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Cognition and Language

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Cognition and Language

Peeking through the language use



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A daydream-like state lives in fiction books, a thought-provoking feeling might be found in a newspaper or a quality conversation with a friend. Words matter. When reading powerful lines, you can be touched, surprised, or whatever emotional whirlpool is there for you to taste. Not everybody, though, in our busy lives, is aware of what an influential tool language is. I invite you to peek at the two theories behind the interaction between language and cognition. The early 1980s were the busy times for cognitive linguists and psychologists.

But let's start with the year 2021 and a random example that I want to share with you. San Diego-based filmmaker and entrepreneur [Thoraya Maronesy](#) has a simple but powerful idea that involves talking. She sets a camera and a mic in a local park and invites people to talk on camera or anonymously. Strangers share secrets, get something off their chests, speak up. I came across her YouTube channel and once again became convinced that language is power.

You can look at language as a simple tool that people use every day without even thinking about it. But you also can look at it as an intricate system of communication with its cultural, geographical, and other contexts. On social media, you use keywords to generate the search or attract followers with hashtags.

Translators carefully choose words to create a perfect transition of phrases from one language to another. You can manipulate or put down with words, but you can also encourage or support using them.

One of the most fascinating ways to understand how words work is to look at the link between cognition and language.

Metaphors and Cognition

You've probably heard this phrase — TIME IS MONEY. It's not a simple phrase, it's a conceptual metaphor. In cognitive linguistics, it's common to write metaphors like that in capital letters. The essence of metaphor is to think of one thing in terms of another.

[George Lakoff](#), American cognitive linguist and [Mark Johnson](#), philosopher, are the two masterminds behind the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In 1980, their seminal book had an enormous impact on cognitive linguistics. Have you ever heard of Star Wars? Well, everybody in cognitive science has heard about Lakoff and Johnson.

In their book, the authors state that metaphors shape the way we think. LIFE IS A JOURNEY (I've lost my sense of direction), IDEAS ARE FOOD (He devoured the book), or HAPPY IS UP (That boosted my spirits) are also metaphors. When you reverse engineer metaphors like that, you might find something interesting about how they are designed to pull the right strings in people's minds. Conceptual metaphors are often used in politics, marketing, and other spheres of influence via language.

[George Lakoff](#) says the following about metaphors:

"Because conceptual metaphors unconsciously structure the brain's conceptual system, much of normal everyday thought is metaphoric, with different conceptual metaphors used to think with on different occasions or by different people."

We can't help but use metaphorical thinking in our daily lives. This is because metaphors are parts of our cognition.

Now, let's mentally teleport to the 1980s, from the USA to Australia and New Zealand. Here, two friends, colleagues, and therapists, [Michael White](#) and [David Epston](#) are working on what will soon be known as Narrative Therapy.

Nowadays, David Epston and his colleagues run an online community of co-founders and experts in narrative therapy called [Narrative Approaches](#). They say the following about this therapy:

"A narrative therapy involves listening to and telling or retelling stories about unique and empowered people and the challenges and problems they encounter in their lives."

Words are at the core of this type of psychotherapy. The main idea is that you're separated from your problems. It has become a motto: **The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem.** These words make a very interesting point, don't they?

By practising this way of thinking and with guidance from a professional, this approach can be beneficial in many ways in everyday life. You can try to "rewrite" your old ways of behaving and thinking that no longer serve you. Perhaps you can feel less stressed or less guilty about something in your life that you can't change or control. The experts from emphasize:

"In the face of serious and sometimes potentially deadly problems, the idea of hearing or telling stories may seem a trivial pursuit. It is hard to believe that conversations can shape new realities and meanings of our lives. But they do."

David Denborough, an Australian community worker and a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, adds:

"Our lives and their pathways are not fixed in stone; instead they are shaped by story."

In The Retelling the Stories of Our Lives (2014), he gives examples of how using the right words and the right stories can shape the way we think. Words can be addressed to ourselves or can affect other people. For example, if you say, "He's a bad kid," it means a kid is a problem, but if you say, " Trouble is really following that kid around," that's a different story. It's a different way of looking at the situation, and hopefully, a better way to deal with whatever this situation entails.

Behind metaphors, there are intentions. Behind stories, there are emotions. And vice versa. Looking at what cognitive linguists and psychologists offer us, even just the tiniest peek, we can see that words matter.

*"Every time we ask a question,
we're generating a possible way of a life."*

David Epston