

# Culture and Language Correlation in Language Learning, Language Teaching and Communication

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## Abstract

The significance of culture and language, the place of culture in language acquisition and the culture-language relationship has been examined in this study. It has been detected that culture is more than a component for language; it is like an indispensable part of a machine for language. It has crucial importance to understand the way of lives of people of the target language and to analyse the socio-cultural structure of them to be component in a (foreign) language. Lots of materials can be read, understood if one has concentrated on the target language, but it is sure that it is highly difficult to be capable of speaking, understanding the daily language, proverbs, idioms, social life and the world of the target language's country.

'Culture' derives from the Latin word *cultura* and it stems from *colere* which means "to cultivate". From academic to ordinary matters, there is a wide usage of the term as there is much debate on its definition. It is very common to see the word 'culture' in daily language, in the articles and etc. Moreover there are infinite studies, books, thoughts and theories on it. While having so many materials and definitions, it would be proper to use one the most general definitions for culture instead of an individual definition. One of these general definitions but the most encompassing one is delivered by R. Wardhaugh and K. Goodenough who explain *culture* with these words:

A few words are necessary concerning what we mean by 'culture'. We do not intend to use the term *culture* in the sense of 'high culture', i.e., the

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appreciation of music, literature, the arts, and so on. Rather, we intend to use it in the sense of whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society. A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.' That knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviours are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Culture, therefore, is the 'know-how' that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; only for a few does it require a knowledge of some, or much, music, literature, and the arts" (211).

Despite the general tendency to include it into the science of anthropology, culture should rather be considered as one of the most important and inseparable components of language and of course of philology. In fact, it is nearly impossible to examine any branch of social sciences without 'culture' and its elements, because culture lives in and with sociology, psychology, philosophy, literature... Following these explanations, language takes the second priority within the context of the culture, which stands to reason why language and culture can not be thought separate.

Language, that is, our total communicative ability, allows us to develop "human" qualities by learning from vicarious and symbolic (as well as direct) experiences, to help formulate our thoughts, and to convey them to someone else. Without language, none of this is possible. Put another way, communicative ability allows culture development through interaction and communication with other individuals. Language serves as the construct that aids cultural development" (Fantini 5).

About the relationship between "culture and language", Prof. Dr. Mehmet KAPLAN in his unique work *Culture and Language*<sup>2</sup>, he asserts that "Language is the basis of culture and as it so; anything mentioned by the people of a society -oral or written- is a part of culture" (Kaplan 139). That generic and broad statement can cause one to think that culture is such a complex topic that it is extremely hard to analyse it systematically and to be able to write on it. That is not true, of course, but it has always been difficult to draw the lines of culture and to explain the relationship between language and culture.

The exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has fascinated, and continues to fascinate people from a wide variety of backgrounds. That there should be some kind of relationship between the

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2 The original name of the book in Turkish is *Kültür ve Dil* and there is not a translated version.

sounds, words, and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it seems so obvious as to be a truism. It would appear that the only problem is deciding the nature of the relationship and finding suitable ways to demonstrate it” (Wardhaugh 211).

The definition of language is so complex and there are so many different components and all these components are so significant that it may be hard to comprehend the significance of language at first glance. As it is more than a system to encode and decode information, as it plays a vital role in the policies of governments, and as it is the magnificent arm to be powerful in the world, there is no need to explain its persistently increasing importance. In the circumstances though it is sometimes invisible, ‘culture’ always kept being the hidden hero in this process. While having such a vital function, the right increase of the importance of learning or teaching a language becomes inevitable. And what is the function and prominence of culture in this learning or teaching process?

When language is regarded as a social practice, the concept of culture develops into the heart of language teaching. The main aim behind teaching culture is to help learners to understand the roles and identities in the target community by putting forth special resources and forces. In other words, cultural elements are applied in the realization of the spoken and written discourse which can be further termed as *cultural* competence. In the processes of language learning, the knowledge of the communication patterns, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country is an indispensable component. Since *cultural* awareness is concerned in the light of communicative competence, it empowers the realization of language proficiency together with the natural outcomes. Cultural awareness is a considerable factor in terms of creating cross-cultural personality among foreign language learners. Then, it can be put forward that with the help of teaching “target” culture, the students of a foreign language develop their abilities to get a sense of the humanity of the people in the target community (qtd. in Mengü, Sarıçoban).

For these reasons, the significance of culture in the learning or teaching process of a language should not be ignored. Many linguists, philologists, anthropologists and letter of men come up with the idea that culture and language gain meaning when they are handled together. Language (teaching) without culture or, culture (teaching) without language does not sense anything.

“Many students (and some teachers) view language only as a communication tool-a methods human use to indicate the objects and

ideas of their physical and social world. In this view, languages are sets of words tied together by rules, and learning a foreign or second language is the simple (but tedious) process of substituting words and rules to get the same meaning with a different tool. This kind of thinking can lead to becoming a “fluent fool.” A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well but does not understand the social or philosophical content of that language. Such people are likely to get into all sorts of trouble because both they themselves and others overestimate their ability. They may be invited into complicated social situations where they cannot understand the events deeply enough to avoid giving or taking offense. Eventually, fluent fools may develop negative opinions of the native speakers whose language they understand but whose basic beliefs and values continue to elude them” (Fantini 16).

On the other hand, without teaching these cultural issues like belief, custom, morals and superstitions, one can not wait the learner to understand the target language properly. If we compare Turkish and English cultures on this topic, it would not be too difficult to find numerous examples. While ‘owl’ in Turkish culture is a negative metaphor which is generally used for inauspicious events or people, in English culture (also in the Continent or in other western countries) it reminds people ‘wisdom’, moreover the word “owl” itself is used as an equivalent for ‘wisdom’. Another example may be the number ‘13’, while it is accepted inauspicious in western culture; it has no special meaning in Turkish (culture).

“Understanding the cultural context of day-to-day conversational conventions such as greetings, farewells, forms of address, thanking, making requests, and giving or receiving compliments means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language. Culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language learning. Second language teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach. Student can be successful in speaking a second language only if cultural issues are an inherent part of the curriculum” (Peterson and Coltrane 2).

In addition to these, it is notably common to see that the dictionaries are inadequate to paraphrase or translate or just to understand a word. When the situation is so, misunderstanding or misinterpretation becomes inevitable. Is it possible to explain the Turkish word ‘*aşiret*’ to a foreigner by using the words ‘clan or tribe’, if he/she has no idea about the social

structure of some parts of Turkey? Else, as the daily language plays a great role in culture and communication, even intonation is crucial while talking. Through intonation it is possible to make a positive sentence into a positive sentence or into a question sentence.

“We give and take orders, request help, commiserate, chat with friends, deliberate, negotiate, gossip, seek advice and so on. We participate in such routine activities, with relative ease and can easily distinguish one activity from other. For example, we usually tell when utterance ‘What are you doing?’ is meant as prelude to an invitation and when it is meant as a reproach” (Hall 9).

It is even tough to translate this sentence, ‘My mother died of consumption.’ as ‘My mother died of tuberculosis.’ without daily language experience, advanced knowledge on the target language or cultural background. These theories are advocated by Samovar, Porter, & Jain with these words:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... (24)

Another crucial issue on language and culture relation is proverbs and idioms. Many years in teaching a foreign language or living in a foreign country for decades might not be adequate to understand the proverbs and idioms which constitute the fundamentals of a culture within the context of the language.

Whether called maxims, truisms, clichés, idioms, expressions or sayings, proverbs are small packages of truth about a people’s values and beliefs. Values like ambition, virtue, generosity, patience are addressed in sayings from most every culture. Yet, each culture has proverbs that are unique to it. The saying, “If you want to know a people, know their proverbs” illustrates this (Schuster 1).

The examples to these proverbs or idioms are so numerous that there are special dictionaries published just for that. However just few of these examples<sup>3</sup> in English are:

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3 The examples and definitions of the idioms are from *Oxford Idioms Dictionary For Learners of English*.

- Don't Count Your Chickens: means not to think about the future before we reach it.
- talk of the devil: said when somebody who has just been mentioned appears unexpectedly.
- recharge your batteries: rest for a while to get more energy for the next period of activity.
- die in your bed: die of old age or illness.
- fish for compliments: encourage somebody to say nice things about you.
- join the club: said as a reply to somebody who tells you their bad news when you have been in the same situation yourself; an expression of sympathy.

If we handle just the last example, is it possible for the learner to understand the idiom without cultural background. Moreover, if he/she is saying something really very sorrowing and if the native speaker(s) is/are trying to say that they have the same problem or they are in the same problem with this idiom, there will be a misunderstanding with a high degree of probability. As it is clear in this idiom example,

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them (Kramsch 1).

All in all, culture and language are not separate components and even thinking of them as separate notions would be a great fault. And in teaching a language, without or inadequate cultural background it is not possible to fulfil a proper teaching, learning or acquisition. "Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language" (Krasner, 1999).

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