

Culture as Meaning-Making

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Abstract. The present paper analyses the role of social and cultural background knowledge in the cognition of meaning. Language and culture integrated studies have long been in the focus of attention. In order to study the language of a target culture, one should understand how human beings construct meanings, understand processes of meaning-making, account for different meanings, and examine their effects in social life. The language cannot be interpreted in the right way without taking the target culture into account. In the knowledge-based society people of all professions have realized that they will be more successful if they take “cultural” factors into consideration.

Our analysis of meaning-making process follows Lyn Spillman’s (2002) theoretical perspectives. To analyze the data, qualitative analysis is used.

Our findings suggest that miscommunication occurs as a result of the lack of knowledge about the target culture. A foreign language could act as an obstacle to express one’s thoughts and ideas. While communicating, people use lots of value-loaded words. Through the language the whole set of values, attitudes and beliefs could be expressed. Language cannot exist apart from social and cultural context. Moreover, meaning-making and cognition are heavily dependent on such social factors as gender, age, education, social class, and ethnicity.

Introduction

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.

It is common to hear public discussions of “multiculturalism” or “cultural diversity”. Culture includes shared understandings of all sorts of objects and events. Our experiences in our own and other societies keep reminding us that some understandings are widely shared among members of a social group, surprisingly resistant to change in the thinking of individuals, broadly applicable across different contexts of 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 & Quinn, 1997: 3).

Social reality is constructed through language. This motivates to learn languages, but it is not enough to learn the language without understanding the culture where the target language circulates. On the contrary, if you know and understand the culture, you may spot the foreigner even if he/she speaks a perfect language.

The **problem** to be discussed in the paper is miscommunication, which comes as a 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 people 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.

The other question we have **aimed** at discussing is to what extent, and in what ways, does language determine thought. This question is normally answered with the reference to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. We had the supposition that if a particular person learns two different linguistic items from different groups of people, each might be associated with a different set of cultural beliefs and values. Furthermore, following Hudson (1980: 96), it could be stated that each item activates a different set of beliefs and values.

Theoretical background

Meaning and culture

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. Hannerz argues that “in the recent period, culture has been taken to be above all a matter of meaning” (1992). Contemporary scholars in the humanities as well as in 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 are the external, public mark of ideas in people’s heads and gain their meanings only in relation to those ideas (Strauss & 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 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 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 on 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, 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. 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 often may feel different if spoken in German rather than in English or Chinese. Sapir - Whorf hypothesis states that people perceive the world through the cultural lens of language. Language shapes the way we think. In other words, language structures our perception of the world.

Meaning-making processes

Lyn Spillman provides three perspectives how meaning-making processes might be studied:

1. First, he discusses meaning-making processes “on the ground” (2002: 7), which means investigating how interactions constitute meanings and how individuals use them.
2. 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.
3. The third approach is to research meaning-making “in the text”, focusing on features of culture and drawing in insights about textual analysis more familiar in the humanities than in social sciences (2002: 8).

Analyzing the first perspective of meaning-making, one should bear in mind the significance of the wider cultural repertoire from which social actors construct their strategies of action. This provides the perspective of diversity, since a variety of meanings may be embraced by people in the same context, or even by the same person at different times. Moreover, particular sets of meanings are not assumed to be universally shared, coherent, or consistent within the given group or society; and common norms, values, cognitive frames and practices are not assumed to be transparent and unambiguous to all. Rather,

individuals and social groups may interpret the meanings according to context (2002: 7).

The second perspective examines how the particular organizational context in which, for instance, art is created, or a new musical style is disseminated, or science practiced, can have important consequences for the cultural product.

The third perspective analyses close connections between textual properties and the ways in which they are influenced by and influential for individual and institutional meaning-making practices.

Often, a complete explanation of why aspects of culture vary, or how meaning-making influences human action in particular contexts, will necessarily integrate different levels of analysis. But unless these different levels of analysis are recognized, it is easy to assume that looking at only one dimension can provide a complete cultural account (Spillman, 2002: 8).

Methodology

We have chosen the convenience sample of 120 students to conduct a study. The sample involved first and second year students, English language learners, both males and females aged 18-21. Their level of language acquisition was ranging from pre-intermediate to advanced. They had no special preparation in American cultural studies. None of them has ever visited America.

The respondents were interviewed after watching several American films in the original. Additionally they were asked to comment on four different photos expressing their ideas in two languages. The data were interpreted using qualitative analysis.

The shift from a culture of print to a culture of seeing which began in the second half of the 19th century and gained its full force with the arrival of the film and other 20th 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 expressivity 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 was the reason why we had 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 some tasks and the discussion followed afterwards. We should bear in mind that students have seen lots of American films and that through them have already constructed their image of American society. Many of them 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 American exceptionalism. These American ideals, however, have always hidden an underside that has submerged in American nightmares such as slavery, the genocide of the Native American, and the Vietnam War.

But the picture Lithuanian youngsters have acquired of America seems to be based on Hollywood production, not reflecting such important societal issues as ethnic pluralism, power, race or gender equality.

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

The second film was “Animal Farm” produced by John Halas and Joy Batchelor in 1999. Adapted from George Orwell’s satire, this full-length animated film uses animals to depict the flaws in political systems. Some critics say that it is the most famous work of political allegory ever written. The animals take over the running of a farm, and everything is wonderful for a while - until the pigs get out of hand. It is a brilliant description of what happens when the revolution goes astray. Allegory is hard to do 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 by children with no understanding of the political message at all (Yee, 1992).

The second task provided to the respondents was to describe, using creative language, four different pictures. The first photo depicted a surfer on a huge wave, the second photo showed a man descending from a high rock, the third picture was of two males, one young and the other old, playing chess, and the last picture showed a woman planting flowers into the pots. Their task was to brainstorm about each picture and to put their ideas in two languages: their native (Lithuanian) and English. The pictures were taken from the course book “Enterprise” Intermediate (1997).

Analysis and discussion

The analysis of meaning-making processes is based on Lyn Spillman’s theoretical perspectives. Film cognition is analyzed following meaning-making “on the ground” perspective, whereas analysis of the four photos relies on the meaning-making “in the text” approach.

One of the central narratives of 19th century literature and 20th 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, in which the search for symbolic recognition has undergone in American culture and, specifically, in women’s culture. The film “Waiting to Exhale” may be considered a typical example of the “Cinderella” story. Moreover, the strong female characters that finally emerge at the end of the film 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.

Most of the students were surprised and even annoyed that all the actors in the film were Black. The other thing, which had struck them, was 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 and seemed not to have liked it very much. Was it because the life of black women has been depicted? Are they prejudiced against race or gender? Sean Means 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. The film has been awarded for promoting the positive portrayal of African-Americans in entertainment. This positive image of the Black again was striking for Lithuanian viewers, as they had already formed a stereotype of the Black being criminals, drug-dealers and uneducated idles. To explain such stereotypical thinking, one should bear in mind that Lithuanian society is a homogeneous one, and hence comes the construction of social reality. Lithuanian viewers watch American films through the lens of Lithuanian cultural and social background. Thus, the judgements made are based on values, beliefs and attitudes formed in a home culture. Therefore, we come to miscommunication or the wrong interpretation of the meaning. Finally, what is failed to be recognized, is rejected.

The analysis of the second film “Animal Farm” evoked contradictory evaluations depending on the cultural background the viewers had previously formed. There were students shocked by the film, which they understood as a direct parody of the Soviet regime. If they had some good childhood memories from the Soviet times, it was rather shocking for them to view the film and to evaluate the system they had lived in through the eyes of an American producer. They commented that “the American producer had no understanding how it had been in reality” and they were furious saying, “how could the American producer dare make a film like that”. Others viewed the film as a children cartoon. The images of talking animals might have acted as the background knowledge for such an interpretation of the film. Some of the film critics say, “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 society.

The aim of the second task was to test if language could determine thought. Our findings indicate that in some cases there was no difference observed between descriptions of the pictures in two languages. We assume that some students simply translated their ideas from one language to another. Still, in other cases we could find rather unexpected turns in thought when the respondents were switching from one to another language. Some of the examples are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences in description of photos by language

No	English	Lithuanian
1	A hot summer. Holidays in Russia , at the Black sea. It was cool.	Primena serialą "Home and Away". (Reminds of an Australian film "Home and Away".)
2	It is a brilliant activity, but only for the young and strong .	Puikus laiko praleidimo būdas australams ir amerikiečiams. (A good way to spend time for Australians and Americans .)
3	That man needs more adrenalin.	Aš norėčiau iššokti iš lėktuvo su parašiu. (I would like to jump out of a plane with a parachute.
4	Chess is boring because you are sitting and thinking.	Ideali proto mankšta. (An ideal way to train your brain.)
5	Chess is a very old game .	Šachmatai man asocijuojasi su senyvo amžiaus žmonėmis. (I associate chess with old people .)
6	Flowers are the most beautiful things in our life.	Gamta šaukia. (The nature is calling.)
7	Woman is planting her favourite flowers.	Nesuprantu žmonių, kurie jaučia malonumą sodindami augalus. (I do not understand people who enjoy planting flowers.)

As is seen from some descriptions provided in Table 1, the thought could be determined by language. In their native language the respondents seemed to be more fluent, more expressive. On the other hand, it is difficult to explain, how through English a respondent could bring back the memories of a holiday spent at the Black Sea, while through Lithuanian the same respondent associates the photo with an Australian film "Home and Away". The second example implies as if only Australians and Americans could be young and strong. The third case is a good illustration of cultural division to "they" and "us", expressed by the words "that man" meaning "unknown, foreign culture" and "I", meaning "familiar, home culture". As the location shown in the first and the second pictures was not typically Lithuanian, the associations caused by them were depicted as "romantic" and "exotic", which they expressed by such words as: "hot summer", "quite expensive holidays", "a beach in Australia", "luxury". The fourth and the seventh examples provide the illustration of strong value-loaded thinking. In one language the activity gets a positive evaluation, whereas in the other it is valued negatively. We can only guess if the change in attitudes has been determined by the change of language. The fifth and the sixth examples in Table 1 illustrate the pattern of thinking which moves from specific to general (old game – old people; flowers – nature). It seems that the native language in this case allows expressing oneself on broader terms.

The third and the fourth photos did not involve much activity; they had evoked associations with home and family, or with the feelings of love and spring. As the first two pictures portrayed the active out of doors sports and the last two the indoor life, the difference in the words used to depict the pictures by gender could also be observed (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences in description of the first two photos by gender

Males	Females
Bravery	Interesting, but very dangerous
Adrenalin	I would never choose such activity
Freedom	I am scared of height
Adventure	Risky
Addictive	

The value-loaded words used by male students are quite opposite to the concepts provided by females. Thus, we may conclude that the system of values, attitudes and beliefs might be different even if the young people are socialized in the same culture. Males and females have acquired the typical cultural knowledge what kind of behavior is proper for males and what is expected from females. At the same time it shows how deep this division line between genders is imprinted in Lithuanian society. A similar pattern could be observed analyzing the third photo of two males of different age playing chess.

Table 3. Description of the third photo by gender

Males	Females
A dull, boring day	A good way to relax with friends
A headache	Warm feelings about the family
It is boring. I prefer basketball and football.	Who is going to win: young energy or experience?
Chess is the game for old people.	Father and son
	An experienced player

Males seem not to be interested in chess playing, as no outdoor activity is involved in it. On the contrary, females adore the picture. It brings back the warm feelings and the image of nice family relationship to them.

The last picture depicting a woman, planting flowers evoked quite contradictory descriptions. In this case, no strict gender differences were observed, though for some respondents it associated with their mothers, homes, warm feelings about the family, nice activity, while for the others it seemed to be "a dull, boring activity" or even "the way to earn for living". This might be explained by the different personal experience the respondents have had in connection with the activity.

In any case, it is always dangerous to generalize from what people do in formal experimental interview situations. However, the findings are at least compatible with what we predicted on the basis of the connections between language and the rest of the culture, so it is possible to suggest that we make use of different value and belief systems according to which linguistic varieties we happen to be using at the time.

Conclusions

The problems discussed in the article are very wide and the findings might be contradictory but they all contribute to the understanding of meaning-making processes.

Miscommunication often occurred as a result of the lack of knowledge about the target culture.

We would not recommend studying language only from the linguistic point of view. In order to avoid miscommunication one should integrate language with the studies of the target culture. It is not enough to be acquainted with the popular culture, which spreads through music, films, 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 have been viewing. This can be explained by the lack of cultural and social knowledge they have gained so far.

Our findings show that it is common to add a romantic “touch” to everything, which is culturally not known and not recognized. A foreign language could act as an obstacle to express one’s thoughts and ideas. While communicating people use lots of value-loaded words. Through language the whole set of values, attitudes and beliefs could be expressed. Language cannot exist apart

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Kultūrinis žodžio reikšmės interpretavimas

Santrauka

Šis straipsnis analizuoja kultūros ir socialinės aplinkos įtaką teisingam užsienio kalbos suvokimui. Kalba ir kultūra yra neatsiejamos studijų proceso dalys. Norint išmokyti užsienio kalbą, reikia suprasti ne tik žodžio reikšmę, bet ir kultūrinį bei socialinį kontekstą, kuriame ta reikšmė funkcionuoja. Žinių visuomenėje daugelio profesijų žmonės suvokė kultūrinio ir kalbinio faktoriaus svarbą sėkmingam tarptautiniam bendradarbiavimui.

Tyrimo metodas – kokybinė duomenų analizė. Analizuojant duomenis, remtasi Spilmano (2002) “reikšmės interpretavimo” metodologija.

Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad žodžio reikšmė nesuvokiama arba neteisingai interpretuojama, kai trūksta žinių apie studijuojamos kalbos kultūrinę ir socialinę aplinką. Kalba gali būti kliūtis minčių raiškai. Kalbinę išraišką ir suvokimą įtakoja ne tik socialinis ir kultūrinis kontekstas, bet ir tokie faktoriai, kaip lytis, amžius, išsilavinimas, socialinė klasė, etniškumas.

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from social and cultural context. Moreover, meaning-making and cognition is heavily dependent on such social factors as gender, age, education, social class, and ethnicity.

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