

## THE ROLE OF TEACHING CONCEPTS IN AN 'ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES' DISCIPLINE

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to consider the ways of teaching the concept of language-thought dominance, and to discuss what predominates in the human brain - the way in which we think or the way we shape our thoughts into different utterances. Furthermore, it focuses on how cultural influences could impact on the way we create ideas and produce thoughts, or the ways we choose the words we need for self-expression in a language.

Are we slaves to our language and does it shape our thoughts, or can we claim that our thoughts determine the way we speak?

The question of interaction between thought and language has been stirring in the minds of linguists all over the world for many years. Of course, it is impossible to dismiss that the way we express our thoughts does not influence our cognition at all. However practice shows that it is erroneous to think that language has dominion over our thoughts. If language had come first, humanity would have hardly ever been able to invent new things and create new words by which to refer to them, because we would have been unable to perceive the new concepts. If our thoughts were limited by the language we speak, we would never have all the myriad languages that currently exist. People would have been unable to learn new language the way we do at present because learning a new language would mean acquiring a new system of concepts. That would make the process of language learning impossible.

The question of what comes first, be it thought or language, is still hotly debated by leading scientists and for this reason this article provides some interesting facts and evidence of how both cognitive conceptions are interrelated on scientific grounds, and which one is dominant up to the author's argumentative position.

**Keywords:** Teaching, concepts, language, thought, human, brain, scientists.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Which comes first - a word or a thought? This question is as rhetorical as that of which of the proverbial hen or egg came first.

According to the Bible, the word came first. However, this statement only tells us that a word precedes an action and leaves the question of language and thought open to further research. The question of interaction between thought and language has stirred in the minds of linguists all over the world for many years. Many of them, such as George Orwell, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf, have written in support of the idea that the language we speak is the determiner of our cognition (Fromkin, et al. 2007).

Of course it is impossible to entirely reject the notion that the way we express our thoughts does not influence our cognition, however practice shows that it is erroneous to think that our language has dominion over our thoughts. The process of thinking is very fast and before the moment of the actual verbalization of a thought we have to make a choice between the multitudes of ideas that are ready to come out of our mouths. If language had come first, humanity would hardly have been able to invent new things and create new words to name them, because we would have been unable to perceive such new concepts.

If our thoughts were limited by the language we speak, we would not have the many languages now in existence. We would have been unable to learn new language the way we do at present because learning a

new language would mean acquiring a new system of concepts. This means that the two languages would not be interrelated.

Hence, the creativity of a language, the possibility to express oneself in any of the languages of the world. The human ability of the non-linguistic representation of ideas supports the hypothesis that thought is not determined by language, though a particular language choice can influence our cognition to some extent.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The creative aspect of a language helps that language to catch up with our thoughts. This means that language is developing together with the development of our mind. The process of language acquisition is a good example of this gradual language development. The more information a child acquires, the more complex sentences he/she can build. If we were unable to create new words, we would be unable to interact with each other because everything that comes to mind would have to be named.

Popper describes the following stages of language development: the “lower stage” where sounds are used to express feelings and the “higher stage” which is the representation of a concept using sound (Chomsky, 1968). Chomsky himself insists that there is no evolutionary transition between these two stages (Chomsky, 1968). We can't reject the actual existence of the aforementioned stages as well as their support of the priority of thought.

The first thing that we usually learn about a language is its phonetic system. Even in this case before learning a sound we actually learn the concept of a particular phoneme. After acquiring a phonetic system we move on to learning the vocabulary. Here again we can see the dominance of a concept because a simple combination of sounds has no importance for us. We need a concrete concept to underpin these sounds to make them worth learning.

The same situation can be observed in learning grammar. It is much easier to learn a pattern if it has a clear concept. In this case the concept means the meaning is encoded in a particular grammar rule. The invention or discovery of a new concept, for example a computer or a new specimen of flower, are at first perceived by us as a concept and only after fixing this concept in our mind can we give it a name.

Concepts that don't have any particular language representation can also exist. For example, the Kazakh language doesn't make a distinction between the genders but it doesn't mean that Kazakhs don't see a difference between a man and a woman. We are able to create and produce an unlimited number of utterances, much of what we say has never been said or heard before but we still can interpret the meaning due to the limited number of concepts that shape our language (Cook, 1970). Our every utterance is conditioned by a particular concept. We can invent an unlimited number of ways of presenting our thoughts but the concepts are permanent and limited until we create something new.

Further evidence of the priority of thought can be found in the possibility of expressing oneself and the same concept in any language in the world. Even if there is no exact equivalent for a particular idea, there is always a way to make this thought comprehensible in any language. We all share the same concepts, or if a concept is new to us owing to some natural or other conditions, we can easily learn it through the verbal representation of the concepts that were familiar to us up to this point. For example, if there is no English equivalent for the Kazakh word “kaimak” we still can explain to the speaker of English that *kaimak* is a variety of a sour cream that has a quite sweet taste and thick consistency. Before giving an explanation of what *kaimak* is we need to have a concept of it. A person who has never seen *kaimak* before would hardly be able to explain to somebody what it is.

After gaining a concept, even from somebody's words alone, we can freely add the word to our vocabulary. Furthermore, some sociolinguists suggest that there are no two speakers who will express a thought in the same way (Asseburg, 1999). This supports the notion that if our thoughts were determined by a language, we would be unable to communicate because then every word would require a separate concept. Thus we would need to have as many concepts as words we know. This does not make sense. We can say “chelovek” in Russian, “adam” in Kazakh, and “human being” in English, but it doesn't mean that we need to have three different concepts of a human being, or that the Russians, Kazakhs or Englishmen perceive them in a different way. The possibility of translation from one language into another with hardly any losses in meaning supports the priority of thought over language.

Finally we cannot say that language is the only way to communicate our ideas. For example we can express our approval of a friend's suggestion to have lunch together by a nod of the head or even by a smile, and we

can greet each other with a handshake or a kiss. We can point or just stare at a person to express our surprise or disapproval.

Our thoughts can also found in artistic representation. For example, meaning could be expressed by means of a picture or a sculpture. Verbal representation could also be substituted by an object that the concept represents. However, this could never work in reverse. We could not find a concept for a word if we did not know it before and didn't have any concept of it in our mind. We may have ideas that never find verbal representation (Munger, 2008). Our thoughts are so fast that we are not always able to catch them. We do not articulate everything that passes through our mind. When asked a question, we have to look through a number of concepts in our minds before making a verbal representation of the best, at least in our opinion, idea. We do not voice all the possible answers we have.

The most striking example of concept dominating over word can be found in a child's development. Children start to make themselves clear long before they learn to present their desires verbally. Their behaviour speaks louder than words (Bermudez, 2006). At first children acquire concepts for the people and things surrounding them. The words they utter do not necessary match the words accepted for the concept, but the way children manage to present these concepts helps us to see what they are about. In this case the actual language takes a back seat and we can see the importance of the thought. We can understand a child not because we share the same language system, but because we share similar concepts and can make predictions and assumptions of what could be important for a child in a certain moment.

In spite of all the evidence pointing to thought dominating language, we still have to admit that language determines our thinking in a particular way. For example, the final position of a verb in some Asian languages such as Kazakh contributes to the indirect way of expressing its ideas. Another example is the implication of the English pronoun "it" for the animals and inanimate objects which helps us to understand that speakers of English make the distinction between a human being and an animal, while Russian shows that those who speak it hold that a person is a kind of animal.

A study by Gary Lupyan shows that labelling things contributes to the understanding of a concept (Munger, 2008). According to Gordon, who had been studying an Amazonian tribe called the Pirahã, the way people express numbers influences the way they perceive the numerical system. An example of his hypothesis is that members of the Pirahã tribe were unable to cope with a task involving numbers higher than three because their language only had words for one, two, and many (Graham, 2004).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Many people associate their language with their identity. Language can show us what values its speakers share. For example, the Kazakh language has a range of words for horse meat. This allows us to understand that the Kazakhs hold this food in very high regard. The existence of a great number of Russian words related to the process of drinking vodka may give us some understanding of how this is a custom valued in their society. The English have many words to describe the rain that characterizes the unique English climate. You can see how many conclusions we can reach about a people judging by the language they speak. But the language can only reflect and minimally direct cognition.

Taking into account all that written above, we may come to the conclusion that the way we think is reflected in our language. Ultimately, we have to admit that our thoughts determine the way we speak. We always have to create new ways to represent our thoughts as well as to create new concepts based on those already existing. We are able to think of the same concept in different languages and translate the same idea in any language existing in our world. It is also possible to express our thought without the involvement of any language. Though language does not come before concept, it still can tell us much about the way we think and perceive this world.

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