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Language as a Form of Mental Slavery

The question of whether language affects the way people perceive the world has been ongoing for many years. I ultimately believe language is the only thing that creates our perception of the world. Perception is a matter of the mind and not an absolute truth that can be defined in one way or the other. Lera Boroditsky’s TedTalk “How Language Shapes the Way We Think” argues that language is a way of transmitting knowledge to others and therefore is able to craft our reality. Thus, language is in fact able to influence one’s thoughts. Because each language is so drastically different, each person’s knowledge of the universe varies based on their reality. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is a hypothesis that was, “first advanced by Edward Sapir in 1929 and subsequently developed by Benjamin Whorf, that the structure of a language determines a native speaker's perception and categorization of experience” (Oxford Dictionary). According to this hypothesis, the language people speak creates their perception of the world around them. Because there are different ways that people view the world around them based on their language and culture, this ultimately leads me to believe each language is its own universe. Lera Boroditsky builds on this claim by saying, "human minds have invented not one cognitive universe, but 7,000" (Boroditsky 12:19). Therefore because language has such a powerful influence on the mind, it can be said that all humans are experiencing a form mental slavery because of what their language is allowing them to know. Merriam-Webster defines a slave as “one that is completely subservient to a dominating influence” (Merriam-Webster dictionary editors). In sum, I argue that we, as humans, are all slaves (as the previous definition states) to the language we speak because it is ultimately the ruler of the universe we have allowed ourselves to know, and it is quite the challenge to emancipate ourselves from this form of mental slavery (Marley).

To start, realize that by saying any random combination of words, we are able to change what the listener of those words is thinking about at that very moment. Each person will most likely have a different thought about the words that were just said based on their background. This reveals just how flexible the mind is. However Benjamin Whorf states, “the effortlessness of speech and the subconscious way we picked up that activity in early childhood lead us to regard talking and thinking as wholly straightforward and transparent” (Whorf 238). We never questioned the ability to speak or how it was affecting us as a person because at the time we were too young to comprehend. All we cared about was communicating. Furthermore he says, “to rid ourselves of this way of thinking is exceedingly difficult when we have no

linguistic experience of any other” (238). He is not saying that it would be completely impossible to allow your brain to experience a different universe, but rather hard. And who is to judge when this has occurred? Finally, Whorf moves on to say, “there are here no laws of thought. Yet the structural regularities of our sentences enable us to sense that laws are SOMEWHERE in the background” (238). We must have some sort of structure to be able to communicate and transfer the language to other people, however as long as someone understands what you are saying, it really does not matter how you say it. There is no law for communication of thoughts. No one, except yourself, can tell you if you are thinking the ‘correct’ way. Whorf goes as far to say, “[his] own studies suggest that language, for all its kingly role, is in some sense a superficial embroidery upon deeper processes of consciousness” (239). The self is the only person that can sense the conscious. Therefore, the self is the only person who can train their mind to have the ability to form new thoughts about the world.

A prime example of language controlling thought and creating new universes is through religion. There was apparently one book, the Old Testament, written thousands of years ago during B.C. times that has now been transcribed to thousands of books and interpretations based on language of cultures. These books have become such an essential part of life that people dedicate their entire being to worshipping it, depending on what their translation of the book says. Without language ever existing, we would have no form of religions. There would be no way of communicating the purpose. Think back to Hitler. By using words of religion and a culture’s beliefs, he was able to control an entire country and kill millions of people. Had this language not created this religion, this would not have been able to happen. Hitler was able to give a voice to this hateful rhetoric and accomplish his goal of violence, because of course words lead to action. And conversely, misinterpretation of words leads to wrong-doings. But when powerful people come along and are able to develop a way to communicate that picture as they see the world - into the psyche of many - that is when language is the ultimate mental slaveholder. And it has always been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. This is because people generally are quicker to believe what they see versus what they hear. However, this picture created in one’s mind will vary for each person, and it is almost impossible to translate the meaning of what we picture to someone else.

Several years after Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis was released, Bob Marley wrote his “Redemption Song” as he was battling with cancer, and realizing he could die in the near future. The famous song has a repeated verse saying “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery / None but ourselves can free our minds” (Marley). Now, because this is a song released in 1980, several people from several cultures will interpret the lyrics in so many different ways to mean so many different things. However one interpretation I agree with comes from “The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers” that says, “emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind. Mind is your only ruler, sovereign. The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of the other man who uses his mind ..” (Robert A. Hill, Marcus Garvey 791) To me, the other man using our mind is language. Language is literally telling you your thoughts, and if we didn't have language we would not even be able to formulate these thoughts in our mind into a way we were able to comprehend. Although there is not much evidence proving we must know a language to experience thought, the truth is that if you do not know any language, then you are not experiencing much of the human world, and therefore will not be able to form proper thoughts. Human thought structures and limits the ideas that individuals are capable of formulating and expressing. Another way in which Bob Marley’s song can be related to Lera Boroditsky’s TedTalk, in my interpretation, is when he says, “How long shall they kill our prophets / While we stand aside and look? / Uh, some say it's just a part of it / We've got to fulfill the book” (Marley). I will use another Merriam-Webster definition to make my point here, where the fifth definition part b defines the prophet as a “disappearance of material sense before the conscious facts of spiritual Truth” (Merriam-Webster dictionary editors). In this sense of the word prophet, it can be tied to languages. Because language creates perception, it must contain conscious facts that one is able to experience through it. Even further, Lera Boroditsky claims that “languages, of course, are living things, things that we can hone and change to suit our needs. The tragic thing is that we're losing so much of this linguistic diversity all the time. We're losing about one language a week, and by some estimates, half of the world's languages will be gone in the next hundred years” (Boroditsky, 12:30). So when using Marley’s song as a metaphor, we can relate the verse of prophets being killed, to languages dying off and being replaced. It seems that no one even realizes this is happening. Once again “Redemption Song” can be tied in here in the verse stating, “While we stand aside and look? / Uh, some say it's just a part of it”. No one is really doing anything to prevent these languages from disappearing. Is this how it is supposed to be? Is this just a part of it? Or should something be done? Once the language is gone, the “conscious facts of spiritual Truth” it contains will be permanently erased with it as well. You cannot tell the past of ancient cultures without their language. When there is no one left that can speak the language, there is no one left to be the mentor of the language for those to follow that want to learn it. Meaning, once the language is gone, it would be extremely hard (if not impossible), to get it back. Again, we are slaves to language here because we rely on language for every aspect of our life, and if it were to ever disappear, we would not be able to function the way we do now. We rely on language to tell our legacy when we are gone. So even in death, we are slaves to language. Even in death, it is extremely difficult to emancipate ourselves from the mental slavery brought about by language.

Moreover, I will ask you to think about a time when you were experiencing a feeling that you just could not find a word to describe. I know this has happened to me on several occasions. This is because each language does not have a word for everything we want to say or know. I know several people who are bilingual and I have heard them stumbling to find a word to translate another word they know in a different language - and sometimes it simply does not exist. Translation from languages is not an easy process because it is not just about changing a word to another word, but rather expressing the entire sense of the meaning to another. What should that person do in that situation? Create a word for what they are thinking? Describe what the word means? Then, even if they were to describe it, what would happen if we still were not able to understand the concept? Does this imply that they are experiencing some higher form of thinking and perception because they are able to process this thought in their mind, yet we are not? Again, who is to be the judge? So many new words and concepts are created every day. Who creates them? Where do they come from? Conversely, several words and concepts are disappearing every day. Where are they going? This demonstrates one reason language has such a powerful influence on the human brain, thus allowing us to see the manipulation that is occurring, rather it be benign or sinister.

As languages evolve, the control system allowing our mind’s to program meanings is evolving as well.

In closing, if you agree that language controls thought, this means we, as humans, are completely submissive to its dominating control of our mind - slaves to language. Humans are surrounded by language during almost every moment of our day. In Boroditsky’s TedTalk, she quotes Charlemagne, Holy Roman emperor, who once said, "To have a second language is to have a second soul" (Boroditsky 1:35). This is a strong implication of language crafting perception. The vocabulary, meanings, and structure of a second language are able to enhance your knowledge and widen your perspective of the world. Some words have a strictly unique meaning and the can nature of them is unknown to other languages. Therefore, by being bilingual one is able to experience emotions and understandings that others cannot. Even in this instance, the bilingual person is still only able to think about the concepts her mind is allowing through language. There will always be an unknown - something you just cannot describe. After all, Barry Mandela once said, “Words are the most dangerous weapons of all”.

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