

# Language Identity and Cultural Difference

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**Abstract**—The question of the interrelationship between language, identity and cultural difference is a major concern for many social theorists and cultural researchers. As is well-known, language, identity and cultural difference are closely connected and influence each other. Stuart Hall has examined the relations between language, identity and cultural difference in his articles which provide us with a deeper understanding of all these inter-related forces. The following essay discusses Hall's work in this area in the following way. Firstly, definitions of the key terms: 'language', 'identity' and 'cultural difference' will be offered. Secondly, Hall's theory of the connection between those factors will be discussed. Thirdly, I provide an example from my own life as a way of illustrating the connections. Finally, I evaluate the degree to which Hall's theory is applicable to my personal experience and where there may be limits to his account of the relations between language, identity and cultural difference. The essay aims at providing a thorough understanding of the connections which will better equip learners with cross-cultural knowledge for future studies or work.

**Index Terms**—Language, identity, cultural difference, interpretation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kramersch states that the aim of FL learning is "cultivating international understanding, responsibility, and effective participation in a global age" [1]. That is to say, English learners should enhance their cross-cultural communication skills. In order to achieve this goal, first of all, a thorough understanding of the relations between language, identity and cultural difference becomes necessary. A well-known fact is that culture and language are closely interrelated. In order to understand the connections between these phenomena, first of all, we should become acquainted with these concepts. A key characteristic of language is its relation to meaning. As Hall states, "language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged" [2]. But how does language generate meaning? As Hall explains, language is a representational system. This means that, "We use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings" [2]. Hence, via representation, meaning is able to be produced and circulated in a culture and even across cultures. Language, then, is not restricted to oral or written language but exists in different modes. Hall sums up the nature of language and the roles of

communicators in this social practice: "Language, then, is the property of neither the sender nor the receiver of meanings. It is the shared cultural 'space' in which the production of meaning through language – that is, representation – takes place" [2].

It is important to gain some deeper understanding of culture because it relates to the key terms which are being examined in this essay: 'cultural identity' and 'cultural difference'. According to Hall, we know that traditionally culture means the greatest or most creative achievements of humanity. It expressed by phrases such as 'high culture' or 'popular culture'. There is also the anthropological sense of culture which has to do with a people's 'way of life' or 'shared values'. But the way Hall utilizes 'culture' is in a more specific sense which has to do with the social processes and practices that generate and communicate meanings. As Hall explains, "Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or a group" [2] or, in other words, "By culture, here I mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society" [3].

Now that a sketch of culture has been offered, we can begin to address cultural identity and difference. First of all, Hall examines the problem of 'cultural identity' by proposing that there are two ways of approaching it. The first way is an essentialist one: "The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" [4]. This approach proposes that identity is stable and unchanging and that there is a "'oneness' underlying all the other, more superficial differences" [4]. Hall provides the example of 'Caribbeanness' – the 'essence' of being Caribbean. This first position of cultural identity is contrasted by Hall with a second perspective that problematizes this notion of 'oneness' by recognizing historical discontinuities. As Hall puts it, cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" [4]. In other words, cultural identities change and transcend space, time and history. While Hall's second approach is more sensitive to the complexities of cultural identity, there is perhaps some kind of essence to a group or community that can be contrasted with other communities and it is perhaps these differences which we call cultural difference.

## II. RELATIONS BETWEEN LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

In the circuit of language, identity and cultural difference, the connection between them can be comprehended by

Manuscript received August 27, 2012; revised October 12, 2012. This work was supported by the Research Foundation for Advanced Talents, Jiangsu University, under Grant 10JDG109.

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analyzing the relationship between each of the two. Language and cultural difference have a close link. Firstly, Hall explains that a culture produces ‘shared meanings’ [2]. This sharing of meanings generates and reinforces the notion of cultural difference. “To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other” [2]. Secondly, language can embody the cultural difference. Hall suggests that language is a signifying practice. “It is a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture” [2]. Finally, Hall emphasizes that the cultural context gives meaning to things rather than a thing having meaning ‘in itself’. He offers the example of a stone: it can mean a stone, a marker, art, and so on. It is our own representation of such objects that gives them meaning. Representation involves cultural practices that “carry meaning and value for us, which need to be meaningfully interpreted by others, or which depend on meaning for their effective operation” [2]. What’s more, the shared culture can also have effects on language such as the renewal of the language. Just as Hall mentions, “meaning is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘thing’” [2]. Because of the close relations between language and culture, we need to attach more emphasis on cultural learning. Just as Byram states, “cultural learning has to take place as an integral part of language learning, and vice versa” [5].

Interaction between language and identity can obviously be seen in Hall’s article. On the one hand, language can present and construct identity. In hall’s viewpoint, “meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’” [2]. So that even non-linguistic body language like the expression on my face says something about me (my personal identity) and the community to which I belong (cultural identity). Hall also reminds us that meaning is generated via many forms of communication, including the mass media, advanced technology, narratives, and so on. In turn, linguistically-generated meanings “help set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed” [2]. Hence, language is not passive but actually helps shape society itself. This is one reason why language, identity and cultural difference are important because they shape our world and they actually help shape how we see ourselves, how we interact with others, and how we conform to social rules and norms. On the other hand, speaker may alter his or her language to reflect his or her identity according to different situations. Hall claims that “meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part” [2].

Identity and cultural difference are also closely connected. On the one hand, cultural difference constructs different identities. That is to say, culture can shape the individual and the individual is able to create himself or herself through culture. Hall claims that “the word ‘culture’ is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation or social group. Alternatively, the word can be used to describe the ‘shared values’ of a group or of society” [2]. Therefore, cultural difference has the function

of distinguishing and preserving group identity. On the other hand, people who have the same identity will share the same distinct culture. Just as Hall believed “members of the same culture must share, broadly speaking, the same ‘cultural codes’” [2].

This connection between meaning, language, identity and cultural difference is mentioned by the notion of a ‘cultural circuit’: “the question of meaning arises in relation to all the different moments or practices in our ‘cultural circuit’ – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct” and that the “privileged ‘media’” is language [2]. This notion of ‘circuit’ stresses the interactive nature of this web that produces meaning. In summary, language constructs a certain identity for us and gives meaning to belonging to a culture or maintains identity within a group of people. Just as Hall says, “members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, broadly speaking, the same ‘cultural codes’” [2].

Hall believes the recognition of connection between language, identity and cultural difference is of vital importance. In his viewpoint, we can not understand any single one without relating it to others. Or we will have incomplete view. For example, he recognizes the significance of the relationship between language and culture. As Hall puts it, “Language is the privileged medium in which we ‘make sense’ of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged” [2]. That is to say language can be viewed as the means and medium through which we form knowledge about ourselves and the social world. So in order to make sense of culture we need to inquire into how meaning is produced symbolically in language as a signifying system. Also Hall believes, “Without these ‘signifying system’, we could not take on such identities and consequently could not build up or sustain that common ‘life-world’ which we call a culture” [2].

### III. ILLUSTRATING THE CONNECTIONS

The connections between language, cultural identity and cultural difference may be perceived by examining our daily life. Many phenomena may be explained by exploring these relations. Considering my own life, one of my personal experiences can help illustrate this ‘cultural circuit’. Once I lived in home-stay accommodation after arriving in Australia. I lived with a couple and one Chinese girl. The hostess, who was a middle aged woman, was a friendly Australian, and her husband was an American. One weekend we prepared to have supper together. Before dinner, the hostess let us sit together waiting for supper because she thought this is a good opportunity for us to chat with each other. We talked about the interesting things which happened in the day and shared our stories with each other. The host always liked to talk about some news in the media. When we were listening to the American host talking about one of the interesting news which he read in *The Age*, suddenly I sneezed twice. After my sneezing, I heard two different responses almost at the same time. The host said “God bless you” without thinking,

while the Chinese girl said with a smile “Somebody missed you”. We all laughed and looked at each other. I made sense of what the host said as well as the girl’s response. I knew why the host said “God bless you” because I undertook a college course about cultural differences between China and western countries. I could understand that in American culture, sneezing is connected with death, for according to some western religious beliefs, sneezing expels the soul, thereby causing death. I also definitely understood what the girl said because we are both Chinese, sharing a common culture. However, the host was confused and I knew he did not make sense of the Chinese girl’s response. I told him that in Chinese culture, if people sneeze twice it means someone misses you. The Book of Odes which was very famous in ancient times records that if a child sneezed twice, his or her mother would say “your grandmother missed you”. Then the mother would plan to go home to visit her family. Sneezing twice was gradually accepted as a sign of being missed and considered as a cultural norm even though there was no scientific evidence. After I explained this to the man, he seemed to understand and expressed delight at the magical nature of our culture.

This experience may be interpreted according to Hall’s work. According to Hall, “language works through representation. Spoken language uses sounds, written language uses words, musical language uses notes on a scale, and the ‘language of the body’ uses physical gesture- to ‘say something’” [2]. So sneezing can be regarded as a kind of body language. Each person in the room has been somewhat constructed according to the culture to which they ‘belong’. Each one of us has a certain cultural ‘identity’ which facilitates greater understanding between some (the Chinese with Chinese, the westerners with westerners) and also generates cultural difference (Chinese versus western). Even though my double sneezing may be considered as a physiological occurrence, it also had different meanings according to those who were present. After sneezing twice, the Chinese girl and the American host responded in two totally different ways, for the double sneezing represented and meant different things to the different cultures. Also that’s why they had totally two different interpretations of the same body language. At the same time, from the two person’s various interpretations and responses of my body language, their distinct Chinese and American identity are clearly reflected. Sneezing is a gesture and it has different meanings in different culture. That is the reason why I know the two cultures interpret the action differently through what they say. What’s more, as far as I am concerned in this situation, I have the same identity with the Chinese girl so I share the same culture with her and I can judge if the Chinese girl gives the right response. However, I am able to make sense of the American host’s response not because I am an American but because I have learned something which may not be proved in the past. This also illustrates the connection between identity and culture.

This example also illustrates the connection between production and consumption which were mentioned in the circuit of culture by Hall. I produce an action which is consumed by the Chinese girl and the American host in different ways and then they produce their own response, which shows how they consume my body language. Above all, different interpretation of the same body language illustrates people’s different identities and culture. Different culture results in people’s different interpretations which construct and embody people’s different identities in reverse. All of these demonstrate the circuit of language, identity and cultural difference.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I am in broad agreement with Hall’s views but I still believe that Hall perhaps runs the risk of exaggeration. Hall claims that “representation functions more like the model of a dialogue. What sustains this ‘dialogue’ is the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meaning will remain stable forever” [2]. Hall proposes that no meanings can remain stable over long periods despite the changing of contexts. However, it seems to me that there can be some meanings in some circumstance that remain relatively fixed over long periods and changing contexts. For example, certain things in Chinese culture have not changed for thousands of years and their meanings have instead become more fixed and even stronger, such as the ‘dragon’ being the symbol of noble, rank, honor and success. Chinese people will probably not use ‘dragon’ to refer to negative things. Therefore, perhaps we should not completely abandon the possibility of a certain degree of stability of meaning, of meanings that can transcend various contexts.

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