

# Lenguaje: what makes us humans

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## ABSTRACT

Pediatricians carry out the surveillance of language in preschool children as one of the components of child development (language, fine and gross motor skills, etc.). However, language is more than that. The process of transformation of the magic meaning on the word present in the initial stages of human evolution (Myth period) into a new, symbolic meaning as representative of the object (Logos period) took around 40,000 years. With the mastering of language, man was capable of thinking; from then onwards, these two functions, thought and language, became inextricably linked, the evolved hand in hand. But this achievement had a high price: the alienation of man from nature. Hence, language became a social construction which, far from representing the objects of nature, was capable of assigning attributes and meaning to the objects themselves. Language can be used as a commercial strategy (making the words *value* and *cost* indistinguishable). According to Lacan, language is also a part of the subject, we are constructed by language. By promoting language in children we contribute to the promotion of the child as a person, as an individual and as a social being.

**Key words:** *language, child development, promotion, thought, social integration.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Pediatricians “use” child language as a tool (among others) to promote and assess psychomotor development.<sup>1,2</sup> The acquisition of language is the most important intellectual adventure of human being. Language is included into the list of developmental areas, composed of fine and gross motor, personal-social, and many others. It is obviously quite a necessary and relevant practice; in order to accomplish this task, pediatricians have guidelines, recommendations, screening tests, etc. However, language is much more than that; the implications of language invade all our human existence. It is because of this reason that I thought it is convenient

to describe some aspects of language which are beyond child development and could help to better understand its utterly transcendent meaning.

## Origins of language.

### The Myth and the Logos

This first oral expressions in human life seem to be present approximately some 40,000 years ago. It is a matter of linguistic debate whether these expressions had or did not have an onomatopoeic relationship with the object.<sup>3</sup> However, taking into consideration that some words do have a similar expressive sound in several languages (for example the word “mama”, “mamma”, “mother” “mutter”), it is possible that the first words might have had a relationship with the object of reference. In the origins of language, men believed that words had a concrete effect on reality, that is to say, they believed that words had a magic effect which could influence the real world. This period of history in which words and the symbolized things are fused, is called The Myth.

There certainly are reminiscences of this period in our present days. For example, in one of the stories of the book “*The thousand nights and one night*”, about Alí Baba and the forty thieves, it is told that the thief, coming back from his robberies with the booty of spoil, used to say the words “*Open, Sesame!*” at the front of his cave, and forthwith the cave’s door opened magically. The word “*abracadabra*”, and many others are pronounced by magicians to produce a special effect on the audience. Even us, when we express the wish of some evil to fall on someone we dislike, (I wish you’d ...) and this evil actually affects the person, we have a feeling of guilt, thinking that our words might have had some real effect on

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the person. We have ancestral remains of the mythical period of language. Borges says that poetry may be an attempt of man to rescue that original, magic meaning of words. The cave man did not paint bisons or guanacos on the walls of the paleolithic caves of Altamira or the Río Pinturas in Argentinian Patagonia, in an attempt to decorate his living room, but as a tool in the struggle for life, addressing them to promote the success of the hunting.

After tens of thousands of years, man realizes that the word "tree" has nothing to do with the actual tree he sees in the countryside. The word is actually detached from the object; we cannot live within the word *house*, and the word *heat* is useless for protecting us from cold winter. This concept has enormous consequences for man's fate. In the first place, man starts thinking with words (we think with words), we build a world with words and those words contribute to drive us away from nature. When man thinks about his tribe, he does not (and will never again) think about the tribe, but about the tribe he has in his head. Man starts building a world in his head, the world in which he thinks he lives; that process expels us from nature. Some writer said once: *"the tiger does not think about his tigerness, the tiger jumps"*. Instead, we humans think, reflect. In a certain way, the expulsion of man from paradise described in the Bible is true,<sup>4</sup> since this expulsion took place with development of language.

### Language and thinking

Language and thinking go hand in hand; we think with words. If we have few words, we have few thoughts. Words are in a way, an expression of relationship with the world. Dogs have no language, not symbolic language, they have no words, consequently, have no thoughts. I am not saying they have no feelings, (jealousy, fear, hunger, etc.), but they have not what we understand by the word *thought*. What would dogs say if they could speak?, they would say *"wharf"*.

### The word and the things

The first rational interpretation of language was given by Plato in his book *"The Cratylus"*.<sup>5</sup> The philosopher said that each word reflected its corresponding object existing in nature. For example, if there were trees in nature, then man created the word *tree*, if there were horses, then the word *horse* was used. This interpretation led Borges to write the following poem:<sup>6</sup>

*Si, como dice el griego en "El Cratilo",  
el nombre es arquetipo de la cosa  
en la letra de rosa está la rosa,  
y todo el Nilo en la palabra Nilo.*

*If, as the greek man says in "The Cratylus",  
the name is an archetype of the thing  
In the letter of rose is contained the rose,  
and all the Nile river in the word Nile.*

But, unfortunately this interpretation seems to be a little naïf because... what object in nature is represented by the word *democracy*, or the word *freedom*? These concepts are absent in nature because they are social constructions, and precisely because of that, they are represented by words. Metaphores are figures of speech originally used to designate an object, are used to qualify other objects. For example, if we want to qualify an evil person we could say he is a *"scorpion"*, or use other words of the kind. Consequently, words do not represent objects present in Nature, on the contrary, they **assign** meaning to the things present in Nature. This concept is opposite to that of Plato. Here it seems suitable to quote José Martí, who said *"language is not the horse of thought, but its rider"*.<sup>7</sup> It is because of this that we are deeply concerned on the poorness of language seen in our adolescents; far from being something funny, it only expresses a scaring inner emptiness. The practice of reading books, recommended by pediatricians to adolescents, is one of the few actions capable of promoting language and, consequently, thinking.

Sometimes the use of words produces a curious phenomenon: some words become worn out and lose their original meaning. For example, the word *"terrific"* which originally meant something very scaring, capable of generating terror, is used nowadays also to express something excellent, very good, which is very contradictory with its original meaning. There are many examples, and we want to quote here the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein, who said that *"... some words not only do they change their meaning, but also they lose all meaning at all, and we no longer know what their meaning is"*. *"In these cases (Wittgenstein said), it is convenient to send them to the dry cleaner and re-introduce them in the vocabulary again"*.<sup>8</sup>

### Language as falsification

Language has an extraordinary power on people. Words can mobilize a crowd, convince an entire country to go to war, fight for freedom. This

power can be used for different ends. Find below some examples:

Some powerful nations have hundreds of military bases deployed all over the world, they were never invaded, but they have a ministry in charge of war called "Ministry of Defense". In fact, all wars are produced with the argument of defense, or from some outside threaten. There are even people who think that wars are simply the fight for the meaning of words. When we go to buy a shirt and ask for its price, the attendant says: "... the shirt is worth xx pesos". In fact, the shirt is not worth xx pesos, it **costs** xx pesos. The answer of the attendant is simply a commercial strategy, and it is not innocent.

When we watch television and see something we would like to question, we do not have a way to do it, the TV set has no microphone, consequently, there is no communication between the speaker and the watcher, the flux of information is unidirectional, there is no exchange of information between both agents. Then we should reject the use of the word communication, and call the TV a tool of broadcasting, not a communication tool. For us, communication is a bidirectional process: a person sends a message, another one receives it and even processes it. Thereafter the second person sends the message back, perhaps with a modification of the original idea. We should assume the responsibility of deciding the meaning of words. What do we want the word *communication* to mean?, what do we want the word *friendship* to mean?, and so on. It is not about looking for the meaning of the word in the dictionary, it is about the fact that we should work hard in order to get the words to mean what we think they should mean. It is about us performing an action on the words, on language.

Some time ago I walked into a vegetarian warehouse, and read an announcement: "soya milk". Immediately, I approached the landlady and told her that milk is a white fluid coming out of a mammalians breast, very rich on nutritional contents, and this milk had nothing to do with the fluid obtained from soya, and the advertisement could endanger the nutrition of children, especially infants. I said to her she was cheating the customers. Fortunately she removed the announcement the day after.

### Language as a contributor to the structure of the being

Sigmund Freud thought impulses lied in the unconscious,<sup>9</sup> but Lacan proposed that these impulses were secondary to something structuring

the subject: language, words.<sup>10</sup> He said we were constructed with words.<sup>11</sup> This concept, so difficult to understand to me, became clearer when I was once listening to a mother reporting the clinical problems of her 5 year old son with asthma. All of a sudden, I interrupted her and asked the child: "and ...what is wrong with you?" the boy answered: "*my mother does not look at me*". There is no doubt that this phrase plays a relevant role upon his life. There is no doubt that the child is constituted by this phrase, perhaps not only with this phrase, but the persistence of these words will have a decisive influence on his future life.

Perhaps we all have a phrase within us, around which a great part of our lives moves. Let the reader imagine the different fate of a child bearing in his mind the phrase "you are a good boy", or: "you will always be a loser".

### Final considerations

It is essential to understand the force of language in its multiple dimensions of human life, as both a part of thinking and as a tool for human development. We should try to rescue it from degradation, distortions, and even the intentional silencing of words. The promotion of language development in children by pediatricians is a way to contribute to the achievement of these ends. ■

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