

THE CULTURAL COMPONENT OF LANGUAGE TEACHING¹

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The current interest in the role of culture in language teaching is due to a number of factors, political, educational, ideological. Both in Europe and in the U.S., albeit for different reasons, there is a great deal of political pressure now put on foreign language educators to help solve the social and economic problems of the times. Educators fear that the mere acquisition of linguistic systems is no guarantee of international peace and understanding. After years of communicative euphoria, some language teachers are becoming dissatisfied with purely functional uses of language. Some are pleading to supplement the traditional acquisition of "communication skills" with some intellectually legitimate, humanistically oriented, cultural "content". Others, who teach their language to non-native speaker immigrants, are under pressure to absorb (read: acculturate) into their society growing numbers of newcomers. And there is of course the recrudescence of nationalism around the world that draws political capital from increased links between national languages and national cultures. The reasons for the growing "culturalisation" of language teaching are many, the motives often contradictory.

After a short definition of terms, I will first review the history of the relationship of language and culture in language teaching. I will then try to survey the current landscape as it relates to various educational traditions in which languages are taught. In a third part I will suggest a theoretical base for exploring the cultural component of language study.

-2-

Definition of Terms

The term "cultural" has often been associated with the term "social", as when one talks about the "socio-cultural" factors affecting the teaching and the learning of foreign languages. Many scholars do not distinguish between the social and the cultural. In this paper, I will take both adjectives to refer to the two sides of the same coin, namely, the synchronic and the diachronic context in which language is used in organised discourse communities. Both terms refer to a individual's place within a social group and his/her relation to that group in the course of time. In the words of Adrienne Rich: "A place on the map is also a place in history" (1986).

First let us agree on a definition. Irrespective of whether we are talking written or oral culture, highbrow or popular culture, noteworthy events or events of everyday life, the term "culture" has always referred to at least two ways of defining a social community. The *first definition comes from the humanities*; it focuses on the way a social group represents itself and others through its material productions, be they works of art, literature, social institutions, or artifacts of everyday life, and the mechanisms for their reproduction and preservation through history. The *second definition comes from the social sciences*: it refers to what educators like Howard Nostrand call the "ground of meaning", i.e. the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community (Nostrand, 1989: 51). This latter definition is in many ways similar to the one given by social

scientists like Richard Brislin in his book *Applied Cross-Cultural Psychology*. "Culture", he writes, "refers to widely shared ideals, values, formation and uses of categories, assumptions about life, and goal-directed activities that become unconsciously or subconsciously accepted as "right" and "correct" by people who identify themselves as members of a society." (Brislin, 1990: 11)

Both definitions have given rise to two different approaches to the study of culture: the historical and the ethnographic. The first is based on the written tradition of texts; it understands the present and imagines the future in light of the past; it derives its authority from time-honoured institutions, gatekeepers of the academy, that have codified the rules of exegesis and interpretation of written texts. The second is based on the observation, data collection and analysis of mostly oral phenomena; it understands the present by viewing current events in the light of their social diversity and their relation to other contemporary events; it derives its authority from the discovery of laws that regulate social life. Both approaches give meaning to phenomena by placing them into appropriate historical and social contexts and by enunciating their appropriate laws in time and space.

Laws, rules and regularities are not only the fabrication of scientists. They are constantly generated by people in everyday life. They are what distinguishes cultural meaningfulness from natural randomness. Because they allow people to anticipate events, they often acquire a moral rigidity and righteousness that engender stereotypes and even prejudices. Indeed, they tend to "naturalise" culture and to make one's own ways of thinking, speaking and behaving seem as natural as breathing, and the ways of others seem "unnatural." Culture is always linked to moral values, notions of good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly.

-3-

But, of course, culture is arbitrary, which doesn't mean it is gratuitous, only that different events could have been recorded if other people had had the power to record them, different patterns could have been identified, these patterns in turn could have been differently enunciated; which is why culture, in order to be legitimate, has always had to justify itself and cloak its laws in the mantle of what is "right and just" rather than appear in the naked power of its arbitrariness.

Teaching culture means therefore teaching not only how things are and have been, but how they could have been or how else they could be. Neither history nor ethnography provide this imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own. Breaking down stereotypes is not just realising that people are not the way one thought they were, or that deep down "we are all the same". It is understanding that we are irreducibly unique and different, and that I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances — in other words, that the stranger, as Kristeva says, is in us. In addition to history and social science, culture is therefore also literature, for it is literature that opens up "reality beyond realism" and that enables readers to live other lives — by proxy.

Culture, then, constitutes itself along three axes: the diachronic axis of time, the synchronic axis of space, and the metaphoric axis of the imagination. But to what extent is culture in that sense the responsibility of the language teacher?

One of the major ways in which culture manifests itself is through language. Material culture is constantly *mediated, interpreted and recorded* — among other things — *through language*. It is because of that mediatory role of language that culture becomes the concern of the language teacher. Culture in the final analysis is always *linguistically mediated membership into a discourse community, that is both real and imagined*. Language plays a crucial role not only in the construction of culture, but in the emergence of cultural change. To be sure, the optimism of the sixties and early seventies concerning the possibility of changing people's attitudes by giving them a new vocabulary to construct social realities (whether they be national, gendered, or racial realities) have given way to a much more sober assessment of language teachers' limited room for manoeuvre against more powerful institutional ideological forces (Fairclough, 1989). However, this power is not monolithic and education has never brought about change directly and immediately. Social change occurs slowly, but inevitably at the edges of dominant cultures. This is true also of the change that we might want to bring about by teaching people how to use somebody else's linguistic code in somebody else's cultural context. Teaching members of one community how to talk and how to behave in the context of another discourse community potentially changes the social and cultural equation of both communities, by subtly diversifying mainstream cultures.

This view of the social construction of culture through language has been researched by sociolinguists and by scholars in the general field of cultural studies. However, it is not a view that is familiar to language teachers, who tend to consider culture as composed of attitudes and ideas existing somewhere out there independent of language.

-4-

Historical Background

Throughout the history of language teaching, we can distinguish three types of links between language instruction and the teaching of culture: universal, national, and local links.

Universal links between language and culture

In the days when the only academically respectable languages taught were Latin, classical Greek or Hebrew, there was no question but that a certain universal "culture" was acquired together with and through the knowledge of the absolute ablatives and the conjugation of the aorist. Roman and Greek history was not usually taught within the language curriculum and the translation of *De Bello Gallico* rarely gave students an understanding of the ways Roman actually spoke and thought; yet, nine years of Latin were the best entrance ticket to the universal culture of the European educated elite. The sacred truths might have been replaced by more secular ones, but the link between language study and culture was an immediate and uncontested one.

For all modern languages the way to universality was through their literature. We all know how up until recently, the sole rationale for the teaching of modern languages was access to the "great works", the universal canon of world literatures. Literature, like the Holy Scriptures or Cicero's oratories, ensured a certain cosmopolitan, at first religious, then aesthetic, view of

the world that various speakers of various languages could share across social and national boundaries. Translations and *explications de textes* ensured exquisite attention to shades of textual meaning that were neatly enclosed within their own worlds of semantic reference.

National links between language and culture

With the development of literary criticism beyond philological inquiry, and the growth of linguistics as a field in its own right, the split between the teaching of language and the teaching of literate culture widened. Language acquisition became the acquisition of skills, of automatic verbal behaviours that were perceived as having no cultural value in themselves, but that could later give access to a national literature with unique cultural value.

Within this national perspective, not only did language teaching get separated from the teaching of literature, it got separated from the teaching of culture as well. Subjects like French "civilisation", German "Landeskunde", English "culture" have developed separately from language instruction, enclosed in textbooks within culture capsules, cultural notes, glossy photographs and more recently a array of so-called authentic texts. The German 1989 encyclopaedic *Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht* (Bausch et al., 1989) lists the following disciplines as informing elements of language teaching: applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, education, learning theory, literary studies and, in a separate category, "Kultur- und Landeswissenschaft" or study of the land. Indeed, the classification gives the impression that language is the mere conduit for transmission of a literary or cultural knowledge that exists out there independent of the discourse in which it is cast.

-5-

In the last 30 or 40 years, the academic separation in the teaching of culture, literature and language has allowed each domain to make the theoretical and pedagogical advances we know, but it has caused language teaching to lose sight of the crucial factor I mentioned earlier: namely, the *mediating function of language in the social construction of culture*. The separation has kept language teaching within strict structural or functional bounds, with culture often considered to be a fifth skill, after speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Local links between language and culture

In the 70s, language teaching was no longer in the exclusive service of the educated elite, but was made to serve more democratic social goals. It was to meet the local needs of local speakers and hearers in locally situated contexts of communication. The cultural component of language teaching came to be seen as the pragmatic functions and notions expressed through language in everyday ways of speaking and acting.

This understanding of culture as the words and actions of everyday speakers in everyday life brought into focus the synchronic axis of language use. It did stress particular situations and local transactions between friends and acquaintances, vendors and consumers, employers and

employees. But it was predicated on a kind of universality based on shared human needs, easily expressed, interpreted and negotiated through universal speech functions. Since then, linguists doing research in the realisation of speech acts across cultures have come to understand how illusory this universality is (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). Others have shown how imperialistic even a pragmatic approach to teaching language can be if it assumes that universally shared basic human needs automatically correspond to universally shared ways of thinking and talking about those needs (Phillipson, 1992).

Current Landscape

The teaching of culture as a component of language teaching has traditionally been caught between the striving for universality and the desire to maintain cultural particularity. By nature it grapples with the following dilemma: should it stress the commonalities or emphasise the differences between the native and the target culture? To what extent must teachers hold non-native speakers to native speakers' conventions of language use, and to native speakers' norms of interpretation?

-6-

The current landscape is dominated by two catchwords, which have each unleashed political passions on either side of the Atlantic: "intercultural" and "multicultural". These words characterise two educational attempts to understand and overcome particularity, by building bridges between one culture and another. The term "intercultural" is used in Europe in the educational world, to characterise the acquisition of information about the customs, institutions and history of a society other than one's own; in the corporate world, the term is applied to the behavioural training for business executives (e.g. Müller & Thomas, 1991; Müller, 1991).

Beyond the traditional knowledge of cultural facts, an intercultural approach aims at gaining an understanding of the way these facts are related, i.e. how as a pattern they form the cultural fabric of a society. Examples of this approach can be found in attempts to develop intercultural sensitivity in the training of language teachers (Baumgratz, 1992; Baumgratz & Stephan, 1987), or in the international dialogue proposed by Robert Picht (1989), or in the "intercultural communicative competence" advocated by Michael Byram (1993: 16). Other forms of intercultural education refer to a process of decentering, of relativising self and other in an effort to understand both on their own terms and from their own perspective, as well as from the outsider's perspective. This "intercultural approach" to teaching foreign languages (Zarate, 1986, 1993) and to writing foreign language textbooks is not without raising some controversy among politicians and literary scholars alike who feel that language teachers should be responsible for teaching "only language", not culture nor politics. Indeed, culture cannot and should not be taught in classrooms, they say, but rather, learners should be sent abroad to experience the culture "on location". Educational and applied linguistics research has picked up the challenge, and is trying to precisely document and evaluate the cultural component of study abroad programs (see Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1993; Kline, 1992) or the cultural gains made by pupils in linguistic exchange programs within the European

Community.² Findings seem to indicate that sojourns abroad, destined to enhance linguistic proficiency, do not ensure *per se* deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Radically different from these efforts to link the teaching of foreign language to an understanding of foreign *national cultures* are current initiatives in American foreign language education to broaden and diversify traditional views of culture beyond the boundaries of nation states. The notion of "multicultural education", in particular, attempts to "expand the traditional curriculum by incorporating issues of race, class, and gender in an effort to sensitise students to the unique historical realities that have shaped United States culture" (Mullen, 1992). Multiculturalism has had the effect of de-emphasising national differences and of highlighting the social diversity and cultural pluralism that exists within one and the same nation, within one and the same foreign language classroom due to differences in ethnicity, social class and gender (Taylor, 1992).

It is little wonder that multiculturalism has become in the U.S. the target of hot political debates; right wing factions accuse multiculturalist liberals of "political correctness", left-wing liberals accuse the right of chauvinist intolerance. The debate is fuelled by current discussions about immigration laws in the light of the recent immigration waves, both legal and illegal, to the United States. From the language teacher's perspective, multiculturalism has helped diversify the presentation of foreign cultural phenomena to include a variety of social class and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, the traditional national isolationism of American education counteracts the benefits of its multicultural perspective. Cultural diversity within the United States is of such overwhelming concern in American education that one easily loses sight of general national characteristics that might differentiate U.S. Americans from citizens from other countries. It is easy to take one's own national culture for universally human. Under the fear of reinforcing cultural stereotypes, and under the cover of multicultural pluralism, the default assumptions linked to national cultural ideologies remain often unquestioned and, hence, unexplored.

In sum: Despite the advances made by research in the spheres of the intercultural and the multicultural, language teaching is still operating on a relatively narrow conception of both language and culture. Language continues to be taught as a fixed system of formal structures and universal speech functions, a neutral conduit for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Culture is incorporated only to the extent that it reinforces and enriches, not that it puts in question, traditional boundaries of self and other. In practice, teachers teach language and culture, or culture in language, but not language as culture.

Theoretical Base for an Understanding of Culture in Language Teaching

Recent suggestions have been made to bring language teaching more in line with current thought in both the linguistic and in the social and critical sciences (Fairclough, 1989; Kramersch, 1993a and b; Pennycook, 1990; Byram, 1989, Byram et al., 1991; Kramersch & von Hoene, 1995; Kramersch & Nolden, 1994). The argument goes as follows.

If we accept, with Halliday (1978), that language "as social semiotic" is central to the way cultural reality is shaped and represented, then we have to realise that cultural reality is as heterogeneous and heteroglossic as language itself. What does it mean to say: "French speak this way, Israelis think that way, Russians behave that way?" Cultural characteristics are embedded within historical relations of power and authority which secure social, professional, political, pedagogical status through the way of speaking of particular speakers in a particular time and from a particular space. Multicultural relativism or democratic pluralism do not automatically reverse these relations of power and authority, they only make them more invisible. This is where advocates of critical language pedagogy propose replacing the binarism of Us vs. Them, Insider vs. Outsider, that essentialises people in one or the other of their many cultural dimensions (e.g., an "Israeli" or a "woman", or a "Black") by a focus on what Bhabha calls the "social process of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1992: 57).

This process is a dialogic process that attempts to locate the cultural component of language teaching at the moment of rupture or disjuncture between interlocutors' assumptions and expectations. A critical foreign language pedagogy focused on the social process of enunciation has the potential both of revealing the codes under which speakers in cross-cultural encounters operate, and of constructing something different and hybrid from these cross-cultural encounters. Bhabha calls this "a third space, that does not simply revise or invert the dualities, but revalues the ideological bases of division and difference" (Bhabha, 1992: 58). Rather than seek to bridge differences and aim for the universal, it seeks to create a dialogic context in which the vital necessity to continue the dialogue ensures a mutual base to explore the sometimes irreducible differences between people's values and attitudes.

Of course, it is Third World or minority cultures that have given us the necessary insights in this regard. Homi Bhabha, writing about "Postcolonial authority and postmodern guilt" (1992), describes well the situation of the language teacher having to teach in conditions of heteroglossia: "From that perspective, the perspective of the 'edge' rather than the end, it is no longer adequate to think or write culture from the point of view of the liberal 'ethic' of tolerance, or within the pluralistic time frame of multiculturalism". Culture must be seen as a moment caught "in between a plurality of practices that are different and yet must occupy the same space of adjunction and articulation" (p. 57). The realisation of cross-cultural conflict and incommensurability of values offers the opportunity to pause and muster the effort necessary to speak, quite literally, in terms of the other. Bhabha calls this pause "the time-lag of cultural difference" (p. 64), "an interrogative space ... of psychic ambivalence and social contingency" (p. 59). For Bhabha, this ambivalence is grounded in the fundamental ambivalence of the linguistic sign. Teachers of language as social semiotic are placed at the privileged site of "possible reinscription and relocation emerging out of cultural difference" (p. 62).

How can language teaching focus less on language structures and function and more on the social process of enunciation? I would like to suggest that language teachers focus less on seemingly fixed, stable cultural entities and identities on both sides of national borders, and more on the shifting and emerging third place of the language learners themselves. Learners of a foreign language, challenged to learn a linguistic code they have not helped to shape, in

social contexts they have not helped to define, are indeed poaching on the territory of others — a kind of oppositional practice, that both positions them and places them in opposition to the current practices of the discourse community that speaks that language.

In order to teach a foreign language as oppositional practice, learners have to be addressed not as deficient monoglossic enunciators, but as potentially heteroglossic narrators. The texts they speak and the texts they write have to be considered not only as instances of grammatical or lexical enunciation, and not only as expressing the thoughts of their authors, but as situated utterances contributing to the construction, perpetuation or subversion of particular cultural contexts. Thus the development of linguistic and communicative competence can be enriched by such a growth in aesthetic and critic consciousness that we can define as "critical cross-cultural literacy". (See Kramersch & Nolden (1994), Kramersch (1995), and Kramersch (forthcoming) for pedagogical applications of such an approach.)

Conclusion

The theoretical framework I propose here for teaching culture through language suspends the traditional dichotomy between the universal and the particular in language teaching. It embraces the particular, not to be consumed by it, but as a platform for dialogue and as a common struggle to realign differences. In this regard, it makes learners and teachers accountable for what they say, it fosters linguistic vigilance and discursive circumspection. It reaffirms the language teacher in his/her full social and political responsibility.

Within this theoretical framework, one may want in the future to define the language teacher not only as the impresario of a certain linguistic performance, but as the catalyst for an ever-widening critical cultural competence. If the ability to understand other cultures is itself mediated through language, then language teachers and learners may want to reflect on the social process of their own pedagogic enunciation. They may also want to reflect on the limits which the academic culture of their universities, the educational culture of their classroom and institution impose on their attempts to teach language as culture. For, in the final analysis, the process of "reinscription and relocation emerging out of cultural difference" is not intended to maintain the status quo. It is a process which makes language teachers into agents of social change.

-9-

NOTES

1. This paper was delivered at the Conference on Trilingualism held at Haifa on 12 June 1994. It is a shortened version of a keynote lecture given at the Xth World Congress of the International Association of Applied Linguistics in Amsterdam, 12 August 1993.

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2. An international project "Evaluation qualitative des échanges linguistiques dans la

formation continuee des enseignants" is currently studying ways in which teachers can be sensitised to foreign cultural phenomena before and during their sojourns abroad. This three-year project (ECP 92-01/0496/F-IB) financed by the European agency LINGUA, is coordinated by Genevieve Zarate (ENS Fontenay/St.Cloud, CREDIF), and includes the following researchers: I. Baptista (Portugal); M. Byram (UK); A. Cain, I. Cintrat, and G. Zarate (France); C. Kramersch (USA); C. Mata-Barreiro (Spain); and E. Murphy (Ireland). See Byram, Murphy & Zarate (1995). [Back to document](#)

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-10-

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