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Language and Culture Interconnectedness

Zespoleńie języka i kultury

Abstract

Numerous criticism directed at the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis called forth the viewing of the hypothesis through the prism of language and culture interconnection and check to what extent the linguistic determinism is an applicable and useful tool in foreign language studies. For this reason, the present paper carries out a discussion to construct a somewhat modified version of the linguistic determinism idea by adding to the language-culture unit a third element such as expressiveness. To make the proposed here version of linguistic determinism comprehensible, it has been decided to describe and explain the notions of language, culture, and expressiveness to make them clear and digestible for the purpose of the present discussion.

In the course of the discussion, strengthened by quotations from the literature, the main stress is put on the language-culture interconnectedness viewed as the key element determining successful language studies, especially in the foreign languages domain. Finally, the attention is directed at the role of creativity and expressiveness as factors responsible for the level of the language user's competence, which, in turn, is viewed as creative communicative competence.

Key words: *language, culture, interconnection, expressiveness, competence, creativity.*

Abstrakt

Dość często pojawiająca się krytyka Hipotezy Sapira-Whorf'a wywołała potrzebę spojrzenia na tę hipotezę przez pryzmat wspólnego związku, jaki tworzą język i kultura oraz ustalenia w jakim stopniu determinizm lingwistyczny może służyć jako użyteczne narzędzie w nauce języka obcego. W tym względzie, niniejszy artykuł podejmuje dyskusję, celem której jest stworzenie zmodyfikowanego obrazu determinizmu lingwistycznego poprzez dodanie do układu łączącego w sobie język i kulturę, trzeciego elementu, jakim jest ekspresywność. Aby ukazać spójność zaproponowanej tu wersji determinizmu lingwistycznego, zdecydowano się na opis i wyjaśnienie pojęcia języka, kultury i ekspresywności, aby te pojęcia stały się klarowne i służyły celom prowadzonej tu dyskusji.

W trakcie dyskusji, wspartej odniesieniami do literatury, główny nacisk został położony na zespolenie, jakie tworzą język i kultura, co postrzegane jest jako główny element decydujący o powodzeniu w nauce języka, zwłaszcza w sferze nauki języków obcych. Finalnie, uwaga skierowana jest na role odgrywane przez kreatywność i ekspresywność, jako czynniki odpowiedzialne za poziom kompetencji użytkownika języka, co z kolei, postrzegane jest jako jego kreatywna – twórcza kompetencja komunikacyjna.

Słowa kluczowe: *język, kultura, związek wewnątrzsystemowy, ekspresywność, kompetencja, kreatywność.*

Language and Culture at Work

The modern world, especially now, being on the brink of the 21st century, is governed and guided by human communication. People representing different nations and cultures organize fora and panels to discuss and negotiate a variety of issues of global importance. For such debates, the *conditio sine qua non* is the adoption of internationally recognized means of communication. As in the civilized world of the Middle Ages the role of international language was played by Latin, nowadays, the same role has been assigned to English. This is the evidence that at any stage of human development and activity there has always been a need for communication and therefore, the employment of a commonly accepted linguistic instrument responsible for inevitable human contacts.

To use language effectively it is unquestionable, first, to construct, and then, to employ the whole system which is responsible for expressiveness of the language user. The term – system indicates that there must be mo-

re than one element as a component part. So, apart from language, in its traditional perception as a means of communication, at least one more constituent element of the system is a prerequisite, aiding linguistic creativity and expressiveness. It is quite reasonable that this constituent element must be culture, and especially the language user's cultural competence which, combined with linguistic competence, is responsible for expressiveness and thus, for success in communication. This sketchy account can be presented graphically in the form of communication triangle, where its three legs are GRAMMAR – CULTURE – EXPRESSIVENESS. (Zygmunt, 2008)

At first glance, the component parts of the communication triangle may seem arguable unless they are made plain and thus, comprehensible. Therefore, "grammar", in this case, is understood traditionally, as the branch of linguistics which deals with syntax and morphology, and in consequence, is a system of rules which makes language work. Hence, "grammar" is viewed as the study of how words and their component parts combine to form sentences and, finally, make the language user expressive. Indeed, grammar, as an element of the discussed here triangle, stands for language, denoting its core component part. So, whenever reference to grammar is given, it denotes language in its panoramic image which comprises, according to von Humboldt's terminology, language as a process (*energeia*), and as a product (*ergon*). Nevertheless, it is necessary to underscore that language has to be viewed as a system of graphic signs and vocalic signals which are used in the course of communication to pass on information, exchange views or demonstrate moods and feelings. The language signs, signals or symbols are utilized in the process of communication and become a conventional code acquired and known to language users who represent a given language community and are distinguished from another community by rituals they practice, social norms, manners or behavior. In this way language symbolizes cultural reality and testifies to the identity of those individuals who compose a culturally distinguished community. This standpoint is also supported by Kramsch who says that "*language is not culture-free-code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture...*". (Kramsch, 1998, p. 8) Even a rough analysis of the above quoted opinion makes us realize that the idea of linguistic determinism, as once presented by Benjamin Whorf (1956), is quite realistic. We must not forget that communities may differ with reference to the way of thinking and the mental characteristics of a given group of people, in general. In this respect, the somewhat controversial and criticized Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis gains momentum. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, as we actually

know it today, can be broken into two basic principles: linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity (referred to, later). It is linguistic determinism which puts a stress on the interconnection and interrelationship between language as a code, and culture as its background. The Hypothesis refers to the belief that the language we use to some extent determines the way in which we view and think about the world around us. The concept emphasizes the relationship between language and its user's thinking as an immanent act of mind, characteristic of people representing a social group. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that language actually determines thought.

"Culture", on the other hand, requires more detailed description as it refers to a much wider scope of human activity and knowledge. Defining culture is a specific task because among scholars there is no unanimity concerning the notion of this phenomenon which is commonly identified with civilization. Sometimes, they rely "*on a generic concept of culture as a collective name for language, religion, art, law, state, history, society, craft, etc.*" (Tenbruck, 1989, p. 18) It has to be underscored that the phenomenon of culture is multi-component and multi-constituent, and thus, requires a panoramic view, which, in turn, results in numerous standpoints and thus, definitions.

Quite recently, culture also began to attract the attention of linguists, ethnographers, translators, and foreign language educators who perceive the significance of implementation of cultural material into the foreign language curriculum. What comes out of such observations is the prevailing opinion pointing to the language user's cultural experience as the key factor which makes one's linguistic competence complete. From this view, in turn, comes out the notion of culture as an "*inherited system of ideas that structure the subjective experience of individuals*". (LeVine, 1984, p. 20) It means that culture has much to do with the shaping of the individual's identity, which, in many cases, is a decisive factor responsible for the quality of human contacts and thus, communication. Therefore, LeVine (1984) underscores a substantial integrity of culture and communication. The same point of view is also represented by many scholars who rightly say that communication and culture are acquired simultaneously and therefore, they cannot exist separately. Hence, this opinion, results in working out one more definition of culture, according to which culture "*is a shared consensual way of life, and that sharing and consensus are made possible only through communication*". (Haslett, 1989, p. 20)

More and more convincing and thus common becomes the opinion that it is impossible to acquire a new language completely and manifest its mastery without acquiring knowledge of social norms and cultural beliefs and values

of the speakers of the language in question. This is so, because “*meaning is embedded in cultural conceptions of context and that accordingly the process of acquiring language is embedded in the process of acquiring culture*”. (Ochs, 1987, p. 307) Again, a strong integrity and interconnection between language and culture can be found in Risager’s point of view, who says that “*human culture always includes language, and human language cannot be thought without culture. Linguistic practice is always embedded in, and in interaction with, some cultural, meaningful context*”. (Risager, 2006, p. 3)

Following the afore-quoted thoughts, we come to a very adequate definition by Ochs whose observations on culture may be considered as the quintessence of the on-going here discussion. According to her, culture is “*a system of implicit and explicit ideas that underlies and gives meaning to behaviors in society. These ideas are related (in various ways, to varying extents, according to school or paradigm) to political, economic, religious, and kinship relations, events, interactions, and institutions; to values; to conceptions of the world; to theories of knowledge; and to procedures for understanding and interpreting*”. (Ochs, 1987, p. 307) Without regard to drawbacks of any definition, a characteristic to be considered while discussing the phenomenon of culture is its social aspect. Since language is also a social construct, so, language and culture interconnectedness must be a natural process and the only instance of questioning and analysis is either the very process itself (*energeia*), or its output (*ergon*) created within a given period of time and on a given layer of human activity, such as, for example, political, economic, religious, interactional, educational, or translational just to mention a few. (Bednarová-Gibová, 2021)

Although briefly presented, it seems, however, that the images of language and culture have been adequately illustrated while building the picture of the communication triangle. So now, the third and final element of the triangle, that is expressiveness, has to be determined. The term “expressiveness” as used for the purpose of the present discussion and the working out of the idea of triangle is understood as a vivid and effective communication act in speech or writing. It is also an explicit and comprehensible presentation of the human mind’s product often full of emotions and feelings. Thus, expressiveness manifests the power of mind. Moreover, expressiveness, as mentioned earlier, has to be considered as the output resulting from the language – culture interconnectedness and interrelatedness. We can imagine that the procedure of interrelatedness which involves and activates language and culture, is a sort of clash between these two components of the communication triangle. This sort of clash results in the final product which

appears in the form of language, demonstrated by its user who represents a given cultural community. It is quite natural that this community, like any other, can be recognized by its political, economic, religious, educational or behavioral views, beliefs or matters, in general. Undoubtedly, views, beliefs, conceptions of the world or theories of knowledge are prerequisites for the understanding and interpreting of the language in use. Moreover, they become essential to carry on a discourse and comply with the principles both linguistic and cultural. (Zygmunt, 2017) Hence, it can be concluded that a high level of expressiveness testifies to the quality of communication in speech or writing, and therefore, to the style and elegance of language. Evidently, expressiveness is the result of interconnection and interaction between language and culture. As a matter of fact, expressiveness is directly related to the presence and linguistic activity of a human being – the individual who simultaneously uses language and represents culture. Therefore, the language user due to his linguistic performance becomes the main linking element, joining the legs of the communication triangle. In consequence, the notion of the communication triangle emerges as a three-leg construct composed of TOOL (grammar) – BACKGROUND (culture) – EFFECT (expressiveness). Each of the three component parts is marked by the human presence and each of them is made workable by a human being's activity.

From a variety of contemporary approaches to language and culture, one general conclusion may be drawn: namely, the unity of social life of a given social community is maintained by the community language since language is regarded as a social product and a communication device functioning within the community; for example, Labov (1972) considers language to be “a social institution”. Moreover, language, from what we have already learnt, appears to be a manifestation of culture as all kinds of social activity are generalized by language. This is so, because communication is inevitable in all cultures, and it involves all participants or consumers of culture, regardless of their social status and age. Language does not develop in isolation, and the development of Man is simultaneously the development of language and culture. Hereof, it is apparent that the process of language development, especially a foreign language should be regarded as intercultural education. You can hardly consider the language user's knowledge as complete without achieving the fullest possible competence, including cultural. (cf. Zygmunt, 2017) The above opinions find a very strong support in the newly “re-discovered” classics of Wittgenstein (1958, 1969), Vygotsky (1962, 1978), and Whorf (1956).

It is expected that so far, the carried out discourse has been substantially free from confusion or doubt. However, at this point a question arises;

namely, “Where does the interconnection between language and culture take place?” Since, we can take for granted that expressiveness is the result of the working of human mind, therefore, expressiveness must take place just in the human mind, that is in the mind of the individual who is involved in the process of communication, regardless of its form: spoken or written. Furthermore, we may ask one more question concerning the communicative repertoire put into service during a discourse by the language user. It appears that grammar is not sufficient to initiate discourse, although, from the initial part of the present discussion we know that grammar is used to combine words to form sentences and, finally, enables the language user to be expressive. However, the question would be rather directed at the substance which makes the triangle work and thus, initiate communication. Hence, we would ask as follows: “What activates the triangle?” or “What makes expressiveness evident?” The answer seems to be simple but we would never think about the core issue and correct answer unless we ask such questions. Therefore, the issue that is thought about here is lexis. Hence, the inside of the communication triangle already created by the language user and stored in his mind is filled with lexicon, that is his knowledge of words. Hence, the use of lexicon makes expressiveness evident; an appropriate use of words activates the triangle and makes the language user expressive due to his ability to combine linguistic competence with cultural competence. Depending on the user’s lexical repertory, his creativity and expressiveness may reach either a high or low level of communication. Here again, we come across one more evidence of language and culture interconnectedness since there must be a source for a list of words making up a lexicon. “*This is just the language user’s culture which is a supplier of names and notions, producing a lexicon. All these names and notions are the product of thought and all of them are neatly ordered in accordance with the rules responsible for logical expressiveness in the language, being an instrument used within a given community for the purpose of communication*”. (Zygmunt, 2016, p. 50)

In any discussion over expressiveness and its lexical source, it must be remembered that lexicon may appear in two forms: universal and individual. A universal lexicon is a sort of dictionary of the widest possible scope of linguistic applicability while an individual lexicon is the repertory of names and notions stored in the language user’s mind. Therefore, the universal form is homogenous while the individual one is heterogenous, which means that every single member of a social community, distinguished by its cultural principles, possesses and thus, may demonstrate during communication different names and notions, depending on what he stores in his individual

repertory. So, it is evident that the contents of the lexical repertory testifies to the level of the individual's creativity and expressiveness and thus, it simultaneously provides evidence for the quality of his or her development at the level of language and culture. This is so because we have to remember that the language user's culture is responsible for producing a lexicon. This point of view finds support in Elinore Ochs who says, in the earlier part of the present discussion, that "*meaning is embedded in cultural conceptions...*". Therefore, if we consider two languages as immanent parts of two cultures, we have to take into account that meaning and distinctions encoded in one language only, are unique to that language alone. This is the essence of linguistic relativity once presented by Benjamin Lee Whorf as hypothesis, which nowadays is being rediscovered, especially if it comes to deal with some problems in translatability. Moreover, linguistic relativity, marked with its idea of completely arbitrary compartments full of culturally determined meanings, gives a strong support to the status of language and culture interconnectedness and mutuality.

Conclusions

By all accounts, language elegance and expressiveness par excellence are the proofs for interconnectedness and interaction between language and culture. Furthermore, interconnection and interaction between language and culture or even interdependence makes us aware of a serious education problem which teachers of foreign languages may face in their teaching practice. From the above presented discussion comes out that teaching a language is simultaneous with the teaching of the culture associated with this language. We have already learnt that "*human culture always includes language, and human language cannot be thought without culture*". Therefore, the teaching/learning process aimed at philology students, especially foreign language students, should be focused on developing in them a sort of creative communicative competence, being a vivid illustration of how language and culture work together. (cf. Zygmunt, 2017) Not only students of philology but also language users such as, for example, journalists, translators or politicians, have to be sensitive to interdependence and interconnection between language and culture because their wrong selection of lexical items from their repertory will result in an inability to understand them or in their misunderstanding. Even a more serious problem is language offensiveness; deficits in cultural competence may cause that your neatly constructed utterances are grammatically correct, but your language output is offensive from the point of view of culture.

It is believed that the aim of the present discussion has been attained and the reader's attention directed at language and culture interconnectedness perceived as a separate area to be dealt with in the teaching/learning process designed for philologists. So, instead of criticism, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has been viewed and revised here from a different perspective in order to make us sensitive to the effect, that is the output of the language-culture interconnection and interrelatedness and thus – productive interaction.

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