

Close Connection Between Words and Culture

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Abstract: Sociolinguistics may be defined as “the study of how language is used by different groups in society.” Of the same importance for this area of linguistics, however, is the focus on the language and the culture in which it is spoken, and the relationship between the two has been an area of interest for many researchers. The statement that such a connection exists is now of little doubt and the relationship may be manifested in many areas of social usage of the language.

Key words: Culture, words, kinship, relationship, languages

Introduction

First of all, it should be stated what the word “culture” means in this exact context. Clearly, it does not refer to the so-called high culture connected with the appreciation of art, literature, or music. In this case culture is best described by the definition provided by Goodenough, in which culture is thought as “whatever it is one 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 except for any one of themselves.” It is a set of necessary behaviours and knowledge one must know in order to function in a particular society. Members of the same society who speak the same language interpret and perceive the world in a similar way and hence can quite easily understand each other.

The Whorfian Hypothesis

There are several theories concerning the relationship between language and culture. The neutral claim states that there is little or no relationship between the two. Significantly a different theory suggests that the culture is reflected in the usage of a language and things that are valued in a specific society influence the language. But the most well-known theory is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, known also as the Whorfian hypothesis – the second name may be considered more precise as Whorf developed the claim the most. The strong form of the hypothesis is labelled as linguistic determinism – different languages represent different ways of thinking about the world around us. In other words, language determines thought. As stated by Sapir “humans do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.” This idea was further extended by Whorf, a Sapir student, who concluded that the grammar of each language is a shaper of ideas and largely determines the way its speakers view the world. Since the languages differ structurally the experience of the world is different for speakers of different languages and it is impossible to see the world objectively as it is because the perception is based on a particular language system.

Whorf based his findings on the work with American Indian Languages. He contrasted the linguistic structures of Hopi with the structures of languages such as English which he named as Standard Average European. According to him, Hopi and English differ significantly in their structural characteristics and in the ways of expressing the same concepts. As he stated, Hopi centres on events and processes whereas English on things and relations. In SAE events occur in a definite time – either in the past, present, or future, and the time itself is apportioned into fixed segments such as minutes or days. For Hopi speakers, however, of importance is whether an event can be warranted to have occurred, or to be occurring, or to be expected to occur. The world is seen as ongoing set of processes and emphasis is laid on how the action is performed

(aspect) rather than when the action is performed (tense). Because of these differences, according to Whorf, speakers of the two languages view the world differently.

In Whorfian hypothesis language functions like a filter to reality – it determines the way the speaker perceives and organises both social and natural world which helps to form one's world-view. Therefore if a language has a word describing a certain concept it is easier for its speakers to talk about the concept than for speakers of another language which lacks appropriate word. Moreover, if one language makes grammatical distinctions that another language does not make, then the speakers of that language become conscious of the kinds of distinctions that must be referred to.

Many researchers tried to prove the hypothesis or at least attempted to test it. Examples like describing one thing by using several different words in one language while in other languages there is just one term describing the concept were provided. Others like Lucy focused on grammar of different languages – he compared category of number in English and in Yucatec Maya with the results showing there exist only some evidence to proof the claim. Others tested the statement that it is impossible to describe certain things in some languages as they lack the necessary resources. In each and every instance the results were not concluding and the claim still remains unproved as it appears that thanks to circumlocution it is possible to talk about anything in every language. Some concepts, however, are easier expressed in some languages than in others.

The Relationship of Culture and Language

Although researchers still try to find and prove the theory explaining the relationship between the language and culture, it is unquestionable that such a relationship exists – whether in a strong claim such as Whorf's or in a weaker one suggesting that the language is just being influenced by the culture. This relationship is visible in many areas of a language used to describe some concepts or social relations.

Kinship and social relationship

The way people use the language in social life is visible in kinship system. Because of the importance of family in social organisation the kinship system is universal. Some systems may be richer than others but they all make use of such factors as sex, age, generation, blood and marriage. The system regulates not only nomenclature but also it explains the way how people should behave towards others in the society. Obviously, societies may differ significantly in they approach to family matters and it is best visible in the vocabularies of different languages. Extensive family vocabulary is typical for societies which social organisation revolves around family. For instance, in Australian Aboriginal language Njamal, every member of the tribe have their own specific kinship term. More developed societies tend to have restricted family vocabulary as the importance of family is significantly lower. In English more complicated family relations cannot be referred to directly as hardly ever there exists a word to describe them. Therefore, it is impossible to name, for instance one's brother's wife's father in a single word nor there is distinctive vocabulary for a father's sister or mother's sister – in both instances she is referred to as *aunt*. In some cultures, like in Polish, extensive kinship vocabulary has existed but it loses its significance and often more general terms are used. For instance, a father's brother may be called *stryj*, but currently the word *wujek* (uncle) is in common usage. The same situation may be noticed in the instance of the father's brother's daughter. In the past she would be called *siostra stryjeczna* but now she is referred to simply as cousin.

Some terms like father, older brother or even husband carry with them certain ideas suggesting how they should behave towards others in the society using a specific kinship system. In this case *fathers*, *older brothers* or *husbands* can enjoy certain rights but they also have some duties. In reality they may behave otherwise as it is not the behaviour which classify them as such but the kinship system itself. That is why in some societies a *father* may be regarded as the head of a family and is expected to function as a decision-making body (the common situation several years ago in Poland) or in many Islamic countries a *husband* is seen in a way as the owner of his wife – she cannot do any social activity without his consent nor she can travel alone – but at the same time it is the *husband* who has to provide for her.

In the most extreme examples kinship terms may regulate a right way of addressing other people. In the system found in Rossel Island in Papua New Guinea the elaborate system determines how one's father calls other men (there are nine ways possible) or women (six ways possible) and so the son has to correctly

address those people according to the way his father does. But not only exotic tribes make use of such systems. In Japan honorific system is very elaborate as well. It even extends family relationships as a member of a society is expected to address more important people or their seniors with due respect by using more formal words or adding honorific *-san* or, in very official situations like addressing an emperor, honorific *-sama*. Analogically, referring to juniors or younger people require the usage of different honorifics (like *-chan*). These are just general rules as there are many other possibilities.

Worth highlighting is that in many instances the usage of kinship vocabulary may be extended to naming people outside the family. The Polish word *wujek* (meaning uncle) may be used by children to refer to the close friends of a family or even to the neighbours – in this case the most important factor is familiarity and age. The case in which different relationships may be described by the same words is not so uncommon. In aforementioned Japan in some marked situations young girl may be referred to by a child as “*onee-chan*” (literally meaning older sister) and the word “*obasan*” may mean both aunt or older woman.

Folk Taxonomies

Another instance where the relationship between culture and language is visible is through the use of so called folk taxonomies. In simple words a folk taxonomy is a vernacular naming system. It is not a scientific classification but rather intuitive one, in which people classify some part of reality they deal with in a way it makes sense to them. As folk taxonomies are the result of social knowledge, they are used primarily in everyday speech and they are used locally in all parts of the world mainly to name local plants and animals often vital for the survival of specific society. Naturally, folk taxonomy is not restricted to flora and fauna only as there are many other instances of such classifications – astrology may be considered as such in contrast to scientific classification called astronomy. All in all, analyses of folk taxonomies reveal how speakers use their languages to organise the world around them, sometimes showing a classification which may be surprising or even contrary to generally accepted classifications – the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands treats salt water as different substance than fresh water or in Yup'ik there is rich vocabulary describing seals with the words representing not only different species of seals but also specimen in different times of life or different circumstances such as a seal on the ice.

One of the best-known studies of folk taxonomy was presented by Frake (1961) who described the terms used by the Subanon of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines to explain disease of the skin. To effectively treat a disease they have to properly diagnose the symptoms and categories used to discuss them range in the level of generality. For them diagnosis means finding the appropriate name for a set of symptoms as without it treatment is not possible. The success of the treatment is therefore not dependent on therapeutic value alone but on folk system of classification of diseases.

Colours

We live in a colourful world and there is no society which does not have linguistic means to describe colours. In colour terms the relationship between culture and language may be further presented. The colour spectrum is a continuous entity without any breaks yet all languages divide it further into smaller pieces assigning them names, such as green or red. Surprisingly, not every culture perceive those distinctions between respective colours in the same fashion which often leads to problems with translation of a colour term from one language to another.

It is still unknown whether colour terms are arbitrary or if there is some general pattern. Berlin and Kay tried to answer such a question in analysis of basic colour terms. Basic colour is a single-word term which is not a sub-division of some higher order term, it has general use and is commonly accepted and used by all members of a society. According to their analysis there do exist some patterns and the number of basic colour terms is limited to 11. All other terms are either variations, combinations, or modifications of the basic colours or highly specific shades used by professionals such as designers.

The number of basic colour terms used by a particular society may be further contrasted with its cultural and technical complexity. In this case conclusions may be drawn that little developed communities distinguish the fewest colour terms, communities on intermediate level of development employ several terms, and the most developed societies usually use all eleven terms. There is also a scheme of colour development – languages with only two colour terms make use of equivalents of black and white only, then

red, yellow and green are added. In later stages employment of blue and brown takes place and finally terms like grey, pink, orange and purple are added to vocabulary. Accordingly, a community like the Jale of New Guinea make use only of two colour terms with the words corresponding to dark and light only, and the Burmese have seven, and English 11 basic colours. There are also some exceptions like in Japanese in which kanji 青 (*ao*) symbolises green and blue, or in Russian which have even 12 basic colours as there are two terms in the blue region – *sinij* (dark blue) and *goluboj* (light blue). However, colour awareness may differ even in one society – in western cultures women are thought as more colour sensitive than men.

Whatever the case, the question whether colour systems are biologically determined or socially constructed remains unresolved. However, it is the fact that identifying the parts of the colour spectrum by using specific system may be easier for some speakers than for others. It is also generally difficult for individuals to assign precise borders between neighbouring colours, for instance between blue and green or red and orange, and often it is easier just to indicate a part of a colour spectrum considered as a typical colour, such as a typical blue.

Words Typical for Specific Culture

The most visible examples of relationship between culture and language are the words which are typical only for one culture and hence are difficult to translate. Such words transmit not only the image of the concept they represent but often they also contain specific connotations. It does not mean that translation of such a word or its understanding by people from different cultures is impossible. It just means that to fully comprehend the meaning of the word some studying is required and often translation has to be made by either using more than one word (phrase describing the object) or by introducing the said word to the language it is being translated to – in this case changes in phonology and spelling may be required.

Those untranslatable words highlight the fact that said concept is of great importance for the society. At the same time the lack of the word describing the concept in other language signifies its insignificance for other society. The lack of the word describing the concept, however, does not mean one is incapable of conceiving it. The only real difference is that it is easier for people to name it and to talk about it while at the same time they are more conscious about it. The fact that Bedouin Arabic has many words for different kinds of camels makes it easier for its speakers to talk about the animals than for Polish speakers for whom those animals are not that important and they have just few terms describing them. At the same time it does not mean Poles are unable to conceive the difference between different kinds of camels.

Untranslatable words often describe religion, food or things typical for specific culture. In many cases translation to other languages seems possible yet it often lacks the right connotation or hidden message of a word. The polish name for popular type of restaurant in 20th century is *bar mleczny*, which can be translated into English as a *milk bar*. The literal translation, however, lacks connotations the word has in Polish (cheap self-service cafeteria with all types of dishes for people from every social strata, but mainly for less wealthy) and it only refers to the origin of the word as at the beginning this type of restaurant indeed sold milk dishes – nowadays hardly ever available in its offer. Culture-bound syndromes are also a good example. This type of disorders are typical for particular part of the world or just for one society. For instance a Japanese term *hikikomori* refers to adults who decide to withdraw from society and isolate themselves in their houses. The term *karoshi* means a death from overworking – it is not so uncommon in Japan culture whereas for Spaniards it would be unthinkable to die out of overworking.

Taboo and Euphemism

In most cases words are used to express cultural meaning. Nonetheless there are instances when some things are not being talk about even though there are linguistic means to express them or when speakers deliberately avoid mentioning some matters directly. The first instance is called taboo and the second euphemism and both are examples of conscious word selection as a result of influence of a culture.

Taboo may be summarised as a prohibition or avoidance of behaviour regarded in specific society as harmful to others. The reasons for taboo are of social or religious nature and breaking the taboo can cause feelings like anxiety, embarrassment, or even social contempt. In other words taboo functions as a politeness constraint. In a language taboo is manifested through the avoiding of certain topics and consequently not

saying prohibited words. Some objects considered as taboo may be also referred to only in specific circumstances, by certain people, or by the use of circumlocution.

Tabooed subjects can vary widely and although there are no universal taboos some like cannibalism, incest, or homicide occur in majority of societies. Taboos can include restrictions concerning food one can eat (in India eating beef is prohibited, some sects of Buddhism prohibit eating of any animal flesh), relationships and sexual activities (in Christianity sex outside of marriage or homosexuality are seen as a sin), exposure of body parts (in many Arabic countries women have to hide their hair, in Japan tattooed body parts have to be hidden), and many others. Linguistically taboo is the most visible in swear words although in this instance there has been a considerable change over the recent years in languages such as English and Polish. The foul words are still regarded as rude and unseemly but are certainly more common and less taboo. What is important, taboo violation may have some serious consequences – in many parts of the world blasphemy is still regarded as a crime and incest may cost someone their life.

Since the 20th century in the English-speaking world there has been a visible decline in linguistic taboo. There again it is more connected with the extensive use of euphemistic language than with the changes in perception of taboo topic. The task of euphemistic words and expressions is to neutralise the unpleasantness and to enable discussion on the controversial topics such as death or criminality. The euphemistic language can also change the sound of things regarded as unpleasant and present them as attractive. In other words it is a process of renaming things.

Euphemisms are deeply connected with the concept of verbal hygiene introduced by Deborah Cameron who used it to describe how people respond to “the urge to meddle in matters of language.” On the one hand, the practices of verbal hygiene are aimed to criticise incorrect language forms or to impose standard, on the other hand, they may be used as a mean for political or ideological action. Such changes in linguistic usage are encouraged among others by feminists who deliberately adopt non-sexist usages for words which encode the information about the gender. Following this logic instead of saying policeman a term police officer should be used, or instead of chairman – chairperson.

Such changes are not restricted to gender area of language only. Attempts to change other words in vocabulary are made, often in the name of political correctness. Hence the term crippled when referring to a person with physical disability was changed to disabled, or people with dark skin in the USA are to be referred to as Afro-Americans because the term black person is seen as offensive. Although in many cases such linguistic substitutions are thought as changes for the sake of changing only, they are important for people concerned who often feel discriminated on the basis of their physicality. Unfortunately, this type of changes is frequently abused by people who want to subordinate others to their individual agendas. As a consequence there are attempts to substitute even neutral words like overweight.

Conclusion

As presented above, the claim that language and culture are interrelated is of little doubt. There are still some discrepancies between researchers in terms of the exact relationship between language and culture though. Some like Whorf claim that language determines our world-view, some suggest a contrary idea. Either way the words describing objects of cultural importance are omnipresent in every language system in the world.

The relationship between culture and language is manifested in many linguistic areas and certain parallels are universal in the majority of languages. Therefore terms describing kinship, colours, or taboo subjects are present in every language although their coverage may be different in different languages. Some make use of the abundance of terms describing a family whereas others have rather limited colour vocabulary. The important fact is that the culture-language relationship is subject to change and new linguistic expressions may be introduced in a language when the need for changes arises.

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