

Headline English

2010, week 51 *Learn English through reading on current world affairs*

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2 **Language and the way we think**

3 original at:

4 <http://www.economist.com/debate/days/view/626>

5 Some differences between languages yield big cognitive differences. For
6 example, unlike English, many languages do not use words like "left" and
7 "right" and instead put everything in terms of cardinal directions, requiring
8 their speakers to say things like "there's an ant on your south-west leg".
9 As a result, speakers of such languages are remarkably good at staying
10 oriented (even in unfamiliar places or inside buildings) and perform feats
11 of navigation that seem superhuman to English speakers. In this case,
12 just a few words in a language make a big difference in what cognitive
13 abilities their speakers develop. Certainly next time you plan to get lost in
14 the woods, I recommend bringing along a speaker of Kuuk Thaayorre or
15 Guugu Yimithirr rather than, say, Dutch or English.

16 In other cases, features of a language can serve as a gateway to whole
17 realms of reasoning. For example, some languages do not have exact
18 number words (there may be words for "few" or "many" but none for
19 "seven" or "sixteen"). Speakers of such languages generally are not able
20 to keep track of exact quantities—they cannot count.

21 Beyond these examples, language influences how we think about time,
22 causality, events, motion, emotion and the contents of other minds. Each
23 language provides its own cognitive toolkit, and encapsulates the
24 knowledge and worldview developed over thousands of years within a
25 culture. While language is a central part of cognition, there is nothing
26 magical about how language shapes thought. Languages shape our
27 thinking in the same ways that going to medical school or learning to fly a
28 plane also build expertise and transform what we can do. Different
29 languages encourage different kinds of cognitive expertise in their
30 speakers, and as a result, speakers of different languages end up thinking
31 differently.

Questions

- 1) Give synonyms for 'yield' (line 5).
- 2) What is the difference between a term like 'left' or 'right' and a cardinal direction?
- 3) What are, according to the article, the consequences of being a native speaker of a language where cardinal directions are used instead of word like 'left' or 'right'.
- 4) Paraphrase 'bringing along' (line 14).
- 5) Paraphrase 'serve as the gateway to' (line 16).
- 6) What is allegedly the consequence of not having words for specific numbers in one's native language?
- 7) According to the article, is the manner language influences humans completely unique compared to other things that have an impact on people?
- 8) Do you agree with the article? Do you think that 'speakers of different languages end up thinking differently (lines 30 to 31)?'

Vocabulary

realm (line 17) – the region, sphere, or domain within which anything occurs, prevails, or dominates, the special province or field of something or someone

keep track of (line 20) – to observe or follow the course of progress of

content (line 22) – something that is to be expressed through some medium, as speech, writing, or any substantive information or creative material viewed in contrast to its actual or potential manner of presentation

toolkit (line 23) – a set of tools designed to be used together or for a particular purpose

You can find additional explanation and more examples to help you understand and use English words and phrases at <http://dictionary.reference.com>, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> or <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>

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