

## **Language and Culture**

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### **Abstract**

*Language, the most commonplace of all human possessions, is possibly the most complex and the most interesting. Since it is an instrument for humans' communications with each other, the growth and development of their talents, causing creativity, innovation, and novelty, exchanging and transferring their experiences, and on the whole, for formation of society(s). Concern with language is not new. From the earliest recorded history, there is evidence that people investigated language. Many of the assumptions, theories and goals of modern linguistics find their origin in past centuries. However, this study aims to investigate whether there is any relationship between language and culture, and if so, what the relationship between language and culture is. To achieve the aims of this study, some of the main theories which can be related to the goal of the paper are introduced and explained. Then, it is followed by a precise discussion. The results of the article indicate that there is a very close relationship between language and culture. That is, culture has a direct effect on language. Language and culture are closely correlated.*

### **Introduction**

Human being is a social creature. In fact, man is a receiver and sender of messages who assembles and distributes information (Greimas, 1970). Sapir (1956) insists that “every cultural pattern and every single act of social behaviour involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense” (p. 104). The tool for this communication is language.

This study seeks to investigate whether there is any relationship between language and culture, and if so, what the connection between language and culture is. In other words, if there is relationship between language and culture, how they can have this association. To achieve the answer of the above question, some of the main relevant points are introduced and discussed as follows.

### **Language**

To open discussion about language, first of all, it seems necessary to mention that as far as language is concerned, Saussure's theory of the sign is one of the main theories which had an effective and significant role in this domain. Saussure's theory of the sign has a thoughtful and reflective manipulate on both linguistic and the rise of semiotic approach. In this respect, Saussure (1974) believes that language is a system of signs. For him, a sign consists of a signifier (the sound- image or the written shape) and a signified (a concept), in the manner that, they both are inseparably linked with each other (ibid). In other words, the sound-image cannot be separated from the concept, that is to say, these two never part with each other (ibid). He further likens language and thought to a sheet of paper; He believes that thought is the front part of paper and sound the back part. It is impossible to cut any of the two parts without cutting the other. In the sense that, in language the sounds and thought are inseparable.

On the other hand, the indivisibility and undividability of the signifier and the signified, for instance, for a speaker of English the sound-image *dog* belongs with the concept and perception *dog* and not with the concept *cow*, generates the misapprehension and false impression of the lucidity and clearness of language. In other words, as Hjelmslev (1969) maintains, “It is the nature of language to be overlooked” (p. 5).

Generally speaking, language is introduced by Crystal (1971, 1992) as “the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self expression”. Similarly, Emmitt and Pollock (1997) believe that language is a system of arbitrary signs which is accepted by a group and society of users. It is taken delivery of a specific purpose in relation to the communal world of clients. Chase (1969) declares that the purpose of language use is to communicate with others, to think, and to shape one’s standpoint and outlook on life. Indeed, language figures human thoughts (ibid). Saussure (1956, 1972, 1974, 1983) defines language as the system of differences. In this sense, he believes in the difference of meaning of a sound-image or written shape in different languages. “If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true” (Saussure, 1974, p. 116). That is to say, the concept of a sound-image or symbol in different languages is different.

### **Culture**

According to Roohul-Amini (1989) "Culture has multifarious meanings. Culture meant farming" (p. 15). It is used everywhere as rural culture, urban culture, American culture and so on. Today, in every field, in humanities, every research requires a general view of culture. It is used in archaeology, linguistics, history, psychology, sociology and etc. It is even said that man is an animal with culture. That is to say, the factor which differentiates the human being's behaviour from the behaviour of animal is culture (Mesbahe Yazdi, 2005). In general, from the sociological perspective, culture is the total of the inherited and innate ideas, attitudes, beliefs, values, and knowledge, comprising or forming the shared foundations of social action. Likewise, from the anthropological and ethnological senses, culture encompasses the total range of activities and ideas of a specific group of people with common and shared traditions, which are conveyed, distributed, and highlighted by members of the group (Collins English Dictionary 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003).

There are about two or three hundred and even more definitions for culture. With respect to the definition of culture, Edward Sapir (1956) says that culture is a system of behaviours and modes that depend on unconsciousness. Rocher (1972, 2004), an anthropologist, believes that “Culture is a connection of ideas and feelings accepted by the majority of people in a society” (p. 142). Undeniably, culture is learned and shared within social groups and is conveyed by nongenetic ways (The American Heritage, Science Dictionary 2005). Taylor (1974), an anthropologist, says in his Primitive Culture that culture in a complex definition includes beliefs, arts, skills, moralities, laws, traditions and behaviours that an individual, as a member of a society, gets from his own society. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), consider civilization and culture the same and they believe the two terms have been used synonymously. For them, they both indicate different levels of the same subject. Civilization indicates the great development of a civilized society; culture indicates the same subject too (ibid). Each society has its own special culture either simple or complex. If culture is taken seriously, it seems that people require not only sufficient food but also well-cooked food. Goodenough (1996) claims that culture is a systematic association of people that have a certain way of life. Therefore, culture is the only distinction between human and animals. Of course, animals live in association but it is a special kind. There are, indeed, a lot of sharing characteristics between human beings and animals such as associative life, responsibility toward children and so on. But culture is for men, only. T. S. Eliot (1961) considers culture as a capital and means for developing all cultures and knowledge in order to terminate all human sharing problems, for helping economical stabilization and political security. Spencer (1986) calls culture the milieu of super organic and highlights the separation of culture from physical and natural factors. He believes that the super organic factor is only for man, whereas; the other two factors are the same for man and animal.

### **Elements of Culture**

Each individual belongs to a special group. He/She reflects his/her own special thought and culture. It is easy to put him/her in his/her group and distinguish him/her from the others. For instance, language of a child is different from the language of an adult or the people in the North speak differently from the people in the South or the language of the poor is different from the language of the rich, even their clothes are different.

Elements such as language, rituals, clothes, science, beliefs and values connect people together (Roohul-Amini, 1989). Culture is learnt through relation with other people. Therefore, culture is not natural, inborn and will-less; it is a social product. Some factors are considerable and momentous in this transmission such as information and knowledge in a society, social changes, social relations and mass media. Thus, culture transmits generation by generation, the elements are carried from one place to another place, it is divided into some sub-cultures and it is finally the victim of crises.

Words are the most significant tools of cultural symbols. That is to say, poems, stories, fictions, epics and myths are the main ingredients and components of a culture in a society. Myth, Levis Strauss (1976) believes, in a language expresses universal realities in symbols. On the whole, the elements of culture are the entirety of socially transmitted and common behavior patterns, prototypes, samples, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.

### **Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis**

Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis is a Hypothesis built up and expanded by B. L. Whorf (1897 – 1941) and derived from linguistic approach of his teacher, E. Sapir (1884 – 1939). This hypothesis, in fact, suggests that a language determines and resolves the thought and perception of its speakers. In the sense that, no language can subsist except it is in the context of culture and reciprocally, the culture which does not have at its centre the structure of a standard and ordinary language cannot survive (Sapir, 1921; Berlin and Kay, 1969). Whorf himself called this view the 'linguistic relativity principle' (Whorf, 1952; Lucy, 1992a, 1992b; Levinson, 2000; Gilbert, et al. 2008).

Consequently, Sapir – Whorf hypothesis is, indeed, a theory of the relationship between language and thought expounded in its most explicit form by the American anthropological linguists Edward Sapir (1884 – 1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897 – 1941). This hypothesis is also known as the theory of the linguistic *relativity*. The main idea in this hypothesis, as Whorf (Whorf, 1952, 1956; Levinson, 2000; Gilbert, et al. 2008) puts it, is that every human being views the world by his own native language. In other words, just as time, space, and mass (according to Einstein) can be defined only in terms of a system of relationships, human knowledge similarly arises only in relation to the semantic and structural possibilities of natural languages.

In fact, Sapir and Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1952, 1956; Berlin and Kay, 1969; Lucy, 1992a, Lucy 1992b; Levinson, 2000; Gilbert, et al. 2008) comprises two consistent and unified ingredients as follows:

- Linguistic Relativity: In accordance with linguistic relativity the languages which are completely different in their vocabulary and structure, put across and convey different cultural significances and meanings. This belief, indeed, maintains that the way people view the world is determined wholly or partly by the structure of their native language.
- Linguistic Determinism: In proportion to linguistic determinism in its strong version, models and samples of thought and observation and comprehending of reality are settle on, agreed on and found out by one's native language.

The first part which is *linguistic relativity*, indeed, has a more important role in forming Sapir and Whorf hypothesis. The main idea in this hypothesis, as Whorf (ibids) puts it, is that every human being views the world by his own native language.

### **Discussion**

#### **Language and Culture**

The word culture has several related senses, they are important to be mentioned. These senses can be briefly explained as follows:

There is, first of all, the sense in which culture is more or less synonymous with civilization and, in an older and extreme formulation of the contrast, opposed to 'barbarism'. This is the sense that is operative, in English, in the adjective 'cultured'. It rests ultimately upon the classical conception of what constitutes excellence in art, literature, manners and social institutions. Revived by the Renaissance humanists, the classical conception was emphasized by thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and associated by them with their view of human history as progress and self-development.

The view of history was challenged, as were many of the ideas of the Enlightenment, by Herder, who said of the German equivalent of 'culture': "nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing is more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods" (Williams, 1976, 1983, p. 79).

It is interesting to note, in this connection, that the expression 'language de culture (literally, "language of culture") is commonly employed by French-speaking scholars to distinguish what are held to be culturally more advanced from culturally less advanced languages. 'Kultursprache' is similarly used in German. Although there is no accepted equivalent in English, the attitude on which the use of such expression rests is no less common in English-speaking societies. Most linguists nowadays take the view that there are no primitive languages. However, it is worth looking at this question again with particular reference to what one might call the classical conception of culture.

The word culture is to be interpreted, not in its classical sense, but in what might be described loosely as its anthropological sense. In fact, this is the sense in which Herder proposed that the term should be used; but it was not until about eighty years later that anthropologists writing in English adopted this usage. In this second sense, culture is employed without any implication of unilinear human progress from barbarism to civilization and without a prior value being made as to the aesthetic or intellectual quality of a particular society's art, literature, institutions and so on. In this sense of the term, which has spread from anthropology to the other social sciences, every society has its own culture; and different subgroups within a society may have their own distinctive subculture. Herder's promotion of the word culture in this sense was bound up with this thesis of the interdependence of language and thought, on the one hand, and, on the other, with his view that a nation's language and culture were manifestations of its distinctive national spirit or mind. Indeed, many other writers in the Romantic movement had similar ideas. This is one strand in the complex historical development of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which dominated all discussion of language and culture, as it did of language and thought, a generation ago.

Although the word culture is now widely employed in the social sciences, and especially by anthropologists, in the sense that has just been identified, it can be defined, technically, in several different ways. Culture may be described as socially acquired knowledge, to be precise, as the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society. Two points must be made here about the use of the word knowledge. First, it is to be understood as covering both practical and propositional knowledge: both knowing how to do something and knowing that something is or is not so. Second, as far as propositional knowledge is concerned, it is the fact that something is held to be true that counts, not its actual truth or falsity. Furthermore, in relation to most, if not all, cultures we must allow for different kinds or levels of truth, such that for example the truth of a religious or mythological statement is evaluated differently from that of a straightforward factual report. Looking from this point of view, science itself is a part of culture. And in the discussion of the relationship between language and culture no priority should be given to scientific knowledge over common-sense knowledge or even superstition.

It is customary to draw a distinction between cultural and biological transmission. As far as language is concerned, it is quite possible that there is an innate language-acquisition faculty. Whether or not this is so, there is no doubt that one's knowledge of one's native language is culturally transmitted: it is acquired, though not necessarily learned, by virtue of one's membership of a particular society. Moreover, even if there is a genetically transmitted language-faculty, this cannot result in the acquisition and knowledge of a language unless the data upon which the language-faculty operates are supplied by the society in which the child is growing up and, arguably, in conditions which do not seriously affect the child's cognitive and emotional development. This means that the cultural and the biological in language are interdependent. Indeed, it will be obvious, on reflection, that one's linguistic competence, regardless of its biological basis, comes within the scope of our definition of culture. And it may very well be that other kinds of socially acquired knowledge—including myth, religious belief and so on—have as much of a species-specific biological basis as language does. This point should be borne in mind when one is considering the acquisition and structure of language in terms of the opposition between the biological and the cultural. In fact, it is no longer possible to think in terms of a sharp distinction between nature and nurture. **Herder** talks about the interdependence of language and thought. Humboldt comes closer to linguistic determinism. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as it is usually presented, combines linguistic determinism (language determines thought) with linguistic relativity (There is no limit to the structural diversity of languages).

Concerning the above discussion in addition to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis the following points appear in the mind:

1. We are, in all our thinking and forever, at the understanding of the particular language which has become the means of expression for our society, we experience and practice our expression by means of the characteristics, peculiarities, and sometimes literary words encoded in our language.
2. The characteristics, peculiarities, and literary words encoded in one language system are distinctive, typical, and unique to that system and they are dissimilar as well as incomparable with those of other systems.
3. Since the culture of a particular place or nation is different from others, sometimes the misunderstanding and misconception occurs when one from another nation uses the language of that nation.
4. In order to understand the specific words, literary terms, and even sometimes the simple words in one language, we must be familiar with the culture of that nation.

Thus, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis mostly indicates the influence of language on thought. It is worth mentioning that, as a reality, memory and perception are affected by the availability of appropriate words and expression. For example, experiments have shown that visual memories tend to be distorted so that they are in closer correspondence with commonly used expressions; and that people tend to notice the things that are codable in their language: i.e. things that fall within the scope of readily available words and expressions. Codability, in this sense, is a matter of degree. Something which comes within the denotation of a common single word is more highly codable than something whose description requires a specially constructed phrase. Codability is not unavoidably constant and uniform throughout a language-community-especially when we are dealing with a community as complex, as diffuse and as varied as the native speakers of English. All too often, the correlation of language and culture is made at a very general level, and with the tacit or explicit assumption that those who speak the same language must necessarily share the same culture. This assumption is manifestly false in respect of many languages and many cultures. No less important is the fact that the codability is not simply a matter of the existence of single-word lexemes.

Particular languages are associated historically with particular cultures; the languages provide the key to the associated cultures, and especially to their literature; the languages themselves cannot be fully understood otherwise than in the context of the cultures in which they are inextricably embedded; subsequently, language and culture are studied together. It so happens that English and the other major languages of Europe are, in many respect, highly unrepresentative of the languages of the world. English, in particular, has been used in the administration of an empire of great cultural diversity. It is spoken as a native language by members of many different ethnic groups and adherents of many religions, living in many parts of the world. It is widely employed by anthropologists, missionaries and writers of all kinds, not only in the description of every known society, but also in novels, plays and etc., which have their setting in countries and societies in which English is not normally spoken.

The above points indicate that English, to an even greater extent than other European languages, has been enlarged and modified by loan-translation in almost every area of its vocabulary. The correlation between the semantic structure of English and the cultures of its native speakers are therefore much more complex and diverse than are the correlations between language and culture in the vast majority of human societies. It is also much easier for a native speaker of English or one of the major languages of Europe to think that all human languages are inter-translatable than it would be for a speaker of most other languages.

### ***Conclusion***

From the mentioned points and discussion, it can be concluded that there is a very close relationship between language and culture in general, and a specific language and its culture in particular. That is, culture has a direct effect on language. In fact, the two issues are closely correlated and interrelated. Language is the symbolic presentation of a nation or a specific community. In other words, language is the symbolic presentation of a culture.

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