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# Language and Culture: Reflections, Experience

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In this paper I would like to touch upon some reflections on language and culture in general, and more specifically, upon a small-scale, exploratory study I have carried out to test experience and personal observation.<sup>1</sup>

Linguistically speaking, one of the most influential theories on the language-culture relationship in the Anglo-Saxon world was proposed by Sapir and Whorf in the 1930s. Their theory, which came to be known as ‘the hypothesis’, has ever since provoked rich and often controversial expressions of views, positions and interpretations. Mould and cloak stances, weak and strong versions of the theory, relativist and universalist positions (Chandler 2003: 58-60), all these demarcations have been used by humanists to draw lines within the questions asked, and to emphasise points they wished to make explicit and relevant. The question whether culture resides within language, or whether language resides within culture, comes down to defining variations and the personal belief, observation or position related to *the extent* to which one holds that language defines culture, and/or that culture defines language.

It is when faced with the reality of the *real life* which lies behind a *certain* culture and a *certain* language that human beings experience on their skin, as it were, the *impact* of one or two or more of the following realities: cultural surprise, cultural shock, cultural expectations, cultural adaptations, cultural assumptions, cultural switches, cultural inclusiveness, cultural exclusiveness, cultural dominance, cultural inferiority, cultural history, cultural background, cultural preservation, cultural expansion, social culture, individual culture, language culture. These realities, as concepts, have been discussed in research and academic circles, yet, essentially, they are real life concepts which can be testified to only by those who have experienced them and know that cultures differ. Assuming or ignoring, *in abstracto*, that they do not, is a misconception, often coming from a lack of real life contact with another cultural system. We have the ability to bring this impact to *consciousness*, yet it is a rare quality presumably not exercised by many, for understanding *why* cultures and their languages bear that special mark of singularity and uniqueness may be as joyful as painful, no matter how much we may wish to remain

in the sacred ground of detached objectivity.

Without going into the full implications of the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis, I would like to quote part of the now classic passage from Sapir (1985: 160) in which he clearly and simply says the following:

The fact of the matter is that the ‘*real world*’ is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are *ever sufficiently similar* to be considered as representing *the same social reality*. The worlds in which *different societies* live are *distinct worlds*, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation [my italics].

We come to appreciate these observations, I think, when we find ourselves in real life situations which either fully bring the reality of these observations upon us, or at least challenge us to reflect on the underlying assumptions of a new culture and its language.

## 1. Recent research

Without referring to Sapir, a group of linguists, Márquez Reiter, Rainey and Fulcher (2005), have recently published further evidence about cultural implications of the ways human beings use language forms and behave. They have taken the case of British English and Peninsular Spanish, which has proven a good case to work upon, as the two cultures are indeed different, as anyone who has visited Spain and Britain may easily testify to. By focusing on a particular language element – that of indirect requests, or conventional indirectness – and the way it is used by native speakers, the authors show how Spanish and English people differently *perceive* and *use* compliance and indirect requests *because* they, the Spanish and the English, have “different social values” which provide “different social meanings” and “different cultural expectations” (Márquez Reiter *et al* 2005: 23). One may notice that the central issue here is concerned with the values the two cultures perceive to be desirable; the desired values turn out to be different, which in itself is sufficient cause for language forms and human behaviour to be adjusted accordingly by the native speakers of the two cultures. The authors’ study shows, and at the same time seems to confirm the studies done by Brown

and Levinson (1978, 1987), that Spanish desirable social values, such as *companionismo* and *simpatía*, are closely related to the ways in which the Spanish use positive politeness in order to show *simpatía*, while the British values expressed in the need for privacy and independence are closely related to the ways in which they tend to use negative politeness.

There is an issue of honesty which, I think, should be mentioned here. Because if we are honest, we will admit that as human beings we will, sooner rather than later, tend to show implicit or explicit preference for certain values, and therefore implicitly or explicitly tend to show preference for certain forms of language behaviour. By definition, this means that we will tend to decline certain values and forms of language behaviour. We know that psychologists and sociologists confirm that members of a culture typically tend to assign judgements to values, at least unconsciously. Consciously, though, we may tend to hold a view, even a strong view – and try to act upon it to the best of our abilities and intentions – that an unbiased or an objective approach towards cultures and languages is the one to be followed. If, for example, an individual experiences, and knows, that *simpatía* is a Hispanic cultural script (Márquez Reiter *et al* 2005: 29-31) and, more importantly, *identifies* himself with and *enjoys* being part of that script, the *real life question* is to what extent that individual is prepared to adjust to a culture which may prove to rely on counter-*simpatía* rules.

I would assume that my experience of teaching in different cultures is by no means unique in that it has enabled me to look deeper into the cultural realities hiding such *real life* questions. More specifically, I would like to take the case of teaching Business English, which is becoming increasingly popular. As is well-known, teaching this type of English requires a more or less active process of teaching certain language and cultural patterns connected with concepts such as socialising, negotiating and communicating so as to be able to carry out teamwork, brainstorming, creative thinking, and so on – in a word, well known and familiar concepts in Anglo-Saxon and Western Business English culture. You equip yourself with a reasonable supply of good and modern teaching materials, and aim to seek appropriate interaction with your students, and a certain degree of active involvement on their part. I have said ‘a certain degree’ of involvement, but I realise that this is less than the truly motivated involvement any serious educator<sup>2</sup> would like to see from her students. The real life questions come into play when the learners’ active involvement, for some reason, is hardly present.

## 2. Our study

Having observed that her learners show a conspicuously high level of reluctance to take part in speaking activities, and that they tend to indulge in longer periods of silence, the teacher pauses to think about the possible causes of the situation. The teacher notices that her students typically do one or more of the following: they a) are strongly hesitant to talk and express their opinions, b) do not enter easily into discussions and groupwork, c) show obvious signs of shyness, reluctance or fear about giving presentations, d) try hard to avoid their peers’ eyes and faces when discussing a topic, and e) try to avoid relating or discussing any personal experience whatsoever. The teacher wonders if these perhaps are symptoms of a deeper cause, and decides to look first at the appropriateness of her own methods, following the time-honoured rule that we should first put our own house in order. Hence the teacher decides to use a number of other practice activities and other pragmatic teaching techniques. However, the result seems to remain more or less the same, as the expected involvement from her students fails to occur. The students have done what they were asked to do, but the teacher observed, as well as felt, that this was done because it was somehow required of them during the learning process, and she had to admit that active, free involvement on the students’ part was lacking.

At this point, we may wonder whether the students’ proficiency level was perhaps an obstacle to more active and open communication. The initial placement test had shown that the majority of the students were strong intermediate learners, and that a few of them were upper-intermediate or advanced. Consequently, although the teacher was aware that the students’ language and grammar needed further development, it was obvious that the form and grammar of English should not act, at least in theory, as a major obstacle to communication.

Yet it turned out that ‘theory’ had been challenged by real life, or, more precisely, by culture. Despite many years of intensive cultural contact with the country and its people, the teacher had been forced to realise that her students’ cultural assumptions, habits, and expectations were distinct to such an extent that it took some time for them to adjust to the rules and cultural concepts underlying the English Business course. It was felt they were struggling with questions such as: How should I behave? How should I communicate? Shall I try and do this new thing? Why is this new thing important? Is it important at all? How come that I feel uneasy talking to my peers?

It was also observed that it was no problem for students to intellectually grasp and see the benefits of cultural concepts such as free thinking, free discussion, teamwork, networking, brainstorming, negotiating, and so on, yet it turned out that what *was* difficult for them was to actually accept the concepts, integrate them into their cultural system and behaviour, and use them during practice. At this point, one should be extremely careful, I think, not to insist too much, or even to insist at all, because it remains true that the freedom to develop mind and thought in every single individual has 'its inviolable rights' (Jung 1991: 34).

As it had been observed that it was difficult for the students to 'express themselves openly and without secrecy' (Jung 1991: 33), and that they would rather remain silent, I decided to test my observations by asking the students to take their time and write down how they saw their own culture, including business culture. I was also interested to know whether they thought that creative or lateral thinking, a concept developed by Edward de Bono in the 1970s, was encouraged in their culture. Forty-nine Slovene university students replied to the first question, and thirty to the second one. In considering these questions, many students gave careful thought to expressing their personal views, and their writing skills proved to be of considerable proficiency. It was obvious that for the students it was much easier to express themselves in writing; in contrast, talking, discussion or any kind of oral communication was seen as an exposure of oneself to others, a situation which was, in my observation, perceived by many students as embarrassing or one which might potentially put them in a vulnerable position.

## 2.1 Analysis and results

I have analysed the students' response qualitatively and will describe and illustrate the dominant lines of thought and views found in the response.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of students have made a connection between the general nature of the culture in which they live and the more specific business culture which comes from it. Some students identified the nature of Slovene culture in general with what they called their national character, and this they described as having the following characteristics: reserved, serious, cautious, traditional, conservative, closed, hard-working and modest. One student said that they are a "speechless, closed people who never talk about their private life", another observed that typical communication tends to be "distanced, formal and with good manners", while a third said

"we are realistic, calm, stating only what is necessary."

The majority of students made the strong point that in their culture people tend to avoid confrontation. The students perceive their business culture as a direct result of their wider culture and what they perceive to be their national character. It is therefore perceived that their business culture follows the assumed and accepted behaviour underlying the wider culture, and is described as having the following characteristics: it is serious and formal, with a tendency to avoid confrontation (one student observed "at all cost"); disagreement is rarely expressed or sometimes indirectly; there is normally no humour at meetings; a strict agenda is typically followed at meetings; it is an individualistic culture where team spirit is rarely shared; getting results is of primary concern, and people are perceived to be of less importance than results. A number of students observed that it is difficult for them to trust others, and one student explicitly said "we hardly trust people and when we have a business meeting we are very formal."

Another line of thought which drew my attention in the data is that the majority of students tried hard to understand *why* their national character had developed into its current perceived reality. They find that the main reason lies in the history of their country and culture. Therefore the students typically offer a *historical explanation* for the ways things are now in their wider culture, related business culture, and national identity. They think that their country, now one of the most successful new EU economies, has suffered a lot in the past, and that this suffering in wars and under other countries has left scars and wounds.<sup>4</sup> Distrust of others, and fear of being used, are all rooted in history, according to the students.

In terms of similarities and differences between business cultures and cultures in general, the majority of students expressed the view that the Slovene business culture is similar to the German one. They think that the reason for this lies in the perceived quality of German business which the Slovenes tried to follow in the past. They also find that the two business cultures share some common characteristics: both cultures cherish results, are individualistic, conservative, cautious and quality-oriented. Business cultures, and cultures in general, which are perceived as being different from Slovene business culture are Spanish and Italian culture, "where it is more relaxed, and people are put in first place", as one student wrote. In relation to these

two cultures, many students mentioned the Spanish and Italian languages and body language, which the students find completely different from their own. They mention, for example, that “Italians maintain direct eye contact while talking, which is a sign that you are sincere and honest”, and add, “eye contact while talking is not very typical of Slovenes, so conversations are less personal.” “Italians are more open, they hug each other, shake hands and kiss not just women but also men”, one student wrote.

As for the question whether they perceive creative or lateral thinking to be encouraged in their native culture, the students replied negatively. There are a number of reasons for the perceived lack of clear signs of encouragement to apply this type of thinking. One is the local education system which, above all, according to students, encourages efficiency and logical, rational thinking. The system focuses on what is perceived as a kind of rigid attitude to life.<sup>5</sup> Another reason lies in the perceived national character, characterised by traditionalism and conservatism (we are “not open to progressive ideas,” “we resist change,” “we resist any new idea”) and general distrust of others (“we do not trust each other.”) Closely linked to this is the fear that one may make a mistake or fail to do something well and in accordance with expectations. People and employees have a fear of taking risks and also fear that they may not be accepted in the culture if they depart from the expected norm of behaviour. One student wrote: “Some of us may already be using this kind of approach, but not openly. And still if you speak up, and say something that may sound illogical you are laughed out.”

Students see the major strength of their national character and native culture in their appreciation of and love for their beautiful land, their hard-working style of life, modesty and ambition to succeed.

A number of students summarised their thinking by recognising that what they (as a culture) need is to see their history and past from a learning perspective: they expressed a need for change, particularly in the education system and the way things are taught. Others observed that their professional and business lives are burdened by historical determinism, and that there is a need for change here, as well.

[...] We will have to become more open, and more democracy will have to be initiated in the company (...) we have to learn from the history and do a lot of motivation and let our staff express themselves. We

have to listen to them, to their proposals and their needs.

[...] if people will look at each other [i.e. take care of each other, my comment] and not at the money, then we will have a future.

One student mentioned the concept of ‘life vision’, which governs the direction in which a culture develops: “The major difference that is keeping us away from other cultures is a different viewpoint on how to succeed. It is like we have a tool in our hands, but we can’t use it to build a building called ‘life I am dreaming about.’”

### 3. Concluding thoughts

This small-scale study provided me with insights which I think have not only explained but also confirmed to a certain degree the observed language use and behaviour during the English Business sessions. The language behaviour, characterised by a reserved and silent attitude and a reluctance, shyness or fear to take part in groupwork and speaking activities in particular, seems to be rooted in the dominant cultural assumptions of the native speakers about how individuals should behave so as to be accepted and safe within their culture. The desired values in the native Slovene culture seem to have deeper, underlying causes in the way the history of the country has developed. All the students offered a *historical explanation* of their culture, including their business culture, and the consequent language behaviour. It seems that members of the Slovene culture tend to be reminded of their collective historical background, of the historical self of the nation, which is often identified with the suffering self. Reserved attitude, independence, distrust of others and reluctance to openly share team spirit are confirmed by the students as being more or less the direct result of a perceived historical cause.

Concerning first and second/foreign language use and behaviour, we may interpret that Slovenes would tend to show negative politeness so as to preserve the territorial need for privacy and independence as described in Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Márquez Reiter *at al* (2005) and would, consequently, be removed from the cultural script of *simpatía* as described in Márquez Reiter *at al* (2005). A helpful further research step would be to compare the observed language behaviour and the studied perceptions with relevant and related psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and sociological studies.

## NOTES

1. This paper is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the 15th ESP Symposim, University of Bergamo, Italy, 29 August-2 September 2005.
2. C.G. Jung (1991: 63-133) uses the term 'educator' for 'teacher' in his lectures delivered at the International Congress of Education in London in 1924.
3. In quotations, I report the students' views as they have written them, that is, in their own interlanguage grammar and style.
4. It is common for Slovenes to refer to themselves, particularly when speaking of their past, as *trpeèi slovenski narod*, the suffering Slovene people.
5. The students' testimonies strikingly remind one of what de Bono (1990: 35-38) is actually saying, namely, that the main purpose of creative thinking is to overcome and escape from rigid, clichéd patterns; as such, lateral thinking often gives rise to humour and insight.

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