What Came First Thought Or Language Essay, Research Paper

Language came after Thought

In order to be able to prove the statement Language came after thought , the words language and thought first will have to be defined. Language could be described as a system for formulating and communicating information, thoughts and feelings. There is, however, not one adequate definition of thinking, since most definitions do not cover all aspects of thought. It could be defined as a mental activity, but also as the way one s mind perceives one s senses. Having gathered this information, the concepts of language and thought will be looked at, and the relationship between the two concepts will be found.

Firstly, a distinction has to be made between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. There are infinitely more thoughts in our mind than we can ever perceive. The German psychologist Fechner, who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century, compared the mind to an iceberg. This iceberg has only a fraction of all the information and thoughts stored in the mind above the water level, on the surface of consciousness, but by far the biggest part of it is hidden underwater, in the unconscious mind. Recent research has shown that only a very tiny proportion of our unconscious thinking is converted to conscious thinking. This conversion processes like the search engine in a computer: this search engine unconsciously selects the thoughts we want to be available for our conscious mind. Then a small part of the thoughts from the unconscious component of the mind, the part that is aware of, and to a certain extent induces the person s choice of action, is consciously translated into language. This means that the meaning a person wishes to express provides the strategy for the proper word.

In the conscious mind there are words, whereas in the unconscious mind there are only concepts. Creativity, for instance, can be found in the unconscious mind. Inspirations for paintings or for music compositions are found in the unconscious mind. Human beings, however, do not encounter them in the form of words. Musicians in general are much more likely to think in form of harmony instead of in a melody: they do not think in the form of chords, but in the form of harmony and melody. This harmony is in that musician s subconscious mind, and is expressed through his conscious mind in the form of a melody. Even scientists often do not think in language. Einstein himself wrote that language does not play any role in his mechanism of thought. Instead the combination of certain signs and images were the essential features in his productive thought before they were converted to language, with the purpose of sharing with others. Therefore language was only used during the secondary stage of his thinking.

Occasionally it can be very difficult to explain an idea (creative or non-creative) in words. One s vocabulary can be insufficient, or language can simply lack a word needed for expression of thought or emotion. Therefore language is a much less sophisticated and flexible system than thought is. Nevertheless it is a more standardized system of carrying and transferring information than whatever system exists in human minds. Language provides us with usable concepts, but restricts us to traditional concepts. The system existing in our heads is much more complex and great than the system of language; language is a tool for organizing thinking because it often bears the concepts of thought.

If language came before thought then thinking would not be possible without the language based concepts. This means that language would have to be the basis of thinking and not just the means of communicating. Therefore, thought came before language.