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# Language Versus Thought, and Theory of Formation of Meanings

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*Abstract-* There is a long debate going on for years that either language shapes thought or thought shapes language. Many thinkers, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and linguists have tried and reasoned to support either the superiority of language over thought or of thought over language. This article attempts at proving that language and thought are combined to make, mould, effect, and modify language and thought further. A research was conducted on two different groups of students and teachers. One group of teachers and students dealt with literary studies while the other group of students dealt with linguistics studies. The students of literary studies were affected by the themes and ideas which they studied in their text books, while the students of linguistics were not affected by the themes and ideas rather they had learning of structure of language. Both groups had dealt with English. This research proves that formation of meanings by language and thought combined has affects. I call this theory of formation of meanings.

*Keywords: language, thought, theory, meanings, linguistics.*

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# Language Versus Thought, and Theory of Formation of Meanings

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*Abstract-* There is a long debate going on for years that either language shapes thought or thought shapes language. Many thinkers, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and linguists have tried and reasoned to support either the superiority of language over thought or of thought over language. This article attempts at proving that language and thought are combined to make, mould, effect, and modify language and thought further. A research was conducted on two different groups of students and teachers. One group of teachers and students dealt with literary studies while the other group of students dealt with linguistics studies. The students of literary studies were affected by the themes and ideas which they studied in their text books, while the students of linguistics were not affected by the themes and ideas rather they had learning of structure of language. Both groups had dealt with English. This research proves that formation of meanings by language and thought combined has affects. I call this theory of formation of meanings.

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## I. Introduction and Background

Very often linguists, philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists have spent a great deal of their time and words in finding out the relationship between thought and language. Does language shape thought or thought shapes language? The thinkers like John Locke (1690), Bertrand Russell (1921), Paul Grice (1957 and 1969), and David Lewis (1969) have said that language functions just for communicative purposes, performing a public role rather than cognitive. This is known as communicative conception of language (Carruthers, 1996). Whereas the figures like Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921 and 1953), Lev Vygotsky (1934), Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), Daniel Dennett (1991) have stressed upon the view that thoughts are devised in language. They have given reasons that language shapes thoughts. Then there is popular Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that nature is dissected along lines provided by our native languages (Carroll, 1956). This hypothesis suggests that our thoughts are shaped by the underlying principles and systems of classifications which are provided to us by the language in which we are born. Still, this is regarded as hypothesis which has been reasoned against by many like Martin (1986), Fortescue (1984) and Pinker. Furthermore, there are imagists who believe that images represent thoughts which are translated by language and thinking consists of images. There is also famous example of the early Spanish explorers and Grand Canyon which shows that thinking comes prior to perception. The party that went down into Grand Canyon never returned because they could not perceive the actual depth and measurement of Grand Canyon. This means that their thinking was earlier than their perception. Structuralists and deconstructionists have played upon this example and have pointed out that language shapes our view of the world. They argue that in the language of Spaniards there was nothing like Grand Canyon so they could not have actual perception of its measurements (Tyson, 2006). Yet, there is Chomskeyan view that all languages have similarities except for the minor differences of syntax and lexis. It has been induced from this generalization that all humans think alike, more or less in the same way towards the world. A person living in remote areas of Africa and a person living in remotest corner of Australia would be thinking on the same lines except for sociological differences, which are minor. This means that human beings have an innate and generalized web of linguistic structure with which they operate and learn different languages and also participate in linguistic creativity. Fodor (1978) emphatically reasons that the sentences may be related, not to a natural native language, but to an innate, universal, language of thought, which he calls 'Mentalese'. This language consists of an innate lexicon, or vocabulary, and an innate set of rules for the creation of perfect sentences, which naturally exist in all human beings, and perhaps by all other creatures that share the features of our mental capabilities. Contrary to this universal grammar view, are the ideas of those like Kaplan and Mathiot assert that there are differences in languages all over the world and all languages have different effects on the thinking patterns, perspectives and approaches of the speakers.

Hence there can be, broadly, two aspects of relationship between language and thought. One aspect is that our thoughts regulate and produce language. We think and then give language to our thoughts. Language is dependent on our thoughts. Our thoughts make us pick and chose certain type of vocabulary and make certain sentence constructions. Suprasegmentals and punctuations go along with language as we think.

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Second aspect is that language, be it native or non-native (whatever we know) shapes our thoughts. Here thoughts are dependent on language. We cannot think beyond language. Those ideas, of whose language we do not know, do not enter our brain. And thus we cannot express them. But both of these aspects leave many questions unresolved. Where do new words come from which do not exist in language if language is dependent on thought? How can we think of new thoughts if thought is dependent on language? If language shapes thought, why do people of different languages come up with the same essential philosophical questions? Why have philosophers of different regions speaking different languages have been thinking on the same philosophical questions and almost on same lines? If thought shapes language, why does a new word creates a new idea in brain and changes the existing consciousness of the learner or thinker? These and many other questions have posed a great challenge for linguists, psychologists, anthropologists and philosophers. In this article an attempt has been made to find out the relationship between thought and language, and also if there is any other factor that controls and influences these.

## II. Results and Discussion

In order to find out the effect of English language (L2) on the thoughts of students, a research was conducted. A questionnaire was formed to get the response of 50 teachers of MA English courses who taught literary subjects and 50 teachers of MA English classes who taught linguistics subjects. Another questionnaire was developed to get the response of 50 students of MA English literature and 50 MA English linguistics. Teachers were to respond to a set of ten questions like: Do you find your students talking more about themes of writings like ultimate reality, abstract ideas like life and death and so on? Do your students respond to traditional things (like prayers, concept of marriages, rituals) in the same way as they did in the beginning of their classes? Do they take interest in literary writings and attempt at doing their own creativity? Whereas, students were to respond to another set of ten questions like: Do u feel like writing your own poems or stories? Do you like the idea of any writer and want to follow him? Does lexicology of words attract you more than the way these are joined together to make sentences? Do you feel any change in your ideas about the world around you? All questions were formed deliberately to get the answers in yes or no. The questions were developed also to see only a specific kind of effect i.e. change in ideas towards world from their regional and traditional perspective to English writers' perspectives. If the answer would be 'yes' by those who taught and studied literary courses, it would show the effect of literature on students; and if the answer would be 'yes' by those who taught and studied linguistics courses, it would show that linguistics had also the same effect on their thoughts. If the answer would be 'no' by those who taught and studied literature it would mean that literature did not affect their thoughts; and if the answer would be 'no' by those who taught and studied linguistics it would show that linguistics also did not change their thoughts.

The results are summarized in the following table.

*Table 1 :* Which students' ideas are affected by their courses?

| Respondents | Frequency of 'Yes' | Frequency of 'No' | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teachers teaching literature | 46 | 4 | 92% |
| Teachers teaching linguistics | 5 | 45 | 10% |
| Students studying literature | 47 | 3 | 94% |
| Students studying linguistics | 8 | 42 | 16% |

As the above table shows, teachers teaching MA in literature responded that 92% of their students' ideas and outlook different than their native perspective was changed by what they studied. Teachers teaching linguistics said that only 10% students' outlook towards life was changed. 94 % of students who studied literature asserted that their previous ideas towards life were changed after studying English literary writers. Only 16 % students' ideas, who studied linguistics, were changed. This shows that study of literature has deeper effect than the study of linguistics. But what does it has to do with language and thought?

This research was conducted for a very specific purpose. The notable point is that both types of students have been taught English vocabulary. They all dealt with words of English language. But their learnings were different. Why so? It proves that words alone do not have effect if not joined together to form certain ideas. Individual words do not shape thoughts. Vocabulary is just like dictionary. When words are joined together to form an idea, then that idea changes, modifies, or replaces the previous idea. The joining of words is purely dependent upon the need or will of the individual. So, the key player in changing thoughts in neither language nor thought, rather it is the will or need of an individual that motivates one to form certain combination of words for certain meanings and that changes ideas. It can also be concluded that words, when combined, form certain idea. That very idea shapes thought and even language (as literary writers mostly keep on affecting language in many ways like



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giving new meanings to a word, coinage, and forming new grammatical expressions).

## III. Conclusion

A significant conclusion can be drawn from this research that the attitude of learner is also determinant in change of thought. Those students who studied literature were, consciously or unconsciously, aware of the fact that they were studying ideas and themes of many writers about life. And that their job was to ponder and evaluate. Whereas, the students of linguistics were mainly concerned with sounds and structures. Their attitude was different than those of literary students. Literary students focused more on ideas, hence change in ideas occurred, while linguistics students focused more on language, their learning took place about language. If thought means mental activity, then every word generates that activity. Then language (precisely every new word) affects thought. If thought is taken as an idea or point of view then those ideas are not just shaped by merely the presence of words rather by their presence in a specifically arranged sequence with specific meanings. Again, the arrangement of words plays a key role in effecting thoughts.

Hence, the arrangement of words, which form certain meanings, which is done due to certain will or need (while will or need is based either on some idea, feeling, and other countless factors), is what I call the theory of formation of meanings, shapes language as well as thought. It is not just language alone that is shaping thought neither it is thought alone that is shaping language. Thought and language are combined to make new thought and language. They affect, shape, mould, and modify themselves which is not possible if any of this pair is taken independently.

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