



# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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## Abstract

Connections between language and culture often come to question while studying second or foreign languages. It is generally agreed that language and culture are closely related. Language can be viewed as a verbal expression in learning a second or foreign language it is possible to separate language and culture. For language teachers and learners in general, an appreciation for the differences in opinion regarding the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language. In this regard, this paper aims at discussing the relationship between language and culture proposed by Wardhaugh (2002).

**Keywords:** language, culture, Whorfian hypothesis, internalized language, social behavior

## INTRODUCTION

According to Vygotsky (1962, as cited in Nunan, 2010), language plays a crucial role in cognitive development, at least from the time the child promotes language competence. Language, first developed as a means of social communication, is later internalized and becomes an essential tool in the shaping of cognitive processes relevant for the elaboration of the abstract symbolic system that will enable the child to organize thought. Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Turuk, 2008) states that the child acquires knowledge through contacts and interactions with people as the first step, then later assimilates and internalizes this knowledge adding his personal value to it. Wardhaugh (2002, p. 2 as cited in Elmes, 2013) defines language to be: a knowledge of rules and principles and of the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences. Language serves as an organizer of knowledge (Hamers & Blanc, 2000), and there is reason to believe that aspects of language influence categorization. Language, in light of what was claimed by Jiang (2000) is the mirror of culture in the sense that people can see a culture through its language.

Goodenough (1981) asserts that culture in a society is whatever a person has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Fuller and Wardhaugh (2014) note that culture is socially acquired. It is the “know-how” that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; only for a few does it require a knowledge of some, or much, music, literature and the arts (Fuller & Wardhaugh (2014).

According to Fuller and Wardhaugh (2014), there are several possible relationships between language and culture. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. A second possibility is directly opposed to the first. Linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure or worldview. This is the view that is behind the Whorfian hypothesis. Such a view is behind certain proposed language reforms: if we change the language we can change social behavior. A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. Certain language reforms can also be seen as relying on this perspective; the reforms are made because of changes in societal norms. A fourth possibility is to assume that there is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of Culture

Many scholars define culture differently (e.g, Sapir, 1921; Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1940; Herskovits, Man & His Works, 1948; Geertz, 1996). Sapir (1921) defines culture as socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of people’s lives. Redfield asserts that culture is an organization of conventional understandings manifest in act and artifact, which, persisting through tradition, characterizes a human group (Redfield, 1940).

Herskovits, (1948) note that Culture is essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behavior, knowledge, sanctions, values, and goals that mark the way of life of any people. That is, though a culture may be treated by the student as capable of objective description, in the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think (Herskovits, 1948).

According to Goodenough (1981) culture is the various standards for perceiving, evaluating, believing, and doing that. A person attributes to other persons as a result of his experience of their actions and admonitions.... Insofar as a person finds he must attribute different standards to different sets of others, he perceives these sets as having different cultures. (Goodenough, 1981).

### The Whorfian hypothesis

The main theme is that culture, through language, influences people’s thinking. Whorf (1956 as cited in Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004) believed that linguistic patterns (such as grammars) in different languages have impact on people’s habitual thinking. According to Whorf, the differences in linguistic structure between languages are reflected in habitual thought and habitual behavior. Certain properties of a given language affect the way people perceive and remember. Whorf also believed that culture and language are not separable (Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004). The claim that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world is today most usually associated with the linguist Sapir and his student Whorf (Today, the claim is usually referred to as ‘Linguistic Determinism,’ the ‘Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis,’ the ‘Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis,’ or the ‘Whorfian Hypothesis (Fuller & Wardhaugh, 2014). Wardhaugh (2002, pp. 219-220, as cited in Elmes, 2013) reported that there appear to be three claims to the relationship between language and culture:

The structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world or, as a weaker view, the structure does not determine the world-view but is still extremely influential in predisposing speakers of a language toward adopting their world-view. According to Fuller and Wardhaugh (2014, as cited in Elmes, 2013), one claim is that if speakers of one language have certain words to describe things and speakers of another language lack similar words, then the speakers of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things. A stronger claim is that, if one language makes distinctions that another does not make, then those who use the first language will more readily perceive the relevant differences in their environment.

Many linguists explore the relationship between language and culture. Nida (1998 as cited in Khatib, Tabari, & Mohammadi, 2016) holds the view that —Language and culture are two symbolic systems. As announced by Jiang, everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative (Jiang, 2000). Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language. People of different cultures can refer to different things while using the same language forms. Khatib, Tabari, and Mohammadi (2016) concluded that domestic culture is present in all aspects of human life even in the realm of academic writing.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the relationship between language and culture four claims are reported. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. A second possibility is directly opposed to the first: linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure or worldview. This is the view that is behind the Whorfian hypothesis. Such a view is behind certain proposed language reforms: if we change the language we can change social behavior. A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. Certain language reforms can also be seen as relying on this perspective; the reforms are made because of changes in societal norms. A fourth possibility is to assume that there is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other.

The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in a certain way, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do. A 'neutral claim' which claims that there is little or no relationship between the two. The first of the proposed relationships from above is the basis for the Whorfian hypothesis; the belief that the structure of the language determines how people see the world.

According to Khatib, Tabari, and Mohammadi (2016), it is generally agreed that language and culture are closely related. Language can be viewed as a verbal expression of culture. It is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Language provides us with many of the categories we use for expression of our thoughts, so it is therefore natural to assume that our thinking is influenced by the language which we use. The values and customs in the country we grow up in shape the way in which we think to a certain extent. As asserted by Elmes (2013) for language teachers and learners in general, an appreciation for the differences in opinion regarding the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language

As a concluding remark, Understanding the relationship between languages and cultures can be a good starting point for any approach to language education. This relationship can help policy makers to design programs in order to teach language learners about the target cultures in order to achieve real competency in the languages they are expected to learn.

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