

### ACTIVITY 3

#### Does language affect the way we think?

The language we speak widens our perspective, deepens our knowledge, and changes the way we perceive the world. It's also through language that we are able to trigger emotions, imagination, and action.

There are now more than 7000 languages spoken in the world. This, now, begs the question: Does language influence the way we think?

The principle of **linguistic relativity** states that the way people think of the world is influenced directly by the language that the people use to talk about it. Or more radically, people could only perceive aspects of the world for which their language has words.

Language and culture relate a community's values and ideas. For example, Korean use only one word "*nunchi*" (meaning eye-measure) that has no English translation to relate to the Korean belief in gauging how people are thinking and feeling in order to create connection, trust and harmony.

Read the text and do the tasks



#### Does language affect the way we think?

Have you ever heard anyone say that Eskimos have over a hundred words to describe 'snow'? Or that speakers of languages without a future tense are generally happier? What about languages that don't have numbers for counting large quantities? These are common stories we hear about differences between speakers of different languages.

There is a huge amount of research that has been done about the link between language and psychology or behavior. The subject became popular in the early 20th century when a linguist named Whorf presented his hypothesis that speakers of different languages are cognitively different—they literally process thoughts differently as a result of their respective language's limitations, or lack thereof.

That idea was widely accepted at the time but has proven to be only partially true. For example, an article in Scientific American describes a study done with the Piraha tribe in the Amazon who have no number words at all! According to the study, they have only three words for numbers: "around 1", "some," and "many." Can you imagine a world in which we had no numbers to budget our economy and count money? It turns out not having words for numbers doesn't affect their ability to conceive of different amounts of things, but only their ability to remember specific amounts.

Another article describes a study that showed how, for bilingual speakers, the language you speak can determine your world view or your prejudices. The study, involving Arab and Hebrew bilingual speakers, showed that when speaking Arab, the participants linked certain names with a negative feeling, and when speaking Hebrew, they didn't.

The same article brings up the old myth about languages that don't have any future tense. A study at Yale University showed that those who speak languages without a future tense, like Mandarin Chinese for example, tend to see their lives as a whole (picture a circle), as opposed to seeing it as a timeline. In this way, they tend not to waste money on unnecessary things, take better care of themselves, and live longer. Compared to languages with multiple future tenses, like English, there is a somewhat different life experience which is taking place on a linear axis, in which, as the author cleverly points out, "the past is something

we've left behind, and the future is like a distant planet where consequences live that we don't fully intend to visit." Now there's some food for thought!

And what about the study between language and navigation skills, brought up in one of the most famous articles on the topic, written by Lera Boroditzsky. She points out that for native speakers in a remote Aboriginal tribe that she studied, there is no word for "right" and "left", but rather the speaker must always use a specific direction such as "southwest" or "northeast". As a result, they possessed excellent navigational skills, always knowing which direction they were heading. Talk about having an inner compass!

So, does the language we speak really determine the way we think? Or just the way we communicate? The important thing is to focus on our similarities and enjoy our differences. That is part of the richness of learning another language after all, as you experience new ways of saying things, you also acquire a new way to see things. And that is a good thing!

Adapted from; <https://www.speakenglishcenter.com> Does Language Affect the Way We Think?  
Here's Proof! Posted by [April Buchanan](#)

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### **Exercise 1**

**Are the following statements *True* or *False*. Find evidence in the text to support your answer.**

- The study carried out in the Amazon confirms the fact that their language limitations cause them problems with their ability to remember precise quantities.
- A study involving speakers of Hebrew and Arab shows they don't have similar perceptions about the same word in either one language or the other.
- Lera Boroditzsky puts forward the fact that not being able to refer to sides as right or left gives you better navigational skills.

### **Exercise 2**

**Find synonyms in the text for the following words:**

- inwardly .....
- apprehend .....
- bigotry .....
- swivel .....

### **Exercise 3**

**Fill in the gaps with appropriate words**

- Mandarin Chinese, ..... speak a language without a future tense, tend ..... (see) their lives as a whole.
- The link between language and behaviour ..... (study) during the 20th century, Pursuant ..... it, speakers of different languages process thoughts differently
- Lacking the words 'right' or 'left' in their vocabulary, speakers in a remote Aboriginal tribe must use a specific direction such as "southwest" or "northeast". ....., , they ..... (say) to possess excellent navigational skills,

d. Language is reckoned as capable of ..... (induce) the way we think. Learning new ways of saying something allows you to focus on aspects other ..... just how different we are.

#### **Exercise 4**

##### **Discuss with a partner**

- a. Have you ever observed yourself change your way of thinking when you speak a second language?
- b. As a bilingual speaker, have you ever noticed these kinds of language differences? Are there any word(s) that you miss in English and you find really helpful in your language or vice versa? What do you do when you meet that situation?

#### **Exercise 5**

##### **Write 150-200 words on the following topic**

Do you consider that far from being a disadvantage, being bilinguals or multilingual enables people to have more than one perspective on a particular issue?