teeth and the fact that it is dirty whereas someone who speaks a language that doesn't have a word for dog might just call it a strange beast. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that language "is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but is itself a shaper of ideas". In short, language determines or shapes our perceptions and thinking, thus our ability to gather and understand knowledge. This idea is called linguistic determinism. The words that we possess in our vocabulary determine the things that we can know. Thus, if we have an experience, we are confined not only in our communication of it, but also in our knowledge of it, by the words that we possess. For example, speakers of different languages may see different numbers of stripes in a rainbow. Since rainbows are actually a continuum of color, there are no actual stripes. However, people still see as many stripes as their language possesses primary words for different types of color. Therefore, the fact that they speak a certain type of language is limiting their ability to know and understand. Another example of how language can limit thought and understanding is portrayed by George Orwell in his book 1984. In this book, Orwell creates a fictional language name Newspeak, to replace the original English Language known as Oldspeak. It was created by a totalitarian regime characterized in the book. The basic idea behind Newspeak was to remove all shades of meaning from Oldspeak by creating a greatly reduced and simplified vocabulary and grammar in order to make any alternative thinking

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impossible by removing any words or possible constructs which describe the ideas of freedom and rebellion and assert the total dominance of the state. The fact that the state changed the language meant that the climate of thought changed as well, to the point where there were no thought but the ones dictated by the state through Newspeak. In conclusion, both language and perception are connected in that we can only communicate what we perceive. The main point of this essay is that what we know about things are affected by the limits on our perceptions and language which are determined by the lack of words and structure in a language or by our attitudes towards what we are perceiving. This prevents us from seeing things as they are and causes us to see things only as we are in that it causes us to have a one-sided opinion and not see every aspect of a situation. Word count: 787