

## Essay

# Incarcerated in language?

Jherr Daven F. Velasco

One of the exceptional facets that make our species as humans unique is language. Zagada (2020) remarks that people have a long history of treating words merely as labels for objects, and language was thought of only as a way to string words together in order to share ideas, feelings, and concepts. But language is more than that. Boroditsky (2017) describes language as “one of [the] magical abilities that we humans have” (0:17) which facilitates our capacity to transmit even our most complex thoughts to one another by making sounds and signs that our peers can decipher and understand—eliciting emotions, imagination, and subsequent action in the process. Not only is language an important tool for communication, but it is also a vessel for the culture of the society that speaks it (Lumen Learning, n.d.). According to Eberhard et al. (2022), recent linguistic data reveal that there are 7,151 documented languages in the world which, by the above postulations, means that there are also more than 7,000 cultures and beliefs embedded in them.

Language accomplishes several different functions which give it chief importance in our lives. However, amidst these, it is also worth emphasizing that language is also not a perfect tool that ensures successful thought transmission when we use it to communicate with other people. Gleitman and Papafragou (2012) most notably remarked that “language is sketchy, thought is rich” (p. 636) due to various reasons including the pervasive ambiguity of words and sentences, contextually reliant pronouns and indexicals despite the specificity of their underlying referents, and incompleteness of thought/proposition linguistic encoding.

Perhaps, one example of the sketchiness of language is exemplified by the very question asked for this think piece: “Do you feel imprisoned in your own languages?” For me, it can have two readings and interpretations based on what version of the hypothesis of linguistic relativity we follow:

- There is the strong version which says that language *determines* thought (Kihlstrom & Park, 2018). Subscribing to this version raises the question of whether or not language imprisons me because it prohibits me to have thoughts about concepts that are not encoded in my language. Any other idea that is indescribable of the systems, vocabularies, and features my language has cannot exist. Hence, in this view, language is a thought prison.
- On the other hand, the weak version of linguistic relativity, which states that language simply *influences* thought (Harbeck, 2018), may provoke one to think that

language imprisons me because it limits the ways I can communicate and express myself to other people due to the restrictions it imposes on my perceptual experiences and worldview. In this view, language is a transmission and perception prison.

It should be noted that academics have already refuted the strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (see Fogarty & Whitman, 2018; Frothingham, 2022; Harbeck, 2018; Kihlstrom & Park, 2018; Martin, 1986; Nordquist, 2019). However, as scholars are more accepting of the possible influences of language in thought, I will be anchoring my response in the second interpretation of the question.

### **Do you feel imprisoned in your own languages?**

One of the biggest realizations I had upon reading the materials that deeply scrutinize ethnolinguistic concepts is how limited my view of the world is, and I believe a major part of that is because of the languages (and the consequent cultures embedded in them) that I use. It is with this premise that I answer with an affirmative to the question posed by this think piece. However, to make things clearer, I feel that it would be more accurate if from here on forward, I use the phrase *limited by* rather than *imprisoned in* my own languages due to the nuance that being “imprisoned” renders me in a state of total arrest with great inability to do anything, compared to the connotations of being limited which still allows me to act beyond the said linguistic shackles, albeit with certain disadvantages and impediments that make it more challenging to do so.

As a compound bilingual who is fluent in both Tagalog and English, I enjoy access to and feel a certain kind of belonging to the worlds and cultures that speak these languages. According to Boroditsky (2011), bilinguals not only have a more extensive connection with the world and its societies, but are also able to perceive the world differently depending on the language they choose to use. In addition to this, Nacamulli (2015) shares that bilingualism also gives the brain remarkable advantages including higher grey matter density in the brain which translates to more neurons and synapses, alongside heightened activity in certain regions when a second language is engaged. This purportedly helps in delaying the onset of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s and dementia.

Yet, even if being bilingual gives me benefits in these areas, I still cannot deny the feeling of restraint when dealing with views, ideas, and concepts outside English and Tagalog. These limitations brought by the languages I speak manifested as difficulties in my understanding of the world the speakers of the languages I study have. For instance, when I was studying Korean as a foreign language, I remember being so astonished by the seven speech levels in their language. As someone who uses mostly English in university and even at home, I was so confused by the levels of politeness that they have to learn especially when my languages do not have intricate systems that affect the morphology of a language to reflect the level of politeness that needs to be expressed. In Korean, there originally are about seven or eight verbal endings that vary in terms of politeness whose usage is required in different contexts (Asia Society, n.d.;

Jang, 2020). Though the number of Korean speech levels has declined to about four to six still in use today as a natural consequence of the country no longer being a strict class society, it still was confounding enough for me to study, especially as Tagalog just mainly uses *po* and *opo*, while English only needs to drop slang terms and avoid the use of personal pronouns to establish linguistic formality.

In addition, other circumstances that made these linguistically induced limitations evident to me include moments when I encounter words or concepts with no direct translation to either Tagalog or English. Some examples I found fascinating when I first heard them include the German term *Schadenfreude* (which has already entered the English lexicon) defined as “the joy one feels at another person’s pain” (Slauer, 2019, para. 14), alongside the Arabic phrase *ya’aburnee* which literally means “you bury me” (Belcher, 2021, para. 3) often used to tell the person one hopes to die first as living without them would be too painful to bear. In addition, I also found the Spanish concept of time intriguing. This is because the Spanish language designates different time frames when one is to greet *buenos días* ‘good morning’ (used from around 6:00 to 14:00), *buenas tardes* ‘good afternoon’ (used from around 14:00 to 21:00), and *buenas noches* ‘good night’ (used beyond 21:00) (ProfeDeELE, 2017). I remember asking my Spanish professor about why this is the case, and she explained that this is rooted in the usual time the sun rises and sets in Spain which not only affected how they greet each other but also influenced how they live (as my professor said that they also start their day later in Spain than here in the Philippines).

These are just some subjective examples that brought me to answer “yes” to the query of whether I feel imprisoned in my own languages, with the belief that languages limit the perceptual experiences and influence the consequent worldview carried by a person. I specifically avoided using the term *imprisoned* as it gives certain connotations about the belief that language is primarily deterministic—that one cannot have thoughts outside of it if its systems cannot accommodate them. This decision also reflects my hope and desire that even if language limits the ways by which we navigate the world, we are still in control of broadening our visions because it is possible if we really want to. We just have to let languages, those that we do not speak, teach and guide us.

### Acknowledgments

I extend my warmest thanks to Prof. Michael Manahan for assigning our class the task to reflect on this topic and for always believing in everyone’s abilities, in and out of the four walls of the classroom. I would not be able to share my reflections on this if it weren’t for him who urged and inspired all of us to do so.

### References

Asia Society. (n.d.). *Understanding the Korean language*. Retrieved July 31, 2022, from <https://asiasociety.org/korea/understanding-korean-language>

- Belcher, S. (2021, August 31). *Halsey's "Ya'aburnee" is based on this Arabic phrase*. Distractify. <https://www.distractify.com/p/what-does-ya-aburnee-mean>
- Boroditsky, L. (2011, February 1). *How language shapes thought*. Scientific American. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-language-shapes-thought/>
- Boroditsky, L. (2017, November 2). *How language shapes the way we think* [Video]. TED Conferences. [https://www.ted.com/talks/lera\\_boroditsky\\_how\\_language\\_shapes\\_the\\_way\\_we\\_think/](https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think/)
- Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2022). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (25th ed.). SIL International. <https://www.ethnologue.com/>
- Fogarty, M., & Whitman, N. (2018, November 30). *Does your language influence how you think?* Scientific American. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-your-language-influence-how-you-think/>
- Frothingham, M. B. (2022, January 14). *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (linguistic relativity hypothesis)*. SimplyPsychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/sapir-whorf-hypothesis.html>
- Gleitman, L., & Papafragou, A. (2012). New perspectives on language and thought. In K. J. Holyoak & R. G. Morrison (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of thinking and reasoning* (pp. 543–568). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199734689.013.0028>
- Harbeck, J. (2018, August 3). *Can language slow down time?* BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180806-can-language-slow-down-time>
- Jang, A. (2020, June 24). *Korean speech levels and how to use them properly*. Lingodeer. <https://blog.lingodeer.com/korean-speech-levels/>
- Kihlstrom, J. F., & Park, L. (2018). Cognitive psychology: Overview. In *Reference module in neuroscience and biobehavioral psychology*. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-809324-5.21702-1>
- Lumen Learning. (n.d.). *Language and thinking*. Retrieved July 31, 2022, from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/waymaker-psychology/chapter/reading-language-and-thought/>
- Martin, L. (1986). "Eskimo words for snow": A case study in the genesis and decay of an anthropological example. *American Anthropologist*, 88(2), 418–423.
- Nacamulli, M. (2015, June 23). *The benefits of a bilingual brain* [Video]. TED Ed. <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-speaking-multiple-languages-benefits-the-brain-mia-nacamulli>
- Nordquist, R. (2019, July 3). *The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis linguistic theory*. ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/sapir-whorf-hypothesis-1691924>
- ProfeDeELE. (2017, November 5). *Saludos y despedidas en español*. <https://www.profedeELE.es/actividad/saludos-despedidas/>
- Slauer, S. (2019, October 9). *20 amazing words that don't exist in English — but really should*. Insider. <https://www.insider.com/words-that-dont-translate-no-english-equivalent-2018-9>
- Zagada, M. (2020, March 13). *More than words: How language affects the way we think*. goFLUENT. <https://www.gofluent.com/blog/how-language-affects-the-way-we-think/>