
Callum: Hello and welcome to Talk about English. Today we have the second in our series on culture, Who on Earth are we? In this programme presenter Marc Beeby tries to answer the difficult question: what is culture? Here's Mark.

Marc: 'Culture' is a difficult word to define, but that's what we'll be attempting to do today – trying to answer the question: what is culture? More importantly, perhaps, we'll also be thinking about why culture is so difficult to talk about. But let's start with a definition. Here's Rebecca Fong who teaches a course in intercultural communication at the University of the West of England.

Rebecca Fong

When you think about it, culture is really a very difficult thing to define and if you ask yourself the question 'What is culture?' and you try to come up with a definition I think you'll find that all of us will come up with a slightly different type of definition. One very broad definition suggests that culture consists of ideals, values and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behaviours. So we're talking here about shared assumptions or patterns of behaviour within specific societies.

Eilidh Hamilton

En-shala is a very popular phrase in the Middle East it means 'if it is the will of God' literally. Now it doesn't necessarily have such overt religious connotations as we might expect. But what it does reflect is a certain fatalism amongst many people. They feel that life is, to an extent, controlled by external factors. So the concept of the Westerner as someone who is constantly striving to improve themselves and their situation is an anathema to people there who don't feel that there's very much in a practical way they can do to change that.

Marc: Eilidh Hamilton with an example of a view of life shared by people in one particular part of the world. But perhaps this idea that culture can be defined by the ideals, values and assumptions that a group of people share is too general. What about art, food, language, sex? Here's Rajni Baldani from India, Dionne Charmaine from Jamaica and Kyung-ja Yoo from Japan helping Rebecca Fong with a more detailed way of thinking about culture.

Rebecca Fong

Quite a practical way of looking at culture is to divide it into three groups : products, behaviours and ideas and in the first group - products - we think about all those things that a culture produces - its architecture and its food, its music and folklore and literature - those are the visible products of a culture.

Rajni Baldani

I would describe my culture, the Indian culture as being extremely vibrant, and diverse, complex, in every aspect - art, literature, folk, the oral tradition. We are really very rich in all aspects.

Rebecca Fong

In the second group we'd find behaviours - that's either verbal behaviours - language - or non-verbal behaviours such as gesture and communication. Also habits, routines, social etiquette, all of these things would come under the heading of behaviour.

Dionne Charmaine

Silence in Jamaica is a good thing - it's very much a sign of respect and if you're basically being spoken to - especially by someone that's older than you and so on and you raise your voice then that's being disrespectful

Rebecca Fong

And then in the third group we'd find ideas or our world view and all the things that go to make up our world view. So in this group we'd be thinking about things like our attitudes and our beliefs and the way that we organise such things as our societies - are they class based

societies, what are the relationships and roles within our societies - between men and women for example.

Kyung-ja Yoo

In Japan, what's supposed to happen is women should follow the man and then you are supposed to walk behind him, three steps behind.

Marc: As we've just heard, cultures change. Even so, we could get a good idea of what a culture is like by looking at the things that people produce, the way they behave, and the way they see the world. But perhaps a better definition of what a culture is was first devised more than forty years ago by the North American anthropologist Edward T Hall.

Rebecca Fong

One of the most famous definitions comes from Edward T Hall who was one of the founding fathers of the field of intercultural communication if you like and Hall's definition suggests that culture is the sum total of the way of life of a people. That's a nice definition because it includes all of the things that we've been talking about and probably all of the ideas that you or I could come up would be contained under that umbrella definition. Culture is the sum total of the way of life of a people.

Marc: Hall's definition captures a complex problem very neatly. But he went further. He also gave a very good reason for why we find it so difficult to say what culture is. It's because the culture we grow up in seems so normal that we don't even notice it's there. Here's Rebecca again, with comments from Mahmood Jamal from Pakistan and Kyung-ja Yoo from Japan.

Rebecca Fong

Hall adds that strangely enough what it hides, what culture hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants - and by that what he means is that we grow up inside a culture, we're born into a culture, the culture is there already and so the rules of the culture that we're born into are invisible to us, we can't see them - we can't see the norms, we can't see the

assumptions, we can't see the behaviour patterns - all of the patterns within our society are invisible to us. In fact our behaviour is controlled by culture so we're not free really - we're actually acting in a way that is patterned and we acquire all the rules of the culture almost without knowing it.

Mahmood Jamal

One of the interesting discoveries I made in England was I used to speak very loudly and my colleague, who was a man from India, he told me 'Why are you shouting?' And I didn't mean to shout I was just naturally, I used to speak loudly and I noticed that people whispered and talked very softly. So I used to have arguments with this guy and say 'look I'm just talking like I naturally talk' and he would say 'look this is not accepted here, you must tone down, you must cut down.' And so I found this very peculiar.

Rebecca Fong

Even in a culture that seemed quite similar - let's say from a country that was very near yours or just across the water or a country that you expected to be quite similar to your own, you might find that there are some quite different patterns operating within that society that made the culture quite different underneath.

Kyung-ja Yoo

We are not supposed to touch the people - even parents and children. It's embarrassing, touching somebody. When I went to Korea first time I was taken back. They touch the people a lot - I mean as long as they regard you as a friend or one of the family suddenly they hug you, they touch you they hold your hand . Even walking down the street my cousin hold my hand, hugs me and I was taken aback and got so, so embarrassed. You can't do that in Japan, people think you're odd. And in Japan being thought you are odd - odd one - is a very wrong thing!

Rebecca Fong

You acquire your own culture through growing up in it almost as you acquire your first language when you're a child - through experience and through doing it, through using it - but if you think about learning a second language in school you actually have to think about the rules and think consciously about how to manipulate the different aspects of the language, the

vocabulary and the grammar and so on before you can use it - so it's quite a different process. And in just the same way, learning another culture would be like having to learn the second language in school, it would be conscious you'd have to think about the rules, you'd have to ask yourself questions about the attitudes and the beliefs. Now all of this might seem quite complex and in a way unnecessary and removed from real life but to think of these things theoretically can actually give us a framework through which to consider our own experience.

Marc: Rebecca Fong. The culture we grow up in is invisible to us. We don't look at it because it's 'normal' - this is the way life is. But as we heard in our last programme, learning about another culture is an effective way of beginning to see our own. As Rebecca points out, however, learning about another culture is as complicated as learning another language. We need to learn the rules. Just as language has its building blocks, its grammar - nouns, verbs, and so on - we need to find the building blocks of culture - things that we can look at and compare across cultures. And that's what we'll be doing in this series over the coming weeks, beginning, in our next programme, with the relationship between culture and language itself.

Before we finish today, though, a word of warning. Studying culture, learning the grammar, is not a simple process. Culture is not one big 'monolithic' thing, where people are all the same, all 'homogenous'. People get in the way. And that, of course, is one of the great reasons why culture is so difficult to define. I'll leave with a final word from Rebecca Fong and Mahmood Jamal. Join us next time.

Rebecca Fong

Although there are these different activities that you can look at culture is not a simple objective thing like that - it's much messier in terms of the fact that individuals respond to all of these things quite differently from the generalisations that we can make about the group. So there's a kind of matrix if you like of activities on the one hand but individual, emotional, personal, human factors, intelligence and things like that, that mesh with how we deal with these activities.

Mahmood Jamal

Just like probably English people saw people from Pakistan or Bangladesh or India as being one homogenous group, I also used to see English people as one homogenous group. So that was the first breakdown of my stereotype of English people - that English people are a variety of people from a variety of classes, a variety of backgrounds a variety of regions.