Wendell Johnson

We see the world through our categories, taught Wendell Johnson. Categories again. If you are a dog and my experience is that all dogs bite, then I see you as a biter. In contrast, a person who has developed more extensive categories of dog behaviors would make no such assumption. A word of caution: Categories can cripple understanding. We oversimplify the world and muddle information when we fall into the trap of either-or-ness. For example, if we see things as either good or bad, we are prone to ask, ''Are vitamin C supplements good for me?'' Being more precise with language moves you to ask the better question: ''Under what circumstances will vitamin C supplements benefit me?'' To Johnson, language is the gateway to perfecting our intellect. This is necessary not just for effective communication with others, but to more effectively talk to ourselves. Words are the building blocks of Bruner's mental models—how we shape and re-shape the ideas inside our heads. And when we are ready to move those ideas out of our heads through the act of writing, the words we choose enable us to develop deeper lines of reasoning. Perhaps this explains why people find journaling such an effective tool for enhancing the quality of their thinking. Johnson is adamant about one thing: The responsibility is ours to accurately pass on to the next generation what we really know, and what we have yet to understand. The next generation should stand on our shoulders, not start from scratch. Without focus on language and its careful usage, we are at great risk of passing nonsense to the next.

Could the quality of your thinking be enhanced by increasing your ability to be precise with language? Have you ever considered taking a course in general semantics to transform your language behavior?

Suggested Readings:

1. Johnson W. People in quandaries. New York: Harper & Row; 1946.

2. Johnson W. Your most enchanted listener. New York: Harper & Row; 1956.

Learn More about Johnson:

http://www.uiowa.edu/~cyberlaw/oldinav/wjhome.html