

The relationship between culture and language

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This paper discusses the inseparability of culture and language, presents three new metaphors relating to culture and language, and explores cultural content in specific language items through a survey of word associations. The survey was designed for native Chinese speakers (NCS) in Chinese, as well as for native English speakers (NES) in English (see Appendix). The words and expressions associated by NCS convey Chinese culture, and those associated by NES convey English culture. The intimate relationship between language and culture is strikingly illustrated by the survey, which confirms the view that language and culture cannot exist without each other.

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Inseparability of culture and language

It is commonly accepted that language is a part of culture, and that it plays a very important role in it. Some social scientists consider that without language, culture would not be possible. Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. In the broadest sense, it is also the symbolic representation of a people, since it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. Brown (1994: 165) describes the two as follows: 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.' In a word, culture and language are inseparable.

Metaphors about language and culture

Some people say that language is the mirror of culture, in the sense that people can see a culture through its language. Another metaphor used to symbolize language and culture is the iceberg. The visible part is the language, with a small part of culture; the greater part, lying hidden beneath the surface, is the invisible aspect of culture. This author's understanding of language and culture is conveyed through the following three new metaphors.

From a philosophical view:

language + culture → a living organism
flesh blood

Language and culture makes a living organism; language is flesh, and culture is blood. Without culture, language would be dead; without language, culture would have no shape.

From a communicative view:

language + culture → swimming (communication)
swimming skill water

Communication is swimming, language is the swimming skill, and culture is water. Without language, communication would remain to a very limited degree (in very shallow water); without culture, there would be no communication at all.

From a pragmatic view:

language + culture → transportation (communication)
vehicle traffic light

Communication is like transportation: language is the vehicle and culture is traffic light. Language makes communication easier and faster; culture regulates, sometimes promotes and sometimes hinders communication.

In a word, language and culture, as different as they are, form a whole.

Cultural content in specific language items

Many linguists explore the relationship between language and culture. Nida (1998: 29) holds the view that 'Language and culture are two symbolic systems. Everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language.' People of different cultures can refer to different things while using the same language forms. For example, when one says *lunch*, an Englishman may be referring to hamburger or pizza, but a Chinese man will most probably be referring to steamed bread or rice. The word *dog* in English, and the character *gou* in Chinese, refer to the same kind of animal. However, most English people associate *dog* with man's best friend, a good companion, being kept as a pet, together with many commendatory idioms, such as *lucky dog*. Most Chinese people, by contrast, associate *gou* with watchdogs, defending the household from thieves, a noisy animal, together with such derogatory idioms as *gou tui zi* ('hired thug'). Being culturally loaded, English words and their Chinese translations (or vice versa) are seldom equivalents, and often give rise to different associations or images. This can be shown in the following survey of word associations.

Survey design

A survey of word associations was designed for native Chinese speakers (NCE) and native English speakers (NES) (see Appendix). The survey for NCS is in Chinese, and that for NES in English. In the survey, ten words (food, clothes, family, friend, job, money, culture, success, happiness, love), which are related most closely to people's lives, and cover both material and spiritual aspects of life, were chosen as prompts. The subjects were asked to write down six additional words or expressions that they associated with each of the ten words. That is to say, the subjects were asked to add six words or expressions after each of the ten chosen words, making 60 words in all.

Data collection Between 28 March and 8 June 1998, 40 copies of the survey were distributed to NES by Joni Strohm, an American expert in Qufu Normal University, Qufu, China, who was also the personnel officer of the English Language Institute in China. All of the NES subjects were EFL teachers working in China. In all, 28 valid surveys were collected.

A further 30 copies of the survey distributed to NCS were collected between 12 November and 16 December 1998. Some of the NCS subjects were Chinese English teachers, and others were postgraduates in English Linguistics from Qufu Normal University. Once again, 28 of the surveys collected were considered to be valid.

Population Among the 28 NCS subjects, 11 were male and 17 female; 12 were teachers, and 16 were postgraduates of English linguistics; their ages ranged from 22 to 59. Among the 28 NES subjects, 10 were male and 18 female; 26 were Americans, and 2 were Canadians; their ages ranged from 20 to 64.

Data analysis Among the ten initiating words, only one word—food—was chosen to show the associations. The Chinese words and phrases associated by the NCS subjects were translated into English by the author before categorization. Then all the items listed by the subjects were classified into different categories. The number that followed each item (see Table 1) indicates the times the word or phrase appeared, or the number of people who listed that word or phrase. If the item appeared only once, number (1) was omitted. Table 1 shows the analysis:

Table 1:
word associations

Category	NES	NCS
Kinds of food	Hamburgers (5), ice-cream (4), pizza (3), dessert (3), fruit (3), salad (2), groceries (2), meat (2), milk (2), pasta, grub, steak, chocolate, baked goods, candy, dumplings, chicken, tofu, hot sauce, cheeseburger, cookie, coffee, cherries, berries, ingredients	Steamed bread (14), noodle (10), rice (9), meat (9), fish (7), bread (7), egg (5), tomato (5), vegetable (4), cookie (4), chicken (3), jiaozi (3), hot pepper (3), dish (2), salad (2), steamed stuff bun (2), biscuit (2), apple (2), candy (2), porridge (2), water (2), banana (2), hamburger (2), mutton, cake, Chinese pie, sunflower seeds, gruel, coffee, cola
Meals	Lunch (4), breakfast (3), dinner (2), meal, feast	
Flavours	Chinese food (4), Mexican food (2), Italian, Thai, Western, ethnic, fast food	Fast food (2), green food, Cantonese food
Description	Good (10), hungry (6), hot (3), healthy (2), yummy (2), sweet (2), enjoyable, delicious, I am full, starving, fat, full, tasty, enjoyment, fun, well, favourite smell, subtle, spicy, tastes good, I'm thankful, good smell, satisfaction, pleasure, comfort, easily burnt, shortage, I have enough	Hungry (4), delicious (3), full (3), happy, enough, good, sweet, various, not hungry, not too expensive, comfort, hard to choose
Process	Eat (6), cooking (3), cook (2), taste (2), make, serve, bake, chow, sustains life, like, preparation, filling	Eat (7), drink (3), cook (3), boil

Table 1: continued

Category	NES	NCS
Tool or place	Knife, home, cuisine, restaurants, McDonald's	Bowl (3), plate, dining-hall, table, restaurant, kitchen
Nutrition	Nutrition (2), nourishing, calories, providing substance to our bodies, variety, gives me strength and health	Nutrition (2), nourishment
Get together	Gather, dining out, social gathering, a meal together	Family
Others	We eat to live, recipe, market, famine	Money (3), control, housewife, money, essential need, my sister, labour, be on diet

Discussion

- 1 From the first category, **kinds of food**, we know that NCS and NES have some food in common like 'meat', 'vegetable', 'fruit', 'candy', 'salad', etc. The specific food items listed the most by NCS are 'steamed bread', 'noodle', 'meat', 'rice', 'jiaozi', etc., which are the typical food of the Chinese people. 'Hamburgers', 'ice-cream', 'pizza', 'dessert', etc. are the representative food items for NES. It seems that NCS tend to associate the word **food** with more specific food items than NES do.
- 2 From the second category, **meals**, it seems to us that the difference between 'breakfast', 'lunch', and 'supper' are much more significant for NES than for NCS. It might be because for NCS breakfast, lunch and supper tend to consist of similar food, but what the NES have for breakfast, lunch and supper are quite different.
- 3 From the third category, **flavours**, we know that NES include many more foreign flavours of food than NCS do. We guess that this is because NES travel more widely.
- 4 From the fourth category, **description**, we find that NES tend to use more adjectives to describe their food and feelings than NCS do. We infer that this is related to their economic development period. People only pay more attention to the quality of food when they have enough to eat.
- 5 From the fifth category, **process**, we find that NES tend to think more about the cooking process than NCS do when they read the word *food*. Actually, the Chinese cooking process ('cuisine art') is more famous and exquisite. But the term **shiwu** ('food') is not the right word to stimulate the NCS to make an association with the cooking process. **Pengren** ('cuisine'), might be more appropriate.
- 6 'Bowl' and 'plate' are the typical containers of food for NCS, whereas NES use a 'knife' during their meals. When they read the word **food**, Americans tend to think of MacDonal'd's.
- 7 NES tend to think more about nutrition than NCS do. This is also related to economic development.

- 8 More NES consider mealtime as the ideal chance to get together. It seems that NES dine out more often than NCS do.
- 9 There are many interesting stories in the words and expressions filled in by the subjects. For example, when I asked the subject who had written 'my sister' why she thought of her sister when she read the word **food**, she answered 'My sister is a very good cook. I miss her and the food she cooks.' When I asked the postgraduate who had written 'control' why she thought of this word, she said: 'I have very good appetite. I have to control myself from eating too much food. You know, everyone likes to be slender.'

Conclusion The intimate relationship between language and culture is strikingly illustrated by the survey of word associations. The items filled in by NCS convey Chinese culture, and the items written by NES convey English culture. The referents of language are the entities, events, states, processes, characteristics, and relations that exist in the culture, whether these are referred to by single words or by phrases. Between language and culture there is always an interactive influence: the two cannot exist without each other. They combine to form a living organism. If we compare the society to a swimming pool, language is a swimming skill and culture is the water. When both are present, people swim well (communicate successfully). They swim confidently and rapidly when they are familiar with the water (i.e. within their native culture), but cautiously and slowly when it is unfamiliar to them (within a foreign culture).

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Appendix A survey of word associations (for native English speakers)

Male _____ Profession _____ Age _____

Female _____ Nationality _____ Date _____

Please list six more words or expressions that you think of when you read each of the following (please write clearly):

1 food:

2 clothes:

3 family:

4 friend:

5 job:

6 money:

7 culture:

8 success:

9 happiness:

10 love:

A survey of word associations (for native Chinese speakers)

Male _____ Profession _____ Age _____

Female _____ Nationality _____ Date _____

Please list six more words or expressions that you think of when you read each of the following (please write clearly):

1 Shiwu (food):

2 Yifu (clothes):

3 Jiating (family):

4 Pengyou (friend):

5 Gongzuo (job):

6 Qian (money):

7 Wenhua (culture):

8 Chenggong (success):

9 Xingfu (happiness):

10 Ai (love):
