

**MENTAL FURNITURE  
FROM THE  
PHILOSOPHERS**

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**T**HE VOCABULARY OF a language encapsulates a large part of the conceptual apparatus common to its speakers. As Diderot writes in the *Encyclopédie*, "The language of a people gives its vocabulary, and its vocabulary is a sufficiently faithful record of the whole knowledge of the people; simply by comparing the vocabulary of a nation at different times, one can form an idea of its progress." (1) There have been many suggestive, but isolated, remarks made about the relation between the vocabulary of a speech community and its thought. A modern East German study, (2) for example, compared the vocabularies of German as spoken in the Federal Republic and in the Democratic Republic. It found that there was little difference between the two, except in the choice of ideological terms — a difference the authors attributed to the "imperialist attempt to conceal reality and influence the masses." In a similar vein, Theophylact of Ohrid, a Greek theologian at the time of the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, advocated a lenient attitude towards the errors of the Latin church on the grounds that it was using a language without the requisite theological distinctions. (3) The vocabulary chosen by the Watergate criminals exemplified another way in which words could be related to thought; namely, they could conceal it and preserve the "deniability" of anything that might appear to have been said. (4) Newspaper columnists and comic novelists have long realized that vocabulary is extremely sensitive to social changes, and examples abound in these genres of exposés of the linguistic foibles of sub-classes of societies. (5)

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Two languages may differ in the vocabulary they use in similar circumstances and so reveal differing conceptualizations of the subject matter in question. But it may also happen that two languages differ in the sheer amount of vocabulary of some type. The possibility arises that the community using the poorer language is simply unable to think about the phenomena described by this type of vocabulary in the richer language. Although individuals can perhaps deal in ideas for which there is no word, such ideas can hardly become part of the mental furniture of the community at large. In Diderot's words, if an idea can acquire a name, then, "if this idiom be supposed admitted and fixed, the notions immediately become permanent, the distance of time vanishes." (6) An increase in the vocabulary of a language will then correspond to an enlargement of the pool of concepts at the disposal of its speech community. Modern English, in particular, has a very much larger vocabulary than Old English had. A study of the sources of the new vocabulary can be expected to reveal some deep, and perhaps unexpected, influences on the way we think.

The etymology of English is, of course, in general very well understood. It is well known, for example, that many of the words added to Middle and Modern English are technical terms derived from Latin and Greek. The researches summarized in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Middle English Dictionary* permit an accurate picture to emerge of the first occurrences in English of words of any given type. This study will consider a class of words which has not been satisfactorily isolated for separate treatment, even though the history of any one of them can be described as familiar. The class is that consisting of the English words which express very general concepts (for example, 'general' and 'concept'). These words are characterized by the variety of the situations to which they apply, and the generality of the features of the world which they express. Other examples are 'absolute,' 'act,' 'infinite,' 'necessary,' 'movement,' 'divide,' 'exist,' 'probable,' and 'common.' Such words are so much a part of our linguistic dealings with the world that the poverty of a language which had no such words is almost unimaginable. Yet Old English did not have them — they are all Latin derivatives.

The importance of these words for our thinking is perhaps too obvious to need laboring. Nevertheless, it need not rest purely on subjective evaluations. The "Brown Corpus" (7) lists the frequency of words in a sample of a million words of modern American written English. Of the 500 most frequently occurring words, 124 are of Romance origin. If those which have obviously Old French modifications to their stems are omitted, there remain, in descending order of

























