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Language Use and Culture.pdf

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The intersection of language and culture is a crucial site for the study of social life; it is, moreover, a rich site for the study of intercultural communication, international relations, and cross-cultural studies of communication in general. Of special **[p. 581 ↓]** concern to interculturalists is the variety of ways in which language can be used, differences in the conceptions people hold about language itself, culturally distinctive vocabularies, culturally distinctive forms of expression, and the unique role of language as a means of communication in one setting or cultural scene relative to others. The latter concern brings into view other possible cultural means of communication, such as silence, nonverbal expressions, and nonhuman agents of communication, each of which can help place language use, generally, in its place within a culture's expressive system. Cultural analysts of language use explore these dynamics in multiple ways, including attention to culturally dense language, such as linguistic forms, which identify action, identity, emotion, social relationships, and dwelling.

In this entry, the six uses of language and culture are discussed. These are dense cultural terms and are examples of linguistic usage concerning action, identity, emotion, social relations, and dwelling. Each is explained with reference to various languages, with a special focus on Bulgarian, so as to add some cultural meat to the bones of language use.

Culturally Dense Language

All known languages contain lexical items, words, or phrases that are locally dense with meanings. These are sometimes conceptualized, for example, by Brad Hall as *kernel images*, by David Schneider as *epitomizing symbols*, by Sherry Ortner as *key symbols*, and by Michael Agar as *rich points*. For example, the chief executive officer of Nokia, the cell phone company, was asked by the American journalist Diane Sawyer to account for the success of Nokia as a worldwide company. He explained it to Sawyer with one simple Finnish word, *sisu*. This term is steeped in Finnish history. It resonates with various forms of Finnish actions, ranging from steadfastness to perseverance against all odds, all the while saying something important to Finns about a particularly Finnish mind-set. It is, in a word, a Finnish linguistic badge of identity and honor.

In Russian, one will hear explanations given of Russianness via the linguistic term *dusha*, often translated as "the Russian soul" and/or "a transpersonal plane of moral energy." However, this informal translation will immediately be elaborately developed, as will all such rich cultural terms, by native speakers. The Austrian word *schmah* expresses an Austrian state of affairs where things are not quite as they seem and actually are much worse, so the only thing you can do is laugh it off! The French anthropologist Hervé Varenne, in his book *Americans Together*, has argued that American English contains rich terms that revolve around the words *love* and *happiness*, and their ability to hold together the individual self and a community.

Culturally dense terms such as these are rich and steeped in meanings. As such, they often house a bright semantic radiance in multiple directions, including words and linguistic forms or sequences pertaining to action, identity, emotion, social relationships, and the nature of things. Because of this, they are in need of careful, rigorous, and systematic interpretation and translation.

Cultural Terms for Pragmatic Action and Talk

Cultural terms for *pragmatic action* and *talk* identify for people forms of conduct that are, typically, morally infused. *Moral infusion* means that the action is heard to carry weight along a dimension of actions that run from those that are highly valued to those that are actively disvalued. Of course, these can vary by place and by people. This point will be briefly illustrated with culturally dense Bulgarian terms, which carry a deep range of meanings for Bulgarians.

Several Bulgarian terms for talk and action are anchored in the lexical item *oplakvane*, a term for specific as well as more general actions. One such Bulgarian usage, translated into English, is this: "Surely you'll say again, that we only *se oplakvame* and we don't suggest anything, but when we do it, does anyone hear us, huh?" *Oplakvane* can be translated into English here as "complaining, lamenting, and mourning," according to most Bulgarian–English dictionaries. However, a crucial part of the definition of *oplakvane* is the root of the word, *plach*, which means "to cry," moving the discussion

to the interlingual and intercultural realm. For this reason, *oplakvam* is often translated, with great semantic complexity, as "lament," "bemoan," "weep," "complain," "account," "bewail," "wait," "grumble," and "grievance." **[p. 582 ↓]** All culturally dense language, then, creates considerable translation difficulties, as each is caught within and between such linguistic and cultural worlds.

Culturally dense language, as cultural terms about pragmatic action, can be used to describe particular communication practices—in this case, a way of speaking or a specific communication style. As such, this linguistic action refers in Bulgarian to the exchange of stories and finding problems. *Oplakvane* is recognized and labeled as such by Bulgarians only when a legitimate reason for complaining is recognized or the behavior is socially legitimized. When this term is used, people become a part of the situation in Bulgaria, telling stories of how different things are in Bulgaria (in comparison with other countries) and, finally, evaluating how things in Bulgaria will not change. In this way, terms like this identify cultural actions that not only refer to a specific cultural practice but also offer insight into premises about proper action itself, including political action. In fact, this type of Bulgarian complaining implies political inaction, or the claim is made that "no action will save us Bulgarians," and thus the intricate symbiotic connection is linguistically being woven about a Bulgarian reality and situation through *oplakvane*. The main purpose of *oplakvane*, then, becomes the release of anger and frustration, all the while recreating the cultural conditions for continued frustration. This illustrates how dense cultural terms in a language can be carriers of meanings about action, emotion, and identity itself.

Cultural Terms for Identity

Every language has a set of linguistic items that identify people and types of people. As part of its meaning, each act of identification typically says something about how people are located socially, how they are related, and whether institutions are active when one is identified as such. Stephen Hester and Peter Eglin have examined these terms as *membership categories*. These terms also invoke, through shared knowledge, a class of actions salient to the identity, as when a pastor, through an understanding of a role within a religious institution, is expected to preach, counsel, and console.

Continuing the exploration of Bulgarian terms, there are specific words for being a Bulgarian, including the folk figure *Bai Ganio* and *terikatluk*. *Terikatluk* is a derivative from the word *terikat*, which is a dialectical form that refers to a young man from a small village who makes a living by scamming people for profit. He is usually described as sleazy, dirty, sneaky, and untrustworthy and would even sell his own family for money. The term is connected to the Bulgarian antihero *Bai Ganio*, a fictional character created by the Bulgarian satirical writer Aleko Konstantinov in the 1890s. This character is the epitome of everything to be ashamed of within a national identity, described as vulgar, impudent, opportunistic, uncivilized, an unscrupulous profiteer, a womanizer of the worst kind, and a crook, even though he can be a very skillful tradesman who is ingenious, energetic, and pragmatic.

Those two images, and the terms of identity they provide, offer insight into the identity struggles Bulgarians experience as the nation makes its way from a past of communism, agricultural socioeconomic focus, and the cultural consequences of Ottoman dominance into a European, modernized future. The concepts of *terikati* and *Bai Ganio* emerge as they link the agricultural and slave-based Ottoman past of Bulgaria (the East) with the European, contemporary future (the West) Bulgaria is struggling to enter. In this way, the understanding of Bulgarianness is defined by and through a specific Bulgarian mentality (a way of thinking and behaving), which is shaped by a particular historical context, whereby Bulgarians understand and make sense of their behaviors only within the particular Bulgarian situation of a socioeconomic dysfunction. Language of identity demonstrates its roots in the cultural conceptions of identities, actions, and emotion vocabulary.

Cultural Vocabulary for Emotion

Every known language includes a vocabulary for not only conceiving of but also expressing emotion. While it has been suggested that some emotions are universal, a careful look at language use and culture reveals a more complex picture. One finds, counter to the perspective of many people, that love is not the same everywhere, nor is happiness. Placing emotion language in a cross-cultural perspective reveals different conceptions, uses, and meanings. Unsuspecting young lovers may exchange what **[p.**

583 ↓] passes for romantic dialogue with little or no understanding of the connotation the terms used have in the culture, despite a literal translation of the word *love*.

Cultural Terms for Social Relationships

Specific uses of language make persons aware of how they are related to one another. This is often conveyed elegantly through terms of address, personal reference, titles, honorifics, kin terms, clan identities, and other means of referring to persons, as Karen Tracy and Jessica Robles have recently reviewed. Following is an illustration of some of these with reference to Bulgarian uses of language and its cultural meanings.

Among the top results of an Internet search for the topic "emigration" in Bulgaria is a popular blog spot where the terms and opinions shared by the blogger known as Hikari are highly representative of the general discourse on emigration available in Bulgaria. It draws on the larger, very specific cultural symbols and meanings as to what it means to "be a Bulgarian" or to share in the "Bulgarian mentality." A segment of the blog post addresses practices of corruption as one reason why even Bulgarians who want to come back from abroad do not do so. The author presents an example from "a dozen local universities" where students who tried to transfer from a university abroad had to pay "additional" fees under the pretext of a "sponsorship" since they would count as "international" students. Such behavior, the author emphasizes, amounts to "flagrant stealing," something "unique in the thinking of a society," a unique and predatory "national hyenism," and "Anti-Bulgarianism," in which the country devours its own children.

Verbal interpretations such as these show a kind of social relationship and the disassociation of Bulgarians from their own children who are studying abroad. One site of meanings at play here is the person and action link, through the word *child*, as one whom adults traditionally should care for, but here the child educated elsewhere is deemed "insolent," and thus, to follow the metaphor, the pack of Bulgarians turns predatory toward this group of its own young. This example is intended to show how language concepts such as these weave culture into language use through terms about social relationships, identities, emotions, and actions. These terms, these linguistic

items and forms, together create a cultural scene of dwelling, often invoked through a minimal linguistic form, such as a place name.

Cultural Terms for Dwelling

Place-based language, or any place-based terms active in this cluster, provides for its users a sense of where they are. Local terms of this kind carve the linguistic map into a geographic scene, from local places to global phenomena. Reflecting on the illustration above, terms are found for dwelling that cast Bulgaria into a non-European realm or a place somehow opposed to traditional (Western) Europe. Place-based conceptions like these are invoked and used in communication practices broadly, such as in direction giving, tour talks, responses to questions of where one originates, or grander narratives of history.

Conclusion

Language use is tied to culture as its terms and sequential forms both presume and create dense cultural meanings. Interculturalists, especially those focused on competence, would do well to explore linguistic constructions and cultural meanings as each provides deeply distinctive bases for understanding conduct, such as competence and its ties to identity, emotion, relations, and dwelling.

See alsoApplied Linguistics; Cross-Cultural Communication; Pragmatics; Sociolinguistics

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