

The Intrinsic Relationship between Language and Culture in Mizoram, India

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Abstract

This paper presents a detailed analysis of the linkage or relationship between language and culture in the light of the Mizo language of the Mizo community in Mizoram, India. The main purpose of this paper is to explain in detail the intrinsic relation between culture and language and to show that they are indeed related to each other citing instances from the Mizo language as proof. The relation between the two terms has been a subject of debate among linguists, some agree to the relation and some doubt the intensity of the presumed relation. This paper stands in favour of the theory that language and culture are closely related. Using different examples and instances drawn from Mizo, an attempt has been made in this paper to prove that culture does indeed influence language. Different terms and idioms have been analyzed, which show that certain terms lose their essence when they are translated. The paper has drawn a conclusion that the complications faced in translation are due to the fact that certain terms are too heavily influenced by culture that they cannot be isolated without the cultural connotations they possess.

Keywords: Mizoram, Mizo, language, culture, relation, intrinsic, translation

1. Introduction

To apprehend the relation between language and culture, one has to conceive the meanings of language and that of culture. Many definitions have been made or put forward for language, one of them being "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (Sapir, 1921). Culture, on the other hand, refers to the behaviours, beliefs and characteristics of a social or ethnic group. These two phenomena are presumed to be intimately related and have been a subject of debate and have been a subject to a large number of anthropological and sociological studies and research. Language has been presumed to be determined by culture to some extent, though the extent to which this is true has now become a topic of debate among anthropologists.

Earlier, language was believed to be entirely dependent on the cultural context in which

they existed. This was a follow-up of the theory that words determine thought. This was a logical extension of the *Standard Social Science Model*, which views the human mind as an indefinite malleable structure which is capable of absorbing any sort of culture without any constraints from genetic or neurological factors (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Hence, culture has been often described as a socially acquired knowledge. Culture further influences language to some extent, as is shown from one of the design features of language known as *cultural transmission*. Cultural transmission is mainly the process by which a language is passed on from one generation to the next. This theory stands in agreement to the belief that culture determines language. According to Wardhaugh, there are several possible relationships between language and society. One of which is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior (Wardhaugh, 1986, 2010).

However, it is not right to just say that culture determines language or culture is related to language without any empirical basis or evidence. Therefore, with accordance to different hypothesis drawn from different studies, the relation between language and culture will be further explained in detail in the upcoming chapters, along with examples to clarify it.

Literature Reviews

- The process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next is described as cultural transmission. It is clear that humans are born with some kind of predisposition to acquire language in a general sense. However, we are not born with the ability to produce utterances in a specific language such as English. We acquire our first language as children in a culture. (Yule, 1985)
- Different languages will create different limitations, therefore a people who share a culture but speak different languages, will have different world views. (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997)
- Wardhaugh (1986) claims that the issue of language and culture can be illustrated in the backdrop of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1921).
- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1921) described two terms called linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism. Linguistic determinism claims that it is the language which determines our thought process. Linguistic relativism, which is considered as the weaker version of the hypothesis, claims that linguistic categories and usage influence thought and certain kinds of non-linguistic behaviour.
- Wardhaugh (2010) states that the definitions of language and culture are not independent, in fact, the definition of language includes in it a reference to society.
- Risager (2006) says that the investigation of the interface between language and culture is necessary for both the theoretical understanding of language and linguistic practice as a part of larger wholes and for the development of a variety of areas where language plays a central role. She claims that the increased focus on the relationship of language not only

to the societal or structural context, but also to the cultural meaning- conveying text is a promising sign.

- Sapir (1921, 1961) indicates that language, as a social behaviour, can be seen as a way to describe and represent human experience and understand the world, that is, as a way to reflect the underlying cultural patterns.
- Sohn (2006) denotes that the intimate connection between culture and language derives from the fact that language is the primary vehicle for expressing cultural perspectives as well as products and for participating in social practices and interactions and that all aspects of culture, including all walks of life, are inextricably woven into the language of those who live in the culture.
- Yule (1985) states that the particular language we learn through the process of cultural transmission provides us with a ready-made system of categorizing the world around us and our experience of it.

3. Analysis - Evidence from Mizo

As already mentioned, the phenomenon of language and culture are intimately related in abounding ways. In fact, it has been postulated that culture determines language and vice versa. However, the instances of how language is determined by culture can be seen from language to language. Even though this may be true at some point, one cannot just go ahead and say that culture determines and influences language without any form of proof or evidence. So, in order to justify the belief that culture determines language, a few examples have been taken from Mizo, the lingua franca of the Mizo community of Mizoram, India, as evidence.

3.1. Idioms and Proverbs

Idioms are predominantly used in a culture with references from within the culture. In the Mizo culture, there are some idioms and phrases that have significant meaning within the culture itself, but if translated, makes absolutely no sense at all. For an example, one could take the idiom '*Behliangmunhun*'. 'Behliang' is a type of green vegetable which is found in the hills of Mizoram. The word 'mun' denotes a traditional method of cooking procedure and 'hun' means time. The idiom designates a certain time in the afternoon when people usually prepare the vegetable, i.e., Behliang. Thus, if one were to translate this idiom into English, then it would be translated as 'Time to cook Behliang' which will make no sense for a person who is not familiar to the different cooking practices in that culture.

Proverbs are another important part of a culture. It may be safe to presume that almost every cultural group of the world has a proverb of their own. The Mizo community is no exception. Unfortunately, the case of translated proverbs is the same as that of translated idioms, i.e., they lose all of their significance. An example can be taken from the Mizo proverb '*Tawngkamtha in sial a man*'. This proverb means that if one uses words to please others, then he often ends up being

rewarded. In the Mizo form, the proverb uses the word 'sial' in particular, which refers to a domesticated gayal. 'Sial' is specifically used because in the olden days, the most valuable form of wealth was this animal. 'Tawngkamtha' here refers to words of appraisal. But when one translates the proverb, then the essence or the significance of the 'sial' is lost, because the animal may not possess the same degree of importance to a person outside the community.

Another example can be drawn from the proverb '*Kawi pawh a kawm a that chuan a rah pawh a tha*'. 'Kawi' here is a tree which is found in Mizoram which produces a long hard shelled kernel. Inside the shell is the seed which is referred to as 'kawi'. What the proverb here is trying to denote is that parents play an important part in moulding the behaviour of the child. But if one translates it as it is, it will turn into 'If the shell of the kawi is good then the fruit/bud is good'. The principle of the proverb is unarguably lost if translated literally. However, if one was to translate it in such a way that it makes sense, then the essence of the 'kawi' is absolutely lost. Therefore, from the above examples, we can say that cultural ethics such as proverbs and idioms are a perfect example of the axiom of the relation between culture and language.

3.2. Festivals

Festivals are usually staged by a cultural group to celebrate something that are unique to their own culture. In Mizoram, there are some festivals that are solely unique to the Mizo culture, namely the *MimKut*, the *Pawl Kut* and the *Chapchar Kut*. In the local Mizo parlance, 'kut' simply means 'festival'. The *MimKut* is usually celebrated during the months of August and September after the annual harvest of maize, thus carrying the name 'Mim' which means 'maize'. In the case of it being translated, if the language to which it is translated into has a word equivalent to maize or mim, then it becomes comprehensible that it is a festival associated with maize. However, the case is different with *ChapcharKut*. *ChapcharKut* is celebrated in March, after the bamboos and trees are cut down to be dried for agricultural practices. But if one were to translate the word 'Chapchar' into another language, for instance, English, then it would simply mean 'dry wood'. It loses all of the essence of the festival and the story which lies behind the word 'Chapchar'. While a Mizoram habitat and a Mizo speaker will immediately internalize the depth of the word 'Chapchar', for a person who neither speaks Mizo nor is exposed to the Mizo culture, the significance of the festival would not be understood unless the whole process of the festival is explained in detail to him. Thus, this shows that there are some words determined by the culture and are unique to the culture itself, which therefore exculpates the conjecture that culture determines language to some extent.

3.3 Language- Colour Terms

Colours are a universal entity or something that can be perceived by any individual from any cultural group across the globe. However, the names that we assign the colours may be different, and moreover, a speech community may have or not have a word for a colour according

to the abundance of the colour or the exposure to it. In the Mizo language, there are some colours which do not have a word akin to it or an analogous translation for it. For example, there is no word in Mizo that corresponds to the colour 'golden'. As a result, if one wants to refer to the colour golden, it is usually conveyed as '*rangkachakrawng*' which means 'gold colour', referring to the element gold. The other colours which have no corresponding elucidation in Mizo are purple, grey, and silver. For purple, the closest equivalent is '*pawlduk*', but the word '*pawlduk*' actually means dark blue. For denoting grey, the term '*chhawhchhibuhpawlhrawng*' is often used. '*Chhawhchhi*' is the Mizo word for black sesame and is used for depicting the colour grey. As for silver, there is no analogous translation for either the colour silver or the element silver, as the element was quite foreign to the culture before it was imported from other places. This is yet another exculpation of the hypothesis of the determination of language by culture.

3.4 Traditional Attire

Traditional/ ethnic attires are yet another evidence which solidify the intimate relation between culture and language. The Mizo culture has a number of traditional attires which belong to the different tribes within the community. The traditional attire of the Mizo culture is known as '*puanchei*'. In the literal translation, '*puan*' simply means 'cloth' and '*chei*' means 'decorate'. Yet, if one simply refers to the '*puanchei*' as 'decorated cloth' as the name implies, the beauty and the value of the dress which is embedded in the simple word, is drained of all its essence and worth. As a matter of fact, if one cites it as 'decorated cloth', this would be an insult to the Mizo community. As a result, because of the hidden depth of the simple word '*puanchei*', the translation of the word is complicated and impossible to translate it into a word which covers the same intricacies the word '*puanchei*' carries, in any other language. Another example can be taken from the '*thangchhuah*' attire. In the olden days, the men who could hunt down huge numbers of animals were considered brave and would be rewarded by the village kings when they hunt a specific number of wild animals. This act was called '*thangchhuah*' by the Mizo forefathers. Those who could achieve this '*thangchhuah*' were thrown huge celebrations and were awarded a special attire by the king or village chiefs. Thus, a person who was worthy of this attire immediately entails great courage and achievement. This particular word '*thangchhuah*', is a word embedded with history exclusive to the Mizo culture and if one wants to translate it into another language, there is a very slim chance of him translating it in a simple word without losing all of its vein. Not only in the Mizo culture, the names of the traditional attires of a cultural group stand as an example that culture plays a significant role in determining or influencing the language of that culture.

3.4. Constraints or Restrictions Laid Down by Culture on Language

Our culture sometimes restricts what we can think efficiently about in our own language. According to Mizo, there are some entities which do not have a word for it in Mizo. In such instances, borrowed terms are employed, and are therefore referred to by their names in other languages, mostly English. For example, there is no word for 'fan' in Mizo. If one wants to talk

about a fan, then he simply calls it a fan. There is no word equivalent to 'computer' as well. It is at times referred to as '*khawl*', which simply means 'machine'. However, the word '*khawl*' is more likely used for 'sewing machine'. Another such examples where English words are borrowed are pen, pencil, telephone, earphone, shampoo, bulb, surf, doormat, cushion, television, refrigerator, etc. Moreover, the names of professions such as Engineer, Scientist, Manager, Director and Architect do not have words to correspond to it in Mizo. The reason behind this is that all these things have prefaced in the Mizo culture after westernization, long after the scripts for the language were developed. Since all the aforementioned examples are concepts that have evolved from outside the Mizo culture and mostly in the modern era, the forefathers who developed the Mizo language, had not been aware of their existence during the time they developed the language. Therefore, this shows that culture determines our thoughts or the way we perceive our external reality to a large extent which in turn determines language.

4. Findings

A few notable findings can be seen from the analysis of the Mizo language in the backdrop of the intimate connection between language and culture.

1. Firstly, after going through the analysis, it can be found that the society or culture possesses restrictions or control on the thought process of a person belonging to that specific culture, as it was for the Mizo culture.
2. Secondly, it can be observed that folklore and the names of traditional facets of a culture which are unique to that particular culture, prove that some words are exclusive to the culture to which they are based upon.
3. Thirdly, the fact that there are some exclusive words which, when required translating into other languages, are unique to the culture they belong, making it difficult to isolate the language from the culture, further implicates that culture influences the language to a great extent.
4. Finally, the notion that certain concepts and ideas imported from other cultures require borrowed terms stands as proof that certain aspects of language, like nomenclatures, are largely influenced by culture.

5. Conclusion

From the different theories put forwarded regarding the intrinsic relation between language and culture, from the myriad examples denoted through the analysis of the Mizo language in the background of language and culture, and from the evaluations taken from the research findings, it can be herewith concluded that language and culture are two concepts which are dependent upon each other, and cannot be isolated. They may each possess a certain degree of independence, but

it is undeniable that in defining both the terms, a reference is made to one term and the other. The evidence collected from Mizo language stands as a proof that though language may not be entirely determined by culture, culture does have an influence on language and often draws a line on what we can think about effectively in our language. This paper thus draws a conclusion to the fact that language and culture are indeed intimately related to each other.

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