# Story #15b
# *Language Reduces Experience*

*15. Respect silence - when a student cannot or does not wish to articulate an impression - and model to the class how to leave room for possible non-language moments of higher order learning.*
(The Teacher's Bill of Rights)

We think we are so sophisticated. We have our language with all of its tenses, and we have subjects and predicates.

Before, in the old school view of ancients and indigenous, we used the word 'Primitive' to describe peoples who were *'not civilized'*. Research describes this as a projection of modern head thinking onto ancients, indigenous, and also onto children. We used to jump to the conclusion that if a culture did not use grammar like us, then they were somehow inferior. But does simple language really show inferiority?

*'Primitive' Languages: Case in point - The Hopi*

In the Hopi language, the description of a flash of light from a fire would simply be, "FLASH". We would say, "Oh, they are so primitive. They meant THE LIGHT FLASHED." Or, we would say, "THE LIGHT IS FLASHING." Or to speak in the future, "THE LIGHT WILL FLASH." We would think of how we've got tenses and a subject and predicate. THE LIGHT is our subject and FLASHED is our predicate.

Well, Benjamen Lee Whorf, of the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis, studied the Hopi by traveling to their communities and living with them. He said that once you really get to understand the Hopi, you see that

they are really quite advanced. Whorf was doing this while Einstein was publishing his General Theory of Relativity. Einstein had just published his Special Theory of Relativity and was introducing his general theory to the world. In Einstein's groundbreaking work was the concept of ***spacetime***. Einstein wanted to explain space and time as a unified entity but did not know how to express this using our language. The reason for this was that our language reduces such integrated ideas by breaking them up into subjects, predicates, and tenses. Thus, Einstein had to resort to the mathematics of calculus.

Whorf saw this and claimed that the Hopi language was actually the superior vehicle for such notions that integrate time and space. He said that the Hopi language naturally blended past, present, and future and also subject and predicate as a whole.

“The thoughts of a Hopi about events always include *both* space and time, for neither is found alone in his world view. Thus his language gets along adequately without tenses for its verbs, and permits him to think habitually in terms of space-time. Properly to understand Einstein's relativity a Westerner must abandon his spoken tongue and take to the language of calculus. But a Hopi, Whorf implies, has a sort of calculus built into him.” (Whorf & Carroll, 1964, p. viii)

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So, the child, the indigenous, and the ancient may have been reducing the world less with their language, than we do. So, there's something to learn in order to go forward, by looking backward.

That's the thought for today. I'll see you in one of those tomorrows.

References

Whorf, B. L., & Carroll, J. B. (1964). *Language, thought, and reality: selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf.* Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.