

Reflections On Language And Mind

Shiva Durga

Department of English, GLA University, Mathura, U.P.

Abstract: This topic is like the chicken and egg question, which came first? Did we learn to think before we speak, or did language shape our thoughts? In this section, we will look at the various theories and the relationship of language and thought. Many people consider that upon introspection we seem to think in the language we speak. It is a common misconception that what we think is what we really speak but thinking and expressing are closely related but have their own differences.

It is important that the differences between different forms of communication are discussed in relation to the neural paths of development. In addition, it is also important that we try to understand the basis behind how the mind is directly connected to language. We will study about “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or Theory of Linguistic Relativity”.

Famous researchers even say that infants are born with a language independent processing system. It is also observed that language can act as a cultural entity to identify an ethnic group.

The various studies conducted on the development of languages reveal that infants develop the sense of language only after the age of two. So how do they communicate before that? Is it a simple or more complicated form? Language is not a cognitive function but also the only source of conveying what one thinks and what one intends to say to another person.

Have you ever wondered how kids start understanding what the adults say to them? Let us analyze.

1. THEORY AND ASSOCIATED HYPOTHESIS

It is a general notion that the reality projected through spoken words is synchronous with the thought perception process. Perceiving and expressing are considered to be same and it is preconceived that what we speak is formulated on our thoughts. According to this notion the basic presumption is, what we speak is dependent on how it is encrypted and decrypted in our minds. On the other hand, it is believed that what we perceive depends on what we speak. In short, this group believes that thought depends on language.

Famous linguist Edward Sapir had formulated the Theory of Linguistic Relativity or the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that occupies great importance in the field of communication. “*The grammatical structure of a person’s language influences the way he or she perceives the world.*”^[1] This theory satisfies criteria that are essential to identify its workability. This theory proves that language helps in forming the view on reality. This theory represents language and spoken words in terms of which thought category it falls under.

This ‘theory of Linguistic Relativity’ proves that ‘the thought arises from language and what we see is based on what we say’. ‘The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis’ is split into two categories: ‘Linguistic Determinism’ and ‘Linguistic relativity’.

In a famous experiment, “deaf children see a doll kept in a marble box. The children observe that the marble is removed and placed in another basket after the doll was removed”. The deaf kids are asked to trust that the doll will look into the box for the marble after it comes back. Surprisingly, the deaf kids with deaf parents responded positively to this experiment and the deaf kids with non-deaf parents responded incorrectly.

This study had portrayed the connection between the deaf children and their deaf parents who communicate through ‘complex sign language’ and their attempt to respond correctly to the situation given to them. The children here have been brought up in the sign language environment easily identified that ‘the doll would look into the box’. Besides the children who grew up with normal parents weren’t able to identify because their parents were not well-versed with sign language and could not communicate the same to their children.

The alternate view, ‘weak determinism’, recognizes that there is some impact on the ‘perception of one’s language’ but the concept is not as clear as ‘strong determinism’. This concept doesn’t describe ‘one’s view’ of the world. The second part of the ‘Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is linguistic relativism’. As a world renowned fact, human beings don’t live alone in the world and are dependent on their society for their basic needs.

Thus for humans, language is used as a medium for expression to convey their ideas and thoughts.

Language and Thought

Language and the thought process share a subtle connection. Our everyday lives centre on the usage of a language without which communicating to others and trying to understand what they say would be futile. Language is basically used to converse, understand what another person says and to process information to arrive at logical inferences.

Rational thinking and logical processing requires use of language. Some researchers such as Sapir and Whorf proposed that thought is totally determined by the language. Just imagine a world without language, how would technology advance and create a revolution. Language has become such an integral part of our lives that even the smallest task would require us to communicate to another person using a language.

All the above factors seem to bind the thought process and the use of language in the world today.

The other dimension of thinking included the sub-vocal speech. The attempt to solve a problem or process something internally requires an inner language. Talking to oneself is a common sight when people face bad times or challenges in the most stressful conditions. The most common view of a classroom reveals that 90% of the children vocalize what they have been taught in class by talking to themselves or others. Children resort to this technique not because they would want to store their thoughts in form of language but to only vocalize their thoughts and ideas.

Some linguists and researchers state that the language and thought are entirely two different and independent entities. The variations in the syntax structure and in the various dictionaries available in multiple languages cannot possibly identify the way people think and perceive.

According to the various statements made in the above paragraphs, thoughts come first followed by a person's language as a tool for thought expression. In the case of some scientists like Bruner, 'language and thought' are different entities. He had proposed 'three ways in which a kid remembers and uses the information from the environment around him'. Palmer, Joy (2001).- "*Bruner wanted to create an educational environment that would focus on (1) what was uniquely human about human beings, (2) how humans got that way and (3) how humans could become more so.*" ^[2]

The three ways are through lively representation or using physical means by using objects to demonstrate one's thoughts, by helping the child visualize the environment mentally and through symbolic representations by means of language. The non linguistic thought comes initially that is by enactive methods or by using mental visualizations.

After a child has developed his language, his thoughts are augmented and advanced at a greater pace in terms of symbolic representations. Some scientists do not feel satisfied with either version of language or thought assuming the initial position and came up with a third version. The third version stated that the language and thought processes are interdependent.

Language is a usual part of the thought process and it does not concern one's ideas taking importance over another but both the ideas being equally significant. It is a belief that language and thoughts are mutually dependent at infancy and as the child grows they become interlinked. For example, when the child starts speaking it uses only speech and no thoughts are involved in it. Simultaneously, the child adapts initial stages of logic and reasoning which do not concern language. As the child steps to two years of age, the social speech and the initial logical reasoning combine together and their words represent their symbols for their thoughts.

Empirical Evidences:

According to Piaget, language is just a part of the several symbolic functions. The other functions were symbolic play and imagery. Piaget believes that the relationship of thought and language is the opposite of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. For Piaget, the development of the intellect occupies high priority and without which language is only significant than a baby's babble. For this purpose researchers had observed in the children who could understand the concept of the volume conservation (the children learn to appreciate the volume of a liquid transferred from one container to another). He found that such kids grasped words such as 'more', 'little' and 'bigger than'. The children who hadn't been exposed to this concept before, found it difficult to utilise the vocabulary correctly though they were provided with a specific linguistic training.

A research study was conducted on 'the Navajo Indians' by Carroll and Casagrande. "The three groups of participants were ones who spoke Navajo only; those who speak both Navajo and English and finally American children of European descent who knew only English. The form and shape of things was very important for Navajos which is incorporated in their language. Several verbs are used for handling long, flexible objects from those used for holding short and rigid objects".

American children establish identifying objects in the sequence such as size, colour, form and shape. If the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis was true the Navajo-speaking children would have identified objects at an earlier age than American children.

The main source of confusion is which came first the language or its environment. According to Whorf and Sapir the language came initially and then the way people perceived it, but it could have been vice-versa too.

The ninety two words for rice species used by the Huánuco people are words that indicate their environment and the things that are of great importance to them. Therefore it is important to identify what forms of communication and language holds the greatest degree of importance based on the society of origin. *“The vocabulary, grammatical structure and usage conventions of any language are linked in innumerable ways with the social, cultural, and historical experience of its speakers”* ^[3]. –Sapir

It is a known fact that language helps in differentiating the environments of various people and provides tags to retain the differences in one’s memory. The more flexible a language is, the introduction of new terms, jargons are bound to increase. This instance however emphasizes that the thought is the father of the language and not the vice-versa. Thought is the parent of language. If thought always was required to indicate the language there would be no ways to induce fresh thoughts into the process. Change in only the language is not sufficient, but changes in new technology and original thinking shall ignite new thoughts.

Thus, the above section has presented evidences of how empirical evidences are conflicting when it comes to facets of language and mind.

How do we find out about languages?

We had studied about how people connect their thoughts and language to communicate to others. We had also seen about different ideologies based on this concept. In comparison to the thought process and idea generation language formation is more sequenced and organised. Language is the only way of communicating with the other individuals and is unique to every culture and society. It is also considered a cultural trademark of a society. Language is both a complicated and a flexible system that encourages innovation, modification and evolution. It can be put across in different ways from oral expression, kinetically and through graphical representations.

On the other hand, language plays a major role not only in communication but also helps in determining a particular cultural group and their ethnicity. Language can vary across religion, class, ethnic groups, and levels of education and across generations. The language that a person speaks and how he communicates give us an idea about their cultural affiliations, how others perceive and socialise with them.

Although a person might process their thoughts at a rapid pace, translating them into a language or into a form that is understood by all is a tough task. Not necessarily all that is conceived in the mind ought to be expressed orally.

With proper exposure to the environment children tend to develop their language skills over the initial years of their lives. Children usually obtain information about their language from their surroundings such as parents, caretakers and the adults around them.

Infants generally develop their language by listening and they are very sensitive to statistical regularities in language and inflections in words. They adapt analogies for coining new words and try to mimic the adult speech. Children have a tendency to choose the nouns, verbs and adjectives more frequently and develop their range later on.

Kids respond to the joint focus of attention for both the adult and the kid, like to what is physical and conversationally existent and hence to the language directed to them as listeners.

Social interaction forms the focus of such acquisition processes. People tend to recognise, categorise and recall objects and events without even using language. The sorting that people apply to language does not always link to what they do in response to language.

People tend to develop in a wholesome way only if they use multiple representations of experience, link them to specific languages for encoding purposes and also develop their cognition for recognition, sorting, categorisation and recalling.

A child's initial conceptual portrayal of objects, relations and incidents facilitate a strong foundation for linguistic categories and a universal source for languages. Precisely humans illustrate experiences accumulated from perception inputs, with informational inferences in context.

In the first year of birth infants begin to organise what they know about things around them and the incidents they have witnessed before they learn the language.

The variations occur only when children learn different languages. This section has given an effective summation of how languages are brought into focus and the role of languages in development.

Role of Language in development:

Languages vary in subtle degrees by the way they are encoded because they arouse ideas and offer people exclusive and systematic maps of the events they have spoken about. The grammatical and phrasal options available in one of the languages do not express all details of the concepts available around in the environment. Words and language generally focus their attention on few entities and do not cover the other entities sufficiently. Each language caters to variety in selection of entities and topics that it would cover. It is generally advisable for children to choose the languages in which the categories should work out.

This job treads into adulthood also as children tend to map each unknown word and constructions to relevant concepts and representations in their life. Since languages vary, children who learn several languages tend to link different linguistic forms and structures to their familiar domain to understand the concepts with ease. How they speak about every domain is dependent on their language that they often use or hear.

Some of these variances can be identified at an earlier stage and as soon as the kids begin to pick up a language. This characteristic is evident in the domain of space. According to

various researches conducted on language learning and a child's ability to differentiate between various sounds, children tend to focus their attention completely on the sounds of a particular language in their growing environment. The kids tend to develop listening skills and try to acquire language from their surroundings between 10-14 months, but their capacity to differentiate is not lost completely. Although their capabilities differ, their conceptual differentiations tend to follow a similar pathway.

The kids usually pick up differences in their language and then reduce them gradually to those actually demarcated in the language that they hear in day to day life. To how much extent does this parallel concept hold? Languages differ in their taxonomy or structure that is their meanings, grammatical options, and the usual patterns used in the words and their structuring. Till what limits do young kids reflect cognitive differentiations that were already existent? Certain questions such as do children also make further discriminations from adult who speak the same language and which of the following grammatical differentiations have a conceptual foundation already in place when kids start to learn from them. In the concept of acquiring language, language production lags when compared to comprehension.

The researchers rarely verify activities such as, do children really understand certain terms or they are just making inferences from what speakers or adults mean around them. How do researchers check the alternatives available and the documents with more care when children cope with different forms of language used? Survey findings from development of cognition and comparative psychology state that language may help to establish new links for vision, sense of touch and audio-visual memory also.

Therefore, it is established that the role of language in development is important in arriving at both cognitive and behavioural development. The link between language and development is succulent and if there are problems in some of these patterns of development then the child may develop mental disorders like autism.

2. CONCLUSION:

As we have seen above how language and thoughts play a major role in our lives from the infant stage to the adulthood. The various hypotheses brought out the mutual relationship between the thought perception process and language cognition. Although the thought process and linguistic capabilities are different, they are interdependent. Some scientists felt that a person's intellect and brain had to be developed for the person to learn a language. Then we came across the most important fact that language is not only a capability, but it is used as the medium of communication to put across one's ideas across to another person.

Language is also considered as a cultural unique factor and helps in bonding ethnic groups. The main source of linguistic learning is from the environment. Children tend to learn faster with highly communicative adults and tend to process their thoughts accordingly. It is noted that children lack language production at a younger age and tend to develop better comprehension.

The major question here is that to what limit may the language acquisition be responsible for variety in patters and rates of cognitive and linguistic development? The second question that is asked is, to what limit may such links be impacted by the language amount that children

are exposed to? Most scientists and surveys reveal that children tend to respond better to visualisations and mental imagery when taught something in a class.

Although languages differ, the person's thought process still remains the same and the effort to convert one's thoughts to words remains the toughest task.

3. REFERENCES:

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