“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” What do you understand by this statement by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and do you think that knowing more than one language pushes back the frontiers of the world in which you live?

The ‘linguistic turn’ in the early 20th century was a movement that saw major developments in the practice of philosophy, triggering philosophers to concentrate on the relationship between philosophy and language. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein was an Austrian-British Philosopher who focused primarily on the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein’s ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’, published in 1921, demonstrated the limitations of language and the philosophical dilemmas that arise from these limits. The overarching message in ‘Tractatus’ can be summarised in just one sentence: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”. Firstly, Wittgenstein argues that there are boundaries to language that limit our perception of reality and ability to comprehend the hypothetical. Secondly, the quote indicates that language as a communication device is limited, as the objective definition and description of abstract concepts is impossible. Finally, his hypothesis suggests that a specific language can shape and potentially limit a person’s thoughts, and that speakers of different languages have different perspectives. Below, I will discuss how language can limit perception, communication and attitude, as well as the extent to which knowing more than one language can push back the frontiers, both personal and global, in the world in which we live.

Firstly, it is important to consider the significance of Wittgenstein’s hypothesis in terms of his perception of the world and his philosophical career. At the conclusion of the ‘Tractatus’, Wittgenstein presents his fundamental idea that “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence”.[[1]](#endnote-1) Wittgenstein is implying a limit to language, making a clear distinction between “what can be said” and “what we cannot talk about”. He defines “what can be said” by any conceivable thought that can be communicated and comprehended. Meanwhile, he regards “what cannot” be said as “nonsense”[[2]](#endnote-2). For Wittgenstein, this “nonsense” refers to concepts beyond human perception, with this “nonsense” being non-existent as it can be neither thought nor communicated and therefore does not exist in human perception. Wittgenstein is implying that humans are not equipped with the language with which to perceive endless hypothetical concepts, and that language causes a “limit… to the expression of thoughts”[[3]](#endnote-3), meaning that it is primarily language that is responsible for the restricting our perception and expression of thoughts. Wittgenstein employs a logical sequence in order to justify his hypothesis, stating that the limit of language results in the limit of the expression of thought, which limits our ability for thought altogether. The limit of thought limits our perception of reality, and therefore proves “the limits of my world”.

Wittgenstein’s hypothesis implies universality, but his reference to “my [his] world” rather than the world in a global sense should be considered within the context of his life and philosophical career. Wittgenstein described philosophy as “the only work that gives me real satisfaction”, having had a career dedicated to philosophical study and the release of the renowned ‘Tractatus’, and later ‘Philosophical Investigations’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Wittgenstein’s chosen discipline of philosophy requires abstract thinking, and precise and clear communication, and therefore the “limits of language” were particularly significant in his life and work. He believed that both his ability for endless philosophical thought, and the means in which to communicate his abstract notions successfully, were limited by his language; and thought that this limitation resulted in the frequent misunderstanding of his ideas by his readers. Wittgenstein warned that “This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it”,[[5]](#endnote-5) confirming his fear that his language limited the effective communication of his philosophies.

“The limits of my language” are most prevalent in the communication of abstract concepts, such as one’s personal experience of different emotions, for example it is the precision of language that helps us understand the difference between joy and elation, or jealousy and envy, but where we do not have a precise word it is hard for us to express that feeling. Different languages have different limitations on their expression of abstract concepts. For example, there are words present in German that the English language lacks. The German word “schadenfreude”[[6]](#endnote-6) describes a self-satisfied pleasure that comes from the misfortune of others. Without an English word for “schadenfreude”, we lack an undisputed description of this feeling in our language, and therefore those who experience the emotion may struggle to communicate and relate their experience in order for it to be understood universally. To ensure that others can understand their highly personal experience of this emotion, English speakers have no choice but to borrow the word from Germany to guarantee that their emotion is understood. This reinforces the notion that language is limited in its ability to describe abstract concepts, therefore indicating the importance of universal definitions to attempt to describe and define the abstract. Similarly, the French word “ennui” describes a weary dissatisfaction with the world. “Ennui”[[7]](#endnote-7) is another emotion that lacks definition in the English language, which can struggle to express without resorting to the French term. Of course, speakers of the English language can experience feelings of “schadenfreude” and “ennui”, but may struggle to communicate these feelings effectively without a word to define the particular emotion. It is therefore important to note that the limitations of certain languages do not prevent or limit an individual’s experience of a concept. Instead, the limits of language prevent the objective definition of the experience, limiting an individual’s ability to communicate their experience to others.

Whilst the vocabulary of different languages sets limits in terms of the communication of certain concepts, the limits of different languages are also demonstrated through the contrasting perspectives of different language speakers. Due to gradual developments and changes within different languages over time, it is evident that speakers of different languages have developed differing perspectives. In a study comparing the perspective of German and English speakers, subjects were asked to describe a video of a woman moving towards her car. The German and English speakers gave different descriptions, with English speakers paying attention primarily to the video’s immediate action, saying, “a woman is walking”.[[8]](#endnote-8) German speakers, on the other hand, focused more on the goal of the video’s action, saying, “A woman walks towards her car”.[[9]](#endnote-9) Whilst this difference in description may seem insignificant, it suggests a blatant difference between the English and German perspective. The English speakers’ use of the present participle implies that the English are more action based and fixated on the present, whilst the German speakers’ mention of the woman’s car indicates their priority towards the end goal or destination instead of just the immediate action in front of them. Although language was sometimes a limiting factor in Wittgenstein’s philosophical expression, his ability to speak two languages, German and English, would have extended his limits by giving him access to two slightly different perspectives: a more action-focused English perspective and a more goal-focused perspective German of the Germans. However, these contrasting perspectives are not unique to German and English, as a similar difference was found with French. Journalist Gaia Vince reported that “the same deeply personal question gets a different answer depending on the language in which you’re asking me” [[10]](#endnote-10)when asked the same question in both English and French, and believes that “you gain a new personality with every language you speak”.[[11]](#endnote-11) Furthermore, Alex Rawlings, a professional polyglot who is fluent in 15 languages, believes that “Each language gives you a whole new shade of meaning,”[[12]](#endnote-12) These examples heavily suggest that our perspective and personality are greatly influenced by the language we are speaking; that the perspectives of different languages have the power to change our view of the world.

This indication of different perspectives based on one’s language demonstrates that by learning a new language, we can actively push back the frontiers in the world in which we live, as a new language gives a speaker the ability to adopt a completely different perspective. However, the ability to push back the frontiers in the world we live, in order to broaden our perspective, can also come from the understanding of specific language devices, such as metaphor and word invention, that are present in both poetry and the works of Shakespeare. Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘Wintering’ employs the extended metaphor of both night and day as violent and hostile forces to portray the emotional turmoil she experiences during a separation from her ex-lover. Duffy describes, “Night clenches in its fist the moon” and “Dawn mocks me”. [[13]](#endnote-13)Duffy’s metaphorical comparison of her deeply personal hostile emotion to the image of a hostile night and dawn helps Duffy’s readers understand the complexity of her emotions. Therefore, through use of metaphor in the description of emotional concepts, Duffy is pushing back the frontiers of language and the potential limit of language to describe and define highly abstract and personal concepts. Similarly, the work of Shakespeare involved the invention of over 1700 words, some of which are still present in the English language today, including “swagger”, “bedazzled”, “gloomy” and “dwindle”[[14]](#endnote-14). Through this extensive invention of words, Shakespeare confronted the limits of the English language and its ability to define and describe certain abstract concepts, which had been previously inexpressible. The ability to understand and use invented Shakespearean words and complex poetic metaphors is comparable to understanding and speaking an entirely new language, as metaphor and word invention divert from the normal language conventions, and provide the speaker with an improved understanding of abstract ideas and ultimately, a much broader perspective of the world.

Lastly, as well as the ability to adopt a different perspective and better understand abstract concepts, the act of learning a new language provides a multitude of cognitive benefits, diminishing the intellectual frontiers that we may otherwise be faced with. Most importantly, learning a second language improves cognitive function as it forces the brain to recognise and understand a different language system, causing the brain to operate differently.[[15]](#endnote-15) For example, in a recent study, students who had learnt a second language scored significantly higher in the American SAT exams compared to monolinguals.[[16]](#endnote-16) As for the elderly, bilinguals consistently displayed symptoms of Alzheimer’s and dementia four to five years later than monolinguals.[[17]](#endnote-17) Finally, in a study of 600 stroke survivors, recovery was twice as fast among the bilinguals.[[18]](#endnote-18) Overall, learning another language improves academic performance, enhances disease prevention, and accelerates recovery from brain injury, resulting in the significant pushing back of our mental frontiers, which is vital in a world that consistently values academic performance, and favours superior mental ability.

To conclude, Wittgenstein’s hypothesis clearly demonstrates that the language we speak inevitably limits both our perception of the hypothetical and our ability to communicate abstract concepts. These limitations are more prevalent in a profession where clear communication is fundamental, for example a philosopher’s attempt to explain their abstract ideas precisely, or a politician’s efforts to communicate effectively and gain mass support. However, “the limits of my language” depend on the particular language that we speak, as well as on our to manipulate language poetically. Furthermore, it is undisputable that learning another language pushes back our personal frontiers. Knowledge of another language provides us with an alternative perspective that is unique to an individual language, as well as a multitude of cognitive benefits. Ultimately, understanding different languages, both literal and poetic, offers alternative ways in which to define and describe abstract concepts, and with this knowledge comes a greater potential to communicate our perception of the world.

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