



Gaining a Fresh Perspective on Society by Learning a Foreign Language

Irina-Ana Drobot¹

¹Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages and Communication, Romania

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse ways in which we could say that learning a foreign language means learning to see the world from a fresh perspective. Foreign language learning is intertwined with learning about the culture and society of the respective countries where the language is spoken. The way we think about time (linear or cyclical), the way we address the others (in formal or less formal ways, e.g. using honorifics in Japanese), the way we value relationships (based on the individualist and collectivist dimensions), or express emotion and politeness (through direct or indirect communication) make us aware of alternative ways of having these elements structured. Different types of colours can be discovered, e.g. Russian includes various shades of blue. English emphasizes the individual when we say "In my opinion," while Chinese refers to collective or neutral language. English is also more direct in disagreements, e.g. "I disagree with your point," while Mandarin Chinese is softer and less confrontational, e.g. "I think it might be a bit different." In Tahitian, there is no actual word for sadness, and emotional pain is described physically. With respect to objects having or not gendered form, we notice that this influences how we think about them. In Spanish, we have gender for objects, while in German, we do not, which is how we realize that grammar does not always align with social perception, which makes us unintentionally assign characteristics based on gender norms such as strength or delicacy. As we learn a foreign language, we become aware of social constructionism, which tells us that reality is socially constructed through language, interaction, as well as cultural norms. According to cultural schema theory, we interpret what is new by relying on our pre-existing mental frameworks which were shaped by our culture. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and Edward T. Hall's High-Context vs. Low-Context Cultures will also be used in the analysis.

Keywords: Perception, psychology, communication, individualism, collectivism, gender

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning means much more than finding corresponding words from the languages we already know and which may be our native language or other foreign languages we have already studied. Studying a foreign language is associated with learning about the respective culture and society in which people live. A foreign language may be spoken across several geographical spaces, and due to this, learners may need to consider studying about all of these spaces. If learners are going to use the respective language, they need to know about the social context in which it is spoken, which may rely on various practices and on non-verbal cues which may be specific to the respective cultures and not universal and, therefore, obvious right away. As we start learning our native language, we begin to learn, intuitively, the various non-verbal cues associated with it. As we move from one country to another, the meanings of non-verbal language may become less obvious, since there may be visible differences.

Intuitively, we believe and feel that we get the opportunity to experience a different reality when we learn a foreign language. We find new ways of thinking about our everyday life activities, as well as about what is the most significant in our lives. We can find, through learning a foreign language, an entirely different way of thinking about and structuring the world. Different perspectives on life and on the world, as well as different mindsets open up before us when we compare the way we view reality through our own language and the way in which other languages illustrate reality and make us reflect on it: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone... but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society" [1]. Each language we speak comes with a specific, or subjective view of reality, as words include allusions to a certain



understanding of the world, as well as to traditions, rituals, and practices, which are part of the culture identity manifestations grid devised by [2], along with values, symbols, and personalities. These are the distinct categories of elements forming cultures and their particular features, which in turn represents certain visions or truths about the world by relying on the experience of the members of the respective culture. The versions of reality offered by various cultures through their culture identity manifestations also find a correspondent at the level of language. Language, after all, describes and communicates various perspectives on reality, or versions of the world. We can continue understanding how language creates different versions of life in certain societies: "The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached..." [1]. Language becomes a tool which shapes our vision of the world, which is not objective, but the result of every culture's subjective perception of everyday reality: "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" [1]. Nature itself is shaped by our language, and by the way in which we organize it based on concepts and on the way in which we assign meaning to them: "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. [...] we cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement ... codified in the patterns of our language" [1].

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis claims that language shapes our reality, as well as our way of thinking [3]. Language does not have only a simple descriptive role, but an active role, giving shape to ideas: "The background linguistic system (in other words the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas..." [1]. In this way, learning a foreign language means having access into another way of shaping reality and reflecting on it. Language thus paves the way for us to consider the world from an entirely different point of view. We do not simply learn other words for what we see around us when we learn a language. We learn to see and think about everything surrounding us in a different way, to the point where we start challenging our previous way of perception.

However, we do tend to bring in a lot of the vision of reality and ways of thinking shaped by our own language and culture when we learn a foreign language. This is why we speak about first-language interference [4] when we start communicating in a foreign language. We tend to rely on what we already know and apply it in all our areas of experience. Knowledge of other languages which we have acquired before the new language we have just started learning can also interfere. We cannot simply start from zero in building new visions of the world as we learn a new foreign language, once we have already had contact with our own native language and with at least one other foreign language. However, gradually, we may come to accept the new reality shaped by a different language and culture.

When we visit a foreign country, we may go through a variety of emotional states, such as feeling a complete sense of adaptation to and familiarity with the new culture and language. However, in time, we may start having a completely different approach to the new country with its culture and language. We may feel the complete opposite towards everything, and start believing that the different culture is not for us and that we disagree with all its values and beliefs. As we first feel completely at home in the new culture, we go through the honeymoon phase, the first phase of culture shock [5]. Later on, we go through a state where culture shock is totally visible, as we see everything in dark shades. Gradually, we need to come to terms with the differences and accept them. The culture shock stages remind us of the grief work stages [6], as we are faced with radical changes in both. In the experience of culture shock, we feel the loss of a familiar reality, which we deny, as we believe we have never felt at home in our own culture, and that the new culture is our ideal version of a culture. We may have never felt ourselves and accommodated in our home culture, yet the new culture gradually loses its appeal, as we may start facing unfamiliar elements. In grief work, we may lose not only a loved person but also some ideals and values, and in dealing with this process we may start feeling emotionally conflicted.

Thus, the experience of learning a new language may start off as feeling that we have discovered different ways of thinking with which we may feel more comfortable for the moment, yet in the long term we may start feeling conflicted about the different sets of values, perspectives, norms and ways of thinking as we compare, even if we are not aware of this process, two different languages and cultures. The fresh perspectives we discover by learning a foreign language can be debatable regarding their degree of emotional comfort for the learners. While we may consider that it is a beneficial experience to discover alternative ways of living, thinking and doing, we may further on wonder if we are truly comfortable with leaving behind our own culture, language, and perspective on



life. A different point of view may resonate with our personal preferences and dissatisfactions with our present way of life. However, matters are more complicated than replacing certain values with others, as we replace one language and one culture with another. We go through a process of change and adaptation which is not an easy one. This is why we talk about difficulties to adapt to the new environment as we move from one country to another, regardless of the time period. As tourists, we may only see the bright side, while as students or workers, or even permanent citizens, we may start seeing matters more critically, as we confront ourselves with a new reality.

2. Materials and Methods

We can notice how a foreign language is not always tied up to a culture and civilization framework, but also to a linguistics framework which influences and shapes our understanding of reality. Here we may consider the contribution of psycholinguistics. According to psycholinguistics, "A person's native language sets up a series of 'lenses' through which reality is understood and interpreted" [7]. In this way, we realize that the connection between language and psychological reality is a very strong one, and that a certain language may evoke for us a certain perception of reality. Language is no longer about grammar, rules, and vocabulary, or, at least, not only. Language opens for us the way to other aspects of reality which are related to the way in which we interact with the others or think about reality in everyday life. Language suggests certain dimensions of our everyday life reality, of which we may not be entirely aware until we compare them with other languages than those we already know.

2.1 Time, Relationships, Communication, and Emotions

Some of our main coordinates in life rely on time, relationships, and the emotions we experience. How we understand time is not just a matter of going about our day. It is also a matter of expressing ourselves about it. We can look at the main difference between linear and cyclical time. Linear time refers to the way we see time looking like a straight line, based on past, present, and future. Time never returns in this understanding of time, and, therefore, incidents are non-repeatable, unique, and time can only move forward. Time goes by and we cannot recover it, based on this frame of mind. Time moves forward and it is understood as a resource that can grow scarce and can be finished. At least this is the way in which we are suggested to understand time if we consider our use of language in relation to time, e.g. "I'm running out of time," "The deadline is coming," "This is the most important moment of your life." In contrast, cyclical time refers to time pictured as a circle, as a loop, where events repeat, e.g. as in the case of seasons, which come and return, or in the case of the life-death-rebirth cycle in nature and from a spiritual perspective. Time is understood as able to regenerate. While linear time is common in Western cultures, cyclical time is specific to Asia and African indigenous cultures. The societies understanding time as cyclical are based on agricultural calendars, and they may rely on Buddhist or Hindu concepts about reincarnation. Linguistically speaking, we may have in mind a sentence such as the following: "What has happened before will happen again." While Western cultures also notice that nature regenerates in time, and that seasons return, this is not the main idea of understanding time. What is lost with the passage of time remains lost, according to Western cultures, and becomes subject of nostalgic recollections.

How we address someone else when we communicate may differ from one language to another. While there is the universal distinction between formal and informal communication, function of the context and situation, there may be specific differences related to cultural differences. In general, for instance, the Japanese language uses honorifics to address the others, which makes matters more complicated than the usual formal-informal register of communication in Western cultures. We know that Japanese culture is hierarchical, and holds a higher respect for those in higher positions, e.g. teachers vs students, parents vs children, bosses vs employees. Source [8] would refer to the dimension of high vs low power distance, as Japanese and Asian cultures in general are more authoritarian, and thus high power distances, implying that at school at work and in the family setting we are expected to do as we are told. In Western cultures, on the contrary, our ideal is that of an egalitarian society, and, thus, of low power distance, as we expect to be allowed to negotiate and to express opinions in the same social settings. We may consider linguistic particularities in pronouns, as English and American refer to the interlocutor as *you*, regardless of whether the situation is formal or informal. In Romanian, we have a politeness pronoun, *dumneavoastra*, which contrasts with the friendly *tu*. The same can be found in French, where we can find *vous* for the polite form of address, and *tu* for *you*, the informal, friendly term of address. We know that in American culture, teachers are



called by students by their small name, not by their family name, and with a polite title such as Mrs or Mr. In the case of American culture, resorting to formal terms of address results in feeling distant towards the interlocutor and in him or her feeling that they are kept at a distance and not on friendly enough terms.

The individualist vs collectivist dimension [8] can also be found highlighted when we hear formulations such as "In my opinion" in the English language, while in the Chinese language we refer to collective and neutral language in similar cases. The *I* is not that prominent as in Western cultures. In addition, we may notice how English is direct when expressing disagreements, such as in the following example: "I disagree with your point." In the meantime, Mandarin Chinese language expresses disagreement in softer and neutral language. Mandarin Chinese is less confrontational, expressing disagreement in terms such as the following: "I think it might be a bit different." Thus, we see how Mandarin Chinese uses less direct language. We may, however, argue that traditional British culture is also as indirect in expressing disagreements and suggestions as Mandarin Chinese is. However, if we refer to contemporary society, we notice how the traditional British culture and means of expression are gradually changing. In addition, we may rely more on American culture in the current use of the English language which is taken over by members of cultures from all over the world, as English is a lingua franca.

Direct vs indirect communication shows how we may restrain our emotions and only suggest what we feel and take care not to offend the interlocutor, or how we may wish to be honest with the interlocutor and say directly what we mean and, implicitly, feel. However, in direct communication we communicate directly our opinion about a state of affairs, and not our intent to offend the interlocutor. In Western cultures, saying directly what we mean has not intention in offending the person we are addressing. However, in Asian cultures this is the general perception, and the Japanese may go as far as to say yes in cases such as those where they are negotiating business. Even if a certain project or product are not all right and can still be improved, the Japanese businessman would say yes [9], but he or she would refer to continuing the business partnership, and further on during the conversation he or she would bring allusions to show that the product or project need improvement. Japanese culture, like other Asian culture, is an indirect communication culture, while Western cultures are mainly direct communication cultures. We notice that the indirect communication goes beyond the usual politeness in Western cultures. We can consider here the different between high-context and low-context cultures [10], [11] according to which high-context communication means communication difficult to decipher by persons that are not members of the respective cultures. Outsiders can find it difficult to understand culture-specific allusions, and reliance on voice tone, facial expressions, as well as body language. It is an experience similar with the one where we notice certain groups of friends or couples relying on common experience and body language or language of gestures cues, as well as allusions to various common experiences. Low context communication culture refers to communication which is accessible to anyone, with no common references and allusions to be taken into account for efficient communication. Low context communication does not rely as much on allusions and on body language and the language of gestures specific only to a certain group. For high context communication cultures, we need background knowledge in order to be able to decipher the intended message. Low context and high context communication has to do with the expression of emotion as well. It is expected for emotion to be directly expressed and communicated in low context communication cultures, while it may become more subtle in high context communication cultures. However, caring for the interlocutor's feelings is a main concern in high context communication cultures. We try our best not to offend the interlocutor by any type of critical remark addressed towards an object or action, which would be associated with a cancelling of friendly or collaborative relationships until then.

We should also mention that, from a cognitive point of view, as well as psychological point of view, in languages such as Tahitian, we cannot find any specific word for sadness. In addition, we can see how in Tahitian emotional or psychological pain can be described in physical terms and as a physical sensation. In addition, we notice that there are different shades of blue in the Russian language, which leads to another perception of a colour otherwise considered to have very few dimensions and alternatives. In addition, while for Tahitians psychological pain being described in physical terms may be considered to relate to Western culture intensity of feelings expressed in poetry, we may not start drawing direct comparisons, as in Western culture such correspondences between physical and psychological sensations may lead not just to figurative, poetic language, but also to somatic affections. We may recall hysteria, present in psychoanalytic terms, reflecting the mind-body connection and conversion of emotion into physical symptom.



Certain fashionable values circulating in society at a certain time, such as those related to gender, can also be considered to enter the everyday communication. We may also consider how, in Spanish, as well as in French or Romanian, objects have gender, while in other languages such as German and English they do not. We realize in this way that grammar does not always reflect social perception, making us assign without being aware of it certain features relying on gender norms, e.g. strength and delicacy.

2.2 Social Constructionism and Language

How do we come to account for the world we live in? How do we start assigning meaning to it? We may start off from realizing that the world is all a social construction, or a creation of our own minds, and not necessarily an objective reality: "Social constructionism suspends the assumption that our descriptions of the world are necessarily derived from the nature of the world itself, and instead focuses on the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live" [12].

Further on, we may start wondering how do we assign and create meaning, as well as how do we make sense of the world we live in? One such way is through language. We may consider that society means values and principles, as well as rules and conventions, which clearly draws a psychological picture of it. We may also consider that discourse is able to imagine society and build it through language so that it reflects the values of a certain time. In addition, as we have seen from the analysis of gender, as well as from the communication aspects related to various types of cultures, our expectation of societies may differ around the world.

Language can be understood as actually building our world, and not as being only descriptive of it: "Language and the use of it, far from simply describing the world, both constructs the world as people perceive it and has real consequences" [13]. As an example, we may consider especially the ideological gender-related aspects, as well as everything else, related to individualism vs collectivism, or egalitarianism vs hierarchical structure of society, together with direct or indirect communication. All of these features lead to a certain structure of the respective society, and to a certain understanding of communication and relationships among its members.

3. Results

The present paper has made us aware of how we start having a certain perception of the social life around us by relying on our foreign language learning. Knowledge of another language, therefore, leads us to different constructions of reality and of social life. Communication takes place differently function of the current needs of speakers, as well as function of their preferred way of communication. As a general tendency, we may notice how we all gain the awareness of the way in which our language shapes our reality once we learn another language.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The fresh view on society which we encounter while learning different languages from our own native one may prompt us to start thinking about the way in which language shapes our view of the world and, especially, of our social reality, once we start considering the way in which we communicate with the others. We may start to reflect philosophically on the reality around us and the way in which different languages help us to imagine it. We interact symbolically with our surrounding reality and we are aware of the meaning everything around us has.

We get to know the world through our symbolical interaction with it, as well as based on our affinities with certain cultures and their communication processes, and with their language. As we come into contact with other languages, we also come into contact with different ways of thinking and feeling the world around us. We realize the high extent to which language creates our everyday life reality once we compare the languages we already know with a new one we have just started to learn. Different languages may reflect our psychology of making sense of the world.

REFERENCES



- [1] Whorf B. L., Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 69.
- [2] Baciú S., Culture. An Awareness-Raising Approach, Cavallioti Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012.
- [3] Natsir M., Harahap N. H., Khairani R., "The Role of Language in Shaping Human Thought: A Study of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis", Journal of Learning and Teaching, 2025, pp. 22–29.
- [4] Derakhshan A., Karimi E., "The interference of first language and second language acquisition", Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 5, No. 10, 2015, pp. 2112–2117.
- [5] Pedersen P., The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, New York, 1994.
- [6] Freud S., "Mourning and melancholia", The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14 (1914–1916), London, Hogarth Press, 1917, pp. 237–258.
- [7] Katz A. N., Hussey K. A., "Psycholinguistics", in Runco M. A., Pritzker S. R. (Eds.), Encyclopedia of Creativity (Second Edition), Academic Press, London, 2011, pp. 271–278, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-375038-9.00185-0>
- [8] Hofstede G., "Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context", Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2011, Article 8.
- [9] Drobot I. A., "Analysing the Japanese indirect communication culture", Crossing Boundaries in Culture and Communication, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2021, pp. 9–20.
- [10] Hall E. T., Beyond Culture, Anchor Books, New York, 1975.
- [11] Hall E. T., Understanding Cultural Differences, Intercultural Press, Boston, 1990.
- [12] Gergen K. J., "The social constructionist movement in modern psychology", American Psychologist, Vol. 40, No. 3, 1985, pp. 266–275.
- [13] Burr V., Social Constructionism (3rd ed.), Routledge, London, 2024.