

Language and culture

Abdelfattah Mazari
University Mohammed Premier, Oujda, Morocco

Naoual Derraz
University Mohammed Premier, Oujda, Morocco

Abstract

The study of culture plays a very important role when it comes to teaching or learning a foreign language since words and phrases of that language, such as English, refer to internal meanings to its culture, creating a reality and a well defined semantic relationship that the learner must understand.

Language and culture have at least three important components:

- 1) Language learning offers learners the opportunity to understand the relationship between language and other cultural phenomena.*
- 2) Language learning allows a comparison between the foreign language and the mother tongue and highlights similarities as well as differences between the two.*
- 3) The learning of the foreign culture passes by the knowledge of one's own culture and takes into account its linguistic dimensions.*

In this work, we will try to show that these three components are complementary and interdependent, and must evolve in parallel in the overall educational process. The objectives should be clear so as to make learners appreciate similarities and differences between their own culture and the communities where the target language is spoken. This will, therefore, help them identify with the experience and the perspective of native speakers of that language, and then use this skill to develop a more objective view of their own culture and their way of thinking.

Keywords: language, culture, interdependent, learning, teaching

Introduction

In the contemporary world, millions of people speak more than one language. However, to speak a foreign language is a complex skill which includes varied aspects, such as the status of the language in question, the master's degree of reading and writing, the way this skill is acquired or the way it is used.

The study of a foreign language allows learners to know another culture, not only by the expansion of language experiences, but also by including social and human factors. But reaching a level of effective communication in the foreign language does not have to be the unique concern of the learner of this language. Language teaching has to play a real role in the education of learners by insisting on their perception and their attitude towards other cultures, and towards theirs also. So, the fact of learning a foreign language would not be reduced to the mere transmission of messages, as we see in the language of the classroom, which is a language of "repetition" (R. Mitchell and *alii*, 1981, p.66) and which ignores the imaginative and creative side of the learner.

Knowing a language requires certainly a better knowledge of the language learning process. Therefore, if we help individuals realize that they know something about language learning, we help them at the same time to realize that they know something about the language, and they will understand it better. It, thus, results in these learners a better understanding of the world and their relationships with others. This should contribute to reduce prejudice and promote tolerance between cultures. Moreover, the cultural process of emancipation inherent in language learning is so complex that we cannot summarize it only in grammar, semantics and reading the foreign literature. It is also an emotional experience with all the intellectual and personal enrichment it provides.

Based on this, it would be necessary, in language learning, to re-examine the relationship between language and culture not only through psychology and linguistics, but also by appealing, if needed, to other disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and anthropology.

1. The purposes of language teaching

It is certainly necessary to take into account the learner's needs throughout an educational process whose objectives should not, however, be limited to the only "communication". In the educational process, it is important to become aware of the nature of the language itself and its cultural dimension, by encouraging positive attitudes towards this language and its speakers. However, these positive attitudes must be considered as acquired only if there is knowledge of the concerned society.

Language is especially an obvious means of communication, but we should not be limited to the only self-satisfaction produced by the linguistic ability. It is certainly not enough to hope that a purely linguistic education can have positive impacts. It is necessary to dissipate the concerns relative to the evaluation of the learners and to show that the

intellectual investment is also necessary like the grammatical rules to learn a foreign language.

Therefore, if we take into account the relative priority of the various objectives, it seems important to bring modifications in contents and language teaching methods. First, the objectives must be established with a description of the items to be acquired by the learner, as it is necessary to make an analysis of the language to learn. On the other hand, language learning has to lean on teaching materials to allow to perceive and to explain certain linguistic phenomena in relation with culture.

For this reason, we must try to provide a descriptive analysis of culture and a series of data on the nature of this culture to create a mutual understanding with the other societies. Without such an approach, language teaching would not perform completely its educational role and would not contribute to reconciliation between people.

Certainly, modifications of contents imply modifications of methods. It is necessary to establish a comparative study structured by mother and foreign cultures. This would allow learners to become aware of the intuitive nature of their own culture which will be felt as being different, strange and not constituting necessarily the "standard". Such a vision from outside is likely to facilitate the understanding of another culture and, therefore, the understanding of the other language (Michaël Byram, 1992). These methods can be enriched by being inspired by the mother tongue and literary subjects, which play a role in the process of early socialization, so as to approach a second socialization in the foreign culture. All these modifications cannot be achieved without a real will of teachers to change attitude and consider the learning of culture and that of language inseparable from each other.

The relationship between language and culture in foreign language learning is based on three interrelated axes, a) language as a means of communication, b) understanding and apprehension of the nature of language, and c) the educational value of the study of cultures. These relationships must be respected and put into practice despite their complexity, without any cleavage between language and culture, since language serves as a cultural marker. It embodies the values and the sense of culture.

Many authors have dealt with this issue and focused their works on the importance of language in relation to culture. They have highlighted the interdependence of language learning and culture since the learner of a foreign language (L2) possesses a mother tongue (L1) and therefore there could be interference or semantic transfer. Indeed, the cultural transfer is evident in the association of a meaning in L1 with a word in L2.

Teachers of language and culture have to deal with different disciplines to meet this interdependence between language and culture. In language teaching, linguistics provides syntactic and phonological approach, but it is not enough for its own in this process. Sociolinguistics and pragmatics represent valuable tools to study the functions of language. Indeed, they analyze how native speakers use a given language to establish a social interaction. Recently, "competence of communication" has been focused on, a broader concept than "grammatical competence". At the same time, the idea that the study of culture will contribute to an effective communication and cooperation is strengthened. Indeed,

"competence of communication" tends towards appreciating the appropriate use of language. This use is unique to each culture.

The analysis of these cultural values in ethno-anthropology proves to be a necessary and complementary tool. What does it mean belonging to another culture? This research is based on interpretations more than mere descriptions of symbols and educates for tolerance, even passively. It also allows accepting the difference of others by making understand culture actively. This is what should be promoted.

According to Geertz (M. Byram, 1992, p.113), culture is a structure of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited ideas and expressed under a symbolic shape, by means of which people communicate and spread their knowledge concerning attitudes to life. Such a definition of culture, thus, makes language a key means of culture teaching.

In summary, we can say that the study of culture has two interrelated goals: to facilitate the use of language by learners and help them realize how much we are alike and how we are different from each other.

2. How can a foreign culture be made accessible to foreign language learners?

In modern language teaching, it is necessary to make an analysis and description of the culture based on the analysis of common meanings and artifacts of the foreign culture. The analysis of culture consists in highlighting the structures of meaning, what Ryde called "established codes" (M. Byram, 1992, p.119), an expression somewhat misleading because it suggests that it is a decryption operation.

It is obvious that the formulation of cultural meanings is through the language of the community. From there, the role of language in the analysis of culture seems clearly defined. The language represents then the most important means to acquire the culture and to share it with others.

For his part, William (M. Byram, 1992, p.120) defines culture as three dimensions: first, the area of the "ideal" of certain universal values in which culture is a state of human perfection or a process leading to it. Then, there is the "documentary" field in which culture constitutes all the intellectual and creative productions and in which thought and human experience are recorded in detail. Finally, there is a "social" definition of the term which makes of culture the description of a particular lifestyle reflecting certain meanings and values not only in the world of art or knowledge, but also in the institutions and the usual behavior. On the other hand, considering language as a means of analysis of culture allows exploiting its intimate relationship with cultural meanings, in addition to the other forms of communication such as music, painting, etc.

However, learning culture through language may offend the sense of belonging to an ethnic group or a particular geographic area. This is particularly felt in the case of a culture that has much in common with the historical background and where the need to assert its identity is stronger than when it comes to non-crop by that historical background. Therefore, the analysis of the learner's own culture takes on a crucial place and avoids stereotypes about

the differences from outside. In the language classroom, learning culture should use linguistic elements which serve to express it. In other words, learning language and culture must be done together. Moreover, it is not advisable to try to understand a foreign culture in the mother tongue of the learner; it would diminish the educational value of the learning process. The main question is especially to determine what must be taught, the nature of the cultural contents to be presented to learners and how this presentation must be integrated into the whole language teaching.

It is clear that if a language is spoken in different countries, it can present significant cultural differences. The choice of a country rather than another in learning the culture can be guided by considerations of geographical proximity and the will that these cultural concepts be as close as possible to the culture of the learner. On the other hand, it is necessary to try to create at the learner a cultural sensitivity by using literary texts which convey the relationship between language and cultural meanings.

There is yet another way for learners to make a new cultural experience on the social side: direct contact with the foreign country during language study holidays or tourism. Indeed, far from the reference framework of their own culture pressures, learners create emotional links with the foreign culture along with the learning of the language.

3. Relation between language and culture

The study of foreign languages widens the experience in the language field by allowing comparisons between several languages. It contributes to the personal education of learners. Furthermore, foreign language teaching allows learners to free from their cultural environment limits and study another culture by including in that respect human and social factors. Language and culture are thus inseparable. So, when learners learn something on the culture and when they learn to use the language, they learn to communicate with individuals belonging to this culture. From this perspective, we will focus on the points of view of different linguists on this subject.

For Kohring and Schwerdtfeger (M. Byram, 1992, p. 92), taking as their starting point semiotics as a science of communication, culture is communication. To analyze culture and the study of culture, they suggested two sub-disciplines, syntax and pragmatics. This approach provides primarily a cultural analysis tool, describing how members of a culture communicate within it. Second, the analysis tools are applied to the different approaches of a foreign culture that a learner can borrow and the relationships he maintains with the system of communication of the foreign culture compared to his own culture. In general, when a learner is in front of a foreign system of communication, he tries to assimilate pragmatic and syntactical patterns of the target language, and thus the target culture. He may even sometimes try to deal with the pragmatic and syntactical patterns of the foreign language and culture without going through his own language and culture. This is not really obvious since there are always errors of interferences.

As for Kramer, (M. Byram, 1992, p.94), he refers briefly to developmental psychology. He argues that the learner comes in touch with another culture through learning based on a certain stage of language socialization development. It is by means of assimilation

and adaptation processes that he can cope with new experiences. For him, learning a language can then bring an "extension by contrast" of the original cultural socialization process. The fact that most teachers are trained to criticism and literary appreciation and not to the study of social sciences poses considerable problems, since they are not able to explain a text in a foreign language to their students from a socio-cultural perspective.

Dressler, Reuter and Reuter (M. Byram, 1992, p.93.), in turn, use the concept of "competence of communication". For them, ethnography of communication provides a framework to properly integrate the study of culture in learning the language, since competence of communication involves interaction with a foreign culture. For a learner to be competent, he must master the various aspects of speech acts that this framework will identify. But some of these speech acts are rituals and special conventions to a culture that this framework does not necessarily translate as culture-related proposals.

The study of a culture has, according to Leach, two independent objectives: to facilitate the use of the language by learners and help them to become aware of the concept of cultural "otherness", what Leach calls the "eternal puzzle of any anthropological study" (M. Byram, 1992, p.84). In other words, the question to ask is to what extent we are alike and to what extent we differ from each other.

For several years, lectures were given and articles written on the relations between language and culture, ethno-linguistics, based on the idea that language has an important place in its relation with culture. Hymes (D. Hymes, 1964) thinks that two types of link between language and culture were highlighted. The first one, associated especially with Malinowski and with other British anthropologists, emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture as different aspects from the same social action. The second, associated with Levi-Strauss and other French critics, is more concerned with the harmony between language and culture as parallel systems or products of the collective psychology. The existence of such links was widely accepted, and we could perhaps see that the two points are related. Language and culture are not acquired by the children of a society as two separate things. The interdependence of language and culture in most human activities implies that the first serves as vehicle in which the other is learnt. And since language is the vehicle of cultural aspects, it is not surprising to notice that the structural organization of the language is reflected in the cultural forms.

Among the most decisive influences of linguistic thought on the study of culture, we can cite the work of Levi-Strauss (C. Lévi-Strauss, 1958). For him, there are significant similarities between linguistic structure and cultural structure:

- 1) The units of a system are defined by the relationship between them, and these relationships are more fundamental than the units themselves.
- 2) The essential phonological units of a language as English are not phonemes / p/, / b/, / m/, etc., but rather the contrast relationship in sound, occlusion and nasality which are the basis of phonemes. Thus, according to the point of view of Levi-Strauss, what is essential in a social structure is not any element of the family, but rather the inter- and intra-family relations as consanguinity, marriage and descendants that must define the family.

4. The cultural nature of language

Modern linguistics results from the philological tradition which is firstly interested in classical and modern written languages, and from the anthropological tradition, which is widely interested in pre-literate peoples. The anthropologist had recognized the importance of language, not only as a tool in a more effective working area but also as a critical element of the cultural edifice he studied. So, anthropological linguistics is, sometimes, referred to and can be defined as the study of the unknown varieties of words in their cultural context.

Considering that language is a part of culture, linguistic anthropologists have focused on the following key questions: in what respect does language join the general conception of cultural systems, and how is it distinguished from other components? What are the similarities between the internal structures of the language and the other branches of culture? What role does language play in the functioning of the culture? Do language and culture influence each other throughout history?

Language has an assured position as a branch of culture by its distinctive nature, its specificity to human species, and above all because languages are learnt, not genetically transmitted. In spite of the fact that an ethnic group and language have frequently a historic relationship, so that many people who have the same ancestors also have the same language, this link is not indispensable.

4.1. The role of language in culture

Language is not merely one of several aspects of culture; it leaves possible development, elaboration and transmission of culture, particularly in its written form. One can imagine the transmission of handicrafts from one generation to another without the use of a language; but economic, political, religious or social institutions are something else. It is difficult to imagine how a deaf community, if deprived of language substitutes such as writing, could support human social life.

But how does language, or any other symbolic system, relate exactly to the experience? It is generally argued that symbols, as signs, reflect to something else than themselves. The definition of meaning itself cannot be clearly considered as agreed. The study of culture, thus, plays a very important role when it concerns foreign language teaching or learning, since the different words and expressions refer to internal meanings in the culture of the language in question, creating by the way a reality and a well-defined semantic relationship that the learner must understand. It is said that language learning widens horizons (12); therefore, and if that is the case, this process has to possess an educational virtue. A variety of theoretical models for the concept of meaning has been proposed by philosophers, psychologists and linguists of different obedience. The model that we present in what follows can be used as part of an ethno-linguistic discussion.

Structural linguists have been extremely careful in terms of semantics and sometimes they even tried to exclude it completely from linguistics. Until recently, a conception of strictly behaviorist meaning was in vogue:

“We have defined the meaning of a linguistic form as the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer ... The situations which prompt people to utter speech include every object and happening in their universe. The order to give a scientifically accurate definition of meaning for every form of a language, we should have to have a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker's world ... We can define the names of minerals, for example, in terms of chemistry and mineralogy, as when we say that the ordinary meaning of the English word salt is "sodium chloride (NaCL)", but we have no precise way of defining words like love or hate, which concern situations that have not been accurately classified ... (W. Bright, 1976, p. 139).

These statements seem to induce a linguistic function model in only two parts: on one side, the linguistic form, and on the other one, the associated non-linguistic events (and most probably contextual linguistic events too). Thus, the definition of the word ‘salt’ may be, at least in part, the real substance NaCL.

A more satisfactory model was provided two thousand years ago by the Hindu philosopher Patanjali (W. Bright, 1976, p.6), who argued that word, meaning and object are separated from each other while they are mingled in ordinary use. Thus, according to him, when we pronounce the word "elephant", word, meaning and object are mixed. The word is in the air, the meaning is in the brain and the object (the elephant) lives by itself. It is indeed true that the word is in the air, in the sense that it is transmitted as vibrations of air molecules. It is also true that, actually, the elephant lives by itself; that is to say, it is independent of all human conventions. The only place where these two parts are connected is in the human brain. Therefore, meaning could be defined as the relationship that combines word and object.

This three-part model is more adequate than Bloomfield's but, still, it does not clarify the relationship between language and culture. To do so, we will further explain this model. First, a division can be made between the observational universe, or etic, to which belong word and object, and the structural universe, or emic, inside the human brain. Second, we should distinguish the linguistic behavior of its contents. The two dichotomies interfere as shown in the following diagram:

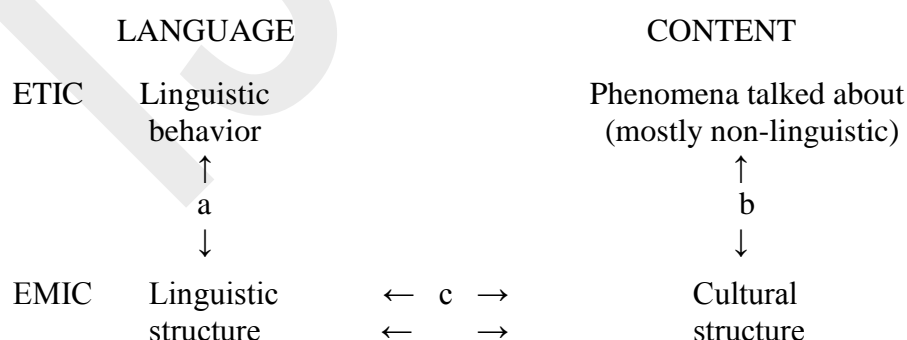


Figure1. Relation between language and culture. (W. Bright, 1976, p.7)

In this figure, arrows 'a', 'b' and 'c' indicate the important relations for the ethno-linguist. Arrow 'a' represents the relation which interests him when he works as a pure linguist. It can be considered as inductive, according to the process by which the investigator

proposes a structure to explain his behavioral raw data, or deductive. It reminds the process by which psychological models of language competence give birth to the visible linguistic expression. Arrow ' b ' represents the analog relationship established by the ethnographer: objects and real events which affect a particular group of people here are connected by induction or deduction. Finally, arrows ' c ' represent the relationships of "meaning".

There are two types of structural units which are linked by the relationship of meaning. The relevant language units are not phonemes or morphemes, but units of a higher level, which are lexemes: these are the minimal units involved in arbitrary relationships of meaning. In this way, isolated lexemes as green and house are lexemes, but it is also the case for the combination of the two lexemes greenhouse, opposed to green house, as long as it arbitrarily designates a particular kind of structure. Almost nobody agrees on the structural units of the cultural behavior; they are often named sememes. There is still no strict correspondence between lexemes and sememes; people sometimes show culturally determined differences in behavior when their language gives no lexematic differentiation. However, the general regularity of lexeme-sememe correspondence reflects the close integration between language and the rest of culture, and it is likely that in this perspective language could be considered as a key to culture as a whole.

Conclusion

In summary, we can say that language and culture learning includes at least three important components:

- 1) Language learning offers to learners the opportunity to understand the links between language and other cultural phenomena, which establishes a relationship between language acquisition and foreign culture understanding.
- 2) Language learning allows a comparison between the foreign language and mother tongue and highlights similarities as well as differences between them.
- 3) Learning of foreign culture passes through the knowledge of one's own culture and takes into account its linguistic dimensions.

These three components are complementary and interdependent and must evolve in parallel in the general educational process. In particular, learning language and culture are based on contents and teaching methods, which brings us to the three interrelated bases in the relationship between language and culture, namely the language as a means of communication, understanding and apprehension of the nature of language, and finally the educational value of the study of cultures.

The objectives should be the ability of learners to appreciate similarities and differences between their own culture and the communities where they speak the target language to identify with the experience and perspective of native speakers of the target language, and then to use this competence to develop a more objective view of their own culture and their way of thinking.

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