

# Thinking Without Words

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I am convinced that people whose work involves *thought* as opposed to *talk* do their best thinking without words, using what I call Non-verbal Thought (NVT). To me, the idea that mathematicians, artists and chess players think in words while they are working productively is preposterous. To quote Einstein, “The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought.”

But I also think that *everyone* uses NVT *everyday* to do familiar tasks, but it is not

☞ conversational – you prepare for future conversations and you rehash old ones; this will be with us as long as there is conversation, and I don’t have any problem with it.

From time to time I have attempted to improve my thinking by removing unnecessary words. On one occasion I decided to see if I could think in French, but found that it wasn’t worth the effort, as I wasn’t thinking that much in English! Other times

about, then you have the option of taking your brain out of gear and letting it do its job of thinking. Of course, if it kicks off a useful thought you can follow up on it, i.e., encourage the brain to go into it more deeply. Maybe it’ll come up with enough that you can actually go do something, instead of sitting around doing nothing! However, there is a psychological factor at work here. I have a specialist type of personality, and when I’m not working on my current project,

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regarded as real thinking – it’s dismissed as reflexive behaviour, or whatever.

Until I graduated university I didn’t even know NVT existed! A few weeks into my first job of teaching high school, I found myself thinking in words and I literally didn’t know what was going on. I finally figured out it was caused by all the verbalization I was doing every day and I was most annoyed – as if a mere job should affect the way I thought!

Several mental processes that involve words are:

☞ the attempt to reason, mentally or otherwise, in words – talking to yourself. In fact, we aren’t really thinking in words, we are holding a dialog with the brain, trying consciously to direct it. So the actual thinking is going on in spite of the words! This doesn’t sound like a very organized process, but it is no doubt appropriate for some situations, possibly where there is a high emotional overtone.

☞ putting the result of sub-conscious thought into words. This seems like a waste of time and mental resources. Why not react to the thought as soon as you’re aware of it, without sub-vocalization, but as a segue into further cogitation or actual action?

☞ psychological – you’re keeping yourself company – no comments or complaints here.

have been when I’ve been writing about NVT and needed to clarify my thoughts; actually this had the immediate (but fortunately short-lived) effect of making me conscious of how I was thinking, increasing verbalization.

I’ve found that I can reduce unnecessary sub-vocalization in daily life just by making a point of not thinking in words. It is my impression that anyone can improve their NVT, but it takes time and effort; on the other hand, presumably, anyone can lose NVT by sloppy thinking.

I wouldn’t want to give the impression that I never use words while thinking. Even apart from the exceptions mentioned previously, I have a tendency to use words as place-holders and for emphasis. I didn’t mention this as a separate category, as it doesn’t seem significant. Also, it seems quite variable in frequency and intensity, indicating that it’s just sloppy thinking and maybe eventually I’ll have it under control.

Mental life is noticeably different with NVT:

☞ petty decision making – e.g., instead of asking yourself, “what did I forget?” just stop everything, wait, and the answer will pop into your head. At this point you don’t say to yourself “oh, yes, I forgot my wallet,” you just go get it.

☞ blank periods – if you don’t have anything particular you want to think

I’m perfectly happy to be thinking of nothing. But someone who’s more of a generalist might only be happy when their mind is bubbling up with ideas, useful and otherwise, and the only time you’re going to find them making like a Zen monk is when they’re dead!

☞ analytical thinking – this is a sub-conscious brain function resulting from conscious data gathering. The concepts have to be built up, over time, with experience, or there won’t be anything for the brain to work with. I noticed this when I was learning to fly. There were many new concepts to be assimilated, not just memorized. At home you might be able to apply a navigation rule by recalling the words, but in the air, with all the sensory overhead of flying the plane, you need the deeper understanding to avoid mistakes.

I would like to see more awareness of NVT to save other people the learning curve and to improve the overall level of cognition and reasoning (wow!). It sounds like something up Mensa’s street, not because it necessarily requires intelligence (at least I don’t think so) but because it concerns mental efficiency, which normally correlates to intelligence. In other words, more brain power for the buck!☞

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