

# UNIT 4 LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

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## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The primary objective of this unit is to examine the relationship between language and thought. This is an extremely complex question and our understanding about its different dimensions is not particularly clear. The purpose of this unit is to start a discussion in this important area. After you have read this Unit, and some suggested readings given at the end, you should be able to examine some of the following questions more meaningfully: Are language and thought two completely independent entities? Do you think without language also? Is all thought ultimately language dependent? Is it the case that we have language at some abstract level which is completely independent of thought? What is really involved when we for example use the word 'chair'? What does the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis say about the relationship between language and thought? What does modern linguistic theory say about it? Do animals think? Do they have a language in some sense? Not much is known about these questions. If we can create an interest in you about these issues, we will indeed be happy.

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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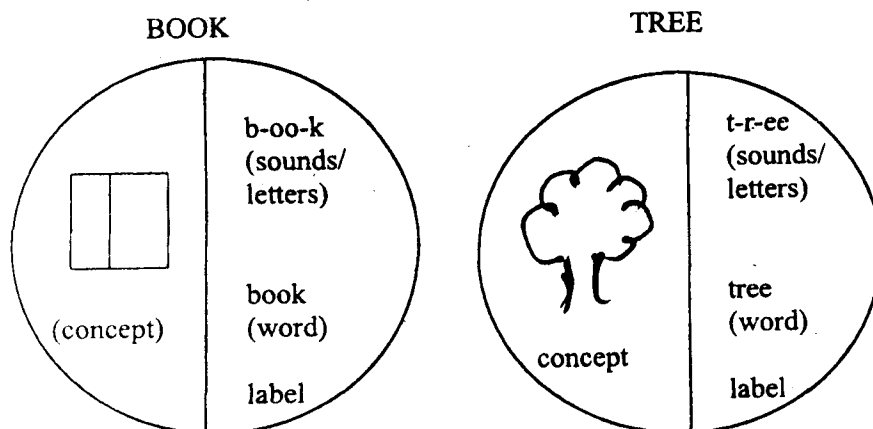
We often come across contradictory viewpoints about the relationship between language and thought. The issue has been examined for centuries from different perspectives including those of philosophy, biology, linguistics, psychology and logic. Some people believe that language is primary and makes thought possible. It is absolutely central to our thought processes. It not only helps us to understand the thoughts of other people and express our own but also structures our thoughts in a variety of very complex ways. We see what our language tells us to see and we express our thoughts in ways that are allowed by our language. Language in this sense is constitutive of thought and defines the limits of our thought. This we may regard as the **cognitive view of language**. According to several other people, thought comes first. Language is only a tool for expression, a means of communication. In this **communicative view of language**, language is seen merely as a conduit through which thoughts are articulated. Thoughts and ideas exist independent of language. It is also claimed that a variety of thought is possible without language. Several important human activities including sculpture, dance, music, painting, etc. involve some of our highest thoughts but may be completely independent of our language. It is possible to argue that dance and music have their own language but it may be significantly different from natural human language which is rooted in a pairing of a lexicon with a set of syntactic rules. Again, many people will argue that dogs and cats have emotions, understanding and thought. They may also have some kind of language but as compared to human language it is extremely limited in a variety of ways. In this unit, we will examine the relationship between language and thought

from both the communicative and cognitive perspectives. It is possible that there is an element of truth in both these positions because nobody will deny an intimate relationship between language and thought. It is possible that the human mind is actually structured in terms of a large number of independent, though interactive, modules.

## 4.2 THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

There is no doubt that many of our concepts and words are closely tied. When we use the word *chair*, we also have in mind the corresponding image of a chair, let us say the concept CHAIR. The concept of a chair must be an extremely complex feature matrix that would include features like four legs, a seat, made of wood, steel etc., used for sitting, with a back etc. Whenever we see a new chair, we don't have to coin a new word to talk about it. We use the word *chair*. Notice that this naming relationship is arbitrary. A community is free to choose any word for any concept but once chosen it cannot be easily separated from the concept for which it stands. Thus for the object 'chair', Hindi speakers do not choose *chair*; they call it *kursii*. But then every time a Hindi speaker sees a 'chair', he says *kursii* and not *peR* which is the Hindi word for 'tree'. This pairing of the label and the concept gives us what is known as the **linguistic sign**. The concept/thought of a chair, the sounds used to utter that word and the actual object 'chair' must constitute one single entity – a linguistic sign.

The concept of the linguistic sign was given by the famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1923). According to him, the pairing of word-labels and meaning-concepts produce a system of signs. Each sign consists of two parts: a **signifier** i.e. a label and a **signified** i.e. the concept. It is important to note that the actual sign is not one or the other or both; the sign is the association that binds the label and the concept together. In the pictures below, we give visual illustrations of the signs for 'tree' and 'book'.



Notice that the sounds or letters involved in speaking or writing the words *tree* and *book* have nothing to do with the objects 'tree' and 'book'; any other set of sounds would do just as well. Hindi speakers, for example, use the sequence p-e-R for the object 'tree' and the sequence k-i-t-aa-b for the object 'book'. However, once these correspondences are established, they acquire a fairly permanent place in our minds. We often wonder how we would function if we did not develop this important mechanism. Imagine how you would feel if you were to coin a new word every time you see a new chair. And then different people in the same community may coin very different words for the same object and it may become impossible to talk to each other. If I want to talk to you, then we must share not only the same words but also the concepts these words denote. According to Saussure,

*Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to separate sound from thought, or thought from sound.*

The concept of the linguistic sign is often used to suggest that our thoughts are entirely formed by our language. Hindi speakers have only one word *barf* for the object for which English speakers have at least two i.e. ice and snow; and Eskimos have more than twenty. So speakers of Hindi, English and Eskimo languages perhaps see the world very differently and their perceptions are conditioned by their languages. Does everyone see the same number and kinds of colours? Do two different communities living in the same environment classify and categorize the flora and fauna around them in the same way? Is there only one 'Reality' there? Or is it the case, that different languages produce different versions of external reality? What happens to people who know and use many languages at the same time?

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### 4.3 SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

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The relationship between language and our perception of reality and its representation in the human mind was explored by the famous anthropological linguist Edward Sapir (1894-1939) and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis named after them has two aspects: **linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism**. The principle of linguistic relativity says that different people see the world in different ways; some people see only one kind of water, others may see five different kinds of water and therefore feel the need for having five different words for different kinds of water. One community may be happy with 'uncle' and 'aunt' while another may have ten different words in this domain of kinship words. There is thus no natural or absolute way of labelling the world around us. According to the theory of linguistic determinism, language provides the framework for our thoughts and it is impossible to think outside this frame. Sapir felt that people were at the mercy of their language. He said:

*It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group..... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretations.*  
(Sapir 1929: 207)

According to Whorf,

*We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds- and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. 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. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.*

(in Carroll 1956: 213)

Notice that whereas Sapir rather carefully talks in terms of only 'predisposing' speakers of a language to the outside reality and the corresponding thought patterns, Whorf uses expressions such as 'absolutely obligatory' and the linguistic agreement

'decreeing' the structure of our talk. Whorf's claim was largely based on his experience as a fire prevention engineer and the analysis of some American Indian languages, in particular, Hopi. As a fire engineer, he noticed that the behaviour of fire workers was conditioned by their use of the words 'empty' and 'full'. They regarded gasoline drums 'full' only when they had liquid in them. They would happily smoke beside 'empty' drums, which were actually 'full' of gas vapour, thus causing fire. Whorf felt that the world is seen, understood and analyzed in terms of the linguistic patterns of the speaker's language. His work on Hopi showed that the structure of typical European languages such as English, French or German was completely different from Hopi and this explained the different ways in which the two communities saw the reality around them. He found that in most languages it was common to understand abstract notions and experiences through using concrete metaphors. For example, we talk about 'grasping an idea', 'moving a debate' or 'embrace an idea' etc. Hopi does not follow the same pattern. Again, most European languages analyze time in terms of present, past and future. This conceptualization of time can be represented as:

The past-----now-----the future

In this system, the past is over and done with, the present is happening now and the future is yet to come. But the Hopi people see the world as essentially a process; objects and events are not discrete and countable; time is not segmented into fixed categories and measured in units of minutes, hours and days. According to Whorf, Hopi contains no words or expressions or grammatical categories that refer directly to what we call time; there is perhaps no general notion of time as flowing from the past through the present to the future. Rather, the Hopi speakers appeared to focus on change and process itself; they appeared to Whorf to be more concerned with the distinctions between the presently known, the mythical and what should possibly happen in the future.

Many people have found the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis very attractive; they feel that language determines their thought patterns in important ways. In more recent times, philosophers like Wittgenstein and Davidson have enriched the cognitivist position in a variety of ways. It is suggested that no other species matches human beings in the complexity, rationality and sophistication of thought and no other species has language like the one we have; this uniqueness is possible only if we believe that it is only language that makes thought possible. The physical and mental activity of most animals is restricted to seeking food and sex, rearing their young ones and protecting themselves from predators. Even the most painstakingly trained dogs and cats display a finite number of responses and behaviour of any significant complexity. But human beings, in addition to all the above, do Physics and Mathematics, make ships and space shuttles of increasing complexity, explore genetic mappings, write poems and create music etc. Some may argue that this is possible because of some abstract intelligence. But this according to the cognitive view is calling water H<sub>2</sub>O. It does not explain anything. It is language that makes thought possible.

In any case, there is no doubt that language is extremely important for our thoughts. As Russell says, it is unnecessary to prolong the catalogue of the uses of language in thought. As compared to images, we produce words easily to articulate our thoughts and listen to them effortlessly to understand others. If we did not have words and sentences, abstract images will almost be impossible to comprehend. Language provides a stable system. Every time people say 'tree', they mean the same object, although their pronunciations may be significantly different. We always need words to recall or describe an image, a thought or an event in our memory.

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#### 4.4 LANGUAGE-INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

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But as we noted above there are many scholars who believe that language and thought are quite different things and that language is only one system for

communicating thoughts and ideas. According to Pinker (1994:57), the idea that thought is the same thing as language is an example of what may be called a 'conventional absurdity'. It is of course a truism to say that language helps us to articulate our thoughts, ideas and images. But the amount of mental activity that takes place independent of language must be substantial and significant. Imagine an ordinary person who has just moved house; his/her household goods including his/her furniture, etc. are lying outside, all in a pile; s/he enters the living room, then the bedroom, kitchen, toilet, etc. s/he examines the spaces available in different rooms and figures out where s/he would keep his/her beds, washing machine, dryer, sofas, etc. S/he suddenly notices the corner where s/he can keep the TV and the big table lamp. Immense mental activity is going on but there is no language involved here.

Consider as another example the case of translation from one language to another. If thought independent of language were not possible, perhaps no translation will ever be possible. For a translator, it should be possible to somehow code thoughts expressed in the source language independent of both the source and the target languages.

Again, there are a large number of people in the world who acquire two or three languages as their native languages. For example, in Delhi, it is possible to find thousands of people who may be equally proficient in say Punjabi, Hindi and English. What is the relationship of language and thought in their minds? It seems obvious that there must be several domains in which he/she will have three different words, for a single concept, presumably stored independent of different languages.

Again, if we were really prisoners of the words of our language, how shall we ever create new words. But we do it all the time. Consider the recent words such as *fax*, *camcorder*, *email*, *wireless*, *web*, *hoover*, etc. Although all great poetry is coded in 'language', there are many poems where we get a distinct feeling that a lot more than linguistic activity is going on. Consider Yeats for example,

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
(From 'Sailing to Byzantium')

or T.S.Eliot in Little Gidding II

Ash on an old man's sleeve  
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.  
Dust in the air suspended  
Marks the place where a story ended.

Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* as you know was created in a dream and leaves the dream-like impact on anybody who reads the poem:

Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of paradise.

Or consider the old man's reply to Alice when she asked him who are you, aged man and how is it you live?

He said 'I look for butterflies  
That sleep among the wheat:  
I make them into mutton-pies,  
And sell them in the street,

I sell them unto men,; he said,  
 'who sail on stormy seas;  
 and that's the way I get my bread –  
 a trifle, if you please.'

The mental landscape that produces such lines in every language must consist of a lot more than just language.

Again, we often find people saying : I know exactly what I have in mind but I can't find the words to say it; or, that's not what I meant at all though that's exactly what I said. Such statements are possible only if we can maintain a disjunction between language and thought. We may also note that it is not just poets, painters or dancers who think in terms of images. Many scientists, mathematicians, geometers and astronomers also do. Let us turn to Pinker (1994:71) again:

*Physical scientists are even more adamant that their thinking is geometrical, not verbal. Micheal Faraday, the originator of our modern conception of electric and magnetic fields, had no training in mathematics but arrived at his insights by visualizing lines of force as narrow tubers curving through space. James Clerk Maxwell formalized the concepts of electromagnetic fields in a set of mathematical equations and is considered the prime example of an abstract theoretician, but he set down the equations only after mentally playing with elaborate imaginary models of sheets and fluids....The most famous self-described visual thinker is Albert Einstein, who arrived at some of his insights by imagining himself riding a beam of light and looking back at a clock.*

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#### 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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There are thus diametrically opposed views about the relationship between language and thought. At the one extreme end we have the view that thought is language; at the other extreme we have the view that thought is independent of language. There is no doubt that language conditions our thinking in a very substantial way. We internalize a considerable part of our conceptual world and knowledge through language. We should also note that for most people language is the only frequently used medium of articulating thoughts and ideas. On the other hand, we also need to recognize that a lot of language independent thought is possible and that language-independent thought is at the source of a considerable part of normal human activity and of poetry, mathematics and science.

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#### 4.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Thomas, L. and Wareing, S. eds. 1999. *Language, Society and Power*. London: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press.

Pinker, S. 1994. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Languages*. New York; Harper Perennial.

Carruthers, P. and Boucher, J. eds. 1998 *Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Russell, B. 1992. *The Analysis of Mind*. London: Routledge.

## **4.7 QUESTIONS**

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1. Find a friend whose mother tongue is entirely different from yours (e.g. if your mother tongue is Hindi, find a friend whose mother tongue is Tamil or French etc.). Make a list of colour terms in your language. Elicit the equivalents from your friend in her mother tongue. Examine the viability of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.
2. Take a short poem from your language and translate it into English. Comment on the process of your translation.
3. Examine critically a situation in which you worked largely in terms of images for which your language does not have single words.