

TÌM HIỂU VỀ NGÔN NGỮ CŨNG LÀ SỰ KHÁM PHÁ VỀ VĂN HÓA

Exploration of language as an exploration of culture

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Chúng ta quan sát nhau, ăn cùng nhau và nói chuyện cùng nhau, và từ đó chúng ta biết nhau.

Bài viết này quan điểm của một người nước ngoài về giá trị của việc tìm hiểu các ngôn ngữ của những người mà chúng tôi đã từng sống và làm việc cùng. Bài báo cũng dụng ý làm rõ sự bổ ích trong việc chia sẻ ngôn ngữ với người khác.

Ngôn ngữ được thể hiện như là một sự biểu hiện rõ nét của văn hóa. Phần lớn những gì chúng ta nói và nói như thế nào đều phản ánh các khía cạnh về văn hóa. Ở những người lớn tuổi, những từ ngữ họ dùng, cách sử dụng từ ngữ, sự nhấn mạnh vào một số từ ngữ cụ thể, sự có mặt và vắng mặt một số từ ngữ cụ thể khi miêu tả chi tiết, và thậm chí cả thời lượng nói, sự im lặng hoặc tạm dừng, tất cả đều biểu thị văn hóa qua ngôn ngữ.

Có sự nhìn nhận không chính xác coi ngôn ngữ như là phương tiện trung gian để khám phá sự khác nhau về văn hóa và trên hết là cần một ngôn ngữ chung để tìm hiểu sự khác biệt và giống nhau của các nền văn hóa. Bài viết này biện luận rằng, qua việc chia sẻ ngôn ngữ, chúng ta ít nhất bắt đầu để tìm hiểu sự phức tạp của văn hóa.

Từ khóa: *văn hóa; ngôn ngữ; sự biểu thị; sự khác biệt*

ABSTRACT

We look at each other. We eat together. We begin to talk together. We start to get to know each other.

This paper will present a foreigner's view on the value of exploring the languages of the people we live with and interact with. It will also highlight the usefulness of sharing something of our own language with others.

Language is presented as a powerful expression of culture. Much of what we say and how we say it reflects aspects of our culture. From the order in which people speak, to the words they use, to the way words are arranged in sentences, to the emphasis and stress given to particular words, to the existence or absence of specific words for detailed descriptions, even to the length of spoken exchanges and the use of pauses and silence, we express our culture through language.

There is a dangerous assumption that language is a neutral medium in which to explore cultural difference and that all that is needed is a common language for our cultural similarities and differences to be revealed. The paper argues that through sharing language we can at least begin to unravel some cultural complexities.

Keywords: *culture; language; expression; difference*

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Introduction

Hello. How are you? Bondia, diak ka lai. Manuia le aso. Ni hao. Xin chao. Kumusta kayo. Sawasdee krab. These are some of the many ways we have of greeting each other, in Australia, in East Timor, in Samoa, in China, in Vietnam, in the Philippines and in Thailand. In some of these cultures there may be a physical gesture to go with the words, perhaps a firm handshake (always right hands) in English speaking countries, in East Timor a very gentle handshake, in Vietnam, sometimes a warm two-handed handshake.

Everywhere I have ever been, a basic knowledge of the local language has opened doors. Language includes but it also excludes. Someone who doesn't know a language is easily cut out of cultural discourse and understanding. Some aspects of culture simply cannot be expressed in another language. Of course language is not our only means of communication, but it is none-the-less very significant. Imagine a museum without any words, written or spoken to support the display of cultural artifacts. Imagine a cultural performance of dance or music without the use of language to at least introduce the event and items. Imagine the transfer of culture from grandparents and parents to children and babies, without any use of language.

Through an exploration of language we can explore the associated culture that supports the language. In learning a language and exploring its idiosyncrasies, we are inevitably taken on a cultural journey. This journey reveals much about the nature of the people who speak the language today, as well as those who spoke the language in the past.

Language as a powerful expression of culture.

According to Kramsch (1998) language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives... it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways." (p.1).

How can culture be expressed? Put simply culture is expressed in what we do, what we say, what we make, what we display, and what we wear. Cultural expression many also occur in the 'how', 'when' and 'where' of what we do. Culture is expressed in our gestures. Culture is expressed when we celebrate, in how and where we celebrate, in the frequency of our celebration. But it is also expressed in the language we use in celebrating. Culture is expressed through artifacts gathered and displayed in museums, but it is unheard of that language is not used, in written or spoken form, to present the artifacts to visitors in the museum.

If we take Robinson's (1985) four - fold categorisation of culture as behaviourist, functionalist, cognitive and symbolic, it could be argued that the expression of culture can be translated as largely action from the *behaviourist* perspective, something that can be seen and experienced, something expressed physically, though it could be argued that the act of speaking has a place here; from the *functionalist* perspective, as observers seek to understand a particular culture, they will analyse action but also interaction between people, trying to understand the roles they play and the meanings behind the actions observed. This inevitably involves a consideration of what people say to each other, a consideration of language. In this context language is clearly a significant expression of culture. While the *cognitive* view does not consider culture in a material sense but more as thought processes, of how individuals analyse incoming data, of memories, of what is happening in people's brains, the cognitive interpretation of culture relies heavily on language as its data source. It is through language, spoken and written, that cognitive interpretations of culture are able to be achieved. It is through language that cognitive expressions of culture are transmitted. Finally, it could be argued that there is less direct expression of culture from a

symbolic perspective. This interpretation of culture is less tangible. Culture is seen as more fluid and derived through symbols and meanings. However, how these symbols and meanings manifest is still likely to involve the use of language. Language is likely to be critical in the conveying of symbolic understanding from one individual to another. Culture may be expressed through dance, or instrumental music, in the absence of language, but the sharing of appreciation or meaning of this dance or music immediately requires language.

Language is used in many different ways to express culture. In Vietnam people are always invited to eat or drink, with the words ‘xin mời’. Such invitations are not so essential in Australian culture. Both bread and cake have a significant place in most Western cultures, with many kinds of bread and many different cakes. There are quite different names for types of bread and cakes, reflecting ingredients (predominantly wheat flour), size, shape and purpose. The actual words ‘bread’ and ‘cake’ are very different reflecting the quite different cultural significance for each item. Bread and cake are eaten at different times in a meal, bread early and cake late. Bread is almost always savory, while cake is sweet. By comparison, in Vietnam, there appears less separation between bread and cake, ‘bánh mì’ and ‘bánh ngọt’. Both words are extensions of ‘bánh’ the generic word for cake, pie or pastry. As a further contrast, in Vietnam ‘bún’ eaten almost everywhere, is made of the staple rice flour. It is less common in Australia and requires three English words for a clear description, i.e. ‘soft rice noodles’.

In many English speaking countries the production and consumption of food is more separated than in Asian countries. Very few Australians are farmers. Those who are produce vast quantities of produce for sale. Most Australians produce no food at all and

have a somewhat romanticised view of food production. Not surprisingly then, we have some separate words for produce and what we eat. We don’t eat ‘cows’, we eat ‘beef’. We don’t eat ‘pigs’, we eat ‘pork’. We don’t eat ‘sheep’, though we do sometimes call it ‘lamb’ (young sheep) when it is served as a dish.

A seemingly peculiar but interesting reflection of culture in how language is used can be found in Samoa, an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. At communal village meals when guests are present, greetings are exchanged, with particular attention being given to the length of the greeting. The longer the duration of the speech, the more respect is being shown by the speaker. As a visitor it is very important to note the length of the welcoming speech directed to you and to be sure to reciprocate with an appropriate length of reply.

Finally, it may appear a simplistic observation, but language is very portable, in the sense that it can be carried and used with little effort. It never contributes to our ‘baggage allowance’ when travelling. It doesn’t require batteries. This gives language the ‘power of availability’, limited only by our knowledge and understanding. To the extent that we can use our own language and the languages of host countries we will express our own culture and also come to a better understanding of the culture in which we are currently living.

The value of exploring the languages of the people we live with

Nau (2014) estimates that there are currently 6,500 to 7,000 different languages in the world. While some linguists, most notably Noam Chomsky (Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch, 2002) have argued for the existence of a ‘universal grammar’ that determines which structures are possible in individual languages, other linguists have more recently argued that all languages are unique. Nau (2014) claims that:

Differences in vocabulary may reflect differences in culture and society and therefore an interesting subject not only for linguistic investigations, but also for anthropology and cultural studies. Furthermore, words can be the carrier of traditional wisdom, of knowledge accumulated by a people through experience over a long period of time.

According to Nettle and Romanie (2000):

The vocabulary of a language is an inventory of the items a culture talks about and has categorized in order to make sense of the world and to survive in a local ecosystem. (p.60)

The values for a foreigner of exploring the language of the people with whom we live are extensive. The first is greater understanding of the people and their culture. To the extent that the differences in language reflect differences in culture and society, the more the foreigner knows of the language the more they will come to know and understand the people around them. If words are 'the carriers of knowledge and wisdom over time', they are a clear source of essential information about the people around us. A comprehension of a local language may allow insights not gained through the filter of translation into English. Extensive exploration of the language of local people may also provide insights unavailable in translated sources.

Along with greater understanding, exploration of the language and a developing ability to use it allows an obvious opportunity for interaction, and for more meaningful interaction than would otherwise be possible. The 'dumb foreigner', ignorant of the language and unable to use it, is very limited in the extent she or he is able to send and receive communications to others in the immediate vicinity, be these occurring in work, social, or domestic settings. This lack of facility also has an impact on local language speakers who are initially likely to perceive the 'incompetence' of the foreigner and may

subsequently limit any attempts to communicate more.

At an even more basic level, some facility with a local language provides greater security though the ability to make limited use of the language in emergency situations, in identifying security services and understanding warnings in public announcements and signs.

The act of exploration of the language of others is also a significant gesture of openness and willingness to engage. It is likely to involve some declaration of ignorance and a demonstration of interest. Both of these features may induce a positive response from local people, reducing apprehensions associated with speaking with the foreigner and allowing 'a helping response' to be initiated. Engaging others in exploring the language also allows them to share, with pride, aspects of their language and culture.

An exploration of others' languages also allows us to reflect on our own language and culture. Why, for example, is English so particular about a rigid, limited, and somewhat impersonal set of pronouns? Does this tell us something about the individualistic nature of our culture and society? Why do we make such extensive use of the verbs 'to be' and 'to have'? Does this reflect a greater self-centredness and a greater focus in Western societies on material possessions? Why are many other languages so rich in words to describe family members and family relationships? How does our own language and culture venerate particular people? Why in the Vietnamese language are there so many words that can and should be used, as a 'prefix' almost, when addressing others, fathers, mothers, younger or older brothers or sisters, younger or much younger people, older and much older people, people of a particular venerated profession such as teachers? Why does English appear to lack, or at least rarely use, the extensive range of honorific terms

common in Asian languages?

Finally, the exploration of the local language allows for the potential to make a more informed and more significant contribution within a host culture. To the extent that a knowledge of, and facility with, the commonly used language informs about the local culture, so foreigners exploring the language are less likely to make errors in communication that could impede their acceptance in the local environment. They are more likely to be accepted and trusted and more likely to be communicated with. When communication difficulties arise, these are likely to be confronted and resolved earlier, and in ways better understood by the parties involved.

Usefulness of sharing something of our own language with others

While there is clear advantage in learning about the language used where we are living, there is also benefit in sharing information about our own language. Again, if language is an expression of culture, as we talk about our own language we inevitably share something of our culture. Sharing something of our own language means 'bringing something to the table'. It introduces a mutuality into communications whereby it is not just the foreigner interrogating the vocabulary and grammar of the host language, but also the local people can engage in language exploration, in their case the language of the foreigner. Similarities and differences in language can be identified, reflecting the similarities and differences between cultures. Locals, as well as foreigners, can learn about their own culture as a consequence of reflecting on the language of the other.

Through sharing of aspects of their own language, foreigners may demonstrate aspects of their own culture, without explicitly talking about them. Actually, foreigners will, often unwittingly, communicate aspect of culture through what they say.

The author of this paper is from Australia, a vast country, with expanses of some of the driest country on earth. A famous Australian poem 'My Country', contains the lines "I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains" (Mackellar, 1908). Our relationship to our land is reflected in the considerable vocabulary, both formal and vernacular, that we possess relating to aridity and its associated challenges. In Vietnam, while recently experiencing severe drought in some localities, the significance of water is different. It is generally abundant. There are many words available to describe the nature of the precipitation. Further, the Australian population is largely located in coastal cities and the inhabitants make great use of the ocean for swimming. Almost all people can swim and we have many words relating to water sports. For example, the vocabulary for clothes that we wear to swim is extensive. In some cases it is even differentiated by region. Depending where someone lives in Australia, they may call their swimming clothes 'cozzies', 'bathers', 'swim wear', 'a one-piece', 'trunks', 'togs', 'boardies', and more. To keep the sun off, given that some people spend considerable time at the beach and are concerned about skin cancer, people may put on 'sun screen', 'suntan lotion', 'UV spray', they may 'slip, slap, slop', they may 'cover up' with a UV protective top, they may wear a 'skivvy'. Very few people in Australia labour, exposed to the sun, in fields (the word 'field' is hardly used in Australia, other than in the context of a football field). Skin browned by the sun is perceived as attractive, beautiful, and sought after. Brown skin is associated with beauty, not a view typically held in Asian countries. Sharing some of this vocabulary is a sharing of who we are, our culture.

Language as a non-neutral medium for exchange

When you speak and I listen as a foreigner, I hear something different to what

you intend, regardless of what language you speak. I hear something tainted, or at least tinted, by 67 years of life in a Western, individualistic, affluent, Anglo-Saxon society. I listen with English wired into my brain from an early age. When I speak and you listen, you don't hear quite what I expect you to hear. You hear through the tinting of your own years of experience, your cultural experience and identity, your own language embedded in your psyche. Avruch and Black (1993), cited by Singh and Rampersand (2010), describe this as seeing the world through the one's own cultural 'lens', understanding what we see by a 'logic' we understand, and ordering it by a 'grammar' that gives it meaning.

As much as language is an expression of culture, the use of a particular language in international communications runs the risk of seeing that language and culture dominate globally over other languages and cultures. With increasing technological ability to communicate cheaply and in real time around the world, there is perhaps a greater danger than ever before that language dominance will occur. What form this may take is obviously the subject of speculation. We could be heading in the direction of a single world language, or a 'cartel of languages' dominating interactions across the globe. Local aspirations influenced by global standards could see much less use of the considerable number of languages in the world today.

If technology has a less significant influence, there is still the risk that greater communication between cultures through language will result in 'cultural homogenization'. The danger here is that the uniqueness of existing cultures would be lost in the blended, perhaps bland, features of an emerging 'global culture'.

Conclusions

As Edward Sapir expressed, more than one hundred years ago, language enables human beings to transcend the immediate given in their individual experiences and to join in a larger common understanding. This common understanding constitutes culture, which cannot be adequately defined by a description of those more colorful patterns of society which lie open to observation.' (Mandelbaum, 1949, p.8).

This in a nutshell is why we need to explore language.

Language exploration is more than just a mechanistic, formulaic process of learning vocabulary and grammar rules. It amounts to a much richer exposé of culture. Exploration of language without a complementary cultural appreciation may generate what could be expressed as 'language difficulties' but are often actually a demonstration of cultural ignorance.

Neither languages nor cultures are fixed. Both are in constant flux. Individual cultures influence each other, languages influence each other. Within languages and cultures changes occur, not always because of external influences. However, new technologies developed in a particular national and cultural context spread rapidly across the globe carrying with them new language and new patterns of communication. The impact of 'social networking', for example, is massive. In such a context it is even more critical to explore language, recognizing what it reveals of culture. Such exploration not only increases our ability to communicate across cultural boundaries, it also may indicate what is particularly precious to us in our shared, and unique, cultural characteristics. It is likely to inform us of what we need to promote and preserve about who we are as people.

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