

THROUGH THE LANGUAGE GLASS. WHY THE WORLD LOOKS DIFFERENT IN OTHER LANGUAGES

By Guy Deutscher
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Guy Deutscher's book is a very elegant and well written material that looks at language and how it reflects nature and human history in surprising ways, making paths to information that is at once compelling and very entertaining. The reader starts with the idea that it would be a fun, easy book, but once you start reading, you soon discover the book's complexity, its intellectual type of phrasing and before you know it, the material walks you through more than a century of linguistic theorizing starting with colors and why they come in so many shades in different languages or so few, and how language is so very conditioned by culture, country, weather conditions and so on. Right from the start of the book, Deutscher clearly shows how different languages around the world (German, French, English, Portuguese, etc) vividly reflect the complexities, vulnerabilities and strong points of the people who speak them. Moreover, anthropologically, the author takes up the arguments of scientist William Gladstone who stated that primitive people had under developed eye sight and traces the development of color distinction from black and white, then red, yellow, green and finally, blue.

For those interested in the encyclopedic type of information feeding, Deutscher's first chapter is ready with fascinating facts. Did you know that in 1992 the linguist Revere Perkins set out to test whether the amount of information expressed within the word related to the complexity of society? Did you know that William Rivers carried out the earliest psychological experiments to test the exact relationship between the colors people could name and the colors they actually saw?

Even more so, Deutscher attracts attention to the fact that in the last two centuries, in step with the development of human thought and world perception, the explanation of cognitive differences among various ethnic groups has shifted from pure anatomy to culture. As such, in the 19th century it was assumed that inequalities among people were given by hereditary mental differences and that

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these mental differences were the reason for significantly different access to resources and social accomplishment among people. In came the 20th century with the argued conclusion which recognized and made proof of the essential unity in mankind and likeness in terms of cognitive heritage. Nowadays we are not concerned anymore with genes that would explain difference and presumably disadvantages in what concerns mental characteristics in different ethnic groups. Additionally, the 21st century has come to recognize the worth in the difference in thinking, which is an imprint of different cultures and of speaking a different language.

Divided into two main chapters, initiated with a Prologue and ending with the Epilogue, Deutscher's study of colors and their development in language, or of societies in which people use points of the compass to describe locations rather than "left" and "right," and how that affects their sense of place, is just one of the ways that examine the interplay between language and thought. Even if phrases like Boas, Jakobson, Chomskian grammar etc. do not make much sense to you, since you are not or have not ever been interested in linguistics, you will find Deutscher's investigations into how language affects society and thought and vice versa, enlightening. Yet, make no mistake, the discourse of the book is not limited to linguistics; it draws on history, ethnography, anthropology or psychology and mixes everything up with a lot of humor, famous names, curious examples, all in an elegant English, full of intellectual zest and detail.

No doubt, *Through the Language Glass* surprised me and made me seriously question what I thought I knew about language and the way it may or may not reflect reality or society. This is the kind of book that you read passages from and, very often, go to someone close in the family or among friends (depending on where you read) and say: „Hey, did you know that ...?“

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