

## **The Structure of Language**

**by**

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Our language defines who we are, and mostly affects the way we earn our living and so the style of our life. Yet, the very most of people know nothing about its order or how it comes to be. From our earliest days, we are accepted by the words we know, how we use them and so how we define the world about us to those we engage with.

From the beginning of life, the fetus will develop phoneme structuring from the sounds it hears from its mother. After birth, this structure will be given clarity and definition by the words it hears and the way it hears them as the mother and father and other members of its family endeavour to teach them their means of communication. As the infant develops within its own social circle, so it will expand its familiarity with language when it enters the formal learning stage and engages other children and teachers.

Yet, throughout the stages of their early formal education, the child's development in language, as with all other aspects of their ability to engage the world about them, will not be as closely cultivated or monitored as it has been with their mother and so the knowledge of that mother. As the child grows, so their understanding of their world will expand through the experiences they encounter. This, of course, has been the purpose of school.

Yet, the ability of the child to interact with information in school and so communicate their understanding of this, is much related to the academic background of their parents. This is not so because they are richer or poorer, but because their ability in language was and is defined for them through the ways they themselves were raised, how they were educated and the type of job that they do. The latter is so, because they will adapt to the language procedures and adopt the sensitivity in how words are used as they seek to become more proficient in the ways they earn their money. Thus, the ways of thinking and the order of words will be different from an accountant to a policeman as to a plumber and to any other worker, as each uses the order of words better tailored to the specific language of their profession.

Yet, often without realizing this, the social standing of the parents has long been used as an indicator of their ability and so the potential ability of their offspring, as based on the idea of genetic inheritance and so genetic diversity. However, what is much less understood is that genetic diversity does not affect the ability of the child to develop their skill of language. The arrangement of the genetic codes that we inherit to enable us to develop our language ability do not determine or impact how well we learn to do this. Any normally born child has the same potential at birth to develop their ability in language as any other child. How that ability develops will be determined by the knowledge of those who raise them, by their desire to develop a high skill in language with their child, and by the

emotional desire of their child to want to learn from them and then by the same desire to want to learn from others and so through their own efforts as they mature.

It is to be understood, therefore, that we do not inherit an ability for language, only the ability to learn it. Thus, if a child was born and immediately left in the wild, and could somehow survive from the moment of its birth, it would have no language. It could not speak, because it never learnt to hear sounds to imitate, and nor would it label the environment to define information. Sky, wind, rain, hill, tree etc., would be seen but little defined and so little remembered. After all, our ability to recognize what we see and so process this to our memory relies upon how well we identified and stored early information which enables us to make sense of this. This necessitates an instruction, a raising, an education, for as John Fiske raised the point:

“What is the meaning of the fact that man is born into the world more helpless than any other creature, and more in need of a much longer season than any other living thing, the tender care and wise council of its elders?”<sup>i</sup> 1

We are, then, by necessity a social animal and so learn to comprehend the world about us through those who raise or influence us. This, in turn, opens up understanding to how cultural and social differences cause people to think differently through the different perspectives they are raised under. Accordingly, and since no two languages are sufficiently similar, it must be realized that the peoples of those languages must live in distinct worlds of thought.<sup>ii</sup> Gordon brought relevance to how and why we devise language through the functions we do, and so how it can construct our thinking capability, when he examined the language of the isolated Amazonian Piraha tribe in 2004.

Consequently, Gordon found how these people had developed a culture that had not necessitated the use of past or future verbs, and so caused them virtually no understanding of past or future times. They lived in, and so only thought in the present time. In addition to this, they were found to count only with one, two, or many, so they could neither relate to nor imagine any higher numerical situation. They could, for example, understand one fish and two fish, but they could not understand the meaning of four fish. The concept of four fish was totally beyond their comprehension. As Gordon pointed out, “A people without terms for numbers, do not develop the ability to determine exact numbers.”<sup>iii</sup>

We may reason from this that the skill of these people to think, or if you wish to demonstrate their intelligence, is shown to be determined by their language, with their language being a direct consequence of their culture and so the job tasks they do. In other words, Gordon’s findings prove that we learn to think, through the language we have evolved, through the tasks that we do.

The importance of this was brought out in a 1995 study by Risely and Hart, who examined the various socio- economic backgrounds of 42 families in the ways they daily exchanged thoughts and how these gave shape to the language and vocabulary development of their children. Thus, they noted that after four years of age the differences in children raised from high income families as opposed to those raised by families on welfare was very significant. In fact, they found that the former were aware of some 30 million words more than the latter. The development of these children, of course, was not just related to language, but also various skills of interaction. Most significantly, follow-up studies found that these early differences do have lasting effects on a child's performance later in life.<sup>iv</sup>

Accordingly, people do learn to think through the jobs they do and this in turn gives them a means by which they develop language skills in their children and so a means of efficiency for them by which they can relate to the world about them.

Thus, if we may only know of our world by the words we are introduced to and of our emotional interest that causes us to take note of the actions by which these words take form, then could our ability to relate our mind to the mind of another, what is said to be our intelligence, develops purely through our life experiences — and is so devoid of genetic differences.

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## References

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- iv Von Bredow. R. Living without Numbers or Time. Spiegel Online International.2006.