

A View on Language as the Roadmap of a Culture

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Abstract:

“Language is the Roadmap of a Culture” -Rita Mae Brown. It has been seen that language is much more than the external expression and communication of internal thoughts formulated independently of their verbalization. In demonstrating the inadequacy and inappropriateness of such a view of language, attention has already been drawn to the ways in which one’s native language is intimately and in all sorts of details related to the rest of one’s life in a community and to smaller groups within that community. This is true of all peoples and all languages; it is a universal fact about language.

Keywords:

Culture, Society, Anthropology, Acquisition, Transmission, Inherited

Introduction: Anthropologists speak of the relations between language and culture. It is indeed more in accordance with reality to consider language as a part of culture. Culture is here being used, as it is throughout this article, in the anthropological sense, to refer to all aspects of human life insofar as they are determined or conditioned by membership in a society. The fact that people eat or drink is not in itself cultural; it is a biological necessity for the preservation of life. That they eat particular foods and refrain from eating other substances, though they may be perfectly edible and nourishing, and that they eat and drink at particular times of day and in certain places are matters of culture, something “acquired by man as a member of society,” according to the classic definition of culture by the English anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor. As thus defined and envisaged, culture covers a very wide area of human life and behaviour, and language is manifestly a part, probably the most important part, of it.

Although the faculty of language acquisition and language use is innate and inherited, and there is legitimate debate over the extent of this innateness, every individual’s language is “acquired by man as a member of society,” along with and at the same time as other aspects of that society’s culture in which people are brought up. Society and language are mutually indispensable. Language can have developed only in a social setting, however this may have been structured, and human society in any form even remotely resembling what is known today or is recorded in history could be maintained only among people utilizing and understanding a language in common use.

Transmission of language and culture

Language is transmitted culturally; that is, it is learned. To a lesser extent it is taught, when parents, for example, deliberately encourage their children to talk and to respond to talk, correct their mistakes, and enlarge their vocabulary. But it must be emphasized that children very largely acquire their first language by “grammar construction” from exposure to a random collection of utterances that they encounter. What is classed as language teaching in school either relates to second-language acquisition or, insofar as it concerns the pupils’ first language, is in the main directed at reading and writing, the study of literature, formal grammar, and alleged standards of correctness, which may not be those of all the pupils’ regional or social dialects. All of what goes under the title of language teaching at school presupposes and relies on the prior knowledge of a first language in its basic vocabulary and essential structure, acquired before school age.

If language is transmitted as part of culture, it is no less true that culture as a whole is transmitted very largely through language, insofar as it is explicitly taught. The fact that humankind has a history in the sense that animals do not is entirely the result of language. So far as researchers can tell, animals learn through spontaneous imitation or through imitation taught by other animals. This does not exclude the performance of quite complex and substantial pieces of cooperative physical work, such as a beaver's dam or an ant's nest, nor does it preclude the intricate social organization of some species, such as bees. But it does mean that changes in organization and work will be the gradual result of mutation cumulatively reinforced by survival value; those groups whose behaviour altered in any way that increased their security from predators or from famine would survive in greater numbers than others. This would be an extremely slow process, comparable to the evolution of the different species themselves.

There is no reason to believe that animal behaviour has materially altered during the period available for the study of human history—say, the last 5,000 years or so—except, of course, when human intervention by domestication or other forms of interference has itself brought about such alterations. Nor do members of the same species differ markedly in behaviour over widely scattered areas, again apart from differences resulting from human interference. Bird songs are reported to differ somewhat from place to place within species, but there is little other evidence for areal divergence. In contrast to this unity of animal behaviour, human cultures are as divergent as are human languages over the world, and they can and do change all the time, sometimes with great rapidity, as among the industrialized countries of the 21st century.

The processes of linguistic change and its consequences will be treated below. Here, cultural change in general and its relation to language will be considered. By far the greatest part of learned behaviour, which is what culture involves, is transmitted by vocal instruction, not by imitation. Some imitation is clearly involved, especially in infancy, in the learning process, but proportionately this is hardly significant.

Through the use of language, any skills, techniques, products, modes of social control, and so on can be explained, and the end results of anyone's inventiveness can be made available to anyone else with the intellectual ability to grasp what is being said. Spoken language alone would thus vastly extend the amount of usable information in any human community and speed up the acquisition of new skills and the adaptation of techniques to changed circumstances or new environments. With the invention and diffusion of writing, this process widened immediately, and the relative permanence of writing made the diffusion of information still easier. Printing and the increase in literacy only further intensified this process. Modern techniques for broadcast or almost instantaneous transmission of communication all over the globe, together with the tools for rapidly translating between the languages of the world, have made it possible for usable knowledge of all sorts to be made accessible to people almost anywhere in the world. This accounts for the great rapidity of scientific, technological, political, and social change in the contemporary world. All of this, whether ultimately for the good or ill of humankind, must be attributed to the dominant role of language in the transmission of culture.

Language and social differentiation and assimilation

The part played by variations within a language in differentiating social and occupational groups in a society has already been referred to above. In language transmission this tends to be self-perpetuating unless deliberately interfered with. Children are in general brought up within the social group to which their parents and immediate family circle belong, and they learn the dialect and communication styles of that group along with the rest of the subculture and behavioural traits and attitudes that are characteristic of it. This is a largely unconscious and involuntary process of acculturation, but the importance of the linguistic manifestations of social status and of social hierarchies is not lost on aspirants for personal advancement in stratified societies. The deliberate cultivation of an appropriate dialect, in its lexical, grammatical, and phonological features, has been the self-imposed task of many persons wishing "to better themselves" and the butt of unkind ridicule on the part of persons already feeling themselves secure in their social status or unwilling to attempt any change in

it. Much of the comedy in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (first performed in 1913, with subsequent film adaptations) turns on Eliza Doolittle's need to unlearn her native Cockney if she is to rise in the social scale. Culturally and sub culturally determined taboos play a part in all this, and persons desirous of moving up or down in the social scale have to learn what words to use and what words to avoid if they are to be accepted and to "belong" in their new position.

Language-and-Culture and the culture and language are strongly interconnected. The relation between them is debatable and several questions pop up in the mind when you try to understand how the language and culture are linked. Do you know whether culture came first or language? What is the difference between them? Can one of them exist without the other?

For a clear understanding of the relationship between language and culture, it is better to get familiar with their definitions first.

What is Culture?

Culture is defined as a blend of thought patterns and characteristics of a group of people.

The word culture is derived from the Latin term *colere* which means to grow something from the earth so when people interact with each other; they grow together which forms their culture. Usually, the term culture is defined using external aspects such as language, traditions, religion, arts, and cuisine. But, culture is something deeper than these factors. It refers to the way we think and interacts with those around us.

How You Perceive the Diverse Cultures Existing in the Society is known as Your Cultural Lens. Interestingly, people living in the same society having similar characteristics may have different cultural views and ideas which depend on several different factors. Thus, it is important to mention that different people living together can have their own ideas and their cultural lens may vary.

What is Language?

Language is the medium of communication using which we express our thoughts and ideas and interact with others. Over 700 languages are spoken across the globe. Some of the languages are evolved from the others while many languages are traced back thousands of years. However, the origin of the first-spoken human language is still unknown

You might find it surprising to know that the same language spoken in different regions sound a bit different. Yes, dialectal differences exist for many popular languages because of the cultural impact. For instance, the French spoken in France is different from Canadian French. Likewise, many languages have different regional dialects.

How Culture is related to Language?

"Changes in Language Often Reflect the Changing Values of a Culture" (Ravi Zacharias)

Language and culture are interlinked and you cannot learn one of these without having a clear understanding of the other. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, language is linked to all the human-life aspects in society, and understanding of the surrounding culture plays an important role in learning a language. Moreover, language allows the organization and evolution of cultural values.

Language is Needed for Effective Expression and Transmission of Culture.

A renowned linguist Ken Hale shares his views on the culture-language relationship. He says that when a language is lost, a part of the culture gets lost as well as Culture is significantly encoded in language.

Culture impacts our core traditions, values, and the way we interact with others in society. On the other hand, language makes those interactions easy. Simply put, language facilitates social interactions while culture helps us to learn how to behave and interact with others.

Language or Culture-Which Came First?

Language is an integral part required for the establishment of culture. Communication is the basic human need, right? From the start, human beings are communicating and interacting with each other in different ways. Thus, for obvious reasons, the language came first.

Language is the source as well as the essence of a culture. With time, many languages evolved, and today, a large number of languages are spoken across the world. Out of over 7000 languages, only 200 languages currently exist in both spoken and written forms while many of the languages are extinct now. It won't be wrong to say that language complexity increased over time and so did cultural diversity. The languages evolve, primarily because of their association with culture.

Evolution of Language and Culture

The common between language and culture, both are continuously changing. For instance, the English language that we use today is way different from the old English. Similarly, you can identify several differences between the old western culture and the new one.

Without Culture, no language can exist. Both language and culture experience drastic changes over time. Therefore, you cannot expect a 10-year-old child and a 70-year-old man to share an identical culture and exact the same language even if they live in the same locality.

How Do Language and Culture Influence Our Personal Identity?

Both language and culture play a significant role in shaping personality. Culture tells you how to interact with others and helps to shape values and ethics. Besides, it keeps you close to like-minded people and thus, the sense of belonging strengthens your bond with society. On the other hand, language is like a tool using which you express your culture. In fact, cultural ideas and beliefs are transmitted ahead via language.

Furthermore, both the culture and language allow us to peek into the past and shape our ideas. How we think, speak and interact with others around us is determined by our cultural values. Likewise, language also impacts human thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, language and culture continue to evolve and so does our personality. As we meet people belonging to different cultures, we get to learn more and explore more, and interaction with them can impact your personality as well.

The understanding of a culture can greatly help in learning any foreign language. If you are interested in learning one or more foreign languages, you must study the culture of the respective regions.

It is rightly said that 'Action Speaks Louder than Words'. For effective communication with a foreign audience, you must be aware of their cultural nuances. Thus, the culture and language are intertwined and you cannot set them apart. If you want to improve your linguistic skills for a second language, you must tackle both the culture and language side by side.

The more you know about the cultural background of a language, the faster you can learn that language.

If you aspire to learn any foreign language, remember that understanding culture is going to be an integral part of your learning journey. For learning any language, it is essentially important to know about the culture of the people who speak that language. In addition to having expertise in the language, you also need to consider

socio-cultural aspects and learn how to properly address people in that foreign language. To cut a long story short, language and culture are inseparable.

Culture is a language in itself, Language always carries meanings and references beyond itself: The meanings of a particular language represent the culture of a particular social group. To interact with a language means to do so with the culture which is its reference point. We could not understand a culture without having direct access to its language because of their intimate connection.

A particular language points to the culture of a particular social group. Learning a language, therefore, is not only learning the alphabet, the meaning, the grammar rules and the arrangement of words, but it is also learning the behaviour of the society and its cultural customs. Thus; language teaching should always contain some explicit reference to the culture, the whole from which the particular language is extracted.

The human communication process is complex, as many of our messages are transmitted through paralanguage. These auxiliary communication techniques are culture-specific, so communication with people from other societies or ethnic groups is fraught with the danger of misunderstanding, if the larger framework of culture is ignored.

Growing up in a particular society, we informally learn how to use gestures, glances, slight changes in tone or voice, and other auxiliary communication devices to alter or to emphasize what we say and do. We learn these culturally specific techniques over many years, largely by observing and imitating.

The most obvious form of paralanguage is body language, or Kinesics, which is the language of gestures, expressions, and postures. However, the meaning of words can also be altered by tone and character of voice.

Language is culture and culture is language

Language and culture have a complex, homologous relationship. Language is complexly intertwined with culture (they have evolved together, influencing one another in the process, and ultimately shaping what it means to be human). In this context, A.L.Krober (1923) said, “culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other.”

If culture is a product of human interaction, cultural manifestations are acts of communication that are assumed by particular speech communities. According to Rossi Landi (1973), “the totality of the messages we exchange with one another while speaking a given language constitutes a speech community, that is, the whole society understood from the point of view of speaking.” He further explains that all children learn their language from their societies, and during the process of learning a language also learn their culture and develop their cognitive abilities.

Language communicates through culture and culture also communicates through language: Michael Silverstein proposed that the communicative force of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality, but also in connecting one context with another. That is, communication is not only the use of symbols that “stand for” beliefs, feelings, identities, or events, it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the present context.

According to the linguistic relativity principle, the way in which we think about the world is directly influenced by the language we use to talk about it. “The real world is, to a large extent, unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever so similar that they represent the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct, not merely the same with a different label attached” (Edward Sapir, 1929). Therefore, to speak is to assume a culture, and to know a culture is like knowing a language. Language and culture are homologous mental realities. Cultural products are representations and interpretations of the world that must be communicated in order to be lived.

The problem lies in what happens when cross-cultural interactions take place, i.e., when message producer and message receiver are from different cultures. Contact among cultures is increasing and intercultural communication is imperative for anyone wanting to get along with and understand those whose beliefs and backgrounds may be vastly different from their own.

Language can mark the cultural identity, but it is also used to refer to other phenomena and refer beyond itself, especially when a particular speaker uses it to explain intentions. A particular language points to the culture of a particular social group. We can therefore presume that language learning is cultural learning, so language teaching is cultural teaching due to the interdependence of language and cultural learning.

Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, basic assumptions, and values that are shared by a group of people and that influence each member's behaviour and each member's interpretations of the meanings of other people's behaviour. And language is the medium for expressing and embodying other phenomena. It expresses the values, beliefs and meanings which members of a given society share by virtue of their socialization into it. Language also refers to objects peculiar to a given culture, as evidenced by proper names which embody those objects. Byran posited that "a loaf of bread" evokes a specific culture of objects in British usage unless a conscious effort is made to empty it of that reference and introduce a new one. So, we can conclude that language is a part of culture, and through it, we can express cultural beliefs and values, and that the specific usages of a given word are peculiar to a language and its relationship with culture.

In fact, language teaching means, inevitably, language and cultural teaching. According to Buttjst, "Culture learning is actually a key factor in being able to use and master a foreign linguistic system." The Bellagio Declaration of the European Cultural Foundation and the International Council for Educational Development states, "For effective international cooperation, knowledge of other countries and their cultures is as important as proficiency in their languages and such knowledge is dependent on foreign language teaching."

Learning a language is therefore learning the behaviour of a given society and its cultural customs. Language is a product of the thought and behaviour of a society. An individual language speaker's effectiveness in a foreign language is directly related to his/her understanding of the culture of that language (Taylor, 1979), and it is possible to consider teaching culture through learners' own languages, which can be used in a specific way to interpret the other culture (Ager).

Finally, we can conclude that immersion teaching accelerates the acquisition of cultural knowledge: "...the integration of language and culture learning by using the language as medium for the continuing socialization of students is a process which is not intended to imitate and replicate the socialization of native-speaker teachers but rather to develop student's cultural competence from its existing stage, by changing it into intercultural competence" (Fengping Gao).

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