

# “The Limits of my Language are the Limits of my World”

by Patrick Schmidt

Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein provides the line I use to introduce the interlocking nature of language and thought and it always leads to a lively discussion. A well-turned phrase transmits the tenets of thought far more effectively than any lecture.

The question of how language shapes the way we think goes back at least a dozen centuries--Charlemagne's "To have a second language is to have a second soul."

Far more recently, Russian linguist Roman Jakobson pointed out that "languages differ essentially in what they must convey, not in what they may convey." The power of a mother tongue is not that it allows thought but that it forces it!

*"I talked to my neighbor last night."*

Think about it: if I were speaking French or German, I'd have to choose *voisin* or *voisine*, *Nachbar* or *Nachbarin*. Gender-based tongues make for more specific images, while anglophones aren't required to consider the sexes of people they refer to.

Language is not only a communication tool, it's a system which allows us to organize perception and subsequent thinking. The American linguist Benjamin Whorf posited that

we act in certain ways because our mental patterns are shaped by how we speak.

How we express ourselves on a day-to-day basis reflects what we decide is critical to survival and adaptation. Americans act quickly because their mind-set tells them "time is money" while *la dolce vita* leaves Italians smiling... when they're not waving their arms in argument.

Even saying **No** is relative, as demonstrated by a Hong Kong journalist's delightful piece of satire:

## CHINESE EDITOR'S REJECTION LETTER

"We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper, however, it would then be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. And it is unthinkable that in the next thousand years we shall see its equal. We are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition and to beg you one thousand times to overlook our short-sighted timidity."

Regardless of ethnicity, my students are always amused when they read this but there is a difference. Europeans and Americans could never imagine writing anything even

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Editorial</b>  | 1  |
| Perihan Ügeöz<br><i>Turkey's dynamic interculturalist</i>         | 2  |
| "The Limits of my Language are the Limits of my World"            | 4  |
| "The opposite may also be true..."                                | 6  |
| American Identity Crisis<br><i>(homo economicus without work)</i> | 10 |
| Book reviews  | 13 |
| 'Building a Tower' Exercise                                       | 15 |
| Manifesto from SIETAR Italia                                      | 18 |
| Events, workshops, congresses                                     | 19 |

# “The limits of ...”

— *continued*



“The Tower of Babel”, painted by the Dutch 16th century painter Pieter Bruegel

approaching that sort of approach...Whereas the Chinese, Japanese and Indian members of my workshops flatly state say that they could (and would).

Westerners and Asians may share a common experience when confronted with the mechanisms of rejection and face-saving but each experiences “a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions that has to be organized by our mind -- and this means mostly by the linguistic system of our mind” (*Whorf*).

Because saving face is so deeply embedded in their mental pathways, the Chinese possess a formidable array of honorific expressions. And it’s a rhetoric for which the West has no patience.

People from different cultures don’t think alike--that we know. What we understand less is the degree to which the language in which we learn to survive acts as a continual translator of reality.

Words define the constructs which cause friction when we attempt to understand foreign values or new ways. Language defines our nature.

The story of the ‘Tower of Babel’ recounts the efforts of united humanity metaphorically attempting to achieve a

godlike status. God is not amused and His answer strikes a universal chord. One tongue becomes a thousand--the mind-numbing cacophony of man-as-monkey--and the tower is no more.

The story is obviously a mirror (as befit the parables of those biblical times) representing the war-or-peace choice tribes have when dealing with one another.

Every person on the planet may well be connected on an existential level, it all goes back to families, clans, tribes and nations. We’re each condemned to perceive our own realities and to express what we feel in a very specific way...which is often only vaguely understood by “outsiders”.

Taking a dynamic *other* perspective necessitates a leap of consciousness. Back-and-forth communication is problematic at best amidst a “clash of differing realities.”

And so we’re led back to the most fundamental questions of intercultural studies. How do we become to be the way we are? What makes us think the way we do? How can we relate to people from outside our tribe in a more relevant way?

The answers are found in the language we speak.

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Editorial</b>  | 1  |
| Perihan Ügeöz<br><i>Turkey’s dynamic interculturalist</i>         | 2  |
| “The Limits of my Language are the Limits of my World”            | 4  |
| “The opposite may also be true...”                                | 6  |
| American Identity Crisis<br><i>(homo economicus without work)</i> | 10 |
| Book reviews  | 13 |
| ‘Building a Tower’ Exercise                                       | 15 |
| Manifesto from SIETAR Italia                                      | 18 |
| Events, workshops, congresses                                     | 19 |