

A Summertime Thought Experiment

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Have you noticed how everything seems to soften in Summer? For me this means that my life becomes less defined by routines, more porous, as it were. I notice, too, that the edges of objects seem to soften and I hold my beliefs more loosely, knowing that they are just opinions. All of this has me thinking about how the English language works to cage me into rigid ways of seeing the world.

For example, English is structured in such a way that we think and speak in terms of things and actions—nouns and verbs. This language structure, whether we are aware of it or not, leads us, from an early age, to “see” the world as made of separate things that stay still (nouns) or that are involved in movement (verbs).

My concern is that through this process of naming/nouning, as an English speaker, I am led to see processes as objects, and this skews my view of reality. For example, rather than naming a tree as a noun—e.g., the oak tree—it would be more realistic to “name” it using a verb because, as we know from modern physics, all so-called objects are in a state of constant flux. Thus, we could say that nouns don’t really exist; rather nouns are just slow verbs.

In contrast to English, many native languages from the Americas have a strong *process* orientation. For example, in the Algonquin language the naming of the world is done in such a way that the sounds of words actually evoke, viscerally, that which is named. In this language, the name of a certain type of tree might be based on the particular sounds that that tree’s foliage makes in the Fall, just after sunset when a gentle breeze is blowing. And if it should come to pass that one year the sound of the foliage were slightly different (e.g., because there had been very little rain), then the “word” for the tree might change slightly to match the human experience of the tree.

What I find interesting in all of this is that we humans are the ones who create our world with words—through naming “things.” And the way a culture constructs its language has profound effects on how its people perceive the world.

In this vein, consider that the Mayan tongue Tzutujil, spoken in Guatemala, does not have the verb *to be*. In English we use the verb *to be* to strengthen our separate identity, expressing who we are and who we are not. But in Tzutujil, without the sense of “beingness” there is no clear sense that something is *this* or *that*. “Belonging to” is as close to *being* as this language gets. So in Tzutujil there is a built in tendency to understand oneself as in relationship with others. Another way of saying this is that *to be* language defines personal boundaries; without *to be* things are expressed in terms of interconnectedness.

As a kind of thought experiment I invite you to imagine what it would be like to express yourself without the use of the verb *to be*. Note that without “to be,” you would not have the

means to say: “I am” or “We are,” or “You are,” or “They are,” or “He is,” or “It is.” To explore what this would be like, consider how you would express the fact that the newspaper is on the kitchen table. Of course, with access to the verb “to be” it’s easy. You would simply say: “It (the newspaper) is on the kitchen table.” But if your native language lacked the verb “to be,” you would be in a pickle. Indeed, it may be that you would no longer experience the newspaper as a separate, discrete object existing on top of another separate, discrete object—the table.

Indeed, without the verb “to be” our whole English-language-based understanding of reality would begin to crumble. Because things were no longer defined by their separateness, boundaries would blur and definitions would become more porous. This is a made-for-summer thought experiment with the potential of inviting us into a more mysterious and intimate relationship with life.