

**“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Discuss.**

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “*Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*,” published in 1921, was a pivotal work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s ‘linguistic turn’- a time in which the importance of language was being investigated across many academic disciplines. The aim of Wittgenstein’s “*Tractatus*” is “to draw limit to thought”;<sup>1</sup> he argues that for something to exist in the world- either imagined or physical- it must be possible to think of it.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the use of language to express thought is a means to map the boundaries of reality. The interaction between language and thought that Wittgenstein advocated was later labelled ‘linguistic relativism’, following the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. However, two key aspects of Wittgenstein’s theory: that language is capable of both limiting the thoughts we can have and influencing the nature of these thoughts, will be scrutinised below to demonstrate how the interaction between language and thoughts is substantially more minimal than Wittgenstein suggested. In addition, the ever-changing “limits” of both language and the world, alongside the problem of meaning, will be investigated in order to show how the world limits language, rather than vice versa.

George Orwell’s dystopian classic “1984”, poses questions concerning the nature of a language “designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought” through the “reduction of vocabulary.”<sup>3</sup> As Wittgenstein argues, for something to potentially exist in the world, it must be within the range of thought, which he believes to be reflected through the range of language. Therefore, decreasing the scope of language decreases the scope of thought, in turn decreasing the “limits of the world.” For example, in Orwell’s world the word “free” is purged of its “heretical meaning” to suppress the public’s desire for political freedom, since they supposedly are no longer able to understand the concept. But how plausible is it that the removal of a word from a language limits one’s ability to understand the underlying concepts? Chinese-speakers are still able to express agreement despite not having words which translate directly to “yes” or “no”, and everyone is able to take joy in the

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1955) *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. UK: Linkgua, 23

<sup>2</sup> (No author) (2002)

<https://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Wittgenstein/wittgenstein.html>

<sup>3</sup> Orwell, G. (1954) *1984*. UK: Penguin, 258

misfortunes of others, even if their language does not have a word that translates directly to the German “Schadenfreude,” suggesting that our understanding of concepts goes beyond our language’s lexicon.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Wittgenstein, linguists such as Steven Pinker offer an alternative theory of language and thought, commonly referred to as “mentalese.” “Mentalese” is suggested to be the universal medium of all human thought, and does not take the form of a language.<sup>5</sup> The theory is supported by the experiences of deaf adults who were never taught sign language, rendering them languageless. Pinker cites the example of Ildefonso, a deaf adult without sign language who still exhibited “unmistakable intelligence and curiosity”, and was quickly able to learn arithmetic, suggesting that our ability to think is not language-dependent. Additionally, Pinker refers to the feeling of remembering the “gist” of something rather than specific words, further implying that thoughts do not adopt the medium of words. Similarly, the philosopher William James defines one of the key features of religious experience as “ineffability” - the experience cannot be put into words.<sup>6</sup> Although the physical reality of religious experience is questionable, there is no doubt that they are truly real in terms of the profound impact they have on thoughts and feelings; another example of how thoughts can go beyond the realms of language. Since thoughts are independent of language, surely they cannot be restricted by language, thus creating a dichotomy between the limits of language and the limits of the world.

The work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf in analysing native American languages came to similar conclusions as Wittgenstein: that “language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.”<sup>7</sup> The latter part of Whorf’s quotation has been addressed above and deemed to be inaccurate, but in order to understand Wittgenstein’s argument fully, the way that language shapes thought needs to be investigated. Due to problems regarding the accuracy of their evidence, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been deemed invalid, and in some linguistic circles has been adapted to a form of “Neo-Whorfanianism,” known as the “Boas-Jackobsen Principle.” The linguist Guy Deutscher

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<sup>4</sup> (No author) (2018)

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/schadenfreude>

<sup>5</sup> Pinker, S. (1994) *The Language Instinct*. UK: Penguin, 53-66

<sup>6</sup> James, W. (2018) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. UK: Charles Rivers Editors

<sup>7</sup> Whorf, B.

explains that this principle means that language shapes thought “not because of what it allows people to think but rather because of the kinds of information each language habitually obliges people to think *about*.”<sup>8</sup> There is substantial evidence to support this principle. Russian has two distinct terms: *siniy* and *goluboy*, which are both encompassed by the English word “blue.” Researchers have found that whilst performing visual tasks, Russian speakers were better at distinguishing between shades of blue than English speakers. The tasks were then repeated, but participants now had to simultaneously recite a sequence of numbers, with the aim of distracting the language circuits of the brain. When this was the case, Russian-speakers were no longer discernibly better than English-speakers at differentiating between shades of blue.<sup>9</sup> This experiment therefore proves that language obliges speakers to perceive colour in different ways, thus allowing it a limited influence over thoughts. Similarly, an experiment conducted by Toshi Konishi measured the impact noun gender has on perception. The word for “bridge” is the masculine “el puente” in Spanish, but the feminine “Die Brücke” in German. Spanish-speakers were found to associate stereotypically masculine adjectives with bridges (such as “sturdy” and “towering”), whilst Germans associated feminine ones (like “slender” and “beautiful”).<sup>10</sup> Henceforth, language forces us to create different associations with different objects, thus shaping our thoughts to some extent. The evidence discussed above proves that our language does not limit thought in the way Wittgenstein proposed, but does still have the ability to shape our perception of the world.

Wittgenstein talks of language as having “limits”, but in fact language is highly fluid and flexible; both lexicon and grammar inevitably undergo change. The lexicographer Erin McKean argues for the making up of words, since it allows for more rich and varied ways of conveying meaning.<sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare alone coined 1700 new English words, including “lonely”, “gloomy” and “savagery”, highlighting the impact that just one person can have in extending the “limits” of the common vernacular.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, words can fall into a state of

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<sup>8</sup> Deutscher, G. (2011) *The Unfolding of Language*. UK: Arrow Books, 152

<sup>9</sup> Deutscher, G. (2011) *The Unfolding of Language*. UK: Arrow Books, 223-225

<sup>10</sup> Deutscher, G. (2011) *The Unfolding of Language*. UK: Arrow Books, 209-210

<sup>11</sup> McKean, E. (2014)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/erin\\_mckean\\_go\\_ahead\\_make\\_up\\_new\\_words/transcript?referrer=playlist-how\\_language\\_changes\\_over\\_time#t-69462](https://www.ted.com/talks/erin_mckean_go_ahead_make_up_new_words/transcript?referrer=playlist-how_language_changes_over_time#t-69462)

<sup>12</sup> Mabillard, A. (2000)

disuse, for example, one rarely hears words such as “fandangle” (a useless thing), “behoof” (advantage) or “disport” (frolic) used in everyday conversation.<sup>13</sup> The obsolescence of these words is another way in which the “limits” of language are adapted over time. Furthermore, words can change meaning over time, as seen through the case of the Old English word “*thyrlian*”, meaning “to pierce.” The word was used as a metaphor for strong emotion, and is the origin of the word “thrill”, which no longer is used in relation to piercing.<sup>14</sup> These aforementioned examples show how language is in a constant state of evolution, meaning that its limits are perhaps undefinable. This raises the question: does language change in line with the limits of the world?

Steven Pinker defines language as “a biological adaptation to communicate information.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, biologist Mark Pagel states that “language opened up the sphere of cooperation for humans to exploit.” He attributes language evolution with the development of human society, as it allowed for social learning and therefore “cumulative cultural adaptation.”<sup>16</sup> What this means is that language allows us to build on the ideas of others; developing these across generations causes technology to progress in ways which are not seen in other species. If the evolutionary purpose of language is to create progression by communicating about the world now and where it could go next, then language must adapt to fit the situation- or “limits”- of the world. However, this is not always possible. For example, many of the world’s languages are threatened by the heritage of colonialism, which drastically increased the usage of a small number of dominant languages (such as English, Spanish and French). Present day globalisation threatens minor languages (like Irish and Frisian) further, since it encourages people to pragmatically learn dominant languages to increase job opportunities. These pressures mean that of the world’s 6000 languages, approximately 3000 will be dead by the end of the century.<sup>17</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, these figures suggest that around half of all

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<http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/wordsinvented.html>

<sup>13</sup> (No author) (2018)

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/archaic-words/>

<sup>14</sup> Deutscher, G. (2006) *The Unfolding of Language*. UK: Arrow Books, 125

<sup>15</sup> Pinker, S. 1994 *The Language Instinct*. UK: Penguin, 17

<sup>16</sup> Pagel, M. (2011)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/mark\\_pagel\\_how\\_language\\_transformed\\_humanity/transcript?referrer=playlist-how\\_language\\_changes\\_over\\_time](https://www.ted.com/talks/mark_pagel_how_language_transformed_humanity/transcript?referrer=playlist-how_language_changes_over_time)

<sup>17</sup> Crystal, D. (2007) *How Language Works*. UK: Penguin, 336

languages are insufficiently adapted to deal with the world's changing situation. From this it becomes clear that capabilities of language do not always align with the demands of the world. As playwright Brian Friel summarises, "it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of fact."<sup>18</sup>

The plight of dying languages show how the world is vital in shaping the uses of language by forcing them to adapt to new situations. This suggests that, contrary to Wittgenstein, the limits of the world mean the limits of language, and begs the question: is it possible for language to go beyond the world we know? For language to function, words need established meanings so that communication is successful, so in addressing this question, it is helpful to look at where words derive their meaning. Returning to Pinker, he proposed that all babies' brains are genetically hardwired to carve up the world in the same way, and they then learn to assign words to these sections. Thus, word meaning derives from the physical world. It seems therefore that since word meaning is thoroughly rooted in the world, it is impossible for language to go beyond it. It is also argued that "meanings are not simply given in nature...they are bound up with culture."<sup>19</sup> For example, Hebrew uses one word "yad", where English uses two to distinguish between "arm" and "hand."<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Navajo word "shimá" can be used as a translation for the English "mother", but its meaning extends to include all givers of life, including the Earth itself.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, culture is seen to disrupt the meanings that are seemingly clearly defined by nature, and has even more impact in determining the words for abstract concepts. For instance, the English word "mind" encompasses different aspects of the French words: "intelligence", "esprit", "raison", "avis", and "tête", which is but one example of how culture impacts the division of abstract concepts into different meanings.<sup>22</sup> This is not only evident between languages, but within them as well. Although pioneered after the publication of "*Tractatus*", another feature of Wittgensteinian thought is the theory of "language-game", which proposes that the meaning of a word is dependent on its use in a particular linguistic community, and is entirely context

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<sup>18</sup> Friel, B. (1981) *Translations*. UK: Faber and Faber Limited, 52

<sup>19</sup> Matthews, P. (2003) *Linguistics*. UK: Oxford University Press, 9

<sup>20</sup> Deutscher, G. (2006) *The Unfolding of Language*. UK: Arrow Books, 16

<sup>21</sup> Matthews, P. (2003) *Linguistics*. UK: Oxford, 9

<sup>22</sup> Deutscher, G. (2006) *The Unfolding of Language*. UK: Arrow Books, 14

dependent. Regardless of whether meaning derives from culture, community, or physical objects, it is clear that all meaning is firmly rooted in different aspects of our world. Therefore, since it is impossible for language to derive meaning from anywhere but the world, language is restricted by the world, and cannot go beyond it. Hence, although language may not limit our experience of the world, it is clear that the world limits the extent of language.

The importance of the external world in the creation of word meaning and language is further highlighted in Wittgenstein's 1953 *"Philosophical Investigations"*, through the "private language argument." A private language is one whose words "refer to what can only be known to the person speaking," and thus cannot be understood by anyone else.<sup>23</sup> Having raised this concept, Wittgenstein goes on to criticise it, in a way which shows the importance of the external world in establishing word meaning. An example of something that "can only be known to the person speaking" is a sensation such as 'pain', that is not necessarily the same sensation within each person. A speaker of a private language could name such a sensation 'S', and refer to 'S' each time they feel that sensation. However, this raises the problem of memory; memory is unreliable, and it is possible that a person could forget the exact sensation which had been assigned the meaning 'S'. To check that one is remembering the correct sensation, Wittgenstein says they could call to mind "a [dictionary-like] table that exists only in our imagination," and use it to verify the meaning of 'S'.<sup>24</sup> However, what will assure the correctness of the 'table'? One memory cannot verify another without being verified itself, since "justification consists in appealing to something independent."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, when talking about qualia such as "pain" in public (or everyday) language, the problem of verification does not arise, as although different people may experience different sensations, this does not affect communication due to a general consensus regarding the way in which these words are used.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore evident that the meaning that is so important in creating a usable language is derived only from the wider linguistic community and the

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<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, L. found at: Kenny, A. (2006) Wittgenstein. UK: Blackwell, 142

<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein, L. found at: Kenny, A. (2006) Wittgenstein. UK: Blackwell, 152

<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, L. found at: Kenny, A. (2006) Wittgenstein. UK: Blackwell, 152

<sup>26</sup> (No author) (2015)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x86hLtOkou8>

external world, thus suggesting that the world is the most important factor in terms of shaping word meaning and by extension language itself.

To conclude, Wittgenstein's claim that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" is fundamentally inaccurate, as later work has shown that language has no power to limit the range of thought, since thought is not represented in the medium of language. The only influence language has is to force us to focus on different aspects of the world, but this is highly minimal compared to the impact of what Wittgenstein was proposing. Additionally, language and the world do not always evolve in sync, suggesting that they cannot always be mapped onto each other. Finally, the fact that word meaning cannot be isolated from the world suggests that although the limits of my language may not be the limits of my world, the limits of my world are most definitely the limits of my language.

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