

# Relationship between Language and Culture

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## **Abstract:**

*The relationship between language and culture is as old as mankind. Through the centuries, people and their living practices have evolved, resulting in wide-reaching changes in societal culture. This in turn, has influenced language to be what it is today.*

*Language is a form of expression or communication between humans. Simply putting it, spoken and written communication with pre-set meanings for each word written or uttered is what we refer to as language. Culture, on the other hand, is defined by the activities of people, sometimes governed by a geographical boundary. Every culture is unique in itself. It includes language, art, music, mannerisms, religion, games, dress, rituals, law and belief. Having two such expansively defined fields, how far would one have to go to observe the effect that culture has on language?*

*Key words;*

Language, communication,  
interpretation, linkage

## **Introduction:**

Man started to communicate with his few kinsmen through symbols. Mutually understood grunts became spoken

communication. Population started to thrive. Groups of people separated and changed. The concept of race was established and thus began the rich diversity of cultures. Large groups were classified into families and each family was then broken down to sub-families and the world as it stands today, is an amalgam of all of them.

Comparative linguists try to pin the origin of a language to its common ancestor. Since cultures themselves have undergone centuries of transition, it's only natural that languages too would have evolved and changed the same way. Researchers have broadly classified the world of language into three families; European and Asian, Pacific and African, and American Indian.

Each of the above families has had its own cultural traits. The peculiarity of each family shaped the way the language was spoken and understood amongst them. Every miniscule tribe had their own phonetic. Grammar, the order of words, the use of vowels, consonants and the tonal accent too varied between tribes and groups. Thus, different languages from the same region had a lot of similarities, but when examined closely, had an identity of their own. These distinctions helped evolve the respective language over centuries.

Social traits, which are culture dependent, also influenced language in the way different genders or classes within the same tribe or race spoke to one another. Trade jargons were established in multilingual regions.

Over time, languages borrowed sounds, grammar and vocabulary from one another. This doesn't necessarily mean they originated from the same region. Point in case, the striking derivatives in English taken from Sanskrit and European languages that made use of American Indians'. Independently, languages like English were standardized, but the way the language is spoken in different parts of the world is a reflection of the effect culture has on it. Trousers in Britain and pants in America mean the same but sound nowhere near alike, courtesy the respective cultures.

Having evolved from a common protolanguage, it's only fair to say that there are more similarities between languages today than differences. Culture enriches language, affecting dialect, grammar and literature, to name a few. As more and more people mingle, the world is literally becoming one. As a result, different languages from their respective cultures help to understand and appreciate the evolution of the world and its people as it is today, for when man started out, language was solely meant to be the means that bridged the gap between him and his fellowmen.

The meaning associated with a word can vary from language to language and culture to culture. The images that a word conveys, even though the word may be the same, are highly influenced

by the culture of the speaker. Thus, one cannot separate a language from the culture in which it is used. The two are interconnected.

#For example, the word "coffee" is ambiguous in Japanese with respect to temperature. It can be either hot or cold. Japanese speakers specify whether they want hot or cold coffee. To English speakers, however, it is understood that coffee is hot. If it is not, it is necessary to specify "iced coffee".

#In Canada, the word "dollar" refers to the Canadian dollar, but many other countries also use this name for their currency. They include Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica and the United States. When Americans say "dollar", they refer to the American dollar. Therefore, speakers use the word "dollar" to refer to the dollar of their own country, and specify the dollar of another country. To a Canadian, "dollar" means Canadian dollar and to an American, "dollar" means American dollar.

#The word "football" is not associated with the same sport in England and the United States. For Americans, "football" is a sport which is mainly played with the hands. They call the World Cup sport "soccer" and the English call the American sport "American football".

#To Hungarians, the word "pepper" carries a different image than for English speakers. Though the word can refer to either the fruit or the spice, when used in isolation it usually conveys to English speakers a spice which is often used along with salt. Hungarian speakers, however, usually think of the fruit which

is a common ingredient in Hungarian cuisine. Unlike in many countries, Hungarians do not sprinkle their food with salt and pepper. Rather, they use salt and paprika.

#The word "breakfast" probably conveys a very different image to French than to Americans. The reason is that the typical French breakfast consists of a croissant and a cup of coffee unlike the American breakfast which may consist of cereal, pancakes, eggs and sausage. In fact, the American breakfast is also common in French Canada. This is the reason that the word for breakfast in French Canada is not "petit déjeuner" but rather "déjeuner". The word "petit déjeuner" literally means "small breakfast" but in French Canada it is not small. For this reason, French Canadians use the word "déjeuner" instead. This example

#Spaniards associate the word "dinner" with a different hour than do Portuguese. The reason is that Spaniards tend to eat dinner at a much later hour than most Europeans. As a result, Portuguese associate dinner with an hour such as six o'clock while Spanish associate it with a later hour such as nine o'clock.

#The word "red" can represent a number of colours ranging from light red to dark red. In Hungarian, however, the word "red" has two words. One is "vörös", dark red, and the other is "piros", light red. When English speakers hear the word "red", however, the shade is not specified.

#Languages can also differ in how they express time. In English, "half past eight" indicates that half an hour has passed since the previous hour. In German, however, this is expressed differently. "Halb neun" literally means half nine. Instead of looking back to the previous hour, it looks ahead to the next hour. It suggests that the time is halfway to nine o'clock.

#The French "deux heures moins dix" literally means two o'clock minus ten. The English equivalent, however, is ten to two. In French, the starting-point is the next hour, two o'clock, and ten minutes are then subtracted to give the time of 1:50. In English, the starting-point is the present time, 1:50 and ten minutes are added to express that in ten minutes time it will be two o'clock. French uses subtraction while English uses addition, but the actual time is the same.

Most languages do not specify whether one's grandmother and grandfather are paternal or maternal, but Danish does. In Danish, a maternal grandmother is a "mormor" and a maternal grandfather is a "morfar". The words literally mean "mother-mother" and "mother-father". A paternal grandfather is a "farfar" and a maternal grandfather is a "morfar". They literally mean "father-father" and "mother-father". However, when it is unclear whether the grandparent is maternal or paternal, the words "bedstefar" and "bestemor" can be used. They literally mean "best father" and "best mother".

Languages and cultures differ in the meanings which they associate with

particular words. Even in the same language, words may have different meanings because of differences in culture. For this reason, it is important to be familiar with the culture of the language to fully understand the intended meaning.

### 1) What is Culture?

Culture is defined as whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to function in a particular society (Goodenough, 1957). Culture, therefore, is the 'knowhow' that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living. This knowledge is socially acquired. The necessary behaviours are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. There are areas in the world where societies share a very similar cultural orientation yet speak languages that are not only mutually unintelligible but completely unrelated and structurally different (Salzmann, 1998).

**Example:** North Americans Indians of the Great Plains, who possessed many of the similar cultural characteristics but whose languages belonged to at least six different language families, whereas Estonians and Lapps speak related languages, but their cultures are quite different. Thus there is no intrinsic relationship between language and culture and therefore the association of a particular culture and language is not given by nature but is a historical coincidence (Boas, 1911; Sapir, 1921).

### 2) The Relationship between Language and Culture.

For the purposes of discussion concerning the relationship between language and culture, the two terms must be carefully described. According to Salzmann (1998) **language** refers to any one of the several thousand systems of oral communication used by different human societies. Language is a part of human genetic endowment, despite of the fact that it must be learned during childhood along with the many nonverbal facets of a particular culture.

The term **culture** also is a comprehensive term. It depicts the total pattern of human learned behaviour transmitted from generation to generation. When one talks about culture, however, the explicit mention of language is, strictly speaking, redundant because any particular language is a form of (even though autonomous) learned behaviour and therefore a part of culture. A solution to this terminological overlap would be to distinguish between a nonverbal culture and the corresponding language. Nonverbal culture can be further divided into mental culture (world view or value orientations), behavioral culture (e.g., wiping one's feet before entering a house) and material culture (a pull-open a radio telescope).

The claim concerning the relationship between language and culture has intrigued many anthropologists and linguists. There are three views regarding this issue:

1) The structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1940a). A somewhat weaker version is that the structure does not determine the world-view but is extremely

influential in predisposing speakers of a language towards adopting a particular world-view.

- 2) The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in certain way, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do. In this view cultural requirements determine the structure of a language (Witherspoon, 1977).
- 3) There is little or no relationship between language and culture.

### 2.1) Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis:

Following the footsteps of Humboldt (1762), Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture. Commenting on this matter, he says:

“Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society....The ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously build up on the language habits of the group....We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.”

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940a), expanding on Sapir’s ideas, put forward ‘Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. According to him, the relationship between language and culture was a deterministic one.

“We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages...organize it

into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way-an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language... [Not] all observers are ...led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar (Whorf, 1940a: 231).”

On the basis of his views, he came up with two principles:

- a) **linguistic determinism**
- b) **linguistic relativity**

#### a) Linguistic Determinism:

The way one thinks is determined by the language one speaks.

#### b) Linguistic Relativity:

The differences among languages must therefore be reflected in the differences in the worldviews of the speakers.

In Hopi, there is one word “masa ‘ytaka” for everything that flies except birds-which would include insects, aero - planes and pilots. This would be a strange idea for somebody who uses to think in English.

#### Criticism:

- Successful translation between languages can be made.
- One language may take many words (circumlocution) to say what another language says in a single word (Lenneberg, 1953).
- Neologism (coining of a new word) could be the solution to the problem:
- Berlin & Kay (1969) put the principle of relativity to the test. They strongly criticized the claim that ‘each language is semantically arbitrary relative to every other language... [and]

the search for semantic universals is [therefore] fruitless in principle.’

They conducted a research during the late 1960s, based on the examination of ninety-eight languages from all parts of the world and came up with an unexpected finding.

According to them there is a universal inventory of eleven basic color categories from among which the basic color terms in different languages are drawn: These categories are white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and gray.

### **3) Dimensions of Culture.**

There are dimensions on which cultures can be different or similar (cultural variability). The most important dimensions, in this regard, are:

- 3.1) Individualism-Collectivism**
- 3.2) Uncertainty-Avoidance**
- 3.3) Power-Distance**
- 3.4) Masculinity-Femininity**

#### **3.1) Individualism-Collectivism**

Individualism-collectivism is the major dimension of cultural variability used to explain differences and similarities in communication across cultures.

Individuals’ goals are emphasized more than groups’ goals in individualistic cultures. Groups’ goals in contrast, take precedence over individuals’ goals in collectivistic cultures.

- In individualistic cultures, ‘people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only,’ and in collectivistic cultures, ‘people belong to ingroups or collectivities which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty’ (Hofstede & Bond, 1984: 419).
- Ingroups are groups that are important to their members and groups for

which individuals will make sacrifices (Triandis, 1988). Members of individualistic cultures have many specific ingroups e.g., families, religions, social clubs and professions. Specific ingroups exert relatively little influence on individuals’ behaviours. Members of collectivistic cultures have ingroups like work groups, universities and families that influence their behaviour across situations.

- Members of individualistic cultures tend to be universalistic and apply the same value standards to everyone. Members of collectivistic cultures, in contrast, tend to be particularistic and apply different value standards for members of their ingroups and members of outgroups (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

#### **3.2) Uncertainty-Avoidance**

Uncertainty avoidance deals with the degree to which members of a culture try to avoid uncertainty.

- Members of high uncertainty avoidance cultures have a lower tolerance than members of low uncertainty avoidance cultures (Hofstede, 1979: 395).
- According to Hofstede, 1979) MHUA cultures express low tolerance in higher levels of anxiety and energy release, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth, and less tolerance for people or groups with deviant ideas or behaviour whereas MLUA cultures have lower stress levels and weaker superegos, and they accept dissent and taking risks more than MHUA.

#### **3.3) Power-Distance**

Power-distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1979).

- MLPD cultures accept power as part of society and believe power should be used only when it is legitimate for example a considerable interdependence between boss

and subordinates have been noticed whereas MHPD cultures see power as a basic fact of society for example a considerable dependence of subordinates on bosses have been noticed (sometimes in the form of autocratic or paternalistic boss or in the form of counterdependence: that is dependence but with a negative sign)

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### **3.4 Masculinity-Femininity.**

The major differentiation between masculine and feminine cultures is how gender roles are distributed in a culture.

- Masculinity pertains to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct; femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap.

- In HM cultures men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.