

# Transcript

## INTRODUCTION

00:00 The language you speak can change the way that you think, the way that you notice things, the way that you remember things, and even the way you feel time passing.

That's because when you speak a different language, you are actually learning a new way to think.

Think about your own language. How do you feel when you speak it? Do you feel any differently when you speak English? Maybe you have different thoughts.

You see, learning English isn't just learning words and grammar. It is learning a new perspective, a new angle, a new way of seeing things.

Hi, my name is Rhys. I'm a master's-level English teacher from the UK, and I'm here to help you level up your English.

So, we're going to start with something simple. I want you to look around you, the room you're in, or wherever you are, and look for different colours. Which colours 01:00 do you see? Red, orange, yellow, blue?

Just think about those colours for a moment. I'll give you a second.

Okay, I think that's enough time. Now, I'm going to break your brain a little bit.

## MAIN PART

It's easy to think that colours are just real and that we all see them in the same way. You know, a tree is green, the sky is blue, your favourite mug is red. But your brain doesn't really work like that.

When we see a colour, your brain has to connect that to something you already know, like language.

Let's take the colour blue. In English, blue is just one colour. Yes, we can have light blue and dark blue, but it is still blue.

Now, this is not the case in Russian. In Russian, blue is two colours. Light blue is голубой and dark blue is синий, right? So, to a Russian, these are not the same.

And that means that Russians are even faster than English speakers at noticing the difference between these two colours.

So, some scientists did an experiment. They tested Russian speakers and English speakers with small coloured squares. Most of these squares were the same shade of blue, but one square was a little bit lighter.

The Russian speakers found the lighter blue very, very quickly, almost immediately. But the English speakers took quite a long time to find it.

And this is fascinating stuff, right? We are the same species. We have the same eyes. The shades of blue were the same for everyone. The only difference was language.

The same thing was coming into the eyes, but language made us process that information differently.

Absolutely fascinating stuff. But it does get even more interesting. Let's travel to 03:00 Namibia.

In Namibia, there is a group of people called the Himba. And the Himba have chosen to keep their traditional way of life instead of embracing modern technology.

And because of this, their language hasn't really been influenced by the outside world. And they have a very interesting colour system in their language.

In English, we have about eleven main colours: Yellow, orange, blue, brown, black, white, and so on. But the Himba have just five. They have burou which covers many greens and blues, dumbu which covers some greens, reds, beige and yellow, and zoozu which is used for most dark colours including dark green.

So instead of separating blue like the Russians, they separate green into three categories.

04:00 So, the scientists did another experiment.

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They gave a bunch of English speakers and a bunch of Himbas twelve cards.

Eleven were green and one was just slightly lighter green.

The Himbas found the lighter green almost immediately. It was so easy for them.

But for the English speakers, it took a long time.

So, maybe the Himbas are better at seeing colour. Or maybe not, because the scientists did another experiment.

They gave everyone eleven green cards and one blue card. Now, for the English speaker, this was so easy. They immediately found the blue card. But the Himbas took a lot longer to find it because, if you remember, the word *burou* in Himba language means green and blue.

It's kind of like saying light blue and dark blue. It was that similar to them. Of course it's going to take longer.

So, it just goes to show that something that is obvious for us is not always obvious for someone else. And then the opposite is true, too.

05:00 You see, language reflects what's important in your environment. If there are lots of different shades of green in your environment, and it's important to know the different ones, then your language is going to give you words for that.

So, there are no real colours. It's just the way that we notice and process things. And that blows my mind. Absolutely.

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If something as simple as colour, which we all experience, is shaped by our language, then what else can be?

Well, it turns out time itself.

Time feels obvious. It's natural. Everybody experiences time. But you can't see time. So instead, language helps us to imagine time.

In English, we imagine time going from left to right. The past is on the left, the future's on the right. Or we can look forward to the future and look back at the past.

06:00 If I gave an English speaker a set of pictures; a baby, a child, a teenager, an adult, and an old person; and I asked them to arrange those pictures, organise them in order of time, they would put the baby on the left and the old person on the right.

It feels obvious, doesn't it? Until you learn Mandarin Chinese, which I am now.

They don't imagine time left to right. Instead, they imagine it up to down. So, "last week" is "up week", and "next week" is "down week".

So, if I gave these same pictures to a Mandarin speaker, they might put the baby at the top and the old person at the bottom. It's a different system, but it's easy enough for us to imagine it and understand it, I think.

But it can get stranger.

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In northern Australia, there is a group of people called the Thaayorre, and they speak a language called Kuuk Thaayorre.

07:00 In Kuuk Thaayorre, they don't have behind, next to, in front of, left, right, and other words like this. Instead, they just use north, east, south, west. So instead of saying, "There's a spider behind you", they would say, "There's a spider to the east of you", right?

So, every time of day, every Thaayorre person knows where north is, where east is, where south is, and where west is. So that's a kind of a superpower in itself.

So, imagine we gave these same pictures to the Thaayorre people and we asked them to put them in order of age. Well, all the babies would be in the north and all of the old people would be in the south. It doesn't matter which direction the Thaayorre person is facing. They could all be sat in the circle, but all the babies are in the north and all the old people in the south.

So, a totally different way of seeing time. And that's because time is not a line.  
08:00 We just imagine it as a line. It feels natural but it just comes from our language. It's not biology. It's not physics. It's just language.

Now let's talk about grammar.

Grammar changes what we focus on. So, think about this situation. A man walks into the kitchen. He picks up a glass and he slips. The glass hits the floor and the glass smashes.

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Okay, the easiest, most natural way to talk about this in English is, "The man broke the glass". We could say, "The glass was broken", but it feels a bit unnatural and it kind of sounds like we're hiding something. The most natural way is, "The man broke the glass".

So, English forces us to focus on who does the thing.

But in Japanese, Korean and Spanish, this is not the case. The most natural way 09:00 to talk about this in those languages is something like, "The glass broke itself". In these languages, we focus on what happened, not who did it.

So, does that change the way that we see the world? Well, psychologists tested this.

They showed people three videos. One of someone popping a balloon, one of someone kicking a ball, and one of someone accidentally knocking something over. Later, they asked everyone what they remember.

All of the English speakers remembered who did each thing, but the Japanese, Korean, and Spanish speakers remember more of what happened, and they didn't always remember who did it.

So, we had the same video but the grammar was different and that led to different memories. So, language affects what you remember.

Let's look at another example.

In English, nouns don't have gender. And for an English speaker, it's kind of a  
10:00 weird concept. Why is a bridge a man? Why is a bin a woman? It doesn't really  
make sense. But in a lot of languages, it's totally natural.

In fact, in German and Spanish, they have different genders for a bridge. In  
Spanish, a bridge is masculine, and in German, a bridge is feminine.

So, when researchers asked German people to describe a bridge, they used  
words like fragile, beautiful, elegant. And when they asked Spanish speakers the  
same question, they used words like big, strong, and dangerous.

Now, I'm just going to give you one more example of how grammar can change  
the way we think.

In English, we use words like "will" and "going to" to talk about the future. "It will  
rain". "It's going to be a good day". And if we take "will" and "going to" out of  
those sentences, the sentence kind of breaks. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't  
have the same meaning. But not every language is like this.

11:00 In German and Finnish, people try to stay in the present as much as possible. So,  
instead of, "It will rain tomorrow", they'll say, "Tomorrow rain". Instead of saying,  
"Later, I'm going to go to work", they'll say "Later I work".

So, what does this mean for the way that we think?

Well, economists found that speakers of these languages that don't have a strong future tense save more money, they exercise more, they smoke less, and they make long-term decisions more often.

And that's because the future feels real to them. It feels much closer.

To an English speaker, it feels like this abstract thing far away, like a different world that you'll never really be in.

12:00 So, the way that your language talks about the future can actually affect your waist size, your health, and how much money you have in your bank account.

There are many, many ways in which grammar and words and language change the way you think and behave.

And we could talk about them, but some of you will probably have an uncomfortable feeling now. You might be thinking, "Who am I?", "Do I really have free will?", "Does language control me?". Well, not exactly.

Your language gives you habits, these mental shortcuts that you don't really think about. You're not aware of them. But you're a second language learner and, when you speak two languages, things get very, very interesting.

Let's think back to our experiment with the Russian speakers and the English speakers. If you remember, they were looking at lots of one shade of blue and one lighter shade of blue, and they had to find the lighter shade.

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Now, some people speak Russian and English, and when these people thought  
13:00 in Russian, they found the lighter blue quickly, but when they thought in English, it  
took them a long time.

And it was the same for Mandarin-English speakers, too. When they think in  
English, time goes left to right, and when they think in Mandarin, it goes top to  
bottom.

Isn't that fascinating? And there are many ways that you can use this. Now, you  
are a second language learner. So, there are a few cool things that you can try.

First, try describing an object first in your language and then in English. Try to  
notice the different things you talk about, the things you ignore, the things you  
really notice.

Next, I want you to think about a memory, an important memory. First, again, in  
your language and then in English. You might notice that the emotion changes.  
14:00 You might notice that you see it in a different way. And for certain memories, you  
might find a way to forgive someone that you couldn't before.

And lastly, this is your real superpower, when you have a problem and you feel  
very stuck, maybe a problem in your life, try changing the language you think  
about it in. The different idioms and metaphors will help you see it in a different  
way and maybe even find some ways to fix the problem or improve the situation.

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## IN CONCLUSION

Before we finish, let's take a look at some of the phrases from today's episode.

The first one was, "It's not just X, it's Y". And this means it's deeper than you think. It's not just this simple idea. It's actually this more complex, complicated idea. The example was, "Learning English isn't just words and grammar. It's 15:00 learning a new perspective". "It's not just cake, it's carrot cake". "It's not just a car, it's a Ferrari".

Our next phrase was, "It's easy to think that...". This means something feels true, but might not be true. "It's easy to think that colours are just real". "It's easy to think that coffee is bad for you". "It's easy to think that he did it because he's a bad person".

Our next phrase was, "This is not the case" and this means, "This is not true". Our example was, "Now, this is not the case in Russian", and we often use "the case" to talk about the truth or the story. So, you could say that it was the case that Russian speakers have two words for blue.

Our next phrase is, "It just goes to show that..." and "that" is optional. It means, 16:00 "This example proves something". "It just goes to show that something that is obvious for us is not always obvious for other people". Or, let's talk about cake again, "You can make a cake with oil. This just goes to show that you don't need eggs to make a cake".

And our final phrase is, "It turns out that..." and we use this to show a surprising result or discovery. "It turns out that time itself is affected". "It turns out that my

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appointment was for next week". "It turns out that English has around 170,000 words".

If you enjoyed this episode, leave a comment. Let me know how English has changed the way you think. Maybe it's about colour or time, or maybe it's about people or yourself.

17:00 And if you would like to learn more English with the podcast, you can start the Podcast Course. Every podcast episode becomes a lesson with many, many parts. We're talking grammar, vocabulary, listening exercises. So, check that out. That's in the description for you.

And lastly, I would like to thank my dedicated members. That's Anna, Alina, Deisy, Marcella, and Dimitrios.

I got a lot of the information for today's episode from the book Drunk Tank Pink. It's a really interesting book about how the things around us change the way we think. I would highly recommend that so there's a link in the description.

Also, the part about the Himba people, I took from a website called Gondwana Collective. Also, a very interesting read. That's in the description, too.

I'll see you next time.

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