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AIDAI IMANKULOVA

LANGUAGE
— AS A —
WORLDVIEW

METAPHORS THAT SHAPE
OUR PERCEPTION



Aidai Imankulova

**Language as a worldview.
Metaphors that shape our perception**

«Издательские решения»

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This book is for anyone who wants to silence the inner translator, move beyond mechanical memorization, and experience one of life's most profound transformations: learning to see the world through someone else's eyes — and understanding others without the need for translation. Open this book. Change your lens. And let your second self finally begin a conversation with the world

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Language as a worldview Metaphors that shape our perception

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A Note to the Reader

Pull up a chair, make yourself comfortable, and pour a cup of tea. Let's have an honest conversation — researcher to researcher.

Have you ever stopped to think about what happens when we open an ordinary bilingual dictionary? Say we're trying to translate a simple word from another language into our own.

We glance at the page, find the translation, and think, Right, got it. Moving on.

But if we're being honest, that's an illusion.

A traditional dictionary is little more than a flat, black-and-white blueprint. Imagine being handed the structural diagram of a rare flower or the architectural plans of a Gothic cathedral. The lines are accurate. The proportions are correct. Yet does that drawing capture the way the setting sun pours color through stained-glass windows? Does it breathe? Does it feel alive?

Of course not.

Trying to learn a language through dictionaries and grammar rules alone is like trying to understand the ocean by studying the labels on bottles of water.

A living language is not a blueprint.

It is a vast stained-glass window — bright, intricate, shimmering in the sunlight. And every piece of glass within it is more than a word. It carries centuries of experience, emotion, and memory. It reflects the ways people have looked at the sky, broken bread, and understood one another across generations.

Do you know why so many of us struggle when learning a foreign language?

Because we try to fit pieces of someone else's stained-glass window into the frame of our own. We take their words and force them onto the familiar patterns of our native way of thinking. The result is something awkward — a convincing imitation that somehow rings false. We may be speaking correctly, yet people still misunderstand us. Or we find ourselves wondering why they laugh at a phrase that seems perfectly logical from our point of view.

And that is because the Tower of Babel is not a curse, as it is so often portrayed. It is one of humanity's greatest gifts.

Imagine humanity as a kaleidoscope. Turn it one way, and a distinctly Russian pattern comes into view. Turn it again, and an entirely different universe bursts into color — Japanese, Arabic, French. Each language represents a unique way of being human. Each offers its own lens through which reality can be seen.

That is why, in this book, we will not dissect language mechanically, reducing it to a collection of dry and lifeless parts. We will not spend our time memorizing tables and rules. Instead, we will take a different path: we will learn to change the lens itself.

My training as a scientist taught me to look for hidden connections and living processes where others see only static rules. Together, we will try to adjust our vision until we can glimpse the world as it may appear to someone who speaks another language. We will set aside our familiar glasses and try on a different pair.

I should warn you: at first, it may make you a little dizzy. The ordinary world can look surprisingly different when viewed through another set of eyes.

And once you begin to understand why people see the world the way they do — once you can taste the flavor of their daily life, hear the rhythm of their footsteps, and sense the scars of their history — the language itself will stop resisting you.

You will no longer need an internal translator.

You will begin to feel in that language.

So, are you ready to look into the kaleidoscope?

Let's give it its first turn.

Part I. Origins and Acoustics

Chapter 1. The Phonetics of Landscape: How the Land May Shape Vowels and Consonants

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

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

Settle into your chair and pour yourself a cup of tea. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that we are standing high in the Caucasus Mountains, somewhere nearly three thousand meters above sea level.

Around us stretch miles of jagged granite. The wind whistles through the peaks. Cliffs plunge into deep ravines where a single misstep could be fatal. The air is thin enough that each breath feels unfamiliar.

Now imagine that you need to shout something important to a person on the next mountainside.

“Watch out for the rockfall!”

Would you pronounce the words softly and melodically, stretching out the vowels like an operatic aria? Or would you instinctively choose short, sharp, clearly defined sounds that can cut through wind and echo without dissolving into the distance?

This simple thought experiment leads us to one of the most intriguing questions in linguistics.

Can the environment itself — mountains, forests, plains, coastlines — have any influence on the way a language sounds?

At first glance, the question may seem unusual. We are accustomed to thinking of language as something created by people. Yet people never exist in a vacuum. They live among rivers and deserts, in valleys and grasslands, on islands and mountain plateaus. For centuries they speak, listen, and communicate within spaces that possess their own acoustics, their own constraints, and their own possibilities.

Of course, language cannot be reduced to geography. It is shaped by history, migration, warfare, trade, religion, education, and countless other forces. Yet some researchers have suggested that the environment may also leave traces of its influence — not only in vocabulary, but occasionally even in the very sounds of speech.

If this idea is even partly correct, language becomes something more than a cultural invention. It becomes an archive of interaction between human beings and the world around them.

In this chapter, we will try to view languages as acoustic landscapes. We will travel through the mountain gorges of the Caucasus, step out onto vast open steppes, listen closely to the voices of forests and sea coasts, and explore how different environments may shape the conditions in which speech develops.

And perhaps we will discover something unexpected: when people speak, the land on which they live may sometimes be speaking as well.

Because every language is more than the story of a people.

It is also the story of a place — a place where generations learned, over centuries, how to hear one another.

1.1 Echoes of Stone and Explosive Consonants

Let's try a small experiment.

Right now, wherever you are, attempt to produce a sound like k' — not with the front of your mouth, but deep in your throat, as if you were forcefully pushing air upward from the very bottom of your larynx. Imagine trying to crack an invisible walnut with your tongue.

Can you feel the muscles in your neck tighten?

For many speakers of European languages, that effort feels unusual. Yet for millions of people around the world, sounds like these are as natural a part of everyday speech as an ordinary k or h is for English speakers.

Linguists call these sounds ejective consonants. They are produced through a distinctive movement of the larynx and create a sharp, burst-like acoustic effect. What makes them especially intriguing is their geographic distribution. Ejective consonants occur with notable frequency in languages spoken in mountainous regions of the world, including the Caucasus, parts of the Ethiopian Highlands, and several high-altitude areas of the Andes.

At first glance, that may seem like nothing more than coincidence.

Yet it is a remarkably intriguing coincidence.

Imagine a person living among gorges, cliffs, and mountain passes. Their world is shaped by vertical space. Here, a voice constantly struggles against the wind, rebounds from stone walls, fragments into echoes, and fades into the distance. In such an environment, communication itself can become a small daily negotiation with the landscape.

Could centuries spent in settings like these have influenced which sounds proved easier to hear, more noticeable, or more reliable for transmitting speech?

Some researchers believe that such a connection is plausible. One hypothesis suggests that the prevalence of ejective consonants in high-altitude regions may not be entirely accidental. It is important to emphasize, however, that this is a statistical pattern rather than a law of nature.

Languages never evolve for a single reason. History, migration, contact between communities, social structures, and countless other forces all shape the course of linguistic change. Yet the idea remains captivating.

If the hypothesis is even partly correct, then some speech sounds may preserve traces of a landscape long after generations have passed. The terrain itself may have left faint fingerprints on the language.

Few places illustrate this possibility more vividly than the Caucasus. To an unfamiliar ear, many Caucasian languages can sound like intricate compositions of glottal bursts, hissing consonants, and abrupt acoustic turns. Where an outsider hears an almost indistinguishable stream of sounds, a native speaker perceives subtle distinctions in meaning. Two consonants may differ only in the position of the tongue or the movement of the larynx, yet to the speaker the contrast is as obvious as the difference between neighboring notes to a trained musician.

And at that point, an unusual thought begins to emerge.

What if language is not solely a creation of human society?

What if every language has a second, silent co-author?

Not only the history of the people who speak it, but also the land on which those people lived for centuries.

Perhaps that is why some languages sound as though the mountains are still calling to one another through them.

Historical Aside: Mountains as Laboratories of Linguistic Diversity

In the first half of the twentieth century, the prominent linguist Nikolai Trubetzkoy observed a striking pattern. Mountain regions around the world often turn out to be true museums of linguistic diversity.

The reason lies not so much in the sounds themselves as in geography. Mountains both connect and separate people. Two villages may be only a few kilometers apart, yet divided by a pass, a ravine, or an impassable ridge. As a result, communities remain relatively isolated for centuries, and their speech gradually develops along its own path.

This is why the Caucasus is often described as one of the most linguistically diverse areas on Earth. Within a relatively small territory, dozens of languages coexist — many of them featuring highly complex consonant systems.

It is important to note that linguists do not consider mountains to be a direct cause of specific phonetic systems. However, geographical isolation creates conditions in which languages can preserve ancient features and develop unique characteristics without being absorbed into larger linguistic systems.

In this sense, the mountain landscape does not act as an architect of language, but rather as its custodian — a kind of vault in which rare forms of human speech are preserved over centuries.

1.2 An Ocean of Grass and Floating Vowels

Now let's leave the mountain gorges behind and move into a completely different world.

Imagine the Mongolian or Kazakh steppe — so vast that your eyes eventually give up trying to find where earth meets sky. The horizon dissolves into haze. Grass ripples in waves like a green sea. Wind travels freely for dozens of kilometers without meeting forests, cliffs, or city walls to break its path.

You are standing in the middle of this space alone.

A horse shifts quietly nearby, hooves pressing softly into the ground.

And nothing else.

Now try to call out to someone far ahead of you. What happens to your voice? Does it become sharp and clipped? Or does it stretch outward — wide, open, almost melodic — like it wants to glide across the land for as long as possible?

Of course, language is not built according to the acoustic laws of the steppe. But the image itself invites a question: can the spaces humans inhabit over generations leave subtle traces in how they perceive sound?

Some languages of the steppe belt do, in fact, give the impression of being unusually vocalic. Vowel sounds play a central role in them, along with vowel length, harmony, and smooth transitions between syllables. This is especially well known in Mongolic and Turkic languages, where vowels often form complex systems of mutual adjustment that linguists refer to as vowel harmony.

For a speaker of such a language, a word does not feel like a sequence of separate sounds. It is more like a single melodic wave. A change in one vowel can reshape the entire acoustic structure of the word, as if one note were retuning an entire chord.

Interestingly, this kind of phonological organization is found among peoples whose histories have long been tied to the open landscapes of Eurasia. Of course, this does not mean that the steppe caused vowel harmony. Contemporary linguistics offers no such evidence. But the parallel itself is strikingly beautiful.

Mountains seem to fragment space into separate valleys.

The steppe, by contrast, gathers it into a single horizon.

And sometimes it feels as if the languages of these worlds reflect the same logic.

Try a small experiment.

Say the Russian word *dom* ("house") out loud.

Now stretch the vowel:

do-o-o-m.

Then round your lips a little more and let the sound flow with your breath.

Physically, it becomes a completely different experience. The body begins to work differently. Speech turns less segmented and more fluid. The sound no longer shoots forward in a single burst — it unfolds in space.

Of course, speakers of Mongolian or Kazakh do not speak in a certain way because of the steppe around them. The history of language is far more complex than any elegant hypothesis. But such

experiments help us feel something important: every language develops its own acoustic aesthetics — its own sense of which sounds feel natural, beautiful, and expressive.

And here the scale of our inquiry expands once again.

We begin to understand that language is not only a tool for transmitting information. It is also a way of experiencing space.

Some cultures have lived for centuries among vertical landscapes of cliffs and passes.

Others among endless horizons.

Some have seen boundaries every day.

Others, continuity without visible edges.

And perhaps the memory of these worlds has been preserved not only in songs, legends, and ways of life, but also in the musical fabric of speech itself.

When we listen to the language of a nomad, we do not hear the steppe itself.

And yet sometimes it feels as though the wind of open spaces is still breathing through its vowels.

1.3 The Ice Castle of Scandinavia

Now let's travel even farther north.

Imagine a winter morning somewhere in Norway or Finland. The air is so cold that every exhale turns into a small cloud of vapor. Snow muffles all sound. The sea disappears behind a gray haze. The trees stand motionless, as if they themselves have become part of the ice.

In a landscape like this, one thing becomes especially vivid: warmth.

The warmth of a home.

The warmth of light.

The warmth of a human voice.

Listen to the speech of Northern European cultures. Many foreigners describe it as calm, measured, restrained — not necessarily quiet, but rarely resembling the kind of emotional fireworks often associated with Mediterranean countries.

Now let's mentally move south.

A narrow street somewhere in Sicily. Open windows. Conversations spilling out from balconies. Laughter. Gestures. Voices overlapping each other. It feels as though speech here occupies as much space as sunlight itself.

A striking contrast emerges.

North and south.

Restraint and expressiveness.

Even intonation versus emotional amplitude.

Of course, it would be far too simplistic to explain this difference through climate alone. Languages are shaped by history, culture, social norms, and countless other forces. Still, some scholars suggest that climate and environment may indirectly contribute to the formation of a society's communicative habits.

Not so much the sounds of language themselves, but the ways those sounds are used.

After all, language does not exist in dictionaries. It exists between people.

If most of the year is lived in cold temperatures, limited space, and long winters, societies tend to develop their own norms of behavior, communication, and emotional expression. In warmer regions, those norms may look quite different.

This is not about biology or the structure of the vocal apparatus. It is about culture.

About what kind of way of speaking feels natural.

About which emotional intensity is considered appropriate in public.

About how much distance feels comfortable between speakers.

About how much silence a conversation can hold.

Try a small experiment.

Imagine telling the same story to a friend in two different settings.

First, sitting by a fireplace in a small wooden house during a snowy winter.

Then, on a sunlit square in a coastal city, surrounded by people and the cries of seagulls.

Most likely, your speech would change slightly. The tempo, volume, and intonation would shift.

Even your gestures might become different.

The language itself remains the same.

But the way it is lived changes.

And here we arrive at another important idea.

Landscape may influence not only which sounds a language uses. It may also shape the atmosphere of communication, the rhythm of everyday life, and the cultural expectations surrounding human speech.

That is why, when we listen to different languages of the world, we do not always hear just a sequence of words.

We hear different ways of existing in space.

Somewhere, speech resembles a mountain path.

Somewhere, an endless steppe.

And somewhere else, the warm glow of a window in a long northern winter.

A Small Experiment for the Reader

Before you close this chapter, let's do a small experiment.

Say the following Russian sentence "mama myla ramu" ("Mom was washing the frame") out loud.

Now say it again, but this time almost without opening your teeth, barely moving your lips, as if you were standing in a cold wind and trying not to let any warmth escape your mouth.

Notice what happens.

The sound becomes tighter, more contained. Speech seems to turn inward. What changes is not only the sound itself, but the bodily experience of the sentence.

Now repeat the same words in a different way.

Open your mouth more fully on each vowel. Add more air, more space. Imagine speaking in a sunlit square where city noise does not prevent your voice from spreading freely around you.

This feels completely different.

The sentence is the same.

Only the way your body produces it has changed.

Of course, this experiment does not prove anything. It does not show how languages originated or why different peoples speak the way they do.

But it allows us to feel something important.

Speech is not only grammar and vocabulary.

Speech always lives in the body.

Every sound requires a specific configuration of tongue, lips, jaw, and breath. When we learn a foreign language, we are not only acquiring new words. We are learning a new way of using our own voice.

So next time you open a textbook of English, Arabic, Chinese, or any other language, try taking one more step.

Do not limit yourself to phonetic charts and transcription symbols.

Try to imagine the world in which that language exists.

What kinds of spaces surround its speakers?

What landscapes do they see every day?

What rhythm of life feels natural to them?

What distances do they cross regularly?

What sounds have accompanied them since childhood?

Of course, a language cannot be derived directly from geography. Mountains, steppes, and climate do not determine phonetics in any simple or linear way. But the surrounding world shapes human experience, and human experience inevitably becomes part of the culture in which language lives.

That is why learning a language is always something more than learning words.

It is an attempt to step, for a moment, outside your own worldview and see reality through another people's eyes.

Perhaps then unfamiliar sounds will stop seeming like arbitrary rules.

And you will begin to hear in them not only speech.

But also the history of the people who, for centuries, learned to live in their corner of the world.

Because every language is not simply a way of describing reality.

It is a memory of how a human community has lived that reality.

Conclusions

We began this chapter by observing how differently human speech can sound across the world — in mountains, steppes, northern and southern spaces.

At first glance, language appears to be a fully autonomous system, shaped entirely within culture and history. Sounds, grammar, and vocabulary all seem to follow the internal logic of language itself.

And yet, as we moved through different landscapes, a different impression gradually emerged: that language has another layer of interaction with the world — the space in which it lives.

We saw how in mountainous regions speech often takes on sharper, more precise forms, as if it must cut through wind and echo. How in steppe environments sounds stretch and flow, following the logic of open horizons. How in northern and southern cultures it is not so much the language itself that changes, but the rhythm and density of communication — the emotional temperature of speech.

Of course, language is not a direct reflection of geography and does not obey climate as a law. But there is growing reason to believe that environment may indirectly shape speech habits — through the body, lived experience, and patterns of human interaction.

That is why language cannot be understood only as a system of rules and meanings.

It exists at the intersection between the world and human perception of the world.

It absorbs not only history and culture, but also the shapes of the spaces in which that history unfolded.

When we listen to different languages, we do not merely hear different sounds.

We hear different ways of being present in the world.

And perhaps the central conclusion of this chapter is exactly that.

Language is not only a tool for describing reality.

It is one of the ways reality is lived by human beings.

Chapter 2. The Palette of Perception: The Semantics of Color and Space

“Well then, my friend, let’s finish our tea. We’re about to enter one of the most fascinating parts of our journey — a place where ordinary logic gives way to the true magic of perception.”

“Language is the eye through which we look at the world from within.”

— Paul Ricoeur”

We tend to trust our eyes without hesitation. It feels as though the physical world streams directly into our minds — objective, faithful, and unbiased. The azure clouds drifting across the sky, the rich emerald grass beneath our feet, the sharp turn of a country road to the left — all of these seem like fundamental constants of reality. We assume that any person with healthy vision, no matter where they were born, would see this scene more or less the same way.

Yet there is an intriguing paradox hidden here.

Although our eyes may receive the same physical world, perception does not end at the retina. As light, color, shape, and space travel through the astonishing complexity of human consciousness, they do not arrive on a blank mental screen. Instead, they pass through filters shaped by culture, experience, and perhaps language itself.

Language is not simply a box of colored pencils that we use to fill in the outlines of a world that already exists. It may be closer to a set of lenses — or a coordinate grid — through which we organize experience. It helps us notice certain distinctions while overlooking others. It allows us to divide a continuous stream of sensations into recognizable categories and give them names.

In this chapter, we will explore how Kas — the deep field of awareness that accompanies us throughout this book — assembles the familiar picture of reality from an endless spectrum of impressions. Why do different cultures divide colors in different ways? Why can space itself be described in ways that feel surprisingly foreign to us? And how might the words we use every day influence what becomes visible to our attention in the first place?

Linguistic Fact

In 1858, William Gladstone — the future Prime Minister of Great Britain — undertook a close analysis of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and noticed something unusual. The texts contain remarkably few references to what we would recognize as the color blue.

Homer’s sea is famously described as “wine-dark” (oinops), while the sky may appear bronze or iron-colored. At first, Gladstone proposed a striking explanation: perhaps the ancient Greeks perceived color differently from modern people.

Today, scholars approach that conclusion much more cautiously.

The issue was probably not one of eyesight, but of linguistic description and categorization. Ancient Greek may have organized color distinctions differently from modern European languages. Attention may have been directed more often toward qualities such as brightness, sheen, intensity, or texture than toward hue in the way we typically think about it today.

This historical episode became one of the earliest clues pointing toward an idea that will accompany us throughout this book: people may look at the same world, yet their languages can help them carve its continuous spectrum into meaningful categories in different ways.

2.1. The Color Continuum: Adjectives as Filters of Light

Imagine a rainbow.

Not a child’s drawing with neatly separated bands of color, but a real rainbow hanging in the sky after a summer rain. Try to find the exact point where red becomes orange. Or where green turns into blue.

It is almost impossible.

The color spectrum is not like a political map with clearly drawn borders. It is closer to an endless gradient, where one shade flows seamlessly into the next. Light waves change their wavelengths continuously, without abrupt jumps or natural dividing lines. Nature does not label portions of the spectrum with words such as red, yellow, or green.

The boundaries appear later — in the human mind.

And this is where language enters the story.

Color adjectives function as a kind of perceptual filter. They do not create colors, nor do they replace vision itself, but they help us divide a continuous stream of sensations into manageable categories of meaning. Where physics sees a gradual transition, language often draws an imaginary line and says, “One thing ends here; another begins.”

We become so accustomed to these boundaries that we begin to experience them as properties of the world itself.

An Experiment at the Border Between Worlds: Blue Versus Green

Imagine a scene from the fieldwork of a linguistic researcher.

A scientist arrives in a village of the Himba people in Namibia and shows local participants a card covered with colored squares. Among many shades of green sits a single bright blue square.

For a European observer, the task seems almost trivial. The blue square practically leaps off the page.

“There it is,” we think almost instantly.

Yet some Himba participants complete the task noticeably more slowly. In their traditional color-classification system, blue and certain shades of green belong to a broader shared category. By contrast, distinctions within the range that a European speaker might simply call green can be far more meaningful — and more readily perceived — for them.

Now imagine the reverse situation.

The card contains only green squares. To a European observer, they appear virtually identical. Yet one square differs slightly in shade. A Himba participant may detect that difference more quickly than someone raised within a European linguistic tradition.

It is important to understand what this does — and does not — mean.

The issue is not that people possess different kinds of eyes. Human beings perceive the same physical spectrum of light. However, some researchers argue, and a number of studies suggest, that linguistic categories may guide attention and influence how quickly certain distinctions are recognized.

In other words, language may not change vision itself so much as help direct consciousness toward the differences that deserve attention first.

Filtering Reality Through Linguistic Categories

A typical European model:

BLUE | GREEN

A traditional Himba model:

BURU | (a category encompassing part of what Europeans would call blue and part of what they would call green)

Of course, experiments like these do not imply that speakers of different languages inhabit different physical universes. What they do encourage us to consider is something subtler: language may help our attention carve familiar pathways through the same shared world.

The Curious Case of Russian Goluboy

An especially fascinating example lies much closer to home — within the Russian language itself.

For an English speaker, the color of the sky and the color of a pair of blue jeans belong to the same broad category: blue. The shades may differ, but they are generally understood as variations of a single color.

Russian took a different historical path.

At some point, it drew a particularly significant boundary through this region of the spectrum and anchored it with two separate words: *siniy* (dark blue) and *goluboy* (light blue).

For a Russian speaker, the distinction feels so natural that it can be difficult to imagine that many languages function perfectly well without it.

In the early twenty-first century, a team of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology investigated how speakers of different languages distinguish shades within the blue spectrum. In one experiment, participants were asked to quickly determine which colors matched one another.

The researchers observed an intriguing pattern. Russian-speaking participants often detected differences more rapidly when one shade fell into the category of *siniy* and the other into *goluboy*. English-speaking participants showed no comparable advantage.

By itself, this finding does not prove that language determines perception. However, it fits well with the broader idea that familiar linguistic categories may influence the speed with which visual information is processed.

The picture that emerges is a fascinating one.

Nature offers us a continuous spectrum.

The eye receives light.

The brain analyzes differences.

And language helps decide which of those differences become important enough to earn a name of their own.

That is why words sometimes resemble more than labels attached to a ready-made reality. They are more like lines on a map of perception. They do not create the territory, but they help us navigate within it.

Perhaps every language can be thought of as a unique collection of perceptual filters. The world outside the window remains the same, yet the beams of attention pass through different lenses — and as a result, different cultures may notice slightly different boundaries within the very same rainbow.

2.2 The Architecture of Space: Where Does the Self End?

Imagine standing on the bank of a river.

In front of you sits an old wooden boat. To your right grows a willow tree. To your left lies a large boulder.

Now turn around.

The boat is still exactly where it was. The willow has not moved an inch. The boulder has not disappeared.

And yet something strange has happened.

What was on your right is now on your left. What was on your left is now on your right.

The physical world has not changed.

The coordinate system has.

We are so accustomed to this little trick that we rarely notice it.

Space That Turns With Us

If color words help our Kats divide the world into shades, spatial language helps it assemble a map of reality.

Most European languages describe space through the position of the human body. We say:

“Put the spoon to the left of the plate.”

“Turn right.”

“Take a step back.”

“The house is in front of us.”

In each of these examples, the speaker serves as the point of reference.

The coordinate grid moves with the observer. Turn around, and the entire system instantly rearranges itself. Right becomes left. Front becomes back. The map of space rotates together with the body.

This way of navigating the world feels natural only because we grew up inside it.

But it is far from the only possibility.

A World That Does Not Depend on the Observer

In northeastern Australia lives a community of speakers of the language Guugu Yimithirr. Incidentally, the English word kangaroo is believed to have entered English through this language.

Linguists working with Guugu Yimithirr speakers noticed something remarkable. In everyday conversation, they frequently use absolute directions — north, south, east, and west — in situations where most Europeans would use words such as “left” or “right.”

Imagine an ordinary exchange.

A European might say:

“Move the cup a little to the right.”

A Guugu Yimithirr speaker would be more likely to describe the cup’s position using a direction tied to the cardinal points.

To someone raised in a European cultural tradition, this can sound almost impossible. How can a person constantly know where north is?

Yet for speakers of languages that rely on such systems, this awareness forms part of everyday life. Research suggests that they often display an impressive ability to orient themselves in space and to keep track of their position within the surrounding landscape.

Not because their brains are fundamentally different.

And not because they possess some mysterious internal compass.

One interpretation is that the continual need to use absolute spatial coordinates trains attention toward orientation and place. Language and daily practice work together as a single system.

Coordinates Move | Coordinates Stay Fixed

With the person | Within the landscape

At first glance, this may seem like a minor distinction.

What difference does it make whether you say “to the right” or “to the east”?

But the longer you look, the more it becomes clear that we are not dealing with different words alone.

We are dealing with different habits of attention.

In one case, the body serves as the center of the map.

In the other, the speaker must continuously relate themselves to the larger environment.

Some languages seem to ask:

“Where is the object in relation to me?”

Others more often ask:

“Where is the object in relation to space?”

Of course, no one automatically becomes wiser, more humble, or more environmentally conscious simply because they speak one language rather than another. It would be far too bold to draw such conclusions.

Yet language may gently encourage certain ways of engaging with the world.

When the coordinate system rotates with the observer, attention naturally gathers around the self.

When coordinates are anchored to the landscape, attention may remain focused on the surrounding world.

Where Does the Self End?

Try a small thought experiment.

Close your eyes and picture your room.

Where is the wardrobe?

To your left?

To your right?

In front of you?

Behind you?

Most likely, you immediately used your own body as the reference point.

Now try answering differently.

Where is the wardrobe relative to north and south?

Where is the desk relative to east?

Where is the door relative to west?

Suddenly, your familiar mental map begins to resist.

Our Kas is accustomed to building the world around the observer.

Yet there are languages in which people learn from childhood to place themselves within the map of the world.

And this is where the deeper lesson of the story emerges.

The space around us remains the same. The planet is the same. The sky, rivers, trees, and roads do not change when the language changes.

Something else changes.

Language helps determine what becomes the center of the coordinate system: the individual or the landscape.

And then the question “Where is the object?” slowly transforms into a much deeper one:

“Where am I in relation to the world?”

2.3 Landscape Thinking: Words Like Rocks, Words Like Dunes

Imagine two children.

One grows up amid the endless snows of the Arctic.

The other among the sands of the Sahara.

Neither knows anything about linguistics yet. Neither has read textbooks. Neither has heard of cognitive science.

And yet, every day, their eyes are solving different problems.

One learns to notice the structure of snow, the condition of ice, the direction of a blizzard, and the quality of the surface beneath their feet.

The other learns to track shifting winds, the shape of dunes, footprints in the sand, and the rare landmarks scattered across a seemingly endless desert.

The world asks questions.

Language gradually learns how to answer them.

When Snow Becomes More Than Snow

Perhaps no linguistic myth has proven more durable than the claim that Eskimo peoples have dozens — or even hundreds — of words for snow.

For decades, the story traveled through newspapers, documentaries, and popular science books. With every retelling, the number grew: ten words, fifty, one hundred, two hundred.

The reality turned out to be even more interesting than the myth.

Linguists studying Inuit and Yupik languages discovered that the issue is not simply a vast inventory of separate root words. Many of these languages are polysynthetic, meaning they can build long, complex word structures that combine multiple layers of meaning into a single expression.

But the most important conclusion lies elsewhere.

For Arctic peoples, snow is not an abstract white backdrop on a winter postcard.

It is part of the living environment.

Snow may be loose or compact. Freshly fallen or wind-packed. Safe to travel across or potentially dangerous. Suitable for building shelter or completely useless for that purpose.

Where a city dweller sees only “snow,” a hunter or traveler may notice a host of practical distinctions.

And this is not merely a matter of language.

Rather, language and way of life evolve together, helping people attend to those features of the environment that matter for survival and daily life.

When the Landscape Never Stands Still

Now let us travel thousands of kilometers south — to the Sahara.

At first glance, the desert seems monotonous.

Sand.

Sky.

Sun.

And more sand.

Yet for someone whose family has lived there for generations, the desert is full of information.

The shape of a dune may reveal prevailing wind patterns.

The texture of the sand can tell a story about recent weather.

Tracks on the ground may allow an experienced observer to reconstruct events from hours — or even days — earlier.

What appears to an outsider as emptiness becomes, for a skilled nomad, a detailed map.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the languages of desert peoples often contain rich vocabularies for describing sand, wind, terrain, and environmental conditions.

Of course, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the landscape itself directly dictates the grammar of a language. The history of any language is far too complex for such simple explanations.

Yet one pattern seems difficult to ignore: people tend to name in greatest detail the things that are constantly present in their lives and demand their attention.

The Arctic teaches people to distinguish snow.

The desert teaches people to distinguish sand.

The sea teaches people to distinguish water and wind.

The mountains teach people to distinguish slopes, passes, and routes of movement.

At this point, it is easy to draw the wrong conclusion.

As though language creates the world around us.

Of course, it does not.

Arctic snow existed long before anyone named it.

Sand dunes do not need nouns in order to change their shape.

But language helps our Ks solve a different problem.

It suggests which distinctions are worth noticing again and again.

Which features of the environment deserve a separate name.

Which details are worth storing in memory.

In a sense, words are like paths through a forest.

The more often we walk a particular trail, the more visible it becomes.

In much the same way, linguistic categories help attention carve familiar routes through the surrounding world.

A Thought Exercise: The Fracture in Perception

Try a small experiment.

Look out the window.

Choose any object: a tree, a cloud, a puddle, a flower bed, or a stretch of road.

Now describe it using a single word.

Most likely, your description will be quite general.

“Tree.”

“Cloud.”
“Grass.”

Now imagine that your work, your journey, or even your safety depends on the precision of that description.

Try to identify five additional characteristics.

Not simply “cloud,” but light, layered, fast-moving, sun-blocking, rain-bearing.

Not simply “grass,” but dry, young, trampled, damp, or freshly cut.

Suddenly, the world begins to split into countless details that seemed invisible only moments ago.

The object has not changed.

Your attention has.

And along with that shift in attention, new words begin to emerge.

This is where one of the most subtle boundaries between language and perception can be found.

We do not notice the world solely because words exist.

But words may help us notice more of what is there.

From Landscape to Thought

The longer we travel through the languages of the world, the clearer one idea becomes.

Language is not a mirror of reality.

But neither is it an arbitrary collection of labels.

It emerges at the intersection of human experience and the surrounding environment.

Within it remain traces of climate, migration routes, economic activity, and habits of attention.

Every word resembles a small imprint left by a piece of the world that once proved important enough to remember.

And gradually, language begins to resemble a map.

In some places on that map, there are more rocks.

In others, more dunes.

Elsewhere, more snow.

But ultimately, all of those lines lead us toward the same question:

If language preserves traces of the landscape, how much of the surrounding world lives quietly within us as well?

Exercise for Reflection

Try describing the room you are in right now without using the words “left,” “right,” “in front,” or “behind.”

Instead of saying:

“The armchair is to the left of the door, and the television hangs in front of me,”

try using the cardinal directions.

If you are unsure, open the compass on your smartphone.

Your description might become:

“The armchair stands against the western wall, and the television is mounted on the southern wall.”

Now shift your attention away from the objects themselves and toward your own experience.

Did the description require more concentration?

Did your sense of the room change?

Did you begin to feel that the room was connected to a larger map extending beyond its walls?

You may notice that your usual coordinate system has shifted slightly.

Or you may notice nothing unusual at all.

Yet it is precisely these small experiments that reveal how deeply language is woven into our most automatic ways of navigating the world.

Conclusions

We began this chapter with a simple question:

Do all people see the same world in the same way?

At first glance, the answer seems obvious. The sky remains the sky regardless of language. Space follows the same laws of physics everywhere. Colors do not change when they cross national borders.

And yet, as our journey unfolded, we discovered another layer between the physical world and human experience: language.

We saw how different languages draw boundaries through the color spectrum in different ways. How different cultures may organize space around the individual differently. How landscape, climate, and ways of life leave their traces in the words people use every day.

Of course, language does not recreate reality from scratch, nor does it turn speakers of different languages into inhabitants of separate universes. Yet there is growing reason to think that language may help guide attention, highlight meaningful distinctions, and shape familiar pathways of thought.

This is why learning another language is more than acquiring new vocabulary.

It is an encounter with a different coordinate system.

It is an opportunity to discover that many things we once considered natural and self-evident are, in fact, only one possible way of organizing experience.

When we learn a new language, our eyes do not change.

But sometimes we begin to notice things we used to walk past without seeing.

And perhaps that is the greatest gift languages offer.

They remind us that the world is far larger than any single worldview we have grown accustomed to treating as the only possible one.

Each language offers its own set of lenses.

No single lens reveals reality in its entirety.

But the more lenses we have at our disposal, the richer, deeper, and more expansive the world becomes.

Part II. Being and Society

Chapter 3. Everyday Syntax: The Grammar of Hearth, Bread, and Clothing

So, let's throw another log onto the imaginary fire and place a second cup of something warm beside it. We are moving into a space that usually feels too familiar to be important — the everyday.

“A human being lives not in an objective world, nor in a world of social activity alone... To a large extent, they are under the control of the specific language that has become the medium of expression for that society.”

— Edward Sapir

In its usual framing, everyday life appears as background. Almost like a kind of noise beneath which the “real” events take place — philosophy, politics, religion, art. We tend to think that daily actions — washing dishes, choosing clothes, slicing bread, arranging objects in the kitchen — are automatic gestures, devoid of inner structure.

But this is precisely where the main perceptual error arises.

Everything that seems like “background” is, in fact, the densest fabric of experience. In everyday life, language stops being text and becomes architecture. It does not merely describe the world — it organizes it so that life inside it becomes possible at all.

If we look closely, the material world begins to behave like a system of signs. Objects cease to be just things: they become stable nodes of meaning. Domestic rituals — the repeated actions of morning and evening — start to resemble grammatical constructions that structure time itself. And the smells and tastes of the kitchen are no longer just sensations, but compressed “memory formulas,” in which entire cultural scenarios are folded into a single experience.

And then something unexpected becomes visible: everyday life is not the opposite of thought. It is thought that has become material.

Insert: A Historical Excursion

Wilhelm Humboldt

saw language not as a finished product, but as a continuous process of becoming — *Energieia* rather than *Ergon*.

If we transfer this view onto everyday life, an interesting shift occurs: a cup on the table stops being just an object. It becomes a frozen habit of action — a way in which culture repeatedly negotiates how exactly to quench thirst, how to preserve warmth, how to distribute attention between body and world.

From this perspective, everyday objects are not final things, but materialized forms of repeated linguistic and cultural agreements.

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