

How language shapes thought

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Shaped by Language: What Comes First the Thought or the Language

Language, due to its specific properties, is one aspect that makes human beings unique in comparison to other animals and species. The fact that different languages can alter the way we perceive the world, and objects we view. From the perception of space, time and even nouns, languages changes the way we think. Countless studies show that linguistic processes effect even down to the most fundamental thought processes, which unconsciously shapes our brain altering perception.

Language is important to how we deal with experience with each other and how we view the world. Consequently, some cognitive psychologists believe that language may influence thought processes. Because of changing unpredictable of human's thinking in different cultures, it is difficult to define effects of a particular language on a particular thought pattern. The question of language and thought has been debated constantly similar to the age-old question of what came first the chicken or the egg. Drawing on our experiences we must contemplate the original theory that language shapes thought.

The hypothesis introduced by Benjamin Whorf, which is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or linguistic determination has stood the test of time and is a beginning to any debate about language and thought. He believed that our thoughts are completely limited by our language. A strong quote by Benjamin Whorf suggests that, " We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way--an agreement that holds throughout

our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language” (Whorf 213-14).

This allows me to believe language is basically the need for a given group of people to communicate with each other. Another question to ask when thinking about language is what came first, man or language? The size of one’s world can shape the size of their vocabulary. Given that man preceded language, everyculture shaped different languages according to their specific environments and needs. Resulting in that language is a human cultural that as a nation one helps to make evolve.

Not only does their own language shape the culture, but also the interaction with other cultures. Language is a force that allows humans to create ties that bind into a community, providing them social, individual, or cultural identification. In James Baldwin text, “ If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me What Is,” he refers language to being an unparalleled power by stating, “ Language is also a political instrument, means and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity” (242).

Baldwin draws points of language’s importance to the experience of the African slaves. Having no common language, the slaves were unable to communicate with one another. They evolved a language, which they used to articulate their familiar experience and shaped their own community. The African Americans evolved a dialect of English that enabled them to describe their reality and establish their own distinct cultural identity. It is controversial how the humans think by figures or by concepts.

In general, it is clear that thinking happens via ideas and imagination, which are expressed by words, and organized in speech. Sciences claim that thinking and language are so related, that changes in languages can organize thoughts, ideas, imaginations and human actions. The word “macho” shows the difference between thought and the language spoken in both English and Spanish. The essay “Americanization Is Tough on ‘Macho’” written by Rose Del Castillo Guibault examines the cultural differences behind one certain word.

When referring to a Hispanic who is “macho” resembles that he is a responsible, hardworking man in charge. Even though the language and the word is the same the thought is different in English. The American macho has a negative reference meaning to the word such as: brute, uncouth, loud, abrasive, and a chauvinist (238). When language is used in the normal way, the speaker has a thought with certain content and chooses words such that on the basis of those words the listener will be able to recognize that the speaker has a thought with that content.

This example reiterates that once words and phrases supporting particular notions and thinking have been formed, they have the effect of embedding those notions and thoughts firmly and therefore becoming cultural norms. Accepting the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its “strong” form that language completely determines thought can be hard for any individual. Taking in the opposing views can show other avenues of the language and thought theory. Just as the chicken and egg question we as humans cannot know everything, or should know everything. Some things are left open for interpretation and personal views.

So a more limited Whorfianism, that states that “ the ways in which we see the world may be ‘ influenced’ rather than completely determined by the kind of language we use, in particular our language can affect that we remember and what we find it easy to pay attention to” (Chandler). As humans continue to grow on this earth our environments shape languages and languages shapes you as your instrument for thought. Work Cited Baldwin, James C. (1979). “ If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What is? ” The New York Times, July 29, 1979 by the New York Times Company Chandler, David. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. " The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. N. p. , 18 Sept. 1995. Web. 20 Oct. 2012. . Guilbault, Rose Del Castillo. “ Americanization Is Tough on ‘ Macho’ ” About Language: A Reader for Writers. 5th Ed. Eds. William H. Roberts and Gregoire Turgeon. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 238-39. Whorf, B. L. (1940): 'Science and Linguistics', Technology Review 42(6): 229-31, 247-8. Also in B. L. Whorf (1956): Language, Thought and Reality (ed. J. B. Carroll). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press