

The Role, Methodological Basis and the Subject of Cultural Studies in the Globalized World

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Abstract

The article entitled *The Role, Methodological Basis and the Subject of Cultural Studies in the Globalized World* analyses the essentials of the academic subject of Cultural Studies in the Globalized World. The article analyses reasons why acquiring culture is equally important to becoming linguistically competent for any language user (a regular user of language as well as professional translator and interpreter). The author provides evidence from various areas of linguistics where cultural background of a linguistic phenomenon is as relevant as its translation. Finally, the author provides a synthesis of several current definitions of the notion “cultural studies”.

Keywords: Globalized World, Methodological Basis, Subject of Cultural Studies.

Introduction: The Role of Cultural Studies

The process of learning and teaching language inherently implies acquiring and sharing culture as well. Many professional scholars as well as language learners understand it is impossible to learn a foreign language without acquiring the culture it embraces. Even by teaching the first words and the simplest conversational patterns, teachers perpetuate different cultural concepts and modes of behaviour. For example, the basic concept *lunch* has a very different meaning in Slovakia (where it usually means a two-dish meal, served at a table), in Britain (where it could refer to a bag of vinegar-flavoured crisps) and in the USA (where it often means a quick stop at a fastfood restaurant). A response to the question *How are you?* also differs from country to country. In some countries, the only socially acceptable answer is simple and pre-formatted (*I'm fine*); in others it is almost impolite not to go into great length, and not to mention individual members of one's family, their medical condition, job and social life. Thus, proper functioning in the new culture might be even more important than mere mastering the linguistic rules of a foreign language.

Needless to say, such social competencies expand regular day-to-day informal situations. In business, closing a contract often depends on prompt, properly formulated and culturally sensitive reactions to various proposals. Interpreters also greatly profit from cultural awareness; they often function not only as transmitters of the discourse but also as cultural “bridges”, merging two or more different cultures. For example, the direct and brief answer “no” may in some cultures sound impolite and disrespectful. It is the interpreter's task to re-formulate it into a socially more palatable style and form of response.

Competent users of a foreign language do not only function *linguagewise* but, more importantly, can cross cultures on a *culturewise level* (Zelenka, 31; Zelenková, 2008). By what means, however, culture should be taught – that is a question that has been attracting scholars for decades.

Therefore, a competent language speaker has to be both “linguagewise” and “culturewise” in order to understand the multiple forms of use of a foreign language in various unrehearsed situations and to be able to react spontaneously yet appropriately. Therefore some scholars speak about “the art of crossing cultures.” Whether culture can be taught is an unresolved question. Some believe acquiring a new culture is a life-long process; however, selected cultural maxims can be transmitted to professional linguists in cultural studies courses. In this article I would like to

explore the philosophical essence of cultural studies and to analyse cultural studies in the context of its role and legacy.

1.1 The Notional Context and Methodological Basis of Cultural Studies: What is a culture?

Etymologically, the word “culture” comes from Latin word *to cultivate*, meaning improvement and enrichment*. Cicero, a Roman philosopher, political theorist and orator, is believed the first who used the phrase “cultivation of the soul” (*cultura animi*) in his *Tusculanae Disputationes* (45 BC) in the metaphorical sense of the word. In modern times, the Cicero’s original use of the term “culture” has been extended to “all the ways in which human beings overcome their original barbarism, and through artifice, become fully human.” Nowadays, the term “culture” encompasses the teachings of many theorists and philosophers (e.g. Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emanuel Kant). In common speech “culture” usually refers to (1) identity (e.g. of a region, group of people, nation) or (2) cultivation of the original, authentic “self”.†

Culture, however, is also a subject of professional research for many disciplines such as anthropology (the study of mankind, its origins, development and customs), ethnology, (the study of different human races), sociology, political sciences and many others.

Modern definitions of “culture” are vast. Some scholars recognize over 200 definitions of the term “culture”. Let us explore three of these—a linguistic (dictionary) one, a sociologic and a political definition:

1. Linguistic (dictionary) definition: A. S. Hornby (1989): “Culture [means]:

- 1 ...a refined understanding and appreciation of art, literature, etc. (for example: a university should be the centre of the *culture*).
- 1 ...the state of intellectual development of a society (for example: the mass culture, the 20th-century culture).
- 1 ...a particular form of intellectual expression, e.g. in arts and literature (for example: the Greek culture).
- 1 ...the customs, arts, social institutions, etc. of a particular group of people (for example: the Eskimo culture)[‡].

2. Sociologic (anthropologic) definition: R. Murphy (1986): “Culture means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It thus refers to the norms, values, and standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the worlds and rendering it intelligible. Culture is [...] a set of mechanisms for survival, but it provides us also with a definition of reality. It is the matrix into which we are born, it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged.”§

3. Political definition: The official UNESCO definition (2002): “...culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”**

All these definitions, the linguistic, sociological and the political one, each broaden the core of the term “culture” from their own perspective. Thus, studying culture from a political perspective (focused on fundamental documents, institutions and mechanisms of the examined society) inevitably differs from studying the same culture from the perspective of literature, education or the fine arts.

* Barker, p. 96.

† Based on: Barker, pp. 96-97.

‡ Hornby, p. 291.

§ Murphy, p. 14.

** UNESCO DEFINITION OF CULTURE, p. 1.

Not only the focus of attention of cultural studies but also the method of acquiring cultural information differs from other academic subjects. According to M. Byram, the study and acquisition of culture includes information gathered consciously (by learning, practicing), but also subconsciously (by experience, imitating).^{*} Byram writes, “[Mastering culture] reaches from the commonest greetings through conversational rules of turn-taking and general politeness to non-verbal behaviour and is as significant for successful communication as the native speakers’ conscious knowledge (historical, geographical, sociological, etc.) about their society along with linguistic knowledge.” (Ibid.).

What is more, some scholars point out that culture is not an “invariant and static entity made up of accumulated, observable, thus eminently teachable and learnable facts but a variable entity, changing with times and new social phenomena”[†]. As a result, cultural studies differs from all other academic disciplines: its subject of research is interdisciplinary and modified by the purpose of the study; unlike other disciplines, cultural studies examines both conscious and unconscious cultural knowledge of the target country and its inhabitants, and the focus of research is changeable and needs perpetual upgrading.

1.2 The Legacy of Cultural Studies: Why do linguists and philologists study culture?

Studying foreign languages inherently incorporates the study of culture of the respective language. In this observation we rely on the research of M. Byram, who observes that language has no function independent of the context in which it is used, and thus always refers to something beyond itself: the cultural context.^{*} Slovak scholars Otrísalová and Gazdík also observe that “translations are not made in a vacuum but arise in a given culture at a given time.”[§] Here are some examples:

- **Historical and geographical cultural context:** The lexica of many languages contain words that have rich and interesting historical backgrounds. Many of these words were originally borrowed from other languages and, therefore, often lack a Slovak (or European language) equivalent. For example, the first settlers in America borrowed many Indian words (mostly referring to regional flora, fauna and the way of life in America) which completely lacked any equivalent in Slovak (or any other European language). Instead of being translated, the original word has been used up to the present. For example: *catalpa* (a Catawba Indian word for a specific plant^{**}) is referred to in Slovak as *katalpaobyčejná*. Mere translation thus does not help to understand the meaning of the word; we need to learn more about American flora to know its shape, colour or flavour and use.

- **Linguistic-cultural context** (grammatical, phonetic, morphological etc.): As the English language “travelled” across oceans to America, Australia, Africa and many other regions of the world, many grammatical, phonetic, morphological and other types of changes occurred. For example, the pronunciation of the final “r” sound in the word “car” depends on the region where the word is used. Morphological and lexical changes also occurred, both internationally and nationally. For example, in most of the USA you stand *in the line* but in New York you stand *on the line*.

- **Social-cultural context:** mastering a foreign language means more than mastering its linguistic rules. As I. Zelenka and A. Zelenková^{††} note, it is equally important to master the “culturewise” (i.e. cultural) level of the language. That incorporates many verbal and non-verbal

^{*} Byram, p. 48.

[†] Moore, p. 1.

[‡] Byram, 1988, p. 1.

[§] Otrísalová-Gazdík, 2012, p. 116.

^{**} Cothran, p. 171.

^{††} Zelenka, p. 31.; Zelenková, 2009.

elements (including proximity, gestures and movements, facial expressions and many others), social skills, codes and taboos, for example:

- proximity: how close people stand to each other,
- how loudly or softly someone speaks;
- when to and when not to make eye contact;
- socially acceptable and unacceptable topics for formal/informal situations;
- formulations of excuses, how to respond to feedback;
- how directly or indirectly one may ask for help or clarification of instructions, how to treat people of a different gender, sexual orientation, race, culture or age;
- how to say no;
- in what manner (tone, pitch, style) to criticize or praise other people's performance and many others;
- when to be casual and when to be formal;
- how to interpret the meaning of others' behaviour.*

Mastering non-verbal communication is also essential for successful use of a foreign language. R. M. Paige introduces the term "cultural effectiveness" referring to one's ability to function in the foreign culture. That is the major aim of students of cultural studies. †

1.3 Conclusion: What is cultural studies? What is American studies?

Paige and Jorstad define culture learning as "the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively."[‡]

Cultural studies (in Europe also known as "realia courses" and country studies) is an interdisciplinary subject that integrates information from many fields of research, such as sociology, politics, economics, geography, history, and the arts, as well as literature, philosophy, law, photography, gender studies and many others.

In 1994, M. Byram formulated so-called *Minimal Content*, i.e. the minimal scope of culture-based information and data that would provide the learner with the minimum necessary extent of data needed to successfully function in a new culture. These are:

- a) social identity, social groups (age, sex, class, region, profession);
- b) social interaction (verbal and non-verbal behaviour, familiarity);
- c) faith and behaviour (routine, natural group behaviour, moral and religious faiths);
- d) social and political institutions (state institutions and their values, law, health care);
- e) social and public life (family, schools, professions, religion, military service);
- f) national history (including present and historical events that are regarded as important by the members of the society);
- g) national geography;
- h) national cultural heritage;
- i) stereotypes and national identity (roots for stereotypes, their comparison).

American studies is thus an intercultural discipline that explores many fields of the American political, social, cultural and daily life. American studies does have its own terminology (e.g. the term *Americanization*); however, it also borrows some terminology and research methods from other disciplines such as law, economics, political sciences, arts, and many others.

French Americanist Marc Chenetier, however, warns against merely accumulating data from various fields; instead he advocates the internalization of cultural studies and the necessity of a

* Adopted from: Gardenswartz – Rowe, 1990.

† Paige, p. 171.

‡ Paige–Jorstad, p. 1.

comparative approach.* We in accordance with notable Slovak and international scholars[†] also understand cultural studies as an interdisciplinary and comparative discipline, exploring a broad scope of USA-related data such as main historical and political events, the structure and functioning of fundamental institutions and organizations, the significance of major American documents, artistic, literary and technological achievements, nationally recognized holidays, famous American people in history and many other areas. Understanding these concepts will help the students to better and more competently use the English language in practical use as well as in translating. Furthermore, through this wide spectrum of related information, language learners will develop the ability to become linguistically competent but, what is more, they train their ability to become culturally competent and to be able to “cross cultures. Finally, teaching culture as an integrated part of language acquisition will help learners to acquire better understanding of the world culture.

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* Chenetier, pp. 1-3.

[†] See Zelenková, A. 2009, *Interkultúrne vzdelávanie ako súčasť cudzojazyčnej výučby na vysokej škole*; Hohn, E.: 2011, *Komparatistik im Kontext der literaturwissenschaftlichen Methoden*.

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