

Language and Culture: “What's your Culture?”

Khalid Waziri

Assistant Professor of English Department, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Kabul University, Rabia Balkhi Road, Kabul, Afghanistan

Abstract: *The main focus of this article is on the relationship between culture and language. Language is an essential part of every culture and to learn a language, one must learn the culture as well; the two go together. In my readings, I researched how language is used as a marker and an element of identity and power to reveal relationships between individuals or groups, and how language and thought can influence each other. This article also describes the relationship of language to writing and introduces the various types of writing systems. Using Language Files, a textbook on second language acquisition, and excerpts from A.S. Canajarah's Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching and the magazine Language and Culture as a basis for this research. I learned that language has a great impact on our society, specifically in the areas of 1) identity, 2) social divisions, and 3) writing. I, therefore, endeavored to analyze these different aspects in depth, in order to give the audience a general idea of how language is used for different purposes in diverse and dynamic settings. For example, in order to establish social identity, one frequently refers to their native language. To be identified as an “in-group” member one needs to first be able to communicate in the language of the group s/he is trying to belong to. Having “in” and “out” group members then creates social divisions or a social hierarchy, and as a result, there are problems with the balance of power and understanding. The presence of written texts enables us to analyze these identities and divisions, making clear differences between these hierarchies and cultures.*

Keywords: culture, identity, social divisions, in –group, out-group, power, linguistics

1. Introduction

Kramersch (1998) in her chapter on language and cultural identity (Kramersch, *Language and Cultural Identity*) tells a story about an African-American boy who, after listening to two Danish women speaking Danish, asks them: “What's your culture?” Seeing that the women are confused, he then refers to his skin color to show what his cultural identity is. The women then tell him that they speak Danish, so they are Danish. This story gives clear evidence for language and culture being related. This paper mainly focuses on these relationships between culture and language and how language reflects and influences humanity, society, and culture. It points out that it is impossible to escape from the fact that language is strongly connected to human culture--our identity, our relationships with one another, our expression of language, and our thoughts. In this paper, I will point out the definition of language and culture, the areas of study that cover these, the influence of language on identity and power, and finally word systems, the way by which language and culture are propagated.

As implied earlier, culture can be defined as the way of life for an entire society. As such, culture includes language, religion, rituals, games, dress, norms of behavior such as law and morality as well as arts, the way people eat, life style, thought, and inventories. In order to understand one's culture well, one needs to know the language. That is, language, the vocal communication of thought, and is the most essential part of a culture through which culture can be learned or thought.

There are two ways to study this interaction between language and culture in the linguistic field: anthropological linguistics, and sociolinguistics. Anthropological linguistics is more concerned with the study of the relationship between language and culture and the relationship between human biology, cognition, and language (this is not to be confused with linguistic anthropology which only studies humans through the languages they use). Sociolinguistics, however,

deals with the study of the relationships between language and human societies. Research is done in this field through national and international language and culture research centers, in the field of observation, and certain experiments such as color testing (asking people to organize colors that may or may not exist in their language), and carefully written surveys.

These areas of study are very limited and not entirely accurate; however, due to the difficulty of finding language or culture isolated variables that are not influenced by other factors, and the fact that the human race is so diverse and there are different responses from different individuals. But the truth of the matter is to do all these things, researchers need to use language, and these difficulties confirm that language defines us, and is almost indivisible from our cultural and personal identity.

As stated before, language and identity are like two sides of the same coin: depending on your point of view, one defines and directly affects the other. Perhaps the ambiguity comes from the definition of identity itself. Does identity mean “who we think we are”, “what culture we represent”, or “the perception of others of ourselves”? As stated in the *Language Files*, the notion of identity is a complex one (Bergmann, et al., 2007, p. 527), and the relationship of language and identity can only be qualified as depending upon the priority given to it by an individual in certain contexts. As I saw in Kramersch's story, language is only a factor to defining one's identity, but a person cannot separate the language they speak from their identity without losing a considerable part of who they are, they essentially have their own linguistic identity.

We use living language to communicate our ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings; to express who we think we are, and to satisfy our needs within a community. Bergmann et al., 2007 cite, “Language is an independent object, it does exist because people create it and use it – all humans in all societies have used language” (Bergmann et al., 2007, p.

Volume 9 Issue 7, July 2020

www.ijsr.net

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

527). Therefore, every society has its own language, marking their identity as the group that people belongs to, or identifies with and shows the group that a person can associate with or not. There are many factors that play a role on the identity formation; for example, language use (in particularly of lexical items), actions, practices, characteristics of the people, prestige, sociological factors (i.e. age, region, and gender) etc. (Bergmann et al., 2007, p. 527).

In this case, it is important to also realize that our way of life determines the incredible relationship between language and identity as well. As *the mentioned scholars assert*, our identity depends on the speaks of our situation. Our responses to situations determine who we are and the group we belong to according to our identity.

Most of the time we do not have complete control over our linguistic identity, because identity is indicated at every level of our linguistic structure, from phonetics to pragmatics; without us even knowing as we speak that we are using a specific grammatical structure, voice intonation, or lexical item, based on our identity. This identification according to language is shown by the fact that linguistic features of the same language differ according to age, place and time. Strand (1999) in a study found that listeners will actually classify phonemes differently depending on whether they think they are hearing a man or a woman. Other examples giving in English are: the use of “like” as an interjection: “I was, like, going to the stories” associate with younger speakers. All of these can form a basis to say that the ways people use linguistic form is a sign of their association or belonging to a certain group.

There are, however, problems that come with identifying oneself with a certain language: when we are identified by our linguistic performance, we can be put in a discriminatory position. Bergmann et al. (2007) narrate a case of discrimination when a landlord refuses a renter because he judged them based on their accent. It should be mentioned that this kind of dialect discrimination is illegal in the United States and is an unfortunate consequence of the use of language to mark identity (p. 530).

Now we can understand that language does not occur in a vacuum, but all individuals use it to communicate with others in society. In addition, Kramsch (1998) explains that because of that socialization, culture gives us a base for our identity (pp. 6-7). He also explains that our identity makes us choose to say or not to say something when in the need to express our ideas or thoughts. This common attitude, beliefs and values are reflected when we speak using four factors: Intonation (where you're from and the group that you identify with), Speech community (people using the same linguistic code), Discourse community (the way members of a social group use language), and Discourse accent (differentiates individuals from each other, depending on language features, topics they talk about, language style etc.). These differences are shown by the fact that in France, if you compliment someone on their sweater, it is considered an invasion of privacy, but in the United States it would be taken as a compliment.

So as we have seen that our culture, the language that people grow up speaking, and our identity are like that coin that cannot be separate, because it will lose its value. Based on this analogy, we must view the trilogy of culture, language and identity as a whole, to be able to perceive the true worth of oneself.

Finally, another part of signaling identity is the way we perceive ourselves, identifying ourselves in a particular language and a culture, which makes us have the power to choose and have the options to manipulate the language within the community in which we live in. We can call this the power of language in a social context.

The role of language in power relationships can be seen between a more “powerful” speaker (with more authority) whose intention is that the hearer reacts or obeys a certain order or task. For example, we can think of the power of words to hold audiences spellbound, to persuade voters to vote certain way, to educate students in how become skilled professionals, to convince consumers to purchase particular products...etc.

In addition, there are many levels at which the use of language can show someone's power over someone else. In any given conversation, there are linguistic signals that we can perceive as indicators of power relationships. For instance, if speaker 1 says, “I am the king of the castle” and speaker 2 answers, “I bow to your lordship's wishes”, you will clearly see that one is more of an authority than the other. This situation illustrates that the one convincing the other has power in conversations. On the opposite spectrum, we can see studies done by O'barr and Atkins in 1980, who found that people who had little power in the court room tend to use similar constructions of powerless (hedges) such as “it's sort of hot: I'd kind of like to go”. Sometimes you are able to get what you want by using polite or complimentary speech such as “would you please close the door?” instead of the imperative “close the door quickly!” which in most cases would be considered very rude and not produce the effect you were looking for (Bergmann et al., (2007).

Another way to show power in language, is determining when it can be used. Language is a powerful tool for establishing global relationships within and between communities. In some countries, there are regulations of how language must be used or which language may be used officially. For example, the United States, Afghanistan, India, and the United Kingdom guarantee freedom of speech, but other governments may not guarantee such a liberty (like a civilian or journalist in Iran, Cuba or North Korea). Thus, the government can establish its power over the people it governs by determining when and how they may use a certain language, or even be vocal in their own language.

Furthermore, in a country with a large number of languages (such as Guinea, West Africa, which has more than ten different languages), declaring one language as an official language to avoid practical difficulties (in this instance, French), would have both positive and negative social ramifications, helping that country to effectively succeed in

the world of politics and economics, but also hurting those who aren't proficient speakers of the official language, partially excluding linguistic minorities from participating in the political process. For example, in Guinea, the government is always ruled by whatever people group/language the president comes from/speaks. As a result, other people groups find themselves at a disadvantage compared to the one in power.

It could also cause minorities to be physically at risk if public safety messages are monolingual, and they may not be hired in certain jobs as a result of not speaking that language. Also, when languages like English and Spanish are chosen over an indigenous language, it can create a feeling that there is a presence of indigenous inferiority and European supremacy in that country.

It is important to point out the power of world languages as well. For example, English is being used as an official language in the International Olympic Committee, in the United Nations and other international organizations. World languages such as English or French are used over wide areas of the globe as an official language (especially in developing countries), for commercial dealings and other things, even though it may not be the native language of any speakers of the countries they are found in. One of the only advantages it has is that it makes it easier for that country to participate in the world economy.

Finally, there are some regions and countries that are divided because of the languages they speak. One good example is the Sri Lankan civil war: ever since 1970, the Sinhala population has been in a conflict with the minority Tamil population. In 1956, the dominant government (Sinhala majority) made Sinhala the sole official language. As a result, Tamils had a hard time getting jobs and positions in the government. Then, in 1970, Tamil language films, books, magazines, journals were banned. As a result, the minority language rose up in a wave of violence and indignation, carrying out many terrorist attacks as a result of not having a voice in the way their country was being run, and forming a terrorist group called the Liberation Tigers of Eelam (Wikipedia, 2016).

There is also an example of a lesser conflict in Québec, Canada. Most of the people living in that part of the country are French speakers, and as such they have a hard time communicating with the rest of the country. The French quebecois, surrounded by English speakers are afraid of losing their language, which they view as part of their cultural identity. Further divided by their economic status (a result of not communicating in the main English language) and their religion (most French speakers are catholic), the separatist party has gained in volume.

In another note, language can bring people together as well as we see with the reunification of West Germany and East Germany in 1990 after the fall of the Berlin wall as symbol of cultural identity and language.

So, based on what we have discovered, our culture shapes us our thinking, the way we identify ourselves through the language we speak, and how we interact with each other in

society. Basically, the culture in which a person is exposed to has incredible impact and affects the way that person interprets the world around them, and other cultures.

Another interesting aspect of language and culture is the way language relates to thought. Since thought is like an internal language, what effect does it have on our actions, our speech patterns, and other aspects of culture? Does thought affect our culture, or does our culture affect the way we think? The nature of thought is an actual on-going debate, and the implications are huge: if we could study the way one person thinks by studying their culture, we would have a massive inroad into a plethora of information on the inner workings of the human brain. This hypothesis was later named the Principle of Linguistic Relativity.

It was in the early twentieth century that the anthropological linguist Franz Boas first made the hypothesis that, "*Because languages have different ways of classifying the world, different people will classify the world differently based on the languages they speak*" (Bergmann et al., 2007, p. 539). They based their findings on their study of North American languages, studying the way their language and culture related to others. Boas' hypothesis was taken up again by two influential linguists, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Sapir took Boas' theory to the next step, claiming that "*the language we speak can shape our thoughts*" (Bergmann et al., 2007, 538). This approach makes sense, being as how we think in our language everyday. For example, the word "Heimat" is not present in the English language. There is no specific word even referring to that concept, and it can only be best simply interpreted as something like: the place where one feels most at home. English speakers, not having a word for this specific thing, never make this a great place of discussion, having only words that encompass part of the concept, never the whole.

Bergmann et al., (2007) write that it was Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) who coined the term "Linguistic Relativity", and added the aspect of culture to the hypothesis, creating the Whorf hypothesis: "*users of markedly different grammars are pointed by the grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world*" (p. 58)" Noticing that, through studying the English and Native American languages, that their classifications of days were different (according to Bergmann et al. (2007), English speakers view a group of days as different, while the Hopi viewed these groups of days as repetitions of the same day). From this and other evaluations, Whorf concluded that "*language influences thought, which may in turn influence culture*" (Bergmann et al., (2007). This makes sense when you consider one of the African cultures in Guinea, West Africa. In their language they do not seem to have a concept for depth. As a result, some, when asked to dig a ditch in a straight line and at a regular depth, are unable to do so effectively. This influences the culture by the fact that their people group is not known for building. Another experiment used to prove this hypothesis is that of spatial categorization. Cultures with different words for direction, such as north, east, south and west instead of up, right, down, left, have difficulty identifying which way an arrow was pointing

when asked to point to it from a 180-degree difference.

Problems with these hypotheses come in many forms, one of which being that there is no real way to tell what entirely “*language-and culture-neutral*” tasks (Bergmann et al., (2007). Also, the experiments done to prove this hypothesis particularly that of colors, have mixed results. Different languages having different colors in their repertoire were brought in and told to classify different hues of colors that were not available in their language, to see if they could tell the difference between them. The mentioned scholars add that they found that while some cultures made no consistent choice between these colors, others were successfully able to do so. It is impossible to say that these hypotheses are entirely without merit, but there is no strong conclusion that consistently supports them as being undeniable truth (Bergmann et al., (2007).

There are many variations of this hypothesis. For example, this hypothesis has been taken further to even say that language actually determines thought, but this variation isn't very plausible, when citing examples of culture change as a result of a proximity to another culture. Another of the modern day theories takes up these hypotheses to create another: language no longer determines thought, but becomes a tool for its daily use and communication. This theory, developed by Vygotsky, studies the practical side of language. (Mitchell, 1987)

Moreover, it would be pertinent to note that, in contrast to the Sapir Whorf hypothesis view of the relationship of language and culture, there is also the view of social constructionism. The basic notion of the social constructionism is that our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others. In other words, we can understand any one thing in several ways. Our language gives us words to describe and distinguish between things in our world. How we “lump” things together depend on the use of a particular social reality. In turn, how we react towards these things depends on the social reality we have.

There is considerable information covering and supporting both of these theories and hypotheses, so it is plausible to say that they are both viable.

In a final note, it came to my attention that there was another form of expressed thought that is pertinent to the study of language and culture which are the writing systems. Writing systems do not seem to quite belong to the categories of language identity, relationships and social divisions, but in reality, writing systems are integral to language and culture. Being defined as the graphic representation of a language, writing systems are not only the means by which we discover the history and evolution of culture, but also “shape” a culture in and of itself when implemented. According to Olson (1994), once writing systems come into effect in a culture, it changes that culture's outlook on life (Mitchell, 1995), so we can viably infer that writing systems have to do with both language and culture.

Writing systems are often referred to as the graphic representation of a language and can be found in many forms, be it monographic writing systems which use only

one symbol for one meaning (for example, Chinese), or phonographic writing systems, like English, which use symbols for the sounds in the language, and have Alphabets (consonants and vowels), Abjads (consonants), or Abugidas (consonants with diacritics to mark vowels). Developed over thousands of years to become an accurate form of communication, writing systems permit cultural transference (without them we would never have had the Renaissance), an accurate view of cultural history, and promotes the development of a culture.

In conclusion, as clearly stated above that language and culture are two inseparable parts and always travel together. Also language greatly influences the way we view our world and interpret things around us. Hence, identity, power, and thought are all big parts of culture and identity, bringing societies together, or pulling them apart.

It is hoped that this paper has been informative and edifying and accurately explains the relationship between language and culture, being concise.

References

- [1] Bregmann, A., Hall, K. C. & Ross, S. M. (ED) (2007). In Language and Culture. *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. (pp. 525-558). Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press.
- [2] Canajarajah, S.A. (2003). Resistance to English in Historical Perspective. In *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism and English Teaching*. (pp. 59-63). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Kramsch, C. J. (1998). The Relationship of Language and Culture. In *Language and Culture* (pp. 4 – 14). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Kramsch, C. J. (1998). Language and Cultural Identity. In *Language and Culture* (pp. 65-78). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Mitchell, R. (1987). *Assessing the Language Skills of Bilingual Primary Pupils*. (pp. 44-45). Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education.
- [6] Olson, D. R. (2001). *The World on Paper. The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. (pp. 65-70). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Strand, E. A. (1999). *Uncovering the Role of Gender Stereotypes in speech Perceptions*. (pp. 94-95). Ohio: Ohio State University Press.
- [8] *The Sri Lankan Civil War*. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved June 8, 2018, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_civil_war