

The Role of Communication in Thought

by DMan Johnson



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Last year I gave a paper at the Society for Disability Studies conference. A woman in the audience asked if I was able to think before I had access to communication. I understand that this looks like a logical question, but it is pretty silly.

People have thought that thinking requires language. I agree, but they are wrong that language needs communication. They are working under the assumption that the only way to learn language is through interaction. For example, Jean Piaget, an important psychologist from the mid-twentieth century, believes that children learn language (logic too) by talking. He argues that they learn through having grown-ups talk with them (Piaget 1981, ch. 8).

On the other hand, Steven Pinker, a neurologist from Harvard, looks at things differently. His theory is that thinking in language is built into the human brain. He justifies his belief with the following evidence.

Pinker argues that children learn at least some abstract concepts before they limp into speech. For example, infants looking at Mickey Mouse dolls look longer if the number is not what they expect:

"The developmental psychologist Karen Wynn has recently shown that five-month-old babies can do a simple form of mental arithmetic...In Wynn's experiment, the babies were shown a

rubber Mickey Mouse doll on a stage until their little eyes wandered. Then a screen came up, and a prancing hand visibly reached out from behind a curtain and placed a second Mickey Mouse behind the screen. When the screen was removed, if there were two Mickey Mouses visible (something the babies had never actually seen), the babies looked for only a few moments. But if there was only one doll, the babies were captivated—even though this was exactly the scene that had bored them before the screen was put into place. Wynn also tested a second group of babies, and this time, after the screen came up to obscure a pair of dolls, a hand visibly reached behind the screen and removed one of them. If the screen fell to reveal a single Mickey, the babies looked briefly. If it revealed the old scene with two, the babies had more trouble tearing themselves away. The babies must have been keeping track of how many dolls were behind the screen, updating their counts as dolls were added or subtracted. If the number inexplicably departed from what they expected, they scrutinized the scene, as if searching for some explanation. (Pinker 1994, 59)."

Thinking does not need communication. In Pinker's book, he motions to the idea that people learn grammar before they start speaking. I might not be able to talk, but I think grammatically perfectly. The mostly believable idea that grammar is learned through talking is not true.

Pinker's second clue is how people think in different languages. He shows that not only do we learn grammar in the absence of talking, but it is possible to learn multiple grammars this way. Linguistical knowledge is not predicated on knowing how to talk in the language.

In thinking about how people learn to read in the absence of communication, it is useful to look at studies on how gifted children learn to read. In an article called "Children Teach Themselves to Read," the people interviewed could read young by teaching themselves (Gray, 2010). Thinking about how they do that helps us to understand how you can legitimately get literacy with no communication.

People think that young people learn by being taught. But they can teach themselves. Looking at

books is only one ploy. Other ways include playing with alphabet blocks, hearing their parents helping their brothers and sisters, looking at labels and signs, and also, television.

There are lots of studies permitting us to know how gifted children learn (Cunningham, 2006; Aldridge and Rust, 1987; Price, 1976). But listening to FC users is apparently not valid. Hopefully, people who are interested in literacy will start to notice that we know how we learned.

Judging from Pinker, not making too many guesses from only the experiences of typical children but looking how children like me learned to use language, then one can see that people learn language in the absence of communication.

However, I must not limit the usefulness of communication. I propose that only people who cannot talk learn language mostly by thinking in place of by communication. People who talk mostly learn language by talking. I think that the ability to talk makes people learn thinking differently. If one could not talk, then the ability to learn lots of things in the absence of communication kicks in.

I might begin by pointing out that people like me jump (that's my term for feeling autistic) when people look numerous. When there are people around, I look like I might be copying them, but I might be learning. I now know how to read because I looked at things people were reading.

People might not look like they pay attention but they learn things. You might just not know they are learning. People like me jump lots, but my learning has been going on.

I believe my knowledge of language lies in listening to people talk. I learned to use language in my head before I began communicating. But having communication helps me think more clearly. I might not be making sense in my head. Communication means I get feedback.

I got my means of communication later than most people. But people know how to think in their heads before they learn to talk. Therefore, learning to communicate is not necessary for learning language.

References:

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Healthy Living

by Mike Pribek

My name is Mike Pribek and I am from Two Rivers, Wisconsin. I will be 20 years old in 3 weeks, and I graduated from Two Rivers High School in 2009. I am currently in the process of doing a job assessment and job search with Dept. of Vocational Rehabilitation, but I have been volunteering at the Two Rivers and Manitowoc Public Libraries for about 2 years now. I have also taken online computer courses through Lakeshore Technical College. My favorite things are NASCAR-I've been to several races, video games-I have quite an extensive collection, and anything to do with math. My mom says that I have a calculator in my head, so there is no need to have one in our house as long as I am there. I am able to calculate things in my head that most people need a calculator to do.

Up until 3 years ago, I had been on a very limited diet. I was very particular with the foods I ate.

I ate only dry cereal, McDonald's French fries, crackers and potato chips. It was very difficult when we went on vacations. I loved Pringles Sour Cream and Onion potato chips, so that is what everyone gave me for my birthdays. My parents tried to get me to try other foods, but the texture of certain foods made me throw up. I eventually added other crunchy foods, such as Ore-Ida onion rings and fish sticks, made in the oven with lots of salt.

When I went to see Dr. Greene for my annual checkup on April 13, 2007, I weighed 168 pounds. Dr. Greene told me that if I wanted to remain healthy, I needed to start eating healthier foods, adding fruits, vegetables, chicken, turkey and fish to my diet, and start exercising. He recommended that I do 30 minutes of cardio exercising, such as walking, running, or biking; and 30 minutes of weight

Continued on next page