

Culture, Language and Applied Linguistics: Language Teaching and Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

The role of culture in a field as vast as applied linguistics is so pronounced and vital that even a highly selective overview might not be sufficient to be comprehensive. What follows might be a synoptic account of the role of culture in the realm of applied linguistics. The enigmatic point which even makes the vast field of applied linguistics goes to unbeaten tracks is the similar nature of culture. Due to the aforementioned point, here the canonical overlap of them is emphasised. Moreover, as culture and language are intrinsically intertwined, it's decided to have a more cultural stance rather than a linguistic one. In this presentation, major studies in connection with language and culture will be considered first. Then, it'll be tried to unravel, or better to say, to come to grips with this enigmatic riddle, culture. It will be explained that it is hard to give a clear-cut definition for culture. However, it might be possible to shape or even make what it must be.

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Introduction

The role of culture in a field as vast as applied linguistics is so pronounced and vital that even a highly selective overview might not be sufficient to be comprehensive. Put another way, whenever there is a language, there exists a certain culture with it, and having a negative view towards that culture might cause failure in the learning.

The prime example could be the term acculturation coined by Schumann (1978). The term came from an often-quoted case study of a 33-year-old Costa Rican who could not acculturate to the target language community. Moreover, the reason was his antagonistic view towards the new language, which in this case was the English language.

He (1978: 34) then came to the conclusion that ‘Second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target-language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language.’

Nevertheless, acculturation has its own limitations. For example, ‘For some theorists, one limitation of the acculturation model, as a theory of SLA, is that it does not explain the internal mechanisms of how an L2 is acquired; it is a sociopsychological model rather than a cognitive-processing model’ (Barkhuizen, 2004: 562).

As mentioned earlier, it is not possible to raise all the issues of culture that these days we are dealing with. Also, two crucial factors should be taken into account. First, although here I focus mainly on English, the purpose is any language in power which might be another language in the future. Second, considering English as accepted norms might be called into question. Concerning the first issue, Halliday (2006) points out:

It is naive to imagine that if the United Nations had decreed, back in 1950, that some other language – say Esperanto, or even Malay or Korean – was to be adopted as a world language, the global situation would have been any different: whatever language was adopted would soon have been primed to function as a medium of corporate power. In that case English would have continued to serve – as French does today – as a highly-valued international language in certain cultural regions and with certain clearly defined spheres of activity. (p. 362)

On the other hand, regarding the second issue, Kachru (2006) does not accept that English should be called international. He argues that:

It is in that diverse, cross-cultural sense that English is *international*. I have avoided the term *international language* with English. The term “international” used with “English” is misleading in more than one sense: it signals an *international* English in terms of acceptance, proficiency, functions, norms, pragmatic utility, and creativity. That actually is far from true – that is not the current international functional profile of the English language and never was. (p. 449)

The role of culture in the realm of applied linguistics is going to be discussed at this point. To this end, first, I go through the major studies in connection with language and culture.

These studies might fall into three broad categories, namely 1) those relating to epistemology of culture, 2) those relating to its relation to language, and finally 3) those relating to its presentation through a given language.

Furthermore, the relation between applied linguistics and mind as is going to be considered as a starting point. 'The field of applied linguistics, born in the fifties, at a time when the relationship of language and mind was the primary concern of formal linguistics, had a natural affinity to the brain sciences as they were developed then' (Kramsch, 2004: 235). But the relation between language and thought or better to say culture and thought has its origin in early nineteenth century (Kramsch, 2004). If one wants to know the relation between language and thought, s/he may refer to the often-quoted statement by Sapir. Sapir points:

Language is a guide to "social reality" . . . it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. 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 fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (1962: 68–9)

A hotly debated issue related to language and somehow thought is the hegemony of language. Kachru (1985) considers three circles regarding the use of English, namely inner, outer, and expanding circles.

English speaking countries comprise the inner circle. The outer circle is composed of the countries where English is their second language. And the expanding circle refers to the countries where English is neither their first nor their second language.

However, not surprisingly, the inner circle is creating norms for the other two circles, which in a way could be a matter of hegemony.

Epistemological look

Few might know that one of the striking similarities between applied linguistics and culture is that there is no unanimity on what they are. Put another way, these two broad concepts are known to us through their impacts on our lives. That is why it might not be surprising that more than 156 definitions for culture exist (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963).

For instance, for Chastain (1988) culture is viewed differently by different people.

Furthermore, she emphasises the differences between small c culture and big C culture. The former is related to the culture the students of language are in touch and try to come to grips with, while the latter pertains to major effect of it.

Kramsch (2013) believes that three critical features of culture in relation to language are its relational, historical, and symbolic mediation.

It can be implied from what Allameh Jafari (2003), an Islamic philosopher, thinker, and scholar, argues that instead of searching what exactly culture is we should try to create a pioneer culture. That is to say, regardless of what culture these days mean, we have to hunt for what culture must be. To him, a pioneer culture improves human lives, and it helps human beings achieve their final goal.

In a similar vein, Dahmardeh, Timcheh Memar and Timcheh Memar (2014) hold that what is going to miss in culture is ethics. They believe that ethics and culture are two twin concepts, and regarding their pedigrees, ethics precedes culture. In other words, culture is the variations of ethics which come to existence soon after certain concept of ethics is born.

On the other hand, some researchers have tried to reveal different aspects of this umbrella concept and make it more tangible. These scholars have provided a number of metaphorical models such as culture as an atom, an onion, a tree, and an iceberg (Bennett, 2013). From among these metaphors, the often-quoted metaphor of culture as an iceberg likens culture to an iceberg because only a small portion of culture is visible, while its line share is not easily visible (Weaver, 1986). Moreover, based on the iceberg metaphor, those invisible aspects of culture are included in deep culture, whereas the visible aspects lend themselves well to surface culture.

Its relation to language

Maybe, not long ago, culture was viewed as a periphery part of language which was quite like an additional and separated skill. For instance, in Chastain's (1988) book, though one specific chapter is devoted to just culture, it implied that culture could be at least like one of the traditional four skills at push. In fact, although she emphasises the role of culture by devoting one chapter to it, she regards it as, more or less, a separable part of language. It goes without saying that that kind of notion was quite common at that time, but times have changed.

Culture has witnessed more terms and metaphors. Wallace (1988) introduced the term Cultural Competence by which he stresses out the complex package of the beliefs, ideas, knowledge, and so on.

Intercultural competence is another metaphor which has found itself in a good many of studies today. Byram (2000) holds that intercultural competence has the following characteristics: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, critical cultural awareness.

Now, culture is viewed as an inseparable part of language. It plays so vital a role that Kramsch (1998) argues that culture is more than a skill in that it cannot be separated from language. In other words, the atomistic view of language has been discarded.

Neither any of the skills of language nor its culture is considered as a divisible part of language. Joseph (2004) maintains that:

Language teaching and learning, which occupy a privileged place within applied linguistics, are political in the sense that they always involve two languages with differing cultural prestige in the world at large and in the particular situation in which the teaching and learning are taking place. (p. 348)

Quite similar to what Joseph (2004) mentions regarding the political nature of language, Kachru (2006) holds that 'in the new millennium culture wars, the English language has indeed become a vital weapon for articulating various positions and visions' (p. 449).

Dissanayake (2006) goes further and talks about politicisation. He points out:

Cultural Studies and politics of culture are inseparably linked . . . As a matter of fact, one of the readily identifiable influences of modern Cultural Studies has been this politicization, and the concomitant desire to challenge the hegemonic power of the nation-state, multinational corporations, main stream and entrenched scholarship . . . Our inquiries into the works of world Englishes will benefit greatly by delving more deeply into these imbricated issues. (p. 558)

How it should be presented

The way culture should be presented in books has long been a subject of controversy. To Risager (1998) there are four ways of teaching culture namely, 1) intercultural, 2) multicultural, 3) trans-cultural, and 4) foreign-cultural.

In short, Foreign-cultural approach solely emphasises the target culture and does not take into account the comparison of the target and source culture, as it does not care about source language at all. This has been losing ground since the 1980s.

The intercultural approach emphasises the idea that culture is better learned once the comparison of the target and the learners' own culture is at work. This has replaced the foreign-culture approach, and is the dominant one today.

The multicultural approach is based on the idea that every given culture consists of some sub-cultures. This has made its appearance since the 1980s, but still is in marginal position.

The trans-cultural approach regards the foreign language as an international language, and thus for this approach it does not stand to reason to add any specific culture to the foreign or target culture. This approach is just beginning to appear as a result of internationalisation.

Overall, there are or better to say used to be at least four types of the presentation of culture. First, the target language, for example English, should be taught without its culture.

Here the author definitely believes the separability of culture from language. However, such an idea has received virtually little attention.

Second, only the culture of the target language should be taught.

This type of presentation on its own might split into two strands. That is to say, for example regarding English, the presentation of culture could be restricted to what Kachru (1985) calls inner circle, the countries where English is their first language, or in addition to inner circle, it might include what Kachru (1985) calls outer circle, the countries where English is their second language or official language. In this regard, India could be a prime example. Viswamohan (2011) describes the stance of English in India as follows:

The socio-cultural transitions have ensured that English is accepted as a regular mode of communication in Indian songs and no hackles are raised anymore about the so-called purity of lyrics. Evidently, the pronounced use of the English language in media and society has expanded the linguistic repertoire of the film songs, where English seems to seamlessly blend with the rest of the lyrics. (p. 22)

Moreover, he (2011) believes that the language spoken today in India among the youth is English. In other words, in a way, the new generation in India has accepted the culture of English without thinking of conflicts.

The same story might be true for Russia where seldom any attention is given to variants of English, let alone to outer and expanding circles. For example, Leontovich (2005) believes that:

According to the Russian linguistic tradition, scholars doing theoretical research on different aspects of English in most cases do not make a clear distinction between its numerous regional variants. They usually refer to British and American English as “subcultures” within a unified culture of the English-speaking countries. All the other regional variants are seldom taken into account, which can be easily explained by the fact that the contacts of Russians with people from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. are very rare.

In the teaching of English at Russian schools and universities very little attention is given to the differentiation between the world Englishes. (p. 523)

Not dissimilar to Russia and India, English is considered, more or less, a language of high prestige in Saudi Arabia, and it is of great importance for the employment. Moreover, quite often people in Saudi Arabia send their children to bilingual schools where they can learn English in addition to Arabic (Al-Rawi, 2012).

In Iran is also other variations of English are rather unknown, and little attention, if any, is paid to them. Mainly, two so called standard variations of English, American, have drawn attention.

Third, the presentation of culture, for example of English, is not even restricted to outer circle, and the culture of the source language, for example Persian, should be included.

Fourth, the presentation of culture even is more expanded and might include the world culture, the given author of the book might include all the cultural points he or she deems necessary or interesting for the learners regardless of boundaries and borderlines of countries.

Now let's take the above-mentioned types of presentation of culture into account. Obviously enough, the first type is not valid anymore, as the duality between language and its culture has long been proved to be virtually of no validity. Among the other types mentioned before, teaching target culture has drawn more attention. More specifically, in practice, the first strand of the second type, stating that the inner circle culture of the target language should be taught, is more common. For instance, as regards English course books, the majority of them have focused on inner circle to the exclusion of outer circle. However, there is a growing concern regarding to the inclusion of outer circle or even the world culture, one of which could be the book series titled *World English* written by Johannsen and Chase (2011) which has somewhat been adjusted to Asian countries, mainly Islamic countries.

Trends

As there might be no mainstream for culture, its relation to language, and its presentation in books, introducing the trends seems to be a bit a matter of taste. From among the three broad categories regarding culture, the last category has drawn more attention, and a good many of studies have been carried out in this regard. The reason might lie in the fact that the first category, the epistemological view of culture, seems to be an unfathomable issue. The second category, the relation between language and culture, has virtually been proved to be inseparable. In other words, few might want to call such a notion into question, and there is almost unanimity among the scholars of the field. Now the last category pertaining to the presentation of culture is hotly debated. These days, the growing concern in connection with English is not just germane to inner circle; people are now talking about world Englishes. Let's go through the practical dimension of the trends, and see some of the seminal and influential studies concerning different presentations of a given culture. Having investigated two textbooks in terms of culture in Hong Kong, Ka-Ming (2011) found that the textbooks favoured English speaking countries. More specifically, after counting the frequency of the cultural points of different continents and countries, he maintains that the frequency of English speaking countries in the course books is quite above others. Not dissimilar to Ka-Ming's (2011) conclusion, Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) came to the conclusion that a balance between the target culture and students' native culture should be stricken. Another practical trend might owe itself to the emergence of intercultural competence which roughly may fall into the category of the presentation of culture. Among different scholars of intercultural competence, Piller's (2011) book entitled *Intercultural communication: A critical introduction* has mainly accentuated the importance of understanding different cultures. As a matter of fact, by the emergence of the term, intercultural, studies of language and culture have taken a new leaf.

Conclusion

Given the situations in India, Saudi Arabia, and to some extent Russia portrayed by Viswamohan (2011), Al-Rawi (2012) and Leontovich (2005) respectively, one might

come to know that English has come to be a language of prestige, especially American or British English. Moreover, by extension, outer-circle countries are going to replace their mother tongues with English, and the expanding circles are becoming the outer-circle and eventually replacing their languages with English. As mentioned earlier, it is hard to give a clear-cut definition for culture. However, we might be able to shape or even make what it must be. In line with what Allameh Jafari (2003) believes, we should have a pioneer culture, a culture which is based on high standard morality and ethics. Put it simply, we might be unable to change what culture is, but we will be able to make what culture be.

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