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 14 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 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 he gets by quite well with only the basics. He follows American football online, 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’s happy as a mostly monolingual expat.

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Paul’s story raises a number of questions, but I want to focus on Paul’s language ability—or lack of it—and what relationship this might have with cross-cultural understanding. Most people agree that language and culture are interconnected in some way. Yet there is disagreement on just how strong those connections are. For some people, language learning and cross-cultural understanding are inseparable and they may find Paul’s story disturbing or incredible. How could someone live in Japan so long and not have learned more Japanese? They assume that something must be wrong with Paul in some way—perhaps he is prejudiced or an inordinately inflexible person. Others, however, don’t find his case so shocking and see language and culture as somewhat less intertwined. 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. Some feel that speaking the local language is a plus but it’s not absolutely essential for cultural learning. Which of these two positions makes more sense to you?

**Language-culture-cognition**

Can we master a foreign language without learning about culture? Can we gain deep understanding of a cultural community whose language we don’t understand? As usual, such simple-sounding questions are profoundly difficult to answer. Let’s start with the easy answers. Of course it’s possible to learn a language to some degree without much experience using it in a foreign environment. People do that in classrooms all the time. And it’s possible to have plenty of cultural learning that doesn’t involve language learning. You can visit a country, meet its people, study its traditions, and learn many other things that don’t require foreign language ability. There’s still a lot of grey zone, however, between these two poles. Another way to approach this issue is by asking: What’s the relationship between the meaning in our head and the language we speak? Does speaking a new language involve inhabiting a different perceptual world, or is language just a set of labels for thoughts that are mostly universal? If the answer is closer to the former, monolinguals are missing out on whole worlds of meaning. If the answer is closer to the latter, then perhaps Paul doesn’t need Japanese that much after all.

Alas, despite recent advances in the new science of mind, there is no clear consensus as to the relationship between the thoughts and perceptions in our head and
the language we use to express those things to others. Some say, for example, that the human capacity for thought led to the development of language. In this view, cognition and consciousness evolved first and was a starting condition for the development of language. (Pinker 1995; Damasio 1999) Others think the opposite—that the development of language led to our ability for abstract thought. In this view, words allowing us to express thoughts not related to the hear-and-now, and this spurred the development of more abstract thinking. (Bickerton 2009) This question of primacy—whether language or thought comes first—may be important. If thought comes first and is largely independent of language, then perhaps speaking a foreign language really doesn’t affect our way of thinking or perceiving. This is a more universalistic position which cognitive linguist Steven Pinker (Pinker 1995) expresses when he writes: “People don’t think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in the language of thought.” (pg. 81) 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. (pg. 57)

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (Damasio 1999) also argues that thought comes before language, saying: “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.” (pg. 108) At the root of this conundrum is our ignorance about what meaning is and how meaning is related to thought and language. For Pinker, meaning exists independently of language. He hypothesizes what he calls mentalese—meaningful thoughts that exist independently of language, and consist of “symbols for concepts, and arrangements of symbols that correspond for who did what to whom.” (pg. 81) 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 is close to Damasio’s idea that language gives us names for things that we are capable of thinking about without language. This view implies that the cognitive capacity for meaning is primarily a product of general human perceptual and cognitive capacities, and thus not likely to be affected in important ways by cultural differences. In other words, because we have similar cognitive hardware which 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. (Everett 2012) Those 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 (Sapir 1958) stated his position on this way back in 1929 in the following way:

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. (pg. 69)

Since then, linguists have attempted to prove or disapprove this idea in a number of ways. Studies supporting linguistic relativity looked at, for example, the ability to classify colors (Kay and Kempton 1984), categorize objects (Carrol and Casagrande 1958), and make hypothetical interpretations (Bloom 1981). Other researchers, however, have challenged such results. (Au 1983; Davies, Sowden et al. 1998 ) Studies like this seemed to go out of fashion for a time, but new research is emerging and encouraging those who speak in favor linguistic relativism. (Deutscher 2010) One study that I enjoyed reading about 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 tended 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, while it’s a masculine noun in German, and that this affects the way people perceive these objects. (Motluk 2002)

Though interesting, this sort of research seems only distantly related to Paul’s situation since Spanish and German speakers will not likely have intercultural conflict due to miscommunication about keys or other concrete objects, or even different perceptions related to colors for that matter. The problems we face crossing cultures are usually more abstract and related to differing communication styles, contrasting values
or conflicting beliefs. We can surmise that differences in perception related to language would more likely be manifest in words that can’t easily be translated from one language to another. Could these hard-to-translate-words provide hints to the connection between language and culture? Let’s take a look at a few: Some such words refer to objects that are not commonly used in a foreign community. Furoshiki, for example, is a Japanese word that refers to a piece of cloth used to wrap things in. That doesn’t seem to provide evidence for some difficulty in cross-cultural understanding. Other hard-to-translate words describe particular situations or sensations, such as: saudade a Portuguese word for the feeling we have towards something that you love and has been lost; or mamihlapinatapei, a word from the Yagan language in South America which apparently refers to the silent, meaningful look exchanged by two people who are ready to initiate something, but hesitate; or ayumnamat, an Inuit word expressing the sentiment that it’s useless to worry about things that can’t be changed. (Fields) The German word schadenfreude—taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others—is working its way into English. One can only wonder if the net effect will be for Americans to take more such pleasure as they become sensitized to this reaction.

In addition to these situational words, we can find terms whose meaning hinges on cultural values or assumptions in a particular community. For example, a friend of Barack Obama’s mother in Indonesia, Elizabeth Bryant, described him during that period in this way: “He has the manner of Asians and the ways of Americans—being halus, being patient, calm, a good listener.” (Scott 2011) As we saw in chapter 6, halus refers to a Javanese ideal of restraint, dignity and calm command. Perhaps Bryant used this Indonesian word because she felt it was impossible to accurately express it using the conceptual universe of English. Likewise, the psychologist Takeo Doi wrote a whole book about the Japanese word amae—a sort of nurturing dependence—that he argues is a central organizing principle of the Japanese worldview, and thus untranslatable. (Doi 1995) Culture-laden words may also be false friends—appearing more similar than they are. The French word fraternité, for example, expresses French cultural ideals in a way not captured by the English fraternity. When learning Japanese, I struggled to grasp the word nakama. When I looked it up in a Japanese-English dictionary, I found a long list of more than 50 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. (ALC 2014) With time, I figured out that *nakama* refers to a relationship that comes from sharing an in-group, such as being a colleague or classmate. This is a social distinction not usually made in English, rendering it hard to accurately get across in that language. The extensive list of possible equivalences for *nakama* raises questions about the relationship between language and meaning. How could a single word in Japanese require so many possible translations? If we think of meaning in terms of *mentalese*—symbolic thought separate from language—we would need 50 different concepts from English to piece together a single Japanese concept. This doesn’t seem right.

I’ve come to think that it’s easier make sense of these translation challenges in experiential or situational terms. If we think of language in terms of when and how they are experienced, we can better discern how culturally unique that word is. *Saudade*, for example, is relatively clear if you’ve experienced loss of a loved object. In that sense, it’s fairly universal and can probably be understood intuitively by a wide range of people, regardless of their native language. An understanding of *nakama*, on the other hand, requires cultural experience with Japanese people and how they relate to each other. *Halus* too, relates to cultural experience—the more you’ve spent time with Javanese; if you’ve seen them interact, their manner, when and how they express emotion, how refinement is expressed, the easier it will be to get a feeling for *halus*. Seen in this way, the words like *nakama* and *halus* are a sort of *insiders* words that need to be understood *within* a particular cultural context in order to more fully understood. Seen in this light, the connection between language and culture hinges not so much on concepts as on experiences. This may also be one reason we sometimes import words from a foreign language. The difference between *veal* (originally from the French *veel*, meaning calf) and *calf* is not one of substance, but of experience—*veal* refers to the meat on your plate whereas a *calf* is the animal you see next to a cow in the field. In the same way English has largely imported the Japanese word *sushi* rather than simply use the term *raw fish* because the experience of these two terms are different—one calls to mind the experience of eating a delicate sliver of fish on rice, while the other conjures up a less appetizing set of images.

**Embodied simulation**

Recent research in the field of cognitive science and neurolinguistics has
been shedding light on questions related to language, culture and meaning. It’s taking us beyond the simple cause-and-effect conceptualization of Whorfian thinking about language. (Chiu, Leung et al. 2010) I am particularly excited by the hypothesis that the experience of linguistic meaning involves a cognitive process of embodied simulation. 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. (Bergen 2012) If I say to you “the dog jumped over the swimming pool” your brain responds by creating a simulation of what it would be like to actually see this. This means that the word “dog” for example, 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 from someone with a Great Dane who owns an inflatable kiddie’s pool.

Figure 10-2

This may sound rather commonsensical—and it may be—but this provides a new way of thinking about meaning in our brain. If we think primarily in terms of concepts, one would expect the images in our minds to be fairly prototypical—a idealized dog jumping over an idealized swimming pool. If linguistic meaning is more closely tied to actual experience, however, the images in our head would be expected to vary more widely based on individual experience, and by extension, by cultural background. Thinking of meaning as a simulation, rather than as a purely abstract concepts, leads to predictions that can be tested empirically. Bergen points to many studies that he feels support this view. In one, volunteers were exposed to words accompanied by either sound or a picture—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 words learned with the sound activated the part of the brain used in processing sounds. In other words, recalling the word reflected the experience associated with that word. (Wheeler, Peterson et al. 2000) In the same way that recalling sights and sounds
activated areas of the brain related to seeing and hearing, 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. (Bergen 2012) (pg. 44)

The idea of embodied simulation also jibes with other common experiences, such as the effectiveness of “image training” techniques that athletes sometimes use—picturing the perfect tennis serve in your mind can help you attain one on the court because of the cognitive connection between imagining a behavior and performing it. (Driskell, Copper et al. 1994) Another interesting finding is that hearing a word can interfere with our ability to perceive that object (the Perky effect). (Perky 1910) 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, that's because language processing uses up mental resources that otherwise would be used for processing 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 a pure abstraction. (Bergen 2012)

This line of research fits well with the phenomena of embodiment in general—the idea that our mental experience entails a whole-body experience. Daniel Kahnemann talked about this in terms of associative activation, the way in which one meaning in our mind will trigger another, and another, and so on (Kahneman 2011). He explores this phenomena by asking readers to look at the following two words (pg. 50):

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 that is 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 Kahnemann puts it, “cognition is embodied; you think with your body, not only with your brain.” (pg. 51)
Seeing linguistic meaning in terms of embodied simulation seems relatively straightforward when talking about objects and actions—like seeing, hearing, 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, get lost in thought, have it up to here when losing patience, and even feel down when depressed. George Lakoff has argued 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”. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) He goes on to argue 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, as opposed to a comparative marketplace. Lackoff and some other linguists argue that such metaphors are more than turns of speech and can provide clues to the thinking of that language’s speakers. (Hiraga 2005)

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 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 more often talked about as though it is an object, as when we talk about 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 a searching metaphor. He 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 people who were filling themselves with...
liquid—they were in a bar—as well as those actively searching for something—they were in a library—and a group of people who were doing neither—just 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, with the control group scoring 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. (Bergen 2012) (pg. 202)

**Embodied cultural knowledge**

If we experience meaning as a form of mental simulation of experience, it becomes easier to see why some words can be 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. (Pg. 177)

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

> The Fourth of July is celebrated on July 4th.

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. If you are American it calls to mind images of fireworks, picnics and hot dogs. You may associate it with the parchment the Declaration of Independence was written on, and be able to picture its loopy handwritten script in your mind. You 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 4th of July understand this rich set of associative meanings and experiences. *Herein lies the power of language and its connection to culture—it allows us to share a world of virtual*
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.

Patterns of collective simulation

Linguistic meaning doesn’t exist in isolation. It always has a network of meaningful associations—or schema—connected to it. This means that in different languages, even words for concrete objects can have vastly different sets of cultural associations. For many Americans and Europeans, for example, the word wedding dress sets off a particular cascade of images, such as: the color white, an exchanging of vows, a veil, a 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 of life being a struggle between good (white) and evil (black). We recognize that 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 when the associations are pointed out they are recognizable. This knowledge isn’t dependent on agreeing with these associations—it’s not a question of whether people feel white should symbolize purity. Those 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 ask you what you intend by it.

To take a contrasting example, Japanese Shinto wedding dresses—sorry, yet another Japanese example—are also typically white. But the associated networks of meaning connected to them are different. It signifies purity of a different sort. White cloth is pure in the sense that it is un-dyed, and thus can take on the colors of the husband’s family. Traditionally, marriage involved the wife incorporating 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 associates reveals a very different set of underlying cultural
patterns.

Figure 10-3

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 wedding dresses. If we are cultural outsiders speaking a foreign language, our linguistic simulations are more impoverished. They may allow for communication, but the simulations won’t align as well as if two cultural insiders were communicating. That’s not to say that the embodied simulations of all language speakers will be precisely the same. But they will be in enough accordance that communication is relatively smooth.

An understanding of meaning as simulation of experience also highlights how closely cultural scripts are related to language. Cultural scripts provide templates both for how to act and what to say. Here, a student raised in New Zealand learned that studying the Japanese language—how to introduce herself, for example—didn’t mean that she understood the scripts for making 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.

Language use is highly situation precisely because its tied to such cultural scripts. 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 alone. 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 at those parties *were* partying—but the poor foreign student couldn’t recognize the script.

**Idiolect and idiolact**

Foreign language learning, just like cultural learning, can be seen as the
process of internalizing new networks of embodied meaning. Studying verb conjugations in French will not make you a fluent French speaker. Neither will learning about French cinema teach you how to interact with Parisians standing in line at a movie theatre. This knowledge will, however, provide you with a starting point for interacting with French speakers and increasing your experience with a French worldview. Beginning language learners, and less experienced sojourners, tend to think of language and cultural knowledge in terms of facts to know and rules to follow. They see grammar as guidelines to follow when making sentences and cultural customs as the behavioral codes to follow when abroad. What they may miss, however, is that these are patterns that must be internalized, at which point they can be used as a creative medium to express oneself and participate in the collective experience of new linguistic and cultural communities.

Linguists refer to the unique way an individual uses a language as an idiolect, as opposed to a dialect, which refers to usage particular to a group of speakers. Each of us has our own idiolect and no two people will express themselves in quite the same way. We all have our own creative quirks of self-expression and we use them to express our individuality. Skilled writers are said to have a “voice” that is unique to them—when you read Mark Twain or Ernest Hemingway, you can recognize their distinct tone. This is a kind of miracle. Language has a predictable structure and conventions of usage we must learn and respect in order to make ourselves understood. Yet as this system becomes a natural part of us, it turns into a creative tool through which we express our most personal thoughts and original ideas. This explains why we feel constrained, childish, and not our “true self” when using a foreign language. We start by learning words and grammatical structures, we practice making sentences and interacting, and slowly, if we persevere, we may start to feel that we can “be ourselves” in the foreign language.

So it is with the schemas and scripts of implicit cultural knowledge. Shared cultural knowledge can be talked about in terms of rules—when invited to someone’s home in Russia, dress well and leave some food on your plate to show you’ve been well fed. But as with language, deep culture knowledge is much more than the sum of its parts. As we learn the habits and patterns of a new cultural community, we provide ourselves with a new sort of expressive tools. We take on a new system of meaning, and this provides us with a new way to be ourselves. There’s no word that I know for the
cultural equivalent for an *idiolect*. Perhaps we can call it an *idiolact* (idio = own, personal + actus = related to one’s actions). *Our idiolact is the particular way that an individual behaves relative to the expectations of the community.* When I visit California, my brother Larry greets me with a bear hug, whereas my brother Mike gives me a quick hug with one hand on each shoulder. They both understand American conventions of hugging and express themselves within that broad framework. And so it is with anyone within a cultural community. We follow certain conventions and break others, use certain gestures, have unique communication patterns, and adopt preferences that signal to others our particular social profile. Just as you can’t express yourself through an idiolect if you don’t speak a language fluently, you can’t express yourself through an idiolact until you’ve internalized deep culture patterns.

**Language and culture learning**

Inexperienced language learners often think learning a new language is useful because it provides a new code for exchanging useful information in a foreign place. This sort of thinking is also found in Steven Pinker’s comment that “language conveys news”. When I asked Steven, a six-year American expatriate in Korea, if not speaking Korean made it difficult for him to understand Koreans. He said: “I’m sure that being fluent in the foreign language would help. But there are also other ways of getting that information.” For Steven, “understanding Korea” was thought about in terms of getting information, not in terms of sharing experience. Paul says something almost identical when I asked him the same question: “I can experience the culture with people through English.” Yet the embodied simulation view of language and culture would indicate that his assertion is, literally, false. Cultural learning involves sharing an experience through language, not just the acquisition of 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, 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.
The idea that Paul could live in Tokyo and not have the opportunity to use Japanese makes absolutely no sense—unless language is seen primarily as an information exchange system. It seems he feels he would have to artificially invent situations in which to practice exchanging information. It doesn’t seem to occur to him that using Japanese with the people around him will create relationships (through a more fully shared 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 an unpredictable biological data system? (Human beings.)

Many other people, of course, recognize the shared-experience aspect of language—particularly those who have made it beyond the beginner’s 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.

What better way to express the experience of sharing a linguistic experience than to say that people “treat you more as an ordinary person”? And once you start sharing more fully in these other linguistic and cultural worlds, you begin to feel that these experiences become you. 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.

We can feel that Robert understands firsthand the experience of sharing a world of language and cultural meaning.

Let’s look at a tiny example of how learning a foreign language can involve creating new categories of experience, and thus, a new way of seeing the world. English speakers learning French, for example, must choose between the more formal vous and the less formal tu when saying you. To do so, they must know when to choose
which. But that’s not always obvious. Which relationships or situations are considered casual enough to use *tu*? Will college-aged-students use it when meeting classmates for the first time? Will colleagues who’ve worked together for many years use? Will it depend on age? Suddenly, English speakers struggling to learn French must pay conscious attention to elements of their experience (like degree of intimacy and social status) that they haven’t had to before. They must learn the system of politeness as they practice the French language. Fully doing so requires plenty of experience, such that they can mentally enter into the experiential world of French-speaking communities. The wider ranging our cultural experiences, the more we gain mastery of these intuitive patterns.

This brings us back to Paul, who hasn’t made much progress in all these years. If asked, I would tell him that he really could gain a lot from putting more energy into foreign language learning. I might even give the following advice:

Learning a foreign language requires that you practice enough to internalize linguistic patterns. It takes time to make language a part of you. Find ways to enjoy the process

Try to get beyond thinking about language simply in terms of meeting practical needs and communicating information. It is a tool for deepening your relationships and creating solidarity with the speakers of the language.

Every time you choose to step out of the comfortable world of your language, and into the stressful, uncertain world of a foreign language, you are building a new world of linguistic and cultural experiences.

A linguistic world is built upon the shared cultural experiences of a community. A desire to share experience within a new community encourages both language and cultural learning. If you have no desire to connect to people, you probably won’t ever learn their language well.

I don’t expect everyone to be convinced by this view of language and culture. Some will say point out that there are *fluent fools* who master a foreign language yet remain largely oblivious to cultural conventions, or that some people may be quite insightful about a cultural community without ever gaining fluency in that community’s language. And more closely related languages—French and Spanish; Russian and Czech—may be learned without much of a mental stretch. But the fact that they are exceptions to the
general principles I am outlining suggest that, broadly speaking, an integrated view of meaning, language and culture, is on the right track.

**English as an international language**

Regardless of what you think of Paul’s story, it’s worth asking whether his experience is a sign of the future—a time when globalization makes living abroad so convenient that we have little need for extended interaction in a foreign language. Expatriates on foreign assignments ask me how important it is to study the local language, given that that English is increasingly the de facto lingua franca of international business. In English language education around the world, there is an increased focus on *international English* or *English as a global language*, the core of English that is widely understood by English speakers independent of cultural communities. (Crystal 2003) The use of English is becoming increasingly de-coupled from a local cultural community. International English is sometimes conceived as a neutral linguistic meeting ground for people from all over—something like a cultural third space. (Bhabha 1994) While this benefits native English speakers in many ways, monolingual English speakers don’t always function well in these settings because they tend to use more culturally laden idiomatic expressions, or are unaware that their sense of humor or communication style may come off quite differently in other places.

In the past, speaking a foreign language was often considered to involve taking on a foreign self. Yet if English is increasingly divorced from a particular cultural community, what sort of cultural learning can we do? Is a lingua franca a culturally neutral way to communicate? This is a difficult question, because our use of language is always in some sort of cultural context, even if that context is multicultural. And because language use provides us with new tools to express our unique qualities, it can deeply affect us even if we don’t spend extended periods in a foreign country. This is an issue that faces studious English learners around the world who have relatively few opportunities to go abroad. One Chinese woman shared this experience with me:

I have been learning English as a foreign language for over 20 years. I have never lived in another culture for over a week, except that I work in a multicultural environment. Yet, even before I began to work in the multicultural environment, I noticed that when I spoke to people (even Chinese) in English, my personality and behavior changed to some extent. I
become more proactive, more talkative, more direct, more assertive, and less cautious.

She asked about whether speaking a foreign language in this way provides us with a new cultural viewpoint. I suspect that in the process of learning English, she has entered into the experiential world of the English language, and learned to use a new set of linguistic tools to express herself, even if she hasn’t lived abroad. She has built her English-speaking self from her experiences with English, both by using it in China with other speakers, but also indirectly through English media, books and so on. An understanding of embodied simulation is helping us understand how someone can construct a sense of self in a foreign language, even without living abroad.

When we use a lingua franca, we often have less shared cultural knowledge with other speakers. This encourages and requires low context communication—a more explicit and unambiguous way of expressing ourselves. High context communication involves reading between the lines and depending on the nuance that is possible when we know each other well. (Hall 1976) Japan is often held up as an example of a country in which high-context, subtle communication is important, whereas Germany or the United States are considered to emphasize low-context communication. This trend towards more low-context communication strategies is another probable effect of international English. When a German is using English with a Kenyan and a Thai, they are forced to say more explicitly what they mean, without relying on idiomatic expressions, shared cultural references, wordplay, or humor. That has the effect of taking some of the flavor out of language, since there is less reliance on complex associative patterns of meaning. It can, however, provide a relatively neutral base from which mutual understanding can be constructed.

**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 new places and see new things—it gives us new freedom of movement. It also allows us to interact with people we might be cut off from otherwise. I believe that this interaction is a cornerstone of cultural understanding, because shared experience is necessary to come to an intuitive understanding of new cultural worlds. Foreign language learning also engenders
humility, forcing us out of the comfort zone of the familiar, and making us focus on the thoughts and actions of people who are different from ourselves. It also allows us to become more conscious of the conventions that our own language and culture. When I was first working as an English teacher years ago, I was asked when it was considered polite for Americans to address each other by their first name, and when the surname would be more appropriate. I had never consciously considered these conventions, nor the values that were built into them. This sort of reflective process can only help us gain the awareness and flexibility needed for a more fully intercultural mind.

**Key terms**

**Embodied simulation:** the hypothesis that the brain understands linguistic meaning by simulating the experience that is associated with the word.

**Embodied cultural knowledge:** the idea that cultural knowledge involves shared mental experience. This includes schema—networks of meaning association—and scripts, patterns of behavior associated with particular situations.

**Idiolect and idolact:** An idiolect is the unique way a particular person uses language to express herself linguistically, while idolact refers to the unique way that an individual uses social convention to express herself culturally.

**Discussion Quote**

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.”
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