

UNITED WISDOM

Language and Perception: How Words Direct Attention

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W42 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience*

Aristotle, On Interpretation, Part 1, 16a3–4; E. M. Edghill's English translation. This is the opening clause of the sentence about spoken and written signs, quoted without its continuation. The passage concerns signs and experience; it does not establish that language governs every sensation.

What this article is about

Two people look at the same landscape and notice different things. One names its colours, another recognises plants, and a third looks for signs of rain. Familiar words can give a distinction convenient boundaries. That does not mean someone without its name sees nothing, or that a language confines its speakers to a separate world. This article asks a more precise question: how does a name become an invitation to attend, and when does it become a premature conclusion? We distinguish sensation, category, judgment, and communication; examine a limited experiment involving Russian terms for blue; and compare philosophical and religious discussions of words and names. Their different concerns remain visible: propositions, learning to speak, coordinating work, and the limits of naming. The practical aim is a way to clarify descriptions without treating every word as an error or asking anyone to abandon their language, culture, or a concept that matters to them.

I. What becomes available with a name

A name lets us pick out a distinction and return to it. In an invented example, two people are choosing curtain fabric. One says both samples are blue; the other distinguishes a cool light blue from a deep blue. The first person does not necessarily see colours less well. They may be using a broader category because they are answering a different question: whether the fabric suits a bright room. The second is already comparing shades. Once they clarify their task, the disagreement involves more than eyesight. It also involves the scale of their description. Naming, discriminating, and preferring are separate activities, although an ordinary sentence can conceal all three inside a few familiar words.

A word can work like a bookmark. It does not insert an object into experience in place of the object itself; it helps us recognise the distinction we want to revisit. Someone learning the

technical name of a bicycle component can ask a mechanic a more precise question and notice which part moves. Yet the name does not guarantee understanding of the mechanism. You can learn it and still confuse the components. You can also repair a familiar object well without knowing the accepted terminology. A vocabulary is therefore useful insofar as it makes actions, questions, and checks available. A long list of impressive terms tells us little about that usefulness. The word opens a possibility that still requires an encounter with the thing.

The other side of this convenient bookmark is an unnoticed closing of the question. Once we have a name, we sometimes stop looking. “It is just tiredness” might describe a familiar state, propose its cause, or end a conversation. To understand its role, we need to ask what it explains and what remains unknown. Here this is an example of everyday speech, not a conclusion about anyone's health. Possessing a suitable word does not turn a conjecture into an established cause. A name directs attention more accurately when it stays connected to observable features and remains open to revision. It narrows attention when its convenience releases us from noticing whatever lies beyond the category we have chosen.

II. Sensation, category, and judgment

Using a word is not always making a claim about the world. In the opening parts of On Interpretation, Aristotle distinguishes a name from a proposition that affirms or denies something. This provides a useful starting point. Hearing “blue” does not yet tell us that an object is blue, that its shade matches another object, or that this colour is the right choice. The philosopher examines propositions; his text is not a modern experiment on vision. We use the distinction to avoid making a single word responsible for the whole work of observation, classification, and verification. Separating those activities helps us locate the actual point at which two speakers disagree.

Here sensation means the experience of a particular present colour, sound, or touch. A category is a way of assigning what we encounter to a class. A judgment makes an assertion that can be discussed as true, mistaken, or insufficiently supported. These are working distinctions for this article, not a complete theory of the mind. You might notice an unfamiliar sound before finding a name for it, name it with a familiar word but misidentify its source, or identify the source correctly without knowing whether it is dangerous. Each case calls for a different check. Replacing a word cannot substitute for examining the object, and accurate observation does not automatically settle a question about consequences.

In an invented workplace conversation, a colleague says, “He answered aggressively.” The sentence contains an assessment as well as a report of sound. We can clarify the volume, words, interruptions, and circumstances, then ask what the speaker means by aggression. Doing so need not deny their impression or pronounce it mistaken. It separates what they

heard from their explanation and their next decision. For one question, knowing the conversation was unpleasant may be enough. For another, identifying a particular breach of an agreement matters. A word remains useful when its scale fits the task. It becomes a trap when a broad category quietly turns into supposed knowledge of another person's intention, which no one directly observed.

III. What the Russian blue experiment shows

Language can have a measurable part in a specific task without governing all perception. Winawer and colleagues' 2007 study tested 26 native Russian and 24 native English speakers on rapid colour matching. The Russian group showed an advantage across its habitual light-blue and dark-blue categories; verbal interference removed that advantage. This concerns response time under specified conditions, not English speakers' inability to see shades. It supports a role for language categories in task performance, not the claim that a language completely determines its speakers' reality.

Why is this limited result still interesting? It lets us ask about a process rather than simply count the words in a dictionary. If a linguistic boundary permanently altered every available visual distinction, its participation would not depend so markedly on the immediate conditions of a task. That reasoning should not become a final explanation of all visual mechanisms: an experimental manipulation tests particular hypotheses within a particular design. The more modest consequence for a reader is useful enough. Between “words take no part” and “words create everything we see” lies a field of testable questions. Within that field we can investigate which distinction is being used, when it assists performance, and what changes the way someone completes a comparison.

Returning to the fabric example, we have fewer reasons for universal slogans and more reasons to examine particulars. A colour task cannot establish that renaming an object changes someone's experience in every dispute. Nor does it justify ranking cultures by the number of terms they possess. In our example, it is more useful to put both samples under the same lighting, identify the feature relevant to the choice, and inspect it. A shade's name assists coordination, while the material, illumination, and purpose continue to matter. Research does not cancel this ordinary encounter with things. It reminds us that comparing them may involve more than an imagined, entirely isolated eye, without supplying a complete explanation of every person's experience.

IV. How a shared scene gives a word meaning

A word becomes intelligible through use as well as through definitions. In Book I of Confessions, Augustine recalls learning speech through sounds, pointing, gestures, and surrounding events. This is religious autobiography, not a controlled study of children. The passage matters as a description of a scene in which names meet the direction of a look and an action. An adult can also know a dictionary translation without understanding what an expression does in a particular exchange. Asking about its use does not necessarily reveal a poor vocabulary. Sometimes the missing element is a situation the speakers mistakenly assume they already share and understand.

Imagine people from different working environments meeting to discuss a document. One asks to “clear” it and expects final permission to act. Another understands this as a preliminary discussion of comments. Both know the expression, but their expected actions differ. Replacing it with a synonym will not restore shared meaning. They need to clarify who decides, what can still change, and what the next response will authorise. Once that is done, the word can again serve as a concise connection. Beforehand, it merely disguised the absence of an agreement. Attention now turns away from a word's supposed inner essence and toward what happens between people: an action, a sequence, authority, a result, and the possibility of correcting an understanding before a costly decision follows.

Context also has limits: it does not license any convenient meaning. If meanings can change without notice whenever someone needs them to, there is no shared language for checking promises. Clarification must therefore be distinguished from substitution. Clarification makes previous uncertainty visible and lets people check whether they actually agree with a new description. Substitution declares that someone ought always to have understood a meaning that was never stated. In the first case, speech becomes more precise. In the second, its flexibility becomes a means of escaping responsibility. Attending to circumstances does not abolish stable meanings; it asks which meanings people actually used at the relevant meeting, rather than retroactively supplying meanings that suit the present outcome.

V. When a shared vocabulary conceals different concepts

Matching sounds do not ensure matching thoughts. In Book III of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke connects words with a speaker's ideas and discusses their communication. We need a limited point about understanding, without adopting his entire system. Two people saying “freedom” may be referring to available options, absence of coercion, material capacity, or recognised authority. Some differences are compatible; others produce a substantive dispute. Until they become visible, a shared word can create an appearance of either agreement or disagreement before the participants have identified the subject of their assertions precisely enough.

Clarifying this does not reduce a serious problem to a word game. In an invented family conversation, one participant asks for more independence and another promises it. For the first, independence means deciding their own return time; for the second, it means choosing activities within an unchanged schedule. Clarification may reveal a real dispute about control. Language work cannot resolve it in place of the participants, but it makes the actual choice discussable. Otherwise, they might repeat one sentence for hours, treating each repetition as evidence of the other's stubbornness. Naming the content of a demand makes disagreement accessible to a decision. It does not guarantee an easy decision or establish in advance which side is right.

A useful sign of that content is the ability to give an instance and a counterexample. If “respect” requires agreeing with me in every circumstance, it makes one demand. If it requires avoiding humiliation while allowing disagreement, it makes another. We can test the distinction with an invented case without treating the person as secretly defective. Sometimes several meanings operate together; then we should retain them rather than select one for simplicity. A conversation needs working precision: which meaning changes the present decision? It does not need a finished theory of every term. Transparency matters where a familiar label becomes an expectation of specific conduct, a right to demand it, or an assessment of an action that already occurred.

VI. Names, roles, and acting together

Names can connect attention with responsibility as well as describe what we see. In Analects XIII.3, rectifying names appears within a question about government and the relationship between speech and affairs. This is a historical Confucian argument about order, not a modern experiment or a universal agreement between equals. It opens a particular question for this article: what becomes visible when we call someone a manager, mediator, or responsible person? The issue exceeds the accuracy of a label. We need to understand the actions expected of the role and who can actually perform, check, or challenge them within the relationships that exist.

In an invented project, three people agree that there is someone “responsible for quality.” One means the document's author, another its reviewer, and the third the person who authorises release. When an error appears, they look toward different people. Renaming the role alone will not close the gap. They need to distribute actions and identify which check must precede which decision. The term can then guide attention: a comment goes to the reviewer, while a request to change the document goes to the author. Language helps coordination by retaining a connection with people's actual capacities. A person is still more than their role and may refuse a new assignment that was never included in the original agreement.

A danger arises when a name presents a desired order as an existing fact. “We are one team” can support cooperation; it can also conceal that one person decides while others bear the consequences. To distinguish the cases, we can examine access to speech, information, revision, and refusal. This is an authorial application of a question about speech and action, not a direct transfer of Confucian politics into a contemporary workplace. The historical text helps us notice a relationship between naming and conduct. People must separately determine the terms of their present agreement. A name makes relationships more visible when it allows that check. When it forbids the check, a beautiful expression occupies the place of a shared reality that has yet to be established.

VII. The limits of naming do not make speech useless

We can recognise a word's usefulness without treating it as an exhaustive account. The first chapter of the Tao Teh King limits the enduring name within its own Daoist horizon. This is not experimental proof that language distorts every experience. Here it challenges the identification of a name with everything it names. A philosophical, religious, or personal concept can retain aspects that a short expression does not exhaust. Recognising those aspects does not make them a secret available only to selected people. Nor does it forbid discussing whatever can still be clarified and checked. The text's place in the argument concerns a limit of description, not a scientific mechanism.

Imagine someone describing their experience of music. “Sadness,” “openness,” and “hope” communicate something without replacing listening. Two listeners can use different words while recognising an important part of one another's experience. They can use identical words while recalling different moments in the sound. Silence is not the only possible response. We can point to a passage, describe a movement, compare expressions, and leave some experience open. A description that declines exhaustive control can still be precise within its limited role. It assists an encounter without requiring the other person to experience exactly the same thing or confirm a single approved vocabulary of sensations. Another listener can understand a description while also maintaining that it does not fit their own experience.

Appeals to what cannot be named also require discipline. If someone says their meaning is impossible to explain, that does not entitle them to demand trust in every practical decision. We can respect the depth of their experience and still ask about a proposal's consequences, price, obligations, and possibility of refusal. An experience's inexpressibility does not make all conditions of cooperation inexpressible. We should distinguish the intimate fullness of experience from the checkable side of relationships. A person need not prove the former to a listener; the latter cannot automatically follow from an appeal to spiritual depth. Speech's limits leave room for attentive listening without canceling clarity where someone's decision affects another person's time, resources, work, or safety.

VIII. An emotional word and a premature explanation

A word about experience can communicate something and invite clarification at the same time. In an invented example, someone says, “I feel anxious about the meeting.” They have already given important information about their experience. The sentence alone does not identify the expected event, what they fear, or what would help now. Sometimes acknowledging it is enough; sometimes a specific request needs clarification. We should not automatically replace their word with something supposedly more correct, such as “excitement” or “interest.” The person can suggest a different label if it fits. It should not deprive them of authorship over their own description or turn conversation into a test of an approved emotional vocabulary.

Clarification helps when it introduces a distinction that changes the next step. We might ask whether the concern involves unknown conditions, a possible conflict, or having to speak publicly. We might distinguish a bodily sensation, an expectation, and an assessment of capacities without declaring them independent components of a mechanism established for this individual. When particulars are unavailable, the unknown remains unknown. Sometimes the initial word is precise enough for the present purpose: communicating a need for a pause or additional time. Not every experience needs immediate classification. Respect for someone's language includes their freedom to use a familiar expression when it conveys what matters and is not made into evidence for unsupported conclusions about them.

A broad label can nevertheless conceal different possibilities. “I cannot” might describe missing skill, time, willingness, permission, or the difficulty of the action itself. Distinguishing those meanings matters if they change a proposed form of assistance. An invented offer to make a plan will not suit someone who lacks authority; a demand to concentrate will not produce missing resources. A question about the word should follow from the task rather than a wish to analyse the speaker. We are not searching every expression for a hidden diagnosis or universal pattern. We are asking which actual limit it identifies today and whether both participants understand enough to choose an attainable action or honestly leave action unchosen for now.

IX. Expanding a description while keeping it precise

A larger vocabulary helps when new words open distinctions we can check. In an invented visit to a garden, someone learns plant names and begins noticing leaf shapes, shoots, and flowering times. Any change involves a name accompanied by an example and a way to discriminate, not the magic of a new sound. This article promises no measured effect from such an exercise for every reader. You can retain the same interest without memorising terminology or learn names without looking more closely. We can ask which observation became available and whether we can revisit it independently. Knowing the word then remains a means of contact with the object rather than a substitute for that contact.

Changing the form of a description may also help. Instead of “It was a bad conversation,” we can identify its purpose, the sequence of statements, and the point at which people stopped understanding each other. The overall assessment need not disappear: it may still have been unpleasant. Beside it is a description people can work with. Different forms of speech answer different questions. A metaphor conveys a quality of experience, chronology clarifies sequence, a definition specifies a term, and a question opens an unknown. The error begins when a metaphor silently becomes an established cause, not when someone uses metaphor at all. Naming these roles permits expressive language without requiring every striking phrase to serve as a warranted conclusion about another person or the world.

Expansion should remain voluntary. No one must adopt someone else's professional terminology before their experience deserves attention. A new term sometimes assists; at other times it makes speech alien and obstructs what matters. People can then agree on a working expression and explain its meaning. Where a shared project, promise, or technical procedure is involved, however, a private vocabulary must connect with a description accessible to others. Otherwise one participant's convenience becomes everyone else's uncertainty. This creates a balance between freedom to name experience and the need to communicate checkable conditions of work. Banning imagery or insisting on the terminology of one school, profession, religion, or culture cannot settle that balance once and for all.

X. A shared world permits several precise descriptions

Several descriptions of an event can be compatible when they answer different questions. In an invented example, rain changes a gardener's watering conditions, delays a traveller, and produces a particular sound for someone beside a window. These relationships do not make the rain three separate events, nor require everyone's experience to collapse into a single word. But if people dispute whether rain fell in a particular place, the question changes. They need evidence of the event as well as respect for different experiences. Linguistic variety does not cancel factual checking. It shows why identifying purpose and perspective helps us understand what someone asserts and where assertions actually conflict, instead of presuming that all differences are either mere opinions or irreconcilable worlds.

This leads to a more demanding understanding of dialogue. Saying “everyone has their own truth” is insufficient where a decision has shared consequences. We need to identify words that report experience, observation, rules, and expected action, then check differences at an appropriate scale. Someone describing an impression need not make another person feel it; two people agreeing on a meeting need an actual time. Precision does not erase differences. It preserves them without turning a shared task into a contest between vocabularies. Respectful clarification can make a dispute more definite and therefore more discussable, even when substantive agreement has not been reached. Its value is an accessible disagreement, not an automatic promise of harmony or a requirement that somebody concede.

Returning to the two fabric samples, we now see more than a contest over whose language is richer. We can distinguish colour without a ready name, use a name to compare, agree on a purpose, and discover that preferences still differ. Words direct attention when they help us notice a feature, retain a question, and communicate it. Their limits become apparent when a name is mistaken for its object and an impression for a complete answer about causes and consequences. We do not need to abandon language. We need to return each word to its work and allow the object to correct our description. That possibility of revision makes a shared world available to joint observation, rather than only an exchange of confident formulations whose questions have already been closed.

What this means in practice

You can choose an ordinary expression from a conversation that remains unfinished: “unclear,” “respect,” “ready,” or “too much.” Write down what it refers to now. Then separate observation from supposition: what actually happened, which cause do you attribute to it, and what do you expect next? An ideal formulation is unnecessary. A description another participant can clarify or correct while retaining their own position is more useful. This is an original exercise for conversation and reading; the research discussed here does not establish its psychological effectiveness.

Choose one invented case in which the expression applies and another in which it does not. For a document's readiness, specify whether you mean finishing a draft, completing review, or authorising release. For a feeling, retain your own label and ask which details are needed for your present purpose. Some experience can remain without words. There is no need to turn every conversation into an interrogation about terms or demand a detailed explanation from someone who does not want to provide one now.

For shared work, return to the actual agreement: who takes the next step, when, and how can changed conditions be communicated? After clarification, check people's understanding as well as the new expression. Matching formulations do not establish agreement, and silence does not confirm acceptance of a role. If a genuine difference of interests becomes visible, discuss it separately. Linguistic precision helps reveal a choice; it does not make that choice for people. You can finish with one checkable sentence: “By this word, I currently mean this; the rest remains open.”

Key quotation

> *The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.*

Tao Teh King, chapter 1, sentence from the first numbered paragraph; James Legge's translation. This sentence is separated from the preceding sentence about the Tao. It limits identification between naming and what is named within the Daoist text; it is not an empirical theory of vision.

Connections between traditions

1. **Sign and presence.** Aristotle, On Interpretation 1–2, treats a name as a sign; Tao Teh King 1 limits the enduring name. The comparison asks us not to identify a designation with an exhaustive account of its object. Aristotle analyses propositions, while the Daoist passage concerns Tao and naming. Their comparison establishes neither a shared metaphysics nor a theory of perception.

2. **Words and a shared scene.** Augustine's account of learning speech in Confessions I and Locke's Essay III.II.1–2 connect speech with communication between people. This helps distinguish possessing a word from understanding its use. Augustine addresses God and recalls his life; Locke offers a philosophical account of signs. Neither passage is an independent experiment on child development.

3. **Speech and action.** Analects XIII.3 connects names with carrying out affairs; Augustine I presents words alongside gesture and bodily direction. Their overlap concerns speech's involvement in action. The Confucian passage addresses historical government; the Christian autobiography addresses learning within its author's relation to God. Neither establishes the authority of participants in a contemporary agreement.

4. **A shared name and a particular discrimination.** Aristotle 1 separates names from propositions; Winawer et al. examine performance with colour categories. Both invite a question about the work a designation does. The boundary is decisive: a logical distinction does not predict the experimental result, and a colour task does not validate Aristotle's whole philosophy.

5. **Concepts and limits of communication.** Locke III.II.1–2 discusses words as signs of a speaker's ideas; Tao Teh King 1 limits the enduring name. Their authorial intersection allows clarification without claiming exhaustive coverage. A philosophical problem of communication differs from the Daoist question of Tao. Misunderstanding cannot simply be pronounced evidence of inexpressible spiritual depth.

6. **Clarifying names and coordinating affairs.** Locke III.XI.1–2 acknowledges difficulties in reforming language; Analects XIII.3 connects naming with practicable speech. This supports a question about working precision rather than a perfect vocabulary. Locke discusses knowledge, while the Confucian passage concerns government. The contemporary procedure is this article's proposal, not an ancient technique supposedly shared by both.

Primary sources

1. Aristotle, On Interpretation, Parts 1–4, translated by E. M. Edghill. Primary philosophical text: names, signs, propositions; epigraph.

2. Jonathan Winawer et al., Russian blues reveal effects of language on color discrimination, PNAS 104(19), 7780–7785, 2007, DOI 10.1073/pnas.0701644104. Primary experiment; a limited colour-task result, not a theory of all reality.

3. Augustine, Confessions, Book I, account of learning speech, translated by E. B. Pusey, Gutenberg 3296. Primary religious autobiography: words, gesture, and circumstances; not a sampled child-development study.

4. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, III.II.1–2; III.XI.1–2, Gutenberg 10616. Primary philosophical text: communicating ideas and the limits of language reform.

5. Analects XIII.3, translated by James Legge, Gutenberg 3330. Primary Confucian text: names, speech, and government.

6. Tao Teh King, chapter 1, translated by James Legge, Gutenberg 216. Primary Daoist text: naming's limits; key quotation.

Tags

language, perception, attention, naming, sign, category, judgment, meaning, context, communication, vocabulary, colour shades, blue, light blue, language categories, Aristotle, On Interpretation, Augustine, Confessions, John Locke, Confucius, Analects, Tao Teh King, designation, role, agreement, metaphor, testimony, observation, revision

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.