

“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?

Wittgenstein’s statement refers to the belief that if one cannot describe something in words, then it does not exist. He comments in his book *Tractatus* that “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence”; this thought is a key part of the philosophical movement of the early 20th century known as the ‘linguistic turn’, a trend in which language itself became the study of academics through the lens of other subjects, such as anthropology. My immediate reaction to this line of thought is to point out that perhaps there are things in existence that are beyond the human intellect and are too complex to describe - Wittgenstein’s rebuttal would have been to ask for an example, something which is impossible to give as they are by definition indescribable, and thus, according to Wittgenstein, non-existent. He claimed that he was trying to “draw a limit to thought”¹.

The crux of this question is whether the key parts of our ‘world’ (our lives) can be verbalised. Therefore I will make the sweeping assumption that relationships and human interaction are the most important part of life so as to conclude on whether my life is limited by what I can verbally explain.

It could be argued that language is the core to interaction. It is interesting to note that, while most species of animals communicate, the more intelligent the animal, the more complex the language. Indeed, the Orcinus Orca is considered to be one of the most complex species on the planet, and they have their own dialects; Northeast Pacific species² have been noticed to be more vocal and their language focuses more on clicks than other groups of orcas. Following this line of thought, the rule would seem to be: the more evolved the species, the more complex their language and the deeper their interactions.

I take issue with the generalisation that beyond words, creatures have no way of interacting - even Wittgenstein himself came to see the flaw in his argument later in his life, particularly in *Philosophical Interpretations*. There are ways of communicating which are non-verbal - for example, the bond between a mother and baby is rested in smell, touch and the feeling of security, long before the child has developed enough to speak. Humans, along with other developed species, are able to form bonds which are not speech-based. Austrian researchers found that the relationship between a dog and its master produces the same ‘strong base effect’³ that has been noted in studies of parent-child relationships; this effect is a key part of attachment theory, and is core to a person, or animal, developing a stable mental state. For this reason, it seems simply untrue to say our existence is limited to what we can verbalise.

There are other parts of life which are simply indescribable. Taste, colour and feelings are all central to the human experience, and cannot necessarily be verbalised. A study of more than one language enables you to explain these things further, as you have more words at

¹ *Tractatus*

² <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/whales/killer-whale.html>

³ The Importance of the Secure Base Effect for Domestic Dogs – Evidence from a Manipulative Problem-Solving Task

your disposal; English has 171,000 words which are still in use⁴, while it is estimated that Japanese, for example, has closer to 700,000⁵. On top of this, other languages create words in different ways to English, so by learning, for example, German, you widen your vocabulary and, according to Wittgenstein's statement, your world. 'Tsundoku' in Japanese is the act of buying a book and leaving it piled up unread. In German, 'fuchsteufelswild' literally means fox-devil wild, a kind of feral anger for which English just doesn't have a word - the exact meaning of 'fingerspitzengefühl' is 'fingertip feeling', which refers to a sense of empathy so strong that it is as if you are at the fingertips of the other person. These words are almost incommunicable in English; to study another language is to come up with more ways to describe the indescribable in English.

Religion has often been used by cultures to express changes and patterns present in their society, so we can learn a lot about how people have viewed language barriers and the power of speech throughout history. Christianity in particular gives an insight, as the Bible is one of the few religious texts that has been repeatedly edited. In Genesis, God decides to stop the Babylonians from building a tower to Heaven by making them all speak in different languages so as to confuse them, meaning they can't work together⁶; this suggests that Bronze Age people like Moses found that language barriers were complete blocks to interacting with people from a different culture, proving that only speaking your native language limits your horizons. Humanity developed, and when language is next touched upon in Acts in the context of Pentecost in around 100AD, language is shown as a flame over people's heads, enabling them to spread the word of God⁷. Language here is seen as a gift rather than a curse, as it enables them to connect their cultures.

Learning another language does not only widen your 'borders' by allowing you to describe more of your life, it also gives you far more opportunities and perspectives on the world. As the world gets smaller and the human race gets more unified, it has never been more important to learn languages. To be born in England is an extraordinary piece of luck for many reasons, not only because we have the gift of English as our first language. For young people of other nationalities, learning a second language is a necessity because the rest of the world, and the rest of the job market, don't speak Estonian or Kujarge or Sentinelese - more than 50% of people living in the European Union speak a second language, and 10% can hold a conversation in more than three. It shows a certain level of arrogance that only a quarter of Britons can speak a second language, with the most popular being French, but it is not necessarily surprising as the borders of the English-speaking world are very broad.

But while it may be possible to get by as a native English speaker, not having a second language holds many disadvantages. It does not seem a coincidence that a country in which so few people have made the effort to connect with other cultures is also the country that voted to leave a union as strong as the EU, and has refused to meet its quota of refugees, perhaps due to fear of integrating with people who don't speak English. Looking at America, where just 22% can converse in a language other than English, it seems unsurprising that that they have elected a man who exhibits such xenophobia, and who has placed a ban on

⁴ According to the Oxford Dictionary

⁵ According to several forums about the Japanese language - there is no overarching organisation that studies the language like there is with other languages so it is impossible to get an absolute answer

⁶ Genesis 11:1-9

⁷ Acts 2: 1-13

citizens of seven Muslim-majority nations entering the country (a man who also, as a side note, can only speak one language). Nigel Farage, ex-leader of the controversial UK Independence Party, campaigned during the 2015 General Election on a pledge to ban languages other than good old English being spoken on public transport; there have been countless cases of Muslims being taken off planes due to the fear of another passenger, because they overheard them speaking in Arabic. This evidence seems to suggest to me that a lack of multi-linguism feeds ignorance and ignorance feeds fear - learning to speak another tongue not only widens your borders but also stops you narrowing them.

In conclusion, knowing another language absolutely enables you to push the limits of your world. Wittgenstein believed that we are limited to what we can verbally understand, something which I see as a sweeping generalisation as it fails to take into account the many other forms of human interaction. However, it certainly is harder to interact without language, and being able to speak more than just your native language permits a greater understanding of the world around you and gives you many more opportunities.

“Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.”

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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