# Words and the limits of your world

*The idea that 'the language you use shapes the way you think' fascinates many people. But **Geoff Pullum**, in opposition to the resolution, is highly skeptical.*

People seem to love the idea that the language you speak shapes or determines the way you see and think about the world. They find it captivating and somehow deeply important, and link it to the notion that learning a foreign language opens up new insights, even new worlds. And that possibility does seem intriguing at first.

However, it is quite impossible to evaluate scientifically, because it's far too vague; and it has a very strange philosophical property: if it were true of you, the fact of its truth would make it impossible for me to convince you of that fact. Why? Because to convince you that the language you speak determines what you can think, I would need to exhibit for you a thought that your language will not let you entertain. But under the assumption, I can never do that, because your language won't let me convey the crucial thought!

People search nonetheless for metaphysical profundity through comparison of languages—often languages they know little about. The popular interest in untranslatable words illustrates this (see Jane Lugea's article in *Babel*, Issue 12). But words are actually a rather superficial aspect of language. They get invented and they get thrown away, rather like physical artifacts. And adding or losing words doesn't change the language in any important way.

Besides, you don't need a word for something in order to be able to conceptualize it. Take the gadget in my pocket, which picks up radio and television broadcasts, calculates arithmetical functions, keeps my calendar, takes photographs, sends text messages, plays music and videos, makes sound and video recordings, tracks my location, computes driving directions, edits photographs, displays books and newspapers, and also functions as a database, task-manager, communicator, notepad, and stopwatch. There's no word for any such device. A few decades ago the concept of such a thing would have made sense only to a highly imaginative science fiction fan. But today most people carry one of these things. And to name them they press into service the clearly inadequate word "phone", or use the more recently invented term "smartphone". It hardly matters which. Latching on to the idea that

there can be such a device is not impeded at all by the absence of a special word that exactly fits it.

Unfortunately, many of the experimental investigations of the influence of language on thought have focused on individual word meanings. For example, some languages lack a single word for 'blue', but have a word meaning 'light blue' (Russian *goluboy*, Hebrew *tchelet*) and another meaning 'dark blue' (Russian *siniy*, Hebrew *kachol*). And people who speak these languages seem, on average, to be slightly faster than English speakers at the task of separating light blue from dark blue items. It's as if their native language has trained them up for years on that distinction, and enhanced their sensitivity to it. I am not casting aspersions on this sort of research: the result is no doubt genuine. But it seems to me this is a pretty weak form of influence of language on thought. It's not as if there are colours that Russians and Israelis see and English speakers simply can't comprehend because their language won't let them.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose writing in the 1940s did much to popularize the notion that language influences thought, was interested in the way thinking might be influenced not just by words but by grammatical systems. Imagine a language where you can add an iterativity suffix to a verb, and if you add it to 'veer' you get a verb meaning 'zig-zag back and forth', or if you add it to 'twitch' you get a verb meaning 'thrash around'. Whorf speculated that the speakers of a language with that sort of feature in its grammatical system might develop fresh and different ideas about physics. And who knows, maybe they would, and maybe the language would have some influence on how they thought about physical phenomena. But such a speculation is not much of a foundation for an idea as radical as that people from other cultures literally see a different world.

The idea that "the real world" is an unconscious mental reflection of the language we use to talk about things is something Whorf may have picked up from his teacher at Yale, the great linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir, or from the 19th-century writing of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who

suggested that the characteristic modes of thought and linguistic systems of a people are so closely related that they could be deduced from each other. But such ideas do not seem to generate experimentally testable hypotheses.

The main way in which languages may seem to restrict or enhance the range of our thoughts is through providing us with helpful nouns for use as technical terms in specific domains—or failing to provide them. Extra tricks of exposition may be needed to express technical concepts where a suitable word is lacking. It will be enormously difficult at first to explain macroeconomic theory or compound interest to people in a culture that doesn't use money. But words can be reapplied (*write* originally meant "inscribe characters with pen or pencil" but now covers composition on a laptop), or stolen from other languages (like *manga* or *emoji*, filched from Japanese). New terms can be introduced by explicit definition, as in introductory textbooks ('we will call a triangle with sides of equal length **equilateral**').

What doesn't happen is that you struggle to grasp a new concept and you can't because your own language blocks it. This just doesn't seem to happen.

My guess is that we all see the world in much the same way. Human life is rich, and human beings so similar and so ingenious: if there is something noteworthy to say, we'll find some way to express it, no matter which of the world's 7,000 languages we happen to speak.

Our languages don't lock us into conceptual cages. Or at least, it's child's play to bend the bars or break the lock. We humans love to share our thoughts. We will not easily be barred from doing so.

---

**Geoff Pullum** is professor of general linguistics in the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. He was formerly a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He coauthored *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* with Rodney Huddleston in 2002. He writes every week for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s blog 'Lingua Franca', and also blogs occasionally at the most popular linguistic science blog on the web, Language Log. A collection of his Language Log work is reproduced in *Far From the Madding Gerund* by Mark Liberman and Geoffrey K. Pullum (William, James & Co., 2006).

## Find out more

### Articles

'Science and linguistics' by Benjamin Lee Whorf (originally in *Technology Review* 42.6 (April 1940), and reprinted in *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, edited by John B. Carroll (MIT Press, 1964) was one of the earliest popularizations of the idea that the speakers of Eskimo languages have many words for snow and perceive snow differently as a result.

The definitive critique of that particular idea can be found in '"Eskimo words for snow": the genesis and decay of a linguistic example' by Laura Martin in *American Anthropologist* 88.2 (1986).

### Books

*Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* by Guy Deutscher (Metropolitan Books, 2010).

*The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language* by John McWhorter (Oxford University Press, New York, 2014).

### Online

A copy of Benjamin Lee Whorf's 'Science and linguistics' is online at: web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/ whorf.scienceandlinguistics.pdf

A copy of Laura Martin's 'Eskimo words for snow' is online at: languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/myl/llog/ LauraMartinEskimoSnowWords.pdf

For a general discussion of Whorf's ideas about language determining thought, aimed primarily at philosophers, see 'Whorfianism' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article 'Philosophy of Linguistics' by Barbara Scholz, Geoffrey K. Pullum, and Francis Jeffry Pelletier: plato.stanford.edu/entries/linguistics/#Who

A general critical review of Whorf's ideas is given by Guy Deutscher in 'Does your language shape how you think?' in the New York Times Magazine, 26 August 2010: nytimes.com/2010/08/29/magazine/ 29language-t.html