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Master 1: Language and culture
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Language and Culture

Introduction (An overview)

Interest in studying language and culture can be traced back at least to the eighteenth century. Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1767–1835), Franz Boas (1858 –1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941) are prominent scholars who all emphasized the relationship between language, thought, and culture. However, a unified subdiscipline focusing on the relationship between language and culture has never been fully developed. As Sharifian (2015) reports in his “Handbook of Language and Culture”, Duranti (2003) distinguishes between three different paradigms in the history of the study of language as culture. At first it was Anthropological linguistics focusing on the description, and classification of indigenous languages. At that time, language was studied in terms of lexicon and grammar. After, with the development of linguistic anthropology and ethnography of speaking, scholars were interested in language use in context and considered language as a culturally organized and culturally organizing domain. With social constructivism, research was about identity formation, narrative, and ideology, and Language was approached as an interactional achievement filled with indexical values.

In the twentieth century, however, views of language have ranged from language as a cognitive system/faculty of the mind, to language as action, language as social practice, language as a complex adaptive system, etc. Culture has similarly been viewed differently by different schools of thought. It has been seen, for example, as a cognitive system, as a symbolic system, as social practice, or as a construct. The challenge that has faced studies of language and culture is due to the complexity of the two notions and of their relations too.

1. Language

If language is only viewed as a system made up of words and a series of rules that connect words together, then language teaching just involves teaching vocabulary and the rules for constructing sentences. Such narrow view of language does not explore the complexities involved in using language for communication. Shohamy (2007, p. 5) argues that only viewing language as “open, dynamic, energetic, constantly evolving and personal” can reflect the rich complexities of communication. This expanded view of language also makes educational experience more engaging for students. Language is not a thing to be studied but a way of

seeing, understanding and communicating about the world. Kramersch (1994) maintains that this understanding of language considers a language not simply as a body of knowledge to be learnt but as a social practice in which to participate.

2. Culture

culture has often been understood as a body of knowledge that people have about a particular society. This body of knowledge can be seen in various ways: as knowledge about cultural artefacts or works of art; as knowledge about places and institutions; as knowledge about events and symbols; or as knowledge about ways of living. When translated into language teaching and learning, this knowledge-based view of culture often takes the form of teaching information about another country, its people, its institutions, and so on. However, culture is not simply a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with each other. Nabi (2017, p. 92) gives a very inclusive definition to culture stating that it is “fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, basic assumptions, and values that are shared by a group of people and that influence each member’s behavior and each member’s interpretations of the meanings of other people’s behavior”

3. Connections between Language and Culture

Seeing culture from linguistic lens presents culture as a kind of extension of language. However, people trained in Anthropology studies would undoubtedly reject this language-bound view of culture. Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture from a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective would suggest that it is central to the process of communication, interaction, and learning another language. This requires understanding how language as code and language as social practice are connected. Kramersch (2014) highlighted the relationship between language and culture in terms of how language expresses one’s cultural reality. She explains that language is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. Thanks to the stock of knowledge about the world that people share with other people, they can express facts, ideas or events that are communicable. When speaking on the telephone or face to face, writing a letter or sending an email message, or reading newspaper, they express and give meaning to their experiences through language. Indeed, the way in which people use the spoken, written, the speaker’s tone of voice, accent, conversational style, gestures and facial expression. Through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, language embodies cultural reality.

Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language, they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Therefore, 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. The nature of the relationship between language and culture according to Wardhaugh (2002, pp. 219- 220) has been analysed under three main claims.

The first of these claims is disputed by many sociolinguists. It is commonly associated with Sapir and Whorf, and regarded as the basis for much research on the relationship between language and culture. Accordingly, the structure of a language either determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world, or does not determine the world-view but is still extremely influential in predisposing speakers of a language toward adopting their world-view.

The second claim goes against Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis and proposes that culture is reflected in language because people 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. Therefore, the 'thoughts' of a culture which are reflected in the language and not the language which determines the thought.

The third claim, however, is a neutral one suggesting that there is little or no relationship between language and culture. It can be argued that it is possible to analyze a language and/or culture without regard for the other. Yet, 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.

Conclusion

Language is one of the most powerful signs of social behaviour. It is more than just a code or a means for communication; it goes beyond what we say or write. In the normal transfer of information through language, we use language to send vital social messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with. It is often shocking to realize how extensively we may judge a person's background, character, and intentions based simply upon the person's language, dialect, or, in some instances, even the choice of a single word (Peter, 1995). Indeed,

language always carries meanings and references beyond itself: The meanings of a particular language represent the culture of a particular social group.

Further reading

The Relationship between Language and Culture by David ELMES (2013). National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya International Exchange and Language Education Center, pp.11-18.

<http://www.lib.nifs-k.ac.jp/nii/46-11.pdf>