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## Language & Thought

As international trade and scientific and political exchange intensify, there is a growing effort on the part of academics, multinational organisations and even nations and governments to improve communication and dialogue. It is becoming increasingly apparent that in pursuit of this goal it is desirable not only to learn foreign languages on a much wider scale, but to show a sympathetic understanding of other peoples' customs, societies and culture. Many binational and international bodies have been created to further this aim, and the personnel and training departments of many large companies have invested substantial sums of money in cross-cultural and internationalisation programmes and briefings for those staff members who will represent them abroad.

Many linguists adhere to the Benjamin Whorf theory or hypothesis, which states that the language we speak largely determines our way of thinking, as distinct from merely expressing it. In other words, Germans or Japanese behave in a certain manner because the way they think is governed by the language they think in. A Spaniard and a Briton see the world in different ways because one is thinking in Spanish and the other in English. People in the British Isles act and live in a certain way because their thoughts are channelled along Anglo-Saxon grooves which are different from neo-Latin, Japanese or Chinese grooves. The Briton, the German and the Eskimo may share a common experience, but it appears to each as a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by the mind. The mind does this largely by means of language. Thus the three individuals end up seeing three different things. What is 'fair play' to the Briton may be something else to the German, who needs to translate the concept into different words, and it may mean nothing at all in a society where there are no organised games.

### *Translation inadequate*

The Greeks, who were the first people to enquire in depth into logic and reason, assumed that language was a universal, untampered-with element of reason. They believed it was a phenomenon shared by all mankind and, in the case of educated people, would provide a standard yardstick for comparison of ideas, experience and reality. They also assumed that ideas could be translated freely into any language. This is only true up to a point. Swedish translates readily into English and vice versa, but with Finnish and English the task is far more complicated. Even those of us who have learned languages at school have noticed the difficulty our teachers have in translating such words as *panache*, *esprit de corps*, *Gemütlichkeit* and *Zeitgeist* into English. Interpreters at the United Nations are faced daily with similar problems, even with languages which are closely related. In one recorded case, the English speaker said 'I assume', the French interpreter translated as 'I deduce', and this was rendered by the Russian as 'I consider' – by which time the idea of assumption had been lost!

### *Different worlds*

If this can happen working with three close relatives of the Indo-European group, we see that two languages as different as English and Navaho literally operate in two different worlds. I think it is important for business-people to consider carefully the implication of the words 'in

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two different worlds'. All observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. English, French, German, Russian and other Indo-European languages can be roughly calibrated (although not always satisfactorily), but where does this leave us with Chinese, Indonesian, Finnish or Japanese? If the structure of a person's language influences the manner in which they understand reality and behave with respect to it, then we could have four individuals who will see the universe through Sino-Tibetan, Polynesian, Altaic and Japanese eyes respectively and then comport themselves accordingly.

### *Internalised thought*

There is a good deal of scientific support for the hypothesis that higher levels of thinking depend on language. Language can be regarded as internalised thought. Most of us conduct an interior monologue, often accompanied by visual imagery. The more educated and literate the individual, the more complex and sophisticated this monologue becomes. It was not until the Middle Ages that people learned to read without reading aloud. Today, talking to or reasoning with oneself is accepted as quite common and there is no doubt that most of this goes on 'in words', whether expressed aloud or not.

We can assume that German, Italian and Malaysian businesspeople do the same thing in their own language. When each speaks, we merely glimpse the tip of a huge iceberg of verbal activity which never breaks the surface of audibility. If you make this reasonable assumption, then you can presume that whatever is said to you will be a brief projection of that inner world of the other person's thoughts. What is said may be grammatically accurate or erroneous in the extreme, but it will be coloured by the foreigner's view of reality, this itself influenced by the rigidity of his or her own language structure. This line of reasoning tends to become somewhat involved – and clearly thought may also influence one's choice of expression – but to clarify the point, one can take a few practical examples.

The German language is a tightly disciplined, no-nonsense entity with long, compound words often expressing complex concepts. We might therefore expect the internal monologue of a German person to be serious rather than casual, concentrating on weighty issues, and resulting in verbalisation which will be anything but flippant.

Contrast this with the interior monologue of an American counterpart. The nature of American English is interwoven with the character and history of the youthful United States. American speech or thought is mobile and opportunistic; it shifts quickly for advantage or compromise and excels in casual and humorous shafts. The German will take Americans seriously when they do not intend to be taken as such. A further complication is the deep slide that American English has taken into clichés and 'tough' talk. Such expressions as 'gotta deal', 'gotta be jokin', 'no way', 'full of shit', 'over the top', 'you can't do this to me' and 'give away the store' fail to indicate properly what the American is really thinking, but are verbal escape routes to simplified analyses or solutions not necessarily in their favour. Britons are guilty of other clichés indicative of near-stultifying vagueness of thought, well designed to convey very little or nothing at all to their foreign interlocutors. Such expressions, occasionally derived from sport, include 'fair play', 'sticky wicket', 'a good innings', 'good show', 'bad news', 'not on' and 'a bit thick'.

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The French thought monologue is quite different. They have dissected their universe better than most of us and they try to think about it clearly. They know where they are going and what it is that they want. Their clinical vocabulary is conducive to quick thinking, its lack of vagueness leads to a cutting directness, and their ruthless pursuit of logic will often irritate Anglo-Saxons or Japanese, who tend to 'feel their way' towards a solution. The Spanish speaker's monologue is earthy, emotional and generous. The wealth of Spanish vocabulary and the wide range of endearments and diminutives (shared with Italian and Portuguese and often untranslatable into English or Finnish) enable the Spaniard to communicate in a warm, human manner indicative of an expansive character and lack of cunning. Exporters should not, however, read this as a sign that the Spanish speaker can necessarily be taken advantage of.

The Japanese have the most difficult task of all in making the transition from their internal monologue to actual verbal utterance. In their thoughts they agonise over striking a balance between gaining advantage and correctness of behaviour. Their thought (we can also regard this as internalised speech) has to be polite in the extreme in view of the fact that they are to address others. But the speech mechanisms involved in such politeness often lead to incredible vagueness of expression, so that whatever message they seek to convey may well get lost in a fog of impeccable behaviour. On top of that, their formidable battery of honorific expressions – so useful in communication between Japanese – are rendered useless in the face of impossibility of translation, so that their conversation with their foreign counterpart emerges as terribly platitudinous, even if grammatically correct.

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