
Relationship Between Language And Thought

The debate regarding the necessity of language for consciousness has been ongoing for centuries, and across many disciplines, including psychology. This paper will explore the relationship between consciousness and language, focusing on the necessity of language for consciousness, and the importance of inner speech. Inner speech is an important component of the human consciousness (Allen & Trestman, 2017).

René Descartes, who coined the famous dictum, 'I think, therefore, I am', concluded that the 'thinking self' is not physical nor material (Blackmore & Troscianko, 2018). Famous early 20th-century psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, argues that consciousness is a mechanism where information from various sources is entwined by internalized speech, which is the main form of the essential mediator of language (Vygotsky, 1934). The term 'consciousness' within and throughout this paper will be based on Descartes' and Vygotsky's conclusions. This paper will conclude with a reflection and general debate in the discussion.

Consciousness is a very complicated topic and thus, perhaps it is easier to question, at what level of consciousness does language become a necessity for the conscious experience? Morin (2006) reviewed nine theories of levels of consciousness and formed three general levels. The first and lowest level is labeled 'consciousness' and is characterized by organisms experiencing and processing perceptions and sensations but with no awareness of the mental events and there is no reflective role. Due to the lack of reflection, it is argued that language is not necessary for this level of consciousness (Allen, 2010). It is believed that animals and preverbal humans experience this level of consciousness (Allen, 2010). The second level of consciousness is 'self-awareness', which refers to when the organism becomes a "reflective observer" - meaning they become the "object of one's own attention" (Morin, 2006). Here, organisms can recognize themselves, and the Theory of Mind begins to develop (Allen, 2010). The final and highest level is 'meta-self-awareness', where one is aware that they are self-aware (Morin, 2006).

Language is localized and holds dominance in the brain's left hemisphere (Obler & Gjerlow, 1999). Within the left hemisphere is the left inferior frontal gyrus (LIFG), an area that has been shown to sustain inner speech use.

The consciousness and the human mind are characterized by inner speech (Allen & Trestman, 2017). Also known as verbal thinking or covert speech (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015), inner speech is significant as it serves as one of the main differences between the cognition of man, machine, and animal (Allen & Trestman, 2017).

Inner speech allows humans to acknowledge and become aware of their own thoughts and without this phenomenon, conscious thoughts would be extremely limited and would be nothing more than vague feelings (Allen & Trestman, 2017). Inner speech is a manifestation of internal subjective experiences, which humans endure when they are conscious (Allen & Trestman, 2017). This may be proof that inner speech and language are necessary conditions for consciousness.

It is argued that inner speech has a significant role in self-consciousness (Morin, 2009) and that the human mind reflects upon itself through the internalized form of natural language (Neuman & Nave, 2010).

A case study exploring the necessity for inner speech in self-awareness and self-consciousness focused on Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, who suffered a stroke in her left fronto-temporal junction (Morin, 2009). Without the flow of language-based thought, and loss of inner speech, Taylor experienced deficits in self-identity, self-awareness, and self-consciousness, resulting in a lower level of overall consciousness (Morin, 2009).

A study by Alain Morin and Jayson Michaud (2007) focused on the role of inner speech in self-consciousness and self-referential activities. They primarily looked at the LIFG. The results of this study suggest that inner speech is in fact involved in self-referential activity, which in turn supports the idea that language is necessary for the level of 'self-awareness' (Morin & Michaud, 2007). Language is necessary for inner speech, but not just spoken language meets this requirement. Non-speech-based languages, such as sign language, are also sufficient.

For a long period of time, it was mistaken that people who are deaf have no capacity for inner speech and would therefore lack certain abilities for abstract thought (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015).

This paper has presented theories and evidence that address the necessity of inner speech for consciousness. The conclusions made would also mean that verbally incompetent organisms, such as babies and animals would not be considered conscious, although this may not be entirely true. Very basic levels of 'self-awareness' do not require nor rely on language (Morin, 2006). To experience and be conscious of pain, it does not require one to be a master of a language. Young infants do not have the capacity to speak nor understand language, however, they have the ability to express emotion and needs, such as discomfort or hunger. Jean Piaget (1964) argues that "thought becomes conscious to the degree to which the child can communicate it". Keenan (2003, as cited in Morin, 2006) argues that chimpanzees and orangutans can recognise themselves in a mirror and are therefore self-aware. Keenan (2003, as cited in Morin, 2006) also states that to be self-aware, the organism does not need to have "any awareness of its mental experiences". Therefore, although meaningful inner speech is a powerful indicator of the presence of consciousness, the lack of meaningful inner speech may not be proof of the lack of consciousness (Allen & Trestman, 2017).

Language may not be necessary for the lower levels of consciousness, as described by Morin (2006). However, language becomes a necessary element as consciousness reaches the highest level of 'self-consciousness' (Neuman & Nave, 2010). Evidence shown in this paper suggests that this level of consciousness is based on language-related abilities, in particular, inner speech. As there are still "ubiquitous philosophical disagreements about the nature of the conscious experience, further research into the theory of mind, and evolutionary studies"

Although there are still many philosophical disagreements surrounding the nature of consciousness, further research into evolutionary studies and the Theory of Mind may provide further insight and perhaps even settle the historical debate regarding the requirements for consciousness.