



Interaction of Language and Culture: A Sociolinguistic Study

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ABSTRACT

Language and culture are intricately interwoven and inseparable. This paper tries to express that languages have significant effects on cultures and languages also are under impact of cultures. To express this mutual relationship, sociological and anthropological views in this relation are provided in this paper. It surveys the importance of culture in linguistic communication and in foreign language learning and explains about key concepts in language use and cultural knowledge.

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Introduction

Language is an important issue in sociability. Language as a technical, social and cultural tool plays a significant role to get cultural knowledge which, according to national Center for Cultural Competence, is defined as “integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of racial, ethnic, religious or social group and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations” (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown & Jones, 2000). Language is in fact, not only part of how we define culture, but also it reflects culture.

Language is a medium to communicate and exchange information creatively and freely, by using different forms of language, dialects, accents and speech acts. This communication at micro-level includes symbolic social exchanges and at macro-level involves human civilization, cultural thoughts and inherits. It also transfer scientific and cultural knowledge, ethnic and social identity from one generation to succeeding one. And help people develop their mental and cultural beliefs through ages. Moreover, it reflects cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken.

Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned without cultural knowledge of celebrations, folk songs or customs of the area in which is the language is spoken. Language learners need to be aware of cultural context of day to day conversational conventions. It means they should know what is appropriate to say to whom, in what situations and it means understanding beliefs and values represented by language. Because behaviors and intention patterns that are appropriate in their community may be perceived differently by members of target Language community. So, language use in association with other culturally appropriate behavior is of primary importance to have a successful communication. Therefore, study of culture is essential for foreign language learning and teaching. Language is such interwoven with different aspects of our daily life that one cannot assume a culture without language or language without culture. Linguists, sociologists and anthropologists study relationship between

languages and culture and their impact on each other from different views.

Language and Culture from Sociological View

Language and social communication

The people of a community communicate each other via language. Language is used to express all human needs from physical needs to mental desires. People communicate experiences, knowledge, thoughts, customs, values and social and cultural norms via language. Language allows people to make cultures, experiences and gather them to transfer socially same behaviors from a generation to the next ones. Language is a communication symbol which connect past, present and future and gather knowledge and transfer it from past to present and from present to future. Symbolic communication among people is accomplished by three language forms:

- 1-Spoken language which facilitates communication
- 2-Written language which maintains cultural inherits
- 3-Semiotic language

- speech act
- Gestures
- Cultural awareness

Intercultural communication is one of the related matters which presents many challenges and one of them refers to the need to create awareness about the importance of understanding speech acts a s spoken language and also gestures as semiotic language.

What is speech act?

We perform speech acts when we offer an apology, greeting, request, complaint, invitation, compliment, or refusal. A speech act is an utterance that serves a function in communication. A speech act might contain just one word, as in "Sorry!" to perform an apology, or several words or sentences: "I'm sorry I forgot your birthday. I just let it slip my mind." Speech acts include real-life interactions and require not only knowledge of the language but also appropriate use of that language within a given culture. The recognition of the meaning of a particular speech act in a given cultural setting is at the heart of successful intercultural communication. Here are some examples of speech acts we use or hear every day:

Greeting:

"Hi, Eric. How are things going?"

Request: "Could you pass me the mashed potatoes, please?"

Complaint: "I've already been waiting three weeks for the computer, and I was told it would be delivered within a week."

Invitation: "We're having some people over Saturday evening and wanted to know if you'd like to join us."

Compliment: "Hey, I really like your tie!"

Refusal: "Oh, I'd love to see that movie with you but this Friday just isn't going to work."

Are speech acts universal?

Speech acts are considered universal, nevertheless researches show that they can manifest differently across languages and cultures that this cross-cultural difference in language use is indicative of broader socio-cultural differences that underline language in use internationally and certainly it is at this level that much intercultural misunderstanding has its origin. For example, speech acts are difficult to perform in a second language because: speech acts are so closely tied to the culture and Learners may not know the idiomatic expressions or cultural norms in the second/foreign language or they may transfer their first language rules and conventions into the second/foreign language, assuming that such rules are universal because the natural tendency for language learners is to fall back on what they know to be appropriate in their first language. What is important for these learners to know is that:

- They should know there are crucial areas of intersection between language and culture that the two are intricately intertwined.

- They should understand exactly what they do in that first language in order to be able to recognize what is transferable to other languages. Something that works in a language maybe can't be used in another language. An example of speech act in this relation is:

When an English learner wants to break into a conversation between the natives of a foreign language for example Persian:

- He needs to identify and mobilize those language structures that are appropriate for showing a desire to break in.

- Also, it is necessary for him to know it is culturally acceptable to break into the conversation of those two people and if so, when and how.

- Are certain discourse conventions used when attempting to join a conversation?

- Do gender, status, rank, and other factors make a difference?

So, this example shows, when performing speech acts in every language, there are some social and cultural conventions that should be considered which these norms will condition what you say, play a role in choosing the appropriate level of politeness, etc. for example some cultural norms contributed to speech acts in Persian are:

1) Your most important concern as speakers is to consider "who is the addressee?" you must consider the hearer's age, social position and the level of familiarity between you and the hearer:

- The role that you and your interlocutor play (such as student vs. teacher)

- The status difference that comes with the role (such as relatively lower status for a student, relatively higher status for a teacher)

- The level of familiarity or acquaintance that is whether you are close or just getting acquainted.

2) Also, you need to choose language forms that express respect and humbleness, for example using the formal form of address

(*Shoma*) rather than an informal form of address (*To*) for showing respect.

As you see, speech acts are so closely related to the culture and ignoring such social and cultural conventions in intercultural communication could easily lead to misinterpreting the speech acts by the speakers. An example of potential misunderstanding for an English learner of Persian would be what is said by a dinner guest in Iran to guests that may well apologize a number of times (for example, Iranian people say to their host that: "Sorry to cause you trouble /make a disturbance to you" in addition to using an expression of gratitude: "Thanks", for instance, for the intrusion into the private home, the commotion that they are causing by getting up from the table and also for the fact that their host has to cook the meal, serve it and will have to do the dishes once the guests have left. But the English guests that are unaware of the social and cultural conventions, might think this to be rude or inappropriate and instead choose to compliment the host on the wonderful food and festive atmosphere, or thank the host for inviting them. Although such compliments or expression of thanks are also appropriate in Persian, they are not enough for native speakers of Persian without a few apologies!

Gestures

Gestures are one part of non-verbal communication. McNeill (1992) defined gestures as the movements of the hands and arms that occur simultaneously with speech. Nespoulous, Perron and Lecours (1986) defined gestures as the movements of the body or any part of the body, that express thoughts and feelings during interaction with others. Gestures are learned innately, not consciously, as blind people gesture even though they have never seen gesture (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 1998). However, there are similarities and differences in gesture production across cultures. Additionally, gestures may take different forms for different ethnic groups (Feyereisen and Lannoy, 1991). For example, the gestures conveying information about emotions, sports, playing musical instruments and using tools are identical in many parts in the world, or Iranian immigrants to America differ in their use of gestures with Americans. For example the Americans show more bodily action when speaking than Iranians do. But Iranians tend to gesture more than Americans in sad and happy situations. Also, the Iranian immigrants often spoke close to or while touching their partner, whereas the Italians maintained greater inter-individual distances. The difference in gesture production may be one source of miscommunication between the two cultures.

So, we can understand that cultural awareness is essential for those who want to become able to use a foreign/second language communicatively and have an appropriate use of language or appropriate speech acts in their intercultural communications. Here, we will discuss more about the cultural awareness, but at first introducing the different cultural categories seems to be appropriate. Nowadays, the scope of cultural studies includes the self, the group and the communication situation, that according to there, three cultural categories can be introduced:

A) Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism describes a general situation (region, country, community) of "cultural contact". Normally, the term comprises three visions of diversity:

- Culture as state-nation (multicultural= different nationalities)
- Culture as religion (multicultural = different religions)
- Culture as ethnic groups (multicultural= different ethnic groups)

Consequently, any country, region, community or group is multicultural by definition, as different cultures interact

simultaneously at any level, so, multiculturalism would be used for the description of contexts where cultures are in contact, not restricted to nations, religious or ethnic groups.

B) Pluriculturalism

In pluriculturalism, identity is the by-product of experiences in different cultures, thus multiple identifications create our unique personality more than a static "identity". Pluriculturalism implies an approach to the self and the other as complex, rich beings which act and react from the perspective of those multiple identifications.

C) Interculturality

Interculturality is, for our perspective, intimately related to communication: it is the link between language and culture, so it is undoubtedly, one of the key notions in language learning at the moment.

Being intercultural is a way of participating in communication in which interlocutors:

- Are aware of the relevance of culture in communication.
- Participate actively in communication.
- React critically to communication.

Awareness of culture

According to what mentioned above, the language learner must be aware of three layers of culture: multi-cultural, pluricultural, and inter-cultural.

1) Awareness of culture from a multicultural perspective implies
The language learner must be aware of diversity in society and how social groups including nations, create, use and manage cultures, which are intermingled in a complex matrix of social contact.

2) Awareness of culture from a pluricultural perspective implies
To define identity as a complex, flexible, dynamic composite in which any situation can adopt an apparently definite layout for a certain purpose with a particular interlocutor.

3) Awareness of culture from an intercultural perspective must be displayed in two directions

First, the learner must be aware of the pluricultural identity of his or her interlocutor, as defined above.

Second, the language learner must be aware of the cultural conventions of the languages they may use:

- Language is a culture-bound phenomenon and there are conventions ruling any communicative act, written or spoken.
- Awareness of these cultural conventions can smooth communication.

Language and cultural Identity

Language affects cultural identity because of its infinite creativity and versatility. These features make a language as a medium for achieving social goals. Cultures are affected by each other via languages. Interactions between languages make cultures expanded and developed. Also changes within cultures make languages developed. For example: dividing social works accompanied with development of technologies lead to conceptual development of languages. If language of a nation changes, conceptual and semantic – pragmatic system of that language which is related through phonological, morphological and syntactic structure will also change. Language is also one of the common human elements of a group and this common element, in political and national movements

For example, in George Orwell's book (1984), a new language named "newspeak" is created to change is created to change the way people think about government. The new vocabulary given was created to control their minds. Undoubtedly, to make a united language is one of the first arrangements to represent a nation's identity. For example,

Iranian Turk people are biased about using only Turkish language in their everyday life, because they know that Turkish language is a representative of their cultural identity. Making a united language also helps geographical and humanistic expansion of that nation. For example, colonist countries tried to dominate the cultural identity of the territories they occupied, destroying the related nation's languages.

Sociologists consider other cultural factors important in linguistic use. These factors are social class, education, job, age, gender, etc.

- Education: Studies show that less educated people are more interested in using high-educated speaking forms.
- Job: Any job that it is specific language, register which is understandable among people of that job
- Age: The younger people are more interested in using modern words.
- Gender: Female speakers are more polite than male ones.
- Race: Immigrants specially new generations of them which have been born in the new immigrated country and have been brought up socially there, consider their mother tongue as bad speaking form and do not accept it, because they are not usable in that region. They also use different degrees of politeness from very formal to very informal which is related to intimacy degree of people in the community.

Sociologists see also bilingualism as an important factor which affects culture, because in a bilingual community, both languages have hierarchy of social roles which are specific: one language is high class language used in formal and important stances and other one as a low class language is used in informal stances.

As we discussed before, sociolinguists define linguistic community by some criteria such as: common language and communication medium. Linguistic community in fact, includes a group of people interact via language and in this view, all mental activities are erupted from language. So, linguistic society is the most important social group.

Language and Culture from Anthropological View

In this point of view, language is seen as an evolutionary phenomenon which can be studied diachronically and synchronically and anthropologists assume language has an intermediary role within which culture transfers from one generation to another one and language has specified our speaking ability and physical revolution. This view believes language makes cultural and social developments we can know dances, customs, traditions, food, music, etc of a community via knowing its language and language changes are based on social, economic, political and religious requirements. They believe that each language has its own kinship words, its own taboo words, accents and dialects.

The importance of culture in language learning

Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware, of the cultural context of day to day conversational conventions such as: greetings, farewells, giving or receiving compliments, address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. It means they should know what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language. They should know that behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They have to understand

that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior. So, through initiatives such as the national standards for foreign language learning, incorporating the study of culture into language learning is essential. Cultural knowledge is one of the five goal areas of the national standards.

Through the study of other languages, learners gain a knowledge and understanding of the *cultures* that use that language; In fact, learners cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27).

In many regards, Culture is acquired implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms that learners are learning. To make learners aware of the cultural features reflected in the language, teachers can make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion in relation to the linguistic forms being studied. For example, when teaching subject pronouns and verbal inflections in Persian, a teacher could help learners understand when in Persian it is appropriate to use an informal form of address (*To*) rather than a formal form of address (*Shoma*) —a distinction that English does not have. An English as a foreign language teacher could help learners understand socially appropriate communication, such as making requests that show respect; for example, “Hey you, come here” may be a linguistically correct request, but it is not a culturally appropriate way for a learner to address a teacher. Learners will master a language only when they learn both its linguistic and cultural norms.

So, culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language learning. Foreign language teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach. Learners can be successful in communication and in speaking a foreign language only if cultural issues are an inherent part of the learning.

Theories Proposed by Some Scientists

Fishman categorizes language as follows:

- Language as a part of culture: Language is an inevitable part of culture who wants to understand and culture, must master its language. Of course, this relationship is reciprocal.
- Language as an index of culture: It is byproduct of its role as part of culture.
- Language as symbols to mobilize populations to defend and to foster cultures associate with them. This relationship is reciprocal.

Kramsch categorizes relationship between language and culture as follows:

- Language expresses cultural reality; words people utter refer to common experiences. They express ideas, facts or events that are communicable. Because they refer to a stock of knowledge, about world that other people share. This view is close to Fishman’s category 2. But Fishman thinks more of grammatical categories.
 - Language embodies cultural reality. Members of a social group create expressions through language. They give meaning to it through the medium they choose to communicate with one another, like speaking face or writing a letter or interpreting a graph.
 - Language symbolizes cultural reality; language is a system of signs. It is close to Fishman’s category but Kramsch thinks more of linguistic instructions at micro-level.
- Sapir thinks that people are affected by confines of their language. He believes that people are mental prisoners and unable to think freely of restrictions of their vocabulary.

Language is not voicing ideas, but shapes ideas. One cannot think outside confines of their language.

Whorf fully believed in linguistic determinism; that what one thinks is fully determined by their language. He also supported linguistic relativity, which states that the differences in language reflect the different views of different people. In Whorf’s view, cross cultural communications which be barrier-free, is almost impossible.

But we see that not every word of communication between people of different languages. Communities are expressed, but messages are getting across. Using universal languages of law and science, people are working together with no major barrier. Lexicon of a specific language is mirrors whatever the nonverbal culture emphasizes. Aspects of a society which are not associated directly with language seem to have a direct impact on formation of language.

Language users sort out their experiences differently according to categories provided by their languages. One culture considers a tree an inanimate object and another language as a living thing which is reflected in grammar of these languages. A personal experience in confines of one language may be physically same as one occurring in another language group, but people are aware cognitively of what is happening, but their interpretations and value of what happened, may be different based on cultural guidelines set forth by their languages.

Conclusion

Cultural knowledge is not only transferred by language, but also somehow created by language. Culture affects language through whatever is within a community. There are different word representations for an important concept based on various requirements. Language forms culture rather than reflects it, because people react against stimulations and other people’s actions. But some experts like Sapir believe that various spoken forms make various ways of thinking. In other words, language words reflect cultures and people use them in their cultures and make them compatible with culture. Although they are different in using languages, they use language within a single culture. Generally speaking, language can control human behaviors can make abstract concepts, mental experiences and sciences.

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