

Culture: The Cradle of Language

Vandit Vedpal Verma

Author, Filmmaker, Teacher, Researcher

Abstract

Culture is a function of society and language is a function of culture. Consequently, it is often said that sociality is a precondition for language. On a real, applied level, language deals with sounds, symbols and gestures that a community uses and associates so that they can communicate. On a deeper human level, language is a manifestation, an expression of who and what we are as individuals, groups, communities, societies and nations. Culture pertains to changing social orders and systems, shared patterns of behaviour, thinking, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and values. Culture provides the essential and natural environment in which languages develop, even as it influences how they are used and interpreted. For example, different culturally shared values provide the context for interpreting the term for 'good'. In most European cultures a 'good' day is a sunny day, but in most African cultures a 'good' day is a rainy day.

This paper briefly essays to underline the significance of culture in the development of language.

Key Words: society, community, culture, language

Introduction

Society and Culture are two entities that are intrinsically tied with man almost since the origin of human beings. The prime consequence and the premier product of socialization of man was culture. Man's cultural interactions and communications produced language.

Languages and cultures deserve study and celebration in their own right.¹ Those wishing to promote a language have a special reason and task to examine how language and culture work.

What then is the essence of language? "*The mind of the hearer is just as active in transforming as the mind of the speaker.*" – Wilhelm Wundt²

The core of language is human activity. Activity on part of one to make himself understood by another and on the part of another to understand what is in the mind of the first. The relations of the two, to one another, should not be lost sight of, in order to understand language's nature. This was often overlooked in the past. Words and forms were often looked at, as if they were things or objects with an existence of their own – a conception, possibly nurtured with too great an occupation with written or printed word, but which is fundamentally ill-founded, as will easily be seen with a little pondering.

Thus, looking cross-sectionally or at a point in time, the oral tradition seems sufficient, in communication of meaning and the written

word appears overly emphasized, but looking at the timeline and the propagation of language down the generations, the script and written word gains significant importance as language protector, preserver and propagator.

General physiognomies of language: When no longer seen as inseparable from attitudes, beliefs, expectations and experience of language users, some general features of language emerge, which are enlisted and enumerated as:

1. Language is epiphenomenal.
2. Without support, language would be empty.
3. Meaning is not inherent but an emergent property of words and sentences.

When and how did language grow? Why is it that only humans have language? The origin and evolution of language is a complex study. A variety of viewpoints including primatological, social, cultural, archaeological, anatomical, neurobiological and linguistics are the multiple tools needed for a thorough study.

“Language, it is believed, evolved in a cultural ethos as an intricate adaptive system.”³ Rousseau, Darwin and Jespersen, among others, believed in the existence of a definite relationship between music and language evolution. It is supposed that music and language co-evolved. It is also argued that a music-like protolanguage enables us not only to explain certain continuities between human speech and primate vocal communication but also to explain the seeming readiness with which newborn infants respond to language and music alike, and the significant overlaps of

the respective brain regions recruited for language and music. Additionally, different reasons are cited for assuming that protolanguage used holistic phrases, not compositional ones. There are a number of reasons why the so-called holistic phrase communication would have had a degree of musicality. In interweaving various strands of evidence, the work on language evolution has become an interdisciplinary endeavor.

Drawing on a variety of indications, it is said, that language and music constitute complementary components of the ‘human communicative system’. The Standard evolutionary theory is quite successful, yet, it does not provide an acceptable basis for understanding human evolution because its assumptions limit what it can explain.

Substantial work of high quality is currently being done to uncover the various facets of language and speech, in almost every domain of knowledge. Culture being a collective of manners, meanings, methods, conduct, rituals, beliefs and values of a people, communication cannot but originate, sustain and thrive in the fertile ground of culture.

Hypothesis: ‘ The community crucible of culture holds the essential elements that catalyze and synthesize communication and lead to the origin, shaping and development of a language.’

Arguments and Discussion:

Language ever presages meanings beyond itself: The meanings in a certain language represent the culture of a certain social group. To interact with a language implies interacting with the culture which is its locus

point. We cannot comprehend a culture without having direct access to its language because of their intimate connection.

“A specific language points to the culture of a particular social group. Learning a language, therefore, is not just learning the alphabet, the meaning, the grammar rules and the arrangement of words, but it is also learning the behavior of the society and its cultural customs.”⁴ Thus, language teaching should always contain some explicit reference to the culture, the whole from which the particular language is removed.

The human communication process is multifaceted and intricate. Many of our messages are conveyed through a *paralanguage*. These supplementary communication techniques are culture-specific, so communication with people from other societies or ethnic groups is fraught with the multiple risks of misunderstandings, if the greater framework of culture is ignored.

Growing up in a particular society, we informally learn how to use gesticulations, glances, slight changes in tone or voice, and other ancillary communication devices to alter or to emphasize what we say and do. We learn these culturally specific techniques over a long period, largely by observing and imitating.

The most apparent form of paralanguage is body language, or Kinesics, which is the language of gestures, expressions, and postures. However, the meaning of words can also be altered by voice modulation or tone and character of voice.

Language is culture and culture is language: Language and culture have a multifarious, homologous relationship. Language is complexly entwined with culture. Having evolved together, having been influencing one another in the process, they have been eventually determining what it means to be human. In this context, A.L. Kroeber (1923) said, “...*culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other.*”

Culture is a result of human interaction, and cultural expressions are acts of communication that are assumed by particular speech communities. According to Rossi Landi (1973), “the totality of the messages we exchange with one another while speaking a given language constitutes a speech community, that is, the whole society understood from the point of view of speaking.”⁵ He further explains that all children learn their language from their societies, and during the process of learning a language also learn their culture and develop their abilities to know.

Language connects through culture, and culture also converses through language. Michael Silverstein proposed that the communicative dynamism of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality, but also in connecting one context with another. Communication is not only the use of symbols that signify beliefs, feelings, identities, or events; it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the current perspective.

According to the *principle of linguistic relativity*, our manner of thinking about the

world is directly impacted by the language we use to converse about it. "The real world is, to a large extent, unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are similar enough to denote identical social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct, not merely the same with a different label attached", said Edward Sapir in 1929.⁶Therefore, to express is to assume a culture, and to know a culture is akin to know a language. Language and culture are homologous, cerebral and psychological realities. Entities arising out of culture are depictions and expositions of the world that need to be communicated in order to be lived.

A problematic situation is one, and in what happens, when cross-cultural interactions take place, i.e., when message creator and message recipient come from different cultures. Contact among cultures is definitely increasing and intercultural communication is today imperative for anyone wanting to get along with and understand those whose beliefs and backgrounds may be immensely different from their own.

Language marks the cultural identity, but it is also used to refer to other occurrences and phenomena and refer beyond itself, especially when a particular speaker uses it to explain intentions. A certain language points to the culture of a specific social group. We can therefore presume that language learning is cultural learning, so language teaching is cultural teaching due to the evident interdependence of language and cultural learning.

Culture is an indistinct set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, basic assumptions, and values that are mutually shared by a group of people and that influence each member's behavior and each member's understandings of the meanings of other people's behavior. Language is the channel for expressing and embodying other phenomena. Values, beliefs and meanings are expressed by language, which members of a given society share by virtue of their socialization into it. Language also refers to entities, atypical to a given culture, as evidenced by proper names which embody those objects. Byran posited that "- 'a loaf of bread' evokes a specific culture of objects in British usage unless a conscious effort is made to empty it of that reference and introduce a new one". So, we can conclude that language is a part of culture and through it, we express cultural beliefs and values, and that the specific usages of a given word are peculiarly unique to a language and its relationship with culture.

In fact, language teaching, inevitably and invariably means, language and cultural teaching. According to Buttjst, "Culture learning is actually a key factor in being able to use and master a foreign linguistic system." The Bellagio Declaration of the European Cultural Foundation and the International Council for Educational Development states, "*For effective international cooperation, knowledge of other countries and their cultures is as important as proficiency in their languages and such knowledge is dependent on foreign language teaching.*"

Taylor (1979) observes, that - "Learning a language is therefore learning the behavior

of a given society and its cultural customs, traditions, ceremonials. Language is an outcome of the thought and behavior of a society. An individual language speaker's effectiveness in a foreign language is directly related to his/her understanding of the culture of that language", and Ager states that- "it is possible to consider teaching culture through learners' own languages, which can be used in a specific way to interpret the other culture".

Immersion teaching hastens the acquisition of cultural knowledge: According to Fengping Gao, "...the integration of language and culture learning by using the language as medium for the continuing socialization of students is a process which is not intended to imitate and replicate the socialization of native-speaker teachers but rather to develop student's cultural competence from its existing stage, by changing it into intercultural competence".

Works Cited:

1. Kenneth Pike – Summer Institute of Linguistics – SIL Publications – Dallas USA - 2018 –P1
2. Terence Moore, Christine Carling - Understanding Language: Towards a Post-Chomskyan Linguistics – Springer – London - 1982 -P145
3. Rudolf Botha, Chris Knight- The Prehistory of Language – Oxford University Press– Oxford - 2009 -P3
4. Fateha Guessabi– Language Magazine – Improving Literacy & Communication Publications – California USA - 2017–P1
5. Alessandro Duranti - Linguistic Anthropology - Cambridge University Press – New York USA - 1997 - P83
6. Sapir, E. - The Status of Linguistics as a Science *and* Culture, Language and Personality (ed. D. G. Mandelbaum). University of California Press - Berkeley, CA – 1929 - P69

Conclusion

As discussed, standard evolutionary theory does not provide a satisfactory basis for understanding human evolution, because its assumptions limit its scope of explanation. It neglects niche-construction's role in evolution. Consequently it has unintentionally created conceptual barricades that obstruct integrating evolutionary biology and several neighboring disciplines, including developmental biology, ecosystem-level ecology, and the human sciences. Niche construction is a process which, combined with other established evolutionary processes, improves comprehension of human evolution. By integrating human niche construction with gene-culture co-evolutionary theory, an evolutionary framework can be developed to explore the evolution of language, and that would make abundantly clear that a language can develop only in the lap and lab of culture.