

SPEAKING AND BEING

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How Language Binds and Frees Us

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To those who paved the way for us. To those who
were never seen, never allowed to fully be.

To the child who gently took me by the
hand and led me through the world.

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. The Power of Language | I |
| 2. Between Languages | 17 |
| 3. The Political Gap | 37 |
| 4. Individuality Is a Privilege | 55 |
| 5. Worthless Knowledge | 71 |
| 6. The Intellectual Cleaning Lady | 89 |
| 7. The Right-Wing Agenda | 117 |
| 8. The Illusion of Sovereignty | 135 |
| 9. Speaking Freely | 149 |
| 10. A New Way of Speaking | 171 |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | 189 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 195 |

Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and
wrongdoing, there is a field.

I will meet you there.

*Rumi*¹

At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison.

It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. So the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which may be larger or smaller, without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside.

Simone Weil, Selected Essays, 1934–1943²

1

The Power of Language

What came first: language or perception?

On a warm summer's night many years ago, in the harbour of a small town in south-west Turkey, we were drinking black tea and shelling salted sunflower seeds with languid rapidity. My aunt gazed at the sea, into the deep, calm darkness, and said: 'Look how bright that *yakamoz* is!' I followed her eyes, but couldn't see a bright light anywhere. 'Where?' I asked. Again she pointed towards the sea, but I still couldn't work out what she meant. Laughing, my parents explained the meaning of the word *yakamoz*: it describes the moon's reflection on the water.¹ And now I, too, saw it shining brightly in the darkness ahead of me. *Yakamoz*.

I now see it every time I go for a nocturnal stroll by the sea, and wonder, do the other people around me see it too? Even those who don't know the word *yakamoz*? Because language changes our perception: I know the word, so I perceive what it names.

If you speak a second language, you can doubtless think of numerous terms that describe phenomena, situations or emotions for which there is no direct English counterpart. The Japanese word *komorebi* describes sunlight

Speaking and Being

shimmering through the leaves. *Gurfa*, an Arabic word, is the amount of water you can cup in the palm of your hand. The Greek word *meraki* describes the ardent passion, love and energy with which someone devotes themselves to a task. And picture this: you are walking through an unfamiliar city, and someone gives you directions; you listen carefully, but no sooner have you set off again than you realise you've already forgotten what they said. Hawaiian has a word for it: *akihī*.

And then there's the Turkish word *gurbet*.

I was listening to the radio one morning, years ago, when I was living in Oxford. It was Eid. The presenter described the fathers making their way to mosque at dawn, the palpable excitement in people's homes, the final preparations for the communal breakfast, and the children dancing with anticipation around their gift bags in their new clothes and with freshly combed hair. The familiar sounds coming from the radio filled our kitchen – and for the first time since leaving my family in Germany to travel the world I felt the void this had created: I realised that I was missing the people back home, my parents and siblings, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, the community elders who would embrace me and tell me what I was like as a child, and talk about how time flies. All the people who loved me, just because. I was mourning their absence.

Although it wasn't *they* who were absent, but *I*. I had left, I was living in *gurbet*.

When I sat down at my desk and tried to put my feelings into words, my fingers danced across the keyboard. The words came naturally, fluently. Only much later did I realise

The Power of Language

to my surprise that I'd written in Turkish, even though in those days I usually talked and thought in either German or English. However, that feeling I had – the deep yearning in a strange land – was best expressed by the Turkish word *gurbet*. Were I to render it as 'living in a strange land', it would be but a poor description of what this word evokes in me.²

Gurbet is one of the many terms I find hard to translate into German and English, just as there are some ideas that I can articulate in English that get lost in German – like 'serendipity' or 'no-brainer' – and some thoughts that I can formulate in German but can't express in a simple Turkish sentence. Sometimes I want to say *doch* in Turkish – and in English, for that matter (it is such a fun word, which you can use to counter any argument) – at other times, I want to explain my recurrent *Fernweh* ('wanderlust'), or 'schadenfreude'; but I have to produce entire sentences before I can even begin to convey to my interlocutor what I think, mean or feel when I use those words. Some feelings live only in certain languages. Language opens up the world and in the very same instant circumscribes it.

Wilhelm von Humboldt once said that inside each language there lies 'an idiosyncratic world view'.³ If that's the case, how much does the way one language conceives of the world differ from that of another? The fact that language – and I don't mean just words – influences our perception of the world is no longer disputed. The question that divides opinion is, rather: *to what extent* does language influence our thoughts and perceptions?⁴

Take numbers, for example: there are languages that

Speaking and Being

don't have numbers, such as that of the Pirahã, a people living in the Brazilian Amazon. Except for 'one', 'two' and 'many',⁵ it has no terms to describe amounts.⁶ Do the Pirahã see the world differently from us, then? In order to find out, researchers conducted an experiment: they placed up to ten batteries on a table, and asked volunteers to put exactly the same number on the table too. When there were up to three batteries on the table, they did it with ease; but when there were four or more, they became increasingly vague in their response.

Pirahã also doesn't have special words for colours. The linguist Daniel Everett, who studied the language for thirty years,⁷ reported that at some point the Pirahã simply started listing random colour words, in order to satisfy the researchers. They don't have a past tense, either: according to Everett, they therefore actually live in the moment, focused on the present – the principle *carpe diem* is prescribed to them by their language, so to speak. Only few Pirahã remember the names of their grandparents; and while other peoples living in similar circumstances produce, for instance, stores of flour to last them several months, the Pirahã only store up enough supplies for a few days at most. Furthermore, like other Amazon peoples, they have no creation myth. If you ask them what was there before – before the Pirahã, before the forest – they reply that it has always been like this. As Everett explains, the word *xibipíio* is the key to understanding the Pirahã's conceptual world:

Eventually, I realized that this term referred to what I call experiential liminality, the act of just entering or

The Power of Language

leaving perception, that is, a being on the boundaries of experience. A flickering flame is a flame that repeatedly comes and goes out of experience or perception. [...] Declarative Pirahã utterances contain only assertions related directly to the moment of speech, either experienced by the speaker, or [...] witnessed by someone alive during the lifetime of the speaker.⁸

For the first few years, Everett lived among the Pirahã as an evangelical missionary; but his repeated efforts to ‘convert’ them came to nothing. They simply weren’t interested in stories from the Bible and thought it odd that Everett kept telling them about Jesus, whose deeds no living soul could testify to – for their culture is not only devoid of creation myths, but has no folk tales or oral traditions of any kind. Living with them eventually turned Everett, the missionary, into an atheist.

If we spoke a language that knew no past, would our thoughts be as preoccupied as they are with things that happened long ago? Would we indulge in historical narratives and in other people’s memories? What would it mean for religions, movements and nations? If there is no collective history, are nation states even possible?

*

A nation that keeps one eye on the past is wise.
A nation that keeps two eyes on the past is blind.

Inscription on a wall in Belfast⁹

Speaking and Being

Language also influences our perception of the present. The grammar of some languages – German and Spanish, for example – assigns sexes to nouns. The word for ‘bridge’ is thus feminine in German and masculine in Spanish, which in turn ‘genders’ the descriptions of actual bridges: in German, bridges tend to be described as ‘beautiful’, ‘elegant’, ‘fragile’, ‘peaceful’, ‘pretty’ and ‘slender’; in Spanish, however, they’re usually described as ‘large’, ‘dangerous’, ‘long’, ‘strong’, ‘stable’ and ‘powerful’.¹⁰

On the other hand, many languages – such as Indonesian, Turkish, Japanese, Finnish and Farsi – have no gender-specific pronouns *at all*, no ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘it’. The cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky describes a conversation she had with someone whose native language was Indonesian: they were talking, in Indonesian, about a friend of Boroditsky’s; her interlocutor, who didn’t know her friend, asked Boroditsky all sorts of questions about her friend, but it wasn’t until their twenty-first question that they asked her whether the friend was a man or a woman. Boroditsky was surprised. Was it possible that her interlocutor had spent the entire conversation imagining a person of undetermined gender?¹¹ And how about you: would you be able to listen to a story about someone, ask follow-up questions and even imagine this person, without an urge to know their gender?¹²

The language of the Thaayorre in northern Australia is particularly interesting when it comes to the perception of space and time. Kuuk Thaayorre has no word for *left* or *right*; instead, the Thaayorre use cardinal directions. They say, for example, ‘There’s an ant on your north-western

The Power of Language

arm,’ or, ‘Can you move the cup south-south-east, please?’ The Thaayorre can indicate precise cardinal directions, even when in a completely enclosed space, by the age of four or five.¹³ When two Thaayorre meet, their greeting involves asking the other where they are going – even in small talk, then, speakers are encouraged to name the cardinal directions, which are an elementary and inherent constituent of their language and perception. Lera Boroditsky says that when she tried to learn Kuuk Thaayorre,

I had this cool experience [...]. You know, I was trying to stay oriented because people were treating me like I was pretty stupid for not being oriented, and that hurt. And so I was trying to keep track of which way is which.

And one day, I was walking along, and I was just staring at the ground. And all of a sudden I noticed that there was a new window that had popped up in my mind, and it was like a little bird’s-eye view of the landscape that I was walking through, and I was a little red dot that was moving across the landscape. And then, when I turned, this little window stayed locked on the landscape, but it turned in my mind’s eye. And [...] I thought, oh, this makes it so much easier. Now I can stay oriented.

When she told a Thaayorre about this strange experience (strange for her, that is), ‘they said, “Well, of course. How else would you do it?”’¹⁴

With its grammatical structures, rules and norms, our

Speaking and Being

language influences not only our perception of space and time, but also our perception of how time moves. How does time pass for you? If I asked you, as an English speaker, to put pictures of someone in chronological order, you would arrange them from left to right, starting with the childhood photos. In English, German and all Romance languages, we write and read from left to right, and that is how we perceive time. Speakers of Hebrew or Arabic would do the opposite, i.e. arrange the images from right to left. But how would the Thaayorre arrange those pictures? From left to right, right to left, leading away from their body or leading towards it – depending on which direction they were facing. Because for the Thaayorre time flows from east to west, following the path of the sun. So if someone were sitting facing north, they would lay out the pictures from right to left, and if they were facing south they would lay them out left to right.¹⁵

Discovering this perception of time and the world has left a lasting impression on me. Only by comparison can we discern the world view that we've been taught: everything revolves around us – or rather, it revolves around the 'I' and individual perception. I turn, and the world turns with me. What if we spoke a language like Kuuk Thaayorre, which would for ever remind us that we are nothing but a tiny dot on a gigantic map; that time flows over us, regardless of where the 'I' is? What principles, what humility would characterise our attitude to other people, to living creatures, to nature?

*

The Power of Language

Studying another language can reveal to us the limits of our own – but we can discover those limits in a less round-about way too. You can sense the insufficiency of language, encounter the limits of your language, even without looking at it as an outsider. Picture the following: a father and his son are in a car, and there’s an accident. Both are badly injured; the father dies on the way to hospital. The son needs an emergency operation, but, on seeing the boy, the surgeon on duty grows pale and says, ‘I can’t operate on him – he’s my son.’ Who is this person?

The educational scientist Annabell Preussler uses the riddle to show the degree to which certain images are rooted in our mind because of how we use language.¹⁶ (Answer: the surgeon is the boy’s mother.)¹⁷

Why does this riddle cause irritation at first? Because when we talk of a ‘surgeon’ we imagine a man, not a woman. We do this in English because, even though the word masks the gender of who is doing it, we have an expectation of what the journalist and feminist Caroline Criado Perez terms ‘the male default’¹⁸ – unless specified otherwise (a ‘female surgeon’, for example), we assume that the surgeon is male. This happens with even greater force in German, which has not only gender-specific pronouns, but also a *genus*, i.e. a grammatical sex – unlike English, for instance, where a ‘teacher’ can technically be female or male. Yet although German often has distinct terms for each gender, such as *Lehrerin* for a female teacher and *Lehrer* for a male teacher, it also has the so-called generic masculine, which means that a job title such as ‘surgeon’ includes both men and women, while still being an explicitly masculine word.

Speaking and Being

This means that the real gender of the person, or people, is further obscured, and the male privileged at the expense of the female – a problem also encountered in other gendered languages, like Spanish or French.

The linguist Peter Eisenberg argues that, in German, this kind of collective noun means *neither men nor women*¹⁹ – the word ‘surgeon’ means simply anyone who performs surgery, and the only point of interest is the activity itself. But in that case the male standpoint is universalised, and the masculine form becomes the standard. If neither men nor women are meant, why not use the feminine form of the word? This is what Luise F. Pusch, one of the founders of feminist linguistics in Germany, proposes. This applies in English too: if the job title of the person who serves you in a restaurant were ‘waitress’, would it still describe everyone who does the job?

This thought experiment shows how insufficient the generic masculine is. It isn’t enough for women to be – possibly – included, if they aren’t at the same time imagined by whoever uses the term.

The social scientists Dagmar Stahlberg, Sabine Sczesny and Friederike Braun demonstrated the influence of gender-sensitive language on our thinking with an experiment in which fifty women and forty-six men, divided into three groups, were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaires were all exactly the same, except in terms of how they designated genders: for instance, while one group was asked about their favourite *hero* in fiction, the second group was asked about their favourite fictional *character*, and the third about their favourite romantic *hero(in)es* – i.e. using the

The Power of Language

masculine, gender-neutral and ‘and/or’ forms respectively.

Fictional *heroines* were named most often in the gender-neutral and ‘and/or’ questionnaires – distinctly less often by the first group, whose questionnaire used the masculine form, which isn’t supposed to differentiate between genders. Many similar studies dealing with the use of masculine linguistic forms have produced the same result: when we use them, we think less often of women.²⁰

How to solve this problem? In some countries where gendered languages are spoken, this question has been debated for decades. Should parentheses be used, as in ‘hero(ine)’ (thereby cementing the representation of gender as a binary either/or)? Or a slash (‘hero/heroine’, ‘hero/ine’)? How would those compound words be pronounced? Which would enter common usage? Nonetheless, the question remains: do suggestions such as these merely treat the symptoms? Do these languages perhaps need a new, visibly not neutral, masculine ending, so that *Lehrer* really means all those who teach in German, or *chirurgiens* really means all those who perform surgery in French – and a man is no longer seen as the standard? Or should those languages entirely do away with categorising people according to gender? There are some that do this – Swahili, Uzbek, Armenian, Finnish and Turkish, for example.

I generally talk to my son in Turkish, which uses *o* in place of ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’;²¹ as my son started speaking more German, I would catch myself correcting him when he used the ‘wrong’ gender – of course, I was only correcting his linguistic mistakes, but I had to ask myself: why

Speaking and Being

am I raising him to classify people first and foremost as either male or female, even before considering their more important qualities?²²

In order to be able to express what *is*, in order to *be* who we are, in order to *see* who other people are, we have to work on the architecture of the language that is supposed to capture our reality.

*

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

*Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*²³

I once talked over dinner with a diverse group about how language can discriminate against people. Many of the others around the table agreed with me, and reported their own experiences; but then a woman spoke up and said she was surprised that some of us were so interested in the subject of injustice in language. She had never considered herself excluded from the generic masculine, had never felt limited by language. On the contrary, she'd been taught to see the world in a positive light. After all, what could happen to her? Even in the worst-case scenario, she would still have a warm home, clothes to wear and enough to eat.

I wasn't quite sure what to think. I wondered whether someone who has never run into a wall, who has never plummeted into powerlessness, loss of control, humiliation, loneliness or speechlessness – whether maybe someone like that can't imagine the walls that cut through

The Power of Language

society. Maybe someone like that walks in the shadow of those walls without even noticing them, without suspecting that for many other people – whose ‘worst-case scenario’ would look very different – the walls are real.

The US author David Foster Wallace’s famous fish allegory perfectly sums up what language and power mean to me: ‘There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”’²⁴

To humans, language in all its facets – its vocabulary, word forms, tenses – is as water to fish. It is the stuff our thoughts and lives are made of, which moulds us and influences us without our being fully aware of it. When I become conscious of it, when I sense the limits of my own perception, I feel humility – humility in the face of a world that I have been apprehending only from my own limited point of view. Knowing the existence of these limits, I am grateful: I hope that they’ll prevent me from looking at the world only in the light of immutable principles and assumptions. Knowing our limits relativises the things that we, in our ignorance, assume – the things we postulate as being universal, but which in fact define nothing but the limits of our horizon.

However, the limitedness of my perception also acts as an incentive; it shows how much I still have to learn, absorb and understand. If language fundamentally guides our way of seeing the world – and thus also restricts it – then it isn’t

Speaking and Being

trivial, it isn't a mere political sideshow. If it is the stuff our thoughts and lives are made of, we naturally should keep asking ourselves whether we agree with how it shapes us.

You can tell a lot about our societies and cultures from how we value different languages, how we deal with perspectives beyond our own linguistic horizon, which languages are encouraged in our school playgrounds and which are scorned; you can tell a lot, too, from our attitude towards those who try to expand our language to make it more inclusive, and towards those who create words to dehumanise others.

Language is powerful. And with power comes responsibility.

How to handle such power? At moments like this, I miss the Turkish word *acziyet*.

'Weakness', 'helplessness', 'inability' – these are the words offered by translation engines when I search for the English equivalent. But *acziyet* means so much more. It's a word that makes me look at the world from below, from the very bottom; it makes me feel powerlessness and weakness, the absence of opportunity, that things are out of reach – and bear them all. Yet I don't think of it as a negative term; there is an odd freedom associated with it, because *acziyet* also evokes the mindful perception of a situation to which you are exposed, an emancipated acceptance of your circumstances. Not a humiliating submissiveness, but respectful regard. Perhaps the mindful, emancipated consciousness of our nothingness is one of the few truths we can wholly comprehend. Our *acziyet*.

When language works well for us, we don't notice the

The Power of Language

stuff our thoughts are made of or perceive its architecture. We only sense the walls and limits of language when it no longer works, when it restricts us. When it takes our breath away.

The moment when language no longer worked for *me* was the moment I started to perceive its structure. I realised what it was that had me cornered, what was making me feel as if I was choking. Language is just as rich and poor, limited and expansive, open and prejudiced as the people who use it.

In his 1960 essay ‘The Hollow Miracle’, the literary theorist, philosopher and Holocaust survivor George Steiner wrote: ‘Everything forgets. But not language. When it has been injected with falsehood, only the most drastic truth can cleanse it.’ Steiner was referring to the language of post-war Germany; he regretted the fact that this process hadn’t happened there, that the German language was instead marked by ‘dissimulation and deliberate forgetting’.²⁵ In this, he was concerned not with language as such, but with how it shapes thought and action, with the ‘relations between language and political inhumanity’.²⁶

‘The relations between language and political inhumanity’ – that is what this book is about. It is also about how we might speak differently, more humanely. Kurt Tucholsky called language a weapon. Yes, it may be that, and is that much too often, even if those who use it aren’t conscious of the fact. But it needn’t be. Language can also be a tool. It can show us the luminous reflection of moonlight in the darkness of night. Language can limit our world – but also reveal its infinity.