

**Research Article**

## LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND CULTURAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

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### ABSTRACT

In a cross-cultural comparison of cultural conceptualization in English and Persian, the researcher selected proverbs and idioms to examine various metaphors to see certain degree of conceptual differentiation interpreted differently in the two languages, and also the meanings and applications of them in each language. Findings will make it clear that some concepts are entirely different so that no link can be found between conceptual image in Persian and the corresponding conceptual image in English. In addition, it will reveal that concepts in two languages may make cultural or communicational misunderstandings. Good examples are mentioned to show clear cases of how variable the relation between metaphor and cultural models can be. It was concluded that the differences between concepts in two languages was due to difference in users' cultural and personal experience.

**Keywords:** Language, Culture, Cultural Conceptualization, Idioms, Proverbs

### INTRODUCTION

Language is a tool shared among human beings, and regarded as one way of communication. It is a specific feature that distinguishes us from other creatures on earth. We express our interests, likes, dislikes, thoughts as well as ideas through language. However, people speak differently throughout the world, but this unique commonality among all languages brings us together. Language also fulfills many other tasks such as greeting people, conducting religious service, etc.

Krech (1962) explained the major functions of language from the following three aspects:

- 1) Language is the primary vehicle of communication;
- 2) Language reflects both the personality of the individual and the culture of his history. In turn, it helps shape both personality and culture;
- 3) Language makes possible the growth and transmission of culture, the continuity of societies, and the effective functioning and control of social group.

It is obvious that language plays a paramount role in developing, elaborating and transmitting culture and language, enabling us to store meanings and experience to facilitate communication. The function of language is so important in communication that it is even exaggerated by some scholars. The most famous one is the hypothesis of linguistic determinism concerning the relationship between language and culture, which Nida regards as misconceptions constituting serious difficulties for cross-cultural understanding. So language is a part communication base and a part cultural base. It is truly wrong to draw a border line between language and culture and separate them exclusively. Knowing Language regardless of understanding the culture of those who speak that language leads to misunderstanding and misconception. Brown (1994) 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.' In a word, culture and language are inseparable. Many linguists explore the relationship between language and culture in specific Nida (1998) holds the view that 'Language and culture are two language items symbolic systems. Everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language.' People of different cultures can refer to different things while using the same language forms. For example, when one says lunch, an Englishman may be referring to hamburger or pizza, but a Chinese man will most probably be referring to steamed bread or rice.

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The language we speak shapes our thoughts, so the meaning associates with a language vary across languages. It is obviously illogical to expect two groups who speak different languages to have similar ideas over one concept. From birth, the child's life, opinions, and language are shaped by what it comes in contact with. Brooks (1968) argues that physically and mentally everyone is the same, while the interactions between persons or groups vary widely from place to place. Patterns which emerge from these group behaviors and interactions will be approved of, or disapproved of. Behaviors which are acceptable will vary from location to location (Brooks, 1968) thus forming the basis of different cultures. It is from these differences that one's view of the world is formed.

A group of people speak the same language and share the same culture and live in the same geographical location, may have a common concept and notion toward the meaning of words, because the degree of interaction among them, and the language they speak, undoubtedly has influenced the meaning of words. However, within a group of people with the same language and culture, some degrees of difference in terms of concept and notion exist. Because individuals view the world differently, so the concept and notion relating to the meaning of a word maybe varied from individual to individual. Two intrinsic aspects of cultural cognition are cultural conceptualizations and language. Cultural conceptualizations are the ways in which people across different cultural groups construe various aspects of the world and their experiences (Sharifian, 2003). These include people's view of the world, thoughts, and feelings. For example, different cultural groups may conceptualize the origin of the world and their relationships to each other and to nature quite differently. Also, research in cognitive linguistics has shown how the ways in which people "think about" their thinking and their emotional experiences may differ from one cultural and linguistic group to another (e.g., Palmer *et al.*, 2003); Enfield and Wierzbicka (2002).

Language is a key component of culture. It is the primary medium for transmitting much of culture. Without language, culture would not be possible. Children learning their native language are learning their own culture; learning a second language also involves learning a second culture to varying degrees. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. It reflects culture. Cultural differences are the most serious areas causing misunderstanding, unpleasantness and even conflict in cross-cultural communication. the meaning attributed to language is cultural-specific. A great deal of cross-cultural misunderstanding occurs when the "meanings" of words in two languages are assumed to be the same, but actually reflect different cultural patterns.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Misunderstanding can result from both cultural and language differences as well as inadequate sociolinguistic knowledge .Extensive comprehension difficulties will surely lead to a source of frustration and disappointment. The lack of awareness of cultural differences and concepts associated with words using in conversation serve the potential seriousness to misunderstanding. Understanding the culture and concepts using in a language reduce the barriers of effective communication. Linguistic, culture, social, political, religion, racial, gender and geographical factors, all impact on communication and are potential source of communication breakdown.

Being able to operate in a multi cultural environment it is important to know and be aware of the cultural differences and peculiarities. Communications differences can cause misunderstanding, enhance a conflict or even cause a conflict. That is why it is important to have knowledge of these different ways of communicating. As an intercultural communicator you should be able to apply this knowledge to enhance communication across different cultures and different communication. Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking--ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. Thus the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the "same" language. When the languages are different, and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstandings increases.

Empirical investigation of cultural concepts can contribute to our understanding of the relationships between languages and cultural conceptualizations of experience between two groups of different speakers. It can also, provide insights that will reduce the potential areas for misunderstanding and miscommunication between speakers in various settings.

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### **Review of Related Literature**

#### *Language and Thought*

The empirical studies of "Whorfian effects" have largely been couched in terms of the extent to which language influences individual thinking (Levinson, 1996; Lucy, 1992b; Pederson *et al.*, 1998). In other words, the (at least implicit) reference to culture in views ranging from Humboldt, through Boas, to Sapir and Whorf, which refer to language and "world view", has been downplayed in the narrowing of the problem-field to one of individual psycholinguistic functioning.

For Boas, "the purely linguistic inquiry is part and parcel of a thorough investigation of the psychology of the peoples of the world" (Boas, 1966 [1911], cited in Palmer, 1996); and this inquiry was explicitly directed to the exploration of both differences and universals. It is likely that Boas was influenced in this conception by the ideas of Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt, though usually remembered as one of the "founding fathers" of laboratory experimental psychology, accorded equal importance (and devoted most of his prolific writing) to what he called "Völker psychology", the psychology of the peoples of the world, or (cross-) cultural psychology. In other words, the originating matrix for what later came to be called the "linguistic relativity hypothesis" was one in which anthropology, linguistics and psychology were distinct, but related, moments of an integrated inquiry into the mutual relations of culture, language and thought. Linguistics and anthropology later achieved a partial rapprochement in the componential-analytic style of early, "first-generation" cognitive anthropology (or ethno semantics), which borrowed the "etic-emic" distinction directly from linguistics, and which was predicated upon the hypothesis that cultural difference was to be captured in terms of the taxonomic categorizations of specific cognitive domains (kinship; color; natural kinds), which are shared by individual members of a given culture, but not necessarily by members of other cultures. This approach eventuated in the important and well-known demonstrations by Berlin, Kay and Rosch of the existence of universal cognitive foundations of categorization.

#### *Language and Culture*

The most comprehensive recent treatment of the language-world view relationship, specifying it in explicitly cognitive linguistic terms, is Palmer's (1996) path-breaking book on cultural linguistics (see also Palmer and Arin, 1999). Palmer defines his research program as follows: "Cultural linguistics is concerned with most of the same domains of language and culture that interest Bosnians, ethno semanticists and [ethnographers of speaking], but it assumes a perspective on those phenomena which is essentially cognitive." (p. 36): by which he means that it employs cognitive linguistic concepts and analyses, in conjunction with ethnographic-linguistic methods. Palmer's innovation consists not simply in the wealth of ethno linguistic data that he reviews and submits to cognitive analysis, but also in his proposal that "Linguistic meaning is subsumed within world view.

Linguistic meaning is encyclopedic in the sense that it involves the spreading activation of conceptual networks that are organized chains and hierarchies of cognitive models. Language both expresses and constitutes world view but could only fully determine it in a culture that lacked other means of expression and communication." (p. 291; our emphasis). Again, we shall emphasize below that "expression" or "embodiment" of cultural knowledge can also involve material culture.

Hirschfeld (1996; 1988; 1994) makes similar claims about social categories. He notes that there is good evidence that the development of racial and gender concepts is similar in many groups and may well be largely independent of any explicit teaching about either racial or gender differences. He asserts that "children are prepared to find that humans come in groups, that is, they have social identities" (1994, p. 222). Children's understanding of social categories is an essentialist one which assumes that, just as tigers has an essence that makes them tigers no matter how transformed, humans have racial and gender essences.

#### *Language and Cognition*

Some early anthropologists and psychologists held the view that different peoples indeed reason differently. Wilhelm Wundt, in proposing a cultural psychology to complement experimental psychology, certainly thought so when he wrote, "All phenomena with which the mental sciences deal are, indeed, creations of the social community" (1916, p. 2). The French sociologist Levy-Bruhl (1910) believed there

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was a characteristic “primitive” thought that did not understand the world in terms of causal sequences and tended to merge emotion and cognition. Levy-Bruhl did not regard primitive thought as inferior but merely as different – and not different in a fundamental pragmatic sense: “...in their everyday activity, when they are not being influenced (misled) by their collective representations, ‘they’ think the same as ‘we’ would, drawing the same conclusions from the same kinds of evidence” (Cole, 1996).

To summarize, after an initial period of mixed findings, growing new evidence supports the Sapir-Whorf contention that linguistic differences affect thought. Solid evidence has been found for the cognitive effect of linguistic differences in number marking (Lucy, 1992), the coding of spatial location (Levinson, 1996), and even color categorization (Roberson *et al.*, 2000). The work supporting linguistic relativity has profound implications for psychology, and more specifically, for the cultural mediation of thought.

A number of studies indicate that East Asians organize the world in rather different ways than do people of European culture. East Asians tend to group objects on the basis of similarities and relationships among the objects whereas Americans tend to group on the basis of categories and rules. In an early study by Chiu (1972), Chinese and American children were shown sets of pictures of three objects, for example, a man, a woman, and a child, and were asked to choose which of two objects were alike or went together. American children tended to choose the objects linked by category membership, and thus chose the man and the woman “because they are both grownups.” Chinese children tended to emphasize relationships and thus chose the woman and the child “because the mother takes care of the child. Ji and Nisbett (Ji, 2000; Ji and Nisbett, 2000) found that adults showed similar tendencies when asked about the association between words. Asked how strong the association was between words in a set, Chinese were more likely to find the association strong if there was a relationship between the words, either functional (e.g., pencil-notebook) or contextual (e.g., sky-sunshine) whereas Americans were more likely to find the association strong if the objects belonged to some category (e.g., notebook-magazine).

### ***Al-Hasnawi's Cognitive Model***

According to Kovecses (2005) and Al-Hasnawi (2007), in the study of metaphorical expressions a researcher should consider two aspects, namely, mapping conditions and lexical implementations. Al-Hasnawi (2007) distinguishes between three schematic models:

- (i) Metaphors of similar mapping conditions and similar lexicalizations;
- (ii) Metaphors of similar mapping conditions but different lexicalizations;
- (iii) Metaphors of different mapping conditions and different lexicalizations.

The first set includes the universal ones which are shared by human experiences in the SL and TL culture. The second set comprises those which are lexically different because of the cultural system in the languages concerned, but here the SL metaphor and TL metaphor belong to the same conceptual domain. The last one includes culture-bound metaphors whose mapping conditions and their lexical implementations are totally different.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### ***Methodology***

The present study is a qualitative study in that the research questions have been answered through comparing and Contrasting some selected proverbs and in English and Persian in order to collect a body of data to examine the cognitive knowledge structures in one’s cultural environment and also aims to explore cultural conceptualizations across two languages and cultures and in order to detect whether speakers of different languages view the concepts differently?

The following English dictionaries were examined: Idiom Dictionary (Laura, 2009), and McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (Spears, 2006). Persian dictionaries such as Farhang-eEstelahat-e-Aamiyaneh (Glossary of Colloquial Expressions: Najafi, 2010), Amsal-o-Hekam-e-Dehkhoda (Idioms and Proverbs: Dehkhoda, 1999) were also consulted to Consider culture-specificity.

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### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Findings**

Some experiences about things and environment around us are culture-specific. For instance, in the west kissing and hugging two different genders with no family relations as a greeting is customary while in Persian culture it's against the religion, law and culture to have a such relation except with certain family members and relatives. Being in line with the stated descriptions, in unrelated cultures (English and Persian) where Cultures, cognitive knowledge, life conditions and models of representation are different.

To mention the beauty of a person English speakers use “as like as a rose or rose bud”. In English culture rose represents beauty in its speakers mind. The idiomatic counterparts in Persian cultures is represented by “full moon” (mesle mahe shabe chahardah), where moon is completed in the half of lunar months which reflects brighter lights in Persian speakers mind. Feather of peacocks is also used to state the beauty (mesle pare tavouse). The colorfulness along with the eye catching forms of peacocks feathers imply the concept of beauty. As it is stated, each culture chooses a source domain different from the other one to conceptualize the same concept.

People's daily experience can be a source for the formation of idiomatic concepts. Having different living environments, social customs, religious beliefs and historical allusions, English and Persian idiomatic expressions are loaded with the same meanings in the two cultures, but each culture chooses a source domain different from the other one to conceptualize the same concept. There is a case in which Persian speakers use slow speed in the construction of idioms whereas English speakers use other domains to imply the same meaning. (Dari aroos mibari), (Are you carrying a bride groom)? According to wedding ceremony of Persian culture guiding a bride to the groom's house is full of customs. She is accompanied by a group of relatives and friends who drive their cars or walk slowly to arrive the newlyweds' house. However the English metaphoric expression is related to funeral ceremony. (Are you caring a dead body) to convey the same meaning.

The Persian metaphoric expressions and their English counterparts are related to the domain of various concepts, the ethical system in Persian led to differences in lexical choice. For example, Persian speakers use (Gedaye Samea), (the beggar of Smera) to express the ultimate poorness, poverty and destitution of a person whereas English speakers use (as poor as a church mouse) to convey the same meaning. This metaphoric expression is used to describe a poverty stricken person. Its metaphoric equivalence in English first appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Originally it was “hungry as a church mouse” because a mouse that was so unluckily to live in church would find no food there. Churches in the 1600s had no kitchens to cook meals and no pantries to store food. A smart mouse would take up residence in the cellar of a house, restaurant or grocery store. As years went by, ‘hungry’ was changed to ‘poor’ and the idiom became popular in many countries. ([www.dictionary.reference.com](http://www.dictionary.reference.com)). In Persian on the other hand (Gedaye Samera) is used to indicate such concept in reader's mind (Samera is a holly city among Muslims community in Iraq which is famous for the number of destitution people and beggars).

Languages abound in such proverbs. The concepts these proverbs may be expressed by a different word in another language and these two concepts may be equivalent culturally, though not lexically. In English to stop lavishing money is expressed by the proverb like “money doesn't grow on the trees”. Trees are used here to represent the concept of profuseness and abundance in English speakers' mind which their numbers are large, whereas in Persian the same concept is being represented by using the word “Alafe Khers”(Pol ke Alafe Khers nist), money is not a bear's grass. Here grass takes the role as tree does.

Put differently, some Persian concepts in general have lexical implementations which are distinct from their English counterparts but imply the same idea in both languages (Morghesh ye pa dare), (his chicken has only one leg) refers to a person who is so firm standing in against situations and doesn't shift his position whereas English speakers use (as stubborn as a mule) instead, which relates to similar mapping conditions but different lexical implementations. According to these two examples different perceptions of the world in two languages and cultures has led to the absence of total equivalent terms.

Different perception of the world also has led to the absence of equivalent terms and language differences in terms and lexical gaps. For example, (one swallow doesn't make a summer) emerges from the socio-

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cultural beliefs and attitudes of a specific culture. In English culture swallow conceptualizes summer in its speakers mind and it is the harbinger of warm weather, while its metaphoric equivalence in Persian is (ba yek gol bahar nemishe), one flower doesn't make spring. The emerge of flowers represents spring in Persian speakers mind, so it confirms Wierzbicka's claim (cited in Al-Hasnawi, 2007) that "it is through the vocabulary of human languages that we can discover and identify the culture specific conceptual characteristics of different people of the world."

### **Conclusion**

We should note that culture is not material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their model of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. Culture is the total life way of people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group (Wilson, 2009). Culture would be transferred through language (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997).

As Sapir-Whorf argues, different thoughts are brought about by the use of different forms of language. One is limited by the language used to express one's ideas. Different languages will create different limitations, therefore people who share a culture but speak different languages, will have different views of the world. Still, language is rooted in culture and culture is reflected and passed on by language from one generation to the next (Brislin, 1976). From this, one can see that learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture (Byram, 1989).

The relationship between culture and language is quite entwined, the latter being an important feature of the former, and each affects the other one. Metaphoric expressions are colorful language used to communicate one's thoughts and feelings, to give life and richness to language by taking the existing words, combining them in a new sense and creating new meanings, just like a work of art (Lenung, 2008). In a cross-cultural comparison of metaphors in English and Persian, selected proverbs are used to compare English and Persian speaker's cultural conceptualizations to see the certain degree of differences in the two languages and cultures. Findings made it clear that some images were entirely different in words but meaning links could be found between Persian and the corresponding images in English. The different concepts of idiomatic expressions and proverbs in two languages contributes to the speaker experiences, social beliefs, and cultural knowledge and attitudes, and he/she transforms them to linguistic manifestations. This manifestation is more culture-oriented rather than universal. The finding used Al-Hosnavie's Cognitive Model to represent degrees of cross cultural conceptualization across languages in proverbs. The results of the present study can help ELT policy makers, ELT experts, syllabus designers, curriculum developers, translators and language educators to show appropriate sensitivity to cultural aspects of foreign language teaching to provide a basis for communicating pragmatic meanings as they facilitate intercultural communication which may hinder successful communication.

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