

January 19, 2010

### Language as a Doorway into the Eyes of Another

Language adds emphasis to everyday events. It changes the perception of reality, but does not actually change what exists. Language may very well be one of the most defining aspects to a culture, after all, many if not all people of a particular speak it. This is, therefore, a unifying characteristic of the culture. In some tribes, like the Inuit, Aivilik and Igloodik, they have many different names for snow compared to Standard English. In contrast, other cultures have different names for the colors of the rainbow, and sometimes less names, compared to the western idea of a rainbow. Also, a study done in Hungary examined the difference between bilingual schools and the perspective of students based upon learning material in two languages. Both of these concepts examine the idea that language can act as a doorway to understanding the world from the perspective of another person or group of people. If someone was to determine the main differences in languages across a variety of cultures, then perhaps, someone could see the world through the eyes of that culture.

The idea of having more or less words to describe something, does not prevent that something from existing; however, it does add an emphasis, or lack of one, for the culture. The first example of this is the idea of having a variety of words for snow. Two the typical American, snow is snow. This is probably because we do not come in contact with snow nearly as much as someone from a northern tribe. That culture may have a specific name for snow falling on water, called "Akitla," or watery snow, called

“Mangokpok” (Chinaroad). From this general idea, it is possible to infer that snow is a more important part of the world for the northern tribes as opposed to the typical American. Someone emerged in the culture in either of these environments would see the world from a different viewpoint; however, that does not limit the possibility that they would not be able to understand the viewpoint of the other culture.

A second example of this is the idea that the rainbow has seven colors as a typical westerner would describe it. This, however, is not true all around the world. Many other cultures may have less, and others may have more depending on the level of importance that culture emphasizes on a rainbow. Noticing this is the first step into seeing the world through another culture’s eyes. After all, even the western opinion of what a rainbow is does not truly define the infinite spectrum of color. By noticing that others may have a different perspective and having an open-mind about that culture allows the possibility, of seeing the world from another’s viewpoint, to exist.

This is proven when some students were sent to a traditional Hungarian school and another group of students were sent to a bilingual school. This Hungarian study helps to show that a different overall experience is had by seeing the world from two different standpoints opposed to one. The bilingual group of students could see the world from two different perspectives as one unique perspective, whereas the traditional group was only able to see it from one perspective. The Hungarian group saw the world from the traditional group’s viewpoint, but also saw it from a more western approach (Duff). Even though it is possible that the traditional group would not be able to see the world from the standpoint of the bilingual group, it does not guarantee that the bilingual group lacks the ability to see the world from the traditional group’s stance. It is likely that it will be

extremely difficult for the bilingual group to completely understand the world from the traditional group, but the possibility is still there.

It is now determined that language is one doorway that allows the possibility to see the world through the eyes of another. Since it is also agreed that language is but one of many facets to culture, it is also very arguable that those other facets would, too, be able to have the same door opening effect. If it is possible to understand a culture's language clearly, would it not also be possible to see the cultures totems, rituals, etc. clearly? Understanding these would help further the understanding of a culture, and would allow anyone to view the world from their point of view and through their eyes.

It is possible to see the world from another person's eyes, as difficult as it may be. Replicating all of the experiences and important events of a specific culture and communicating them would be one of the most difficult tasks an anthropologist attempts, yet it can be achieved. This is why the field work of anthropology can become so time extensive. In order to truly understand all of the significant events of a culture, one must completely immerse themselves within the target culture. A side-effect is that the Anthropologist might lose touch with their first culture in the process.

An overall result is the Anthropologist forming a new identity in the process; however, that new identity is able to view the world from multiple perspectives and through multiple sets of eyes. This is a view of the world that the old one could not possible have dreamed of achieving.

Seeing the world from another person's eyes is a very real possibility. It is also, very difficult and time extensive, and that is why the goal is not achieved very often, if ever. Just because it is difficult, does not give enough support that it does not exist. Just

because Americans do not have a name for every type of snow, does not mean it does not exist. Even though westerners define the rainbow as seven different colors does not change the reality that it is an infinite spectrum. Although something is difficult and extremely challenging to accomplish, does not mean it does not exist.

## References

Chinaroad. "Snow Names and Words." All About Dogs. 2008. Chinaroad Löwchen,  
Web. 17 Jan 2010. <<http://www.lowchensaustralia.com/names/snow.htm>>.

Duff, Patricia. An Ethnography of Communication in Immersion Classrooms in Hungary.  
TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 3, Qualitative Research in ESOL (Autumn, 1995),  
pp. 505-537