

The Impact of Language on Culture

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Abstract

What is the impact of language on society, and what role does language play in social change? Language is the tool that people and societies interact with and it does differ from each other. Language is the way that people can show their culture because they communicate through it. The transferring and passing of life-style is happening through language and it's the language which shows the differences of cultures. As the money is the key and medium role holder of power in changing the economic and political systems the language is the medium of the life-world, respectively can language be so powerful to play a role in changing the systems as well. People have often tried to bring the world closer to the life-world by making it a more human place, and they have tried to do so through language, because on the whole they do not have a great deal of worldly power, but only the words they speak. But through

the words they speak and the practices they establish, they create community. Language can change society. But even if I do not want to short change the media of money and power, I believe the role language plays needs more focused attention. Language is a very complex phenomenon, and it is easy to become overwhelmed by its complexities.

Key Words: Language, Culture, Identity, Transfer, Interaction
Introduction

Language can influence culture in a variety of ways. It can influence the way a community perceives the world, and can create community through the use of varying languages and dialects in different areas. It can both influence the way a society interacts with the world, and create a cultural identity separate from the rest of the world. Vocabulary can be a way for the young to separate themselves from their elders, and reinforce their understanding of the world. The words in a language also affect how an individual perceives the world. As a child develops, having the words "please" and "thank you" in their day-to-day speech teaches them valuable social behavioral skills. Speech is a primary way of teaching children about their culture. Cultures whose language lack words relating to modern society may have difficulty understanding the behavior of people whose lives are dominated by these concepts. If you have never heard of blue tooth, how can you understand the behavior of someone wandering around talking to himself?

Cultural identities can be created by the language that is used, and entire societies may define themselves based on the language and dialect they speak. (1) As one goes from north to south through the Americas, the Spanish language becomes more and more like Castilian Spanish, the Spanish spoken in Spain. Those who speak Castilian Spanish are frequently considered more sophisticated and intelligent than those who speak more informal dialects. Another example is the country of Belgium. Most of its citizens speak either Belgian or French. The speakers of both languages feel that they

are very different and better than those who speak the other language (2). Their identity is determined by the language they speak. One result of this is Belgium's recent inability to maintain a cohesive government. The effect of language on culture, of differentiating and uniting groups of people, is more profound than most people realize. Not only does the specific vocabulary reflect the culture, the language or dialect spoken can also both define and separate cultures.

Does the Language I Speak Influence the Way I Think?

Does language I speak influence the way I think? People have been asking this question for hundreds of years. Linguists have been paying special attention to it since the 1940's, when a linguist named Benjamin Lee Whorf studied Hopi, a Native American language spoken in northeastern Arizona. Based on his studies, Whorf claimed that speakers of Hopi and speakers of English see the world differently because of differences in their language. (3)

What we have learned is that the answer to this question is complicated. To some extent, it's a chicken-and-egg question: Are you unable to think about things you don't have words for, or do you lack words for them because you don't think about them? Part of the problem is that there is more involved than just language and thought; there is also culture. Your culture—the traditions, lifestyle, habits, and so on that you pick up from the people you live and interact with—shapes the way you think, and also shapes the way you talk.

There's a language called Guugu Yimithirr (spoken in North Queensland, Australia) that doesn't have words like left and right or front and back. Its speakers always describe locations and directions using the Guugu Yimithirr words for north, south, east, and west. So, they would never say that a boy is standing in front of a house; instead, they'd say he is standing (for example) east of the house. They would also, no doubt, think of the boy as standing east of the house, while a speaker of English would think of him as

standing in front of the house (4). Has our language affected our way of thinking? Or has a difference in cultural habits affected both our thoughts and our language? Most likely, the culture, the thought habits, and the language have all grown up together. The problem isn't restricted to individual words, either. In English, the form of the verb in a sentence tells whether it describes a past or present event (Mary walks vs. Mary walked). Hopi doesn't require that; instead, the forms of its verbs tell how the speaker came to know the information, so you would use different forms for first-hand knowledge (like I'm hungry) and generally known information (like the sky is blue). Of course, English speakers may choose to include such information (as in, I hear Mary passed the test), but it's not required. Whorf believed that because of this difference, Hopi speakers and English speakers think about events differently, with Hopi speakers focusing more on the source of the information and English speakers focusing more on the time of the event.(4)

Objects are treated differently by the syntax of different languages as well. In English, some nouns (like bean) are 'countable' and can be made plural (beans), while others are 'mass' and can't be made plural (you can have two cups of rice but not two rices). Other languages, like Japanese, don't make this distinction; instead, classifiers like cup of are used for all nouns. Researchers are studying whether this property of the language makes English speakers more aware of the distinction between substances and individual objects. And it shows that the people whose first language is English are more concerned about the amount of things they use in compare to Japanese people that they do not care much.

Here's one more example. People's ideas are different as their cultures are differing in some way. An example of it can be the importance and beliefs of cultures on time. Whorf said that because English treats time as being broken up into large pieces that can be counted—three days, four minutes, half an hour—English speakers tend to treat time as a group of objects—seconds, minutes, hours—

instead of as a smooth unbroken stream. This, he said, makes us think that time is 'stuff' that can be saved, wasted, or lost. The Hopi, he said, don't talk about time in those terms, and so they think about it differently; for them it is a continuous cycle. But this doesn't necessarily mean that our language has forced a certain view of time on us; it could also be that our view of time is reflected in our language, or that the way we deal with time in our culture is reflected in both our language and our thoughts. It seems likely that language, thought, and culture form three strands of a braid, with each one affecting the others.(5)

But people think in language, right?

Much of the time, yes. But not always. You can easily call up mental images and sensations that would be hard to describe in words. You can think about the sound of a symphony, or the smell of garlic bread. None of these thoughts require language.

So it's possible to think about something even if I don't have a word for it?

Yes. Take colors, for example. There are an infinite number of different colors, and they don't all have their own names. If you have a can of red paint and slowly add blue to it, drop by drop, it will very slowly change to a reddish purple, then purple, then bluish purple. Each drop will change the color very slightly, but there is no one moment when it will stop being red and become purple. The color variety is continuous. Our language, however, isn't continuous. Our language makes us break the color variety up into 'red', 'purple', and so on.(5)

The Dani of New Guinea have only two basic color terms in their language, one for 'dark' colors (including blue and green) and one for 'light' colors (including yellow and red). Their language breaks up the color range differently from ours. But that doesn't mean they can't see the difference between yellow and red; studies have shown that they can see different colors just as English speakers can. (3)

The power of language to reflect culture and influence thinking was first proposed by an American linguist and anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and his student, Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941). The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis stated that the way we think and view the world is determined by our language (7). Instances of cultural language differences are evidenced in that some languages have specific words for concepts whereas other languages use several words to represent a specific concept. For example, the Arabic language includes many specific words for selecting a certain type of horse or camel. Cultural differences have also been noted in the ways in which language is used pragmatically. In our American culture, new skills are typically taught and learned through verbal instruction. In some cultures, new skills are learned through nonverbal observation. A distinction has also been made between cultures that encourage independent learning and those that encourage cooperative learning (6).

Does Language Effect Students of Schools?

Differences in the social roles of adults and children also influence how language is used. Home and school contexts may represent different cultures, subcultures, or both and may influence language achievement in noticeable ways. Nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expression) and contextual cues (e.g., shared experience) have different communicative roles in different cultures (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003). Children may be expected, and thus taught, to speak only when an adult addresses them. They are not encouraged to initiate conversations with adults or to join spontaneously in ongoing adult conversations. Additionally, in some cultures, children who enthusiastically volunteer answers at school are considered show-offs (7).

During the 1970s and 1980s, educators and linguists researched and debated the verbal-deficit perspective. This perspective contended that anyone who did not use Standard English did not have a valid language and thus was verbally deficient. Although the verbal

-deficit perspective has now been proven invalid, it is important to understand the research that was conducted to either support or discredit that perspective

The importance of family context in language achievement was more recently described by Hart and Risley (1995, 1999). Findings from their longitudinal study document the significance of “talkativeness” in families in influencing language acquisition rather than the family’s socioeconomic status or ethnic group identity. Differences in language use were attributed to the complex family culture—not simply due to socioeconomic status or ethnic group identity. Among the families that were studied, the most important difference was in the amount of talking (8).

Conclusion

Language develops from the wants of the people who tend to disperse themselves in a common given location over a particular period of time. This tends to allow people to share a way of life that generally links individuals in a certain culture that is identified by the people of that group. The affluence of communication that comes along with sharing a language promotes connections and roots to ancestors and cultural histories.

Language also includes the way people speak with peers, family members, authority figures, and strangers. Language learning process can also be affected by cultural identity via the understanding of specific words, and the preference for specific words when learning and using a second language. Since many aspects of a person's cultural identity can be changed, such as citizenship or influence from outside cultures can change cultural traditions, language is a main component of cultural identity.

So our language doesn't force us to see only what it gives us words for, but it can affect how we put things into groups. One of the jobs of a child learning language is to figure out which things are called by the same word. We learn to group things that are similar and give them the same label, but what counts as being similar

enough to fall under a single label may vary from language to language. In other words, the influence of language isn't so much on what we can think about, or even what we do think about, but rather on how we break up reality into categories and label them. And in this, our language and our thoughts are probably both greatly influenced by our culture. Language help people to express their believes, ideas and life-style. When there is a language among people, there is an identity that people hold to show their culture.

The learning of a different language won't change the way someone things but it will give us more information about the birth place of that language and help us learn and upgrade our knowledge of that language and if the new language is very different from your own, it may give you some insight into another culture and another way of life.

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