

Lesson 6 The World in Our Mind

Reading 1

How Words Color Your World

How many basic colors are there in a rainbow? Most people would likely say that there are seven.

However, the colors that are included can differ from culture to culture. Furthermore, some cultures don't even agree that there are seven basic colors in a rainbow. Does this mean that some people can see colors that others can't? Of course not! The human eye works the same way for almost everyone. So what causes these differences in perception? One reason could be the language a person speaks. Studies have shown that our language can have a major impact on how we perceive and identify colors.

Almost everyone nowadays would say that grass is green and the sky is blue. However, this wasn't always the case. Long ago, some people might have said that the sky was also green! This is because many ancient languages, including Hebrew and Sanskrit, didn't have a word for the color blue. Instead, the people who spoke those languages usually associated blue with other colors, such as green. In fact, one of the only cultures that did identify blue as a unique color was that of ancient Egypt, and this may have been due to the fact that the Egyptians had figured out a way to create blue dye.

Evidence of how color words influence the way people see the world can also be found in the writings of ancient cultures. The work of the Greek poet Homer provides a fascinating example of this. In his epic poem *The Odyssey*, Homer described the sea as being "wine-dark" rather than comparing it to something blue. He also described honey as being green and sheep as being violet!

Obviously, Homer perceived things differently than we do today. This is partly because his language, ancient Greek, categorized colors differently. It identified colors based on how dark or light they were. For instance, the Greek word *kyaneos* referred to dark colors such as violet, dark blue, and black. On the other hand, the word *glaukos* was used for light colors such as gray, light blue, and yellow. So, although ancient Greek people could see all of the same colors that we do, they didn't have a separate word for each one.

Even today, there are many languages that don't have separate words for each color. For example, the Himba tribe of Namibia uses a language that names only five colors. Interestingly, two of them describe different shades of green! Yet none of its words describe the color blue. For researcher Jules Davidoff, this raised an interesting question: If they don't have a word for it, can they really see it? He decided to conduct an experiment to find out.

In his experiment, Davidoff showed members of the tribe a circle made of eleven green squares and one blue square. When asked to identify the blue square, the participants took much longer than expected, and some of them couldn't do it at all. Next, he showed them a circle of green squares only, with one square being a slightly lighter shade than the rest. For most English speakers, the lighter green square would be rather difficult to point out. The Himba people, however, could immediately identify the different square. This suggests that it can be much more difficult for people to notice that a color is different if they don't have a specific word to identify it as a unique color. Even though we see the squares in the same way, our perception of them can differ based on the language we use.

Based on the above examples, it is easy to see how our language can have an effect on how we view our surroundings. After all, it is through the words of our language that we are able to understand and interpret the world around us. So, what do you think: does your language color your world?

Reading 2

What Shapes Your Point of View?

Who is biased? You're probably thinking, "Not me!"

Well, I have some bad news for you. It is all of us

that are biased. Everyone has multiple cognitive

biases. This may sound disturbing, but identifying

and understanding them can make you a more

rational thinker. Let's start by looking at the term

"cognitive bias." It refers to an error in how we

perceive the world. Such errors occur when we filter

information using our personal experiences, creating

a reality that isn't based on objective facts. Many

different types of cognitive biases have been

identified, and today, I will tell you about two of

them.

Predicting the Unpredictable

You may have said, "I knew that would happen!"

when one of your friends happened to wear the

same T-shirt as you. Likewise, you might have

thought, "I had a feeling that was going to happen!"

when you dropped and broke something. Did you

really know? No, you just felt like these things were

predictable.

This is known as hindsight bias. It refers to our

tendency to believe that we could have predicted

things when we look back on situations after they

have occurred. It is commonly observed in students

who have just taken tests. After they get a test back

with an answer marked wrong, students often say, "I

knew that was the answer!" Of course, they didn't

really know the answer. Looking back, however, it

feels like they did. When we feel like we knew

something all along, even though we actually didn't,

we tend not to reflect very much on our

decision-making process. In other words, this bias

prevents us from learning from our mistakes. To

avoid it, try to honestly remember what you were

thinking before the unexpected event occurred. With

this information kept in mind, you will have a more

realistic understanding of the situation.

Picking and Choosing Our Reality

There is a lot of information that doesn't support what we believe, or even contradicts it. However, people like to feel comfortable and avoid mental conflicts. So, if we encounter such information, we often block it out and try to replace it with something that better fits our own perspective. This tendency is called confirmation bias. It is the habit of seeking only information that supports what we already believe.

We can see this bias in how people get their news. With so many sources offering news these days, you probably get your news from one whose views match your own. This may be comforting, but it can cause you to miss out on important facts. Confirmation bias can also promote the spread of fake news. Some people want fake news to be true because it confirms their beliefs. As a result, they end up accepting it as being true and sharing it with others. This bias is hard to prevent, but we can resist it by reading or listening to various points of view. Being exposed to new ideas helps us see things from a more balanced perspective.

Collectively, cognitive biases can influence our beliefs and harm our decision-making, but that doesn't mean we have to let them control our lives. With a little effort, our perspective can shift from being biased to balanced.