

Language: The Cradle of Culture

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Abstract

Language is complexly interwoven with culture. They have co-evolved, influencing one another, and eventually influencing what it means to be the species of man. Culture is a creation of human interaction and cultural appearances and expressions are acts of communicating that are assumed by particular speech communities.

Culture is a function of society and language is a function of culture. Consequently, it is often stated that a culture without a written language is prone to extinction. Like a human generation passing its genetic material to the next, culture also gets passed down the line, albeit with some transformation. The medium that transmits culture is not genetic or cellular but linguistic and language.

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

Key Words: culture, language, community, society

Introduction

“Culture is an ever changing, adaptive entity that is learned and conveyed from one generation to the next. It gets mirrored in the values, beliefs, norms, practices, symbols, ways of life, and other social identities, and its wearing can negatively impact mental health and well-being, leading to despair, nervousness, substance abuse and even suicide” say Kirmayer, Brass & Tait¹ Language is a ‘conduit or conveyor’ of culture and the means by which knowledge, skills and cultural values are articulated and maintained. Suppression of language is a form of oppression and disempowerment, which impacts self-identity, self-confidence and self-esteem, which are important constituents for community well-being.

The immense scholastic value of figurative use of language is in its ability to transfer learning from what is known to what is less or not known and do so in a brilliant manner...

Understanding culture through symbolic cultural comparison or metaphor is an activity, that people of a culture, consider essential and to which they relate emotionally or rationally, for example the Turkish Coffee house or the Chinese family altar. The cultural symbolism represents all or most of the embedded ideals of the culture. Often newcomers have a painful time understanding a particular cultural metaphor, such as American football, and the underlying values of a culture that it stands for.

Culture allows people to ‘fill the gaps’ automatically, when action is required. Cultural metaphors aid us to see the tenets leading to action. This is possibly the most fascinating aspect of culture.²

Hypothesis: ‘The community crucible of culture leads to the creation of a language and gets passed down the generations through the medium of language’.

Arguments and Discussion

According to Nahiyān bin Asadullah, “Language by its very nature is naive, we make it complex and naughty. We make it look and sound like what it is not.”

Language and Culture: The Encyclopaedia Britannica is very concise and precise in stating that “Language is far more than the outer articulation and transmission of inner thoughts framed free of their voicing and speech. In establishing the inadequacy of such an observation of language, the thought has already been drawn to the manners in which one’s native language is closely linked to rest of an individual’s life in a community and to smaller sized groups inside that community. This is correct of all inhabits and all tongues; it is a common fact about language.

Anthropologists express the relations between language and culture. It is certainly more in agreement with reality to think language as a part of culture. *Culture* is being used here, as it is all through, in the anthropological sense, to denote all facets of human life insofar as they are known or accustomed by association in a society. The fact that folks eat or drink is not in its own self cultural; it is a natural need

for the maintenance of life. That they eat specific foods and abstain from consuming other materials, although they may be completely comestible and wholesome, and that they eat and drink at certain times of day and in specific places are matters of culture, something “assimilated by man as a fellow of society,” as per the classic description of culture by the English anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor. Thus defined and envisioned, culture covers a very wide extent of human life and behaviour, and language is noticeably a part, perhaps the most significant part, of it.

Although the ability of language acquirement and language usage is intrinsic and congenital, and there is valid discussion over the degree of this inherentness, every being’s language is “learned by a human as a fellow of society,” together with and concurrently as other aspects of that society’s culture in which people are brought up. Society and language are mutually indispensable. Language could have developed only in a social setting, however this may have been designed, and human society in any shape even distantly similar to what is known today or is documented in history could be conserved and preserved only among people employing and understanding a language in general use.”³

Language is passed culturally; that is, it is learned. To a far lesser degree it is imparted, for instance, when parents purposely encourage kids to speak and to answer to speaking, correct their faults, and increase their terminologies. Children basically attain their first language by ‘grammar construction’ from being exposed

to an arbitrary assortment of utterances that they happenstance. Language instruction in school either is second-language acquirement or, what it regards the learners' first language, is primarily focused on reading and writing, the study of literary material, prescribed grammar, and their own criteria of accuracy, which may not be those of all the learners' local or social dialects. Significantly, language instruction at school presumes and depends on the previous understanding of a first language in its rudimentary terminology and basic construction, learned before school age.

Language is transmitted as part of culture; it is not less true that culture as a whole is transmitted quite largely through language, insofar as it is explicitly taught. Humans having a history, in the sense that animals don't, is completely the consequence of language.

Animal behavior has not transformed considerably during the period available for the study of human history except, when human mediation by domestication or other forms has itself brought about such alterations. Members of the same species, also, do not differ markedly in behaviour over widely scattered areas, again apart from differences resulting from human interference. In comparison human cultures are as divergent as are human languages the world-over, and they can and do change all the time, sometimes with great rapidity, as among the industrialized countries of the 21st century.

Basically, the largest part of acquired behaviour, which is what culture involves, is transmitted by vocal instruction, not by

imitation. Some imitation is obvious, especially in infancy, in the course of learning, but it is hardly significant.

Using language, any skills, practices, approaches to social control, and the like can be explained, and the outcomes of anyone's ingenuity can be understood by anyone else with the intellectual ability to grasp what is being said. Spoken language alone would thus vastly extend the amount of usable information in any human community and speed up the acquisition of new skills and adaptation of techniques to changed situations or new surroundings. With the invention and dissemination of writing, this method enlarged immediately, and the relative durableness of writing made the transmission of material still easier. Print process and the increase in literacy further intensified this course. Modern techniques for broadcast or almost instantaneous transmission of communication all over the globe, together with the tools for rapid translation of the languages of the world, have enabled availability of every kind of functioning knowledge humans need at virtually any place in the world. This explains the high speed of technical, technological, governmental, and social change in the modern world. All of this, whether ultimately for the good or ill of humankind, must be attributed to the dominant role of language in the transmission of culture.

The role played by variations within a language in differentiating social and occupational groups in a society has been discussed. In transmission of language this tends to be self-propagating unless purposely interfered with. Children are

generally brought up within the same social cluster to which their parents belong, and learn the dialect and communication styles of that group along with the rest of the subculture and behavioral qualities and approaches that are distinctive of it. This is an essentially spontaneous process of acculturating. However, the importance of linguistic indicators of social standing and hierarchies is not lost to contenders for private progression in stratified societies. The purposeful cultivation of a suitable dialect, in its lexical, syntactic, and phonological features, has been the self-induced task of many people wanting “to enhance themselves”. Much of the comedy in G B Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, first performed in 1913, turns on Eliza Doolittle’s need to unlearn her native Cockney if she is to rise in the social circle. “Culturally and sub-culturally directed restrictions play a role in all this, and persons wanting to move up the social circle have to gather what words to use and what words to shun if they are to be acknowledged and to ‘fit’ in their new position.”⁴

Similar thought process holds for altering one’s language as to shifting one’s dialect. Language changing is more difficult and rare for the individual, but is likely to be prevalent in a mass immigration undertaking. In 19th and early 20th centuries, the readiness with which immigrants and their children from continental Europe living in the United States learned and insisted on speaking English is an example of their comprehension that English was the linguistic badge of full belonging in their new homeland at the time when the country

was proud to consider itself the melting pot in which people of varied linguistic and cultural origins would become citizens of an aggregated community.

The same type of self-propagation, in the absence of willful rejection, operates in the special languages of sporting and gamesmanship and of occupations and vocations. These are in the main, concerned with special vocabularies.

Languages and variations within languages play a uniting as well as a differentiating role in human society as a whole. Language is a part of culture, but culture is a multifaceted totality comprising different features, and the borders between cultural aspects are neither clear-cut, nor matching. Physical obstacles such as oceans, mountains, and rivers are impediments to human interaction and cultural links, though modern technological advances in travel and communications make such geographical factors less significant. More powerful for most of the 20th century were political constraints on the mobility of people, thoughts and ideas.

The spread of various constituents of cultures varies, and the spread of languages may differ from that of nonlinguistic cultural characteristics. This is the outcome of changing effortlessness and quickness with which changes may be attained or imposed and from the historical conditions accountable for them. For example, from the end of World War II until 1990, the partition between East and West Germany embodied a major political, cultural fragmentation in a region of relative linguistic unison. It is noteworthy that variances of lexis and

practice were noticeable on each side of that separation, superimposing previous dissimilarities ascribed to local parlances.

Culture is the life blood, that moves a society, language is the oxygen which keeps a culture alive and the society, kicking.

The culture of folks without a history and scripted language is prone to extinction. The Maasai, of Africa, for example, akin to many other indigenous people, are fast losing their languages and cultures. Maa is an oral language that has no script or documentation and is hence prone to extinction. Written languages, quickly find their way into their communities via formal schooling, faith, and globalization. One Maasai says that their parents never sought them to go to school but “on the British colonialists’ insistence, a few were unwillingly sent”, adding that “they knew that they would eventually lose their language and culture and later get lost.”⁵

It is assessed that world-over, a language becomes extinct every 14 days. If this tendency endures, by 2100 over half of the more than 7,000 languages spoken on Earth—many of them yet to be documented—may vanish, taking along them a treasure of knowledge about history, culture, the nature, the environment, and the human brain. Much of what humans know about Mother Nature is encoded in verbal languages only. Native groups that have interacted closely with the natural world for thousands of years often have deep insights into local lands, plants, animals, and ecologies—many still unrecorded by science.

Every time a language dies, human beings lose a portion of the picture of what their brainpowers can do. Every fallen sage is equivalent to a burnt library! Conserving and promulgating a language is not simple. When communities lose their land, they lose their language and then they lose their culture . . . they become enslaved by others. Recording culture, language, songs, and other cultural practices for posterity, is imperative.

Cultural interchange among publics of different backgrounds is the key to accord, amity, and maintainable development. Preserving languages and cultures is also important for preserving human rights. For natives like the Maasai, this is a priceless inheritance that will be bestowed to future generations.

“Culture and language have been, and continue to be, overwhelmingly interrupted by colonial systems and structures also. Numerous words, songs, practices, knowledge, and traditions have been lost forever or muzzled along the way”.⁶ Present generations of native people are under the burden of cultural perplexity, embarrassment in not being able to speak one’s mother tongue. Cultural distinctiveness and observance are both protection providing and curative; the urgency to reinstate the well-being of culture and languages is more than ever, a critical endeavor now. This mission will need enlisting the expert teamwork of many, including wise-men, elders, ideators, speakers, innovators, knowledge keepers, thought leaders, linguistic experts, teachers, NGOs, educational institutes, non-profits, health care providers, and of course the

government. It can take place in language seats, in schools, around the house, in environmental meets and digital domains. Eventually, this rigorous vision could balm traumas between generations, stimulate all-inclusive curing, reconstruct self-confidence and reestablish cultural and linguistic pride.

Conclusion:

From the foregoing, it is abundantly evident that, like rivers are the arteries of the Earth

and carry the fertile soil, from one place to another, languages carry the vital elements of culture from one generation to the following one. Absence of a language can lead to the extinction of a culture, of a people, of a society, and its history may all be erased and the land may be wiped from the maps of the world forever.

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