

# The Relationship between Language and Culture

David ELMES\*

## Abstract

With first language learners immersed in their own culture, connections between language and culture often never come to question. For foreign language learners, where true cultural intricacies and understandings are situated well beyond the textbook, an understanding of language assumes a very different form. While it is possible to separate language and culture, one has to question the validity and implications such separation brings. This paper introduces the concepts of language and culture, and explores the viability of their relationship based on the three possible relationships proposed by Wardhaugh (i.e. the structure of the language determines the way we use language, cultural values determine language usage, and the neutral claim that a relationship does not exist). The importance of cultural competency is then considered for its importance to language education and the implications it holds for language learning and policy.

KEY WORDS: language, culture, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, language education

## Introduction

An understanding of the relationship between language and culture is important for language learners, users, and for all those involved in language education. For language teachers and learners in general, an appreciation for the differences in opinion regarding the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language. Moreover, insight into the various views can assist not only second language learners but also first language users, as the way we choose to use language is not just important for some of us. Such insights also open the door for a consideration of how both language and culture influence people's life perceptions, and how people make use of their pre-acquainted linguistic and cultural knowledge to assess those perceptions. For all language users, the recognition of how their language affects others can greatly impact the direction and motivation for both language study and interpersonal relationships, and it can also add great insight and

value to language education, program planning, and curriculum development.

This paper begins by introducing the concepts of language and culture, and then considers the connection between the two through the three plausible relationships forwarded by Wardhaugh: language structure determines language usage, cultural values determine the way we use language, and the claim that a relationship between the two does not exist. In the latter part of the paper, the implications of such a relationship are discussed as they pertain to language education and policy.

## Language and culture

The relationship between language and culture is a complex one due largely in part to the great difficulty in understanding people's cognitive processes when they communicate. Below, Wardhaugh and Thanasoulas each define language in a somewhat different way, with the former explaining it for what it does, and the latter viewing it as it relates to culture.

---

\*鹿屋体育大学国際交流センター National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya International Exchange and Language Education Center

Wardhaugh (2002, p. 2) defines language to be:

a knowledge of rules and principles and of the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences.

While Wardhaugh does not mention culture per se, the speech acts we perform are inevitably connected with the environment they are performed in, and therefore he appears to define language with consideration for context, something Thanasoulas (2001) more directly compiled in the following.

...(l)anguage does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives (Sapir, 1970, p. 207). In a sense, it is 'a key to the cultural past of a society' (Salzmann, 1998, p. 41), a guide to 'social reality' (Sapir, 1929, p. 209, cited in Salzmann, 1998, p. 41).

And if we are to discuss a relationship between language and culture, we must also have some understanding of what culture refers to. Goodenough (1957, p. 167, taken from Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 219) explains culture in terms of the participatory responsibilities of its members. He states that a society's culture is made up of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.

Malinowski (Stern, 2009) views culture through a somewhat more interactive design, stating that it is a response to need, and believes that what constitutes a culture is its response to three sets of needs: the basic needs of the individual, the instrumental needs of the society, and the symbolic and integrative needs of both the individual and the society.

For both Goodenough and Malinowski, culture is defined by benevolence and expectation. While each person holds their own individual roles and subsequent needs as part of a culture, the various needs of the

culture must also be kept in balance. Consequently, in composing a definition for culture, we can see that the concept is often better understood in the context of how the members of a culture operate, both individually and as a group. It is therefore clear how important it is for members of any society to understand the actual power of their words and actions when they interact. Above, Salzmann is quoted by Thanasoulas as saying that language is 'a key to the cultural past', but it is also a key to the cultural present in its ability to express what is (and has been) thought, believed, and understood by its members.

### **The relationship between language and culture**

Edward Sapir, in his studies with Benjamin Lee Whorf, recognized the close relationship between language and culture, concluding that it was not possible to understand or appreciate one without knowledge of the other" (taken from Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 220). However, Wardhaugh (2002, pp. 219-220) reported that there appear to be three claims to the relationship between language and culture:

The structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world or, as a weaker view, the structure does not determine the world-view but is still extremely influential in predisposing speakers of a language toward adopting their world-view

The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in a certain way, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do

A 'neutral claim' which claims that there is little or no relationship between the two

The first of these claims, though in its definitive phrasing is disputed by many sociolinguists, is

commonly associated with Sapir and Whorf. This claim is the basis for much research on the relationship between language and culture and therefore will be covered in the most detail following an acknowledgement of the other two, beginning with a brief consideration of the ‘neutral claim’.

The neutral claim that a relationship does not exist between language and culture, when considering language for its communicative powers and its role in the culture that uses it, would appear to be one for a philosophical debate. While it can be argued that it is possible to analyze a language and/or culture without regard for the other, the reasons for such an analysis seem highly suspect. The fact that language is used to convey and to understand information would imply a relationship in which both the language giver and receiver assume one or more roles. In considering such communication in its most minimal of forms – i.e. the immediate setting – it would be difficult to conclude that culture would in no way have an impact on the interaction even on the smallest of scale.

The second proposed relationship suggests that people in a culture use language that reflects their particular culture’s values. This is the opposing view of Sapir and Whorf in that here it is the ‘thoughts’ of a culture which are reflected in the language and not the language which determines the thought. This claim implies that cultures employ languages that are as different as the cultures that speak them and therefore linguistic functions differ in terms of, for example, a culture’s level of technological development. However, Wardhaugh (2002, pp. 225-226) argues that we must assume that all languages possess the resources to allow any speaker to say anything... provided that speaker is willing to use some degree of circumlocution. When needs for lexical items arise, Wardhaugh (2002, p. 225) explains, we can assume that cultures possess the ability and are free to create or to borrow them as needed, and that cultures

that have not done so have not yet experienced the need. Wardhaugh also notes that people who speak languages with different structures (e.g. Germans and Hungarians) can share similar cultural characteristics, and people who have different cultures can also possess similar structures in language (e.g. Hungarians and Finns). Examples like these indicate that the second relationship between language and culture is quite viable.

The first of the three proposed relationships from above is the basis for the Whorfian hypothesis; the belief that the structure of the language determines how people see the world. The idea that language, to some extent, determines the way we think about the world around us is known as linguistic determinism, with ‘strong’ determinism stating that language actually determines thought, and ‘weak’ determinism implying that our thought is merely influenced by our language (Campbell, 1997). Strong linguistic determinism and the idea that difference in language results in difference in thought, or linguistic relativity, were the basic propositions for the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. The hypothesis claims that we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation (Sapir 1929b, p. 207, taken from Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 220).

In consideration of the various research, it does appear that the structure of a language determines how speakers of that language view their world. A look at how users of different languages view colour, linguistic etiquette and kinship systems helps to illustrate this point.

Lucy (1996, p. 46, taken from Skotko, 1997) reported that Hanunóo, a language from the Philippines, has four terms that seem to refer to what we would call white, black, green, and red but which under further analysis turn out to mean roughly lightness, darkness, wetness, and dryness. Such

observations imply that some cultures interpret colours based on their language, such as with Hanunóo, where it appears that speakers view the colour red as more of a feeling than a colour.

Alternatively, Wardhaugh (2002, p. 234) reports another theory that claims all people approach the colour spectrum in the same cognitive way and it is the development of a culture that creates the demands for differentiation. Nevertheless, Lucy (1997, taken from Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 234) asserts that communicatively relevant encodings of visual experience lie in socially anchored linguistic systems. Skoto also observes (based on Lucy's report regarding the cross-cultural pinwheel of color study by Brown, Lenneberg, and others) that the cross-cultural pinwheel of color linguistics has shown that grammatical structure can influence thoughts and interpretations (Lucy, 1996, p. 47 taken from Skotko, 1997).

If a language is set to respond to perceptions in a specific way, then the thoughts of those who employ that language would seemingly also be restricted. However, when extending this claim to languages that are, for example, structured to reflect social hierarchy such as with Japanese and its numerous levels of politeness, the issue of whether the language actually controls the thoughts of the user is difficult to confirm.

Linguistic etiquette has also been studied for its possible influence on user perceptions. Kasper (1997, p. 385) emphasizes the role of linguistic etiquette in cultures claiming it to be a shaper of both communicative contexts as well as human relationships. Though linguistic norms differ between cultures, demonstrating respect towards others is an important function of language. To help clarify this point, politically correct and sexist language has been studied in order to understand whether this language determines the perceptions of the users. And, in spite of claims to the affirmative, it is not conclusive whether certain language causes sexism or vice

versa ("Sexism: Language," 2005). Furthermore, studies of whether changes in politically (in)correct language result in changes in perception have also been inconclusive ("Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis," 2005). And, although the perceptions of listeners appear to be affected by this language, a relationship claiming that language determines this type of thought remains in question.

Kinship systems have similarly been studied to discover how language is related to thought through the ways in which the use of terms like father, brother, or older brother reflect how people behave toward these people (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 229). Hudson (1996, pp. 85-86, taken from Wardhaugh, 2002, pp. 228-229) reports that the Seminole Indians of Florida and Oklahoma recognize a 'father's brother' to also be 'father', as the Seminole recognize same sex siblings to fulfill the same role. While one culture may distinguish between father and uncle, another may not. The use of the term 'father' in a conversation between a native English speaker and a Seminole Indian would logically produce a different image for both people, as culturally each may classify the roles and image of this person differently.

Whereas strong determinism states that language determines thought, weak determinism allows the 'needed' room for additional influences to enter into the relationship between language and culture. Notwithstanding individual cognitive processes or general knowledge, it is fair to assume that world-views may be influenced by culture and not just language. Although language structure provides us with phrasings for our understanding and can manipulate our thoughts in this respect, if preexisting knowledge does not supply a foundation for general understanding, the ways in which we define and evaluate each individual encounter would be left solely to linguistic knowledge.

When we encounter something familiar we are

able to categorize it quite easily and with some degree of confidence thanks to pre-acquainted knowledge or schemata (Nishida, 1999, p. 754). Nishida explains that when a person enters a familiar situation, they retrieve a stock of knowledge of appropriate behavior and or appropriate roles he/she should play in that situation. Hudson (1996, pp. 77-8, taken from Wardhaugh 2002, p. 236) similarly suggests that when we hear something new, we associate with it who typically may use it and in what kind of occasion it is appears to be typically used. Our interpretations of our observations in life are guided by how we (are able to) classify those experiences both linguistically and culturally.

Turner (1994, pp. 15-22 taken from Nishida 1999, p. 760) states that people use schemata to help recognize situations, create strategies for addressing them, apply the strategies, and then deal with the resulting actions in the same manner. If we were to verbalize this actual process, it would obviously be our language that would restrict how we would express ourselves, but the fact that we are not able to express every thought and feeling involved in every situation does not imply that we lack those thoughts and feelings. Since this type of process is encountered repeatedly in daily life, it might be oversimplistic to assume that it is only language that restricts us from thinking a particular way. We must assume that meaning and intelligibility are at least partially determined by the situation, and the prior experience of speakers (Gumperz, 1977, taken from Saville-Troike, 1997, p. 138).

As educators, a recognition that a relationship between language and culture does exist brings us to consider how this understanding can apply to language education and language policy.

### **Implications for language education and language policy**

The ultimate goals of language education for both learners and instructors revolve around the acquisition of competency. As illustrated above, language and thought interact constantly and linguistic competence is not enough for learners to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999, taken from Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Understanding that languages and their cultures do possess relationships central to the acquisition of linguistic and cultural competency is a good starting point for any approach to language education. The creation and enforcement of an integrated language policy that reflects the need for learners to be educated about both target culture(s) and language(s) is needed if language learners are to be expected to achieve any degree of real competency in any language.

In Japan, current methods of language education appear to often assume a rather passive stance in the incorporation of cultural knowledge into the classroom, taking a more FYI approach in the inclusion of cultural notes and tidbits in language lessons. Many teachers and students seem to lose sight of the fact that knowledge of a grammatical system [grammatical competence] has to be complemented by culture-specific meanings [communicative or cultural competence] (Byram, Morgan et al. 1994, p. 4, taken from Thanasoulas, 2001). Thanasoulas also notes that Kramersch's observations should not go unnoticed:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one... challenging (learners') ability to make sense of the world around them. (Kramersch, 1993, p. 1, taken from Thanasoulas, 2001)

For instructors and learners alike, the concepts of linguistic and cultural competence must be introduced

into the classroom together. Their relationship would also serve best clarified and understood from the onset. Showing language in its natural environment is no easy task in many foreign language classrooms, but as Peck (1998 taken from Thanasoulas, 2001) notes, beginning foreign language students want to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language. Even beginning language learners are aware that there is more to language than grammar, and often it may be the widespread teaching practice that language understanding equals actual language competency that leaves learners questioning their awareness and leads them to struggle with language studies.

In language education it is not a matter of instructors explaining or telling learners 'how it is', it is important to let learners make informed observations such as ethnographers would. By recognizing first-hand the power of language and paralinguistic consistent with one's own culture in another culture, learners gain the ability to see beyond apparent case-specific knowledge. They then realize the underlying processes which speakers of a language utilize to produce and interpret communicative experiences, including unstated assumptions which are shared cultural knowledge and understandings (Garfinkel, 1967, 1972, taken from Saville-Troike, 1997).

For language programs, a language policy would best be implemented in the form of required curriculum emphasizing the integrated study of language and culture. While the incorporation of cultural learning would be an ideal constant in language policy, languages with restricted use such as Esperanto would be realistically very difficult to attach to a culture. While the focus of foreign language learning is clearly on the foreign language and culture, language policy should also include a study concerning the awareness of learners' native language and culture: foreign language teachers should be foreign culture

teachers, and possess the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994, p. 73, taken from Thanasoulas, 2001).

In Japan however, many instructors hold limited target culture experience. Frequently, Japanese foreign language instructors know little more of the actual culture of the language they are teaching than the brief facts that they so sparingly include in their lessons. In Japan, the most common *justification* for this comes in the form of the entrance test requirements for high school and post secondary institutions in the country imposed nationally by *Mombukagakusho* (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). Many instructors maintain that little time is available to offer 'extras' such as practical and lifelike situational language usage activities. This claim is actually quite true, and therefore, in the case of countries with language policies similar to Japan, change must come from the top. If (testing) practices are changed to reflect the need for linguistic and cultural competency, public school language education will be capable of the change needed to teach language learners what it is to be socially competent language users.

### Concluding thoughts

While there is no definitive conclusion to exactly how language and culture are related, it is evident through the linguistic choices that people employ that a relationship exists. There is a need for language learners to understand why people think and speak the way they do, and to understand possible agreements that may be in place between a culture and its language. Integrated studies of language and culture are needed if language learners are to become competent language users.

If language policy reflects the need for learners to become socially competent language users, learners

will be able to better understand their own language and culture as well as any other they may choose to study. For language learners and instructors alike, an acknowledgement that there is more to any language (i.e. 'the ways of...') than the sum of its parts is imperative if any level of real competency is to be achieved. Creating language policy that reflects the importance of the relationship(s) between language and culture will force teachers to educate learners on the authenticity of language (i.e. the how and why behind its use in real life). Such policy would not only offer language learners insight into their own language and cultural competency, but also provide them with an educated base for how to view other languages and cultures as well. With the unfortunate realities of time and budgetary constraints at the forefront of language education, judgments inevitably have to be made concerning the role of cultural education in the second language classroom. And, as strong evidence ties together culture and language, creating a program reflective of this relationship should be nothing short of top priority.

### References

- Campbell, L. (1997). *The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*. Retrieved October 4, 2005 from <http://venus.va.com.au/suggestion/sapir.html>
- Gumperz, J.J. (1996). On teaching language in its sociocultural context. In D.I. Slobin, J. Gerhardt, A. Kyratzis, & J. Guo (Eds.), *Social interaction, social context, and language* (pp. 469-480). Mahay, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kasper, G. (1997). Linguistic Etiquette. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *The handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 374-385). United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers.
- Nishida, H. (1999). A cognitive approach to intercultural communication based on schema theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23(5), 753-777.
- O'Neil, D. (1998-2005). *Language and culture: An introduction to human communication*, Retrieved October 15, 2005 from [http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language\\_6.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language_6.htm)
- Peterson, E. & Coltrane, B. (2003, December). *Culture in second language teaching*. Retrieved October 11, 2005 from Center for Applied Linguistics Web site: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0309peterson.html>
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* (2001-2005). Retrieved October 8, 2005 from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Web site: [http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Sapir-Whorf\\_hypothesis](http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Sapir-Whorf_hypothesis)
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Politics and etiquette*. (2001-2005). Retrieved October 10, 2005 from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Web site: [http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Sapir-Whorf\\_hypothesis](http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Sapir-Whorf_hypothesis)
- Saville-Troike, M. (1997). The ethnographic analysis of communicative events. Chapter 11 in N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: A reader and a coursebook* (pp. 126-144). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Sexism: Language* (2001-2005). Retrieved October 10, 2005 from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Web site: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexism#Language>
- Skoto, B. (1997, Fall). *Relationship between language and thought from a cross-cultural perspective*. Retrieved October 11, 2005 from <http://www.duke.edu/~pk10/language/ca.htm>
- Stern, H. H. (2009). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thanasoulas, D. (2001). Radical Pedagogy: *The importance of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom*. Retrieved October 3, 2005 from the International Consortium for the Advancement of Academic Publication Web site: [http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue3\\_3/7-thanasoulas.html](http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue3_3/7-thanasoulas.html)
- Wardhaugh, R. (2002). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (Fourth Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

## 言語と文化の関係

デイビット・エルメス

### 要 約

第一言語の習得は、自らの文化の中に身を置いた状態で行われる。そのため第一言語習得に関しては、言語と文化のつながりが全く問題にならないことが多い。しかし外国語の習得においては、複雑な文化的背景に対する真の理解を教科書からは得ることができないため、言語に対する理解の形も第一言語の場合とは大きく異なる。言語と文化を切り離すことは可能ではあるが、そうした学習方法の有効性や意味については考えてみなければならない。本稿では、まず言語と文化の概念を紹介し、両者の関係の可能性について、ウォードハフが提示した3つの仮説（人がある言語をどのように使用するかはその言語の構造により決定されるという説、文化的な価値観が言語の使用方法を決定づけるという説、言語と文化の間に関係はないという中立説の3つ）をもとに検討する。さらに、文化を身に付けることの重要性について、その語学教育における重要性と、言語の習得および言語政策における意味の面から考察する。

キーワード：言語, 文化, サピア=ウォーフの仮説, 語学教育