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## **Language, Culture and Two Other Paradigms**

### **Language, Culture and Nature**

Ongoing questions about language, culture and nature

- Are human beings mainly what nature determines them to be from birth or what culture enables them to become through socialization and schooling?
- Do language shapes culture or is it culture that shapes linguistic behaviour?

Kramsch (1988) argues that culture, in a way, forces nature to reveal its 'essential' potentialities. Particular meanings, for example using red roses to express love, are adopted by the speech community and imposed in turn on its members, who find it then difficult to change them. The screws that language and culture impose on nature correspond to various form of socialization or acculturation. Etiquette, expressions of politeness, social do and don'ts shape people's behaviour through child rearing, schooling, and professional training. 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 use of written is also shaped and socialized through culture. Not only what it is proper to write but also which text genres are appropriate (the application form, the business letter, the political pamphlet), because they are sanctioned by cultural conventions. These ways with language, or norms of interaction and interpretation, form part of the invisible ritual imposed by culture on language users. This is culture's way of bringing order and predictability into people's use of language.

### **Language, Culture and Speech Community**

Social conventions and norms of social appropriateness are the product of communities of language users. Culture liberates people from the randomness of nature, and constraints them by imposing on them a structure on the individual on liberating and constraining itself on the social. As an example, people who identify themselves as members of a social group (family, neighbourhood, professional ethnic affiliation, or nation) acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. These views are reinforced through institutions like the family, the school, the workplace, the mosque/or the

church, the government, and other sites of socialization throughout their lives. Common attitudes, beliefs and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language, for example, what they choose to say or not to say and how they say it. Therefore, in addition to the notion of speech community composed of people who use the same linguistic code, we can speak of **discourse communities** to refer to the common ways in which members of a social group use language to meet their social needs.

It is not only a matter of grammatical, lexical or phonological choices, but also a matter of selecting appropriate topics to talk about, ways to present information, and styles to interact. Americans, for instance, have been socialized into responding ‘Thank you’ to any compliment: ‘I like your hat!’ ..... ‘Oh, thank you’. The French, who tend to perceive such compliment as an intrusion into their privacy, would rather downplay the compliment and minimize its value: ‘Oh really? It’s already quite old !’

The reactions of both groups are based on the differing degrees of embarrassment caused by personal comments. This is a view of culture that focuses on the way of thinking, behaving, and valuing currently shared by members of the same discourse community. It is **the social (synchronic)** aspect of culture,

Another aspect/view of culture has to do with the historical (diachronic) one. The culture of everyday practices draws on the culture of shared history and traditions. People identify themselves as members of a society to the extent that they can have a place in that society’s history (the past, present, and future). Culture consists of precisely that historical dimension in a group’s identity. This diachronic view of culture focuses on the way in which a social group represents itself and others through its material productions over time (technological achievement, its monuments, its works of art, its popular culture) that punctuate the development of its historical identity. This material culture is reproduced and preserved through institutional mechanisms that are also part of the culture, like museums, schools, and public libraries. Language play a major role in the perpetuation of culture, particularly in its printed form. Both the social (synchronic) and the historical (diachronic) aspect of the culture are relevant to **the sociocultural context** of language study.

### **Further reading**

**Language and Culture in Sociolinguistics by Meredith Marra** (chapter 25, pp. 373- 385).

In Sharifian, F. (2015). *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*. Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group.