

The relationship between language, culture and identity and the implications for language teaching and language policy

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Culture as a term, encompasses so much that its role in Second Language Acquisition needs to consider a number of factors. In fact, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (culture, n.d.) defines culture as “The totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought (and) these patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population.”

From a language teaching perspective though, culture can be defined pragmatically “as a/the culture associated with a language being learnt” (Byram, M. & Grundy, P., 2003, p. 1). Different conceptions of culture though exist in the language teaching field, but it is generally acknowledged according to Byram and Grundy (2003, p. 95) that the view of culture being “distinguishable, homogeneous and objectively describable” has dominated the discussion of intercultural learning for a long time.

As to what culture covers in language teaching, further other factors can also be seen as: i) the length of silence between speakers and ii) how explicit speakers are in interactions and the recognition of others’ ages and statuses through language, something particular well known in Korean and Japanese for instance with the use of honorific language (Mangubhai, 1997). Such cultural conditioning is unconsciously inherent in other languages.

Culture differs to other ‘individual differences’ that can either hamper or help facilitate success in language learning in the fact that such aspects of affective factors like personality, attitude and self-esteem are categorised as internal factors whilst culture (in addition to other social conditions) is, in contrast, seen as external factors (Zhang, 2006).

An important point to note is also the correlation between language and identity, with language used in a large way to maintain identity, with the reasoning behind this being, in Zhang’s (2006, p. 43) view, “because human’s thought or ideology is an important component of culture and because language is a medium to convey thought” and consequently language being unable to

be isolated from culture. Culture is also closely related to the field of semantics, especially in idiomatic phrases, which second language learners can struggle with. This struggle is often in spite of 'knowing' the words, providing evidence to the concept of the close correlation between language and culture, impacting L2 learners in a great way. Conceptual metaphors are yet another example of how culture affects language, with idioms being overtly metaphorical.

The concept of culture is important from the perspective of the teacher. This is because students from different backgrounds approach education in different ways as a result of the expectations (right or wrong) about the format teachers should go about educating them in a classroom setting. Cook (2001, p. 151) for instance states that those from post figurative societies learn from elders, "hence they naturally favour teaching methods that transfer knowledge explicitly from the teacher to the student, such as academic teaching methods", whereas those from co-figurative societies, where students learn from each other, "prefer teaching methods that encourage group work, pair work and task based learning." Although more modern technological societies naturally also exist, which are seen to be pre-figurative, presently no such teaching method exists. Students from different countries are also often assigned identities based sometimes on stereotypes (once again, correctly or incorrectly based), and as Lightbown and Spada (2006, p. 66) point out: "because identities impact on what they can do and how they can participate in classrooms, this naturally affects how much they can learn."

It is my assertion that these differing aspects of culture and the impacts they play in SLA are essential for teachers to have a sound understanding, especially with regards to methodologies and curricula development. Zhang (2006) uses Chinese students as an example and the relationship of traditional Confucianism in their hesitance in being too active in class for want of not showing off, whereas in a country such as Korea which is predominately seen as being male-dominant, female language students may also lose opportunities to participate in class because of conditioning to be quiet in comparison. In addition, culture impacts students' view of western teaching approaches in being less authoritarian seen as perhaps less professional. Making this statement begs the question as to whose job it is to 'socialise' the students and ensure they have basic cultural understanding of the target language.

Other interesting research conducted by Gatbonton and her colleagues in 2005 (as cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 66), shows a relationship between ethnic affiliation and SLA success in pronunciation, summarised as "learners who had achieved a high degree of accuracy in pronouncing the second language were sometimes perceived as being less loyal to their ethnic group".

More specifically, cultural differences as well as similarities to the host culture of the language in question can explain, to an extent, overall success in SLA. Research by Tse in 2001 (as cited in Zhang, 2006, p. 44) showed that "if the source culture and the target one are similar, it will be

comparatively easier for a learner to acquire the second or foreign language, for he/she may feel at ease with the target culture". Although some may jump to the conclusion that language similarities are the basis for such a conclusion, once again Tse (2001) believes that "culture distance should also largely account for the difference in the length of time because East Asian students may encounter cultural shock in their learning processes to a certain degree", considered a hindrance in SLA.

Idiosyncratic differences, akin with identity and culture, also permeate in expression. This is because it is generally acknowledged that while western cultures are more to the point in direct expression, Asian students for instance, may need to be more forthright in expression, contrary to cultural norms where may be used to, yet another challenge in SLA with respect to the learning of English.

As mentioned, it is generally undisputed that the distinctive relationship between language, culture and identity is complex and highly interrelated, with profound implications for both teaching and language policy. Culture and its related factors play a complex yet pivotal role in language and indeed second language (L2) acquisition. This deeply rooted relationship is one where language plays a role of maintaining and expressing culture. By examining and understanding its role in shaping identity as well as its intimate relationship with language, teachers are placed in a more sound position, not only to use this knowledge in class but also to enable them to implement strategies and activities in order to achieve higher levels of success and increase motivation.

Language does not exist in a vacuum and consequently culture is a particularly important and relevant issue in the field of linguistics. Culture is highly intertwined with language, to the extent that Kim (2003, p. 1) states "without culture, language cannot exist". As for the parameters of both culture and language and which impacts which, others such as Trueba and Zou (1994, as cited in Kim, 2003) see culture as a broader concept encapsulating language. As something which is considered non-static, culture though can be adapted and expressed by language. However, to clarify this relationship, it is language that is used to maintain culture (Kim, 2003, p. 1). Moreover, Whorf (1956, as cited in Cooper and Spolsky, 1991, p. 17) argued that "grammar is more resistant to change than culture, the influence from language to culture is predominant", and prior to this, in 1940 (Whorf, 1940 as cited in Smolicz, 1980, p. 9) in stating language as "the most most fundamental and stable element of culture, a matrix which shapes our particular ways of feeling, thinking and acting."

As for the integral role of culture in language, Holmes (2001, p. 337) argues the "cultural environment in which it develops influences the vocabulary and grammar of a language" and also influences our "perceptions, values, beliefs and attitudes". Regardless of the source, it seems highly important in the majority of definitions that the concepts of values, beliefs and

principles are central. This is in addition to culture being seen as knowledge that “is socially acquired” (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 219).

With regards to cross-cultural communication, examples abound of experiences and instances in which miscommunication surfaces as a consequence of cultural differences, often relating to what Holmes (2001, p. 275) views as “different assumptions deriving from different ‘normal’ environments.” Sociolinguistic assumptions are often made unconsciously that dictate social norms, topic appropriateness, linguistic expressions and politeness to name just a few. It is the concept of thought actually which is seen as highly relevant in the discussion of “cultural variables” (Brown, 2000, p. 196). This is especially the case with regards to one’s mother tongue where cognitive and linguistic development is inextricably connected. As Brown (2000, p. 198) states, “culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought.”

As for the role language plays with identity, scholars agree that language is integral to identity. As Zhang (2006, p. 43) maintains, “human thought or ideology is an important component of culture and because language is a medium to convey thought”. This phenomenon seems prudent to acknowledge relating to the very notion of language conveying and affirming identity. Crystal (2000, p. 39) too states that language is the primary index or symbol or register of identity, in that it expresses cultural distinctiveness. Warschauer (2001, p. 1) also acknowledges this stating:

Language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity. The role of language and dialect in identity construction is becoming even more central in the postmodern era, as other traditional markers of identity, including race, are being destabilized.

As for a definition of identity, Kim (2003, p. 3) sees it as “the individual’s concept of the self, as well as the individual’s interpretation of the social definition of the self, within his/her inner group and larger society” with its formation more of an unconscious process rather than a conscious one (DeVos, 1992, as cited in Kim 2003). To more closely examine language and identity is to acknowledge the important role language plays in the expression of our identity as humans and also allowing creativity. Researchers such as Cummins (1986,) see language as so important that by incorporating the language of a student in class (regardless of the dominant language in the community), the result is one of improved student self esteem, self concept and the reinforcement and inculcation of the cultural identity.

Moreover, it is generally acknowledged (Smolicz, 1981; 1988a; Conversi, 1990; Moore, 1984) that language is at the core of culture and a “source of creativity, as well as economic initiative”. This is true with smaller linguistic groups genuinely fearing the loss of their language, severing ties with fellow speakers throughout the world and hindering any chance of maintaining their

unique cultural and literary heritage. In contrast to some minority communities that succumb to the majority language over time, one example of a high level of maintenance of their native language is the Greeks who reside in Australia. This is believed to be a result of what Smolicz (1991, p. 77) concludes as a history of survival from outside encroachment of foreign countries, i.e. the acquisition of “experience of the ways of defending their identifying cores”, a reflection on what Smolicz (1991, p. 77) again sees as language playing an important role in ‘carrying’ a “group’s culture”. In addition, other cultural values such as a “closely knit and extended family structure”, present in Greece and Italy have also assisted in reinforcing the language amongst these minority groups (Smolicz, 1991).

It is to everyone’s benefit when the majority language can co-exist with minority languages by providing groups with the opportunity to keep their heritage such as the present situation in Australia. This is in contrast to what Smolicz (1991, p. 79) who sees minority groups overseas having to suffer being “under a cloud of suspicion that their linguistic and cultural demands shroud political motives of separation and secession.”

Comments such as the French language playing a “role in sustaining that nation’s identity and vital powers of creativity, as well as its economic well-being” by well-known French Nobel prize winner Allais (1989, as cited in Smolicz, 1991, p. 78) further highlight the importance to some of a language being a symbol and core value in connecting people and enabling them to form a bond and maintain a sense of belonging.

In contrast to cultural homogenisation for instance is the use of dialects that also represent identity. Fromkin et al. (2007, p. 438) argue “the way you use language may also indicate an inclination on your part to belong to a group”, similar to how a regional dialect indicates the geographical identity of an individual. In this sense, language is empowering by allowing a person to gain a sense of identification and affiliation with a particular group, their traditions and culture. This influence of dialects playing a pivotal role in shaping culture and identity is seen as so acute, demonstrated by language policies in existence by certain governments such as France to ensure the encroachment of English does not dominate and overtake the native language and culture.

One important hypothesis to note is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (or alternatively Whorfian hypothesis), which first brought to attention the notion of the interconnectedness between culture, language and thought, i.e. that the language we speak is responsible for how people perceive the world we inhabit. Whorf in particular argued the very notion that the thoughts we have are our own, i.e. “that the patterns of the language we speak largely determine the patterns of our thought processes and, ultimately, of our culture” (Cooper and Spolsky, 1991, p. 7). With its inception in the 1920s and 30s by Edward Sapir and his student and anthropological linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, it was not supported by any empirical or formal evidence. It did however

follow on to encourage research in a number of fields as well as what Cooper and Spolsky (1991, p. 7) saw as changing attitudes determined by “general philosophical conceptions”. Specifically, in his own words, Sapir (1929, p. 209, and 1929b, p. 207 as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 220) states:

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...Even comparatively simple acts of perception are very much more at the mercy of the social patterns called words than we might suppose...We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Importantly, the theories which were borne out of this initial hypothesis include linguistic determinism and what is seen as a weaker claim of linguistic relativism, again promulgated by Whorf. These hypotheses refer respectively to one’s interpretation of the world being fundamentally determined by one’s language and the latter the notion of language influencing an individual’s thoughts on the world (and possibly behaviour) (Holmes, 2001). As an example, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2007, p. 26) speak of the Hopi Indians who “do not perceive time the same way others do because of the absence of different tenses to describe past, present and future”, whereas Lyons (1981, p. 308) states these Indians, as a result of the lack of tense have a different perception to others and “operate with a radically different concept of time from that with which speakers of European languages operate.” Carroll (1956, p. 57 as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 199) and Whorf (1956 as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 199) also argue that due the lack of grammar to express tense, the Hopi had “no general notion or intuition of time.”

While not without controversy, those who dispute the hypothesis seem to favour universalism over relativism. Brown (2000, p. 199) claims Whorf’s hypothesis has been “overstated and misinterpreted”, but in reflection the hypothesis is presently acknowledged in a more liberal fashion whereby evidence is more clearly defined with respect to the integral role language and culture play. Others such as Cooper and Spolsky (1991, p. 25) venture to the extent of critically stating Whorf’s ideas “are often vague and lacking in rigor, and at times he even contradicts himself.”

On a personal level, language brings an element of power with a strong link in its usage to the dimension of status. Numerous languages possess many lexis to represent the rather simple concept of what is referred to in English as ‘you’, indicating in a reciprocal fashion to express what Holmes (2001, p. 377) refers to as “solidarity” or alternatively in a way to express “superior status or power”. Pullum (n.d., <http://people.ucsc.edu/~pullum/MLA2004.pdf>) sees power, whether it be political or economic, associated with the prestige dialect, especially the case in complex societies.

Power, as well as the term 'solidarity' coined by psychologist Brown, can also be demonstrated and expressed through the use of certain words and honorifics which exist in languages such as Japanese and Chinese. In clarifying solidarity, Hudson (1990, p. 122) defines this as "the social distance between people, that incorporates how many social characteristics they share". Another example is the use of different pronouns such as 'tu' and 'vous', both of which mean 'you' in French. Even in English, through what Hudson (1990, p. 122) again sees as "the clearest linguistic markers", the example of addressing people can allow different dimensions to be seen, i.e. whether a person is addressed by 'Mr.', 'sir', his/her first name, 'mate' and so on (Hudson, 1990).

As for language and its role as a core value in the realm of culture, Smolicz (1999, p. 71) defines this relationship as language being "regarded as of such crucial importance to the perpetuation of a group's life that any encroachment upon it by another language is perceived as threatening to the group's survival or dominance". In the event of subtractive bilingualism for example, this can result in dire consequences such as being "destructive to the cultural creativity of all cultural and linguistic groups" (Smolicz, *ibid.*). The relevant paradox in follow up to this argument is ironically how language can be either a bridge or a barrier, with a common language enabling feelings of "commitment, of togetherness, or belonging, and to extend friendship" (Clyne, 1982; 1991; Giles, 1977; Giles & Saint-Jacques, 1979 as cited in Smolicz, 1999, p. 72).

To expand on the importance of culture as a core value, Smolicz (1980, p. 1) believes strongly that it forms one of the most essential parts of a group culture, representing in fact "its very heartland and act as identifying values which are symbolic of the group and its membership." Naturally, it is these core values which provide a pivotal link that connects the individual to the group and through rejection of values brings also the fear of being ostracised. These core values also extend to a social system and the phenomenon of identification.

Finally, the implications of the relationship between language, culture and identity for language teaching and language policy are extensive. Students should be imparted with the knowledge of appropriateness of language in varying situations and expect to be presented with material and resources which are culturally relevant as well as encourage better awareness whilst reducing stereotypes. Furthermore, with respect to language teaching, teachers need to be culturally aware of teaching styles. Pedagogical-based curriculums and policies also need to reflect this.

Teaching styles of a western origin that are student focussed may for instance be either uncondusive or ineffective in an eastern setting. Englebert (2004, as cited in Leveridge, 2008) accurately states "to teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture, and it is important to be sensitive to the fact that our students, our colleges, our administrators and, if we live abroad, our neighbours, do not share all of our cultural paradigms."

Moreover, as Kim (2004) succinctly states that it is ultimately the responsibility of language teachers to have an understanding and appreciation of pedagogically suitable teaching styles and methodologies and ensure they are conducive and effective in the education context language is taught. This is in order to best utilise interaction between students and assist them in achieving their specific language goals. Lastly, it is important also to recognise not solely the cultural differences inherent in teaching language but also have an appreciation for what Leveridge (2008) sees as differences in “ideologies, and cultural boundaries which limit expression.”

As for the implications for language policy, it is worthwhile to mention the importance of not neglecting minority languages, in addition to not solely concentrating on the expansion of English, considered by many to be the global language. To avoid subtractive bilingualism, policies need to incorporate the first language of children, to assist children in achieving what Lightbown and Spada (2006, p. 26) believe results in higher levels of self esteem and cognitive development. Others too (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Swain & Lapkin, 1981; Barik & Swain, 1976a as cited in Cummins & Swain, 1986, and Barik & Swain, 1978, as cited in Hamers & Blanc, 1983, p. 201) see many other benefits such as increased metalinguistic awareness, advanced L1 skills, higher IQ and again increased cognitive flexibility and development.

Only when policies are devised with a) culture and the ideologies of teachers, b) students and c) the environment in which the language is spoken, can an increased appropriateness of usage occur. To elucidate the importance of such consideration, one example is where such a policy has been enacted is the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, having incorporated culture into its curriculum so as to improve the “understanding and acceptance of differences between people, cultures and ideologies” (Leveridge, 2008). For educators and policy makers, this simply means to ensure materials are culturally appropriate.

To recapitulate, this essay has clearly examined the intimate and inseparable relationship between culture, language and identity and evinced how complex this relationship is. The impact of culture in language and SLA has also been closely examined as well as how learning a language conclusively requires an understanding (and even better) an appreciation for the culture where it is used. Intercultural communication, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and how language is interrelated as a core value and identity were also examined to support the ongoing implications for the teaching and policy of language and language acquisition. Language cannot survive without culture and vice-versa and to teach language is to incorporate the teaching of culture. Implications for language teaching and policy are wide-ranging and an understanding of these is necessary to foster appropriate use of language and an increased cultural awareness.

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Abstract: The complex notion of culture and its related factors in the acquisition of second language acquisition (SLA) are indeed important and play a role in understanding differences in improvement and success, but also from the perspective of the role culture plays in deciding what activities are most suitable to motivate students. As no language operates in a vacuum, culture, an ever changing phenomenon, is a particularly relevant issue in the area of language and the correlation between language and culture is strong with culture an issue students of a second language (L2) inevitably come across and thus need to confront. This essay will discuss the need to look at the concept of culture and the role it plays in SLA in a separate light to individual differences, by drawing on various research as well as my own experience in this field. A critical examination of the relationship between language and culture will be undertaken and the basis of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will be explored. The concept of language as a core value in determining identity will also be addressed. Lastly, the implications of the relationship between language and culture for language teaching and policy will be examined, as will the debate on language and power.

言語、文化、自己確立と言語教授、言語方策における関係性

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要約: 第二言語習得において文化の複雑な概念とその要素は、確かに改善と成功の違いを認識する上で大切なものである。しかし、どんな活動が学生の動機付けに一番適切かを決定する上でも文化は大切な役割を持っている。何もないところでは言語が作用できないように、絶えず変化し続ける「文化」という事象は、「言語」の分野において特に関連性を持っている。その相互関係は強く、第二言語習得中の学生が必然的に遭遇し、それゆえに立ち向かわなければならない問題点でもある。この論文は、様々な研究やこの分野での自分自身の経験に焦点をあて、文化の概念に目を向ける必要性についてと、それが個人の違いという隔てられた見方では、第二言語習得上のような役割を果たすかについて議論する。言語と文化の関係について批判的な調査が行われるとともに、サピア＝ウォーフ仮説の基本も検証される。また、自己を確立する元となる基準が言語であるという概念についても調べられる。最後に、言語と文化の関係性が言語教授とその方策にどのような影響をもたらすかについて、言語と力の議論の検証ともに調査する。