

ON LINGUISTIC BORDERS AND CULTURAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

by

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“Human languages are systems through which we express the ways in which we conceptualise experiences of different kinds.”

—G.B. Palmer, *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics* (1996).

In simpler articulation, language is the tool we use to express how we conceive the world around us which includes experiences, events, emotions or even, the simplest of things, like giving directions or asking for the time. Since there is a general agreement that this is indeed one of the definitions of language, what remains to be considered is not the reason why there are so many different languages but what role this language diversity plays in determining how a person perceives the world around them; or, to put it in linguistic terms, whether the theory of linguistic relativity—the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—on the role of language shaping our cognition and worldview has any implications on how the different cultures interact with each other. In a nutshell: Is language learning enough? Is language learning enough when trying to build bridges of understanding or when trying to comprehend another culture or worldview?

As an illustration, here is an example from Australia:

Consider the sentence, “This land is me” which reflects the way in which an Aboriginal Australian speaker conceptualises, rather than describes “the land.” In the “traditional” Aboriginal worldview, human beings are often conceptualised as being part of the land, rather than possessing it. I refer to such culturally constructed ways of conceptualising experience as cultural conceptualisations [...] These conceptualisations emerge from the interaction between members of a cultural group and are constantly negotiated and renegotiated across time and space. (Sharifian, 90-116)

This example highlights the fact that not only have different cultural groups, over time, established particular sets of beliefs, norms, ideologies, customs, values, traditions in almost every aspect of their culture but that these are often expressed through language. In this way a group’s “reality” and worldview are constructed through and also reinforced by language.

Language, Cultural Divides, Greece and Refugees

The year 2015 was of monumental importance to the people of Greece. According to statistics from UNHCR in Greece, more than 800,000 refugees from countries of the Middle East—most of them coming from the civil bloodshed that is still tearing Syria apart—set foot in Greece in that one year, an astounding number compared to the almost 40,000 who came in 2014. Greece, which is a country torn by the economy crisis, unstable political situation and growing number of extreme political ideologies, has been called to the rescue—literally—as instances of people fighting to stay above water have made international news.

Yet, 2015 is now old year's news. We are in the opening days of 2017 and a large number of the refugees have been trapped in Greece for nearly a year having no place to go back to and having no other alternative for moving on. Therefore, Greece is called to the rescue again in the form of assimilation or social integration. It is understood to be critical to integrate refugees into the Greek society so as to avoid cultural segregation and whatever consequences that might entail. However, in this assimilation process lies a massive obstacle: how can a large number of people from other countries and from a range of different cultural groups, be incorporated into the "Greek" cultural group? The most obvious suggestion and the one understood to be possible to implement is to start with Greek language learning. This would appear to be a non-controversial proposal. But from my position it raises a specific concern: Is language learning enough? Can a focus on language learning alone accomplish the proposed task of cultural integration? Of bridging cultural divides?

Greece has begun the language learning experiment already with the idea that through teaching in the Greek language, refugee language learners will learn (and embrace?) the cultural schemas as conceived by speakers of Greek. Schools have been set up, students have enrolled and Greek classes have begun. But I am not so certain the goals will be met in this way.

Not only is language-learning a slow process (so impact and outcomes may not be evident for years) but it is also ineffective when performed on its own. Schooling can provide the basics: grammar and lexis. But, at this time few of them include a more holistic approach to language learning which would feature cultural elements as part of the teaching process as is well-known in the Greek educational reality. It would be rare to see a teacher teach the different expressions of emotions or something simpler, such as appropriate register with regard to age because traditionally, this is something taught by parents. And even if, in an ideal scenario, cultural elements are incorporated, how much of it will be/can be internalized? Think of your own experience as a language-learner; you may know a second language but have you adopted the particular cognitive view of that language? In the best-case scenario, some of us after years of interacting with the language and therefore, with the particular cultural group have re-shaped our cognitive systems at some level intentionally or not.

To experience this type of new or expanded cognition is profound, but a central factor in the process is learner motivation. We must consider whether the necessary motivation is available to refugees being made to stay in a country they likely had not chosen. To learn a language under the best of circumstances is hard; to learn and desire to learn in the midst of trauma and displacement is quite something else. And if in this reality, refugee-Greek residents are unable to learn the language or there may well remain a linguistic border interfering in the process of incorporating refugees into the Greek community.

So, Greece now comes face-to-face with this issue again; if it is difficult to motivate to learn the language, if the pace of language learning is slow and if it is unusual to have holistic teaching that links language and cultural competencies, then, what needs to be done beyond language classes and schools for refugees? What can be done to help assimilate the refugee population into Greek society? It would seem that language learning can pave the way but it is not adequate. Access to the types of

regular and ongoing interactions found in daily life in the economic and cultural and social sectors could help. Yet, employment opportunities are somewhat out of the question given that Greece is still under heavy economic bleeding. Volunteering and other forms of individual assistance might be possible, but this path is not clear and likely still not enough.

So what do we do? What is the solution to the present barrier to integration? Where does language learning fit in? It may well be the best place to begin. Societies and cultural groups are negotiated and renegotiated at a constant rate through space and time but this does not change the fact that linguistic borders are often difficult to penetrate. Misunderstandings and apprehension abound when people cannot speak to one another, cannot fully understand the world and words (through language) of the other. To avoid cultural mayhem and antagonism between disparate groups of people who are now living together in the wake of disaster, we would do well to start by begin to tearing down the linguistic border little by little. In due time, this can lead people to be more open to new cultural schemas and to engage in their adopted society in a more complete way. Even though language learning is not enough, it is a way, possibly a fundamental way, to keep us from moving into an era of disconnection and isolation. And perhaps, just perhaps, Greeks can learn the language and cultures of the refugees as well by building cultural connections through language.

Works Cited

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