
Callum: Hello today we have the third programme in our series on culture and intercultural communication: Who on Earth are we? In this programme Marc Beeby looks at language and culture. Here's Marc

Marc: Hello. Today we begin our look at the 'building-blocks' of culture – those things which help give a culture and its people their character - those things which can often be so very different from one culture to another. We start with something which often seems to be the most obvious difference of all: language.

Rebecca Fong

I think it was Professor David Crystal who said that there really ought to be a word 'languaculture' because language and culture are so fundamentally tied together. What we do is we use language as a way of labelling things and we label them to reflect the way that we see things in our culture and to make it easier for us to navigate our way through life and understand each other. Because of the fact that we all understand these common labels that we've put on things. So a language is symbolic - it's symbolic of the thoughts, the thought patterns that we have and it represents the assumptions and the values that are standardised by our own culture.

Mahmood Jamal

Urdu developed in the courts and very formalised atmosphere of urban India and Pakistan as a result it's a language which has a lot of formality in it - the way you speak to let's say - someone you know well would be completely different from the way you speak to someone you don't know well, or the way you speak to somebody junior to you would be very different

to the way you speak to somebody who's senior to you. So these are distinctions which are cultural and they have come into the language itself.

Marc: Mahmood Jamal from Pakistan, and earlier Rebecca Fong – a teacher of intercultural communication at the University of the West of England. As they both suggest, culture and language are tied together. Language isn't just a tool to help people from the same culture communicate effectively. It's also a window into the way people from that culture see the world.

But just a minute. Why should language tell us anything about a particular culture? Surely we all look at the world in much the same way? After all, we're all human. Isn't it natural to think that people from other cultures will use language in exactly the same way that we do? Well, maybe not.

A hundred years ago, language experts believed that you could say exactly the same thing in two different languages just by accurately translating the vocabulary and the grammar. But in the early 20th century, people began to look at languages a bit more closely. One of these people was the amateur linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf went to study the language of the Hopi people, in the south west of the United States of America. And he made some interesting discoveries. For example, the area where the Hopi lived was very cold – so they had many more different words for snow than, say, English has. Whorf also learnt that the Hopi saw 'time' as one continuous event. It couldn't be broken up into units. So the language had no way of counting time - you couldn't say one o'clock or two o'clock. There were no words to distinguish seasons like summer, autumn and winter – and there were no past or future tenses. Facts like these lead Whorf to draw conclusions that revolutionised the way people thought about language and culture - as Rebecca Fong explains.

Rebecca Fong

Whorf deduced from this that how you perceive the world affects the language that you speak because the language that you speak arises from your needs as a culture, the environment that

you live in and that must mean that all of our languages are in some way different - so it's not as simple as there being a one to one correspondence or correlation between languages. And anyone who's ever tried to translate anything from one language to another will know that it's not easy and you sometimes have to translate concepts with very different words for the people in another culture to get the same meaning from them - this means that languages are relative and not universal.

Marc: Rebecca Fong. Languages are different – and not just in the way they sound, or the words they use. The customs of a language, its grammar, the words themselves, are a product of the way the people of a culture experience the world. And we don't all experience the world in the same way. This means that accurately translating words from one language to another may not be enough for us to understand the cultural meaning that lies behind the words. To illustrate this here are three examples of language that might be difficult to translate because of its cultural content. From Rebecca Fong, Eilidh Hamilton and first, Dr George Zhang from China:

George Zhang

In Chinese language we have words which actually show the kind of subjective view of the people towards time. Either being fast or being slow has a lot to do with how we feel as a person rather than being measured by objective unit. If you sit next to a beautiful girl, time goes very fast, if you sit next to a very ugly lady time goes very slow. You can see this kind of thing in the Chinese language.

Rebecca Fong

I can remember being very confused in Japan in the intervals between work when I'd meet someone in the corridor and they'd say to me “otsakari samadeshda”. And I spent ages wondering what “otsakari samadeshda” meant. And it actually means 'we're all very tired aren't we' The effect of that isn't to express our tiredness it's just a way of greeting someone in a corridor and showing that we're all working hard together. I soon started using it myself - but it was not something that I'd ever say in the equivalent work situation in Britain. People would all think I was mad if I said “we're all very tired aren't we”. This example just goes to

show that there are often times when we can't translate or where there isn't the right expression to use in a particular context. And even when we can translate the words it doesn't carry the same cultural meaning as it does in the original language.

Eilidh Hamilton

Religious terminology features a lot more in Arab culture. People would invoke the name of God as protection over a new born child, they would say “praise God” if they mean I'm fine or if something good has happened, “if it's the will of God” when they're talking about hoping that something will happen. So that is a very strong feature in the language which means that a direct translation into English often sounds strange.

Marc: Eilidh Hamilton. As I said earlier, it's natural for us to think that people from other cultures use language in the same way that we do. This is because, in the same way that we are born into a culture and accept its ways of doing things without thinking, so we are also born into a language - and we accept the way it represents life and experience as normal. And because we think of it as normal, we don't notice that our native language actually affects the way we see the world. Here's Dr George Zhang with an example of how the Chinese language both represents and influences Chinese culture....

George Zhang

I think that the Chinese language helps people to visualise whereabouts they should be in the society and how they should behave - you are taught ever since you start to speak the language to follow certain kinds of rules. You're taught to understand individual bit doesn't make a lot of sense unless you are member of a community - a family to start with, a community to go beyond it and the language reflects this process. Writing an envelope is a very easy example. If you want to write to somebody in English you would say the name of the receiver - so and so - and then the number of the house and then you got a street and the district and the city and then finally the country. Well in Chinese it's the other way round. You start with the country and then go into the city and go in the district and then street, number of the house and person who receives the letter. In the Chinese language the person,

the individual doesn't make any sense unless it is in the context. So the culture and the language in many ways I think are inter-related.

Marc: Dr George Zhang on how language can both represent and influence culture. Now at this point you might feel like giving up! How on earth are we ever going to understand anyone from a different language background if languages are so closely related to their culture and it's so difficult to translate cultural meaning accurately? Well, don't despair. We can still communicate effectively...

Rebecca Fong

What Benjamin Lee Whorf discovered about languages was very very important to how we think about language and culture today. Groups of humans perceive the world in a shared way and because of this they develop a language which shows this world view. But there are other people who believe that although languages are patterned to reflect our own individual cultures, there's still a common core of language that's universal enough for us to understand the general meaning of what someone from another culture is trying to say. So in the end the real message to us as inter-culturalists is that we can still communicate despite linguistic and cultural differences and that being aware of these differences is an important step on the road to better communication and to becoming inter-culturally competent.

Marc: Rebecca Fong. We can still communicate with people from other cultures despite linguistic and cultural differences. The important thing, as Rebecca says, is to be aware of these differences and to think about them when we meet people from different backgrounds. And when we do this, we take an important step on the road to more effective inter-cultural communication.

Of course, language isn't the only tool we use to communicate with one another. In our next two programmes we'll be thinking about other ways of communicating and looking at some of the, sometimes embarrassing, inter-cultural problems they can create. I'll leave you with a final word on language from Rebecca Fong – and the final word is 'fun'. Join us next time.

Rebecca Fong

I've studied a lot of languages and I've completely enjoyed myself learning them. For a start, you're accepted much better in the cultures where you've tried to learn the language. People are automatically willing to give you far more if you've spent some time learning their language. And trying to use a language in the way that the natives do gives you an insight into their own culture and their way of looking at the world. On top of this it's just incredibly good fun - you get to be a completely different person in another language and it gives you a wonderful sense of excitement and freedom.