

# Rethinking of the relationship between Language and Culture

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## **Abstract**

*The relationship between language and culture has been focused all the time. Many scholars have devoted themselves to the study of language and culture with different perspectives. The view this paper holds is that they are inseparably interrelated and the relationship between them is mutual effect.*

**Key words:** language; culture; relationship

The relationship between language and culture has been a popular topic in academic fields. Although there is no consensus about it, most scholars come up with the view that language is a part of culture and they are interrelated and inseparable. They are more and more interested and devote themselves to this subject including the philologists, the linguists and the scientists. That is to say, the relationship is a multidisciplinary question, and there is no way to figure it out in a simple way. This thesis is going to rethink of the relationship between language and culture on the basis of preceding scholars, hoping to give some help to the research, giving a more particular knowledge of the relationship.

## **1. Introduction**

Wilhelm von Humboldt, a philologist and a linguist, he was the first one to make the creative exposition about culturology and linguistics from the angle of systematic pure linguistics, and he was the pioneer that studied relatively earlier on the relationship between language and culture and made a remarkable achievement. The view he held is that every language consisted of a peculiar view on the world. In his opinion, language decide thought. Under the influence of Humboldt, American human linguist Franz Boas came up with the different point that language can express thought, but it can not decide thought. Then his student, Edward Sapir further asserted that language had an impact on the cognition about the world. Sapir's view was made a further supplementary by his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, and it began to form the theory of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which can also be called Linguistic Relativity. This theory guide people to pay attention to the diversity and the national character of language, culture and thought in an objective way, and help us to rethink the relationship between language and culture.

## 2. View culture from the language angle

Sapir pointed in his book *Language* that there is something behind language, and language can not exist without culture. It's one-sided that view culture in isolation, let alone understanding the connotation of culture and respecting or inheriting it. So when we want to do the research on culture, language is a necessary angle. From the angle of language, the relationship between language and culture can be analyzed in the following aspects.

### 2.1 Culture's influence on vocabulary

Vocabulary is the fundamental element of a language, and it's a language symbol possessing complicated factor. If people want to use language to express objective world and abstract thinking, they have to choose proper vocabulary. So vocabulary is a important joint between language and culture. Vocabulary has double meanings, denotation and connotation, and connotation depends on the cultural context to define its meaning especially in the process of translation.

Every country has own geographical conditions, cultural backgrounds, mind habit and so on ,so naturally vocabulary is printed the stamp of culture. It's hard to make the occurrence of some specific words only by the surface of vocabulary. For example, most words involving "dog" express an attitude of attempt in Chinese, However, in English it expresses pity or praise. "West wind" symbolizes cold, grimness, hopeless in our country, because it usually appears in the chilly winter. But in western, when west wind arrives, it's exactly the season that everything rouses up from sleeping and breeds hopes, thus it is connected with hope and power. If we ignore the backgrounds of speakers, a lot of misunderstanding situation would happen.

### 2.2 Culture's influence on pronunciation

Culture's influence on pronunciation is also prominent. If you discover that there are some similar parts in pronunciation between different language, the two countries must have connection on cultural origin. Take Hong Kong for example, English is more popular than mainland, and most of them can speak English fluently. Every Hong Kong person has a English name by and large and they usually call English name no matter in work or in life. Even when they communicate in Cantonese, there are some English words mixing in unconsciously. The reason why this happened is tied to the colonial rule of the United Kingdom since 1840's. Affected by the rule of UK, they absorbed the culture including language, and their English language ability improved continually. Thus even the period of rule colonial had been already over, the influence is still in their heart and they have to inherit all along from generation to generation. As another example, China, Korea and Japan, they all belong the East Asian cultural circle. There are a number of Chinese words in Korean and Japanese under the influence of Chinese culture. They use our pronunciation directly, or make some changes on meaning such as changing its original meaning and making some additions and deletions. So sometimes when we hear the approximate pronunciation in other languages, the meaning maybe is not like what we think.

### 2.3 Culture's influence on pragmatic rule

Compared with vocabulary and pronunciation, mastering pragmatic is harder. People use it unconsciously in most instances unlike language rule. Pragmatic rule includes the way we call others, the way we accept or refuse and the way we bid farewell to, etc. when we talk about date, we are used to putting year before month and day after month, while it's totally contrary in English. This is how the thinking culture act on the language. And in the shop, the way salesclerk and client talk also can find the distinction among each country. In Singapore, when clients walk up to counter, salesclerks would say a "Yes?" with a high tone, which means a inquiry to clients that what do they want to buy. However, in other countries like America and Australia, this behavior is extremely impolite, and they usually say "May I help you?" or "What can I do for you?" to greet clients. Thus, in cross-cultural communication, knowing the pragmatic rules would help you to communicate more rational.

### 3. View language from the culture angle

In the discussion of Franz Boas about language and culture, he pointed that if don't research and analysis the national language, it's impossible to understand the national culture better, which is because the national culture and life style could appear through language. Language is a mirror, reflecting national culture and revealing the content of culture. People could know the peculiarity of the national culture through the national language. Like Luo Changpei wrote in his book *Language And Culture*, we can find the relic of culture through derivation and changes, see the standard of national culture through the mentality of the word creation, find the culture contact from borrowed word, etc. So language is the fundamental element of the culture, and it develops with the development of the culture. Putting language in the culture angle, language is more than the tool of communication, and it is a typical symbol about country and culture.

### 4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, as a tool for communication, language doesn't exist in isolation. Language and culture is an integral whole, and they have the bilateral interaction. On the one hand, language is a special part of culture, the carrier of culture, and there would be no culture without language. On the other hand, language is deeply affected by culture, so understanding a language can't ignore the culture it reflects. Although Linguistic Relativity had the enlightening significance to the study of the relation between language and culture, it had the deficiency that put language and culture as two part to research, so there remains some questions deserving to be observed and studied further.

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