

*Comparative Studies
in Language and Culture*

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Unit 1 A Brief Survey

1.1 Introduction

1

In a book published in 1998, Claire Kramersch made a statement about the relationship between language and culture, which has been greatly circulated among academic researchers. She says in the beginning of her book (Kramersch, 1998:3):

“Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.”

“... The words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Words also reflect their authors’ attitudes and beliefs, their points of view that are also those of others. In both cases, *language expresses cultural reality.*”

“But members of a community or social group do not only ex-



press experience; they also create experience through language. They give meanings to it through the medium they choose to communicate with one another, for example, speaking on the telephone or face-to-face, writing a letter or sending an e-mail message, reading the newspaper or interpreting a graph or a chart. The way in which people use the spoken, written or visual medium itself creates meanings that are understandable to the group they belong to, for example, through a speaker's tone of voice, accent, conversational style, gestures, and facial expression. Through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, *language embodies cultural reality.*"

2 " . . . Language is a system of *signs* that is seen as having itself a cultural value, speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus we can say that *language symbolizes cultural reality.*"

Language is a means to express and exchange thoughts, concepts, knowledge and information as well as to fix and transmit experience and knowledge. Based on cognitive processes, subject to societal factors and historical change and development, it refers to a specific form of expression that is restricted to humans, and differs from other possible languages, such as animal communication and artificial languages through creativity. It is a genetically innate human capacity based on neuro-physiological processes for directing cognitive and communicative processes. It also refers to an individual national language such as Chinese, English and Rus-



sian (Bussmann, 2000).

1.2 Language Studies

What are language studies? According to Linda Thomas and Shan Wareing etc., language studies can be summarized into the following disciplines or sub-disciplines (Thomas and Wareing, 1999):

- ◆ the study of the role of language in different cultures (*anthropology*);
- ◆ the study of language and linguistics in relation to practical problems, such as language teaching, lexicography and translation (*applied linguistics*);
- ◆ an approach to language that is based on people's experience of the world and the way they perceive and conceptualize it (*cognitive linguistics*);
- ◆ the study of how languages change through time; the relationships of languages to each other (*comparative historical linguistics*);
- ◆ the study of two or more languages in order to compare their structures and to show whether they are similar or different (*comparative linguistics*);
- ◆ an approach to linguistics which uses mathematical techniques, often with the aid of a computer to analyze language data in order to establish the order in which learners acquire various grammatical rules or the frequency of occurrence of some particular item; it also includes research on automatic translation, electronic production of artificial speech (*computational linguistics*).



tics);

- ◆ the study of how a language changes over a period of time, e. g. the change in the sound system of English from Early English to Modern British English (*diachronic linguistics*);
- ◆ the study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews (*discourse analysis*);
- ◆ the study of language as a system of human communication, which covers a wide field with different approaches and different areas of investigations (*linguistics*);
- ◆ the study of the way in which words are constructed out of smaller meaningful units (*morphology*);
- ◆ the study of the brain and how it functions in the production, perception and acquisition of language (*neurolinguistics*);
- ◆ the study of the relationship between meaning, language and perception (*philosophy*);
- ◆ the study of nature, production and perception of sounds of speech (*phonetics*);
- ◆ the study of the sound systems of individual languages and of the nature of such systems generally (*phonology*);
- ◆ the study of how the meaning conveyed by a word or sentence depends on aspects of the context in which it is used (such as time, place, social relationship between speaker and hearer, and speaker's assumptions about the hearer's beliefs) (*pragmatics*);
- ◆ the study of how human brains work, the relationship of language and cognitive structures and the acquisition of language (*psycholinguistics*);



- ◆ the study of meaning; how words and sentences are related to the (real or imaginary) objects they refer to and the situations they describe (*semantics*);
- ◆ the different *varieties* of language people use, and why there are linguistic differences between different groups (*sociolinguistics*);
- ◆ an approach to linguistics which stresses the importance of language as a system and which investigates the place that linguistic units such as sounds, words, sentences have within this system (*structural linguistics*);
- ◆ the study of style in language: traditionally, of variations in usage among literary and other texts; now, more generally of any systematic variation, in either writing or speech (*stylistics*);
- ◆ the study of a language system at one particular point in time, e.g. the sound system of Modern British English (*synchronic linguistics*);
- ◆ the study of grammatical relations between words and other units within the sentence (*syntax*);
- ◆ an approach to linguistics developed by Halliday which sees language in a social context and considers language as a resource used for communication and not as a set of rules (*systemic linguistics*);
- ◆ a branch of linguistics which studies spoken or written texts and which is concerned with the way the parts of a text are organized and related to one another in order to form a meaningful whole (*text linguistics*).



1.3 Cultural studies and language learning

Languages do not exist in isolation. They are rooted in the societies that use them. Compared with language studies, culture studies are not as systematic and well established as they should be. Their origins are usually associated with two founding figures, Raymond Williams (1958) and Richard Hoggart (1957) and their particular angle on the *high/low culture* debate in the 1950s. They were both early pioneers in the field of “*cultural studies*”. They were in fact doing cultural studies even before the term was coined. They argued that culture should not be restricted to *the Great Works of Art*. Instead the focus should be on everyday behaviour and expressions.

6

As it is known, culture studies used to be included in literature study. Culture with a capitalized *C* was stressed, instead of culture with a small *c*. The contents of the cultural cultivation were mainly concerned with literature, arts, paintings and architecture. Such a situation lasted for many years until some noted researchers like Williams and Hoggart took up the subject of the effect of culture on languages and vice versa, and shaped it to their own use.

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies revitalized a progressive framework in the early sixties when they rediscovered the theoretical work of Antonio Gramsci. This led to a paradigmatic clash between what came to be known as the “culturalists” and the “structuralists”. The first director of the centre was Richard Hoggart. The next one was Stuart Hall, who is described as “a leading figure of the British left over the past thirty



years and a visionary race theorist.” The “struggle” between the structuralists and the culturalists was however settled in favour of the culturalists. Along with the growing influence of post-structuralism, two main trends can be detected in contemporary cultural studies. They are a mainly American focus on the politics of identity predominantly influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault, and a British tradition inspired by the neo-Gramscian writings of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart which concentrates mostly on the relationship between popular culture and the culture industry and the individual’s ability or lack of ability to find some space for her/himself in which to produce meaningful readings in a seemingly semiotic wilderness.

The process of learning more about the interrelationship between culture and language, either within the native environment or within an intercultural environment, led the way to consideration of the effect of a second culture on second language learning. Now cultural studies generally focus on three aspects (Hammerly, 1982):

- ◆ information culture: the sorts of things an average native speaker knows, including history, geography, and general knowledge.
- ◆ behavioural culture: the way people typically behave towards each other, their attitudes and values. This includes body-language and conversation formulae and the way these are combined in successful communication.
- ◆ achievements (or accomplishment) culture: artistic and literary achievements (traditional culture with a capital C).

The aims of these studies are to raise awareness of cultural



features (both similarities and differences), to modify behaviour to take account of these features and to impart knowledge about the other cultures. These aims encompass affective, cognitive and psychological domains. They focus more on cross-cultural communication rather than knowledge (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993).

In terms of *behaviourist theory*, culture consists of observable behaviours like traditions, customs/habits, foods and products, gestures, folklore, music, literature, etc. It consists of patterns of behaviour acquired and transmitted through symbols. Behaviourist theory is not interested in a phenomenon itself and does not explain why a certain phenomenon exists or where it originates from. As a result of this theory, foreign language learning consists of learning various surface behaviours and manners such as leisure time habits or food purchase and forms and functions of different institutions.

8

Seeing culture as a social phenomenon, the *functionalistic theory* aims to find out why certain social behaviour takes place and what are the reasons and rules of behaviour. It regards culture as a systematic representation of the everyday knowledge which the native member of culture possesses unconsciously, but which the non-native has to handle consciously. Culture is seen as an agreement on thoughts, beliefs, values, ideas and meanings shared by the members of one culture. From the functionalist point of view, the aim of foreign language teaching is to make the learner conscious of the knowledge which the native has both consciously and unconsciously. This theory goes beyond surface phenomena in showing that culture and behaviour are in close contact with each other. In order to fully understand the phenomena in the foreign culture, the learner has to be aware of the self-evident facts in his/



her own culture as well.

The *cognitive theory* pays attention to the person and to the process that takes place as culture is learned. Its main emphasis is on how people analyze, organize and understand the world. Culture is seen almost identical with a person's view of the world. The cognitive concept of culture is non-observable and internal to both, the representative of the culture and the learner. This is to say that culture is not formed of things, people, behaviour or feelings, but rather it consists of forms of things that people have in mind. The schemata they have about the world, for example, what a terrier looks like or how to behave in a restaurant, are strongly affected by their own culture. When a Chinese student enters an English class and becomes consciously aware, for example, of English pubs and people's behaviours in the pubs, etc. This also enriches his/her understanding of another culture.

While the cognitive theory pays attention to the process of analyzing information, the *symbolic theory* concentrates on the result of this process, the meaning. According to the symbolic definition, culture is a system of symbols and meanings in which experience, meaning and reality are all in contact with each other. Culture is also in a constant state of flux and every person is involved with the change. What each person brings to the intercultural encounter is partially public and shared with other people, but it is also private and personal. Thus, no one person represents the whole culture and cultural patterns are not shared by all members of a cultural group in the same way. It is therefore important in foreign language learning to pay attention to real knowledge and also to the present state of the target culture.