

Reasons Language is Important to Any Culture

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Can you translate the word “ilunga”? Probably not, unless you live in the Republic of Congo and speak fluent Tshiluba. Untranslatable words are one of many proofs why language and culture are intertwined. If you want to learn some more and find out why language is important to culture, read this.

- Language is an important part of our lives. It is a uniquely human gift which lets us communicate and differentiates us from primates. But language is much more than just a means of communication. It is also an inseparable part of our culture.

Why is language important to culture?

While there is still some debate whether the particular language influences people’s thought process or it is indeed people’s culture that influences the language, there is no doubt that language and culture are closely connected.

Noam Chomsky, one of the most well known linguists in the world, argues that all languages are dialects of one language, which is the human language. He says that even though they appear very different, they are in fact very similar. Nevertheless, different cultures have a predominant fashion in which they use their language and they have differences which cannot be underestimated.

- **Direct and Indirect Styles**

Cultures such as the United States or Western Europe value self-expression and verbal precision. We are encouraged to be direct and to speak our mind. On the other hand Asian cultures use an indirect style of communication. Words such as “perhaps” and “maybe” are used much more frequently than “yes”, “no” or “for sure”. In Japanese culture precise articulation is appreciated much less than speaking between the lines or being understood without words; therefore the language is used quite differently.

- **Personal and Contextual Styles**

The United States, which is an individualistic culture, uses a personal style of communication. Two of the most frequently used words in our culture are “I” and “you”. Linguists point out that it is impossible for Americans to hold a conversation without using these pronouns. Compared to other cultures, American culture is not very formal, so it is appropriate to say “you” to your boss, to the President, to a stranger, to your spouse or to your child. In Thai language there are twelve forms of the pronoun “you”, which depend of factors such as status or level of intimacy.

Contextual style of communication is used in collectivistic cultures (such as Asian.) The style of language is focused on speaker and depends on someone’s status and identity.

If you wanted to learn Japanese, it would be impossible to do so without learning about their culture. Japanese pay a lot of attention to someone’s status and they use linguistic forms called honorifics, which are used according to the rank of the person who is speaking and who he or she is speaking to.

- **Untranslatable Words**

Another way to show why language is important to culture is to look at the vocabulary that a particular culture is using. Many people don’t realize that there are plenty of words that cannot be translated from one language to another simply because they don’t exist in another language.

The word "shopping", which describes one of the most favorite activities of Americans, doesn't exist in some other languages (such as for example in Russian) as a noun. Why? Because it is not a huge part of the other cultures. The same goes for the word "fast food", which is not only not popular, but unacceptable in many other cultures.

Another interesting example is the word "ilunga". It comes from the Tshiluba language of the Republic of Congo and is considered to be the most untranslatable word in the world. Ilunga describes a person who is ready to forgive any transgression a first and a second time, but never for a third time.

- **Language Is Changing Along with the Culture**

When the culture changes, so does the language. Many of you probably remember that the words he and his were used generically in English language. Since the United States and most of the English-speaking Western Europe are becoming less and less male-dominant cultures, the grammar rules have been changed and new gender agreement rules were created.

Fifty years ago nobody was suspecting that one day in the United States the words "mother" and "father" would become controversial and that some schools would agree to change them both to "parent".

I hope this article helped you understand why language is important to culture and hopefully encouraged you to cherish the language you speak even more.

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