

# Metalinguistic Awareness in Reading Development and Human Cognition

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# Language & Thought

*Philosophical question:*

What types of thought are only available to language-using creatures?

*Psychological question:*

When does the ability for this type of thought arise? How should we look for it?

# What type of thought does language make possible?

- Bermúdez (2003):
  - Thinking about thought requires the ability to think about language
    - No intentional ascent without semantic ascent*
- What types of thought involve intentional ascent?
  - Belief revision
  - Higher-order desires
  - Social cognition/theory of mind attributions

# Why does ascent require language?

- To think about a thought is to allow that first thought to be the object of further thoughts
  - Putting a thought into words makes it an object
- This requires awareness not only of the content of the thought, but the structural relations between the ideas that comprise the thought
- The only system we are aware of that has these relations is natural language

# When does the ability for thoughts of this sort arise?

- Acquiring language does not grant the requisite awareness of language

## *Metalinguistic awareness*

- Perner & Doherty (1998): metalinguistic awareness as an emergent metacognitive ability
  - “ability to reflect on language as a carrier of meaning” (p. 279)
  - Understanding of synonyms and homophones - make this a new slide

# Perner & Doherty on metalinguistic awareness

Problems with the view:

1. Definition of MA as “carrier of meaning”  
is inadequate  
does not uniquely identify language
2. Synonyms fail to prompt the right relation  
not the failure of the one-to-one correspondence,  
but about the arbitrariness of the set of rules

# Metalinguistic Awareness and Written Language

- Awareness of language comes when children are required to think about the structure of language - this comes with learning how print works.
- Glottographic nature of print
  - Written language symbolizes spoken language - understanding how print works requires thinking of speech as an object

# Awareness of the Nature of Print

- Young children think of writing as a form of pictorial representation.

(e.g., Bialystok, 1991; Levin & Tolchinsky Landsmann, 198;, Levin & Bus, 2003)

- Even once they can distinguish between writing and drawing, they lack understanding of how writing works

(Apperly, Williams, & Williams, 2004; Bialystok, 2000; Bialystok, Shenfield, & Codd, 2000).

# Remaining Questions

Further exploration of what acquisition of written language requires.

- How do children acquire this ability?
  - Clues in parent speech (Robins & Treiman, submitted)
- Are there differences in the metalinguistic awareness required across different writing systems?
  - Languages differ in the specifics of their phonological structure, but they are all glottographic

# Conclusions

- The ability to think about thought requires the ability to think about language
- Thinking about language is an ability that children acquire when they begin to think about how written language works.