

# Mind, Language and Thinking in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

**R.K. Singh**

Central Department of English  
drrksnp@gmail.com

**Received:** June 26, 2023

**Revised:** Aug 16, 2023

**Accepted:** Oct. 7, 2023

**Published:** Oct. 20, 2023

## How to cite this paper:

Singh, RK. (2023). Mind, Language and Thinking in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* *Khwopa Journal* 5, (2), 45 - 54

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/kjour.v5i2.60416>

Copyright© 2023 by authors and Research Management Cell, Khwopa College.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

---

## ABSTRACT

*This paper claims that mind, language and thinking have triangular relationship. It raises an issue whether language is necessary in the process of thinking. It is very debatable issue whether language and thinking are interdependent or independent elements. Role of the mind must be significant in the process of thinking. Language is a tool for thinking. This triangular issue of mind, language and thinking has been brought into the scene when Lucky, in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, is sitting and thinking. Lucky's thinking inspires us to explore the triangular issue. After analysis of the data and the language used in thinking by Lucky, it is discovered that mind is a catalyst and language and thoughts are substances in the mind. Benjamin Lee Whorf's hypothesis states that the influence of language on thinking is obligatory. Oscar Wilde remarks that language is the parent, and not the child, of thought. Bertrand Russell claims the role of language is to make possible thoughts which cannot exist without it but processing is in the mind as inner or mental speech. Language influences our thinking and, thereby, our thoughts.*

**Keywords:** Relativity, Mentalese Concept, Mind-First View, Language-First View, Catalyst

## Introduction

This paper explores the triangular relationship between mind, language and thinking. Mind is a dynamic organ in human body that uses language for thinking. Lise Menn (2011) writes that neurolinguistics studies how language is represented in the brain. Our brain stores knowledge about the languages we speak, hear, read and write. The brain processes all language activities. Our brain stores information in

Singh, RK. (2023).

---

a network of brain cells (neurons and glial cells). These neural networks ultimately connect our movements (including those needed to generate speech) and our internal and external senses (sound, sight, touch, and our own movement).

The brain has computer-based methods for all kinds of language exercises. Most of the parts of the brain that are important for both spoken and written language are in the left side of the cerebral cortex (left hemisphere), regardless of how and what we read or write. We know this because aphasia is most often caused by left hemisphere damage, not right hemisphere damage. (Lise, 2011)

It is well known that the brain is an organ that is constantly changing in both structure and function, continuously absorbing and transducing information from the environment (Jenkins et al. 1990; Mora et al. 2007). A considerable amount of neurobiological and computational neural connectivity studies using powerful computers (Proteus) and graph theory analysis have revealed the organization and dynamics of the complex neural circuits (networks) in the cerebral cortex that form the neural underpinnings for mental function (Bullmore and Spurs 2009).

Some linguists claim that language controls mind. It is only the language that mind can work with. Language comes first even while thinking. Language is necessary to communicate yourself. In absence of language, William Golding couldn't talk to Albert Einstein openly all those things that he had in his mind while they were on a small bridge in Magdalen Deer Park (*Einstein in Oxford*). Human beings dream in a language that they know. People, who agree that language is first option but mind is second-option, are supposed to be conservative in their views. Many linguists say that they are out-dated in their philosophy.

These linguists give importance to mind and argue that we think in the language we speak, but we cannot ignore the fact that mind is active for any kinds of internal speeches. Sense and references which are essential for interpretation of any text are functioned by the mind, not by the language itself. Encyclopedic knowledge is within the mind for further processing of sense relation and references.

A third category of expertise is found in this area who claims that language and mind are quite independent of each other. It would be unreasonable to unrelated and dislocate these two from our body, but yet truth is that mind is physical object and language is abstract in nature.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, was an American linguist and anthropologist, demonstrated the relativity of human language and human thinking (Carroll, 1956). Whorf is most famous for his hypothesis of linguistic relativity, often referred to as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" due to his collaboration with linguist Edward Sapir. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that the language we speak influences or even determines the way we perceive and think about the world. The major issue is the mind which does not

have a place in their philosophy. Its place is explored in this paper.

In this drama, Lucky thinks because Vladimir and Estragon decide to have him think. Lucky's thinking is a performance. It is a performance like other performances in our daily life. Thinking and language in Lucky's case, and also in general, are ingredients in mind, Mind is merely a catalyst, and it activates its ingredients. This paper attempts to prove this claim that mind is inert, unaffected form, but language and thinking are affected by the mind.

### **Relativity of Language and Thinking**

Language is an immensely ancient heritage of the human race. All forms of speech are the historical outgrowth of a single pristine form (Caroll, 1956). Probably, the concept of IPA chart is based on this perception. Many sounds enlisted in the chart have common and similar features. Regarding use of language and thinking, mind has universally relatively similar processing.

Albert Einstein's concept of the relativity of space and time is applied in the case of human language and human thinking by Whorf. Human language and human thinking have relativity, because language shapes our innermost thoughts (Caroll, 1956). Whorf's view is that we are introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. With this concept in mind, he makes two cardinal hypotheses:

1. That all higher levels of thinking are dependent on language.
2. That the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one understands his environment.

Since the 1970s, analytic philosophers adapted this idea that thoughts are possible only in language. Gilbert Harman (1973) argues that we think in the language we speak. This can be explained with the propositional structure of a belief that grass is green and apples are red. There is an underlying mental sentence of the form "grass is green and apples are red", for English and other languages' speakers (Harman, 1973).

Jerry Fodor proposes a more radical theory of the nature of internal language (1975, 1981). He argues that we do think in language, but not in the language we speak. In his concept, we have a language of thought in our mind. It is called Mentalese, which refers to a "systematicity" of one's ordinary language. Mentalist gives priority to cognitive capacities. Fodor suggests an example that, if we want to understand the form of words "John Loves Mary", we need to understand "Mary Loves John" Fodor means that thoughts have constituent structure; so there is a language of thought. This theory suggests that there is a language of thought, which is systematic and has constituent structure.

## **Psychological State of Meaning**

Meaning of a term is a concept. It implies that meanings are mental entities. Concept is psychological state of memory and belief. Semantic aspects of language are significant for interpretation of any discourse. Frege (1981) argues that meanings are public property. He says that the same meaning can be "grasped" by more than one person at different times. He identifies concepts (intentions/meaning) with abstract entities. These abstract entities are mental entities. Cognitive aspect of a term relates with psychological state of memory and belief. Meanings are conceptual factors that are inherent in mind and are significantly used to understand an expression or a text.

### **Debate: Mind-First vs. Language-First**

Paul Grice (1989), Schiffer (1972), Donald Davidson (1984) and other linguists make a bold argument over the issue of mind-first option vs. language-first, giving a priority to the mind-first option. From the point of view of mind-first option, they give "a philosophical account of the intentionality of thoughts without essentially adverting to language. The notion of linguistic meaning can then be analyzed or elucidated in terms of the thoughts that language is used to express" (Davies, 2006).

Michael Dummett (1993) favours the language first option, holding his view that an amount of the nature of linguistic meaning can be given without bringing in the intentionality of thoughts and what a person's thoughts are about can then be philosophically explained in terms of the use of language. In his opinion, philosophy of language takes priority over philosophy of mind. Language first view does not consider the nature of linguistic meaning mentalist, rather it sounds behavioristic.

Possibility is that philosophical explanations of language and of mind are quite independent of each other. Language is one thing and thought is another unrelated thing. Putnam's slogan is "meanings just isn't in the head" (1975). Grice thinks that thought content is explanatorily prior to linguistic meaning. Bertrand Russell (1989) argues that thought is "internal speech".

Evelina Fedorenko and Rosemary Varley report from their neuroimaging and neurological studies (2016) that there are two possibilities when we express a thought in language:

1. Do we start with a fully formed idea and then "translate" it into a string of words?  
→ It is possible to think even if we do not have a language.
2. Is the thought not fully formed until the string of words is assembled?  
→ Thought completely depends on, and is not distinct from, a language.

My language to describe things in the world is very small, limited. My thoughts when I look at the world are vast, limitless and normal, same as they ever were. My experience of the world is not made less by lack of language but is essentially unchanged. (Tom Lubbock: a memoir of living with a brain

tumor. Nov. 7, 2010.)

(<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/07/tom-lubbock-brain-tumour-language>>

The substance of Lubbock's memoir suggests that thinking and language are quite independent elements. Thoughts are independent of language.

Fedorenko and Varley's studies report that, in a nature human brain, a set of regions- most prominently those located on the lateral surfaces of the left frontal and temporal cortices (outer layer)- selectively support linguistic processing, and that damage to these regions affects an individual's ability to understand and produce language, but not to engage in many forms of complex thought (2016).

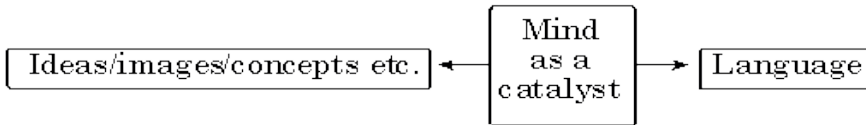
Whatever the arguments we have so far, mind, language and thought/thinking are different from each other substantially but technically and mutually they are related. Process of thinking is in mind. Language is a tool. Thoughts are product of the mind.

Brain injuries or injuries in mind cause problem with communication. Patients with right hemisphere lesions and the majority of patients with traumatic brain injuries have problems with communication more so than with language. Brain injury has certainly an injury over language use. Zingeser and Berndt (1988) have described an anomic patient who presented a selective difficulty in producing nouns both in oral and in the written modality. Clinical observations and data by McCarthy and Warrington (1985) and of Miceli et al. (1988) mention that some anomic and some agrammatical patients show specific defect (for nouns or for verbs) both in production and in comprehension.

Brain injury has impairing impact on language but language absence does not have any injury in mind or brain. All the above conditions conclude the fact that mind is an inert, unaffected part of the body with many substances within it.

### **Mind as a Catalyst**

T. S. Eliot refers an artist's mind as a catalyst (2015). In the case of catalyst, there is a scientific action in which a small piece of pure platinum is introduced into a chamber in which there are oxygen and sulfur dioxide. When the platinum is introduced in the chamber of two gases, there is an action and they form sulfurous acid. The platinum acts as a catalyst. A catalyst is an element that causes action and reaction among other elements, but it remains inert, neutral and unchanged. Human mind is also like the platinum. It is inert, neutral and unchanged. It activates language and ideas. It activates thoughts and language. Mind synthesizes its contents by the means of language. The following figure shows the synthesization.



*Figure 1: Synthesization in Mind*

This part of the paper triangulates mind, language and thinking of a character, Lucky, and that is our major concern. His thinking process is our subject to analysis.

Lucky thinks because Vladimir and Estragon make him think. His thinking is a performance like other performances in daily life. Senses work together for the performances. Senses have connectivity with brain. If senses are dead or the brain is dead, even law declares a man dead. Perceptions, ideas values, concepts, images, language etc. are activated by the senses or the brain.

Lucky thinks in a language. His thinking is divergent and absurd. However his sensible thoughts lie within the flow of his thinking. His thoughts have many scholastic and theological allusion/references, for example,

divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia..... (Act I)

The above phrases possibly denote lack of motivation (apathy), a knife (athame) and lack of language (aphasia). Lucky expresses his view that even God does not have a language to communicate. He means to say that we pray to god in a language but he does not bless us or communicate to us because he does not have a language. A man or a god cannot think or communicate if he does not have a language.

If we avoid irrelevant, incomprehensive, meaningless phrases and clauses from his thought (See the Appendix/Act I), we have the following sequence,

- a. "given the existence....
- b. of a personal God...
- c. outside
- d. time...
- e. who...
- f. loves us dearly ....
- g. and suffers...
- h. with those who ...
- i. are plunged in torment ...
- i. it is established beyond all doubt ...
- j. that man ...

k. for reasons unknown....

l. labours abandoned left unfinished

m. abandoned unfinished ....

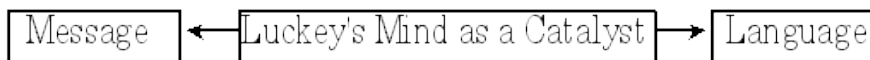
(Act I)

Lucky delivers the message through his thinking that, given the existence of a personal God, one who exists outside of time and who loves us dearly and who suffers with those who are plunged into torment, it is established beyond all doubt that man, for reasons unknown, has left his labours abandoned, unfinished.

It is entirely man's thinking (or belief) that god exists. God exists outside of time. Man thinks that god loves him and suffers with him with all torments. Fact is different. Man's thinking is wrong. He has left his labors abandoned, unfinished, thinking that god will do everything on his behalf. It is not proper application of senses because his thoughts are wrong. Man has mind. He can think. He has a language. He can think. He has senses for thinking. God lacks in all these- no mind, no language, and no thinking. What will he do for a man? Nothing.

### Conclusion

Mind, language and thinking are quite independent entities. They are different from each other by nature. Mind is a human organ. Language is learned and acquired by information processing system. Mind is an active organ like a machine for this information processing. Language may have an influence on our thinking and knowledge may have, in turn, an influence on language and thinking. Mind is only an information processing compartment or store. Its function is of a machine like a computer. Language and thinking are substances in the mind. Language is necessary for the process of thinking. Lucky's mind is a catalyst. The following figure shows the catalyst position of his mind,



*Figure 2: Mind as a Catalyst*

Lucky's mind plays merely a performativity/reactant role. His language carries the message. His message is encoded in the language. Mind is here only a vessel in which language and message co-exist as the contents.

### References

Bullmore, E., & Sporns, O. (2009). Complex brain networks: graph theoretical analysis of structural and functional systems. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 10, 186–98.



- Carroll, John B. (ed.). (1956). *Language, thought and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. The MIT Press.
- Davidson, D. (1984). *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davies, M. (2006). Foundational issues in the philosophy of language. In *Philosophy of Language*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 30-40
- Dummett, M. (1993). *The seas of language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Einstein in Oxford. (17 June 2019). In *Physicsworld*. Retrieved from <https://physicsworld.com/a/einstein-in-oxford/> dated 18/03/2023
- Eliot, T. S. (2015). *The sacred wood*. Martino Fine Books.
- Fedorenko, Evelina and Varley, Rosemary. (2016). Language and thought are not the same thing: evidence from neuroimaging and neurological patients. *Ann N Y Acad Sci*, 2016 April, 1369 (1): 132-153. doi: 101111/nyas.13045
- Fodor, J.A. (1975). *The language of thought*. New York: Crowell.
- Fodor, J.A. (1981). *Representations*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Frege, G. (1891). Function and concept, in Beaney (ed.) *The Frege Reader*.
- Grice, H.P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Harman, G. (1973). *Thought*. Princeton University Press.
- Jenkins, W.M., Merzenich, M.M., Ochs, M.T., et al. (1990). Functional reorganization of primary somatosensory cortex in adult owl monkeys after behaviorally controlled tactile stimulation. *Journal of Neurophysiology*, 63, 82–104.
- Loar, B. (1991). “Can we explain intentionality?” In B. Loewer and G. Rey (eds.), *Meaning in Mind: Fodor and his critics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 119–96.
- Menn, Lise. (2011). *Psycholinguistics: Introduction and applications*. Plural Publishing.
- Mora, F., Segovia, G., and Del Arco, A. (2007). Aging, plasticity and environmental enrichment: structural changes and neurotransmitter dynamics in several areas of the brain. *Brain Research Review*, 55, 78–88.
- Putnam, H. (1975). “The meaning of “meaning.” In *mind, language and reality: Philosophical papers*, vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 215–71. Also in K. Gunderson (ed.), *Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science*, vol. 8: Language mind and knowledge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 131–93.
- Quine, W.V.O. (1970). On the reasons for the indeterminacy of translation. *Journal of Philosophy*, 67, 178–83.
- Russell, B. (1989). *The analysis of mind*. London and New York: Routledge.



Schiffer, S. (1972). *Meaning*. OUP.

## Appendix

### Lucky's Speech

#### LUCKY:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast and considering what is more that as a result of the labors left unfinished crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy-in-Possy of Testew and Cunard it is established beyond all doubt all other doubt than that which clings to the labors of men that as a result of the labors unfinished of Testew and Cunnard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown that as a result of the public works of Puncher and Wattmann it is established beyond all doubt that in view of the labors of Fartov and Belcher left unfinished for reasons unknown of Testew and Cunard left unfinished it is established what many deny that man in Possy of Testew and Cunard that man in Essy that man in short that man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes and pines wastes and pines and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the strides of physical culture the practice of sports such as tennis football running cycling swimming flying floating riding gliding conating camogie skating tennis of all kinds dying flying sports of all sorts autumn summer winter winter tennis of all kinds hockey of all sorts penicillin and succedanea in a word I resume flying gliding golf over nine and eighteen holes tennis of all sorts in a word for reasons unknown in Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham namely concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown but time will tell fades away I resume Fulham Clapham in a word the dead loss per head since the death of Bishop Berkeley being to the tune of one inch four ounce per head approximately by and large more or less to the nearest decimal good measure round figures stark naked in the stockinged feet in Connemara in a word for reasons unknown no matter what matter the facts are there and considering what is more much more grave that in the light of the labors lost of Steinweg and Peterman it appears what is more much more grave that in the light the light the light of the labors lost of Steinweg and Peterman that in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running water running fire the air is the same and then the earth namely the air and then the earth in the great cold the great dark the air and the earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas in the year of their Lord six hundred and something the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold on sea on land and in the air I resume for reasons un-

Singh, RK. (2023).

---

known in spite of the tennis the facts are there but time will tell I resume alas alas on  
on in short in fine on on abode of stones who can doubt it I resume but not so fast I re-  
sume the skull fading fading fading and concurrently simultaneously what is more for  
reasons unknown in spite of the tennis on on the beard the flames the tears the stones  
so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in  
spite of the tennis the labors abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a  
word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara in spite  
of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard (mêlée, final vociferations) tennis . . . the  
stones . . . so calm . . .

Cunard . . . unfinished . . .

Beckett, Samuel. (1953). *Waiting For Godot*. Act I.