



Towards Demystifying the Relationship Between Language and Culture as Frameworks for Understanding Reality

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Abstract

To open discussion about the issue of language and culture, first of all, it seems necessary to mention that languages are historically speaking associated with their particular cultures. In other words, languages cannot be fully understood outside the context and the environment of the cultures in which they are embedded. No one can deny that the relationship between language and culture in general and a specific language and its culture in particular are closely correlated and interrelated. It is much easier for language and culture analysts to notice the huge diversity and complexity between any language and its own culture in the vast majority of human societies. Therefore, it is noteworthy that both languages and cultures have both a direct and indirect effect on each other, and that any study about language without taking into account its particular culture would be meaningless. The real driving forces of this article are to delve into and analyze the idea that language and culture are frameworks through which people communicate experience and understand reality (Vygotsky. 1968). Additionally, the article will shed light on the most common and recent theories dealing with the study of the relationship between language and culture and how they could shape our understanding of the real world.



Introduction

Before delving into analyzing Vygotsky's quote about language and culture and how they shape our ways of communicating and understanding reality, we need first to understand the meaning of both language and culture. In 1971, Crystal defines language as the systematic conversational use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a society for negotiating, communicating and self-expressing. In the same vein, Chase in 1969 states that humans use languages for communicating, thinking and shaping their own standpoint and outlook on life. Saussure in 1956 also sees language as a system of differences. That is to say that there is a difference of a sound image or a written shape in different languages for him. Indeed, language figures human thoughts. As far as culture is concerned, Sapir (1956) declares that culture is a system of modes and behaviors that depend on unconsciousness. In the same way, Rocher in 1972 defines the term as connection of ideas and feeling accepted by a particular society. Goodenough (1996) claims that culture is the only distinction between animals and humans because culture for him is define as a systematic association of people that have a certain way of life. Therefore, culture is a social product which is learnt through interaction and relation with other people and transmitted from generation to generation.

Contextualizing Vygotsky's view

As a way of contextualizing Vygotsky's claim that language and culture shape humans' way of experiencing, communicating, and understanding the world, one can say that one of the most important contributions made by Vygotsky was his idea that our sense of the world is shaped by culture and language. As one of the main proponents of Social Constructivism, Lev Vygotsky, who challenged the views of Jean Piaget that mainly focused on cognitive development as an individual process, rather than a collaborative effort. Although Vygotsky's ideas acknowledged individual psychology in



cognitive development, he shifted the focus to external forces that were entwined with the internal world in which Piaget centered his theories. These influences, outside of the self, have a crucial function, serving to shape how humans view the world. Perhaps Vygotsky's most well-known concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to him, learners with the aid of others, such as parents, teachers, and even fellow students who are at a slightly higher level of development, individuals can increase their competence to a more advanced stage in any particular area of knowledge. By presenting challenges that lay just beyond the individual's range of skill, with a small amount of support, the learner will be able to succeed in completing those tasks. Therefore, by using this instructional approach, learners consequently will be able to raise their level of proficiency in a given area with minimal assistance.

In the same vein, Vygotsky focused on the role of language and culture in developing his cognitive development theory related to the learning theory of social constructivism. For him, the way people tend to perceive the world and develop intellectually depend on the role that language and culture play. Additionally, Vygotsky strongly believed in the strong and close link between learning and development and in the social and cultural nature of both. His socio-cultural theory, stresses the idea that people acquire their language and knowledge through a process which is socially based. In other words, socio constructivism emphasizes the idea that culture and context are so important for understanding and recognizing things happening in societies and in building knowledge based on that understanding. Based on this, one can say that social interaction and the role of knowledge in meaning making are considered as the main pillars of the Vygotsky's view of learning.

Bruner's view

In the same vein, Bruner in his book the Culture of Education (1996) shows how culture and social interaction impacts on cognitive development of humans.



“Culture shapes the mind... it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of our selves and our powers” (Brunner, 1996). In trying to develop his own theory related to socio-constructivism, Brunner emphasized the idea that interactions between a learner and others or social factors have a great impact on cognitive development and that language is a key factor in the process of facilitating the cognitive growth of learners. Brunner built on Vygotsky’s theory to assert that cognitive development emerges and develops through social processes or cultures and that are both shaped by language. Language for Brunner is considered as a consequence of cognitive growth as Piaget determined it but rather it is a tool for thought. Therefore, language is not only related to the ability to encode meaning and allow cognition to operate but also it helps us to organize knowledge and generate new prepositions.

As a way of trying to put Socio-Constructivism theory into practice, there are many examples of classroom activities that can incorporate it. For instance, collaborative, or cooperative learning involves students sharing background knowledge and participating in a reciprocal nature in order to negotiate and settle on a shared constructed meaning. The teacher instructs the students how to use social skills and build knowledge as a group so they can work in cooperation more efficiently.

Issues of critiques and alternative perspectives

In contrast to Vygotsky’s and Brunner’s point of view about language and culture, Piaget States that learning occurs in distinct, age-related stages. In the same vein, cognitive development according to Piaget occurs in a series of four distinct stages. These are characterized by increasingly sophisticated and abstract levels of thought. These stages always occur in the same order, and each builds on what was learned in the previous stage. Therefore, one can say that Piaget can be categorized as belonging to the category of psychological



constructivism that looks at the process of learning as learning through mentally organizing and reorganizing new information and new experiences with older ones.

Whorfianism's view

Another important theory that tries to delve into understanding the relationship between language and culture has to do with Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis. Also known as the theory of the linguistic relativity. The hypothesis was built up and expanded by B. L. Whorf (1897 – 1941). The hypothesis suggests that a language determines and resolves the thought and perception of its speakers. Consequently, Sapir – Whorf hypothesis is, indeed, a theory of the relationship between language and thought expounded in its most explicit form by the American anthropological linguists Edward Sapir (1884 – 1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897 – 1941). Whorf believed that every human being views and sees the world by his own native language. In other words, just as time, space, and mass (according to Einstein) can be defined only in terms of a system of relationships, human knowledge similarly arises only in relation to the semantic and structural possibilities of natural languages. In a simple way, his hypothesis proposed that the words and structures of a language influence how its speakers behaves, feels about the world, and ultimately the culture itself. Simply put, Whorf believed that you see the world differently from another person who speaks another language due to the specific language you speak. This hypothesis also has got two versions. The first one is called Linguistic Relativity or the weak version. This view focuses on the idea that in accordance with linguistic relativity, the languages which are completely different in their vocabulary and structure convey different cultural significances and meanings. This belief, indeed, maintains that the way people view the world is partly determined by the structure of their native language. The view has gained a lot of support and recognition by anthropologist. The second version is called



Linguistic Determinism or the strong version. It supports the view that language dictates thought for its speakers, observation and comprehending of reality are settle on, agreed on and found out by one's native language. However, many anthropologists and linguists have criticized the strong version of this hypothesis. They claim that language can't dictate our thoughts and world view due mainly to the idea that this version lacks a scientific basis. However, it may just have a relative impact on how people think and see the world. Therefore, the weak version of this hypothesis has been widely accepted and supported by anthropologists.

Kecskes's view

Another important view that goes hand in hand with the Sapir hypothesis is the one that is related to Kecskes's view about language, culture and context. In 2013 Kecskes tries to explore the relationship between language, culture, and context. Adopting a socio-cognitive perspective, he argues that culture is a set of shared knowledge structures that capture the norms, values, and customs to which the members of a society have access. Both language and context for him are rooted in culture. A part of culture is encoded in the language. What is encoded in language is a past experience with various contexts while the actual situational context represents actual, present experience.' Therefore, context for him is seen as a dynamic construct that captures both prior contexts of experience and the actual situational context. He also elaborates on the framework of socio-constructivism and provides several examples which reveal how the interpretation of formulaic language draws on both forms of context. The examples he provided demonstrate a strong link between language, culture, and context as well.

Byram's view

As a way of trying to put things into practice and linking the main ideas discussed above with our teaching and learning classroom practices, we will



shed some light on Byram's model of Intercultural Cultural Competence (ICC) that he introduced in 1997. The concept challenged the notion of communicative competence (CC) that all learning theories seek to develop as their main objective and that has dominated the FL education at the time. ICC according to Byram include an aspect of CC which he found lacking in previous theoretical conceptions concerned with the ability to use language appropriately according to context and purpose. Byram's highly influential model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (1997) has been particularly prominent within the field of foreign language education, having had an impact on curricular design and teaching materials in a number of countries.

According to Byram, a competent intercultural speaker is determined by his quality of developing knowledge of self and other; of interaction; individual and societal as well as positive attitudes and valuing others. A competent intercultural speaker has to acquire the necessary skills of interpreting and relating thoughts and world views.

Discussion and concluding remarks.

The various views discussed in this article _ related to Applied Linguistics _ have made it easier to conceptualize and understand how culture is related and linked to language and its use. Culture is linked to language in three major ways: semiotically, linguistically, and discursively. Another important idea discussed also is that language shapes in a way or in another its speakers' cognition, and ways of understanding reality. It is worth saying that the link between language and culture is very complex and powerful. Therefore, the influence of culture on language and that of language on culture cannot be denied or neglected. Our job here as teachers and applied language researchers is to think of ways to develop and improve our students' intercultural competence since it's not easy to separate a language from its own culture. Additionally, our students need to take into account the idea that their own culture affects the way they speak their



native language. The same idea can be applied on the culture of the language they want to learn either from EFL or SL contexts. By working on our students' intercultural competence, our students will be able to learn both how to speak and think about the language they want to learn without having any kind of misconception or misunderstanding. In the same way, I highly recommend Byram's model of ICC for teachers in developing their awareness about both the language and the culture of the language that their students want to learn.



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