

Chapter 9

An Embodied View of Linguaculture



Abstract This chapter explores the relationship between language, culture, and cognition. It looks at contrasting ways to conceptualize linguistic meaning: (1) linguistic meaning as symbols or labels that reflect universal cognitive processes and (2) the idea that language reflects meaning particular to different cultural communities. It discusses insights from neurolinguistics, which reveal that linguistic meaning is not localized in a single place in the brain, and that the meaning of individual words is spread through regions of the brain responsible for different semantic categories. This implies that learning a foreign language requires more than new labels to attach to existing thoughts or concepts. It introduces embodied simulation theory, which hypothesizes that linguistic meaning is not primarily a manipulation of symbols, but an embodied re-creation of lived experience. From the perspective of embodied simulation theory, linguistic meaning is grounded in experience and thus rooted in the shared experience of cultural communities. In short, linguistic meaning is cultural by its very nature.

9.1 Language, Culture and Meaning

Perhaps the most common question asked by language learners is *What does that mean?* Meaning is central to language learning. Learners try to decipher the meaning of individual words, sentences, passages, and dialogues. They attempt to get their meaning across using the new language. Learning a new language entails internalizing a new system of linguistic meaning, and mastery of that system allows us to interpret and express meaning to speakers of that language. When you use that system well, we say you are fluent in the language. You've achieved creative mastery of the system.

The question of what things *mean* is also central to culture learning. By definition, cultural learning involves trying to understand what things mean in foreign contexts. When we are unsure how to interpret the behavior of cultural others, for example, we ask the same question: What does it mean that they offered me a gift? Or asked me my age? Or kissed me on the cheek? When we understand what things mean, we begin to see things from the local perspective—to align our understanding of

what things mean with cultural others. A central challenge of both language and culture learning, then, is coming to know and being able to use—internalizing, or embodying—new systems of meaning.

This chapter will continue to lay the theoretical groundwork for the DMLL by exploring the idea that *shared meaning* is at the nexus of language and culture. It introduces an approach to understanding linguistic meaning—embodied simulation theory (EST)—that helps clarify the relationship between linguistic meaning and culture. In short, according to EST, linguistic meaning is produced through a mental simulation based on experience. What things mean depends directly on our experience, rather than a manipulation of abstract concepts, or as an expression of universal thought processes. This suggests that linguistic knowledge is fundamentally experiential, and thus closely tied to—and limited by—our lived cultural experience. This represents a constructivist perspective, which sees meaning not as something that represents absolute qualities in the world, but which is a result of a meaning-creating process shared among members of a community (Stryker 1980).

9.2 The Linguaculture Tree

A metaphor that can be used to visualize the relationship between meaning, language and culture is the *linguaculture tree*. As represented in Fig. 9.1, the trunk and the branches represent language, and the roots represent culture. This figure reminds us that a tree is not just what we see above ground, but also the roots that provide nourishment to the whole organism. To understand trees, we must remember to take the root system into account. Similarly, if we want to understand language, we need to take into account the cultural communities that give life to that language. This is called a *linguaculture tree* because both language and culture are seen as an integrated whole—two complementary parts of a single, dynamic, and complexly interacting system (Risager 2015). It's possible, of course, to cut the trunk of the linguaculture tree—to sever a language from the cultural community that nourishes it. We are then left with a dead language, preserved in dictionaries or prescribed in textbooks, but cut off from the living communities that give it life.

When we look at a tree we may forget that much remains hidden from sight. Similarly, it's easy to think of language primarily in terms of words and syntax—as though a tree consists only of leaves and branches. The DMLL reminds us, however, that language is alive, with a dynamic complexity that emerges from the interaction of its speakers. As members of a community interact with each other, both cultural and linguistic patterns emerge—their shared experiences give rise to shared linguistic meaning. Shared linguistic meaning is grounded in the shared experience and meanings of cultural communities.

At the top of the tree, we have the words and sounds of the language, which can be recorded, imitated, written down, and analyzed—they are accessible directly to our senses and lend themselves to conscious analysis. Linguistic patterns are represented by the trunk and branches—the structural elements that give it unity. Those linguistic

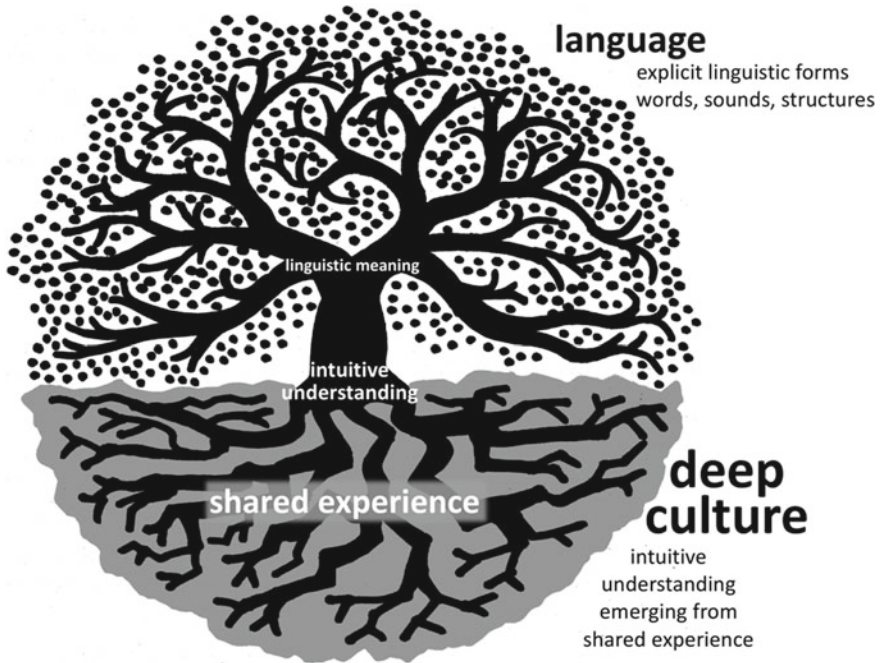


Fig. 9.1 The linguaculture tree

patterns, however, are rooted in an intuitive understanding of how language is actually used. What things mean is ultimately defined by the people currently using that language. Thus, linguistic meaning is rooted in the shared experience and understanding of cultural communities. In the diagram, these roots are labeled deep culture—the largely intuitive (unconscious) patterns of meaning shared by a cultural community.

This is not, to be clear, an argument for the idea that a single language reflects a single discrete cultural community. Linguistic and cultural communities are infinitely complex—they are living ecosystems with many interrelated zones and niches, some seen as more central or standardized than others. To grow up speaking French in Senegal, Quebec, or Paris means participating (and being shaped by) very different cultural communities, despite speaking a common language. Distinct versions of French reflect differing worlds with distinct communication styles, values, and identities. And there are important debates over whether particular versions of a language, or particular cultural patterns, are overly dominant or even oppressive. This is a separate issue. The linguaculture tree simply reminds us that languages are complex, dynamic, and alive—and they will always reflect the shared cultural experiences of the communities that use them.

9.3 Cognition and Linguistic Meaning

These ideas are currently being explored in new ways through the study of semantics—the branch of linguistics that studies linguistic meaning. The ability to use language has long been thought to involve the mental manipulation of symbols—the ability to map “linguistic inputs to semantic or conceptual representations” (Weiskopf 2010). The nature of those symbols, and subsequently, the relationship between thought, culture, and language, however, is the subject of ongoing debate. Gendrons (2014) describes two fundamental approaches to these questions; (1) a realistic theory of semantics, the idea that linguistic meaning is a symbolic representation of thoughts that describe objective qualities that exist in the real world; and (2) a cognitive (or conceptualistic) view of linguistic meaning. The latter view sees meaning as mental entities—the idea that “meanings are in the head” (p. 5), and “cognitive structures are formed in constant interplay between our minds and the external world” (p. 5).

A realistic theory of semantics implies that how we see the world will not be greatly affected by the language we speak; i.e., the particular symbolic system we use to express our thoughts about the world will not greatly affect perception or thinking itself. Steven Pinker (1995) argues for the existence of *mentalese*—a universal capacity for thought which is separate from linguistic ability. As he explains, “the language of thought ... has symbols for concepts and arrangements of symbols that correspond to who did what to whom” (p. 81). He describes the relationship between language and thought thus: “Knowing a language, then, is knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa” (p. 82). In this view, language provides a set of labels to attach to our thoughts, and thus a foreign language is a different set of labels. This characterizes language use as separate from the parts of the brain responsible for things like movement and perception (Weiskopf 2010). This would suggest that the language one speaks should NOT be closely tied to perception or worldview, since human thought is argued to be produced by universal cognitive processes, and reflect elements of external reality. Pinker (1995), a critic of linguistic relativism, describes linguistic meaning by saying simply that “language conveys news” (p. 82). Since “news” is simply an objective statement of what is, this implies that Pinker feels our perceptions are not greatly influenced by the language we speak.

In contrast to this, a *cognitive* or *conceptualistic* view describes linguistic meaning in terms of mental constructs that are co-created by members of a cultural community. This lends itself to the idea of language learning as an “entering into” other linguistic or cultural worldviews (Agar 1994; Fantini 1997, 2001; Luna et al. 2008). This represents the idea that our view of the world is a social construct (Berger and Luckmann 1966). From this perspective, learning a new language is closely related to the ability to construct and thus experience reality in a way that is more similar to cultural others. Bennett (1993, 1998) argues from this constructivist perspective when saying that construing multiple cultural viewpoints (ethnorelativity) is critical for developing cultural empathy or intercultural sensitivity. As Bennett explains:

“a group interacting within a boundary generates a unique way to discriminate phenomena in the world, to organize and coordinate communication, and to assign goodness and badness to ways of being” (Bennett 2013). This view emphasizes perception in the sense of assigning meaning and value to phenomena.

Thus, we have two contrasting trains of thought about linguistic meaning and its relationship to culture and cultural understanding: (1) language as a set of symbols or labels that reflect universal processes of thinking and perceiving an objective reality and (2) that language is a reflection of how a community makes sense of things, and thus is tied tightly to the cultural worldviews from which it emerges. While these positions are not mutually exclusive, they tend to form two endpoints that anchor arguments about linguistic and cultural relativity.

9.4 A Neurocognitive View of Language and Culture

In recent years, largely theoretical arguments about language, thought, and meaning have been invigorated by new research findings from the field of neurolinguistics, which studies the structural features of the brain related to language use (Kemmerer 2015; Willems 2015). In the past, insights into language-related processes were gained through studying patients with injuries to particular areas of the brain. This allowed researchers to identify particular areas, such as the cerebral cortex, that were important for linguistic processing. It identified types of aphasia—language disorders—associated with particular regions, as well. Such research, however, doesn’t shed light on such processes in real time. New research methodology, however, such as fMRI imaging, is allowing us to investigate these processes as people use language, and at different levels of analysis, from syllables and phonemes, to words and sentences, to discourse (Andric and Small 2015). It has allowed for detailed semantic mapping of the brain, allowing us to identify regions of the brain that are associated with particular concepts and pragmatic categories (Maldarelli 2016).

Such research is showing that language use is integrated with many other cognitive functions. In other words, there is no single, modular section of the brain responsible for language processing. If language were a specialized function that operates independently of other processes, then a relatively localized process would be expected. Linguistic mapping in real time shows us, however, that language use is associated with multiple regions of the brain, known collectively as the semantic system (Huth et al. 2016). Activity in particular areas can be related to the processing of linguistic meaning by tracking, for example, brain activity during semantic tasks, as opposed to phonological tasks, or natural speech as opposed to scrambled speech. Semantic maps are broadly similar among different speakers, despite individual variation.

Semantic mapping has shown that words are spread out widely throughout the cerebral cortex, and that single words are not associated with a single place. Rather, the various uses of the same word are found in areas related to different semantic categories. Thus, the word *top* is found in a region associated with positions, and also a different region associated with clothes—that is to say, the variety of meanings

that individual words have are not grouped together. This implies that a word is not simply a label to attach to a singular, discrete concept. Linguistic meaning involves a network of associations that relate to different semantic categories, and thus different experiences. The word *top* can be experienced as referring to a place (*The view from the top looks great!*) or as an article of clothing (*That top looks great on you!*). This implies that learning concepts in a foreign language involves creating a network of meaning associated with widely disparate categories of experience.

Our semantic map is organized in terms of experience. Semantic categories that have been identified include visual, tactile, body part, number, places, person, violence, mental, time, and social. Some categories that have been discovered are quite broad, and include, concrete versus abstract words, action verbs, and social narratives. Some are more selective, and include things like living things, tools, food, or shelter. Such an organizational structure reinforces the notion that semantic knowledge is dissimilar to the lists of words and definitions that we see in dictionaries or textbooks. Linguistic meaning is closely associated with lived experience and the way the world works, both physically and socially. Language use is related to lived experience in the world, and not simply the human capacity for manipulating abstract concepts or symbols. Linguistic understanding, in this view, is fundamentally experiential in nature.

Despite this progress, such research doesn't explain the precise dynamics by which cognitive processes produce the experience of linguistic meaning. That represents an even deeper, more complex challenge, what Evans (2015) describes as the holy grail of brain and mind sciences. This involves answering fundamental questions as: "How does meaning arise? What mechanisms produce it? And what are the respective roles of language and concepts, separately and collectively, in producing meaning?" (p. 24). Such research reminds us that language is not simply a convenient tool to get someone to pass the sauerkraut. Language "reveals fundamental aspects of mind design: features of the human mind that are universal to us all (p. 27)." Or, more succinctly, language "reveals the structure of thought: it is a window on the mind (p. 27)."

Issues of language, mind, meaning and thought used to be investigated primarily by philosophers. That has changed. Philosophy and linguistic neuroscience now seek answers to similar questions. As of yet, there is no consensus on the answers to these fundamental questions. There are competing conceptualizations, such as "radical embodied cognition" and "conceptual metaphors" (Evans 2015). Linguistic concepts may be described as "sensorimotor patterns that allow the organism to interact with the physical world" (Pecher and Zwaan 2005), or in terms of "the geometry of meaning" in which semantics is understood as conceptual spaces (Gardenfors 2014). Such esoteric conceptualizations reflect the complexity of the processes involved. There is an emerging consensus that language is not a simple process of labeling discrete concepts as part of a symbolic system. Instead, meaning is increasingly seen as a construction that is the result of highly complex cognitive processes (Evans 2009).

9.5 Embodied Simulation Theory

Despite these challenges, there has been exciting progress made in understanding the constructive processes of language. One pertinent line of inquiry relates to *embodied simulation theory*—an approach to understanding how the brain produces the experience of linguistic meaning (Bergen 2012). In brief, embodied simulation theory proposes that language use is intimately tied to our actual experience in the world. It is not primarily a manipulation of abstract concepts or symbols. It suggests that our personal experiences and cultural background are an integral part of the cognitive processes of language—that is to say, the meaning we get from language will depend on our previous experience as an individual, and as a member of a linguaculture community. In one study that supports this view, for example, Russian-speaking immigrants were asked to recall life experiences with word prompts. Researchers found that subjects were better able to recall biographical details when the language being used matches the language used when those memories were encoded (Marian and Neisser 2000). That is to say, it was easier to remember an experience in Russia when the verbal prompts were in Russian. This is concordant with the view that language use itself is closely associated with lived experience—language triggers a simulation grounded in that experience.

The theory of embodied simulation poses a challenge to the way that linguistic meaning has traditionally been conceptualized. Language is often thought of primarily as a symbolic communicative code—a product of mentation related to the abstract realms of concepts and thought. This view of language has encouraged an enshrinement of symbolic thinking as a central feature of language. As explained in an introduction to cognitive linguistics: “One crucial function of language is to express thoughts and ideas. That is, language encodes and externalizes our thoughts. The way language does this is by using symbols” (Evans and Green 2006). In this view, symbolic thinking is an essential element of what makes us human, and what makes humans special:

From a scientific point of view, perhaps it would be better to say that the word is both the beginning, middle, and end of development ... If there were no semiotic system in which to formulate a plan, there could be no intelligent action at all. Therefore ... intelligence is a problem of symbolization from start to finish (Oller 1991, p. 7).

This way of thinking about language puts conceptual thought at the center of linguistic meaning. Steven Pinker, for example, says that “semantics is about the relation of words to thoughts” (Pinker 2007). This view lends itself to an information-processing view of language and mind, as found in theoretical approaches to meaning such as schema theory and connectionism (D’Andrade 1995; Strauss and Quinn 1997).

Such debates are important to language educators, because the way we think about language and meaning affects the mental models we use when we teach. Thinking of language as a symbolic code paints a metaphoric picture of language as a sort of linguistic arithmetic—one that involves symbolic formulas that label our thoughts. This characterizes language use as primarily a mental experience, with

communication involving the decoding of a symbolic system. From this perspective, switching languages involves using a different code to express our thoughts. If we take this as a starting point, we may be tempted to focus primarily on the structural features of language—its syntactic coding. We might think: *If I can get my students to understand the structure of the language, they'll be able to use the code.*

This view, however, leaves important questions unanswered. Language may be a symbolic system, but its use is not abstract and detached from the world—it is deeply felt and personal. It's different from math—which also involves the systematic use of symbols. As de Vega (2015) puts it: “one problem with symbolism ... is that language meaning lacks grounding in the world” (p. 183). Language learning is more than a mental exercise—it provides entry into a world of meaning, not simply a new way to label universal thoughts.

Until recently, there have been few alternative models for understanding the mental processes of language use. In recent years, however, another approach has emerged, spurred on by insights from the field of linguistic neuroscience. *Embodied simulation theory* proposes that rather than creating meaning through the manipulation of symbols, our mind experiences linguistic meaning through a simulation, or recreation of actual experience (Bergen 2005, 2012; Gibbs and Perlman 2010). As Bergen (2012) explains:

Meaning, according to the embodied simulation hypothesis, isn't just abstract mental symbols; it's a creative process, in which people construct virtual experiences—embodied simulations—in their mind's eye. If this is right, then meaning is something totally different from the definitional model we started with. If meaning is based on experience with the world—the specific actions and percepts an individual has had—then it may vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. ... It's not about activating the right symbol, it's about dynamically constructing the right mental experience of the scene. (p. 16)

By way of example, according to the embodied simulation hypothesis, the word “clothes” doesn't exist in your mind simply as a concept in a mental dictionary—an item to cover and protect our body. Instead, hearing the word “clothes” will bring to mind images and sensations related to your experience with clothes. For that reason, shirts and trousers may come more quickly to mind for men, while skirts and blouses may be more salient for women. But that will also depend on individual experience—what different individuals wear and come into contact with. Because of this, while kimonos, kilts or penis gourds may fit the dictionary definition of clothing, they probably don't occur to you when someone uses the word clothes—unless they happen to be common to your everyday experience.

According to embodied simulation theory, because it's rooted in actual experience, linguistic meaning incorporates bodily sensations and reactions—it is *embodied*. If I say *wet dog*, for example, your mental simulation may include the smell of a wet dog. Your mind is not simply adding two abstract concepts: *wet* + *dog*. Instead, it simulates the experiences you've had with wet dogs. If you mention that your dog jumped over a pool, one person might visualize a big dog jumping over a small pool, while another might visualize the opposite. According to embodied simulation theory, the mind is not simply remembering feelings associated with symbols, the whole-body experience is built into language processing itself. Language, according

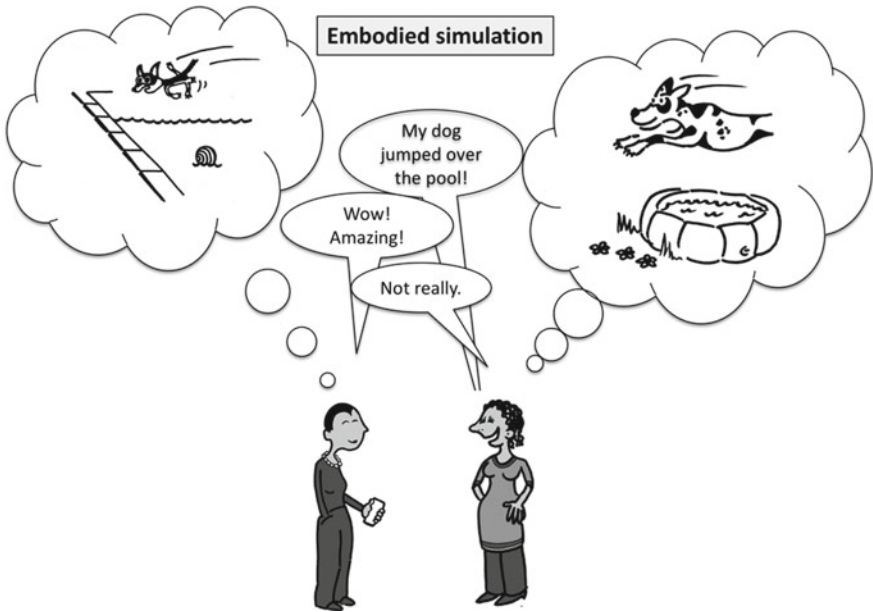


Fig. 9.2 Embodied Simulation

to this view, can only represent reality in terms that relate to our experiences up to now (Fig. 9.2).

While there is still spirited debate on this issue among specialists (Gibbs and Perlman 2010; Weiskopf 2010), there is a growing body of experimental evidence that supports embodied simulation theory (Bergen 2005, 2012; Gibbs 2006; Gibbs and Perlman 2010). Much of this research relates to showing that the parts of our brain that are normally used for perceiving and doing are activated when we process linguistic meaning. One example of this is called the *Perky effect*. This refers to the fact that the processing of linguistic meaning reduces our ability to actually perceive the world. When you are talking on the phone, for example, you are less able to focus your attention on your surroundings. According to embodied simulation theory, the Perky effect happens because processing linguistic meaning uses resources from the parts of our brain responsible for perceiving, seeing and doing. In other words, there's not a clear cognitive distinction between comprehending language and actually having the experience being referred to.

This premise has been tested and confirmed in many ways. For example, physical actions, such as the act of making a fist, activate the same regions of the brain as putting together the sentence *make a fist* (Bergen 2012, p. 45). This is true even when we are not specifically trying to visualize or mentally simulate that behavior. This implies that language use is tied to actual behavior, and doesn't simply involve the manipulation of abstract symbols. Implicit association testing has shown that hearing the sentence *You are driving a car*, for example, makes it easier to access

words related to car interiors (such as the steering wheel) when compared to sentences such as *You are washing a car*, which makes it easier to access words associated with an external perspective (such as a tire). This suggests that processing the sentence involved a simulation of the actual experience. In another experiment, participants were faster at identifying blurry images of a moose after having read the sentence *Through the fogged goggles, the skier could hardly identify the moose*. When they read a comparable sentence involving clean goggles, they were faster at identifying clear images of a moose (p. 70).

One question raised by embodied simulation theory is how the brain processes abstract ideas, such as *government* or *love*. Research in this area has focused on the metaphorical use of language (Gibbs 2006; Hiraga 2005; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). When communicating abstract ideas, we rely on metaphors that are related to actual physical experience: we *fall* in love; *rise* to a challenge; *reach for* our goals; and *catch up on* our sleep. Lakoff (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) believes that metaphor is critical in shaping our experience of the world. He points out, for example, that in English when we talk about arguments, we use metaphors associated with competition and war, such as when we say “he didn’t give any ground” or “she won the argument”. When referring to discussion, English speakers use marketplace metaphors, such as having a *give and take*, or an *exchange of ideas*. Discussion in Japanese, by contrast, is metaphorically more related to a bringing together—it involves terms such as *nemawashi* (“root binding”—a discussion to reach preliminary shared understanding) or *uchiawase* (combining the characters *strike* and *join* to mean “discuss” with an association of bringing together).

Metaphorical language has been explored using embodied simulation theory as well (Gibbs 2006). In one experiment, participants were asked to walk blindfolded to a marker 40 ft away. Prior to this, they had heard stories about a romantic relationship. When the stories were described in metaphorical terms, such as *Your relationship is moving along in a good direction*, participants walked longer and farther than when they heard the same stories using nonmetaphorical language, such as *Your relationship is very important to you* (Gibbs 2013). Such research provides evidence that simulation of meaning is a foundational aspect of even abstract thinking. While such research is in its beginning stages, it does suggest that our actual experience in the world provides the cornerstone of our use of language, and our ability to communicate with others.

9.6 Language, Culture and Embodied Simulation

Embodied simulation theory has important implications for understanding the relationship between language and culture. Bergen (2012) points out that linguistic meaning depends not only on our personal experiences, but also the shared experiences of cultural communities, saying that “the same words can drive different embodied simulations for different bodies of people” (p. 177). The example he gives relates to

the sentence *I was waiting for my brother on the corner*, which may produce a simulation in your mind that involves standing, pacing, or perhaps sitting on a bench. In parts of China, however, these same words might involve squatting, something commonly done when waiting. Thus, even simple words may produce different mental simulations depending on one's experience.

Embodied simulation helps us understand that culture resides not in language itself, but in the patterns of experience associated with a particular language. Words that are heavily laden with associated experiences—such as *tea time*, or *Christmas*—incorporate wide-ranging, complex simulations. Understanding the word *Christmas* conceptually is easy, while having a *feel* for it requires a lot of experiential associations, such as opening presents, a family meal, Santa Claus, and Christmas trees. For learners of a foreign language—who may lack these lived experiences—these words will lack emotional depth and resonance. In a similar way, everyday words like *family* will trigger a set of embodied simulations that reflect one's own cultural background, and potentially cause misunderstanding if we fail to recognize that the same word can have very different experiential overtones in other linguaculture communities.

The idea of embodied simulation draws attention to our *intuitive* understanding of language. It's no accident we talk about having a feel for how a word is used, or getting the gist of what someone is saying. Linguistic understanding is not purely conceptual. It's subtle and nuanced, full of associations, sensations, memories, and emotional resonance. It is this intuitive realm that gives birth to the creative power of poetry and literature—sublime experiential worlds that emerge from one's experience of linguistic meaning. This intuitive experience of language is much more than the sum total of its parts—it produces mental and emotional experiences that go beyond the conceptual understanding of individual words or sentences. We may thus have a feeling for a word that we ourselves cannot define. This implies that linguistic meaning, like cultural meaning, can be relatively explicit (conscious and symbolic) or deep (intuitive and experiential), and that it is the deeper, more intuitive forms of experiencing language that are most closely related to culture.

9.7 An Embodied View of Linguaculture Meaning

An understanding of embodied simulation and the semantic system helps clarify the relationship between language and culture. It suggests that: (1) *cultural patterns emerge from the shared interaction and experiences of participants in cultural communities*, and (2) *language is a symbolic system that activates the embodied simulation of those shared experiences*. That is to say, a word or sentence is not a packet of information that delivers meaning from one person to another—it is a trigger for an experiential simulation. Linguistic meaning is richly experiential (Gardenfors 2014), and thus tied to the shared experiences of cultural communities. That's why learning the definitions of words is not enough to get a sense for how language is used. Our intuitive understanding of language is situation specific and grounded in lived experience.

This helps us understand why culturally laden words can be so difficult to translate or fully express in another language. Cultural understanding is, fundamentally, an insider's understanding, grounded in the experience of that community. When naming everyday objects, such as pencil or table, there may be little distinction between an insider's and outsider's view—the experience of using a pencil or table is relatively universal. Often, however, even common words found in all languages will be experienced differently depending on shared cultural experience. A word like *marriage*, for example, has different associated values and responsibilities, depending on the cultural context.

Some words and ideas rely heavily on in-group experience. By way of example, the term *halus* is an Indonesian word that can be translated into English in a variety of ways: *cultured, sensitive, delicate, soft, invisible, unseen, small, finely milled*. This list provides few clues, however, as to how the word *halus* is used and experienced in Indonesia, and in Java particularly. As an ideal, *halus* refers to a quality of calm that reflects an inner state of spiritual harmony, and is embodied by behavior that is chivalrous and polite. The opposing quality of *halus* is *kasar*, which refers to that which is disharmonious, ugly, imbalanced and out of control. In Java, *halus* is a quality that is associated with the ideal ruler, one triumphs over the turbulence and chaos of opposing forces without seeming to make any effort at all (Fox 2013). The experiential nuances of such as word are rooted in Javanese culture. Without experience living among Indonesian speakers, it's difficult to get an intuitive grasp of a word like this. And intuitive understanding is important for language learners, as it's what allows us to use language in real life.

9.8 Intuitive Cultural Understanding

The idea that linguistic and cultural understanding is grounded in patterns of experience highlights the importance of *intuitive understanding*, as opposed to conceptual or critical understanding. It suggests that educational objectives should focus on the intuitive understanding that comes from experiential learning. This view makes an important distinction between more purely explicit, symbolic or conceptual elements of language (dictionary definitions, mental symbols), and the more implicit, intuitive, embodied, experiential elements of language (gist, intuitive understanding, cultural associations, nuance). Similarly, it distinguishes between explicit and implicit patterns of culture as well. Implicit patterns include things like norms, values, assumptions—elements that are experienced primarily at the intuitive level.

Figure 9.3 brings these ideas about the language–culture connection together visually. It is a more elaborated representation of the linguaculture tree, with language and culture largely overlapping. The tops of the circles represent more explicit, concrete, consciously accessible elements of language and culture. The bottoms of the circles represent elements that are more implicit, intuitive, and contextualized. Deep linguaculture knowledge is primarily intuitive—it develops from experience, it involves implicit understanding, knowing the *gist* of things, the ability to *read*

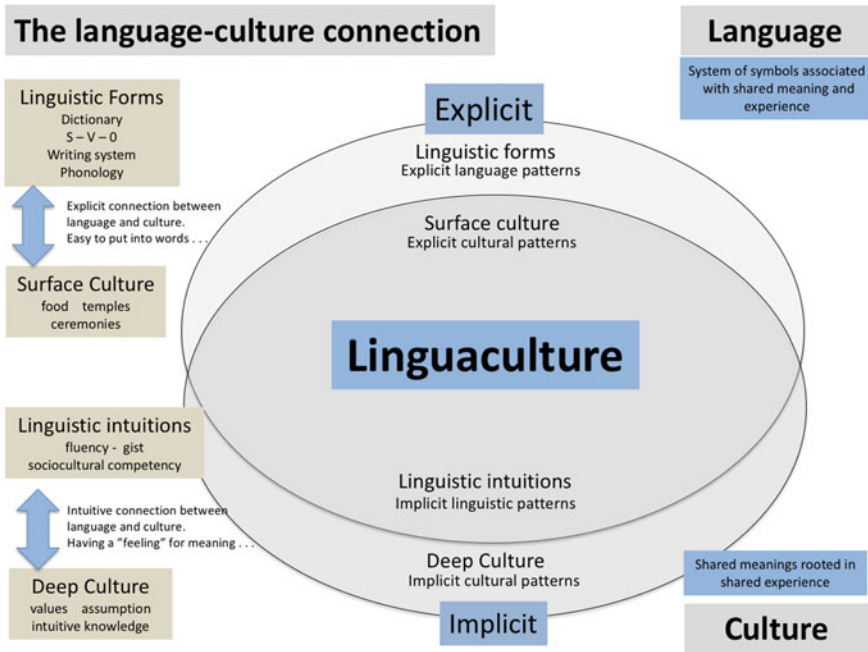


Fig. 9.3 The language–culture connection

a situation, and so on. This distinction between conscious and intuitive knowledge helps explain why explicit elements of culture (food, temples, and ceremonies) are relatively easy to explain using language, whereas deeper, more implicit elements of culture (values, assumptions, and cultural schema) are harder to articulate. Deep linguistic knowledge is closely connected to deep cultural knowledge.

At the top of the language circle are explicit elements of language that are decontextualized. This surface form of a language is often what is focused on in foreign language education. Intuitive knowledge is very difficult to articulate, which is why there’s a portion of cultural knowledge at the bottom of the diagram that doesn’t overlap with language at all. In addition, linguistic knowledge that is most highly intuitive—having a *feeling* for how to use a word, for example, or understanding implicit meaning not found in the words themselves—are toward the bottom of the language circle. There is a portion of language circle, at the top, that doesn’t overlap with the culture circle. That represents language as a purely symbolic system, as might be found in textbooks and dictionaries.

This figure reminds us that language *can* be conceptualized and taught as a purely symbolic system (as at the top of the circle). A more integrated approach to language and culture education, however, will also take into account the deeper, more intuitive elements of language—those which are more closely related to cultural understanding. The elements toward the bottom of the language circle—gist, fluency, and sociocultural competence—are those that require the most embodied and

culturally embedded forms of knowledge. And while a few learners may reach high levels of linguistic fluency in the absence of significant intercultural experience, their ability to use the language in real life will almost certainly be impaired—they may have little sense of the cultural nuances of what they are saying. This implies that language practice which is experiential, contextual, and informed by cultural input, will better prepare learners for the challenges of using language in real life.

An integrated approach to linguaculture learning This chapter has examined the connection between language and culture. It introduced embodied simulation to argue that linguistic meaning is grounded in the shared experience of cultural communities that use a language. This was represented visually as two overlapping circles illustrating both explicit and implicit elements of language and culture. It also introduced a conceptualization of language and culture as overlapping, with intuitive elements of language (gist, fluency) more closely related to deep elements of culture. This integrated view of language and culture is central to the DMLL. The next chapter further develops this conceptualization, and considers the mental models we use when thinking about language and culture learning. It will introduce the theoretical assumptions of the DMLL, and describe four levels of language and culture learning.

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