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Current issues

The relationship of language and culture in language study is one of the most hotly debated issues at the present time. Because language is closely related to the way we think, and to the way we behave and influence the behavior of others, the notion that our sense of social reality may be but a construction of language or 'language game' is disturbing. The notion that a person's social and cultural identity may not be the immutable monolithic entity it is usually taken for, but a kaleidoscope of various presentations and representations of self through language, is unsettling. These uncertainties explain in part the current debates surrounding the role of the native speaker, the concept of cultural authenticity, the notions of cross-, inter-, and multicultural communication and what has become known as **the politics of recognition** (see page 124).

Who is a native speaker?

Linguists have relied on *native speakers'* natural intuitions of grammatical accuracy and their sure sense of what is proper language use to establish a norm against which the performance of non-native speakers is measured. Native speakers have traditionally enjoyed a natural prestige as language teachers, because they are seen as not only embodying the 'authentic' use of the language, but as representing its original cultural context as well. In recent times, the identity as well as the authority of the native speaker have been put into question. The 'native speaker' of linguists and language teachers is in fact an abstraction based on arbitrarily selected features of pronunciation, grammar and

lexicon, as well as on stereotypical features of appearance and demeanor. For example, children of Turkish parents and bearing a Turkish surname, but born, raised, and educated in Germany may have some difficulty being perceived as native speakers of German when applying for a language teaching job abroad, so entrenched is the association of one language with one national stereotype in the public imagination, as discussed in the last chapter. The native speaker is, moreover, a monolingual, monocultural abstraction; he/she is one who speaks only his/her (standardized) native tongue and lives by one (standardized) national culture. In reality, most people partake of various languages or language varieties and live by various cultures and subcultures (see Chapter 1).

Hence, we are faced once again with the old nature/culture debate. It is not clear whether one is a native speaker by birth, or by education, or by virtue of being recognized and accepted as a member of a like-minded cultural group. If the last seems to be the case, ideal nativeness and claims to a certain ownership of a language must give way to multifarious combinations of language use and membership in various discourse communities—more than has been up to now assumed under the label ‘native speaker’.

Cultural authenticity

Much of the discussion surrounding the native speaker has been focused around two concepts: authenticity and *appropriateness*. By analogy with the creation of standard languages, nation-states have promoted a standardized notion of cultural authenticity that has served to rally emotional identification both at home and abroad. Stereotypes, like French chic, German know-how, American casualness, are shorthand symbols, readily recognized and applied to their respective realities; they help draw cultural boundaries between Us and Others in order to appreciate the uniqueness of both. Language learners, keen on slipping into someone else’s shoes by learning their language, attach great importance to the cultural authenticity of French bread or German train schedules, and the cultural appropriateness of Japanese salutations or Chinese greeting ceremonies. Their desire to learn the language of others is often coupled with a desire to

behave and think like them, in order to ultimately be recognized and validated by them.

However, two factors are putting the notion of authenticity and appropriateness in language learning into question. First, the diversity of authenticities within one national society, depending on such contextual variables as age, social status, gender, ethnicity, race; what is authentic in one context might be inauthentic in another. Second, the undesirability of imposing on learners a concept of authenticity that might devalue their own authentic selves *as learners*. Thus cultural appropriateness may need to be replaced by the concept of **appropriation**, whereby learners make a foreign language and culture their own by adopting and adapting it to their own needs and interests. The ability to acquire another person's language and understand someone else's culture while retaining one's own is one aspect of a more general ability to mediate between several languages and cultures, called cross-cultural, intercultural, or multicultural communication.

Cross-cultural, intercultural, multicultural

Depending on how culture is defined and which discipline one comes from, various terms are used to refer to communication between people who don't share the same nationality, social or ethnic origin, gender, age, occupation, or sexual preference. The nomenclature overlaps somewhat in its use.

The term 'cross-cultural' or **Intercultural** usually refers to the meeting of two cultures or two languages across the political boundaries of nation-states. They are predicated on the equivalence of one nation-one culture-one language, and on the expectation that a 'culture shock' may take place upon crossing national boundaries. In foreign language teaching a cross-cultural approach seeks ways to understand the Other on the other side of the border by learning his/her national language.

The term intercultural may also refer to communication between people from different ethnic, social, gendered cultures within the boundaries of the same national language. Both terms are used to characterize communication, say, between Chinese-Americans and African-Americans, between working-class and

upper-class people, between gays and heterosexuals, between men and women. Intercultural communication refers to the dialogue between minority cultures and dominant cultures, and are associated with issues of bilingualism and biculturalism.

The term **multicultural** is more frequently used in two ways. In a societal sense, it indicates the coexistence of people from many different backgrounds and ethnicities, as in 'multicultural societies'. In an individual sense, it characterizes persons who belong to various discourse communities, and who therefore have the linguistic resources and social strategies to affiliate and identify with many different cultures and ways of using language. The cultural identity of multicultural individuals is not that of multiple native speakers, but, rather, it is made of a multiplicity of social roles or 'subject positions' which they occupy selectively, depending on the interactional context in which they find themselves at the time.

The politics of recognition

Finally we turn to the difficult and complex issue of what has been called 'tolerance', 'empathy', or, from a political perspective, 'recognition' of other cultures. Individuals need to be recognized both in their individual and in their social group identity. But as with facework (see Chapter 4), these two demands might be incompatible. As individuals, they deserve the same respect and human rights protection given to all individuals by the laws of a democratic society; but as members of a cultural group they deserve to be given special rights and recognition. In other words, 'I want you to recognize me as the same as you, but at the same time I want you to recognize how different I am from you'. Simply put: should one recognize sameness or separateness?

The struggle for recognition, expressed here as 'we are equal but different', seems to be based on an assumption of equal worth, where 'I' or 'you' can be 'we' because we share a tight common purpose and can work towards the common good. But a common purpose and a common definition of what is good precludes any differentiation of roles and world views. Both the universal and the particular are abstractions that gloss over more fundamental realities of unequal power, authority, and legitimation. What is

needed, then, is not peremptory and inauthentic judgments of equal value or of the relative worth of different cultures, but a willingness to accept that our horizons might be displaced as we attempt to understand the other. In the same manner as we should not confuse bureaucratic and self-ascribed cultural identity, so we should not presume that the cultural categories we use to judge the worth of other cultures are universal.

Given the recent large-scale migrations around the world, this is a difficult issue that politicians are grappling with in almost every industrialized society. National governments that promote multicultural, multiracial harmony like Singapore or the US, one could argue, in fact enhance ethnic separateness by constantly drawing attention to 'racial' and 'ethnic' identities. Such distinctions may be bolstered by religion. For example, in Singapore, the differing beliefs and practices of Chinese Taoists or Buddhists, Indian Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, and Islamic Malays maintain cultural and ethnic separatism despite the strong claim to a national Singaporean identity. These distinctions might also be strengthened by the educational system, for instance in the United States where a decentralized school system, financed mainly by local property taxes, ensures the perpetuation in schools of the local social class structure and local ethnic and racial distribution.

In modern urban communities where the individual cannot rely on predefined social scripts, nor on universally or nationally accepted moral principles, to find his/her cultural self, cultural identities are seen as being formed in open dialogue with others. Communicative practices reflect institutionalized networks of relationships, defined by the family, the school, the workplace, the professional organization, the church, each with its own power hierarchy, its expected roles and statuses, its characteristic values and beliefs, attitudes and ideologies. This may be as far as we may go in defining the boundaries of one's cultural identity. Geographic mobility, professional change, and the vagaries of life may give a person multiple social identities that all get played out alternately on the complex framings and reframings of daily encounters.

However, such a multicultural view of the link between language and cultural identity has to be recognized as stemming, itself, from an urban, industrialized intellectual tradition. A

growing gulf is opening up not between national cultures, but between those who can afford to be supranational cosmopolitans—through access to the Internet, travel privileges, knowledge of several languages beside English, ability and freedom to code-switch between them—and those who are rooted in one national or religious culture. The description suggested above of the plurality and multiplicity of cultural identities within one individual might be violently rejected by people from a different intellectual tradition for whom categories of identity are much more stable consensual affairs.

This brief survey of the multifarious links between language and culture has led us from a study of signs and their meanings all the way to issues of cultural identity and cultural survival. In the realm of the symbolic, the stakes are high. Equally urgent is the necessity to cast as broad a semiotic net as possible in the study of language and culture, and to honor the marvelous difference and diversity among and within human beings.