

Shqip ALBANIAN አማርኛ AMHARIC العربية ARABIC বাংলা BENGALI 廣東話 CHINESE (CANTONESE) 國語 CHINESE (MANDARIN)	ગુજરાતી GUJARATI हिन्दी HINDI Italiano ITALIAN 日本語 JAPANESE	Română ROMANIAN Русский RUSSIAN Soomaali SOMALI Español SPANISH	
	한국어 KOREAN Kurdî Kurmancî KURDISH (KURMANJI)	Kiswahili SWAHILI தமிழ் TAMIL	
	کوردی سورانی KURDISH (SORANI)	ትግርኛ TIGRINYA	
	français FRENCH Deutsch GERMAN	polski POLISH português PORTUGUESE	Türkçe TURKISH اُردو URDU
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"A different language is a different vision of life"

(Federico Fellini, Italian film director, 1920-1993)



Languages for Life, 2005

Whatever the language, leave it to us



Shape or substance?

Try the following experiment.

Which two of the following items do you think are most alike?

- ▶ A plastic box
- ▶ A cardboard box
- ▶ A piece of cardboard

Most people think that the two boxes are most alike.

However, speakers of Yucatec, a Mayan language spoken on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, think that the two cardboard items are most alike.

In Yucatec, objects tend to be defined by separate words that define shape:

- ▶ "Long thin wax" means a candle
- ▶ "Long banana" means the fruit
- ▶ "Flat banana" means a banana leaf
- ▶ "Seated banana" means a banana tree

The above experiment, which was conducted by the anthropologist John Lucy, suggests that:

- ▶ English-speakers focus on form
- ▶ Yucatec-speakers focus on substance

Personal identity

Take the following English sentence:

- ▶ John carefully paddled his canoe through the rapids yesterday

and translate it into Mohawk, a native American language spoken in the US and Canada. In Mohawk, it would go:

- ▶ Yesterday / through the rapids / his canoe / carefully / he paddled / John

The English version can be compared to a movie scene: the camera focuses first

on John, then on his boat, then on the scene around him.

In the Mohawk version, time and landscape come first, followed by the boat, followed by the man: personal identity comes last.

"The two movies represent two drastically different ways of looking at life," suggests the author Brian Maracle. "The way that the English-speaking world structures its sentences explains to me, in a small way, why western society is so self-centred and narcissistic, why it is so fixated on the cult of the individual and why it is so obsessed with celebrities."

Evidentiality

In English you can say to your friend:

- ▶ I talked to Bob today

But in some languages, such as Tariana, an Amazonian language, you have to put a suffix on your verb to say how you know something. (Linguists call this 'evidentiality'.)

In Tariana, you would say:

- ▶ I talked to Bob today, non-visual

... which means you had talked on the phone.

If your friend then tells someone else, they would say:

- ▶ He talked to Bob today, visual, reported

"This is a very nice and useful tool," says the linguist Alexandra Aikhenvald. "Imagine if, in the argument about weapons of mass destruction, people had had to say how they knew about whatever they said. That would have saved us quite a lot of breath."

References

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