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Part I Language, thought, and culture

In 1911 when Franz Boas published his *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, he could not possibly have imagined that one day an excerpt from it would serve as an introductory article in a book that might be used in a course on teaching culture in foreign- and second-language classes; in fact, the teaching of foreign languages at that time was far removed from his sphere. Yet his work inspired a generation of anthropologists and sociologists before the applied linguists took up the subject of the effect of culture on languages and vice versa, and shaped it to their own use. The process of learning more about the interrelationship between culture and language within the native environment led the way to consideration of the effect of a second culture on second language learning.

The extent to which language, culture, and thought have influenced one another, and which is the dominant aspect of communication, have been matters of controversy for three quarters of a century; the influence of the work of Boas, Sapir, Whorf, Hoijer, et al. is seen in the amount of both speculation and careful research that has ensued. Stated perhaps simplistically, the current consensus is that the three aspects are three parts of a whole, and cannot operate independently, regardless of which one most influences the other two. To see them as three points in a constantly flowing circular continuum is surely more accurate than, say, to see them as an isosceles triangle, with one dominant over the other two. It is conceivable that the lack of acceptance of artificial languages such as Esperanto may be explained by their isolation of language from culture. Thought, in any real sense, is very difficult to express without an underlying value system understood tacitly by both the sender and the receiver in a communication, whether both, one, or neither speaks the language natively, no matter how scientifically successful the language may be. While it is true that an artificial language may be a politically wise choice for intercultural communication because it is offensive to none, on the other hand it is a poor choice for a more basic reason: No one can *feel*, or therefore think deeply, in an artificial language.

The research that has been produced in this century has evolved the

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theory that a native culture is as much of an interference for second language learners as is native language. Likewise, just as similarities and contrasts in the native and target languages have been found to be useful tools in language study, so cultural similarities and contrasts, once identified and understood, can be used to advantage. Devotion to a language other than one's own is quite common among those who venture into other languages, most often with the connection in mind between the language and the people who speak it. One says, "I love French – it's so musical and expressive," and produces a mental image of a Frenchman or woman speaking in pleasing notes with sparkling eyes and communicative gestures. Another says, "I love German – it's so precise, regular, and dependable," and the stereotype that peeks out from the mind of the speakers is of a sturdy blond plodding down a straight path, keeping a wary eye out for accusatives and datives. Such reactions to both languages and people are subjective, impressionistic, and, fortunately, variable. Yet it is very natural to associate a people – in appearance, manners, and possibly thought patterns – with the language they speak. The most successful language learners are able to take on the "mindset" of the speakers of the second language, assuming the culture along with the language (though not, of course, without reservations that are consistent with their own mindsets). Yet most people are not aware of themselves as cultural beings, products of their own environments, whether or not they are aware of the cultural base for the behavior of persons from other environments. After the learners are guided to a recognition of the cultural base of their own attitudes and behavior, they are ready to consider others in a more favorable light. Through this process, what has seemed quaint, peculiar, or downright reprehensible becomes more reasonable and acceptable. Once the second language learner comes to understand the behavior of the speakers of the target language, regardless of the original motivation for study, the task of adding the language becomes far simpler, both through acceptance of the speakers of the language and through increased knowledge of what the language means, as well as what it says.

The research of Gardner and Lambert (e.g., 1972) and of Acton and Walker de Felix (in this volume) determined that integrative motivation (the intention of becoming a part of the target culture as well as speaking the target language) resulted in more effective language learning than did instrumental motivation (the intention of learning the language to serve a purpose, such as getting a job, with no wish to mix socially with speakers of the language). While subsequent research (e.g., Brown 1980) casts some doubt on this theory, no one has hypothesized that motivation per se is a negative attribute for second language learning. A positive attitude is seen as a boon to any learning situation, and comprehension of a people's behavior patterns and their underlying values clearly gives

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a more positive attitude to the person who is trying to learn that language, as will be seen in the article by Acton and Walker de Felix. Furthermore, language meaning is obscured without some recognition of cultural values. Even the learner whose motivation is so instrumental as to cover only the intention to read technical texts in English, for example, is likely to fail to grasp the significance of some explanations and directions if unaware of the American/British value regarding time, especially in the technical field: Things must be done in the least possible time, and ways to do them must be set forth in the least possible space, in order to reduce the reading time. Brevity + directness = efficiency. A learner from another culture may be put off by the lack of eloquence and feel that some important information has been omitted.

The most obvious influence of language and culture on thought is that of vocabulary. As Boas points out, words are suited to the environment in which they are used. Linguistics students are always amazed at the often-cited vast number of words for snow in Eskimo languages (see Brown, in this volume), yet they fail to consider all the words used for rain in warmer climates. In a glossary of Old English the number of warlike words is conspicuous, but the tribes of Ancient Britain were a warlike people, a fact that is naturally reflected in their language and, hence, in their literature, which reflects their thought.

Many influences of the structure of language have been noted (see Henle 1958, ch. 1). Translations, particularly of literary works, point up the differences. Literal translations are seen to be true to the form of the original, while free translations depart from the text to find expression that fits the tone and meaning in essence but not exactly in language. A truly literal translation is virtually impossible from any one language to any other, primarily because of vocabulary and structures. For example, the degree of formality in which a work is written can be translated into another language, but the cultural and linguistic influence that resulted in that formality in the original work is lost in the translation. The degree of formality of a language surely affects thought, just as surely as it is affected by culture, and just as surely as it affects culture.

The influence of language on thought and behavior can perhaps best be seen in the world of advertising. The culture – beliefs, attitudes, overt and covert aspirations, pragmatic designs and fantasies, actions and reactions – is studied by advertisers around the world to find the basis for the concepts and language that will inspire the people of any given locale to buy a product of one manufacturer rather than that of another. What sells in Chicago may also sell in Kyoto, but not through the same advertising. The influences of the language of advertising are revealed in Nilsen and Nilsen, *Language Play* (1978), in Bolinger, *Language – The Loaded Weapon* (1980), in Brown (this volume), and in many articles in the popular press. Again, however, the influences are recip-

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rocal. Although the linguistic influence of advertising on the people is undeniable, the culture and thought of the people influence advertising.

Whether one begins or ends with language, thought, or culture, the other two are woven in; the circular pattern holds, with each influencing and being influenced by each of the others. They are not all the same thing, but none can survive without the others. Second language learners must not only be aware of this interdependence but must be taught its nature, in order to convince them of the essentiality of including culture in the study of a language which is not their own. The articles offered in Part I provide the theory that underlies the practice, each in its own way. Boas looks to primitive cultures to illustrate his views on the mutual influences of language, thought, and culture, Kaplan traces the history and development of writing and indicates the cultural aspect of this component of language, Acton and Walker de Felix consider acculturation from the point of view of various researchers, and Brown gives an overview of the topic and clarifies its significance.

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1 Language and thought

Franz Boas

First of all, it may be well to discuss the relation between language and thought. It has been claimed that the conciseness and clearness of thought of a people depend to a great extent upon their language. The ease with which in our modern European languages we express wide abstract ideas by a single term, and the facility with which wide generalizations are cast into the frame of a simple sentence, have been claimed to be one of the fundamental conditions of the clearness of our concepts, the logical force of our thought, and the precision with which we eliminate in our thoughts irrelevant details. Apparently this view has much in its favor. When we compare modern English with some of those Indian languages which are most concrete in their formative expression, the contrast is striking. When we say *The eye is the organ of sight*, the Indian may not be able to form the expression *the eye*, but may have to define that the eye of a person or of an animal is meant. Neither may the Indian be able to generalize readily the abstract idea of an eye as the representative of the whole class of objects, but may have to specialize by an expression like *this eye here*. Neither may he be able to express by a single term the idea of *organ*, but may have to specify it by an expression like *instrument of seeing*, so that the whole sentence might assume a form like *An indefinite person's eye is his means of seeing*. Still, it will be recognized that in this more specific form the general idea may be well expressed. It seems very questionable in how far the restriction of the use of certain grammatical forms can really be conceived as a hindrance in the formulation of generalized ideas. It seems much more likely that the lack of these forms is due to the lack of their need. Primitive man, when conversing with his fellowman, is not in the habit of discussing abstract ideas. His interests center around the occupations of his daily life; and where philosophic problems are touched upon, they appear either in relation to definite individuals or in the more or less anthropomorphic forms of religious beliefs. Discourses on qualities without

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connection with the objects to which the qualities belong, or of activities or states disconnected from the idea of the actor or the subject being in a certain state, will hardly occur in primitive speech. Thus the Indian will not speak of goodness as such, although he may very well speak of the goodness of a person. He will not speak of a state of bliss apart from the person who is in such a state. He will not refer to the power of seeing without designating an individual who has such power. Thus it happens that in languages in which the idea of possession is expressed by elements subordinated to nouns, all abstract terms appear always with possessive elements. It is, however, perfectly conceivable that an Indian trained in philosophic thought would proceed to free the underlying nominal forms from the possessive elements, and thus reach abstract forms strictly corresponding to the abstract forms of our modern languages. I have made this experiment, for instance, with the Kwakiutl language of Vancouver Island, in which no abstract term ever occurs without its possessive elements. After some discussion, I found it perfectly easy to develop the idea of the abstract term in the mind of the Indian, who will state that the word without a possessive pronoun gives a sense, although it is not used idiomatically. I succeeded, for instance, in this manner, in isolating the terms for *love* and *pity*, which ordinarily occur only in possessive forms, like *his love for him* or *my pity for you*. That this view is correct may also be observed in languages in which possessive elements appear as independent forms, as, for instance, in the Siouan languages. In these, pure abstract terms are quite common.

There is also evidence that other specializing elements, which are so characteristic of many Indian languages, may be dispensed with when, for one reason or another, it seems desirable to generalize a term. To use the example of the Kwakiutl language, the idea of *to be seated* is almost always expressed with an inseparable suffix expressing the place in which a person is seated, as *seated on the floor of the house, on the ground, on the beach, on a pile of things*, or *on a round thing*, etc. When, however, for some reason, the idea of the state of sitting is to be emphasized, a form may be used which expresses simply *being in a sitting posture*. In this case, also, the device for generalized expression is present, but the opportunity for its application arises seldom, or perhaps never. I think what is true in these cases is true of the structure of every single language. The fact that generalized forms of expression are not used does not prove inability to form them, but it merely proves that the mode of life of the people is such that they are not required; that they would, however, develop just as soon as needed. . . .

If we want to form a correct judgment of the influence that language exerts over thought, we ought to bear in mind that our European languages as found at the present time have been moulded to a great extent by the abstract thought of philosophers. Terms like *essence* and *exist-*

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ence, many of which are now commonly used, are by origin artificial devices for expressing the results of abstract thought. In this they would resemble the artificial, unidiomatic abstract terms that may be formed in primitive languages.

Thus it would seem that the obstacles to generalized thought inherent in the form of a language are of minor importance only, and that presumably the language alone would not prevent a people from advancing to more generalized forms of thinking if the general state of their culture should require expression of such thought; that under these conditions the language would be moulded rather by the cultural state. It does not seem likely, therefore, that there is any direct relation between the culture of a tribe and the language they speak, except in so far as the form of the language will be moulded by the state of the culture, but not in so far as a certain state of culture is conditioned by morphological traits of the language.

Questions for consideration

1. How does Boas refute the notion that the form of a language may constitute an obstacle to thought?
2. How would you expect the Kwakiutl to express the term *friendship*?
3. From the characteristics supplied by Boas, how do you believe the Kwakiutls' language might affect their thought? Their thought pattern?
4. How might a language express a new concept, such as a Kwakiutl's explanation of his first encounter with television?

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2 Culture and the written language

Robert B. Kaplan
University of Southern California

The relationship between culture and language is well established; it is probably not as dramatic as the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see p. 46) would maintain, but it is perhaps more salient than the weak version. It is certainly possible to claim that the phenomenology of a community of speakers is reflected in the language spoken, and the language spoken helps in some way to shape the phenomenology.

The situation with respect to written language is somewhat more complex. First, it is clear that historically, over the existence of the human species, oral language preceded written language by hundreds of thousands of years. Our ancestors, the australopithecines, were group hunters, were nomadic, were territorial, and these features increased the evolutionary pressure for the development of language. It is highly probable that the australopithecines had an elaborated call system; the argument for that probability rests with the established group hunting behavior, because group hunting demands some sort of communication system. The combination of nomadism and territoriality argues for an ability to abstract; if one moves one's territory about nomadically, it is essential to be able to abstract a map of the territory to carry about in the head as well. The species is, in addition, blessed with one of the most slowly developing young in the animal kingdom; while the young of other mammals are normally able to move with the group and to contribute to its survival within a year or two of birth, human children are essentially useless for six or seven years after birth. (The more sophisticated human societies have become, the longer the period of uselessness has been interpreted, so that in the present time the young are pretty much excluded from significant contribution to the survival of the group until they are between 18 and 21 years of age; indeed, the development of complex schooling patterns serves to impede their entry into useful activity for a considerable time while it also serves to inhibit their competition with adults for increasingly scarce labor opportunities. But the biology of the species points to an earlier entry into the arena of useful contribution; puberty still seems to occur in the earliest teen years.) The fact remains that our earliest ancestors probably had a so-

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phisticated call system – the kind of system essential to group hunting and to the care of a painfully slowly developing offspring.

Incomplete archaeological evidence seems to suggest that the organs necessary to language as we know it probably did not develop until about 100,000 years ago. The changing of the shape of the buccal cavity, the development of the brain, and the necessary changes in the structure of the aural mechanism appear to have coincided and become available at the same time. The speech mechanism is overlaid on other structures (the mouth and the ears) – structures which have older and more basic functions. In short, spoken language of the sort that we take for granted probably appeared in the species on the order of 100,000 years ago. Furthermore, this capability seems to have appeared widely in the species without regard to geographical separation. Indeed, the basic ability to use spoken language is so widely distributed and so universal that it has become the criterion for defining the species norm. We regard as "abnormal" those individuals who cannot speak either because of some impediment in the brain or some aberration of the mouth or ears. The ability to speak and to understand speech defines the normative ranges. In earlier stages of social development, individuals so marked were not permitted to survive, and thus were unlikely to participate in the breeding population.

Written language is, however, a much later phenomenon. It appeared about 10,000 years ago, and it appeared in selective populations; even in the present day, not all human populations have written language, but all human populations within the normative range have spoken language. When written language first appeared in human populations, it was regarded as magical; the earliest forms of writing contained spells, curses, and other magical elements. It was considered dangerous to allow others to have possession of one's real name because the inclusion of one's real name, particularly in written spells, could produce serious harm. Only very gradually did the ability to read and write spread beyond the clergy. The earliest manuscripts were attempts to codify religious information – to "freeze" the myths and legends of a culture.

The wide distribution of writing in the population is a very recent phenomenon indeed. Before literacy could become widespread it was necessary for written language to become more widely available. There were two post-biological evolutionary events that had to occur: the invention of printing (the use of movable type) and the automated word-processing revolution, which is presently going on about us.

The invention of writing made possible a dramatic change in the relation between human beings and information. In orate societies – those that depend exclusively upon spoken language – information is of

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necessity stored in memory. That fact has two important implications: First, there must be a group of individuals who specialize in becoming information carriers, and second, the nature of information is very flexible. Individuals who are repositories of information necessarily achieve special status in a society; they are important to the survival of culture. Information itself is variable because retrieval is variable; it depends upon the condition of the information repository (whether the person is fatigued or fresh, drunk or sober, cooperative or recalcitrant, respectful or disrespectful of the audience), and it depends upon the circumstances of retrieval (whether the audience is one or many, whether the setting is work-related or leisure). Under these conditions, not only is information variable, but there is necessarily a different attitude toward *fact* and *truth* such that fact is also variable and truth mutable. Once information can be written down, however, it can be retrieved invariably over time and space. It is possible for a twentieth-century English speaker in the United States to read the actual words of the Greek philosopher Plato, though they are separated by 2,000 years and 10,000 miles. If the twentieth-century reader knows classical Greek, he can read the actual original words; but even if he does not know classical Greek, he can still have access to accurate written translation.

The ability to retrieve information across time and space in invariant form creates a new environment. It changes attitudes toward *fact* and *truth*; it makes fact invariable and truth immutable. More than that, it makes possible the whole structure of what we have come to call *science* – an activity that is absolutely dependent on large quantities of invariable information and upon a kind of thinking that knows how to deal with cumulative invariant fact. Our whole notion of noetic control over nature is an algorithm derived from the availability of written information. Furthermore, the ability to store information in written form results in actual changes in the structure of language. Language which is to be stored in living memory requires various kinds of rhetorical devices which make information easier to remember, such as rhythm, rhyme, mnemonics, and the like. Once information can be written down, these aids are no longer necessary. Furthermore, once information exists in written form, it becomes possible to comment on the structure as well as the content of a written text. As long as information remains a function of memory, and is variably retrieved, it is possible to comment on the structure of only a given act of retrieval. Thus, as written language has accumulated, the quantity of commentary has come to exceed the quantity of original information. The twentieth-century reader has not only the words of Plato, but 2,000 years of commentary on the words of Plato, which help the reader to interpret what they mean.

The electronic revolution has contributed a number of important new phenomena. Most obviously, the electronic revolution makes possible

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