

Lecture 4: The Interrelationship between Language and Culture

1) **Language and Culture**

Language is a complex code, broadly constructed and extensively shared, that allows a group of human beings to communicate their thoughts to one another. A major advantage of human language being a learned symbolic communication system is that it is infinitely flexible. Meanings can be changed and new symbols can be created. This is evidenced by the fact, that new words are invented daily and the meaning of old ones changes. This allows us to respond linguistically to major environmental, historical, and social changes.

Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives. Culture (from the Latin cultura stemming from colere, meaning "to cultivate,") generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance.

In this respect, there are many definitions as many as researchers about the nature of language. Throughout history, it is considered as the best human beings tool with which human beings could express feelings, needs, experiences, attitudes, and communicate among each other. The entirely human community use language to get in contact and at the same time to entrap the knowledge, traditions, etc by making it remain for the next generations over time (Salehi, 2012: 76). In this line, Oxford Dictionary (2007: 829-830) suggests that

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“language is that system of communication in speech and writing used by people of a particular country or area”. So, language is a means of communication and preservation of human’s heritage through the written form at the same time. Numerous alternative definitions are elaborated from this respect, some of them are; “the totality of utterances that can be made in a speech community is the language of the speech community” (Bloomfield, 1957: 26). Chomsky (1964: 13) viewed it from his generative theory and described it as a set of finite or infinite of sentences, each one is finite in length and is constructed out of finite set of elements. He makes further distinctions between language manifestations. He introduces the notion of E-Language (External Manifestations) and I-Language (Internal Manifestations). According to him, E-languages are appropriate for society, politics, etc. Following this language pattern, it would lead us to conclude that a language is a social fact and a kind of a social contact. It does not exist within individuals themselves, but in a community as a whole. In this way, a language could be seen as follows; “it is a treasure buried by the practice of speech in people belonging to the same community, a grammatical system which has virtual existence in each brain, or more exactly in the brain of a collection of individuals; because language is not complete in any individual, but exists only in the collectivity” (De Saussure, 1961: 30).

To sum up, language has been seen to have two main purposes; to enable communication between people and to represent the world that surrounds them (Eriksson, 2009: 7). But in order to reach this level of communication, there is a need to achieve what is stated by Oxford Dictionary “language is to be able to communicate easily with another person because you share similar opinions and experiences” (829-830). In this respect, it can be understood that there are myriad of languages, communities, and

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cultures. In order to communicate successfully with people of different languages it is really imperative to tackle the issue of language beyond the boundaries of First Language “FL” to move to learn about Second Language and Foreign Languages as well. That is why the concepts of first language, second language and foreign language are all relevant in this respect.

As seen in previous lessons, different definitions of "culture" reflect different theoretical bases for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity. Culture can be defined as all the behaviors, arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture has been called "the way of life for an entire society." As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior such as law and morality, and systems of belief as well as the arts and gastronomy. Culture is symbolic. In addition, the best example of this is language. The most important symbolic aspect of culture is language – using words to represent objects and ideas. Through language, humans are able to transmit culture from one generation to another. In particular, language makes it possible to learn from cumulative, shared experience. Without it, one could not inform others about events, emotions, and other experiences to which they were not a party. Language is both, part of culture as well as the medium by which culture is defined and described.

2) *Language is a part of culture*

Language is a part of culture because language is the vehicle for nearly every type of cultural expression. Even seemingly, wordless artifacts in media such as music, dance, food, costume and handicrafts are ultimately transmitted from one generation to the next via lessons, apprenticeships, recipes and instructions that are expressed using language.

Cultural concepts are embedded in language, and the architecture of each language contains culturally specific features. These include both lexical and grammatical characteristics. The lexical characteristics are often the most obvious and tend to attract more attention.

Some social scientists consider that without language, culture would not be possible. Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. In the broadest sense, it is also the symbolic representation of a people, since it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking.

Brown, H. Douglas describes the two as follows: ‘A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.’ In a word, culture and language are inseparable.

Many linguists exploring the relationship between language and culture hold the view that language and culture are two symbolic systems. Everything we say in language has meanings, designative or associative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with

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culture and culture is more extensive than language. Thus, people of different cultures can refer to different things while using the same language forms. For example, the word dog in English and gou in Chinese, refer to the same kind of animal. However, most English people associate dog with man's best friend, a good companion, a pet. Most Chinese people, by contrast, associate gou with watchdogs, defending the household from thieves. Being culturally loaded, English words and their Chinese translations (or vice versa) are seldom equivalents, and often give rise to different associations or images.

If language does mirror cultural reality, it would follow that changes in a culture will eventually be reflected in changes in the language. We see this happening all around the world today, including in the English language. In cultural linguistics, language is viewed as deeply entrenched in the group-level, cultural cognition of communities of speakers. Thus far, the approach of cultural linguistics has been adopted in several areas of applied linguistic research, including intercultural/cross-cultural communication and second language learning.

3) *Language and thought: the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*

The key component of verbal communication is language. Philosophers and linguists recognize language as a means by which speakers convey the content of their thoughts to others and they are trying to answer the following questions: Do the languages we speak shape the way we see the world, the way we think, and the way we live our lives? Do people who speak different languages think differently simply because they speak different languages?

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Many thinkers have urged that large differences in languages lead to large differences in experience and thought. They hold that each language embodies a worldview, with quite different languages embodying quite different views, so that speakers of different languages think about the world in quite different ways.

In the 1920s, Edward Sapir expressed his conclusions thus: “Human beings do not live in the objective world alone nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.” In other words, the particular language you speak affects the ideas you can have: the linguistic relativity hypothesis.

Sapir’s student Benjamin Lee Whorf came to be seen as the primary proponent of the hypothesis, because he published observations of how he perceived linguistic differences to have consequences in human cognition and behavior. Whorf extended Sapir's idea and illustrated it with examples drawn from both his knowledge of American Indian languages and from his fire-investigation work experience.

The stronger form of the hypothesis, proposed by Whorf, is known as linguistic determinism. According to Sapir and Whorf our thoughts are rooted in language, so we can think about something only if we have a word or words for it. This idea implies that if we do not have a word for a particular concept, then we cannot experience that concept. It also implies that people will see the world differently because of the differences in their languages. Thus, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who live in another language.

A strong version of the hypothesis holds that language determines thought and linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories. A weaker version states, that linguistic categories and usage influence thought and certain kinds of non-linguistic behavior.