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Language, Culture, Perception and Knowledge

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Abstract

The complexity of our diverse communities requires us to reflect on pre-conceived notions of understanding that shape worldviews. This project examines approaches that exclude divergent perspectives, while promoting intolerant ideologies that limit our possibilities for shared learning. It also explores crucial elements that shape our understanding in an effort to expose the limitations created by absolute frames of mind. This research involves an analysis of scientific and religious fundamentalist outlooks that negate vital opportunities for discovery through mutual collaboration and the acknowledgment of exclusive and incomplete perspectives that discourage and undervalue diversity.

The world without language becomes unimaginable, since language makes the articulation of our thoughts and the human experience possible. Through an interactive connection with symbols, signs, and sounds, language enables us to express complex concepts while allowing us to process and convey the abstract, thus creating an environment of communication through the exchange of ideas.

The human need for expression and contact with one another connects us with the origin of language. Once the connection takes place, the cultural components of language begin to develop an interactive relationship between our traditions and our verbal living experiences as a society. It is through this association that our world begins to take shape, and the perception of our world becomes outlined by culture and language. This bond between language and human thought becomes our cultural reality, as well as the medium through which we relate to one another. Through the interrelated nature of language and its cultural components, the way we learn and recognize the world becomes predetermined and dependant on our specific system of symbols and sounds used within our communities, developing our sense of reality and cultural identity.

My main argument explores the relationship between language and its cultural components from a linguistic anthropological and philosophical perspective and investigates the role language and culture play in shaping our perception and epistemological understanding of the world as well as the development, recognition, and acceptance of knowledge. If our cultural identity originates through language, then the foundation for learning and development of worldviews also relies on the existence of language. Edward Sapir[1] speaks about the power of language and culture as he warns us that our cultural traditions potentially imprison our thoughts as well as our acceptance of reality. He states, "Once they had become a part of a linguistic system, they would then be more likely to be imposed on it because of the tyrannical hold

[1] Edward Sapir was a student of Frank Boas, who was widely acknowledged as the founder of American Anthropology (The Anthropology of Language).

that linguistic form has upon our orientation of the world" (Ottenheimer, 25). Sapir's statement reasonably causes mixed responses among scholars, philosophers, and psychologists, and his radical outlook on language does not necessarily receive worldwide support; nevertheless, the study and recognition of cultural elements ingrained in our verbal traditions may begin to clarify the role that language plays in shaping our perception as well as our understanding of the world.

Gadamer speaks about our verbal traditions and their role as perception shapers. He tells us about our inevitable connection with language and the correlation between perception and understanding. He reminds us that, "All kinds of human community are kinds of linguistic community" (443). This relationship between people and language develops our connection with knowledge, and it opens a medium that allows us to interpret the world through its cultural components.

A valuable source for exploring the relationship between language and culture is the written language. An ethno-semantic[2] examination of words and symbols offers us both a broader understanding of the factors influencing our perception as well as a more detailed explanation of the power that our cultural traditions carry into the written form. This power is not exclusive to one language, but it manifests throughout many cultures around the world. The Japanese culture gives us an example of the weight of language and its influential role as an interpreter of reality and a designer of perception. In Japanese the word for spirit is "ki" (気).[3] This word represents the essence of something supernatural, the substance of a force beyond the material world, a different dimension, or the core nature of a mystical entity. Yusua Yasuo describes more in depth the importance of the "ki" element within the Japanese culture in his book *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy*, when he states, "The ultimate secret of Japanese martial arts is said to lie in letting the mind unite with ki" (Yasuo, XI). The essence of "ki" is later transferred into words such as "electricity" (電気), "weather" (天気) and "health" (元気). It is notable that the words "electricity," "weather," and "health" are combined with the"ki"character, perhaps injecting the essence of something mystical into their meaning. It is also worth noting the character preceding "ki" (気) in the word "weather" is pronounced "ten" (天) and it means heaven. When words like "electricity," "health," and "weather" carry potentially supernatural connotations, combined with the historical importance of nature and spirituality to the Japanese culture, it makes sense that the reflection of these cultural elements comes through the language, resulting in a perception of the world that adjusts to these components.

The cultural factors shaping our understanding and interpretation of knowledge through language guide us into a specific worldview that conforms to the reality of that particular cultural community. These elements are transferred from generation to generation and continue to live through the language that is spoken. Edward Sapir's theories on the power of language originate in part from the concept of linguistic determinism, which argues that language has an effect in the way we recognize the world.[4] Many of these components display themselves through different cultural forms of expression, such as religion, politics, and social traditions. Recognizing the metamorphosis of language and its influence on our specific worldviews and accepted perspectives of reality is important, because it allows us to avoid falling into narrow forms of interpretation that understand the world through a limited connection with knowledge that originates from pre-determined cultural and historical perspectives.

Sapir and his student Whorf developed theories that became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Their theories investigate the role of culture within the world of language as well as its influential force. Anthropologist Michael Agar describes the difference between the two primary outlooks explored by Sapir and Whorf and explains their composition. He suggests that the "Strong Whorf theory might be compared to the idea that language is a prison, while the Weaker Whorf might be compared to the idea that language is a room, but you can leave the room and enter other rooms, and return to your original room, shifting perspectives as you go" (Ottenheimer, 26). Both theories share similar concepts but vary in intensity. The Weaker Whorf theory perhaps displays language as a more flexible medium of understanding, one that could be left behind and returned to at will, while the Strong Whorf theory paints a more linked relationship between language and thought, making us ponder on the potential influences of language and human thinking.

The development of our cultural understanding as well as the establishment of our cultural traditions takes place in the world of language. Gadamer communicates the importance of language not just as a perception shaper, but also as the main component for human understanding. He adds, "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all" (440). The exploration of language and its influence in designing our human experience becomes crucial for a better understanding of our worldviews as well as recognizing outlooks that develop narrowly within their cultural constraints and connect with the world through a medium that underestimates the cultural weight of our traditions and the role they play in the developing of our accepted reality.

Before advancing into a more detailed exploration of incomplete perspectives that claim knowledge of our living experiences, let us continue to examine language through its cultural components and its vital connection with perception. This is important because the process illustrates the potential narrowness of language and its influence in the human experience. For instance, in the United States time is perceive differently from how it is perceived in the Czech Republic. North Americans picture the hour that just passed, while Czechs look at the hour ahead[5]. If the

[2] Ethnosemantics: an anthropological approach in which vocabulary is analyzed to learn about systems of meaning and perception (The Anthropology of Language).

[3] Ki, 気 1. Spirit; soul. 2. Feeling. 3. Intention; inclination (The Random House Japanese-English English-Japanese Dictionary).

[4] Linguistic Determinism: the idea that language affects, even determines, your ability to think about things as well as to talk about them (Ottenheimer, 265).

[5] Ottenheimer claims that the perception of time could be influenced through the spoken language. He states "even as a beginner I found myself thinking differently when I used these two different languages" (Ottenheimer, 28).

time is 9:15, most North Americans will state that is its fifteen minutes after nine or a quarter past nine, but people in the Czech Republic describe it as a quarter of ten. These definitions of time may seem trivial, but they could indicate a cultural tendency to focus on the past rather than the future based on a given outlook and interpretation of time. North Americans will address the hour that is coming up next usually when is closer to the hour, therefore 9:45 could be a quarter to ten, but 9:15 is rarely expressed as having a relationship with the next hour[6].

Issues that cultural communities consider important are incorporated into the language as they begin to highlight our cultural understanding of the world around us. A morphological[7] analysis of words connects us with the formation of language based on its cultural emphasis. For example, in the Yupik Inuit culture (Central Canada), there are many different words for snow; Anuit: packed snow, Mixik: very soft snow, Natibvik: snowdrift, Mavsa: snowdrift overhang ready to fall, Nutabaw: fresh snow, powder snow and Sitxiq: hard crusty snow (Ottenheimer, 15). Observing the structure of these words allows us to see that no specific pattern is followed, and each word displays no resemblance to the other words. Although they all represent snow, each word carries its own independent composition emphasizing its importance. In English an adjective or describer is normally attached to the noun to describe more in depth the type of snow (snow flurries, loose granular snow, corn snow, crud snow, powder snow). In English we find words that independently describe types of snow, such as slush or hail, but for the most part the word snow is used to complement each denomination, therefore downgrading its importance. To elaborate further on the possible implication of the radical differences between words and their meaning, we must continue to explore the morphological structure of language.

Languages in general follow some basic pattern, and they share a common blueprint. The study of this universal design is explored through an analysis of words and how they are formed. "There are two parts to a morphological analysis: 1. Identifying morphemes (the smallest unit of meaning in a language) and 2. Analyzing the way morphemes are arranged in words" (Ottenheimer, 83). Although this two-step process is complex and requires detailed explanation, describing some of the fundamental elements of this method becomes essential in order to understand the complexity of the practice as well as the shape that language takes based on its cultural representation.

Here is an example based on two languages displaying the use of morphemes:

Shinzwani	**English Equivalent**
hufua	**to** work metal
hujua	**to** know
hulagua	**to** speak, talk
huloa	**to** fish

As it becomes noticeable, the words in Shinzwani have the morpheme "hu" at the beginning of each word. Although this minimal unit is not separated from the rest of the word, the morpheme carries the same meaning. As a result, when compared with the sentences on the right, we notice that "hu" means "to" in English and that, every time a new word comes up with the morphene "hu," its meaning is understood without understanding the rest of the word. Examples of morphemes in English would be:

Farm	Farm**er**	Farm**ers**
Walk	Walk**er**	Walk**ers**
Jump	Jump**er**	Jump**ers**

Although there are exemptions to the rules and not all morphemes behave equally, some of the elements of the smallest unit of language help us understand many of the universally shared characteristics of languages regardless of their cultural nature. Returning to the Yupik Inuit example, one discovers the importance of snow in this culture, since a completely new word is used to describe the different forms of snow, and morphemes or adjectives are not attached. This could represent the possibility that, for this culture in central Canada, snow is a vital part of their lives, and that minimizing the nature of each denomination of snow by attaching an adjective or a morpheme to it would not display the important essence that each form of snow carries for this culture. If Mavsa (snow overhang ready to fall) is something that people deal with on a regular basis, and if this represents danger to others or it carries a tremendous amount of importance on its own, then it makes sense that a completely new word independent from describers or morphemes is created, since its importance is designated by its people and it is reflected through the language.[8]

Language Shaping Interpretation

So far, language offers us the best medium for communicating the abstract. It is central to my research to suggest that, through the recognition of the influential role of language as a perception shaper, we may begin to understand its capacity for shaping worldviews, thereby giving us the tools necessary to analyze our own perceptions with a more receptive mind, conscious that the cultural elements of our language do not have to keep us prisoners of their own limitations. Through a medium of openness and awareness, our limited interpretations begin to expand, offering us the opportunity to engage with a wider range of possibilities and innovative thinking. Stephen Rowe expresses this need for awareness when he describes the importance of becoming conscious of our own worldviews in order to expand the opportunities for intellectual growth: "Our times require that we make conscious that which had been unconscious, and that we act in the ways that become evident from the perspective of that consciousness" (10). This entails the necessity to understand that our perception is partially shaped and prescribed by our past traditions, and that only through a medium of awareness that recognizes our limited perception

[6] Ottenheimer displays the potential differing views of time based on our cultural understanding. He explains that 9:30 is "half past nine" for English speakers while it is "half of ten" for Czechs (Ottenheimer, 28).

[7] Morphological analysis: The analysis of word structure; it has two parts identifying and describing morphemes, and analyzing the way morphemes are arranged into words (Ottenheimer, 272).

[8] The ethnosemantics breakdown of language based on its cultural emphasis is clearly explained in chapter two of Ottenheimer's book, The Anthropology of Language. This chapter displays many of the differing views people display based on the language spoken and the important elements of their culture.

we can begin to distinguish open channels that offer a more expanded interpretation of our past, present, and future. This new level of awareness would let us perceive our perceptions and interpret our interpretations in unconventional ways, making our understanding less biased and more effective.

Stephen Pinker argues that the idea that language shapes our reality is ridiculous and bizarre. He states, "The idea that thought is the same thing as language is an example of what can be called a conventional absurdity" (47). Pinker negates the possibility that language shapes our perception, and he rejects the idea that language shapes our thinking. He implies that thought is not directly connected to language. He says, "To have a feeling, there has to be a 'what we mean to say' that is different from what we said" (47). Although his theory displaying language as an instinct[9] makes us wonder about the possibility of our thoughts not being limited by language, it is nearly inconceivable to think without language. The moment we engage in the thought process, the moment we begin to describe the abstract, an active interaction with language takes place; without it, the possibilities for understanding and for any kind of thought process seem rather impossible to grasp. Gadamer states, "All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language" (390). This connection between language and interpretation is important to recognize in order to continue exploring the interactive nature of language, culture, and human thought.

The Homogenization of Knowledge

In her book, A Place to Stand, Julie Lindquist speaks about awareness as an essential component for a more in depth cultural understanding; "To understand the particulars of persuasion for a given culture is to understand how that culture establishes itself as a culture" (Lindquist, 4). It is in the place of origin that many of the given characteristics of language are shaped, and it is also in this place where we potentially become slaves of our own perception through language. Lindquist also states, "Apart from its status as a special form of talk, every argument is a cultural event and has a layer of meaning as such" (123). Although language potentially shapes our perception through its cultural components and ancient traditions, by becoming aware of this process, we transition from a place of complacent ignorance to a place of appreciation and recognition of our traditions, culture, and worldviews.

The development of our worldviews through language establishes our different perspectives of reality based on our cultural inclinations. Due to different perspectives and belief systems, nations have gone to war, and the world finds itself in chaos and discontentment. In order to find a place of mutual understanding and respect, we shall begin by recognizing our own biases and our own sense of the real and the unreal. Through this awareness, one begins to comprehend the limitations of our views and the influence of language for limiting our understanding of the world. An educated perspective of the relationship between language and culture gives us some of the fundamental steps needed to understand our thinking process as well as new ways to define and reshape our knowledge.

Gadamer recognizes the importance of understanding our connection with knowledge based on our perception of the world. This recognition keeps us from limiting ourselves to one specific way of knowing. He argues that, "understanding always includes interpretation" (Gadamer, 400). As long as we are able to distinguish the role that language plays in prescribing our interpretations of reality, we establish a connection with knowledge that is not regulated by unoriginal thinking and become free of regulated views.

The homogenization of knowledge restricts knowledge itself by confining understanding to a single interpretation of reality. If language influences our perception of the world based on its cultural components, and if our perception of the world varies according to our exposure with cultural elements, then we must not designate knowledge to a single orientation. Our understanding originates from a diversity of perspectives; any attempt to narrow it separates us from a connection with unlimited wisdom. The need for a universally accepted method that accesses knowledge undermines the diversity of our worldviews in postmodern times, while it establishes a dominant position that underestimates the value of our different perspectives and promotes uniformity of thought. This research explores the cultural characteristics of language in order to expose the narrowness of methods of understanding that speak a single language and expect everyone else to conform to specific guidelines.

The assertion of knowledge claimed by allegedly universal perspectives leads me to explore fundamentalist[10] assumptions enforcing a kind of reality as the recognized truth. Claims of infallible methods of knowing dangerously narrow the chances for knowledge expansion by engaging in the practice of inclusion of sameness and exclusion of differences. In order to understand our limited understanding, we need to look at methods of knowing that claim absolute certainty of knowledge. I will focus on the language of religion and the language of science and the role they play in promoting single methods of knowing through fundamentalist perspectives of reality.

Science and religion both serve essential purposes in our society, and it is clear that the world without faith or science is nearly as imaginable as a world without language. My exploration of the methods used by science and religion does not imply that both areas of knowing function only through fundamentalist perspectives; instead, I focus on the radical viewpoints that each approach offers when it begins to claim the acceptance of reality only through its acquired methods.

The Language of Science

Let us start by recognizing that modern science breakthrough discoveries have changed the way we view the world. The scientific systematic approach carefully analyses data through selected steps that create desired outcomes. Although the success of this precise system shows itself through

[9] "The Language Instinct (How the Mind Creates Language)" argues that language is not created by culture, but that instead we are genetically pre-disposed to learn it.

[10] Fundamentalism: Strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion or ideology (The New Oxford American Dictionary).

technological advancements and groundbreaking medical discoveries, its exclusive approach to understanding[11] reality narrows the possibilities for innovation through different mediums that do not comply with scientifically approved theories of knowing. Huston Smith speaks about this issue when he states, "What science discovers somehow casts doubt on things it does not discover" (34). The fast growing success and acceptance of this methodology that supplies us with systematic answers reduce our ability to consider unconventional ways of knowing as possible sources for knowledge.

Science speaks a language that relies on physical evidence as the condition for accepting something as real. Richard Dawkins places emphasis on the need for tangible data in order to recognize something as real. He states, "We believe in evolution because the evidence supports it" (320). The prominence of this selected method for judging reality demands a mechanical analysis of data through a process that relies on guidelines founded on a particular version of understanding that recognizes and values the materialness[12] of the universe as the main component for accurate conclusions. This singular approach efficiently develops hypothesis through a trial and error technique that narrows the possibilities for miscalculations, creating a form of knowledge that bonds itself to strict principles for its success. By focusing on matter as the main component for identifying the real, supplemented with a system that supports the selected theories, modern science finds ways to minimize mistakes and arrive at conclusions with results that can be duplicated. In his essay, "The Will to Believe," William James questions the integrity of the scientific method with this statement, "She has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for the truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her" (Stewart, 233). Richard Dawkins expresses his willingness to change his view, but not the method, making his reality dependant on a given system. An attitude that relies fully on the steps of a specified method for determining the truth takes away our autonomy of thought since, in order to explore ideas, we must adjust to the rules and regulations provided by the accepted technique.

Huston also describes the essence of the scientific language when he points out that "Number is the language of science; the more knowledge can be expressed quantitatively, in probability equations and the like, the more scientific it is considered to be" (Smith, 10-11). Numerical formulas aid in the process of pre-determining and confirming the validity of the information gathered. The distinctive scientific approach to reality, based on a confident method that pre-determines it, produces a specific type of result that overlooks diverse possibilities for discovery. Based on a perception of knowledge that excludes opportunities for unconventional findings through different mediums, this single view of reality restricts new opportunities for intellectual development by locking unexplored channels of unknown truths. The world of knowledge and discovery becomes property of a specific methodology or language that recognizes no other.

In his book, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer speaks about the scientific approach to reality when he says, "Each science, as a science, has in advance projected a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them" (449). This need for control pre-determines an outcome that is shaped by a particular vision. Gadamer discusses the selective method that science offers and criticizes its narrowness. He adds, "But the knowledge of all natural science is knowledge for domination" (447). The restrictions placed on knowledge by a specific method promote the singularity of one way of knowing, while excluding or discrediting mediums that reach for the truth through unconventional channels.

The modern scientific approach derives its power from its narrowness. This carefully selected method proves itself effective at arriving at dominant positions within its confined structure. My research does not attempt to discredit the usefulness of science, nor the fact that its objective approach provides us with great resources for truth and knowledge. However, we must explore constricted methods for determining the truth through claims of absolute certainty. This attitude undermines the possibilities of unexplored options, and it sets apart knowledge to an elite group of like-minded people, while it stagnates the growth of awareness itself by encouraging exclusive agendas, where suggestions become discarded through a filtering organism that endorses contraction rather than expansion and operates on exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness. The Chinese philosopher, Chuang-Tzu[13], known as a rival of Confucius and mocker of logical thinking, reminds us of the danger of narrow-thinking: "My life flows between confines, but knowledge has no confines" (62). The idea that a carefully designed system creates a single medium for truth expansion ignores the importance of our diverse cultural communities.

Chuang-Tzu suggests an approach that explores unconventional thought through unconventional channels. He indicates the importance of a connection with reality and knowledge not founded on and guided by logical methods. He emphasizes the need for acknowledging our fixed limitations in order to explore unrestricted territories. The reality of a world that is real only through fixed principles precludes an opportunity to explore unexplored channels of wisdom that may open a new realm of possibilities never considered by pre-approved methods. David Stewart addresses the importance of being open-minded so that no one is restricted to single versions of reality. He speaks about our reliance in logic and states, "This emphasis on rationality is one-sided, for human beings are not just creatures of reason, but function through a complex unity of reason, emotion, will, appetites and feelings" (5). The recognition of other components shaping reality and making us human becomes essential in our quest for knowledge.

Recognizing one method, one language, one form of thinking as universal, neglects the existence of multiple perspectives of reality and cultural differences. Science conditions our thought process through the prin-

[11] Understanding: intelligence; ability to comprehend and judge (Webster's English Dictionary).

[12] Huston Smith speaks about science reliance on the physical as a determinant factor for acknowledging the real. He quotes Paul Dirac, the father of antimatter and his point reads as follows: "All matter is created out of some imperceptible substratum. This substratum is not accurately described as material, since it uniformly fills all space and is undetectable by any observation. In a sense it appears as nothingness—immaterial, undetectable, and omnipresent. But is is a peculiar form of nothingness, out of which all matter is created."

[13] Chuang-Tzu's life dates back to the reign of King Hui of Liang or Wei (370-319 BC) and King Hsuan of Ch'i (319-301 BC).

ciples that create and establish its credibility. Huston Smith speaks about liberating our minds from constricted thinking when he states, "The Zenith of Being is Being Unlimited, Being relieved of all confines and conditionings" (Smith, 25). Becoming entrapped by a single vision that accepts the truth of the universe and our human beginnings through a singular method confines us to the limited world of a limited perspective.

The Language of Religion

Throughout history, religious fundamentalism has enforced self-interested agendas that exclude opportunities for intellectual and spiritual growth by promoting confident claims of knowledge that restrict opportunities for discovery and expansion through unconventional channels. The overconfidence of these selected principles overlooks the existence of different mediums of understanding, while it engages in a behavior that encourages discord and segregation. John Hick speaks about this exclusive approach in his essay "The Pluralistic Hypothesis," where he communicates the importance of open-minded methods of knowing that acknowledge the reality of multiple perspectives. He reflects on the narrow views of religious ideologies based on fundamentalist approaches, and he questions the idea of salvation reserved for a select few as others are condemned for not complying with the rules of a given dogma. He expresses his frustration toward ideologies that segregate people by engaging in agendas of exclusion rather than inclusion. He asks for an approach that welcomes other views and is not founded on narrow perspectives. He states, "It is not possible to establish a unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths" (Hick, 39). Dogmatic approaches attempt to own knowledge of the truth based on their accepted agenda.

As stated earlier, the cultural components of language connect us with interpretations of reality that shape our understanding of the world. This connection with knowledge outlined primarily through our cultural traditions sets the foundation for specific ways of thinking that characterize worldviews. Single minded worldviews become troubling issues when they ignore the existence of multiple perspectives while affirming a particular view of the world as the standard for universal understanding. By crafting a system that asserts infallibility, single theories that deny the importance of diversity in postmodern times restrict the potential for knowledge growth through mutual collaboration.

A method of knowing that is carefully prescribed diminishes the potential for spiritual growth. The primary components of early Christianity paid little attention to religion's diversity and the variety of cultural traditions across the world. Hick states, "We have to see the world religions as vast complex religio-cultural totalities, each a bewildering mixture of varied goods and evils" (39). The moment we claim absolute knowledge, we close the door for on an assortment of potential opportunities for discovery, while limiting the world of knowing to limited perspectives. Claims of the only truth by religious ideologies engage in convinced and dogmatic approaches of understanding that undermine different mediums of knowing, since in order for a person to hold the outlined truth, one must adopt their existing principles.

Religious fundamentalism continues to enforce its inflexible agenda throughout the ages. Many denominations claim to hold the truth while negating and discrediting others. Some speak of tolerance and acceptance, but their rules are written to be followed; attempts to deviate from the given concepts are seen as immoral, evil, and wrong. Chuang-Tzu criticizes these claims of infallibility when he states, "We do not yet know of anything which we now affirm that we shall not deny it fifty nine times over[14]" (102). These claims of knowledge and absolute understanding function through a very specific outline that defines our world through their constricted views.

Fundamentalist religions frequently base their ethical standards and belief system on the literal interpretation of a book. This text becomes a symbolic icon that establishes and regulates the faith through pre-assumed accurate interpretations of the written metaphors. A belief system founded on literal interpretations of written works is questionable since, not only do they become the rules and guidelines that believers must follow in order to gain approval and the acceptance of the Ultimate, but these written messages are also translated into hundreds of different languages, thereby complicating the authenticity and integrity of the message even further. The process of translation complicates the validity of a message, since the process of translation deals with many cultural elements existing within the language.

Gadamer speaks about the difficulties of carrying the original message through translation. He reminds us that "The requirements that a translation be faithful cannot remove the fundamental gulf between the two languages" (387). The gap between two languages and their cultural components complicates the possibility for transferring the essence of a message into another language literally. In his book, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer sympathizes with the people who engage in the difficult task of translation. He states, "The translator is often painfully aware of his inevitable distance from the original" (388).

The original meaning of a message may be altered or lost through the translation process, making literal translations and interpretations nearly impossible. Ottenheimer further elaborates on this issue of translation in his book *The Anthropology of Language* by sharing the difficulties encountered between one idea and another across the world of language. For example, the word Ruka in the Russian language means "hand" and "arm" in English. The word "love" in Ukrainian has two different meanings; one describes love in general, while the other refers to romantic love. In the Russian language there is also one word for foot and leg. In Standard English the words lend and borrow are divided, while in Shinzwani the word kopa expresses both actions. These different interpretations become difficult to translate accurately since the cultural elements of language vary from culture to culture and from language to language. If only one word describes "love" in Ukrainian, but the word has more than one interpretation for this culture, then it is important to

[14] Chuang-Tzu was primarily referring to Confucius in this statement. He stated, "Confucius by the age of sixty had sixty times changed his mind; whenever he began by judging 'That's it' he ended by judging 'That's not' (Chuang-Tzu, 102). He reminded us through this concept that we must understand the limitations of our knowledge through a medium that acknowledges our own misunderstanding of understanding itself.

consider the role that language plays before attempting to achieve literal translations of meaning.

The Epistemology of Knowledge

Chuang-Tzu believes that, in order to connect with knowledge--in order to learn and reach unknown levels of spiritual knowledge and intellectual understanding--we must remove ourselves from ourselves. The real connection takes place by discovering the truth within ourselves, and this original truth is not defined by conventions and traditions. It is through the discovery of our unconventional selves that a connection with knowledge and wisdom takes place.

Our interpretation and understanding of the world are shaped by factors such as society, religion, culture, and language. To rely fully on our ability of interpretation would be to deny other mediums of knowledge. This approach not only separates us from the rest, but it also closes us to the possibilities of growth by unwelcoming and denying other perspectives. By confining our choices to limited perceptions, we connect with fabricated ideas of the real and the unreal through a limited medium. Chuang-Tzu's connection with knowledge is one that welcomes all perspectives regardless of their differences, leaving knowledge thriving in a spirit of oneness that integrates and welcomes all possibilities. It is important not to confine the continuous growth of knowledge to a simple or complex interpretation, since knowledge stagnates the moment it is claimed, and the prospects for development and creativity become nearly extinct.

It is essential to move beyond concepts of tolerance[15] and visit a stage of knowing that addresses and recognizes our differences and thrives in a spirit that is welcoming and accepting. It is also crucial to recognize our own view of the world and our cultural understanding of it in order to engage with different perspectives with a receptive mind. Leonard Swidler speaks about our distant past and our secluded existence when he reminds us that groups of people would live their lives with little or no interaction with another one, and for the most part they were unaware of each other's way of life and simply lived within their cultural understanding of the world. Reflecting on our isolated past experiences Swidler states, "Everyone for the most part talked to their own cultural selves" (1). This unawareness of their cultural differences confined knowledge to single societies, each describing their understanding of the world through their given perspectives. Although we have come a long ways from living in small communities oblivious of each other's presence, the voluntary endorsement of a single method of knowing continues to segregate concepts of combined knowledge by promoting single ideologies that attempt to demote or discourage integrative thought.

Although Chuang-Tzu lived thousands of years ago in a small village in China, within the confines of his own cultural community, he was able to recognize the importance of thought diversity as well as the dangers of confining knowledge to single perspectives. He was aware that an understanding of the world is simply that, one understanding, and it does not make it the only valid source of knowledge. In his essay, "Death or Dialogue,"Swidler addresses the need for a new level of consciousness that recognizes our worldviews as limited and welcomes different perspectives. This new level of consciousness is similar to the one that Chuang-Tzu spoke about a couple of millenniums ago. Swidler expresses the need for awareness when he mentions that, "More and more of us, both individually and even at times institutionally, are gaining enough maturity to notice that there are entire other ways of integrating an understanding of the world than the way we and our forebears grew up in" (2). Awareness of multiple worldviews may give us a glimpse into the diversity of thought and human experiences across the globe, but it does not automatically create a medium that welcomes the exchange of ideas as a valuable source for knowledge growth; instead we are required to take additional steps that move us from tolerating our differences to accepting them, giving us all an opportunity to transcend from fixed mediums of knowing to flexible ones that thrive in a spirit of coexistence in the plurality of thought.

Advocating a flexible worldview that is open to others and recognizes its own limitations does not promote the disintegration of our traditions or cultural values; rather it functions through a system of openness that feeds on different sources of understanding, while shaping and strengthening our own views, allowing us to understand our own cultural connection with our traditions and views of the world more in depth through an interactive relationship with multiple perspectives. Stephen Rowe elaborates on this elastic approach to different perspectives when he points out, "This is not to say that I do not have (or am not serious about) my own particular understandings of the Good and the True, but rather that I am able to see that my understandings are limited because I—and the people, my community and my tradition, and everything about me! – am limited, *and* that I am capable of growth" (36). This recognition of our own limitations originates from a place of humility rather than overconfidence, from a place of trust rather than insecurity, and from a place that practices the inclusion of all ideas rather than the exclusion of unknown or disliked ones.

Fundamentalism thrives in narrowness. It questions our right to ask questions as it promotes a single ideology that compromises independent and unconventional thought in order to provide a version of knowledge that is enforced by the people who benefit from a formed perspective. As we become more and more aware of our differences and interconnectedness with one another across the globe, let us remind ourselves of the importance of open dialogue and open mediums that encourage wisdom and value knowledge growth through unlocked channels.

Our ideas are expressed through language. These ideas and views of the world, based on its cultural components, potentially become our accepted reality. It is through the recognition of our own biased perspectives that we may begin to understand the roots of our fixed vision. This understanding will develop a new foundation of thought that is more flexible and welcoming of new concepts not founded on our accepted methods of knowing.

Language and culture both play an influential role in our development of worldviews; our world takes shape through their relationship, and we begin to form our convictions based on inherited cultural principles. The language of science and the language of religion both benefit our world in innumerous ways. Science explores the universe through

[15] Tolerance: capacity for enduring; allowable deviation (Webster's English Dictionary).

technical methods that display the creativity and imagination of the human race, while religion searches for meaning within the soul and the mystical essence of humanity. Let us thrive in the combination of our strengths and the recognition of our weaknesses in order to integrate human thought and maximize the possibilities for reaching unknown levels of knowledge through nameless mediums of discovery. This integration[16] does not imply the assimilation of knowledge into oneness, but rather it values the diversity of perspectives while it develops a new version of knowledge more elastic and less rigid. The choice to become prisoners of our own thoughts through our given worldviews is more of an option today than it has ever been before. The media and technological advances keep us informed of the latest events and the newest conflicts and discoveries taking place around the world. Information is readily available and it is no longer affordable to hide behind the blanket of ignorance.

Diverse pools of methods for engaging with the truth allow us to expand knowledge through a variety of perspectives. Huston Smith reminds us, "The world is not as science says it is; it is as science, philosophy, religion, the arts, and everyday speech say it is" (16). The integration of human thought, from all areas of creativity, with a search for meaning is essential in order to reach unconventional knowledge. In his book, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, David Stewart mentions: "There is no such a thing as religion, only religions" (2). It is in the recognition of our own limited interpretations that the process of growth and discovery becomes unlimited through an understanding that our worldview is valid without a need to discredit or dismantle different ones.

As we continue to witness death and destruction by arrogant and narrow-minded practices that encourage the exclusion rather than inclusion of diversity of thought, we must consider the importance of flexible approaches to spirituality and human knowledge that recognize the limitations of human thought in order to engage in a process that thrives in the diversity of ideas, rather than in the homogenization of human thinking; a process that flourishes through the integration of multiple perspectives rather than uniformity of thought.

Let us coexist in a world that welcomes the autonomy of thought rather than the uniformity of it. Huston Smith reminds us of the importance of unrestricted and unconventional thinking when he speaks about being unlimited and relieved from all confines; these words resonate with those from Chuang-tzu, which express his concern with confining knowledge to limited perspectives. Universal standards do not promote diversity; instead they constrain the possibilities for growth (spiritual and intellectual) by enforcing the homogenization of notions to single perspectives.

Culture and language influence our views and perhaps shape our interaction with the world. Our vision of the real connects with our inherited cultural interpretation of the world as well as with the interconnected elements of language and human thought. We must become aware of this relationship among language, culture and the development of worldviews and fundamentalist thinking in order to practice a more flexible approach that not only tolerates different views and opinions, but also thrives in the exploration of other ways of thinking as a medium for expanding knowledge itself. When speaking about dandelions in his book, *The Anthropology of Language*, Ottenheimer states, "But in your culture dandelions are a kind of lettuce and can be put into salad and in my culture dandelions are a kind of weed and must be dug out of lawns and gardens and thrown away" (18). These two different maps of the world provided by our cultural connection with it define and mold our interpretation, regulating our perception, and outlining our understanding.

As our worldviews become influenced by our connection with language and culture, let us thrive in the recognition of an understanding that explores the world through its multiplicity of understandings. The assimilation of thought into a medium that claims absolute certainty does not take into account that dandelions are beautiful and delicious while ugly and unwanted at the same time. Let us respect our diverse perspectives while striving for visions that crave for truths and understandings of the world through diversity rather than a truth or a single definition and interpretation of it. Our worldviews carry the essence of our cultural understanding. Through their fundamental natures we may find a need to go beyond appreciating our own, wanting to explore a variety of them, so that we may become unrestricted and unconfined from concepts that claim the universality and uniformity of the human existence.

[16] Allen F Repko, in his book Interdisciplinary Research, speaks about integration and describes it as "An activity of critically evaluating and creatively combining ideas and knowledge to form a new whole or cognitive advancement" (16).

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