

William Godwin on the Advantages of the Multilingual Mind

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How the ability to call your idea “by various names, borrowed from various languages,” empowers you to conceive that idea “in a way precise, clear and unconfused.”

Nothing furthers the reach of thought in language more surely than proficiency in multiple lexicons, which confers upon the bilingual or multilingual mind a lush advantage of thought. That is what the radical philosopher **William Godwin** (March 3, 1756–April 7, 1836) explores in a passage from his altogether excellent 1797 book *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (*public library*) —

Advocating for teaching young people multiple languages, Godwin writes:

He that is acquainted with only one language, will probably always remain in some degree the slave of language. From the imperfectness of his knowledge, he will feel himself at one time seduced to say the thing he did not mean, and at another time will fall into errors of this sort without being aware of it. It is impossible he should understand the full force of words. He will sometimes produce ridicule, where he intended to produce passion. He will search in vain for the hidden treasures of his native tongue. He will never be able to employ it in the most advantageous manner. He cannot be well acquainted with its strength and its weakness. He is uninformed respecting its true genius and discriminating characteristics. But the man who is competent to and exercised in the comparison of languages, has attained to his proper elevation. Language is not his master, but he is the master of language. Things hold their just order in his mind, ideas first, and then words. Words therefore are used by him as the

means of communicating or giving permanence to his sentiments; and the whole magazine of his native tongue is subjected at his feet.

Epochs before Susan Sontag insisted that words are a tool of personal agency, Godwin argues that our vocabulary furnishes the building blocks of our understanding, which in turn foments our capacity for effective action in the world:

Words are of the utmost importance to human understanding. Almost all the ideas employed by us in matters of reasoning have been acquired by words. In our most retired contemplations we think for the most part in words; and upon recollection can in most cases easily tell in what language we have been thinking. Without words, uttered, or thought upon, we could not probably carry on any long train of deduction. The science of thinking therefore is little else than the science of words. He that has not been accustomed to refine upon words, and discriminate their shades of meaning, will think and reason after a very inaccurate and slovenly manner. He that is not able to call his idea by various names, borrowed from various languages, will scarcely be able to conceive his idea in a way precise, clear and unconfused.
