

Language and Culture

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李佐文 郑朝红 编著

河北大学出版社  
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# 前言

学习一门外国语言就是学习一种外国文化,因为语言是文化的一部分,是文化的结晶和映像,文化由语言来传承和体现并且制约着对语言的使用。作为外语学习者,我们非常有必要了解与这种语言相关的文化,熟悉有关的文化知识,从而保证语言使用的得体恰当。可以看出,学习语言的过程也就是了解和掌握该语言的文化的过程,二者之间是一种相互促进的关系。过去,有人认为学习一门外语就是掌握一套发音规则、语法规则和一定的词汇量,这样对外交流起来就可以畅通无阻了,其实这些只不过是语言学习的一部分,而不是整体,其中的文化因素也是语言学习过程中必不可少的环节。

目前很多高校外语院系的英语专业都开设了“语言与文化”这门课程,主要讲授语言与文化之间的密切关系,介绍中西文化的主要差异以及这些差异对英汉两种语言及其运用的影响,阐述中西文化、风俗习惯在英汉两种语言上的体现,进而有助于在和英语本族人交流时能够准确、深刻地理解对方和得体地表达自己的思想。尽管在教学中人们都意识到了语言与文化的密切关系和文化习得的重要性,许多院校也开设了这门课程,但语言简练、实用性强的教材并不多见。基于这样的考虑,我们编写了这本《语言与文化》基础教材。在编写过程中,主要做了以下几点考虑:第一,这不是西方文化概论性质的教材,而是主要探讨语言各个层面——词汇、语法、语篇等与文化的内在联系,重点对英汉两种语言受中西不同文化影响所存在的差异进行了对比。第二,语言力求简练,每章将生词、难词列出,适合本科低年级学生使用。第三,为了激发学习者学习了解西方文化的兴趣,每章配有讨论题目。

本书在编写过程中参考了大量的有关语言与文化方面的专著和论文,部分研究生提供了许多有价值的材料,在此一并表示感谢。由于时间仓促,水平有限,书中必有些疏漏和不妥之处,恳请使用者惠予批评指正。

编者

2005年7月

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# **Chapter One**

## **Language and Culture: An Introduction**

Chinese learners of English often find that misunderstanding may arise during their actual contact with native English speakers even though their communicative English are grammatically faultless. For example, a young Chinese woman in the U.S. was complimented by an American for the lovely dress that she was wearing. "It's exquisite. The colors are so beautiful!" In typical Chinese fashion, she replied, "Oh, it's just an ordinary dress that I bought in China." Her reply made the American feel very embarrassed, not knowing what to say next. Though that Chinese woman meant well, her reply implied that the American's taste in clothing was questionable, for the latter got so excited only about an ordinary dress. There is another example. A Chinese waiter who ushered a group of American tourists to go through the door of the hotel said with a smile, "You go first!" He was surprised to see that some Americans were frowning at him. He did not know that the literal translation of "您先请" sounded very rude. "After you" is the proper expression on this occasion. In the above two examples, though the Chinese woman and the waiter spoke English, they thought and communicated in Chinese pattern. Thus learning English well means not only merely mastering the pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms but also seeing the world as native speakers see it, to know the way in which their language reflects the ideas and customs of their society. Learning a language is, in fact, inseparable from learning its culture. Then what is language, what is culture and what is their relationship? This chapter intends to answer these questions.

### **I . Language**

Nature is very kind to human beings, for it provides them with language. Language is uniquely human. Though some species like birds and bees also communicate by

singing or dancing in order to mate or cooperate, they will never possess a language that is close to human language. As Bernard Russell, the British philosopher, once observed: "No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor but honest." However, what indeed makes human language so special and so advantageous? It is necessary to define "language" first before exploring its characteristics.

## 1. What is language?

The question of "what is language?" is very difficult to answer and has been studied by linguists and other scholars in various disciplines. Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. This definition has been widely accepted as the most scientific one nowadays, for it reveals several main features of language.

## 2. Characteristics of language

### A. Language is systematic.

All the language elements are arranged according to certain rules. Some combinations are disallowed in either the formation of words or construction of sentences. That's why we can have "help" but not "ehlp", we can say "He is a student." rather than "Is a student he." Language, as a whole, is hierarchical. A syllable is the smallest unit. Scores of syllables become the carriers of words. With thousands of words we form sentences and discourses. This hierarchical system makes human language creative, that is, potential to produce endless sets of sentences according to different context.

### B. Language is arbitrary.

The arbitrariness of language refers to the fact that the forms of language bear no relationship to their meanings. For instance, we cannot explain why a book is called a /buk/ and a pen a /pen/, or why the same object is called a "table" in English but "桌子" in Chinese. No underlying reason can be found except that these are arbitrary signs chosen by convention. But language is not entirely arbitrary; onomatopoeia and compounding words are two exceptions.

### C. Language is vocal.

Speech is primary medium of language, while writing is secondary. Speech sounds had existed long before writing was invented, and even today, in some parts of the world, there are still languages that have no writing systems. Besides, the sequence of

people's acquisition of language is speech and then writing. Children first learn to speak at a very young age and may learn to read and write at an elder age. Speech is more important than writing in people's life. A person who cannot read and write is only an "illiterate"; however, a person who cannot speak is normally regarded as "disabled."

It must be noted that to say language is vocal is not to deny the importance of writing. The invention of letters or characters in any language bears revolutionary significance during language development, for it makes the transmission of language through time and space possible.

#### **D. Language is symbolic.**

A word in a specific language is only a sign. The meaning it takes is provided by convention. It cannot take the place of the real object. It is only the concept reflected in human mind.

#### **E. Language is used for communication.**

People use language to chat, to think, to read, to write, to greet, to buy and sell, etc. It is used to communicate. Communication here is in an abstract sense. It can be divided into two parts: communication with the natural world and communication with other people. On the one hand, language is the instrument of thought. When we learn, we learn the symbol and its associated concept as well. "Dog" is learned together with the concept associated with the four-legged, furred domestic animal. Moreover, by distinguishing different words, we are able to make distinctions between things and actions. For examples, "dog" is different from "cat", though both can be described as "four-legged, furred domestic animal"; "north" is the opposite of "south", though both are descriptions of direction. Thus, language serves for the expression of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. It gives structure to experience, and helps to determine our way of perceiving things. On the other hand, language is the most important medium to convey one's thought to others. With language, information can be transmitted from one person to another or to a larger proportion of audience. Words also help to hold society together. Language can establish and strengthen interpersonal relations. "John is my friend" undoubtedly states a piece of fact whereas people also use expressions such as "Hello", "Good morning", "Nice day" to maintain a comfortable relationship between each other without involving any factual content. Although these expressions are seemingly meaningless, they pave the way for the following communication.

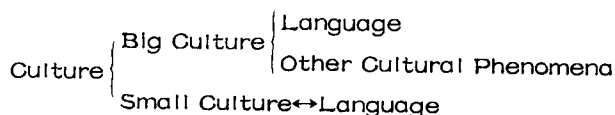
## II . Culture

How do you respond to the Chinese flag, as opposed to the American flag? How do you compliment your friend on his new shirt? Do you believe in Christianity? Your views on freedom, obligation, property, work, health, age, death, dress, family, play, law, superstition, modesty and the like are all parts of your cultural membership.

### 1. What is culture?

The word “culture” comes from the Latin word “colere”, which means “to cultivate”. The word was originally associated with physical activities on lands and production of food. Later, its meaning was extended to the total pattern of beliefs, customs, institutions, objects, arts and techniques that characterize the life of a human community. “Culture consists of all the shared products of human society.” (Robertson, 1981) This means that not only such material things such as cities, organizations and schools, but also non-material things such as ideas, customs, family patterns, languages are all parts of culture. Putting it simply, culture refers to the entire way of life of a society, “the ways of a people.” So the word “culture” now is a really a big word, which can be briefly defined as “the totality of beliefs and practices of a society.”

As regards its relationship with language, there are two concepts in academic study, “Language and Culture” and “Language in Culture”. It is easy to see that the two concepts are contrary: language has an equal status with culture in the first one while language is part of culture in the other. In order to solve this problem, some linguists proposed that culture could be interpreted in two senses: Big Culture and Small Culture (Bright, 1976). Language is part of Big Culture and equals with Small culture. Their relation is demonstrated by the following figure.



**Fig. 1**

This figure shows that language occupies a very important place of all the components of culture. Why does language occupy such an outstanding position? It is because language plays a special role in culture: language is the most important carrier of cul-

ture.

Language expresses cultural reality. To begin with, the facts, ideas, or events that people express with language are communicable because these expressions refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Language also reflects their speakers' attitude, belief, point of view, and the like. In both cases, language embodies cultural reality. But people not only express their experience with languages but also create experience through languages. They give meaning to languages through the medium they choose to communicate with each other, for example, speaking on the telephone, writing a letter or reading a book. The way in which people use the spoken, written, or visual medium itself creates meanings that are understandable to the culture they belong to. In a word, other components of culture can only manifest a particular part of culture, while language is storing the whole information of culture in an all-round way.

## 2. Characteristics of culture

### A. Culture is learned.

Culture is not genetically predetermined or instinctive. There are two reasons for taking this position. First, culture is transmitted and maintained through communication and learning. Culture, in the form of the experience one obtains from one's interaction with the world, would be passed to others and to the younger generations. "Any break in the learning chain would lead to a culture's disappearance." (Keesing, 1965) Second, each individual is confined at birth to a specific geographic location and thus exposed to certain messages while denied others. These messages, whether about religion, food, dress, housing, toys, or books, are culturally based. Therefore, everything that a person experiences is part of his or her culture.

### B. Culture is integrated.

Each individual holds his own way of life, according to his national origin, class, geographical region, occupation, age and sex. If it is not shared with other members in his community, it cannot be called "culture". However, there are certain attitudes and ideas, certain culturally prescribed rules of behavior that seem to be accepted by most people in the same community, and there are certain ways of social interaction that are generally observed. And once culture is formulated, it functions as an integrated whole. Values toward materialism will influence family size, work ethic, spiritual pursuit and other views about the world. "You touch culture in one place and everything else is affected." (Hall, 1976)

### C. Culture is dynamic.

The accumulation of culture is a continuous process. The strong need for a culture is to bind each past generation to future generation. Without the knowledge from those who lived before, humans would not have culture. In fact, "the group's knowledge stored up (in terms of memories, books and objects) for future use" is the core of the concept of culture. (Kluckhohn, 1944) Thus, each generation is making contribution to the development of culture. New ideas, new products and new subjects keep emerging while the contact between different cultures also brings changes.

### D. Culture is based on symbols.

"Human culture without language is unthinkable." (Kluckhohn, 1944) The emergence of language is a milestone which makes possible the remarkable and intricate system that we call culture. Language enables an individual to think, to express and to communicate. By this means, knowledge can be transmitted from person to person. More than that, knowledge is at the same time being passed from generation to generation—a characteristic of culture we just examined. The symbols any culture employs take a variety of forms, vocal, written or nonverbal.

### E. Culture is national.

Chinese use chopsticks; Japanese kneel rather than sit; French like onion soup; Arabians wear kerchiefs, etc. All are related with culture. In fact, a man lives both of his material life and spiritual life within a certain culture. But since each nation has been living in a unique geographical, economical and historical framework, a unique culture has been established and is developing. It should be always remembered that although there are countless universals accepted by all human beings, each culture is unique and therefore has a body of information that is not shared by other societies.

As far as Chinese and English cultures are concerned, it has been argued that the major theme of western culture, of which English culture is a part, is individualism, whereas the central theme of traditional Chinese culture is collectivism, or environmentalism. In individualistic culture, the concepts such as, "I", "independence" and "self-reliance" are emphasized. People are more self-oriented and tend to separate each member of the community from his fellows. Individual identity, individual rights, individual needs are considered more important than the group's interests. On the contrary, the Chinese collectivistic culture tries to seek harmonious relationship between individual human beings, between individuals and society, between man and nature. In collectivistic culture, concepts such as "we", "interdependence", "duties", "obligations", and needs and views of in-groups are valued. They are more group-oriented. Obligations and responsibilities are preferentially advocated.

Besides, Confucius, Mencius, Taoism and Buddhism also have great influence on Chinese culture. China has a long tradition of admiring the thoughts of Confucius, Mencius and Taoism, which have been shaping the thinking and behaving patterns of Chinese people. Doctrine of the mean, called “中庸” in Chinese, literally meaning middle and constant, is one of their central themes. People are expected to be watchful against overdoing and indulgence. As a result, men in the society favor compromise and value reservation highly. Moreover, Buddhism, which originated in India, has affected Chinese people's life greatly, too. It has been investigated that of all the borrowing words in Chinese, 90% are from Buddhism. Chinese people have the saying, such as “临时抱佛脚”, “慈悲”, etc.

English culture is also influenced by ancient Greek, Roman culture and by Christianity. From Greco-Roman mythology derive a lot of idioms such as “Pandora's box”, “Achilles' heel”, “Cupid's arrow”. And as “my God” is the most common utterance of native English speakers, the trace of Christianity can be found in many aspects of people's life. Christianity holds the idea that human beings, unlike other creatures, are created in the image of God, and thus human power should be highly respected. It is reflected by the fact that in English countries, extrovert, domineering and aggressive personality is advocated.

### 3. Relationship between language and culture

Language is part of culture and plays a very important role in it. However, the relationship between the two is more complex than the relationship of a part and the whole. On the one hand, language is the carrier and container of culture. Some social scientists even consider language as the keystone of culture. All the components of culture, such as beliefs, customs, institutions, objects, arts and techniques, can be described, analyzed and evaluated by language. People's experience about them is stored and transmitted by language as well. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. The two interact, and the understanding of one requires the understanding of the other. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and religious backgrounds as well as their ways of living and thinking. The emergence and development of language and culture are simultaneous in human history. Language brings about cultural advance as well as makes record of its steps.

The influence of culture to language can be roughly explored in three major domains: lexicon, syntax, and register.

### A. Lexicon

Lexicon, or vocabulary, is the basic constructive element of a language and the mainstay of the existence of the vast language system. Both of them have universal characteristics, which make different languages able to express a large number of common concepts, and have national characteristic, which make a certain language possible to reflect some unique understanding of a certain culture. For this reason, the cultural difference is reflected most outstandingly and widely on the level of vocabulary.

The most awkward situation in translation is that sometimes there are no equivalent words in both languages. For example, there are words such as "brunch" (breakfast + lunch) and "motel" (motor hotel) in English, but not in Chinese. On the contrary, there is "馒头" in Chinese, while English people have no idea what kind of food it is and it can only be translated into "steamed bread".

Moreover, some words seem to mean the same thing or the same concept superficially; however, what they in fact refer to are not or not totally the same. Each actually has its own culturally loaded meaning. One word may take more meaning than its "translation", or there may be some other subtle differences between them. Yet the conceptual difference is just a drop of water in the vast sea of the cultural differences demonstrated by word meaning. A great divergence is in the endless associative meaning behind the words. So for students who are learning English, it is essential that they know not only the conceptual meaning of words, but also the cultural information the words have with them, otherwise serious misunderstanding can occur in cross-cultural communication.

### B. Syntax

English is a language governed by strict rules and regulations. However, Chinese grammar is very flexible. It has also been discovered that English adopts the branching sentence pattern, like trees with trunk, one or more branches and twists, while Chinese relies particularly on the temporal sequence and adopts the linear sentence pattern, like a flowing river without tributaries. There are also some other important differences. The linguistic contrast between these two languages has been related to the cultural traditions in English-speaking countries and China.

### C. Register

More differences will be known in language and culture, if the way language used in everyday life is examined. That is what we will talk about the differences between languages at the level of register. The register evolves from the context. Therefore, the register produced in different cultural context will inevitably reflect different cultural characteristics. For example, the English and Chinese ways of greeting, congratula-



tion, praise, invitation, thanks, and apology, etc. have differences in various degrees. In a word, cultures differ from each other and each culture is unique. As cultures are diverse, languages are diverse. It is only natural that with differences in cultures and differences in languages, difficulties often arise in communication between cultures. Understanding is not always easy.

### **III. Thought**

The exploration of language and culture cannot do without the discussion of thought, since if a voice is uttered without referring to anything or meaning, what the speaker is thinking is definitely unknown. In other words, when any statement is made, or understood, three factors are involved: language, thought, and culture.

#### **1. What is thought?**

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, but are very much in the world we understand. The real world we see, we hear, we feel is to a large extent unconsciously built up our thought habits. Thought is the function and product of human brain.

However, unlike apple trees yielding apples, thought is not the instinct of the human beings. The human experiences enter the human brain, are processed there and then human thought results. Though human brain is a material base of thought, thinking activity depends on the interaction between people and external world as well as certain culture background and social atmosphere. Thought is social in essence. It is socially edified and influenced. Without certain social culture, it is impossible for the human brain to produce thought.

#### **2. Relationship between language and thought**

The question of what is the relationship between language and thought has obsessed philosophers, linguists, anthropologists and psychologists for centuries. Now most scholars agree that language and thought are closely related. Without language people could not get ideas known to others, nor could they know others' intentions. In other words, language is the instrument of the communication of thought. At the same time, language also has influence on thought. One group of scholars even went to the extreme, proposing Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which holds the opinion that language deter-