10.

the language-culture connection

Wearing different color glasses!
—Marina

It's easy to agree that there's a connection between language and culture, but it's difficult to tease apart the relationship between the two. New research into embodied simulation, however, shows us that linguistic meaning can be seen as a form of simulated experience. This can help us better understand the language-culture connection in our minds.

The Monolingual American

After fourteen years living in Tokyo, Paul's Japanese language ability is still limited. He can handle the simple needs of daily life—shopping, ordering food, asking for directions—yet can't connect simple ideas into an ongoing conversation or narrative. He can introduce himself and tell you that he works as a university instructor, yet he doesn't get far beyond the basic facts he needs to convey. Though he's open and engaging, he can't really express his personality in Japanese, so with strangers he switches to English if possible. He feels somewhat embarrassed by this lack and recognizes that it fits the stereotype of the ignorant American abroad.

The reality of daily life, however, is that Paul gets by quite well with only foreign language basics. He vacations in Hawaii, streams American movies and news, and has plenty of foreign friends. His Japanese wife speaks excellent English. Paul is happy and does not feel isolated—he knows Tokyo well, and is knowledgeable about food and the customs of daily life. He can order food and drink, shop, ask for directions and make basic small talk. The administrative documents at his university are mostly translated into English for the benefit of foreign staff members. He's happy as a mostly monolingual expat. He seems to have found

an equilibrium abroad that doesn't depend heavily on using the local language.

Paul's story raises many questions, but I want to focus on the relationship between language and culture. More specifically, I'm curious about the relationship between linguistic ability and intercultural understanding. How important is learning a foreign language? Is it a critical part of cultural learning? Does it provide us with an insider's view that can't be obtained otherwise? Or is language learning primarily a way to meet practical needs?

I regularly meet people like Paul who live in a foreign country for long periods without learning the local language. I meet expatriate executives who simply decide that they are too busy to focus on language learning. Some study-abroad students in Asia find that a year abroad may not be nearly enough to make them fluent in Japanese or Chinese and give up trying. Most agree that language learning adds to a foreign experience, but many still don't make it a high priority. It takes years and the payoff is not always clear. Paul told me that he has enough language ability to get his needs met, and thus improving his Japanese really wouldn't help him that much. Is that true? As travel and communication becomes more convenient—you can get a translation app for your smartphone—is foreign language learning worth all the effort?

Language-Culture-Cognition

Your attitude towards Paul, and towards foreign language learning in general, hinges at least partly on your view of the relationship between language and culture. Does speaking a new language give us access to a new way of looking at things? Is Paul missing out on a unique Japanese perspective because of his limited language ability? Does speaking a new language involve learning to inhabit a different perceptual world? Or is language just a set of labels for thoughts? Perhaps language is simply a code that allows us to communicate concepts and ideas that don't fundamentally depend on language. Perhaps Paul can learn about Japan by having Japanese things explained to him in English. If the answer is closer to the former—a more *relativistic* view—then Paul is really missing out on whole worlds of meaning. If the truth is closer to the latter, more *universalistic* view, then perhaps Paul doesn't need Japanese that much after all.

This distinction is important because it shapes how we approach our inter-

cultural experiences. Broadly speaking, a more relativistic view emphasizes the importance of language learning when in a foreign environment. Language is seen as unlocking a door that helps cultural learners gain entry into a new cultural world—one that can only be fully accessed through the insider's perspective of language. Relativism implies an important distinction between insiders who share a linguistic and cultural worldview, and outsiders who do not. Language learning becomes a sort of pre-requisite for cultural learning, implying that Paul is really missing the boat. How could someone live in Japan so long and *not* have learned more Japanese?

Others, however, find Paul's case more understandable. A more universalistic stance lends itself to a pragmatic and functional view of language ability. Language is about communicating ideas and accomplishing tasks. It is seen as less central to thinking and perceiving. Language, in this view, is simply a tool for understanding ideas. What's important is not the language we use, but the ideas we communicate. In this view, Paul's attitude is not so hard to understand. Japanese is, after all, a difficult language. He has functional language skills and is respectful of Japanese people. There are, it must be added, many different ways to learn about Japan. From a more universalistic perspective, speaking the local language may be useful, but it's not necessarily essential for cultural learning.

There is no consensus on this question. Cognitive linguist Steven Pinker expresses this more universalistic position when he writes, "People don't think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in the language of thought."[1] He says that mistaking language for thought is a "conventional absurdity"—something that goes against common sense but that people repeat because they've heard it before.[2] This view represents a kind of "thought first" view, which holds that the human capacity for thought, advanced cognition and consciousness evolved first and was a starting condition for the development of language.[3] The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues along those lines when he says "The idea that self and consciousness would emerge *after* language, and would be a direct construction of language, is not likely to be correct. Language does not come out of nothing. Language gives us names for things."[4]

There are those, however, that think the opposite—that the development of language led to our ability for abstract thought. In this view, words allowed us to express thoughts not related to the here-and-now, and this spurred the development of more abstract thinking.[5] It allowed us to live more fully in a world not just of physical objects and immediate concerns, but of ideas and meaning, speculation and fantasy. If so, then language may well have a big impact on our

ability to conceive of the world in new ways. In this view, language, as a symbolic system to express thought, is seen as a central element of our cognitive processes.

At the root of this conundrum is our ignorance about the nature of *meaning*, and how is it related to thought and language. For Pinker, meaning is independent of language. He hypothesizes what he calls *mentalese*—meaningful thoughts, existing *independently* of language, that consist of "symbols for concepts, and arrangements of symbols that correspond for who did what to whom."[6] This view sees meaning primarily in terms of concepts that we hold in our mind, and which can then be transmitted, using language, to others. Or, as Pinker puts it, "Language conveys news." This view implies that meaning is a product of general cognitive capacities, and thus not likely to be affected in important ways by linguistic and cultural differences. In other words, because we have similar cognitive systems that we use to experience the external world, linguistic differences will likely only reflect superficial variation in how we experience things.

There are others who take a more relativistic stance, arguing that language is an artifact or tool of culture—something developed in response to particular environments and thus reflecting wide variations in human experience.[7] People who see language as an important shaper of our thoughts typically argue for some degree of *linguistic relativity*, popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Edward Sapir stated his position way back in 1929:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, or alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection.[8]

Since then, linguists have attempted to prove or disprove this idea in a number of ways. Studies supporting linguistic relativity looked at, for example, the ability to classify colors, categorize objects, and make hypothetical interpretations.[9, 10, 11] Other researchers, however, have challenged such results.[12] Studies like this seemed to go out of fashion for a time, but new research is emerging and encouraging those who speak in favor of linguistic relativism.[13] One study that I enjoyed showed that when Spanish speakers describe the qualities of a key, for example, they tend to use more feminine adjectives (such as "lovely" or "little"), whereas German speakers

tend to choose more masculine words (such as "jagged" or "serrated"). Researchers propose that this is because the word for "key" is a feminine noun in Spanish and a masculine noun in German, and that this affects the way people perceive these objects.[14]

Though interesting, this sort of research seems only distantly related to Paul's situation. It's hard to imagine Spanish speakers having distressing intercultural conflicts with German speakers over miscommunication about keys. It's not clear how such differences could create barriers to intercultural understanding. The issue for intercultural learners is not *perception* in the sense of processing visual stimuli in relation to colors or shapes, it's about *perception* in the broader sense of *how we look at things*. It's possible that language has little or no affect on the perception of colors and physical objects, yet still is closely related to one's view of a situation. For sojourners, the question is the degree to which ignorance of a foreign language will prevent us from understanding others. If we had highly skilled translation technology, for example, would mutual understanding be relatively easy? Or are there many things that would still get lost in translation?

Lost in Translation

It's often said that certain things can't be translated into another language. Some will say that reading Tolstoy in Russian is different from doing so in translation, or that the novel Don Quixote by Cervantes can only be fully appreciated in its original Spanish. The nuances of Japanese are purported to be notoriously difficult to capture and put into English. Looking at such translation difficulties may bring us closer to understanding the relationship between culture and language, because translation attempts not only to transmit individual ideas, but to also to provide entry into other times and places; other social worlds. With that in mind, let's look at examples of translation difficulties and see what lessons they might hold for interculturalists.

One famous example of a cultural product that is considered difficult to translate accurately is Japanese haiku poetry. One of the most famous poems is one by Matsuo Basho which, in a total of only 17 syllables, evokes a scene of a frog jumping into a pond. For these 17 syllables, there are more than 100 different published translations, including:

Old pond – frogs jumped in – sound of water.

Pond, there, still and old!
A frog has jumped from the shore
The splash can be heard.

An old pond
The sound
Of a diving frog.

Breaking the silence
Of an ancient pond,
A frog jumped into water –
A deep resonance

Of the above translations, the first one is perhaps the most literal. Even so, there's some ambiguity, as the Japanese doesn't make clear whether "frog" is singular or plural. What's missing from this translation is the atmosphere, or the nuance of the scene as would be imagined or experienced by a Japanese speaker. Other translations try to capture the mental imagery that might occur to a Japanese speaker using turns of phrase like *breaking the silence*, or *a deep resonance*. Those words are not directly in the poem, but they are part of the linguistic experience for Japanese speakers.

As you can see, the difficulty here is not so much communicating facts—the facts of what happens in this haiku are very straightforward. The challenge is in capturing the mood and symbolic associations. A pond is more than a body of water, and the silence is more than a lack of sound. This is a reminder that language is about more than "concepts" that can be objectively represented using different linguistic codes. Language captures something of human *experience*. The images and associations that this haiku generates for Japanese speakers is, in some hard to quantify way, different from any approximation created in English.

From the intercultural perspective, then, language learning is not so much about acquiring information as about gaining access to shared experience. Words that are difficult to translate are often related to shared experience. The word *furoshiki*, for example, is a Japanese word that refers to a piece of cloth used to wrap things in. In Japan, where there is a tradition of using cloth to wrap things, this word calls up memories and associations related to the *experience* of using *furoshiki*. Likewise, the word *saudade* is a Portuguese word for the feeling we have

towards something that we love and have lost. While this is an experience that may be common to people everywhere, Portuguese focuses our attention on that experience. In the Yagan language of South America, *mamihlapinatapei* refers to the silent, meaningful look exchanged by two people who are ready to initiate something, but hesitate. We can see that language has, at the very least, the power to focus our attention on particular aspects of our experience.[15]

Sometimes, an understanding of a word hinges on having experience *within* a cultural community. For example, a friend of Barack Obama's mother in Indonesia, Elizabeth Bryant, described him during his childhood in Java in the following way: "He has the manner of Asians and the ways of Americans—being *halus*, being patient, calm, a good listener."[16] As we saw in chapter 6, *halus* refers to a Javanese ideal of restraint, dignity and calm command. Bryant seems to have used this Indonesian word because she felt it was impossible to accurately express it using the conceptual universe of English. You have to experience *halus* in the Indonesian context to have a clear understanding of how a Javenese might understand this word.

Likewise, the psychologist Takeo Doi wrote a whole book about the Japanese word *amae*—meaning a sort of nurturing dependence—which he argues is a central organizing principle of Japanese social relations, and thus untranslatable.[17] *Amae* assumes a hierarchical social world in which those in higher positions care for and nurture those below, and those in a lower position depend on and are guided by those above. Depending on the context, it can be used as a verb to refer to seeking indulgence or special treatment (as when an employee presumes that it's no big deal to come back late from lunch), to seek affection or reassurance (of a child towards a parent, for example), or to even to let one's guard down (as when a strong man rests his head on the shoulder of his girlfriend in a gesture of trust and intimacy). As with the word *halus*, understanding the word *amae* is contingent upon having a sense for how people relate to each other in a particular cultural community.

If language reflects shared experience, then it follows that language and cultural communities that are more closely related will have fewer problems with shared understanding. For my part, I remember only occasionally feeling that it was difficult to grasp culturally-laden concepts in Spanish. One example was the word *macho*, which seemed much more complex in Mexican Spanish than the way I was used to using it in English. When learning Japanese, on the other hand, I struggled more often. One example is the word *nakama*. A Japanese–English dictionary provides a long list of more than fifty possible equivalents, including:

associate, buddy, chum, cohort, colleague, companion, comrade, cohort, coterie, crew, crowd, family, fellow, friend, good buddy, helpmate, homie, mate, neighbor, pal, peer, sidekick, tribe, and yokemate.[18] With time, I figured out that *nakama* refers to the particular social connections that come from sharing an ingroup—a kind of ingroup feeling. To get an intuitive sense for the word *nakama*, though, I needed more than a list of translations. I needed lived *experience* with Japanese ingroups.

The extensive list of possible equivalences for *nakama*, and the roundabout descriptions necessary for communicating words like *halus* or *amae*, provide clues to the relationship between language and meaning. If we think of meaning in terms of *mentalese*—symbolic thought separate from language—we run into difficulties. How could a single word in one language require so many possible translations in another? The word *nakama* had more than fifty possible equivalents! If meaning exists independently of language, and thus independently of culture, it seems like it should be easier to create clear, concise translations. An idea that can be expressed with one word in one language shouldn't require so much roundabout description and contextual information to label in another. This hints that linguistic meaning exists not only as universally definable concepts, but is closely tied to situation and shared social experience, and thus culture.

Embodied Simulation

Recent research in the field of cognitive science and neurolinguistics are giving us new tools to look at the questions of language, thought and meaning. New theoretical models—supported by empiric research—are taking us beyond the simple cause-and-effect conceptualization of Whorfian thinking about language and meaning.[19] We are starting to be able to test these models using more empirical methods. We can ask the question: How is the experience of meaning generated by cognitive processes? And How is the experience of meaning related to our use of language? What, in other words, is the relationship between language, thought and meaning?

From the intercultural perspective, I am particularly excited by recent research related to the theory of *embodied simulation*. This research attempts to understand how the brain produces meaning, and how this process is related to language use. Neurolinguist Benjamin Bergen, for example, argues that linguistic meaning does not simply consist of abstract concepts or symbols that are somehow stored in our brain, as would be the case with mentalese. Instead, when we hear a word, our brain *simulates the experience that is associated with that word*.[20]

Let's take a look at some of the implication of this idea. According to this theory, if I say to you, "The dog jumped over the swimming pool," your brain responds by creating a mental simulation of what it would be like to actually see this. This means that the word "dog" doesn't exist in our mind only as a disembodied prototype or construct. Rather, the meaning we construct when understanding this sentence is a direct result of our experiences. Thus, someone who has a Chihuahua and lives in a big house with a full-sized pool would call to mind a different image than someone with a Great Dane and an inflatable kiddie pool.
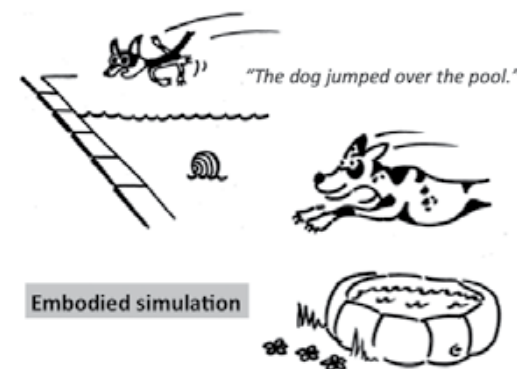

"The dog jumped over the pool."

Embodied simulation

Figure 10-1

This view provides a new approach to asking questions about meaning and language. It allows us to make predictions that can be tested, taking the debate from the realm of philosophy more fully into that of empirical research. For example, if meaning is produced in a non-linguistic way as images that exist as abstract *concepts*, one would expect the images in our minds to be fairly prototypical—say, an idealized dog jumping over an idealized swimming pool. If linguistic meaning is more closely tied to actual experience, however, then the images this sentence provokes in our head should vary more widely based on individual experience, and by extension, on cultural background.

Bergen points to many studies that he feels support the view that linguistic

meaning is tied to actual experience. In one, volunteers were exposed to words accompanied with either a picture or an audio recording—with the word *cow* they might see a picture of a cow, whereas with the word *rooster* they might hear *cock-a-doodle-doo*. The next day, they were asked to recall whether they had learned particular words together with a sound or picture. An fMRI scan showed that when remembering the words they learned with the picture, the parts of the brain used in seeing were activated, while the words paired with audio activated the part of the brain used in processing sounds. In other words, recalling a word reflected the experience associated with that word.[21] It's also been shown that recalling actions activates parts of the brain responsible for those actions. When recalling the action of making a fist, for example, PET brain imaging showed activation in parts of the brain associated with that behavior.[22]

The idea of embodied simulation jibes with other common experiences. Research has shown that picturing the perfect tennis serve in your mind can help you attain one on the court because there is a cognitive connection between imagining a behavior and performing it.[23] Another interesting finding is that hearing a word can interfere with our ability to perceive that object, a phenomenon known as the Perky effect.[24] Think, for example, how hard it is to pay attention to our surroundings when speaking on a cell phone. If the embodied simulation hypothesis is correct, this is because language processing uses up mental resources that otherwise would be used for physical perception. Embodied simulation could also be what allows us to mentally rotate an image in our mind to see it from different perspective—something that would seem more difficult if meaning existed as pure abstraction.[25]

This line of research accords with the phenomenon of embodiment in general—the idea that our mental experience entails integrated mind-body processes. Daniel Kahneman talks about this in terms of *associative activation*, the way in which one meaning in our mind will trigger another, and another, and so on.[26] He explores this by asking readers to look at the following two words:

banana   vomit

Simply seeing these words creates a cascade of images and physiological effects in your mind and body. A rather disgusting scenario pops into mind—one associated with vomiting—such as getting drunk or being sick. Your body will have an embodied reaction as well, with a slight grimace on your face and a rise in your heart rate. Your mind has also now been *primed* (made more sensitive) to

other things that are yellow or that might make you feel nauseous. This range of reactions begins instantaneously at the level of the intuitive mind, before you've fully registered the meaning of these words consciously. As Kahneman puts it, "Cognition is embodied; you think with your body, not only with your brain."[27]

Seeing linguistic meaning in terms of embodied simulation seems relatively straightforward when talking about objects and actions—like seeing, hearing, and eating. But what about our ability to think about things that don't exist in time and space, such as *company*, or *joy*, or *quadratic equation*? One answer is that we think metaphorically. We *shed light* on a problem, *move forward* with our lives, have it *up to here* when losing our patience, and even *feel down* when depressed. In this view, we experience the meaning of abstractions in ways that correspond to more concrete experience. The linguist George Lakoff argues that metaphor also structures our thinking and interactions, and that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."[28]

In Lakoff's view, metaphors are powerful shapers of experience. He believes that "Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people." When English speakers talk about arguments, for example, they use expressions associated with competition and war—such as *scoring points*, *winning an argument*, not *giving ground*, or *yielding an inch*. In chapter eight, I talked about how decision-making in English can be conceptualized metaphorically as a marketplace of ideas—as reflected in expressions such as *give and take* and *putting our options on the table*, *weighing our options*, and so on. This can be contrasted with metaphors for decision-making in Japanese. Words such as *nemawashi* (root binding) or *uchiawase* (strike together) are metaphorically related to fusion or coming together. Lakoff and some other linguists argue that such metaphors are more than just turns of speech; they can provide clues to the thinking of that language's speakers.[29]

In an attempt to test these ideas empirically, Benjamin Bergen has done research related to the metaphorical properties of the words *joy* and *happiness*. He wanted to find out if words that represent abstract qualities such as these also trigger embodied simulation. He points out that though these words are close in meaning, there are metaphorical differences between them. Joy is more often talked about as though it is a liquid—we are *full of* joy or *overflow* with joy. Happiness, on the other hand, is typically talked about as though it is an object, as when we refer to *finding*, *sharing*, or *searching for* happiness. These tendencies aren't absolute, but *joy* is used twice as often with a container metaphor, and happiness ten times more often with the metaphor of searching.

Bergen was curious whether—all else being equal—people would more likely use the word *joy* in situations associated with liquid, and *happiness* in situations with searching. To test this, he showed people a smiling face and asked them whether the person seemed to be experiencing joy or happiness. He asked this question to three different groups: people who were filling themselves with liquid (in a bar); people actively searching for something (in a library); and people who were doing neither (sitting in a classroom). He found, in fact, that those in the bar chose *joy* more often, that those in the library chose *happiness* more often, and that the control group scored between the two. He argues that the state of the respondents' bodies affected their answer, and that this provides evidence that relatively abstract words are embodied simulations of more concrete things.[30]

Embodied Cultural Knowledge

If we experience meaning as a form of mental simulation of previous experiences, it becomes easier to see why some words are so hard to translate. As Bergen explains:

> The embodied simulations we construct when understanding language depend on the experiences that we've personally had. When those experiences differ systematically across cultures, this can in principle lead to the same words being interpreted differently—the same words can drive different embodied simulations for different populations of people.[31]

From this perspective, the words and expressions of language are more than symbols that encode information—they are mental simulations that we experience holistically. People who share the same language and culture have in common a rich body of experiential details about the world. Take, for example, the following sentence:

> The Fourth of July is celebrated on July 4.

For Americans, the *Fourth of July* is more than a day on a calendar. It's a holiday associated with the American Declaration of Independence. It calls to mind images of fireworks, picnics, and hot dogs. Americans may associate it with the aged parchment of the Declaration of Independence, and be able to picture its loopy handwritten script in their mind. They may have affective associations with this word—a positive sense of national pride or nostalgic feelings about setting off firecrackers as a child. Even Americans who have never watched fireworks on the Fourth of July understand this rich set of associative meanings and experiences, as long as they've had enough lived experience in the cultural world of Americans to understand these associations.

Herein lies the power of language and its connection to culture—*sharing a language allows us to share a world of linguistic and, by extension, cultural experience with other speakers.* For those who learn English as a foreign language, and thus don't share this rich assortment of embodied associations, the *Fourth of July* sounds simply like the day that comes after the *third of July*. The more cultural experience one has in the United States, the more foreigners will be able to share the intuitive resonance of words like *The Fourth of July*. That is, not coincidentally, what would allow for more involved interaction with Americans. In a similar way, learning the word *halus* provides an entry point for understanding Javanese values and relationships with Indonesians, just as gaining an intuitive understanding of *amae* is part and parcel of an attempt to understand a Japanese worldview.

Patterns of Collective Simulation

There are other ways in which a cognitive perspective clarifies the relationship between linguistic meaning and cultural meaning. For one thing, the way that our brain processes meaning differs fundamentally from the way that a dictionary lists meaning. In our brain, linguistic meaning doesn't exist in discrete chunks with a list of explicit definitions. It is always connected to a network of meaningful associations. The word *bird*, for example, is associated with a particular category of animals (a category that includes animals with feathers, that lay eggs, and so on.) It is also associated with *qualities*, meaning that we can experience something as more or less *bird-like*. A penguin, for example, falls within the category of bird, although it is not very bird-like. A bat, on the other hand, has many birdlike qualities yet belongs to a different category.

In terms of cross-cultural understanding, this means that even words for an identical object can have vastly different sets of cultural associations, or belong to

different categories. The word *pork*, for example, while referring to the meat of a pig, can be categorized as a forbidden food in one community and a luxury in another. It may be associated with impurity, or, on the contrary, with a wholesome breakfast (think bacon and eggs). This is a reminder that *dictionary definitions of words are not enough to communicate the network of meaningful associations found within a language or cultural community.*

The connection between linguistic meaning and cultural meaning can also be found in the patterns of associations *between* words or ideas. For many Americans and Europeans, for example, the word *wedding dress* sets off a particular cascade of images, such as the color white, the exchange of vows, veils, the procession down the aisle of a church, and so on. The white of a wedding dress has symbolic associations as well: virginity, purity, and tradition. This network of meaning, in turn, is associated with a Christian worldview—the idea that life is a struggle between good (white) and evil (black). We recognize that same symbolism in old Western movies, in which the good guy wears a white hat, and the bad guy a black hat.

Naturally, we don't normally think about the forces of good and evil when we see a wedding dress in a department store window, but people who share in these associations respond to them, and recognize them when they are pointed out. This isn't dependent on *agreeing* with these associations—it's not a question of whether people feel white *should* symbolize purity. Such associations simply exist as part of the pool of shared linguistic and cultural meaning. You may choose to break convention and wear a brown wedding dress, but you do so at your own peril, since people will not necessarily understand what you intend by it. The sum total of these associate networks is cultural meaning itself.

To take a contrasting example, Japanese Shinto wedding dresses are also typically white. But the associated networks of meaning connected to them are different. They signify purity of a different sort. White cloth is pure in the sense that it is undyed, and thus can take on the colors of the husband's family. Traditionally, marriage means that the wife incorporates herself into the husband's household—essentially taking on the "colors" of that family. White is also associated with death, as the bride dies to her family and is born into a new family. A wedding is a joining of two families and the transfer of a member from one to another. So while the white of Shinto and Western wedding dresses can both roughly be said to symbolize purity, a map of cultural associations reveals a very different set of underlying cultural patterns.
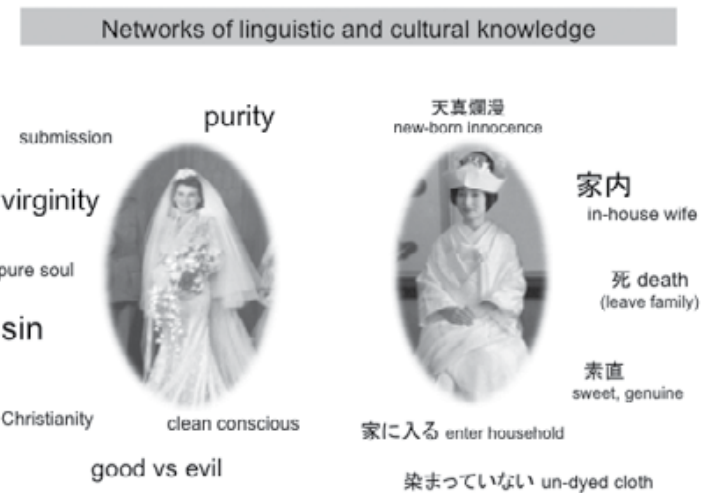

Figure 10-2

The schemas that English and Japanese speakers share for wedding dresses are both linguistic and cultural. Cultural schemas can be seen as the *collective simulation that unifies communities in shared mental experience,* while linguistic meaning is *the shared code that activates those shared simulations.* In other words, hearing the words "wedding dress" activates a culturally based simulation of a wedding dress. If we are cultural outsiders speaking a foreign language, our linguistic simulations are more impoverished. They may allow for communication, but they won't align as well.

The associative networks that I am describing are not simply abstractions. They are tied to everyday behavior as well, since language usage is closely tied to the behavioral scripts that govern human relations. Cultural scripts provide templates both for how to act and what to say. In the example above, it means that cultural knowledge of wedding dresses includes knowledge of wedding ceremonies, how one should dress when attending one, and so on. Cultural outsiders may learn English, but not know that "I do" is a key phrase when people get married, or have an idea of what "popping the question" refers to. Linguistic meaning, without a body of cultural associations, may serve to communicate relatively concrete facts, but will not may one fully functional in a community.

The need for these cultural schema and scripts was discovered first hand by a student raised in New Zealand. She discovered that gaining a certain mastery

of the Japanese language—how to tell people your name, for example—didn't mean that she would understand the scripts for getting to know people and make friends in Japan:

> Since I play guitar and am very interested in Japanese rock and indie bands, I joined several music circles. But despite playing with bands and going to events regularly, it was very difficult to form friendships. At the time, I thought it was purely a language barrier, but I realized that perhaps my struggle to fit in was because I didn't know the rules of interaction. I was behaving in those circles exactly as I would behave back home.

In a contrasting example, a Japanese student at an American university told me he was baffled to be invited to a *party*, only to be shown the beer keg and left on his own. He saw Americans standing around and talking, and had no idea what he was supposed to *do*. He expected a *party* to be more structured. For their part, the Americans there *were* partying—but the poor foreign student couldn't recognize the script, and didn't have the cultural and social skills to have a good time.

Language and Culture Learning

Stories like this are one more reminder of the close connection between language and cultural learning. For some people, however, it can be hard to get a sense of the benefits of taking on the challenge of foreign language learning. Beginning language learners often think of a foreign language primarily as words and rules to memorize—a new code for exchanging information. This information-centric view of language and culture affects how Paul thinks about learning languages too:

> I don't have a chance to use Japanese. I've made some attempts at times, joining language schools. I guess there are other things I've been interested in. . . . I would have to create opportunities. For example I could go to the store, and even though I don't need tuna fish, I could ask for the tuna fish. I could call a department store on the phone and ask for something.

It doesn't occur to Paul that using Japanese not only allows him to exchange information, it also creates relationships and provides a starting point for a more fully shared cultural experience. This may be why some expatriates don't feel the need for the local language. In the information age, we can get limitless information from electronic devices, so why bother interacting with unpredictable biological data systems (aka human beings)?

Many other people, of course, recognize the shared-experience aspect of foreign language learning—particularly those who have made it beyond the beginner level. Neil, an American who has spent far less time in Japan than Paul, says:

> Once you demonstrate that you have some ability to speak the language, people treat you more as an ordinary person. Maybe you won't get the special treatment, but at the same time you feel more part of the group instead of always being outside.

Neil's statement that you will be treated "more as an ordinary person" when speaking the local language captures quite nicely the way in which language provides an entry point into another cultural community. And as you share more fully in new linguistic and cultural communities, you may feel shifts in your identity as well. You may even feel an expanding intercultural self. As Robert, highly fluent in three languages, says:

> You are as many people as languages that you speak. When you speak a different language, your thought patterns change and your gestures change. And when people tell jokes in that language, you understand but you couldn't necessarily explain that to people in another language. The reference points and assumptions are just so different.

Robert's experience is not rare, though certainly not everyone that gains proficiency in a foreign language finds it to be transformational or deeply satisfying. At the very least, however, a cognitive perspective—as well as stories like this—can help us understand just how deep the culture and language connection can be.

Language, Culture, and the Intercultural Mind

Learning to speak a foreign language helps us develop an intercultural mind in several ways. First of all, it allows us to go to new places and see new things—it gives us new freedom of movement. Even a few words of a Thai can give you the courage to approach a street stall and eat dinner elbow to elbow with the locals in Bangkok. Foreign language ability provides an entry point into new experiences. It gets us invited into people's homes, increases our level of interaction, and allows us to relate to people we might be cut off from otherwise. Ultimately, a foreign language opens a door into new worlds of shared cultural experience.

KEY CONCEPTS

Embodied simulation: *The hypothesis that the brain generates linguistic meaning by simulating lived experience.*

Embodied cultural knowledge: *The idea that cultural knowledge involves shared mental experiences. This includes schema (networks of meaning association) and scripts (patterns of behavior associated with particular situations).*

Discussion Quotes

Sapir: It is quite an illusion to imagine that . . . language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection.

Pinker: People don't think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in the language of thought.

Bergen: The embodied simulations we construct when understanding language depend on the experiences that we've personally had. When those experiences differ systematically across cultures, this can in principle lead to the same words being interpreted differently.

11.

the intercultural mind