

# Cultural Awareness in Language Studies

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*El presente estudio de campo aborda los problemas de comunicación que pueden surgir en el contexto de la enseñanza y aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Específicamente, se analiza la necesidad de introducir el contexto cultural de la lengua de destino para superar las posibles deficiencias comunicativas, en el ámbito de la instrucción de la lengua inglesa a estudiantes universitarios lituanos. Tras ponderar las diversas reacciones de los estudiantes muestreados ante la exposición a la cultura anglosajona, llevada a cabo con la proyección y posterior discusión de dos películas, Animal Farm (Rebelión en la granja) y Waiting to Exhale (Esperando un respiro), los autores concluyen que el concepto de «conocimiento» o «conciencia cultural» constituye un elemento fundamental en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, cuya ausencia puede provocar el fracaso en la comunicación. Sin embargo, la enseñanza de tal noción debe integrarse y complementarse con el espectro cognitivo de la lengua y cultura del hablante nativo si se pretende conseguir una habilidad comunicativa eficaz en la lengua de destino.*

## 1. Introduction

Globalization is creating new needs for effective communication across cultures, and is also requiring new and different types of communication skills for the increasing number of international interactions taking place through new technologies. The impact of new technologies has put forward new challenges. Language learners may be equipped with the technology for communicating internationally, but they might lack the knowledge and skills required for successful intercultural communication. The relationship between language and culture is complex. A strong cultural focus has an immense potential in language teaching/learning. Attitudes, orientations, emotions and expressions differ strongly among people from one nation to the other. These differences are fundamentally cultural.

The central concern of those who study languages and culture is to understand processes of meaning-making, to account for different meanings, and to examine their effects in social life.

The problem to be discussed in this article is miscommunication, which comes as the result of a wrong cognition of the implied meaning. Some cultural meanings might be universal across cultures; some may considerably differ; some are enduring in persons and across generations; some are shared, thematically unifying. This paper aims at analyzing how the learners who do not belong to the target culture perceive the cultural meaning through the language they study.

Culture in Language Studies is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on 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 need it most, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them (Kramsch, 1993). This view of culture places it in a very central role: Simon Greenall (in Gaston, 1992) has pointed out that errors of lexis and grammar are seldom likely to get you into real trouble, whereas sociocultural errors and misunderstandings, which are very often made or mediated through language, can do so.

To become a mediator between different cultures one should reflect on one's own culture, to consider one's own and the others' cultures from different perspectives. Penz (2001: 103) notes that in language teaching there has been a strong dichotomy between language and culture. Culture has often been seen as contents conveyed by language, but separate from language. However, many researchers (Kramsch, 1994: 8; Van Lier 1996: 42) argue that culture becomes the very core of language teaching if language is seen as a social practice.

In Europe the question of culture and language teaching has become particularly prominent in the last few years, which is also reflected in a number of Council of Europe publications, as would be the case of Byram and Zarate (1997), and their views about socio-cultural competence as part of intercultural communicative competence.

In the discussions about the role of culture in language teaching, varying terminology has been used. One of the terms which has gained prominence is «cultural awareness». This concept is connected to a number of other terms such as «intercultural communication», «intercultural communicative competence», «intercultural studies», etc., and should be seen in relation to these.

Another issue is the question of how language awareness may facilitate language learning. According to Gnutzmann (1997: 228), developing awareness of the relationship between mother tongue and foreign language education is a particularly important factor of language awareness. Fenner (2001) states that foreign language learning was throughout regarded, less as the development of specific skills, than as enabling the learners to react linguistically and culturally in an appropriate manner in communication situations which were not predetermined. Such situations require that learners apply general cultural and linguistic competence and awareness, not only of the foreign language and culture, but also of their own.

## **2. Meaning and culture**

Culture includes shared understandings of all sorts of objects and events. Our experiences in our own and other societies keep reminding us that some meanings are widely shared among members of a social group, surprisingly resistant to change in the thinking of individuals, broadly applicable across different contexts in their lives, powerfully motivating sources of their action, and remarkably stable over succeeding generations. To omit this older view of culture from current thinking about it is to ignore the fact that both domination and everyday practices rest on shared interpretive schemes;

schemes learned in ways that sometimes render them resistant to change (Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 3). Furthermore, Hudson (1980: 96) notes that each cultural item activates a different set of beliefs and values.

Different scholars might emphasize different analytic dimensions of meaning and value, stressing artifacts, norms, customs, habits, practices, rituals, symbols, categories, codes, ideas, values, discourse, worldviews, ideologies or principles. And this list, according to Lyn Spillman (2002: 4), is not exhaustive; any list of cultural «things» will necessarily be incomplete because meaning and interpretation are active and fluid processes. Tylor (1958) equated culture with socially learned ideas and behaviors. Most recently, argues Hannerz (1992), culture has been taken to be above all a matter of meaning. Contemporary scholars in the Humanities as well as in the Social Sciences treat culture as «processes of meaning-making» (Spillman, 2002).

Philosophers have long debated this, particularly with respect to the meaning of words and sentences. Some have proposed that the meaning of a term or sentence is its referent (i.e. the thing or situation in the world it stands for). Others, most notably John Locke, argued that linguistic expressions were the external, public mark of ideas in people's heads and gained their meanings only in relation to those ideas (Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 5).

According to Spiro (1987: 163), what a word, an object or an event means to somebody depends on exactly what they are experiencing at the moment and the interpretive framework they bring to the moment as a result of their past experiences. A cultural meaning is the typical interpretation of some type of object or event evoked in the people as a result of their similar life experiences. To call it a cultural meaning is to imply that a different interpretation would be evoked in people with different characteristic life experiences.

Strauss and Quinn (1997: 7) suggest that cultures are not bounded and separable. You share some experiences with people who listen to the same music or watch the same television shows that you do; other experiences with people who do the same work you do; and still others with people who have had formal schooling like yours, even if you live in opposite sides of the world. This makes each person a junction point for an infinite number of partially overlapping cultures.

The nature of the relationship between language and our perception and understanding of the world has been approached from many perspectives, one of the most influential being the work of the linguists Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir (Macionis, 1998: 107). Sapir and Whorf noted that each language has words or expressions with no precise counterparts in other tongues. In addition, all languages fuse symbols with distinctive emotions. Thus, a single idea may often feel different if spoken in German rather than in English or Chinese. Language shapes the way we think. In other words, language structures our perception of the world.

Lyn Spillman (2002: 7, 8) provides three perspectives to approach the study of meaning-making processes: first, he discusses meaning-making processes «on the ground», which means investigating how interactions constitute meanings and how individuals use them. To use the second perspective is to analyze meaning-making processes «in the institutional field», as they occur within fields of institutions or networks of cultural producers. The third approach is to research meaning-making «in the text», focusing on features of culture and drawing on insights about textual analysis more widely used in the Humanities than in the Social Sciences.

### 3. Methodology

To research the role of cultural awareness in language studies a sample of 120 Lithuanian students has been drawn. The sample involved the first and the second year students, English language learners, both male and female, aged 18-21. Eighty per cent of the students were from the Faculty of Computer Sciences, while twenty per cent belonged to the Faculty of Social Sciences. Their level of language proficiency was ranging from pre-intermediate to advanced. They had no special preparation in American Cultural Studies and none of them had ever visited America. The respondents were interviewed after watching several American films in the original. The research methods consisted of interview analysis and participant observation. (See appendices I and II for the questionnaires handed out to students).

The shift from a culture of print to a culture of seeing which began in the second half of the nineteenth century and gained its full force with the arrival of film and other twentieth-century mass media is one of the most significant events of American cultural history. As part of this shift, but also as a result of it, a culture of performance emerged, which relied on spectacle, exhibition, visibility and ostentatious expressiveness, and which, in turn, created a language of non-verbal expression that became the basis for the world-wide dissemination of American mass culture. This is the reason why we have chosen film as a genre to be analyzed and discussed with the students during the language classes. Before viewing the film the students were given a list of questions. The interviews followed afterwards.

We should bear in mind that students have seen a good amount of American films and that through them they have already constructed their image of American society. Many of the students see it as a country of dreams, of possibilities, and many would like to get a job there or maybe even to emigrate. The «American Dream» is possibly the best-known myth connected to the culture of the United States. This «super-myth» is made up of different similarly well-known sub-myths such as the «frontier», the «melting pot», and the notorious «American exceptionalism». These American ideals, however, have always a hidden underside that has surfaced in American nightmares such as slavery, the genocide of the Native Americans, and the Vietnam War. But the picture Lithuanian youngsters have acquired of America seems to be based on Hollywood productions, not reflecting such important societal issues as ethnic pluralism, power, race or gender equality.

The first film shown, *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), directed by Forest Whitaker and starring Whitney Houston and Angela Bassett, is based on Terry McMillan's best-selling homonymous novel. It is a film about four African-American women who find strength through their rare and special friendship.

The second film, *Animal Farm* (1999 [1954]), directed by John Halas and Joy Batchelor is an adaptation of George Orwell's satire, labelled the most famous work of political allegory ever written. This full-length animated film uses animals to depict the flaws in political systems, providing a brilliant description of what happens when the revolution goes astray. Allegory is hard to produce gracefully, but Orwell manages it superbly: while true appreciation of *Animal Farm* requires an understanding of the history

of the Russian Revolution, those without it will still get the point. And *Animal Farm* can even be appreciated as a story for children regardless of the political message (Yee, 1992).

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

Film cognition has been analyzed following Lyn Spillman's (2002) meaning-making «on the ground» perspective.

It should be noted that the film *Waiting to Exhale* might be considered as a typical reworking of the «Cinderella» story. One of the central narratives of nineteenth-century literature and twentieth-century popular culture is the symbolic transformation of weakness into strength. A young male or female character, who is at first treated badly, ignored, deserted or ridiculed, eventually finds his or her well-deserved recognition. The typical male genre for this story is the adventure story; a prevalent female narrative draws on the «Cinderella» motif in various forms and variations. Some popular films follow the change which the search for symbolic recognition has undergone in American culture and, specifically, in women's culture. The strong female characters that finally emerge at the end of the film «Waiting to Exhale» are Black, which doubles the effect of achievement. And this is exceptionally striking for a white male to recognize, especially if one is used to viewing typically male adventure stories.

We could observe that the film was perceived in quite a different way depending on the social background of respondents. Most of the students were surprised and even annoyed that all the actors in the film were Black. Male respondents were astonished by the fact that the main characters were women. When asked if they could recommend the film to be viewed in Lithuania, male students would answer that only women might be attracted by it. They seemed not to have liked it very much.

Is it because the life of black women is being depicted? Are they prejudiced against race or gender? Sean Means (<[www.movieclub.com/reviews/archives](http://www.movieclub.com/reviews/archives)>) in his commentary of the film agrees that women are the target audience, while men are just targets. This two-hour-plus celebration of African-American sisterhood should appeal to women, but does have its charms for men willing to appreciate them. Female viewers supported the point made by Sean Means, as all of them seemed to have enjoyed watching the film. The positive image of Black people, supported by the fact that the film won an award for promoting the positive portrayal of African-Americans in entertainment, was again striking for the male viewers, as they had already formed a stereotype of the Black being criminals, drug-dealers and uneducated idles. Stereotypes gained through the media seem to be very influential. Storylines involving black people tend to emphasize conflicts, problems and cultural differences. Non-white people are shown when the theme is racism or racial conflict, but shown far less often as ordinary people living ordinary lives. To explain the stereotypical thinking of the viewers, one should bear in mind that Lithuanian society is a homogeneous one and, hence, thus comes the construction of their social reality. Lithuanian viewers watch American films through the lens of the Lithuanian cultural and social background. Thus, the judgments made are based on values, beliefs and attitudes

formed in a home culture. Therefore, miscommunication or the wrong interpretation of the meaning arise. A failure to recognize difference eventually leads to rejection. On the other hand, the research revealed that female viewers turned out to be more tolerant, more understanding. This could be explained by the fact that female problems are perceived in a much similar way across different cultures, independently of ethnicity or race.

The analysis of the second film, *Animal Farm*, evoked contradictory evaluations depending on the cultural background that the viewers had previously constructed. This time the ethnicity of the respondents acted as a dividing line for their evaluations. There were students shocked by the film, which they understood as a direct parody of the Soviet regime. For those who had spent their childhoods living in Russia and had had some good childhood memories from the Soviet times, it was rather shocking to view the film and to evaluate the system they had lived in through the eyes of an American director. They commented that «the American producer [sic] had no understanding how it has been in reality» and they were furious saying, «how could the American producer [sic] dare make a film like that». Still the majority of the respondents viewed it as a political allegory and perceived the meaning implied by the author. There was a group of respondents who viewed the film as a children cartoon, an interpretation possibly deriving from the background knowledge provided by the images of talking animals. In fact, one of the commentaries about the film found in «The Internet Movie Database» states: «while watching this film, I wondered who the intended audience might be. By making an animated version, adults who were not familiar with the novel may not want to watch it. Also, the seriousness of the story might not appeal to children» (<<http://us.imdb.com>>).

Summing up, we might say that in the latter case culture might be seen as ideology: meaning-making is important to understand what is «really» going on in a society.

## 5. Conclusions

The problem discussed in this paper is very wide and the findings might be considered as contradictory. Miscommunication might occur as a result of the lack of knowledge about the target culture. In order to avoid miscommunication one should integrate language with the study of the target culture. It is not enough to be acquainted with the popular culture which spreads through music, films, or eating habits. Social problems are equally important to be aware of, otherwise the interpretation and cognition of meaning might be totally wrong. Some of the students failed to interpret the films they had watched, which could be explained by the lack of cultural and social knowledge they had gained so far.

Our findings indicate that it is common to add a «romantic touch» to everything that is culturally not known and not recognized. When communicating people use lots of value-loaded words, and, through language, a whole set of values, attitudes and beliefs could be expressed. Language cannot exist apart from the social and cultural context; moreover, meaning-making and cognition are heavily dependent on such social factors as gender, age, education, social class, and ethnicity.

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**Appendix I**

Interview questions, discussed after viewing the film *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), director Forest Whitaker.

- Review the plot of the film. What happened to each of the four characters?  
.....
- How would you describe the relationship between the four women?  
.....
- Which main character was your favourite? Why?  
.....
- What surprises you most about this film, if anything?  
.....
- The women in this film are portrayed as strong, independent, and able to exert an influence in their own lives. Are young people in Lithuania similar? What about women?  
.....
- Describe the attitude towards sex in the film. How did that strike you? Is this different from the attitude in Lithuania? Why or why not?  
.....
- Did you learn something about the United States from the film? What did you learn? Is it possible to learn about a different country from a film?  
.....
- Would this film be popular in Lithuania? Why or why not?  
.....
- Your age: .....
- Sex:        ☐ Male                ☐ Female
- Faculty: .....
- Ethnicity:   ☐ Lithuanian   ☐ Russian   ☐ Polish   ☐ Other .....
- Place of residence (of your parents):        ☐ Vilnius   ☐ Kaunas  
   ☐ Klaipeda   ☐ Šiauliai   ☐ Other .....

## Appendix II

Interview questions, discussed after viewing the film *Animal Farm* (1999), directors John Halas and Joy Batchelor.

1. The novel *Animal Farm* is a satire of the Russian Revolution, and therefore full of symbolism. G. Orwell associates certain real characters and historical events with the characters and events in the book. Identify them:

Old Major  
Napoleon  
Snowball  
Squealer  
Boxer  
Jessie  
Pigs  
Dogs  
Moses  
Pigeons  
Windmill (destruction of it)  
Farm buildings  
Mr. Jones

2. The pigs made up seven commandments:

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill another animal.
7. All animals are equal.

Comment on how they changed when pigs took over the ruling of the farm.

3. What are the two parallels of the plot?
4. Did the work in the farm have any sense?
5. What happened to the most loyal worker?
6. How did the animals spend their years of oppression?

7. What did inspire the idea of a new life?

- Your age: .....
- Sex:       ☐ Male              ☐ Female
- Faculty: .....
- Ethnicity:   ☐ Lithuanian   ☐ Russian   ☐ Polish   ☐ Other .....
- Place of residence (of your parents):     ☐ Vilnius   ☐ Kaunas  
  ☐ Klaipeda   ☐ Šiauliai   ☐ Other .....