

Letter from my uncle

Graeme Maxton

What is this thing called thinking? Part 4



Here is the fourth part of my uncle's research on what is called thinking. He looks at how language determines thought.

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軒尼詩道
灣仔
香港
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Dear Nephew,

I see you found my notes on the subject of love.

Attached are my fourth set of notes on what is called thinking, on the role of language. I'm going to take a break next week and enjoy some time reflecting.

I'll write again soon.

慢走, as they say here, man zou!

Much love,

Max

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Part 4 The role of language in thinking

What of language? How much does language determine what is called thinking? How much of what we call thinking is limited, or made possible, by the language we speak? What do the theories of linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism tell us? Is language the fabric of thought, as Humboldt claims? Language determines our world-view, he said. *"The diversity of languages is not a diversity of signs and sounds but a diversity of views of the world."*

The nature of language lies in the relatedness of ideas words contain. That's a complex thought, a difficult sentence to grasp. I'll try to explain what I mean more simply. Every word has a meaning. Every meaning is related to an idea. Put all the words together and it forms a language. It is a living thing, a language. Words are constantly added, while others are forgotten, left to moulder in dictionaries. Who uses croton, finnimbrun or pintle these days?

The verb "to be" is an idea. It is the idea of existence. The verb "to have" is the idea of possession. The verb "to want" is the idea of desire or need. We learn the meanings of words as we grow up. When a parent wants a child to behave in a certain way it's necessary for the words that contains the idea to be explained. A child must listen before it has understanding. Learning comes from thinking and understanding. It's a small thinking-step that helps us make sense of the world.

No word can exist alone, because a language of one word is not a language. I am reminded of the thinking pathway I mentioned at the beginning, about how thought is a journey across an ever-changing landscape, a billowing ocean. Our thoughts are a process of discovery, and to communicate them, they become movement within a language. How much does the language we speak create its own shifting ground? How much does it make the sea of thought surge and swell? Can it act like a damper on our waves of thought? Do some languages offer a smoother thought-crossing than others? Is a language with more waves, that takes us across deeper waters, more poetic and refined than one that walks with shallow calmness?

If a language is unable to describe what is called thinking, explain what it is, how can the concept of thought be fully understood? When a language is uniformly available to everyone, what uniformity in thinking does this create? Does it constrain thinking by enforcing a particular way of thought?

Does someone with a mediocre vocabulary think less, or think less well? Do thinkers we might refer to as "crude", those who lack an understanding of many words, suffer from poorer thought? Is their vocabulary lacking, or their imagination, their ability to think?

Is there such a thing as pure thought, a perfect way to think? How much does the purity of thought depend on the language used?

For many years it was believed those who spoke "superior" languages had superior thinking. While this idea is very little discussed today, because the implications are no longer politically acceptable, this does not mean the notion is wrong, nor right. Some languages, pidgin and creole for example, are regarded as simple. Though there is no specific ranking, it is clear that other languages have much more complex structures and much greater lexical complexity. Do societies with more complex languages achieve more? It obviously depends how we track it. If we use the measures of today, the size of an economy, the level of technological advancement, a sense of cultural superiority, the answer would seem to be affirmative. Cultures with complex languages are more successful. If we think about the societies that created the finest music, poetry and art, it appears to

be true too. If we think about the cultures that have started the greatest conflicts, that have done the greatest damage to nature, then it is surely true as well.

Measuring language complexity is extremely difficult of course, as is measuring complexity of thought. Linguistics lacks any coherent theory of complexity. Most of the research on the link between language and thought is within the discipline of psychology, which surely boxes-in what can be thought and said. The interconnections between language and thought are a question on which a cornucopia of disciplines could provide helpful insights, not just psychology. Neither language nor thought find their main intellectual home in psychology, I would argue. It may be a natural home for cognition, no more.

It is surely possible to demonstrate that some linguistic structures are more complex than others but that does not necessarily mean the thinking is more complex, or more advanced.

The German language has four cases and three genders while English has no cases and no genders. It is sometimes necessary for German speakers to hold a single sentence in their heads, which can extend to more than a written page, and which cannot be fully understood until the last word. This could negate the whole sentence or provide an essential verb to give it meaning. German speakers have to hold a lot of ideas in their head at once. Does this mean they think more, or better?

The Cantonese dialect in Chinese has nine tones, and is very hard for those without experience of tonal languages to learn. Manlai says it is a language that evolves more quickly than most, with new word combinations and structures appearing all the time. But this does not necessarily mean it is more complex than other languages, from a thinking perspective. It is hard to see how this might mean Cantonese speakers think differently from the four-tone language used by most Taiwanese people, for example, especially when both use the same written script.

Does it matter if a language exists in written form? Some languages are only spoken. And, yes, this appears to suggest a lower potential level of thinking. When communication is limited to the spoken word, then the transmission of complex ideas is constrained by the intellectual and lexical limitations of the person speaking, their ability to comprehend and relate an idea. It is harder to verify what's being said without a definitive, written source.

Is it possible to think without language? A baby can respond to a stimulus without being able to say what's happening. It experiences the world at some level. Primitive humans, even without language and living in isolation, must have been able to think. Our minds are thinking constantly, it is impossible to stop the flow. Thoughts do not appear to us as words. How they appear is hard to say. How one person sees a thought may not be the way others see a thought.

We can probably conclude that it is possible to think without language, though only in a relatively limited way.

We can also surely agree that people brought up to speak different languages think slightly differently, at least to some degree, in ways are not simply cultural.

In Spanish there are two versions of the verb 'to be'. One indicates permanence, the other transience. Death uses the temporary verb. This suggests Spanish speakers think a little differently about death compared to most English speakers.

In German, there are concepts expressed in single words, pillars of Germanic thought, that need several sentences to translate into English. German has several words for Being, awareness, consciousness, and existence that are hard to translate directly. The German word for passion is linked to the word for suffering, a derivation partly lost to contemporary English-language interpretations. The novels section in German bookshops is labelled "beautiful sadness", an idea that is strange to English readers.

In Chinese, there is not really any word for "no". There is only the negation of a verb. People say, "don't want", "don't have", "don't need", "not correct", "not alright", "is not", for example. Perhaps this suggests that Chinese speakers don't think as negatively as English speakers, not in such black and white terms. The Chinese response leaves a little more room for interpretation and discussion. It is a slightly different way to think, more nuanced. It's a slightly different way to behave towards others.

If a group of people who speak a particular language think slightly differently about a concept as simple as yes and no, perhaps they think differently about more complex ideas as well.

Similarly, in German, there is a word (*doch*) that can mean both yes or no, depending on the context.

The tonal nature of the Chinese language means multiple- interpretations, and a great deal of humour, hidden in the homophones is lost in direct translation to other languages. The Chinese see a range of meanings in many sentences, and this would suggest they also think slightly differently. I imagine it must be a bit like colour blindness. A Chinese sentence can be red and green, either or both. One is never completely sure which is intended.

The number four is unlucky in Chinese because it is the same as the word for death, using a different tone, while the number eight sounds like another word which means wealth. So apartments on the eighth floor are worth more, while those on the fourth floor are rented out to foreigners, who are unaware of the bad fate that comes with their new home. A popular politician in Taiwan is known as "Korean fish" because this is what his name with different tones becomes. "Do you like Korean fish?" is a subtle way to ask about someone's political leanings. Thanks to double meanings, a man will never wear a green hat, because it suggests his wife has a lover, while to say someone is "eating soft ice cream" means a man is being looked after by his wife financially, which is not thought good.

Many languages retain the polite form of communicating, a mental construct that maintains a distance with strangers. Again, it is a different way of thinking, and relating to people. It changes perceptions of trust, and closeness. In German, there is a construction that allows someone to be quoted in a way that makes it clear that the person reporting takes no responsibility for what was said.

Can we say thinking is determined by language? There seems to be a strong case to support this idea. Different languages place different concepts in entirely different places. The thinking pillars of languages vary in significant ways, ways that lie at the root of understanding.

While German and English speakers have expressions that say being near a goal might as well be a mile away, the Chinese have an expression meaning exactly the opposite, that "nearly there" is good enough. In Singapore there's a word, *kiasu*, which means the satisfaction of winning when others are forced to lose. Because of this idea Singaporeans sometimes take the best food from a buffet and

throw it away, so others lose out. In a lift, they sometimes press the close-door button to frustrate someone approaching. Drivers block the exit road so those in the middle lane are unable to leave a motorway. These are all deliberate attempts to force others to lose, a way of thinking.

Do you remember Miyaki? She has a wonderful story about how the Japanese think. When the French built a high speed train that went faster than the Japanese Shinkansen, the Japanese decided to re-engineer their train. They made it travel precisely 1kph slower than the French one. Why? Because this sent a signal. Japanese engineers could easily make their train go faster than the French one. But to do so would be seen as crass and showy, unnecessarily competitive. Japanese engineers didn't need to do that.

I also remember going to a Toyota car showroom in Tokyo with her one day. I commented on the small hand-written signs on car windscreens, telling buyers about the car. I thought they looked a bit amateurish. Why didn't they print them out, and make them look neat?, I asked. She said this would not be seen by customers as friendly and approachable. It was a different way of thinking.

After, we looked at a large Mercedes car in a dealer selling foreign vehicles and the signs on the windscreens were neatly printed out. Then she shrieked in horror when she saw one of the buttons on the dashboard of the German car, the one used to recirculate the air. It was written in characters. "That's just so wrong!", she squawked. German engineers had adapted it for the Japanese market, thinking this was better. They had used characters for Japanese people to read. But Japanese people who drive foreign cars don't want that, she told me. If they drive a foreign car it must look foreign; everything must be foreign. That's what makes it cool, and distinctive, she said. Having a button with characters on it was just naff.

In Russian, words that express a sense of longing with nothing to long for, of boredom, melancholy, or spiritual anguish and yearning, are closely interconnected, in a way that defies easy translation. While the Russian language blends conscience and morality with a sense of shame, Japanese thinking takes a different perspective. Face matters more than shame. The idea of being caught doing something embarrassing is more important to the Japanese than any thoughts about the morality of the act itself.

I had an American teacher of English at school. He taught us the plays of Shakespeare and was very good at it, except for one thing. He could never properly explain the meaning of the word irony. It's certainly a word that's difficult to explain and define, but it's also an idea that's essential to understand these plays. He had terrible problems explaining its meaning. It was as if he just couldn't grasp it. My friends and I wondered if it was a cultural issue. Was the fact that he was American the reason he didn't understand irony? When I watch American comedy shows, I sense the same problem.

There's an Alanis Morissette song called irony where she sings "*it's a black fly in your of Chardonnay, good advice you just didn't take, or rain on your wedding day*". She offers these as examples of irony. But none are good examples of irony. Perhaps the song is the problem.

Some societies dismiss ideas prominent in other languages as superstition, as if they believe their way of thinking is superior. They largely ignore the notion that people speaking other languages might be thinking and talking in metaphor. They don't really believe in dragons or elves, but they *do* believe in some force they are unable to otherwise explain.

In his book, *The Tyranny of History*¹, Jenner offers many insights into the differences between Chinese and Western thinking. While Westerners tend to look forward, he says, the Chinese tend to look back. People in the West are always focussed on what comes next, about their own plans and ambitions, while the Chinese view of the world is better imagined as someone walking backwards. Rather than seeing the past behind them, they face it, while stepping backwards. Chinese speakers are more concerned about their responsibilities to those who came before them. Their thinking is strongly influenced by what their ancestors did and achieved. The past is not to be undermined, but built on. It is a different worldview.

Similarly, Mandarin Chinese speakers think about time in a different way to English speakers². Time is perceived more vertically. How does this change thinking, when time is a central idea to most languages?

Legal systems offer another example. The West prefers clear rules. Some actions are illegal, with each bad deed met with a counterbalancing penalty. As Nietzsche says, the Western legal system is essentially about revenge. Someone commits a crime and the state takes revenge by imposing a punishment that it says "fits the crime".

Legal thinking is different elsewhere. Laws in China are less specific, and designed to promote three inter-related concepts: China's worldview, China's values, and Chinese ethics. Laws are more inclined to express a general intention than a specific rule. The state expects people to behave in a certain way. They should not be disruptive or act against the interests of others, for example. The laws reflect this broad intention, rather than having hard-and-fast rules for every misdeed.

Similarly, thinking on the notion of freedom varies. This word, which seems relatively simple to translate, means different things in different places. In some societies freedom is about the chance to think without restraint. In the English speaking world it is generally about acting without restraint. In Russia, freedom can simply mean not being in captivity, while in Asia the concept of freedom comes with obligations, to the rest of society and the family, because collective harmony is seen as more important than individual freedom. When American politicians talk of promoting freedom, the message received is not the message sent.

There are three other examples of differences in linguistics I will mention in my lecture.

1 - The way people think changes their views on government.

Variations in thinking can lead one society to embrace a particular political philosophy. A society that thinks individual freedom is more important than collective harmony inevitably requires a different political, legal and governmental structure. When different cultures have different ways of thinking about how they should organise, it leads to misunderstandings not simply over the meaning of words but also about social goals, and the role and purpose of government. Different thinking can lead to disharmony between cultures.

Flexibility in thinking plays an important role here. In the West, some thought-pillars are rigid. I examined this idea in my research notes on the currency of thinking. Ideas about free trade, economic development and light-touch regulation are deeply embedded in the West. They are not seen as a worldview but the worldview. They are an embedded "common sense" way of thinking

1 W. J. F. Jenner (1992) *The tyranny of history : the roots of China's crisis*. London: Allen Lane

2 Boroditsky L. Does language shape thought? Mandarin and English speakers' conceptions of time. *Cogn Psychol*. 2001 Aug;43(1):1-22. doi: 10.1006/cogp.2001.0748. PMID: 11487292.

which dismisses any other approach. Common sense thinking is not always good. It is the last resort of those who are envious of thinking by nature. Its soundness lies in its immunity from any accusation that it failed to address a new need. It has a rigidity that creates a block in thinking, an inability to consider alternative systems objectively. It is a glittering deception, with the pretence of being true and valid. It holds humanity back.

We all have a duty to shout-out common sense thinking when we see it, especially when it exists to make judgements on thought. How else will people wake up, unless they see what they are doing? Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the idea that there is only one form of social and political organisation that works, the one based on democracy, liberalism and capitalism, has become fixed in the minds of people in the West, a common sense. This rigidity makes it hard for them to understand the thinking of others, or even to understand that a different way of thinking exists.

When a state-run society partially embraces some aspects of Western capitalism, as China has done, the West is confounded. It appears stunned, outraged. When China applies Western economic thinking, free market liberalism, to parts of the economic system where it offers an advantage, but retains state direction where this offers other advantages, the West decries it as wrong. For the Chinese it is win-win, and perfectly sensible. For the West it is seen as unfair because it offers advantages the West doesn't like, or is not willing to think about. Western thinking on economics and politics is fossilised.

2 - The way people think changes their views on personal relationships.

In China³, the idea of getting married for love alone is not embraced. It is called a "naked marriage" because it leaves the couple exposed to financial instability. Two people coming together should always think about their future financial welfare, and economic suitability. Love alone is not enough. Similarly, children are expected to support their parents when they get older. Looking after parents in old age is seen as a filial duty. Parents make a sacrifice to bring up children, and in return they depend on their children when they are old. These ideas reflect different values and opinions, and different ways of thinking.

3 - The way people think changes their approach to business.

In the West, businesses are expected to grow and focus on boosting profitability. It is not the same in much of Asia where profit is not necessarily the main objective of a firm. The primary goal might be to employ people, to provide a service to a community, or to support a family, for example.

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One final thought on the language of thinking, on framing, and propaganda. People in the West have been led to think that propaganda only exists in times of war, and mostly in other places. The reality is that it exists everywhere, and always. Some people always want to change the thinking of others, in their own interests. The words that people choose changes the thoughts of those who hear them.

When a country is referred to as a democracy, this is a code in the West for saying it is good. When it is not a democracy, it is called a regime, a code for bad. The word socialist is meant in a disparaging sense, to frame thinking negatively, even though the word simply means that government is organised in the interests of everyone, for society, while capitalism means government is organised in the interests of the rich.

3 <https://www.mandarinblueprint.com/blog/15-chinese-words-that-dont-exist-in-english/>

Research to find a cure for cancer is called a fight or a battle, suggesting the disease is more likely to be fatal than others. The word sustainable is applied to products that not sustainable at all. The word is ill-defined in any case, which is why it's used. What does sustainable mean, exactly? Nothing humans do involving the use of finite resources, or that creates rising pollution, is sustainable. Attaching the word is mostly done to give a false impression. It is a framing. Similarly, a new government policy that encourages personal responsibility usually means that people who once received support have been abandoned. Saying 80% of patients survive a treatment, isn't as bad as saying every patient has a one in five chance of dying.

Varying the words used, the language, like this is a thinking game which most are unaware is being played. That's the idea. It's another reason why people need to think more.

I want to come back to the word democracy as a final example. Democracy literally means rule by the people. As I've already mentioned, the word and the concept are sometimes used as a weapon by the West, to condemn or ostracise countries viewed as non-democratic. Some countries believe it is a governance system that is imposed by the West to sow chaos in traditional societies deliberately, to gain economic advantage.

There is also a framing here, which is important. The West only permits one interpretation of the word. To be accepted as democratic, a country must have several political parties, none of which is extreme in its views, and the people must have the chance to elect a government made up of these parties once every four or five years. That government then creates laws and makes other decisions, to fight wars for example, on behalf of the population, even when the ruling party is elected by a minority of voters, as is often the case.

Other forms of democracy are not accepted as valid, especially if there is only one party. This denies or misunderstands how other systems work. The Chinese government is democratic too: it just uses a different system. It is a system that thinks and calls itself democratic where people are voted into power and govern. Candidates are elected at a grass-roots level, for their village or community. Some are elected to represent business, the military, and other sections of society. Once in government, those elected rise within the party, generally on merit. Rather than a leadership with little or no experience of running a country, China is led by people who have been doing the job for decades.

I find it mildly amusing that, from the outside, many Western democracies and the US actually look very much like one-party states too, and yet they condemn China for that. In the US, there is very little to separate the Democrats from the Republicans, ideologically. They both stand for the same basic system - rule by the rich - capitalism, and US exceptionalism.

In Russia, despite Western media claims, President Putin is enormously popular, even after many years as leader. President Kim in North Korea is also hugely popular. This is not because they are dictators, or the opinions of citizens are manipulated, and everyone is brainwashed. Just as Russia has a different system, North Korean society chooses a paternalistic style of leadership. Russians and North Koreans think it's Western society that's been brainwashed. They think the US, Europe and Australia are led by unqualified people who are puppets of a system of thinking, not true leaders. They say big corporations are in charge. The West's system is corrupt and manipulated by a small majority in their own interests, they say. Their evidence is compelling.

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So, what is this thing called thinking?

We can conclude that what is called thinking is poorly understood, medically, linguistically and philosophically. It is one of the most basic of human functions, as vital as breathing and digestion, something which lies at the core of human consciousness, and yet it is barely understood at all.

We must conclude too, that thinking is not the same as awareness. Nor is thinking a good word to describe the daily noise in our heads, which is hard to stop. Thinking requires effort, to actively consider the world and attempt to understand it. The endless chatter in our minds is a barrier to thinking.

Thinking defines us. It is Being. It is consciousness, the spirit, our soul. Thinking is a thing, an element, an activity, a way of being, that lacks most of the characteristics scientists and philosophers use to try to define it, which is why they fail.

When I spoke to Suzanna recently, and we talked about thinking, language, the spirit and soul, she said something interesting and unusual:

"Ich komme auch immer mehr drauf, dass wir Schöpfer sind! Und DARIN Gott ähnlich. Das ist so unglaublich genial. Wir könnten Welten schöpfen, erschaffen!!! Wir müssen es sogar tun! Schöpfungskraft!"

She refers to what I said earlier, about the whole universe being present within each of us, when I talked about a living, conscious universe, developing and evolving around us, which we can all tune into. Is there a universal consciousness present in all living things?, I asked. Is this what gives life? Do each of us have the whole universe within us, just as a fragment of a hologram contains the entire picture within it?

As you know, Suzanna has an otherworldly sense, and she feels strongly that this is so. She may be right. But what she said during our call is additionally interesting. She believes that we are also the creators of the world, that we create the world around us. More than that, we must create it, we must create the world around us. It is a calling, a need.

She may be on to something here. I think about *Siddhartha*, that wonderful book by Hermann Hesse, on the path to enlightenment and contemplation, on the need to surrender oneself to the irrational, about embracing the twisting, odd forms of nature until we find a sense of harmony with our inner Being, which appears as shapes, as our own creations, created by our moods.

The boundary between thinking and other worlds is very thin at times, and sometimes it can vanish. In another of his books⁴, Hesse puts it this way:

"To a great extent we are creators, our souls have a part in the continuous creation of the world. It is the same invisible godhead, which is active in us and nature. If the outside world fell into ruins, one of us would be capable of building it up again, for mountain and stream, tree and leaf, root and blossom, all that is shaped by nature lies modelled within us, comes from our soul, whose essence is eternity, but which is revealed to us for the most part as the love-force and in our creative power".

4 Hesse, H., (1919) *Demian: The Story of a Boyhood*, Fischer Verlag

Perhaps he is right. Perhaps we all contain the accumulated souls and knowledge of the world, of the universe. Perhaps this wisdom is somewhere within us, all the experiences of every soul that has ever lived, all those who were good and bad, the essence of every race and nation, all those desires, all those starting points, and the ability to create it all. If the world really is our own idea, as Schopenhauer says, then all this must be true. Everything we perceive depends entirely on our consciousness for its existence. Everything is a journey for the mind, a reality of exploration and discovery.

Yet I find people are afraid, scared of this idea. They are afraid of themselves, because they have never had the courage to Be, to be themselves. They are afraid of the unknown. At the same time, the laws they create no longer mean anything, and their commandments have become outworn. They know how to kill, how to pray, how to consume, and how to scroll, how to flick left and right, how to amuse themselves for a fleeting moment, and how to distract themselves from their empty reality for a short moment. But no cheerfulness or serenity can ever come from any of this. These creatures, who move so uneasily together. Their ideals have ceased to exist and yet they stone everyone who proposes anything new.

The pathway to something better is not difficult to see. Should people seek out that godhead, should they want to explore their inner wisdom, and become one with nature and the universe again, they have all the tools they need. They only need to think. That's all.

They need to learn to think again.

My final thought after all this research is this: thinking is difficult. It cannot be analysed using simple questions because misinterpretations threaten on all sides. That is because all mortal doings belong within thinking's realm.

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Well, dear nephew, this has been a longer exercise than I intended. I hope it has given you nourishment. I am tired now and must put all these books and papers away.

I am away next week, on my annual retreat at the abbey in Steiermark. I'll write again when I get back because there seems to me still one area I have not properly covered: the impact of AI on thinking.

With much love,

Max

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Image: Tara Winstead