



depictions of death and victory, for instance, the idea is represented by a man if the noun is masculine and a woman if it is feminine, says Boroditsky. Germans tend to paint death as male, and Russians tend to paint it as female.

Language even shapes what we see. People have a better memory for colors if different shades have distinct names—not English's light blue and dark blue, for instance, but Russian's *goluboy* and *sinly*. Skeptics of the language-shapes-thought claim have argued that that's a trivial finding, showing only that people remember what they saw in both a visual form and a verbal one, but not proving that they actually see the hues differently. In an ingenious experiment, however, Boroditsky and colleagues showed volunteers three color swatches and asked them which of the bottom two was the same as the top one. Native Russian speakers were faster than English speakers when the colors had distinct names, suggesting that having a name for something allows you to perceive it more sharply. Similarly, Korean uses one word for "in" when one object is in another snugly (a letter in an envelope), and a different one when an object is in something loosely (an apple in a bowl). Sure enough, Korean adults are better than English speakers at distinguishing tight fit from loose fit.

In Australia, the Aboriginal Kuuk Thaayorre use compass directions for every spatial cue rather than right or left, leading to locutions such as "there is an ant on your southeast leg." The Kuuk Thaayorre are also much more skillful than English speakers at dead reckoning, even in unfamiliar surroundings or strange buildings. Their language "equips them to perform navigational feats once thought beyond human capabilities," Boroditsky wrote on Edge.org.

Science has only scratched the surface of how language affects thought. In Russian, verb forms indicate whether the action was completed or not—as in "she ate [and finished] the pizza." In Turkish, verbs indicate whether the action was observed or merely rumored. Boroditsky would love to run an experiment testing whether native Russian speakers are better than others at noticing if an action is completed, and if Turks have a heightened sensitivity to fact versus hearsay. Similarly, while English says "she broke the bowl" even if it smashed accidentally (she dropped something on it, say), Spanish and Japanese describe the same event more like "the bowl broke itself." "When we show people video of the same event," says Boroditsky, "English speakers remember who was to blame even in an accident, but Spanish and Japanese speakers remember it less well than they do intentional actions. It raises questions about whether language affects even something as basic as how we construct our ideas of causality."

Begley is NEWSWEEK's science editor.

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**Posted By:** [vancouverite](#) @ 01/08/2010 9:15:50 AM

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Interesting article, but it seems to suggest that you can define all of this on an examination of a superficial words. I think that Lera's work strives to leave the melodramatic "thought is formed by language" hypothesis behind and look at how culture interacts with language and thought, not try and decided if one forms the other.

In its examples, the article skips over simple problems of word connection in its examination of word association. For instance, Germans may think that keys are masculine, but that may have nothing to do with culture or thought, it may instead be related to the fact that a wrench (a rather hefty, rugged object) is also a kind of key: "der Schraubenschlüssel," or literally "the screwkey."

@ Fort Begay: I think you Joseph Conrad example is wonderful! I would love to be able to ask him if learning a new language gave him new thoughts, or if it was his vast cultural experience that shaped him. Did he ever write about this? Does anyone know?

**Posted By:** [siegg6529](#) @ 09/09/2009 11:15:07 AM

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Ummm...the sun does rise in the east...

**Posted By:** [queenofromania](#) @ 08/10/2009 5:24:18 PM

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Language shapes thought? People who believe this probably also believe that the sun rises in the east.

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