

Lecture 1: what is culture?

1) Some Definitions of Culture

Many people think that culture is a simple word which can be easily defined. However, as one tries to find a definition for this term, s/he may be astonished by the range of definitions s/he would come across. The simplest source of the complexity of defining culture stems from the fact that definitions of culture vary to different extents from one field of study to another. Some of these definitions may seem alike, convergent or homogenous overlapping in some way or another; some others are different, divergent, and even conflicting. Defining culture is a source of controversy as researchers from different fields of studies (ethnography, anthropology, cultural studies, and language teaching) show little agreement about how to define it. So if one is to define culture, he has first to agree with Scollon and Scollon (2001) who say “the word culture often brings up more problems than it solves” (138).

A twofold definition is given by Scollon and Scollon (2001) who distinguish between two ways of using the word culture: high culture and anthropological culture. When the word culture is used with the first meaning, high culture, the emphasis is on the period of social development and organization that is considered most highly advanced. In this sense, societies may be described as highly cultured when, for example, high intellectual and artistic achievements are reached. On the other hand, when culture is used in an anthropological sense, which is the appropriate meaning in intercultural communication as claimed by Scollon and Scollon (2001), an emphasis is put upon the “ideas”, “communications”, or “behaviours”

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by Dr . Lounis Maha /MCA / Mila University

that characteristically represent a particular group of people and systematize cohesion and membership in that group. Using culture in an anthropological context implies that culture is unavoidably related to social groups at times uniting the members of a particular group, and, at others, distinguishing a group from other groups. Group identity is reinforced by culture.

Another anthropological definition is given by Tylor (1871, p. 1) and runs as follows, “culture is...the complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” While this definition does not provide an exhaustive list of the components which make up “the complex whole”, it indicates that culture is something which is not innate. Culture is rather something that people acquire and learn through everyday experience and contact with other members of society or, using Duranti’s definition, culture is “something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interactions and, of course, through linguistic interaction.” (1997, p. 24). This definition of culture draws a link between culture and language, the latter being the medium which brings about the communicability of the former. However, language should not exclusively receive all the credit for passing down cultural heritages among generations because other human actions and the rules which govern such actions seem to be of equal importance.

According to Barnett (1988), Culture may be defined as a general agreement among members of a given community about the meaning of verbal and nonverbal symbols. In the absence of such an agreement, it would be impossible to encode and decode the meaning of messages. In other words, Social interaction necessitates a consensus held by the members of

the community about the meaning encoded in symbols of all types in addition to other rules of communication. Standing on a similar ground, Geertz (1973) claims that culture is:

Historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in a symbolic form by means of which men communicate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life.(p. 89)

In this definition, a number of ideas are issued. First, culture is transmittable. Second, culture is a set of symbols that represent meanings. Third the the existence of such a systematized symbolic representation of meanings enables men to communicate and promote their knowledge. This knowledge according to Geertz, guides the way people act and react appropriately and it has an impact on “each member’s interpretations of the meanings of other people’s behaviour” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, P. 4). 89)

From a foreign language teaching perspective, as claimed by Robinson (1985), culture is also viewed and defined differently according to different language teaching theories:

- From a behavioral view, culture is considered as observable human behavior and includes customs, habits and rituals particular to a specific group.
- From a functionalist view, culture is seen as forms of rule governed behavior. The rules underlying a person’s behavior are to be inferred from his observed bahvior(s).

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- From a cognitive view, culture is seen as a set of mental processes ranging from memorization to interpretation of incoming data much similar to data processing by computer programs.
- From a symbolic view, culture is seen as a non static system of symbols and meanings. These meanings arise from an individual's conception of the world around them.

From all that has been said, it can be concluded that culture refers to the knowledge about manners of behavior, skills, beliefs, values, norms and attitudes. It is this knowledge, whether acquired or learnt, that unites people and informs them to behave as a group. Culture is something beyond civilization.