

TOK GUIDING QUESTIONS

Language

'Words are more powerful and treacherous than we think'. (J-P Sartre)

Language is so much a part of human activity that it is easily taken for granted. The issues related to language and knowledge call for conscious scrutiny in order to recognize its influence on thought and behaviour.

Nature of Language

How have spoken sounds acquired meaning? What is the nature of the connection between the sounds and what they are taken to represent? Is it possible to think without language? How does language extend, direct, or even limit thinking? To what extent does language generalize individual experience, classifying it within the experience of the group? To what extent does a personal experience elude expression in language?

Can language be compared with other human forms of symbolic representation, such as conventionalized gestures, sign language for the deaf, dance, painting, music or mathematics? What might language share with these other forms in the communication of what we know? In what ways might it be considered distinct? To what extent is knowledge implicit in language? For example, could it be said that 'Saturday is in bed' does not convey meaning, even though the sentence is syntactically correct, because of the prior knowledge that days of the week are not physical objects? How do computer languages compare with the conventional written and spoken languages of everyday discourse?

How does the capacity to communicate personal experiences and thoughts through language affect knowledge? To what extent does knowledge actually depend on language: on the transmission of concepts from one person or generation to another, and on exposure of concepts or claims to public scrutiny?

How does language come to be known? Is the capacity to acquire language innate? If knowledge is based on an internal representation of the world does this imply that language is a necessary component of knowledge? In most of the statements heard, spoken, read or written, facts are blended with values. How can an examination of language distinguish the subjective biases and values which factual reports may contain? Why might such an examination be desirable?

How apt is Voltaire's view that 'Error flies from mouth to mouth, from pen to pen, and to destroy it takes ages'?

Functions of Language

What different functions does language perform? Which are most relevant in creating and communicating knowledge? What did Aldous Huxley mean when he observed that 'Words form the thread on which we string our experiences'?

In what ways does written language differ from spoken language in its relationship to knowledge? Can control of written language create or reinforce power?

Is it reasonable to argue for preservation of established forms of language? Is it reasonable to ask for one language common to the whole world? What is the role of language in creating and reinforcing social distinctions, such as class, ethnicity and gender? What is the role of language in sustaining relationships of authority? Do people speak the same way to inferiors and superiors in a hierarchy? Does the professional authority speak in the same way as the person seeking opinion or advice?

What may have been meant by the comment 'How strangely do we diminish a thing as soon as we try to express it in words'? (Maurice Maeterlinck)

Language and Culture

If people speak more than one language, is what they know different in each language?

Does each language provide a different framework for reality? How is the meaning of what is said affected by silences and omissions, pace, tone of voice and bodily movement? How might these factors be influenced in turn by the social or cultural context? What is lost in translation from one language to another? Why? To what degree might different languages shape in their speakers different concepts of themselves and the world? What are the implications of such differences for knowledge? In completing the sentence, 'I know that . . .', one is making a knowledge claim. Why is it useful or necessary to express knowledge claims? Are there Areas of Knowledge where it is expected or required? Are there Ways of Knowing where it is not? To what extent is it possible to overcome ambiguity and vagueness in language? In what contexts might ambiguity either impede knowledge or contribute to it? Does the balance between precision and ambiguity alter from one discipline to another?