

The Language-Culture Connection: Intercultural Influences in Social Networking

Abstract

Differences across language learners' native and target speech communities, their expectations and cultural backgrounds are expected to cause them difficulties in communication. They may, for instance, produce grammatically and lexically correct sentences but vague in terms of meaning. They may also produce linguistically correct utterances but inappropriate or misleading. The present paper highlights the language-culture relationship in general and the language-culture-religion relationship for Arab-Muslims in particular. Furthermore, it investigates Algerian EFL students' strategies and problems while communicating through social media (particularly Facebook) with native speakers of English. It attempts to see if Master students at the University of Mentouri Brothers, Constantine are able, at this rather advanced level, to develop some awareness of the target language rhetorical tendencies and conventional norms and seeks to gauge the extent to which the rhetorical and cultural differences between first and target languages result in communication breakdowns.

Keywords: language-culture relationship, foreign language writing, social networking, The Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis, The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Introduction

The connection between language and culture is hardly ever raised for first language learners as they are completely immersed into their own culture. For foreign language learners, however, the issue of culture may be a real obstacle in achieving effective communication because it requires more than grammatical and lexical competence. Successful communication in the target language necessitates an awareness of the target culture, speakers' backgrounds and logic. Farther than that, non-native language learners need to see the world from a native perspective and to become a part of the target speech community. Therefore, intercultural understanding is an essential component of foreign language learning, not only for getting acquainted with others' lifestyles and traditions, but also for comprehending the context in which language is produced and therefore communicating more efficiently.

A Brief Historical Overview of Culture Teaching

As far as culture teaching within foreign language teaching is concerned, the journey has presumably been through four main stages. During the early beginnings, culture was not a part of the language classroom. The focus was placed on the structural and grammatical features of the target language with no reference to the contextual or cultural influences on language use. Through the initial attempts to integrate culture, it was limited to the study of literature and civilization. The main concern then was to examine big "C" culture and small "c" culture as the two main facets of any given culture. Afterwards, a tendency towards the study of pragmatic and sociocultural aspects of oral communication has grown. The emergence of disciplines such as pragmatics and discourse analysis made the investigation of cultural dimensions in

spoken language possible. Finally, it is only recently that the cultural dimension is being explored in relation to writing (contrastive rhetoric, text analysis, etc.)

The Language-Culture Connection

A lot has been said concerning the inseparability language and culture, a subject that is gaining an increased interest in the field of foreign language teaching. Applied linguists as well as everyone else involved in the practice of teaching are now seeking the best measures to teach culture and diminish cultural barriers in communication. Jiang (2000: 328), for instance, holds that “language and culture cannot exist without each other.” For Brown (2000: 177), “a language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the without losing the significance of either language or culture.” In the same vein goes Merrouche (2010: 103) maintaining that

Language and culture are inextricably tied: they cannot be separated without losing their essence and significance. What is language if not a means of communication operating in a defined socio-cultural context? Without language, communication would be very restricted; without culture, there would be no communication at all.

Eventually, any language is a part of a given culture and considered as its mirror. At the same time, culture influences and shapes language by representing people’s approaches to life and cultural backgrounds. In this regard, Qaddumi (1995: 118) argues that “language is the vessel through which culture expresses itself” and “language does not only express the way people communicate but also the way they think and behave.”

Language and culture are then interrelated, inseparable and cannot be dissociated. Their relationship has as well been treated in terms of mutual influence; in

other words, the ways in which culture influences language and the ways in which language influences culture.

One of the well-known theories that took the matter of culture influence on language into consideration is “The Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis” first developed by Kaplan (1966). According to this hypothesis, logic, rhetoric and communication are interdependent and culture specific. For Kaplan (1966), people living in a particular cultural context view the world and organize their discourse according to that context. As a result, people will not only develop their oral discourse in a unique culture-specific fashion, but also write in a way which reflects that culture.

Examples on the influence of Arabs’ culture on their language are plenty, to cite one of them is Qaddumi’s (1995) about how a guest’s reply to a host offering a drink differs across Arabic and Western societies. According to Arabs’ traditions, a guest is not asked whether or not to have a drink, they are rather directly offered a drink, typically coffee or tea. Therefore, the guest’s answer to a host offering a drink would be “thank you” as in “yes, thank you” because no matter how hard he/she tries to politely refuse, his/her refusal is not going to be taken into consideration and will be offered a drink anyway.

The most obvious influence of language on culture is that the latter is verbalized through the former: “culture shapes thought and thought is verbalized through language” (Qaddumi, 1995: 120). This means that when someone speaks, he/she does not only give information related to a present communicative situation, but also gives cues about his/her cultural background. However, for “The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis”, things are interpreted differently. This hypothesis, also known as “The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”, which was first developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf on the

basis of his teacher's (Edward Sapir) linguistic approach, holds two versions: a stronger version and a weaker version. While the weak version maintains that language influences thought and perception, the strong version suggests that language controls thought and perception. In other words, every individual views the world by his/her own native language where the world is partly or entirely determined by the structure of the language (Whorf, 1956).

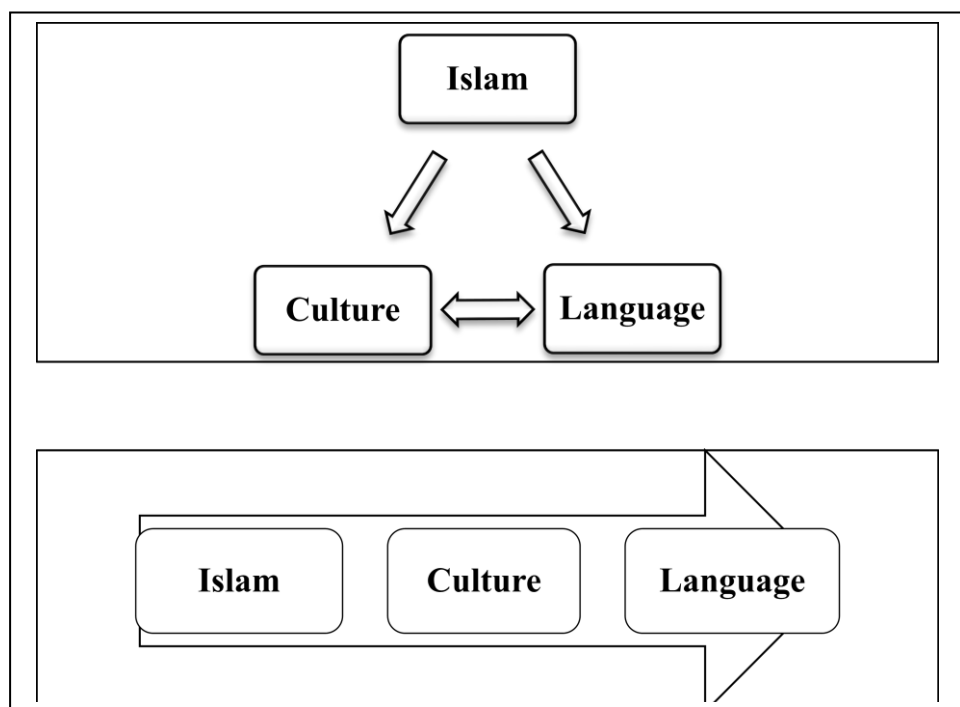
The Impact of Religion on Language and Culture

Generally speaking, there is always a relationship between languages and cultures. However, when it comes to Arab-Muslims, it is the language-culture-religion relationship. Islam has its obvious mark on the Arabic language and on shaping Muslims thought patterns as it is for them the absolute truth and the guide for a better life and afterlife, especially when it comes to Qur'anic teachings and principles (Abu Rass, 2011).

For example, in making appointments, a Muslim would say "*In sha'Allah*" (God willing) because as the Islamic belief dictates, it is only God who knows the future and the only one who knows whether the transaction or the appointment will take place at all. This might be frustrating for a Westerner who is expecting a "yes" or a "no" answer. Another example is the answer to the formulaic question: "how are you?" with "*Alhamdu li'Allah*" (praise be to God) for Arab-Muslims where in the other hand, there is a number of other expressions expected from a Westerner without any religious implications such as "I'm fine, thank you". The variety in responses to such questions may be confusing without a cultural background and may challenge the interlocutor's expectations as Yule's (1996: 5) description of his experience shall demonstrate:

When I first lived in Saudi Arabia, I tended to answer in Arabic about my health (the equivalent of ‘How are you?’) with the equivalent of my familiar routine responses of ‘Okay’ or ‘Fine’. However, I eventually noticed that when I asked a similar question, people generally answered with a phrase that had the literal meaning of ‘Praise to God’. I soon learned to use the new expression, wanting to be pragmatically appropriate in that context. My first type of answer wasn’t ‘wrong’ (my vocabulary and pronunciation weren’t inaccurate), but it did convey the meaning that I was a social outsider who answered in an unexpected way.

On the whole, language and culture are interconnected and play a role in shaping each other. For Arab-Muslims, though, religion seems to be a third variable that demonstrates even a stronger influence on both language and culture. This influence is primary for Arabic-speaking Muslims and secondary for non-Arabic-speaking Muslims considering the fact that Arabic is the official and original language of the Qur’an and most worship. The language-culture relationship is then to some extent obvious; yet, it is sometimes difficult to determine the connection of religion to them.



Figures 1. Religion, culture and language relationship

The relation between Islam, the Arabic language and culture could be explained into two ways. The first is that Islam directly influences language and culture and is not influenced by any of them. The second is that Islam influences culture which on its part influences language. However, there may be more potential explanations to this relationship that should not neglect the fact that religion, language and culture for Arab-Muslim societies are closely tied and immersed into each other that it becomes difficult to distinguish them and to trace the source of some linguistic usages and cultural tendencies.

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