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Does the Language You Speak Change How You Think?

Language doesn't just express thought, it can also influence it. Purify the language, and you can help purify thoughts and actions.

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When one person speaks to another, the process generally goes like this: The speaker thinks a thought. He then moves his tongue and lips in certain ways while exhaling and resonating his vocal chords. This produces vibrations passing through the air as huffs, pops, bursts, hisses, pitches and tones. The listener's ear detects these sound waves, and his brain converts them into a thought very similar to the thought of the speaker.

We take this for granted, but it is an astonishing thing. By making hisses, tones and pops, human beings can transmit intricate ideas to one another.

You could say to your friend, "Abraham Lincoln atop the Great Pyramid." Your friend's mind will create an image of that concept, probably for the first time in his or her life.

An air traffic controller can tell a pilot during a low-fuel emergency: "I can offer you Runway 08 at Victoria Airport, eight miles to your east." And all souls on board can be saved.

A man can say three words to his wife, and she understands that she is cherished.

This is the miracle of language.

(Listen to the episode of *The Sun Also Rises* about this topic)

Human beings speak about 6,700 different languages, each with its unique traits, vocabulary choices, patterns, sentence structures and sounds.

Here is what is fascinating: The language that a person speaks determines more than just the sounds he makes to refer to certain things. Linguists have discovered that the specific language a person speaks actually influences the way he sees the world, how he thinks, and what he does.

Language Gives Superhuman Ability?

Kuuk Thaayorre is a language spoken by a small community in northern Australia. One remarkable characteristic of this language is the way it describes space and direction.

Kuuk Thaayorre doesn't have any words like "left," "right," "forward" and "backward." These are relative words; they define direction relative to the observer's position. Speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre instead have only absolute terms: north, south, east and west. They say, "I injured my northwest foot," or "Move that table a little to the south-southeast."

Speakers of other languages would find it difficult to use only cardinal directions and not relative directions, because we often do not know where we are on the compass. But for speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre, it is second nature. They are always firmly oriented, because their language requires it.

"The result is a profound difference in navigational ability and spatial knowledge," wrote Lera Boroditsky, a cognitive scientist. "Simply put, speakers of languages like Kuuk Thaayorre are much better than English speakers at staying oriented and keeping track of where they are, even in unfamiliar landscapes or inside unfamiliar buildings. ... What enables them—in fact, forces them—to do this is their language" ("How Does Our Language Shape the Way We Think?" *Edge*, June 11, 2009).

During a 2017 lecture, Boroditsky explained that Kuuk Thaayorre speakers remain oriented more firmly than experts thought human beings were capable of doing. She said: "We used to think that humans were worse than other creatures because of some biological excuse. 'Oh, we don't have magnets in our beaks or in our scales.' No. If your language and your culture train you to do it, actually, you can do it."

In this way, the thinking and ability of Kuuk Thaayorre speakers has been shaped *by their language*.

But not all traits of a language benefit those who speak it.

Orange You Grateful for Language?

In the 1950s, Eric Lenneberg and John Roberts from the Linguistic Society of America studied the language of the Zuni tribe of Native Americans in New Mexico. They noticed that the Zuni language had just one word that covered both yellow and orange.

What surprised the researchers was that after monolingual speakers of Zuni were taught the difference between the two colors and some time passed, they had considerable difficulty remembering it. Lenneberg and Roberts wrote that even after being shown the difference, "not a single monolingual Zuni recognized correctly either orange or yellow." These Zuni-speakers saw color exactly as speakers of other languages do. But they had lived their whole lives without any words to distinguish between these two colors, so they couldn't remember the difference.

This example shows how language can *limit* our thinking. Words can be missing from our vocabularies and our comprehension, whose absence we are not even aware of. Our thoughts affect our languages, and our languages affect our thoughts. How we use our languages not only limits us but also corrupts us.

"Today, all languages are corrupt. ... All languages have peculiarities of expression and grammatical oddities," the late educator Herbert W. Armstrong wrote in his booklet [*The Wonderful World Tomorrow—What It Will Be Like*](#). "They are literally filled with pagan, heathen terms—superstition—misnomers—exceptions to rules—peculiar idioms."

As Mr. Armstrong wrote, this leads to worse things than just oddities that make languages hard to learn. It entrenches false concepts, and it causes misunderstandings. Most misunderstandings and linguistic hindrances are unintentional. But sometimes language impurities are intentionally exploited.

Dangerous Language Ambiguities

In July of 1945, as World War II ended in Europe, the war in the Pacific raged on. The United States was closing in on Japan and demanded its surrender. The response of Japanese Prime Minister Kantarō Suzuki's government centered on one word: *mokustatsu*.

Mokustatsu can convey, "We remain silent about this for now and need more time," or it can convey, "We treat your message with contempt."

These are stark differences for a word appearing in a crucial message. Some analysts believe the Japanese intentionally used this ambiguous answer to stall as they tried to broker a last-chance deal with the Soviet Union while continuing to inflict as many casualties on the U.S. as possible. Naval historian James Hornfischer wrote: "*Mokustatsu* was an evasive term used advisedly" by Prime Minister Suzuki "in order to buy time that his nation, it turned out, did not have" (*The Fleet at Flood Tide: America at Total War in the Pacific, 1944–1945*).

Language researcher Matthew Coslett writes that Japanese nationalists and militarists “could take the harshest meaning and imagine a strong prime minister contemptibly brushing aside the foreign bully boys; while the more peace-loving politicians [in the U.S.] could assume that the statement indicated that surrender wasn’t off the cards” (“The Japanese Art of Silence,” *Gaijin Pot*).

To some degree, this worked, but not on U.S. President Harry Truman. In response to Suzuki’s *Imokustatsu*,” he authorized the atomic attacks that finally brought the fanatical Japanese war machine to a halt.

Language can affect thinking and behavior when the stakes are incredibly high.

So how did language originate, and why are there so many languages, each with so many flaws?

Origin of Language and Its Corruption

The Creator of human beings is the Creator of human languages.

God gave the first man not only the ability to understand and speak a language, but also the ability to create new words. Genesis 2:19 says that God brought the animals He had created to Adam “to see what he would call them.” And whatever Adam called each one, “that was the name thereof.” This expandable God-given language was pure.

But after Adam and Eve chose to reject God and yield to Satan’s influence instead, as shown in Genesis 3, they not only continued expanding the language’s vocabulary but they also began corrupting it.

And they were far from alone in this corruption. The Bible makes clear that Satan the devil is “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). And Ephesians 2:2 describes him as “the prince of the power of the air.” This powerful spirit being is the original perverter of human thought and language. He infects people’s thinking with his own toxicity by “broadcasting” it wordlessly to us. “Satan transmits through the air—broadcasts—attitudes, impulses, desires of vanity, lust and greed, jealousy and envy, competition, rebellion against authority,” Mr. Armstrong wrote (op cit).

Jeremiah 17:9 shows that since mankind yields to Satan’s attitudes, the human heart—or intellect—is “deceitful” and “wicked.” And since the human heart is wicked, the thoughts and words that people speak are evil (Matthew 12:34-35).

The Division of Languages

For the next 1,700 years after Adam and Eve yielded to Satan’s corrosive influence, all of humanity continued to speak and to increasingly corrupt this same original language. Genesis 11:1 notes that at the end of that era, “the whole earth was [still] of one language.” Everyone was still speaking the language God had given Adam, but it had become rife with corruption, reflecting evils in thought and action.

The main population gathered at this time somewhere in the area that is now Iraq, and began collaborating on a huge project motivated by an evil purpose. Two generations earlier, a global flood had punished the world’s population for its sins. But now they began to build a tower in which they thought they could survive such a punishment. They could live their lives as they pleased, rejecting God’s authority and law just as Adam and Eve had, and still avoid the punishment (verses 2-4). The tower of Babel was a type of humanity’s attitude toward God throughout our history.

In response, God did something ingenious. He took the gift of language, the ability to share and unify thoughts, and abruptly divided it. This immediately divided the people into separate groups.

That day, God created perhaps dozens of language groups as He “confound[ed] their language” so they were unable to “understand one another’s speech” (verse 7). This was the origin of the parent languages that have resulted in the 6,700 different languages spoken today.

This did not result in people repenting toward God. But it did slow their project of open rebellion toward God that would have quickly led to self-destruction.

Generation after generation, mankind corrupted those languages more and more, bringing us to the present with each one filled with perversions, vagaries and impurities.

But the Bible shows that there is a time on the horizon when language will be purified and unified once again!

A Pure Tongue

The Bible is clear that Jesus Christ will soon return to Earth and use God’s Holy Spirit and His government to reeducate mankind to love His law, His truth and His way of life. This will convert mankind and the Earth into the “wonderful World Tomorrow” that Mr. Armstrong’s booklet discusses in depth. “As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God” (Romans 14:11; see also Revelation 12:5; 19:15-16).

Mr. Armstrong stressed that this global reeducation and conversion will happen because God will impart His Holy Spirit to mankind and teach them. “All this is made possible only through the Holy Spirit, providing *spiritual comprehension*,” he

wrote. “[W]e shall never have real utopia on Earth until human nature is changed [and] man can’t change his human nature” (ibid).

Man cannot fix his wicked heart, but “God can—and will,” Mr. Armstrong wrote.

Scripture also specifically mentions a revolution in *language* that will occur in the future. Zephaniah 3:9 quotes God as saying: “For then will I turn to the people a pure language”

This is when God will undo the language divisions. With His Holy Spirit, He will undo the evils that human beings have embedded in their communications. God will give all human beings one unifying language, and it will be pure.

If the language is pure, what will that mean for those who speak it? Much more than just convenience.

Considering how Kuuk Thaayorre affects the thinking and enhances some abilities of its speakers, and considering how the Zuni language puts some limits on its speakers, and considering that God highlights this specific issue in His inspiring prophecy about our future, we can infer that the pure language will play a part in purifying the peoples’ thinking.

Mr. Armstrong made clear that people’s hearts and thinking will be cleansed by the power of God’s Spirit. And he wrote that the pure language will also play a role in building that utopia. “A different language means a different culture, different music, different habits, different education, different values and standards, and a whole different approach to life,” he wrote (ibid).

People will use the Holy Spirit and the pure language to understand the beauty of God’s way and the world around them and to share that understanding with others in vivid color, in precise detail, and in truth. This will be a new era of brilliant music and art, rich literature, scintillating conversation and tightly knit families and societies. It will be an age of radiant health—physically, mentally and spiritually.

Learning to speak—and *think*—the universal pure language will help people be upright, highly capable individuals. It will help men and women mature into deep thinkers who are stable, understanding and joyous. It will help them remain law-loving individuals living lives of peace, accomplishment and fulfillment.

Mr. Armstrong continued: “What an age it will be, when all the world becomes truly educated—and speaks the same language.”

Learning the Pure Language

Changing the language will require thorough reeducation not only of vocabulary and grammar, but of thought itself. “Yes, indeed, the educating and reeducating of the world will be one of the most important tasks the Kingdom of God will face, after Christ returns to rule,” Mr. Armstrong wrote. “Their entire thinking will require a reorientation—a change of direction” (ibid).

Part of this reeducation and reorientation may be helping old corrupt languages fade as people learn the pure one.

A Japanese person learning the pure language might ask: “What is the new word *formokustatsu*?” And the answer may be something like this: “There isn’t an equivalent word, and there’s no reason to think in those kinds of terms.” There will presumably be one term for “please wait while we deliberate” and a distinctly separate term (or maybe none at all) for “we scorn you.”

An Arabic speaker might ask: “What is the term in this new language *fortaqiya*—the word meaning it is permissible to lie to someone as long as that person is an infidel?” This individual would be shown that this concept is false. He will be taught that the thinking that led to the coining of that word was polluted, and that there is no equivalent for it in the pure language.

An English speaker might ask what the new language’s equivalent is for *peccadillo*—the word describing a sin, but a sin that is so small that it is mostly harmless and doesn’t much matter. The answer once again would be that there is no such word in the pure language because that is a false concept.

There are millions of polluted words like these. Soon they will disappear because the *thinking* that led to their creation will eventually disappear.

If a *human dictator* were to force an Orwellian type of language and thought control on mankind, it would create a terrifying and dark world. But the benevolent God is no human. Christ is “filled with outgoing concern for the governed—their welfare and salvation,” Mr. Armstrong wrote, and He will use his “total power” to “enforce God’s law—God’s government on Earth” (ibid).

Mr. Armstrong explained that with the use of God’s Spirit and government to keep His law, and partly because of the pure language, mankind will have “a whole different approach to life”! The Bible shows people will use that “different approach” to help, encourage, inspire and love each other—and to serve God.

The complete verse in Zephaniah 3:9 states: “For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.”

A pure purpose for a pure language!

In the present world, full of linguistic corruption and confusion and with so many language traits that twist our thoughts, it is difficult to imagine that pure language being universally spoken around the world. But the Bible makes clear that the dawning of that age of pure speech and of “a whole different approach to life” is very near.

Mankind’s transition to that one language of purity will be dramatic. It will be a major change. And it will affect more than just the words people use. That world of tomorrow—when God blesses mankind with a pure language that helps purify them—will truly be wonderful. ■