

# Thinking in English

Liegt der Schlüssel zum Erlernen einer Fremdsprache etwa darin, in dieser Sprache zu denken? **RITA FORBES** hat dazu Dr. Aneta Pavlenko, Professorin für Angewandte Sprachwissenschaften, befragt.

**W**ould you speak, read and understand English better if you actually thought in English?

Dr Aneta Pavlenko, Professor of Applied Linguistics at Temple University, Philadelphia, says there's more to thinking in a foreign language than just hearing the words in your head. To truly master a language, and to think in it, you need to learn to pay attention to the world in new ways. Pavlenko has researched and written about multilingualism. Her most recent book is called *The Bilingual Mind and What It Tells Us about Language and Thought*. Here, in an exclusive interview, she shares insights from her research that may change not only the way you think about language, but about your thinking itself.

**insight** ['ɪnsaɪt]    Einsicht, Einblick



**Spotlight: What does it mean to think in a foreign language?**

**Aneta Pavlenko:** Academics generally differ from laypeople here. Laypeople often think that it means you can articulate thoughts in that language, maybe speak to yourself and form sentences quickly without having to translate. When people hear the words of another language in their head, they may believe they are thinking in that language. But this is misleading. To really think in a different language requires that we start paying attention in new ways. We have to change our categorical distinctions — because things are grouped in different categories in different languages — and the ways we see and understand events.

**Spotlight: Can you give us an example?**

**Pavlenko:** English has a progressive aspect, which means we can talk about things as they're happening, in progress: "I see women walking." "I see children playing." You can't say the same thing in German, can you? My colleagues at the University of Heidelberg have been studying this for several years, using eye-tracking equipment. They find that in German, people talk about goal-oriented events. When they look at a picture of two women walking, they look at the end point: "Where are they walking to? They are walking to the house." When English speakers look at the same type of picture, they don't have to look at the house, because they can simply say: "Oh, there are women walking." It doesn't matter where they're walking to. So when German speakers are learning English, they have to learn to not think about end points, like going to the house or toward the forest. They need to learn to break up events in a more fine-grained way, rather than discussing them holistically like in German.

<b>articulate</b> [ɑ:'tɪkjələɪt]	artikulieren, zur Sprache bringen
<b>distinction</b> [dɪ'stɪŋkʃən]	Unterscheidung
<b>eye-tracking</b> ['aɪ ,trækɪŋ]	Blickbewegungsregistrierungs-
<b>fine-grained</b> [ˌfaɪn 'greɪnd]	detailgenau
<b>goal-oriented</b> ['gəʊl ,ɔ:riəntɪd]	zielorientiert, zweckgerichtet
<b>holistically</b> [həʊ'lɪstɪkəli]	ganzheitlich
<b>laypeople</b> ['leɪ,pɪ:pəl]	Laien
<b>matter</b> ['mætə]	wichtig sein
<b>misleading</b> [mɪs'li:dɪŋ]	irreführend
<b>perceive</b> [pə'si:v]	wahrnehmen
<b>shortcut: take a -</b> ['ʃɔ:tkaɪt]	eine Abkürzung nehmen
<b>subtitle</b> ['sʌb,tʌɪtəl]	Untertitel

**Aneta Pavlenko's tips for learners**



- When you're reading, watching movies or talking to people, pay attention to situations where miscommunication may happen. For example, if you're watching an English movie with German subtitles, think to yourself: Where is the translation correct, and where do we have to take shortcuts? What kinds of things are untranslatable? Where is it difficult to translate between the two languages? It's when you notice these things that are different that you begin thinking in the other language.
- Speaking to yourself in the language you're learning has its advantages — you're practising putting sentences together. But it also has disadvantages, because you don't get the correction you need. So I would say that you actually learn to think better in a language by talking in it to others than by talking to yourself in your head.
- Poetry is a really good way of looking into the mental and emotional world of other languages. Poets are creative. They take interesting shortcuts with language, and they highlight features that are central to the language. I recommend starting with the American poet Billy Collins. Or you might try writing poetry. When you talk about your own feelings in a language, it becomes yours in a way.
- Learning other languages is also helpful, because you work out your own strategies, what works for you. Sometimes, something you've learned in one language can help you with the next.
- One idea for an English lesson would be to have people imagine being in different situations and to ask them how they would describe them, and then see how native speakers of English describe them. Look at the similarities and differences between how German and English speakers perceive the same situation. Do we always think like English speakers? Where are we different?

**Spotlight: Would you say that thinking in your target language is one of the keys to fluency?**

**Pavlenko:** No, I would not. Fluency is the ability to quickly recall words and to string them together. That's not the same as thinking. It's possible to speak fluently, but to continue thinking in the categories of your native language. You wouldn't always communicate well. But you can have basic fluency and get basic tasks done without changing much about the way you see and understand the world.

**Spotlight: Is it really possible to think effectively in another language?**

**Pavlenko:** Absolutely! You see this very well in Germany, where you have people who immigrated to Germany as teenagers or adults and became bilingual writers in German, like Yoko Tawada, who is Japanese-German,

living in the country where the language is spoken. If you're in your native country, that does not have to limit your opportunities for interacting with others, because that's where the contemporary media come in! We have amazing technology that links us to the world. We can watch movies and TV shows, or use YouTube, and Netflix, and Skype...

**Spotlight: Could the increasing amount of English vocabulary and grammatical structures in the German language make it easier for Germans to think in English?**

**Pavlenko:** Well, given the fact that English is a Germanic language, we do have some common ground to begin with. And it's not just McDonald's that travels all over the world today. English concepts, like privacy or frustration, are also being adopted by other languages.

And if you think about how many people are now saying "yay!" and "high five!" and "ouch!" — that, too, is spreading as a way of emotional communication, and it all comes from English. So, yes, the adoption of English-language concepts makes it easier to learn English and to communicate with English speakers, but one also needs to be aware that the meaning of words that have been integrated into another language sometimes changes. In that case, they may create more confusion.

**Spotlight: What do you think of the idea that our language frames the way we perceive the world? Does changing our language change our view of the world?**

**Pavlenko:** Well, that idea has always been rather simplistic, because there

are many different ways of seeing the world, and many of them do not depend on language. The more up-to-date view is not that the language makes us see things, but that we use language as a tool to talk about things that we need to talk about. But when we use a language on an everyday basis, of course, that does train us to systematically pay attention to certain things.



Comedian Ricky Gervais teaches funny English on YouTube

or Alina Bronsky, who is Russian-German and has written some prize-winning books. They write in German in ways that are understandable and appealing to a German audience. There's even an award now for the best non-native-speaker-writer in German. So it definitely is possible. And there are non-native speakers who have become famous English writers, too, which means that they articulate their thoughts in ways that are completely English-like.

**Spotlight: At what point in the learning process do we start to think in a foreign language?**

**Pavlenko:** That very much depends on how much exposure and interaction you have in the language. It could be anything from six months to two years if you are

<b>exposure</b> [ɪk'spəʊʒə]	Kontakt
<b>high five</b> [ˌhaɪ ˈfaɪv] <i>N. Am. ifml.</i>	(Abklatschen zur Begrüßung oder Freude)
<b>ouch</b> [aʊtʃ]	autsch
<b>recall</b> [rɪˈkɔ:l]	hier: abrufen
<b>string</b> [strɪŋ]	verknüpfen
<b>yay</b> [jeɪ] <i>ifml.</i>	juhu



### Films with German subtitles can help you think in English

For example, if you are a speaker of Turkish and you're talking about something that happened, you need to make clear whether you saw the event yourself or whether it's hearsay. So in that way, you can say that our languages train us to pay attention to certain things, and learning a new language means that we need to start paying attention differently. So it's not that the language will ever make you think differently — but you need to start thinking differently if you are to master the language.

### Spotlight: And this different way of thinking — it's something that happens naturally?

**Pavlenko:** Yes. It happens over time, mostly unconsciously. We should stop worrying about languages, because this happens to be one of those things, unlike playing the violin or learning a medical profession, where even a little bit of knowledge is a really good thing! It doesn't have to be perfect — most of the time it cannot be perfect, because we already have a language — but it can be very useful from day one to know a little bit more of another language, a little bit more of another way of seeing the world.

Aneta Pavlenko blogs at  
[www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-bilingual](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-bilingual) ■

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**hearsay** ['hɪəseɪ]    Hörensagen, Gerücht

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