

Language, Cross-cultural communication and Reality

Kantilal Das*

It has often been said that India is culturally rich and the real strength of Indians lies in 'unity within diversity'. India is culturally diversified and such cultural diversification is synthesized through language. The present world is just like a global family hinges on global *family resemblance* and criss-cross overlapping similarities and dissimilarities of cultural heritage. Language, in fact, actualizes our culture. The bondage between language and culture is predetermined. According to Hegel culture is the measure of things taken for granted and language is the most important of such things through which culture is actualized. Even Parmenides observed that the relation of the word to the thing is the key problem about which all culture and all knowledge finally turns. The inseparability of the word (language) and the thing (reality) is the postulate of all positive cultural epochs and the loosing of the word from the thing actually gives birth of *scepticism and relativism*. Humans' culture is all about the development of the relationship between language and things or objects. In this sense, there underlies an entwined assimilation among language, culture and reality. One should not, however, confuse between culture and civilization. One's culture is nothing but a way of explication of one's *baptismal ceremony*. The culture of a community accommodates logocentrism, but there underlies no logo centrism in civilisation. Civilisation is the mark of post-colonialism and post-modernism. Civilization is a radical transformation of individual outlook with the blessing of science and technology. Thus, there always remains a gulf between culture and civilisation.

Culture is something ingrained and *sue-generic* in nature, but civilization is something acquired and relatively transient and transparent.

What then is culture? The word 'culture' is etymologically stemming from the Latin word '*colere*' meaning 'to cultivate'. People learn culture as culture resides in all learned behaviour. According to social scientists culture consists of symbolic, ideational and tangible aspects of human societies and the essence of culture is not its artifacts, tools or other tangible (touchable, concrete, physical) cultural elements, *but how the members of the group interpret, use and perceive them in their form of life*. It is the value, symbols, interpretations and perspectives that distinguishes one people from another in modernized societies. Culture is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies, rather people within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts (things made by man) and behaviour in the similar ways. Culture is also said to be the *mankind's primary adoptive mechanism*, learned and shared human patterns of living pervading all

* Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of North Bengal,
Email: kanti_lal_das@yahoo.com

aspects of human social interaction. It is also said to be the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another. Culture also includes all historically design, heritages existing at any given time as potential guidance for the behaviour of man.

How does language actualize humans' culture?

The exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has, in fact, fascinated people from a wide variety of backgrounds. It is language, i.e. sounds, words, and syntax of a language through which speakers of that language experience the world. It is true to say that culture reflects value through language and culture is used in the sense of whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society. According to Goddenough "a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves."¹ Therefore, cultural knowledge is socially acquired; it is something that can be learned. It is by no means come from any kind of genetic endowment. It is not something that has been determined generically or biologically. *Culture therefore is the knowledge that a person belonging to this community must possess to get through the task of daily living within his own form of life or community.*

There is no question of doubt that a man is known through his or her culture, his or her *baptismal ceremony* and the dignity of a society is based on the cultural development. Since language is the only medium of communication, people belonging to different culture can exchange their own culture to other. That means cultural exchange is made possible through language. Accordingly, language and culture *inter-alia* play an all important role in shaping individual and collective behaviour and values. One's culture is manifested through his language and the language of different tribes or communities are different. Therefore, there is a mechanism through which an inter-translatability of one language into other is made possible. Thus, the question of universal language and translation manuals come into consideration. Whether universal language is possible or not is a matter of debate, but one thing is sure that one language can be translatable or adaptable into another. In this sense, one can know the culture of other by knowing the meaning of other language through the process of inter-translatability or cross cultural mechanism. University Grand Commission of India in the recent past has introduced cultural exchange program in collaboration with foreign countries, such as, French, Germany etc., for university and college teachers and in this regard importance has been given only to those contenders having knowledge and mastery about language for the country they have desired to apply. This again reflects that knowing language of other country has paramount importance of knowing the culture of that country. Noam Chomsky one says that language is the mirror of human mind. Therefore, a person can be cognized by understanding his or her language through which his or her culture has been expressed. Language and cognition is inseparable. In this sense language is identical or at par with culture. Even Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* understands language through the 'form of life' or custom and it is another important dimension of the relationship between language, culture and reality.

As far as the relationship between language and culture is concerned, there we notice three views such as:

- (a) *The structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world.*
- (b) *The culture of people finds reflection in the language they employ, because they value certain things and do then in certain way. Moreover, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do.*
- (c) *There is no relationship between language and culture.*

Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis

The view that the structure of language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world is associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf known as *Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis*. According to Sapir the relationship between language and culture is so involved that one cannot be comprehended without knowing the other. Sapir says, "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of *particular language* which has become the medium of expression for their society."² Therefore, it would be wrong to suggest, Sapir remarks, that one can sense reality (culture) without the use of language and that language has merely an accidental means of solving specific problems of communication. The real world to a large extent is unconsciously built up on the language habits of our community because the language habits of our community actually predispose certain choice of our interpretation. Whorf, being a student of Sapir, has further extended what he has learnt from Sapir. According to Whorf there is a *predisposition or predilection* between language and culture and the relationship between language and culture is a deterministic one. Whorf says, "...the background linguistic system of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but rather is itself the sharper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stroke in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process... but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages."³ Whorf further contends that the world is presented before us just like a **kaleidoscope flux of impressions** which has to be organized by our minds and this is largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. The same point has been raised by Noam Chomsky who pronounces in his *Language and Mind* that 'language is the mirror of human mind'. Language as the mirror of human mind reflects the culture of the individual in the society or community in which he belongs to. With the help of linguistic systems we cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do. This is made possible for us as we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way. This agreement is made up of all the way through our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. According to Whorf, all linguistic observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe unless their linguistic background are similar or can in some way be calibrated.

According to Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis different speakers view or experience the world differently if the languages they use differ structurally. Reflecting on the **Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis**, Fishman goes on to say that if speaker of one language have certain words to describe things and speakers of another language lack similar words, then speaker of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things. For example, physicians' talk about medical phenomena is a case in point. If a person can classify camels, boats, and automobiles in certain ways, he will definitely perceive camels, boats, and automobiles differently from someone who does not require for making these differentiations. The grammatical categories available in a particular language not only help the users of that language to perceive the world in a certain way, but also at the same time limit such perception. In this regard every native speaker will act as a blinker as he perceives what his **language allows or predisposes him to perceive**. That is why Ronald Wardhaugh comments by saying, "Your language controls your 'world -view'. This may perhaps be attributed as the cosmopolitan view of language. Speakers of different languages will, therefore, have different world-views."⁴ One language may not be better than other language and every language is adequate for knowing the culture of its communality. Having said this, it, at times, contains worldviews that cannot be translated into another language. Culture is all about the getting hold of habits where language plays the all important role in facilitating the self-consciousness and rationality of human beings.

What has been said above is that language is just like an eye or just like a microscope through which one can express his own culture. Language determines how does a speaker perceive and organize the world around him. In this sense language helps to form your world-view. Language determines our experience for ourselves and we do not use language simply to report that experience. In this sense language is not neutral; rather language imposes on us habits of looking and thinking in the *form of our life*. This leads us to say that the language of a speaker actually determines his relation to the external world in one or more ways.

In recent times, Professor Bernstein's view of the relationship between language and culture is heavily influenced by Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis. Before the appearance of Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis, Bernstein was committed to the view that the deep structure of grammar actually regulated linguistic communication. In fact Bernstein regards **language as something which influences culture and is in turn influenced by culture**. For example, a child growing up in a particular linguistic environment and culture eventually learns the language of that environment as well as that culture and then proceeds to pass on that learning to the next generation. Bernstein is of the opinion that there underlies a direct and reciprocal or mutual relationship between a particular kind of social structure and the way people in that social structure use language. This relationship, in fact, is not contingent or *ad-hoc*, rather it would be continued from generation to generation. According to Bernstein, a particular kind of social structure leads to a particular kind of linguistic behaviour and this, in turn, reproduces the original social structure. Individuals learn their social roles through the process of communication and this process varies from social group to social group. This again reflects that language is all about of viewing or knowing the culture of a particular community.

The relevance of universal language

It is important to point out here that knowing all forms of language possessing by all communities in all over the world is not viable as it then goes beyond the capacity of a normal human being. That is why a form of universal language has been addressed by linguists. English, for example, may be supposed to be a model of universal language. This does not, however, make sense to say that people of the world, all without exception, know English. Here the term 'universal' should not be interpreted in logical sense. Rather it would be better to assume or presuppose that a universal language is a form of language that can be used internationally. In this way the so-called cultural exchange amongst people is made possible. Let us explain this point with an example. Suppose 10% to 15% people of each country can speak in English. They can learn the culture of others countries interchangeably. Having been acquired or learned the culture of other countries, they can help the people of their respective countries to know the culture of other countries through their native language. In this way universal language can help to know the culture of other countries.

Problem with universal language

What has been said above has a distinct negative impact. To know the culture of other community by interacting with them directly through their own native language is one thing and to know their culture indirectly through universal language mechanism is a different thing altogether. We think that knowing the culture of other community through universal language mechanism cited above is *ad-hoc*, unrevealing and superficial, because in such a case we use language just as an instrument of mere medium of communication. However, language is not just a mere medium of communication. Without knowing the language of other community, it would be very difficult to know the feeling, sentiments, and egos of these communities. As human culture consists of symbolic, ideational and tangible aspects of human societies and the essence of culture is not its artifacts, tools, it is something associated with the emotion, sentiment and egos that can be expressed through their own language. Therefore, knowing the culture of other communities through universal language actually overlooks so many things associated with their culture.

Inter-translatability mechanism

It is known to all of us that inter-translatability mechanism of language can help us to know the culture of other communities or countries. A person having the competence and mastery over more than one language can translate one language into other and thereby can help others to know the culture of other countries or communities. The speech of the Prime Minister of Indian in UNISCO in Hindi is a case in point.

Problem associated with inter-translatability mechanism

Like universal language, we are forced to overlook so many cultural aspects of other communities if attempt has been made to know the culture of other communities

with inter-translatibility or cross cultural mechanism. Inter-translatibility mechanism hinges on a link process where there are at least three individuals/parties out of which the middle man plays a dual role. Suppose A belongs to Bengali and C belongs to Nepali. A does not know Nepali and C does not know Bengali. B belongs to Shik community who knows Hindi, Bengali as well as Nepali languages. By virtue of knowing both Bengali and Nepali, B comes to know the culture of both Bengali and Nepali communities by interaction with them in their own language. Let us suppose that A is willing to know Nepali culture through B with the help of inter-translatibility or cross cultural mechanism and also C is willing to know Bengali culture through B with the help of same mechanism. My own observation is that although both A and B have known the culture of Nepali, but as far as knowing the culture of Nepali is concerned, B would be far more better position than A. Again, although both B and C have known the culture of Bengali, but B would be in a far better position than C as far as knowing the Bengali culture is concerned. The difference actually lies in the *direct-contact theory*. B would be in a far better position than A and C, because B has acquired both Bengali and Nepali cultures by interacting with these communities face to face. This would not be the case in A and C. Knowing or cultivating culture of Nigerians through Television is different from knowing or cultivating their culture by knowing their own native language and also interacting with them face to face. This would be the problem of inter-translatibility mechanism cited above.

Native language helps most in knowing culture

What has been revealed from the above is that if language is supposed to be the best possible means of knowing the culture (language is culture) of other communities, then, of course, it would be the native language which helps the most in knowing one's own culture. Since, culture is value, ethos of community, it would be better to know the native language of that community for knowing their own culture. In fact, attempt of knowing the culture of other community through universal language or inter-translatibility mechanism actually alienates one community from the other community. It would be just like a *telephonic education* which is completely different from *class-room education*. Although telephonic or distance education is a form of education, but somehow or other it would be different from class-room education. Thus, knowing other culture is one thing and knowing other culture rightly is another matter. My own observation is that knowing other culture by knowing their native language is far more genuine than knowing other culture through universal language or through inter-translatibility mechanism. Having said this, we cannot ignore the relevance of universal language or the inter-translatibility mechanism as it would be quite ridiculous for people to know the native language of many communities. Therefore, it can be said that inter-translatibility is certainly an option of sensing or realizing the culture of other communities. However, knowing the culture of other communities by knowing the language of these communities is certainly a better option.

Is culture language specific?

A relevant question may crop up in our mind: Is culture language specific? If native language of a community is supposed to be the best possible means of knowing the culture of this community, then does it not mean to say that culture is language specific? There is no question of debate that language is the bedrock of culture and one language cannot be better than another. In this sense we are *linguistically nonaligned*. At the same time it may perhaps be the case that there may have some ethos, may be religious ethos, for which specific language may be required. For example, the originality of a particular person or a particular community or a particular region actually lies in its language. The culture of a particular person is therefore manifested through his native language. Language helps one to know the culture of a community through which the values lies in such culture can be revealed.

Concluding Remarks

On the basis of the above observation I can draw the following observation as far as the relationship between language culture and reality is concerned. I do believe that language and culture play an all important role in shaping individual and collective behaviour and values. Language reflects culture and, in turn, culture equally reflects language. They are two sides of the same coin. The identification of a community is the identification of its culture. Here the sanctity of the ownership issue comes first. Language, to some extent, is cultural specific. Therefore, knowing the culture of one community by other community largely depends on how far one community knows the language of other community.

I also think that Universal language and inter-translatibility are definitely two important avenues through which one can come across the culture of other community, but these means are *ad-hoc* and contingent. Following Quine, we can say that there remains indeterminacy in translation manuals. Excessive reliance on universal language eventually opens up the possibility of devaluation of cultural diversity. Metaphorically, it can be said that universal language is just like *first-food or continental food* in which cultural diversity of the traditional homely food (native language) is mostly absent. First-food or continental food is a kind of food which is suitable for all communities, but it definitely misses the cultural diversity of the traditional food of different communities. The difference between universal and native language of a particular community is just like this.

Any successful communication between two language communities, I do believe, requires some appropriate common measure between the languages used; otherwise communication between the communities would break down. In fact, the cross-language communication breakdown is the essential sense of Khan's notion of incommensurability. However, I do believe that even though language is predominantly culture-specific, but translation manuals and the concept of universal language help immensely to make successful cross-cultural communication. In this regard, one must assume conceptualism as a background of making cross-cultural communication successful. Moreover, one can take a lesson either from the unified core of conceptual scheme of P.F.Strawson or from absolute conceptual relativism of Quine. Mere form of translation does not bear any sense

of making communication successful, but conceptualism of any form will play the vital role in making cross-cultural communication successful.

Language so to speak is creative in nature. For example Heidegger says that language makes man possible. Language opens up the avenues of man's becoming. Language mirrors the world before us. In this sense language has immense capacity and diversity. Every natural language must be an extremely rich system. However, a speaker perhaps will not be aware of some degree of circumlocution in the absence of familiarity with another language. In fact every natural language not only provides its speakers with a language for talking about every other language, but also provides them with an entirely adequate system for making any kinds of observations that they need to make about the world. People use language in daily living to refer to various kinds of kin. In fact there we find a considerable literature on kinship terminology in our natural language. Kinship system is a universal system of languages, because kinship is so important in social organization. However, as social conditions change, we can expect kinship systems to change to reflect the new conditions. What we can say here is that as the social structures evolve, the use of language also evolves in the course of time and in this process there will emerge some difficulties which are very much relative in nature.

I think that the phenomena of language and culture are inherently related as both phenomena are unique to humans. Language, of course, is determined by culture and in turn culture is determined by language. Even early anthropologists believed that language and its structure were entirely dependent on the cultural context in which they existed. This view is presently known as *standard social science model* which states that human mind as an infinitely malleable structure capable of absorbing any sort of culture without constraints. According to the memetic theorist Susan Blackmore, language developed as a result of memetic evolution. The definition of a culture in memetic theory is an aggregate of many different meme sets shared by the majority of a population. In this regard, it can be said that language itself created by memes and language and culture are united by memes. Thus, we can conclude by saying that language is not just the medium of culture; language, so to speak, is also a part of culture.

Notes and References

- 1 Goddenbough, W.H. 'Cultural Anthology and Linguistics' in P.L.Garvin (ed.) *Report of the Seventh Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Study*, Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1957, p.167.
- 2 Sapir, Edward. *Language*, 'The status of Linguistics as a Science', *Language*, 5. 1929b, p.207.
- 3 Carrol, J.B. (ed.): *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956, p.212.
- 4 Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Blackwell Publishers, 2005, p.218.