

Language And Culture

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Abstract: The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Different ideas stem from differing language use within one's culture and the whole intertwining of these relationships start at one's birth. When an infant is born, it is not unlike any other infant born, in fact, quite similar. It is not until the child is exposed to their surroundings that they become individuals in and of their cultural group. This idea, which describes all people as similar at birth, has been around for thousands of years and was discussed by Confucius as recorded in the book by his followers, *Analects* (Xu, 1997). From birth, the child's life, opinions, and language are shaped by what it comes in contact with. Brooks (1968) argues that physically and mentally everyone is the same, while the interactions between persons or groups vary widely from place to place. Patterns which emerge from these group behaviours and interactions will be approved of, or disapproved of. Behaviours which are acceptable will vary from location to location (Brooks, 1968) thus forming the basis of different cultures. It is from these differences that one's view of the world is formed. Hantrais (1989) puts forth the idea that culture is the beliefs and practices governing the life of a society for which a particular language is the vehicle of expression. Therefore, everyone's views are dependent on the culture which has influenced them, as well as being described using the language which has been shaped by that culture. The understanding of a culture and its people can be enhanced by the knowledge of their language. This brings us to an interesting point brought up by Emmitt and Pollock (1997), who argue that even though people are brought up under similar behavioural backgrounds or cultural situations but however speak different languages, their world view may be very different. As Sapir-Whorf argues, different thoughts are brought about by the use of different forms of language. One is limited by the language used to express one's ideas. Different languages will create different limitations, therefore a people who share a culture but speak different languages, will have different world views. Still, language is rooted in culture and culture is reflected and passed on by language from one generation to the next (Emmitt & Pollock 1997). From this, one can see that learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture (Allwright & Bailey 1991). Consequently, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram 1989). The implications of language being completely entwined in culture, in regards for language teaching and language policy are far reaching. Language teachers must instruct their students on the cultural background of language usage, choose culturally appropriate teaching styles, and explore culturally based linguistic differences to promote understanding instead of misconceptions or prejudices. Language policy must be used to create awareness and understandings of cultural differences, and written to incorporate the cultural values of those being taught.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language always carries meanings and references beyond itself: The meanings of a particular language represent the culture of a particular social group. To interact with a language means to do so with the culture which is its reference point. We could not understand a culture without having direct access to its language because of their intimate connection.

A particular language points to the culture of a particular social group. Learning a language, therefore, is not only learning the alphabet, the meaning, the grammar rules and the arrangement of words, but it is also learning the behavior of the society and its cultural customs. Thus; language teaching should always contain some explicit reference to the culture, the whole from which the particular language is extracted.

The human communication process is complex, as many of our messages are transmitted through paralanguage. These auxiliary communication techniques are culture-specific, so communication with people from other societies or ethnic groups is fraught with the danger of misunderstanding, if the larger framework of culture is ignored.

Growing up in a particular society, we informally learn how to use gestures, glances, slight changes in tone or voice, and other auxiliary communication devices to alter or to emphasize what we say and do. We learn these culturally specific techniques over many years, largely by observing and imitating.

The most obvious form of paralanguage is body language, or Kinesics, which is the language of gestures, expressions, and postures. However, the meaning of words can also be altered by tone and character of voice. Language is complexly intertwined with culture (they have evolved together, influencing one another in the process, ultimately shaping what it means to be human). In this context, A.L.Krober (1923) said, "culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other."

If culture is a product of human interaction, cultural manifestations are acts of communication that are assumed by particular speech communities. Language communicates through culture and culture also communicates through language: Michael Silverstein proposed that the communicative force of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality, but also in connecting one context with another. That is, communication is not only the use of symbols that "stand for" beliefs, feelings, identities, or events, it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the present context.

According to the linguistic relativity principle, the way in which we think about the world is directly influenced by the language we use to talk about it. "The real world is, to a large extent, unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever so similar that they represent the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct, not merely the same with a different label attached" (Edward Sapir, 1929). Therefore, to speak is to assume a culture, and to know a culture is like knowing a language. Language and culture are homologous mental realities. Cultural products are representations and interpretations of the world that must be communicated in order to be lived.

The problem lies in what happens when cross-cultural interactions take place, i.e., when message producer and message receiver are from different cultures. Contact among cultures is increasing and intercultural communication is imperative for anyone wanting to get along with and understand those whose beliefs and backgrounds may be vastly different from their own.

II. LINE BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language can mark the cultural identity, but it is also used to refer to other phenomena and refer beyond itself, especially when a particular speaker uses it to explain intentions. A particular language points to the culture of a particular social group. We can therefore presume that language learning is cultural learning, so language teaching is cultural teaching due to the interdependence of language and cultural learning.

Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, basic assumptions, and values that are shared by a group of people and that influence each member's behavior and each member's interpretations of the meanings of other people's behavior. And language is the medium for expressing and embodying other phenomena. It expresses the values, beliefs and meanings which members of a given society share by virtue of their socialization into it. Language also refers to objects peculiar to a given culture, as evidenced by proper names which embody those objects. Byran posited that "a loaf of bread" evokes a specific culture of objects in British usage unless a conscious effort is made to empty it of that reference and introduce a new one. So, we can conclude that language is a part of culture, and through it, we can express cultural beliefs and values, and that the specific usages of a given word are peculiar to a language and its relationship with culture.

In fact, language teaching means, inevitably, language and cultural teaching. According to Buttjst, "Culture learning is actually a key factor in being able to use and master a foreign linguistic system." The Bellagio Declaration of the European Cultural Foundation and the International Council for Educational Development states, "For effective international cooperation, knowledge of other countries and their cultures is as important as proficiency in their languages and such knowledge is dependent on foreign language teaching."

Learning a language is therefore learning the behavior of a given society and its cultural customs. Language is a product of the thought and behavior of a society. An individual language speaker's effectiveness in a foreign language is directly related to his/her understanding of the culture of that language (Taylor, 1979), and it is possible to consider teaching culture through learners' own languages, which can be used in a specific way to interpret the other culture (Ager).

Finally, we can conclude that immersion teaching accelerates the acquisition of cultural knowledge: "...the integration of language and culture learning by using the language as medium for the continuing socialization of students is a process which is not intended to imitate and replicate the socialization of native-speaker teachers but rather to develop student's cultural competence from its existing stage, by changing it into intercultural competence"

It is now clear that the terminology used by a culture primarily reflects that culture's interests and concerns. For instance, Indians in Canada's Northwest Territories typically have at least 13 terms for different

types and conditions of snow, while most non-skiing native Southern Californians use only 2 terms--ice and snow. That does not mean that the English language only has 2 terms. Quite the contrary, there are many more English words that refer to different states of frozen water, such as blizzard, dusting, flurry, frost, hail, hardpack, powder, sleet, slush, and snowflake. The point is that these terms are rarely if ever used by people living in tropical or subtropical regions because they rarely encounter frozen water in any form other than ice cubes. The distinctions between different snow conditions are not relevant to everyday life and children may not even have the words explained to them. However, people in these warmer regions make fine distinctions about other phenomena that are important to them. For instance, coastal Southern Californians often have dozens of surfing related words that would likely be unknown to most Indians in the Northwest Territories or to people living in Britain for that matter.

The number of terms related to a particular topic also may be greater or smaller depending on such social factors as gender. For example, North American women generally make far more color distinctions than do men. This may be largely due to the fact that subtle color differences are important factors in women's clothing and makeup. Parents and peers usually encourage and train girls early to be knowledgeable about these distinctions.

The cultural environment that people grow up in can have surprising effects on how they interpret the world around them. This became apparent during a Washington D.C. murder trial in 2002. A deaf man was convicted of stabbing to death two of his classmates at Gallaudet University. At his trial, the defendant said that he was told to do it by mysterious black-gloved hands. His delusions did not come in the form of spoken language. He was told to commit these brutal murders through sign language--his mode of communication. Another example is provided by Guugu Timithirr language speakers of the Cape York Peninsula in northeastern Australia. This group of Aborigines do not have words for left, right, front, or back. They use absolute rather than relative directions. When they refer to people or objects in their environment, they use compass directions. They would say "I am standing southwest of my sister" rather than "I am standing to the left of my sister." Critics of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would point out that the Aborigines who speak this language also usually learn English and can use left, right, front, and back just as we do. However, if they do not learn English during early childhood, they have difficulty in orienting themselves relatively and absolute orientation makes much more sense to them.

III. CONCLUSION

Although language is no longer just used for basic needs for survival, the evolution of language continues as new generations integrate new technology as a part of their daily vocabulary. Just as stone tool making had also used communication to improve on technology across generations, our future generation will continue to evolve language to technology as our society becomes more heavily depended on it. Language just like biological evolution will continue to evolve to simplify tasks and getting meaning across to another person more effectively. As efficiency in communication grows, it will allow for more room in the brain to develop in different aspects of life, forcing humans to be able to achieve more. As we continue to study the capabilities of the brain to acquire language, use and its creative outlets, we can see that biological factors on a primitive level will still play a large role in language learning. On the other hand, it can be observed that a child's language ability is not only depended on the natural capabilities of its brain but rather, its social environments could play a larger role in the amount of knowledge and languages a child could be exposed to. Therefore, the evolution of language cannot be just observed as solely biological or socio-cultural but rather the interworking of the two contributed to the development of human languages.

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