

The Nexus Between Language and Thought

Script

Reflection Statement

The inspiration for my Major Work is greatly attributed to my strong passion for linguistics through my own personal experience of learning a second language. Through learning Mandarin Chinese, I became intrigued by the influence of language on its speakers as I noticed vast dissimilarities between both English and Chinese and our ways of thinking. My Major Work aims to enlighten an academic audience interested in theoretical discussion concerning linguistics. Through rigorous investigation into linguistics, language acquisition and cognitive science, I was able to map out the developments of linguistic theories over time and therefore effectively formulate my own thesis on the power of language.

My speech, 'The Nexus Between Language and Thought', is held in a lecture theatre in Massachusetts Institute of Technology. My critical study of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' in Advanced English and the 'play within a play'¹ structure encouraged me to pursue the concept of a 'speech within a speech.' I employ renowned linguist, Noam Chomsky, as the principal persona of my speech, who utilises a creative characterisation of Eric Blair, pseudonymously referred to as George Orwell, to address an audience of academics to demonstrate that differences in language account for diversity of thought, while also emphasising that these differences reveal a similarity amongst all cultures – 'that we, as humans, *all* aim to make sense of this world around us.'²

Two texts that encouraged me to pursue this topic were Lera Boroditsky's 'Does Language Influence Culture'³ and Ferdinand de Saussure's 'Course in General Linguistics.'⁴

¹ Fischer, Gerhard; Greiner, Bernhard; (2007); *The Play Within the Play: The Performance of Meta-theatre and Self-reflection*

² 'The Nexus Between Language and Thought'

³ Boroditsky, Lera; (2010); 'Does Language Influence Culture?'

⁴ de Saussure, Ferdinand; (1916); 'Course in General Linguistics'

Boroditsky's text allowed an insight into her research on the effects of language and provided me with the framework for examples seen in Chomsky's speech. Saussure's book deepened my understanding of my concept and allowed for me to further authenticate my belief that language attributes to cultural differences of thought and values, as stipulated through the integration of gender categorisation with comparison between a French and German speaker.

Throughout the process of investigation, I utilised the opinions of my Chinese teacher and teachers from a bilingual school in Sydney. Through interviewing them, I was able to further grasp my concept and view it from the perspective of others. Daniel Everett's documentary 'The Grammar of Happiness'⁵ allowed me to further delve into the effects of language on thinking as the Pirahã language lacks a conventional number system, an idea I explore within my Major Work. Videos, such as Vox's 'The Surprising Pattern Behind Colour Names Around the World'⁶, illuminated the different interpretations of the colour spectrum, which I embedded into Chomsky's speech to further validate my belief that language diversity reveals a commonality within society - in that all cultures have unique ways of perceiving their surroundings.

Noam Chomsky's speech incorporates a lecture style that both informs and educates an academic audience that have had significant exposure to language acquisition and share a passion for linguistic discourse, as well as monolingual and multilingual students at the Institute that wish to broaden their understanding on the topic. Therefore, I utilised my studies of 'Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen'⁷ within Module A of Advanced English by permeating Chomsky's speech with a didactic tone which lends itself to an educational and instructional motive to implore my internal audience to question the power of language, as he

⁵ Everett, Daniel; (2012); *The Grammar of Happiness*'

⁶ Vox; (2012); *The Surprising Pattern Behind Colour Names Around the World*'

⁷ Weldon, Fay; (1984); *Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen*'

states through learning another language we ‘inadvertently learn a new way of looking at the world and gain and insight into the nexus between language and thought.’⁸ I kept Edgar Allan Poe’s assertion that the length of any literary work is limited to ‘a single sitting’⁹ in mind throughout the composition process. Therefore, while aiming to appeal to my target niche audience, I also inserted humour into Chomsky’s speech to further engage with the audience and provide an element of entertainment as some jokes are used to satirise the difference in language and culture, ‘I could imagine the speakers in this language have a much easier time planning a wedding.’¹⁰ My Major Work adopts an academic undertone and, with the inclusion of contemporary linguistic research, appeals to my anticipated publishing platform, the Linguistic Society of America,¹¹ that publishes scholarly journals and other peer-reviewed research focused on the scientific study of language.¹²

Through the sound medium of speeches, I have successfully addressed my audience using just oral communication and persuasive rhetoric, without the need for written or visual aids. This enabled me to further reinforce the power of language. My studies in English Extension One developed my understanding of verisimilitude, a concept that I have applied to my speech. By using Orwell and Chomsky as keynote personas in my speech, I was able to use them as vehicles to assert my own beliefs on language and have it appear more believable. Another key component in the structure of my speech is the inclusion of a third, omniscient persona. The purpose of my Major Work is to contribute to linguistic discourse. By employing a third persona, James A gate, I allude to my own journey towards becoming the next ‘father of

⁸ ‘*The Nexus Between Language and Thought*’

⁹ Poe; Edgar Allan; (1846); ‘*The Philosophy of Composition*’

¹⁰ ‘*The Nexus Between Language and Thought*’

¹¹ Linguistic Society of America; <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/lsa-publications> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2017]

¹² Linguistic Society of America; <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/lsa-publication> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2017]

modern-linguistics'¹³, as Agate is an alias for myself, and appears in both Orwell's broadcast and Chomsky's speech.

To ensure contextual integrity of my Major Work, I thoroughly researched Orwell's career at BBC from 1941 to 1943. I established the context of Orwell's speech in 1942 by discussing historically accurate content and making reference to Orwell's masterpiece 'Nineteen Eighty-Four,' subtly by suggesting that he aspires to write a book on a restricted form of English as he asserts, 'I do strongly believe that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere'¹⁴ and that 'uncensored language is essential in maintaining freedom of thought and speech.'¹⁵ I chose to place Chomsky's speech in 2017, exactly seventy-five years after my creative broadcast as Orwell. In doing so, I gave myself the opportunity to discuss at length a range of contemporary examples of language diversity and its influence on ways of thinking.

A crucial component of my speeches was to authentically recreate two well-known public figures. Therefore, I was careful to learn the mannerisms and specific accents of each persona. While there are no actual audio recordings of Orwell's voice, through critical study of his accent and creative interpretations of him in a BBC docudrama,¹⁶ I was able to produce an accent that mimics his. Archives from BBC further clarified the characteristics of Orwell's voice as a complaint was received stating concerns of the 'unsuitability of Orwell's voice'¹⁷ to the microphone. To authenticate Chomsky's voice, I actively utilised a friend from Pennsylvania, during my independent investigation, in order to correctly mimic Chomsky's

¹³ Bermúdez, José Luis; (2010); *'Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Science of the Mind'*

¹⁴ *'The Nexus Between Language and Thought'*

¹⁵ *'The Nexus Between Language and Thought'*

¹⁶ BBC Television; (2003); *'George Orwell: A Life in Pictures'*

¹⁷ BBC - Archive - George Orwell at the BBC - Memo criticising Orwell's voice; (1943); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/orwell/7427.shtml?page=txt> [Accessed 12 May. 2017]

accent along with exploiting several recorded lectures¹⁸ that he has conducted to further master his modulation, tone and pauses whilst delivering a speech.

To further create a sense of reality, I enhanced the background ambience noise of my speech through manipulation of several aural effects such as footsteps and audience laughter. I further employed digital sound effects such as echoing, to establish the contextual setting of a lecture theatre, and vinyl crackling for Orwell's radio broadcast. The technical advice I received from Mr Alastair Reynolds from Broadcast Audio Technical Services in Sydney was invaluable in allowing me to achieve the best possible sound quality through choice of microphone and in encouraging me to use Apple's 'Garageband' as my audio editing tool. The advice further developed my knowledge of vocal coaching to ensure the correct intonation for audio recording and drove my investigation into script writing.

Through brainstorming, drafting and editing, I was able to frequently refine my concept and improve throughout the course. Feedback from others, including teachers and peers, propelled my Major Work into its final stages and allowed me to fine-tune my concept from different perspectives. Finally, persistent reflection and consideration of the aims and goals in this course have allowed me to realise the purpose of my Major Work, to add to contemporary language discourse and ultimately become the next 'father of modern linguistics.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Noam Chomsky - Language and Thought; (2015);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEmpRtj34xg> [Accessed 22 Jun. 2017]

¹⁹ Bermúdez, José Luis; (2010); '*Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Science of the Mind*'

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