

Matching Thought with Language

Any researcher who has tried to measure the effect of some teaching treatment on the growth of thought and speech knows what easy-scoring standardized tests ignore—that the presence or absence of a certain word or sentence structure does not necessarily indicate the presence or absence of certain thinking. The fact that people use the word *because* does not mean that they understand causality, for many small children use the word before they grasp the concept. The chief issue of assessment, in fact, is distinguishing between true growth and hollow verbalism.

The idea of causality, on the other hand, may be expressed in a discourse without the word *because* appearing in it. Concepts of relations especially are often conveyed “between the lines” by context. Juxtaposition and punctuation may convey the cause-and-effect relation: “He decided to leave; he knew they wanted to be alone.” Omitting *because* makes the logic more implicit and gains the rhetorical advantage of understatement. If we were to measure growth by counting this author’s logical conjunctions we would score her low because of her more sophisticated composing!

How do you offset this lack of one-to-one correlation between thought and language? On any one occasion you probably can’t, because you don’t have enough to go on. The smaller the sample of discourse, the greater the problem. *To judge language growth, you have to sample a learner’s speech on many different occasions and make a composite judgment.*

Thought is invisible until it is translated into deeds or words. So while intellectual growth is more important, you most often have to detect it as manifested in language, because language incarnates thought. Since the language half is all we can see, we are much tempted to forget this invisible thought that it is being matched off with and even forget the whole process of matching. Too often teachers just focus on language forms as if these existed alone.

There are several reasons why thought and language cannot be matched off in predictable, standard ways. First of all, thought is more various; it is too big for words. The possibilities of what many individual human minds can conceive and combine are greater than the permutations possible with a single lexicon and grammar, although creative use of language, as in poetry, bends language to fit the mind.

Second, before less-developed learners have learned how to use all the resources of language, they must make shift to cast their thought into language by any means they can. So they will express

their thinking in more ambiguous, less differentiated forms of language than if they knew how to employ all its resources.

Third, language does not exist merely to convey thought; besides its logical function it has a rhetorical function, to exert some kind of force on other people. So many of the choices speakers and writers make in composing aim to have an effect on other people, not just to express ideas. This justifies making an important distinction between *abstracting from* some raw source and *abstracting for* a certain audience.

Fourth, any shift of thought from one medium to another necessitates loss and slippage. Language can only do certain things. Like any medium, it has its limits. In fact, it is most likely true that language can never do complete justice to thought, especially the subtlest, deepest, most original thought. Mathematical language and symbolic logic were developed, in fact, to offset some of the logical deficiencies of ordinary language, as figurative language has served to symbolize “ineffable” feeling and intuition. Other media may be more successful sometimes in rendering certain kinds of nonlinear, nondiscursive perception. Language is a flexible mold, however, and growth consists of finding out just how much, and which kinds of, thought language can indeed render.

Finally, language arts are arts, and many of the options about how to put thought into speech are aesthetic choices for the sake of wit, play, economy, beauty, and so on. At the same time we put our thinking into words we are often also playing games with the medium somewhat for game’s sake, as in painting, photography, dance, and other arts. Practitioners “make statements” in those media but also just use the media as wherewithal with which to compose form. We have to think of language as both means and end and look for growth at once in communication effectiveness and in word play.