

Chapter 8

The Language and Culture Debate



Abstract This chapter explores approaches to understanding the relationship between language and culture. Although language and culture are commonly understood to be related, they are traditionally seen as different domains of knowledge. Common conceptualizations of culture are introduced, with an emphasis on recent work in the area of culture and cognition. A definition of culture as it is used in this work is given. This chapter then discusses different approaches to viewing the relationship between language and culture, including the idea of linguistic relativism. Debates about linguistic relativism are said to often be far removed from the practical concerns of language teachers. The notion of linguaculture—the idea that language is culture bound—is also introduced. This chapter then explores the idea that shared meaning is central to both language and culture. This chapter lays the groundwork for the following chapter, which proposes that neurolinguistics and embodied simulation theory provide new insight into the interconnection between language and culture.

8.1 Culture for Language Teachers

For language teachers, an understanding of the language–culture connection is typically grounded in our own experiences and interests. If we became fascinated by German after visiting Vienna, we will want to share that experience when we teach German. We also look at the language–culture connection through the filter of our teaching situation. If we prepare students for a stay abroad, we will want to help them survive and thrive in that foreign land. Sometimes, learners are highly interested in foreign customs, people, and places. Sometimes, they are studying a foreign language as a required subject and have little interest in cultural exploration. For teachers of a language used as a *lingua franca*—such as international English—language can seem quite separate from culture. Or we may be teaching the local language to immigrants who are struggling to make sense of their new cultural home. How we think about the language–culture connection depends on our experience and situation.

While this may meet our immediate pedagogical needs, it's also worth taking a step back and reflecting more deeply on the language–culture connection. Language

and culture are central to what it means to be human; both operate at deep levels of mind and self; they mediate our relationship with people and society; they touch upon and reflect our identity. All of this, however, often escapes conscious attention. We take language and culture for granted; we understand it but cannot explain it. We effortlessly use our L1, for example, yet can't describe its structures. We may find ourselves falling back on our intuitive knowledge, explaining "Well, that's just the way we say it." Similarly, we don't notice our own cultural programming until we find ourselves a fish out of water abroad, surprised by the many cultural differences we notice, unable to read intentions, inadvertently causing offense, or simply being at a loss as to how to act. The importance of reflecting on language and culture lie in this contradiction—it's so central to the human experience that we scarcely notice it. Language and culture are intertwined threads that are woven into the very fabric of perception, communication, and community.

Unfortunately, language and culture do not lend themselves easily to conceptual analysis. Even considered separately, language and culture are enormously complex phenomena and resist rigid classifications or simple cause-and-effect reasoning. It's easy to get lost in detail—a linguist may write a doctoral dissertation on the usage of "the" and "a", and an anthropologist may spend a year studying the culture of a hockey team. Yet, pulling back and viewing language and culture from higher levels of abstraction also has its pitfalls. Such complex phenomena can be looked at from any number of perspectives, each with their own merits—there's no single, all-encompassing point of view that will lead us to some ultimate, objective truth about language and culture.

Despite these challenges, exploring these issues increases our understanding of the everyday experience of language and culture, which, in turn, informs everything we do as educators. It is with this in mind that this chapter provides some basic building blocks for a more clearly articulated understanding of the language–culture connection. It starts with a brief overview of the complex usage of the word *culture*, including a look at emerging insights from cultural neuroscience. We'll look at ways in which the language–culture connection has been conceptualized, including debates about linguistic relativity. We'll also explore the idea that culture is an embodied system of shared meaning that is represented through language. We'll look at how the word *linguaculture* has been used to emphasize this sense of language and culture as two sides of the same coin. We will touch upon complexity theory as a way to describe the complex and fluid nature of linguaculture. This chapter acts as a review of current thinking, while the next chapter explores language and culture from the neurocognitive and psychological perspective.

8.2 The Language and Culture Dichotomy

Analyzing the language–culture relationship can easily become a forced-choice exercise. If we think of language as one discrete phenomena and culture as another, we are forced to choose between competing starting points for analysis. A linguistic

perspective, for example, puts culture in the background and looks carefully at the systematic properties of language. An anthropological perspective, on the other hand, promotes culture to the foreground while demoting language to something that carries or reflects culture. The tendency to get caught in this dichotomy is so strong that there is little scholarship that focuses explicitly on the *connection* between language and culture. This has led to what Sharifian (2015b) has called the “immature development of a unified sub-discipline for the study of language and culture” (p. 3). Scholarship tends to be fragmented, and includes the complementary disciplines of linguistic anthropology and cultural linguistics. Both look at the relationship between language, meaning, and social life (Chen et al. 2009; Duranti 2001; Sharifian 2015a), with ethnolinguistics looking particularly at the language and perception of different ethnic groups (Goddard and Ye 2015; Gladkova 2015; Leavitt 2015a). Language and culture is also studied in relation to specific topics, such as gender (Tanaka 2015), translation (Armstrong 2015), intercultural communication (Hua 2011; Sharifian and Jamarani 2014; Wolf 2015), globalization (Angouri and Miglbauer 2014; Kirkpatrick 2015; Risager 2006), second language learning (Kramsch 2015), and language and culture pedagogy (Byram et al. 2002; Byram 1987, 2008; Corbett 2003; Diaz 2012, 2013; Kramsch 1993).

This fragmented literature highlights the need to find a starting point for examining the language and culture connection. This work focuses narrowly on the relationship between language and culture from the point of view of language learners, as well as from a neurocognitive perspective. It does not focus on broader issues of educational policy, sociopolitical issues, multiculturalism, or the complexities of cultural identity. It seeks to make sense of the competing ways that we use basic terms. With this in mind, we will look at how culture is typically conceptualized, and how linguistic meaning reflects the shared experience and perceptions within cultural communities. To start, we will look a bit more closely at a word we use every day, yet may struggle to define clearly—culture.

8.3 The Contentious Concept of Culture

The word *culture* is a contentious one, with whole books having been dedicated to dissecting it (Eagleton 2000; Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). At the core of many definitions of culture are two critical elements: (1) culture is learned (it’s not an inborn trait nor genetically determined) and (2) culture is shared among members of a community. Such a view goes back at least to the late nineteenth century and the work of Edward Tylor (1871), a foundational figure of the field of anthropology. At the time, this articulation of culture was a highly progressive notion. It acted as an important counterweight to then common ideas of biological determinism. Anthropological pioneers such as Boas (1928), Mead (1961, 1995), and Benedict (1934, 1943) argued that culture shapes behavior in many ways, and that human nature was much more flexible than previously thought. At the time, there was great

interest in the exotic customs of faraway peoples, and a belief that studying culture could teach us fundamental lessons about human potential.

These days, the term culture is used in ways that are descendants of this primal definition. It is sometimes conceived of as collective esthetic or creative accomplishments—often in the form of art, food, architecture, clothing, ceremonies, and so on. This is sometimes referred to as *big “C” culture*, *visible*, or *explicit culture* (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998) with an etymological association of cultivation of the individual. The term *explicit culture* refers more broadly to the concrete products that can be seen, heard, or read about—including everyday objects, ceremonies, and so on. Explicit culture often involves *reification*—when a concrete object or behavior represents an immaterial quality. Thus, a white wedding dress may represent purity; a statue may have religious significance; a suit and tie may represent business, and so on. Properly speaking, explicit culture does not refer to culture itself, but rather to the *products* of culture that have shared significance for a community.

Culture is also found in the behaviors of everyday life. Travelers speak of “experiencing the local culture” when they sit in a café or visit someone in their home. This *small “c” culture* or *implicit culture* typically refers to the norms, values and hidden assumptions that underlie the explicit behaviors of a cultural community. Cultural norms—such as greeting store clerks in France by saying *bonjour monsieur*—are expectations about how things should be done. Such norms, in turn, reflect deeper cultural values—for example, the importance of *politesse* (politeness) in French society more broadly, and its roots in its role in creating egalitarian interaction. These values are in turn underpinned by taken-for-granted assumptions about human relations, such as the idea that politeness functions to reinforce social solidarity, because it provides a respectful way to recognize the inherent worth of every individual. Such ideas are only sometimes articulated, and may be largely unconscious. They are powerful nonetheless, however, precisely because they are so foundational.

The values and assumptions of implicit culture can be found in any cultural community, large or small. When we refer to the *company culture at Google* or a *culture of impunity* that develops among elites, we are also referring to this largely implicit side of culture. This usage emphasizes the role that culture plays in framing interaction and shaping behavior. It implies a set of community standards that guide expectations about what is normal in a given situation, what behavior is considered polite or rude, and what shared values are considered important. The notion of implicit culture doesn’t imply that people all act the same—rather, there are shared standards by which to interpret behavior and to choose how to act. We express our individuality in the context of culture. In any given community, some people will break convention or be contrarian. They do so, however, knowing how their behavior will be interpreted. Thus, implicit culture doesn’t so much control us as it provides an intuitive sense of what people will think of a given action. That is to say, culture relates not so much to whether people act in the same way, but in the fact that they have shared understandings of what things mean (Bennett 2013).

The word culture is also used to refer to the communities that we feel a part of and identify with. This usage can be heard in statements such as “I’m proud of my

culture” or when we apply cultural labels, as in “I’m a Navajo”, or when someone proclaims “I’m not Spanish, I’m Basque.” Such usage is highly fluid, because everyone participates in any number of communities. Indeed, the idea of culture as something that binds groups together into discrete, separate communities can seem anachronistic. In traditional societies, cultural groups lived more separate lives with relatively clear social boundaries. In our globalized world, this sense of clearly and unquestioningly belonging to a particular cultural group is being superseded by a more fluid, overlapping of non-geographic communities (Agar 2002; Lash 2010; Risager 2006; Shaules 2007a; Sparrow 2000). Such identity spaces need not correspond with geography—gamers, for example, may share a cultural space that is entirely virtual. Globalization has sparked a lot of interest in culture as a form of negotiated identity (Adler 1977; Burke and Stets 2009; Friedman 1994; Sparrow 2000).

For educators, there’s an important distinction between (1) culture as shared norms, values and assumptions and (2) culture as a form of identifying, labeling and belonging. The former represents the “rules of the game” in a particular community—expectations about how to act rooted in cultural worldviews. Learning how things work in a new language and in foreign settings is a core challenge for language learners. It is closely tied to using language appropriately in context, and understanding the perspective of the speakers of the target language. The latter understanding of culture—as a form of identification—is also important, but is related more to how we label ourselves and others. Learners need to avoid overly simplistic labels—e.g., “the Russians”—and understand that there is wide individual variation within cultural communities. They also may have to deal with being labeled, perhaps stereotypically, as representatives of their own country or cultural community. Ultimately, culture in the context of language learning relates to learning the “rules of the game” linguistically and culturally, and also to learn to navigate the cultural labels that we use to describe ourselves and others.

8.4 Culture and Cognition

Increasingly, culture is being studied from the perspective of neuroscience, cognition and the brain (Chiao and Ambady 2007; Chiao 2009; Dominguez et al. 2009; Han and Northoff 2008; Han et al. 2011; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Nisbett 2003; Shaules 2014; Warnick and Landis 2015). Having at least a passing familiarity with advances in this area is, arguably, important background knowledge for all language teachers. Important works include: Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) exploration of cultural difference in cognition and identity; Nisbett’s (2003) research into how culture shapes cognitive processes; and an expanding body of research on how social and cultural environment shape brain structures and cognitive function (Chiao and Ambady 2007; Chiao 2009). Technology that allows for mapping of cognitive activity has given rise to new ways to study cultural difference, and is showing that culture shapes cognitive processes in powerful, yet diffuse ways (Han and Northoff 2008). It has also highlighted the highly embodied nature of culture—that is to say, that social

and cultural factors shape brain structures, cognition, emotion, and identity, in ways that touch us at deep levels of the self (Shapiro 2014; Varela et al. 1995).

The picture that is emerging from this body of work is of cultural variation as a universal element of mental function. Mind is cultural by nature—shaped in fundamental ways by social and cultural patterns. Kitayama and Cohen (2007), for example, remark that “culture cannot be understood without a deep understanding of the minds of people who make it up and, likewise, the mind cannot be understood without reference to the sociocultural environment to which it is adapted and attuned” (p. XIII). The ability to speak our L1 is a good example of this nature + nurture view—our brain is sensitized to the linguistic input that surrounds us as we grow up, and acquiring our L1 is an integral part of the brain’s natural developmental processes. Once acquired, however, our L1 is a built-in part of our cognitive and communicative operating system—it is as natural to us as walking and eating. In a similar way, our sociocultural environment shapes our cognition, emotion, and identity in fundamental ways. Humans are, so to speak, both linguistic and cultural to the core.

A thorough review of this body of work is beyond the scope of this chapter, but there are insights worth considering. First of all, neuroscientists don’t argue extensively about definitions of culture. Culture is conceptualized quite broadly as sociocultural patterns in the environment that are shapers of, or are reflected in, neurocognitive structures and processes (Kim and Sasaki 2014; Kitayama 2013). That is to say, culture is conceptualized fundamentally as *patterns*. Those patterns are assumed to be dynamic and complex, as is seen in the dynamic complexity of cultural communities, as well as the dynamic complexity of cognitive structures found within a given individual. This means that culture is both *embodied*—it can be found within the individual—and *embedded* in the world at large. It is not a fixed or static quality, nor is there a contradiction between variation at the individual level and commonality at the group level. That is to say, sharing in a cultural community doesn’t mean that everyone acts the same way. Or, to use a linguistic metaphor, each person uses language in a unique way, even as they follow broader patterns of language usage. Language and culture allow us both to share with others and express our unique qualities.

Another key insight of cognitive and cultural neuroscience is that cultural influences take place largely out of conscious awareness. Researchers are starting to identify cultural patterns that influence us deeply, even though we are not consciously aware of it. Culture has been shown to influence fundamental elements of self, including identity formation, emotion regulation, and cognitive processing (Han and Northoff 2008; Kurata et al. 2013; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Zhu et al. 2007). In addition, we are increasingly understanding that biases are built into the cognitive architecture of our minds—they are features, not bugs (Amodio 2009; Amodio and Mendoza 2010; Choi and Nisbett 1998; Dreu et al. 2011). This implies that going beyond ethnocentrism or prejudice is not easy, and requires more than a philosophical commitment to diversity or curiosity about cultural difference. This focus on culture and unconscious cognition is just now beginning to be applied to intercultural education (Shaules 2007b, 2010, 2014).

Another area of insight relates to the study of cultural difference. Traditionally, cultural difference has been studied by asking people directly—through questionnaires or interviews—about issues related to culture. Anthropologists, for example, have relied heavily on ethnography, while cross-cultural researchers often rely on statistical methods developed in the social sciences. The latter can be found, for example, in the cross-cultural research of Hofstede (1980, 1983) (Hofstede et al. 2010), or the database compiled by sociologists working on the World Values Survey (WVS 2014). A better understanding of culture and cognition, however, is introducing new research methodology into cross-cultural studies, including brain imaging (Han and Northoff 2008), implicit association testing (Amodio and Mendoza 2010; Danziger and Ward 2010), and social psychology methodology (Iyengar 2010; Nisbett and Cohen 1996; Nisbett 2003). Such work doesn't negate earlier research, but it helps us better understand the complexity of the issues involved. It can also help us dig deeper into the labels and categories that we use to talk about cultural difference, such as *individualism* and *collectivism* (Chiao and Blizinsky 2010; Oyserman et al. 2002). It helps us appreciate the complexity of culture as a phenomenon—something that cannot easily be reduced to simple categories or essential qualities.

8.5 Culture Defined for the DMLL

In the DMLL, the word culture refers broadly to *patterns of shared understandings that emerge from interaction within a community, and which provide interpretive frameworks for social interaction*. This conceptualization is constructivist and dynamic (Bennett 2013). It emphasizes culture as a medium through which people find shared purpose, negotiate outcomes, interact, and express themselves as individuals. In this view, individuality is expressed in the context of shared social expectations. Cultural communities exist at many scales of analysis, from groups of friends, to families, to ethnic groups, to national, or supranational entities. Communities are bounded in some way—there is a distinction between insiders and outsiders—although those boundaries can be complex, diffuse and overlapping. Culture is not seen as having essential qualities. Rather, like a living language, culture is a set of dynamic patterns that both emerge from and shape interaction. Just as no individual can embody the totality of a language, no individual can represent the totality of a cultural community.

Seeing culture as both emerging from and shaping interaction allows for a dynamic understanding of cultural learning. In the context of foreign language education, cultural learning involves learning from foreign experiences and coming to grips with the (largely implicit) cultural patterns encountered during the process of learning a new language. This involves making sense of the new language, and the contexts and communities in which that language is used. We use a foreign language in foreign situations, with people who have backgrounds that are foreign to us, and as part of a larger process of entering into new cultural worlds. And while other forms of cultural learning—negotiating cultural identity, avoiding stereotypes, learning facts

and figures about foreign places—are also important, within this work they are seen as complementing the adaptive process described by the model presented in this work.

8.6 Linguistic Relativism

Research into the connection between language and culture can seem far removed from the everyday concerns of educators. For example, the most influential framework for discussing culture as it relates to language has been the notion of *linguistic relativism*. This term is associated with the work of linguists Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (Carroll 1956). Just what is meant by this term, however, has been the subject of ongoing debate for the better part of a century (Kay and Kempton 1984). Inquiries focus on the relationship between language, thought, and culture. At issue is how the language we speak may affect the way we perceive the world. The *Sapir-Whorf* hypothesis is typically described as having a “strong” version—linguistic determinism, the supposition that thought is limited by or determined by the language that one speaks—and the “weak” version which says that language shapes thought in a more limited way. The points of contention are not always clear, but reflecting on them can help us think through basic questions about language, thought, perception, and culture.

Research in this area has produced a contentious exchange of claims and counter-claims, some arguing for a causal relationship between speaking a particular language and some cognitive or perceptual task. Research has focused on tasks such as classifying colors, categorizing objects, and making hypothetical interpretations, and has produced mixed results (Bloom 1981; Carroll and Casagrande 1958; Davies et al. 1998; Kay and Kempton 1984; Motluk 2002). The debate about linguistic relativism has tended to produce a binary for-or-against narrative about whether language does or does not influence people’s thinking or perception. In the “against” camp are those who argue that thought exists independently from language. Cognitive linguist Steven Pinker, for example, declares that people “think in the language of thought” (Pinker 1995, p. 81), which he refers to as a universal *mentalese*. Other authors, however, argue that language acts as a sort of perceptual prism (Deutscher 2010) and see language as contributing to the development of abstract thought (Bickerton 2009).

Specialists are still arguing about linguistic relativism (Au 1983; Bloom 1981; Brown 2015; Chiu et al. 2010; Dedrick 2015; Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Leavitt 2015b). Kramsch (2014) argues that the virulence of such debates is understandable, given that Whorf and others were deliberately going against the grain of positivism and universalistic thinking. Leavitt (2015b) argues that this stark for-or-against dichotomy is a result of a misinterpretation (or misrepresentation) of Sapir and Whorf’s work. He argues that Sapir and Whorf didn’t believe that language determined or limited thought, but that their quotes, taken out of the broader context of their work, have been used to set up a straw man that can easily be refuted. He

sees their fundamental premise more broadly, as the idea that language and culture affect “meanings and orientations toward some aspects of experience” (p. 18) and that language reflects meaningful differences in thought and cultural worldview.

Recently, advances in cognitive neuroscience have provided new paradigms for asking these questions and may be taking us beyond binary debates about the effects of language on perception (Chiu et al. 2010). Language and culture are now being examined in terms of the cognitive processes involved (Chen et al. 2009; Nisbett 2011; Polzenhagen and Xia 2015; Robinson and Altarriba 2015; Yu 2015). This is part of a larger trend. It is exploring the enormous complexity of language and culture, rather than simply arguing the pros and cons of linguistic relativism.

8.7 Linguaculture—Language Is Culture Bound

In foreign language education, much of the scholarship related to language and culture focuses on defining learning goals in the context of globalization (Byram and Parmenter 2012; Kelly et al. 2001; Risager 2006). This has included increasing usage of the term *linguaculture* to refer to language and culture as part of a larger whole. The linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar uses this term when writing about ways in which language and culture reflect each other. Central to his work is the idea that language is culture bound—i.e., what things mean, and how language is used, goes beyond the definitions found in dictionaries. It is also bound in the sense of providing boundaries, “the fence around the territory, and then sets individuals loose within those limits to do whatever they want” (Agar 2002). Thus, linguaculture provides us with the field of play for communicating and managing human relations.

Agar’s (1994) work also looks at how language can act as an entry point into new worlds of cultural meaning. He recounts studying the culture of “junkies” (as they referred to themselves) through an analysis of the language they use to talk about drugs and drug use. In Agar’s view, language provides us with a starting point to discern critical elements of experience, and helps us understand the insider’s perspective in a foreign cultural community—a view that fits well with the concerns of language learners. Agar’s work discusses culture in terms of *experience*. From Agar’s perspective, the experience of a new culture “moves you in a new direction that changes who you are, in both the old territory and the new” (p. 210).

Fantini (2000) also emphasizes the experience of “entering into” a new linguaculture. In his view, a language is more than a code to label objects found in the world—it’s a reflection of a worldview. Learning a new language, then, means learning a new way of making sense of things:

Language, in fact, both reflects and affects one’s world view, serving as a sort of road map to how one perceives, interprets and thinks about, and expresses one’s views of the world. This intertwining invites a fresh look at how we conceptualize what is meant by world view, its components, and their interrelationships: and how language and culture mediate (inter)cultural processes. (p. 27)

Fantini and Agar's work both emphasizes the experience of exploring cultural worlds while using a language. Agar (1994), for example, says that "vocabulary is more than a list of words you memorize. When people use words, they do more than just hammer out a sentence. Different words signal a different mentality, a different way of looking at things" (p. 89).

8.8 Linguaculture as Shared Meaning

The idea of *shared meaning* provides a crucial conceptual link between language and culture. In this view, a linguistic code reflects the shared cultural experience of its community of speakers. Thus, as we learn a new language, we are gaining access to a particular view of the world. This view has been articulated by, among others, Hall (1997):

To put it simply, culture is about 'shared meanings'. Now, language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings. (p. 1)

Similarly, Agar (1994) describes linguaculture (or, languaculture) by saying that "words are the surface of culture", and "culture is a conceptual system whose surface appears in the words of people's language" (p. 79). Similarly, Hall (1997) describes language as a *representational system*:

In language, we use signs and symbols ... to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in culture. (p. 1)

The core notion of shared meaning, then, is that both language and culture reflect a shared set of understandings about the world. At the risk of oversimplifying, language is a set of labels for shared meaning that emerges from the shared experience within a linguaculture family.

Viewing linguaculture in terms of shared meaning emphasizes the *systematic nature* of both linguistic and cultural knowledge. Once a language system is mastered, we are able to use it to express ourselves and interact with others. The idea that language and culture are fixed systems has, however, been widely criticized (Byram and Parmenter 2012; Barnland 1989; Cates 1997; Crystal 2003; Friedman 1994; McLuhan and Fiore 1968; McLuhan 1964; Risager 2006). Agar (2002), for example, points out that "culture used to be a way to generalize and explain what someone is doing" (p. 15), but says that it's difficult or impossible to do so anymore. Globalization has led to highly fragmented boundaries of cultural identity, thus calling into question cultural labels (Friedman 1994; McGuigan 1999; Singer 1968). And while individuals in a community may share certain cultural understandings, each individual has a unique perspective that may be at odds with the opinions of

others. In addition, cultural meanings are constantly in flux. Many resist terminology that implies that culture is monolithic, such as when we talk of *Thai culture* or *Finnish culture*. Such labels have fallen out of favor in a world that is obviously more complex than such simple terminology allows for.

Similarly, the boundaries of language are also fuzzy. There is, for example, no single “English language”, because there are countless communities of English speakers, each who may share particular linguistic habits. We now speak of world Englishes or English as a global language (Crystal 2003), and a single language can encompass any number of cultural communities. In addition, each speaker of a language uses and creates their own version of the languages they speak—their *ideolect*. That’s one reason we will never find an idealized “native speaker” that can represent the totality of a particular language. Likewise, no grammar book can fully describe a linguistic system. This is complicated by the reality that certain dialects may be seen as more official, or superior to others. Thus, speaking of a language in fixed terms easily becomes prescriptive—with high-status speakers in the privileged position of setting the standard.

8.9 The Dynamic Complexity of Linguaculture

An understanding of the complexity of linguaculture reminds us that language and culture can never be described fully in terms of rules or essential qualities. The grammatical rules we find in textbooks are, at best, approximations of the syntax of many speakers of that language at a given point in time. Language changes over time, and when there is no critical mass to keep that dynamic process going, we speak of a language as having “died”. We include languages such as Latin or ancient Greek in this category, not because there are no speakers of this language, but because there is no community of speakers to enable this dynamic, interactive, creative, self-organizing process to continue. For a language to remain alive, it needs a cultural community whose interaction maintains the dynamic of development and change. Linguaculture, then, can be seen as a *complex system*. Diane Larsen-Freeman (2008), who has explored complexity theory in the context of SLA, explains that:

a defining characteristic of a complex system is that its behavior emerges from the interactions of its component. ... The agents or elements in a complex system change and adapt in response to feedback. They interact in structured ways, with interaction sometimes leading to self-organization and the emergence of new behavior. They operate in a dynamic world that is rarely in equilibrium and sometimes in chaos (p. 2)

This describes well the dynamic flux of both linguistic and cultural communities. Complex systems do not have clear boundaries because they are an *emergent property*—a phenomena that is produced by the interaction of simpler parts. They can be highly fluid on the one hand—with shifting boundaries and niches, yet highly stable on the other, at time absorbing vast amounts of energy without upsetting the system’s equilibrium.

An understanding of complexity reminds us that static conceptualization of language and culture will always fall short. Neither language nor culture is a “thing”. Linguaculture is, more than anything, a set of patterns that emerge from interaction—patterns which are always more dynamic and unpredictable than any possible set of rules used to represent them. Linguacultures are “alive”—they change over time, have loosely defined boundaries, and can die out. Individuals don’t so much “master” a language or culture, as they learn to participate in a complex linguaculture ecosystem. This complex view also reminds us that generalizations about culture will always be overly simple. That doesn’t mean, however, that cultural patterns don’t exist and can be discounted. Cultural labels—for example, stereotypes such as *Italians are passionate*—can be both inaccurate and contain a grain of truth.

An understanding of complexity helps resolve seeming contradictions between the diversity and unity of language. The English language, for example, is so diverse that it can be difficult or impossible to define its boundaries or what represents “correct” usage. On the other hand, standardized versions of English spoken by economic elites are often experienced as existing at a central location within the English ecosystem. Linguistic ecosystems, despite having extensive peripheral zones and multiple niches, still maintain powerful patterns of overall unity that are experienced as “standard” or “right” versions of a language. This contradiction provokes debate, since it creates tension between speakers who see themselves as representing the purest or best form of a language, and speakers who represent the dynamic diversity of that language. In the language of dynamic system theory, high-status versions of English can be seen as *attractor states* that remain relatively stable in spite of the diversity swirling in and around them.

In a similar way, cultural communities are fluid and have diffuse boundaries, yet are not arbitrary. Patterns of culture emerge from interaction among people who share similar interpretations and expectations of what things mean. Cultural patterns—like linguistic patterns—are not deterministic. Rather, they inform our intuitions about what is “normal” in a given situation. These patterns of normal are not enough to predict what any given individual will do, but they provide an indispensable framework for interaction. Linguaculture patterns are both highly diffuse and variable, yet also systematic and normative. In short, both language and culture are alive, and are best conceptualized in terms of patterns and systems, not essential qualities.

Linguaculture hidden in plain sight The complexity of linguistic and cultural patterns is hidden in plain sight. Linguaculture patterns that are familiar to us sink beneath the surface of conscious awareness. The work of language and culture educators touches upon elements of human relations that we take for granted, yet are of central importance to our lives. This implies that we shouldn’t expect language or culture learning to be simple or straightforward. It acts as a reminder of the need to take this complexity into account in the work that we do. With that in mind, the next chapter will focus on the language–culture connection from the perspective of cognition and mind. We’ll see that recent research is shedding light on the interconnection between language and culture, and can inform the work of language and culture educators.

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