

YOUR LANGUAGE YOUR CHARACTER

Mursid Saleh
Semarang State University

ABSTRACT

The main function of any language is to express ideas, thoughts, and feelings. These being characteristic properties of human beings, the language a human being uses will ultimately reflect what is characteristic of him or her. Good language reflects good characteristics of the user, and vice-versa. Learning being another characteristic property of human beings, the language one learns shapes and is shaped by his or her personal characteristics. As character is the accumulation of one's personal characteristics, there are good reasons to suggest that while one is learning and using a language, he take good care so that good character is reflected. In that way communication will be properly conducted and interpersonal relationships properly established.

Key Words: language, character, thought, feeling

INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that men in their association with one another need a means to communicate. Although theories differ in terms of when and how language was originally created, they agree on one point that as it is used today language symbolically represents fundamental dimensions of social behavior and human interaction (Wolfram, 1991). Through language people transfer information of all kinds including messages not intentionally meant to be delivered. Your sex, your age, and your social class, for instance, may be revealed through your use of grammar, pronunciation, or even your choice of words. As a method of expression language uses voices as basic elements of its construction. Voices constructed in different ways produce words with different meanings. Words combined into phrases

and phrases into sentences can be used to convey more purposeful meanings, ideas, and intentions. Furthermore, the words you choose, the grammar you use, and the style you adopt when speaking to other people may become clear indicators of your attitude, belief, and personal character. This paper aims at discussing the way language has become a powerful means and measure of social behavior.

LANGUAGE AND US

Imagine life without language! We meet someone in the street, exchange looks, smiles, or maybe sneers, but no words, no greetings, no callings, no talks, and no chats. You may want to laugh or cry if something amuses or hurts you. But you cannot expect anyone to help you or join you in the happiness because they do not know what has made you laugh or cry.

They may want to know, but how? They need a means to express this wish. They may use gestures to meet the need, and they may be successful to a smaller or greater extent. But chances are great for them to fail.

Here is, perhaps, where men begin to exploit their special might to produce combinations of voices to serve their various purposes. These combinations of voices, which are constructed in regular forms and patterns to represent varieties of meanings, constitute what is later called language. With this men can share ideas, feelings, and information with one another. Beginning with simple words like *I*, *you*, *laugh*, *cry*, *yes*, and *no*, the language has then developed into a more and more sophisticated means of expression capable of transmitting all kinds of thoughts as well as intentions.

Now you can tell your friend what you want, how you feel, and what you think is good or not good to do. Your friend can ask you what problem you have, and what you are going to do to solve the problem, or even suggest you a better solution. All of these can be done through the use of language. In fact, language has become so indispensable that it seems impossible for life without language.

So, what can language do for us, and what can we do to language? Sapir and Whorf (1956) hypothesized that language shapes the way you think, and the way you think shapes your language. The very

widely quoted words of Sapir, the teacher, which still maintain till this day are that

“... human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.”

This hypothesis implies that the way a person thinks, speaks, and understands others is very much determined by the language he shares with the other members of the community. This seemingly one-sided perception about the interrelation between men and language has then been expanded by Whorf, the former's student, in his more explicit statement that

“... the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not a merely reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock of trade.”

While Sapir seemed to be more interested in the power of language in affecting human's thought, Whorf perceived a somehow reciprocal relationship between the two properties of mankind, language and thought. Nevertheless, however guided we are by our language in perceiving the world, once we have

processed and organized our perceptions of the world, these perceptions will, in turn, determine the way we express our feelings, thoughts, and responses. In Whorf's words,

"... the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. ... We cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees".

Although it seems odd to think of a servant (the language) controlling the master (the man as user), that has been the case in real-life experiences. Men create all kinds of tools in order for them to be subsequently dictated by the creation.

LANGUAGE AND MANNERISM

Language being an agreed codification system of thoughts and meanings, it binds every one member of a community in using it as a means of communication. There are rules to follow, and norms to adhere if one wants to be accepted and properly understood by the other members of the community.

As language differs across communities so do rules and norms in using it. The general rule is, of course, that

one should learn what is accepted in the community, and practice it accordingly. Although there is no written document which can be referred to as regards with the agreement on what is accepted and what is not, these can be learned through direct communication.

Once a person has learned about what is accepted and what is not, it does not automatically follow that he would adopt the accepted and avoid the rejected. In reality, very often one refuses to do what is accepted in favor of what is generally rejected. This has something to do with mannerism, that is, the way of behaving to others characteristic of a particular person.

When you talk to other people, you are supposed to use the accepted language in terms of grammar, vocabulary, idioms, as well as usages. Otherwise you will be considered ill-adjusted, ill-mannered or misbehaving, if not abnormal. In other words, there is something wrong in your social behavior.

Indeed it is not easy to define acceptability as there is no precise instrument to measure it. If offense, for instance, is set up as criterion to distinguish acceptability from unacceptability, we often find that offensive words to some are amusing to others, and vice-versa. In the world of entertainment particularly, such instances are abundant. While acting on stage as a blind person, for instance, a joker may ask his girl-partner to let him rub her body to make sure she is beautiful. Such supposedly

entertaining words can become an intolerable insult to some minority group of people, namely the blind. The writer of this paper had a real-life experience of being offended when in a group chat a neighbor said, "Mr. X (this writer) is frightening when he is angry". Then another said, "I know, even when he's not angry". The other people felt amused, but the writer was absolutely not. A more serious problem may result if such uses of language involve moral or religious issues.

The absence of measuring instruments of language acceptability, (un)fortunately, does not stop the social rules or norms governing social interactions. Legal sanctions, which may be denied due to the absence of formal laws or regulations, are replaced with social sanctions in the form of reprimands, peer rejection or isolation.

Justifying the social sanctions is, to mention one, the assumption that it is obligatory for a member of a social group to comply with the group's codes of conduct. It means that as a group member you are not free to speak the way you like, or else another member will be displeased. Your first guide before you get the opportunity to learn the group's codes of conduct is, of course, your "conscience". It is your inner capacity to tell what is good from what is not (Piepmeyer, 2007), and that is another justification you can rely on.

But conscience, you may argue, is personal, and therefore subjective. Or you may even suggest that it is pretentious to believe in such an abstract idea and take it

as your life principle. Anyhow, conscience has been widely referred to as a one-for-all criterion you can turn to in the absence of conceptually measurable criteria. As can be quoted from the words of the world's great thinkers, conscience is like a spotlight which may bring into sight what is otherwise invisible. Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s pronouncement:

"There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right." (In Luker, 1993).

Conscience has also been perceived as an inaudible voice within one's heart capable of warning him, amidst the thundering storm of voices, that melody has not been created. In Carl Jung's words,

"Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune." (Jung, 1961).

So important is conscience that George Washington, the former President of USA said:

"Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience." (Washington, 1989).

SPEECH, LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND THOUGHT

From the above discussion it becomes clear that there is a systematic interrelationship among man's thoughts,

beliefs and values shared, system and ways of expression, and personal traits.

In a comprehensive discussion, Goodenough (1957), as quoted by Hudson (1980), stated that thought is the overall system encompassing culture, language, and speech as its subsystems. Here is how Goodenough perceived the interrelationship between thought, culture, language, and speech, leaving a question of what constitutes the fraction of language uncovered by culture. In answer to this, however, Goodenough referred to that notion of language acquired not by learning from others, and therefore is not shared with the other members of the community.

We may want to argue, of course, that Goodenough's explanation stands at odd with the long-standing definition of language as a means of communication. Whichever part of a language, once it has been used in actual communication, it becomes shared, and therefore cannot be excluded from culture.

In understanding Goodenough, however, we need to assume that when he is talking and making propositions about thought, culture, language, and speech, he is referring not only to the generic but also to the specific meaning of those terms. It means that the thought, culture, language, and speech are not just the ones shared to become common properties of the whole members of the society, but also the ones possessed by its individual members.

Holmes (2001) gives a vivid example of how someone's speech represents his thought, beliefs in culture, and language competence.

"You are an intolerable bore, Mr. Brown. Why don't you simply shut up and let someone speak who has more interesting ideas to contribute", said Lord Huntly in the well-educated and cultured accent of the over-privileged.

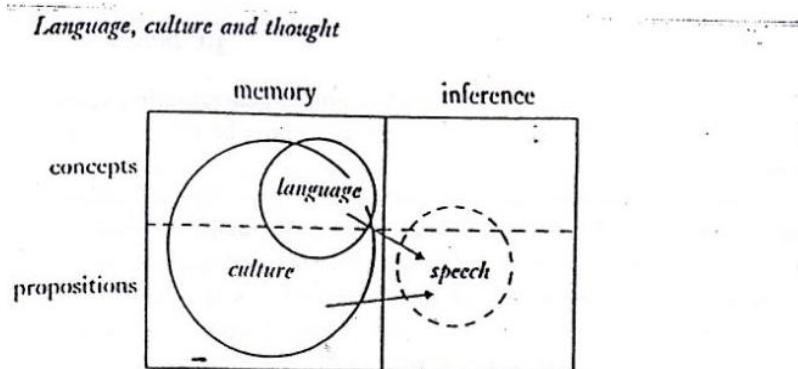


Figure 3.1. The relations between thought, culture, language and speech

Although this bit of speech is not meant to illustrate the way speech represents thought and culture, we cannot fail to see how it does so. First, the speech reflects Mr. Huntly's thought that no one should waste time in a formal meeting by putting forward useless ideas. Secondly, the use of rude words like "bore" and "shut up" shows the speaker's cultural belief that it is the right of over-privileged people to use such words when speaking to the under-privileged without guilty feeling. In this scene, Mr. Brown seems to be younger, less educated, coming from a lower social class, or of lower position in the organization. Thirdly, although accent cannot be detected from this written quote, it appears that Mr. Huntly is a well-educated and cultured man.

A fourth inference can be drawn from this small example that in addition to its ability to represent thought and beliefs in culture, language can also reflect one's "character", that is the combination of all those thoughts, knowledge, and beliefs that have been so internalized to become a driving power for him to behave in whatever way. In this instance, Mr. Huntly's character as someone who is not only easily offended but also who readily offends others is clear.

LANGUAGE AND CHARACTER

Character is another property of man, more substantial and more potential than conscience.

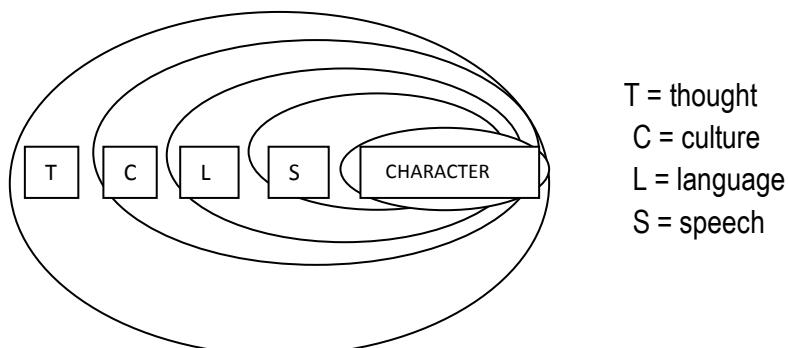
It is substantial in that it takes more concrete forms, and potential in that it has more direct effects on decision making. Yet, while conscience always inclines to the good end, character is capable of moving along a good-to-bad continuum.

Indeed as if driven by the positive way of thinking, most of the renown philosophers, in defining the word "character" always fall short delineating what is good to be expected of a person, not the possible opposite. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, for instance, as quoted by Lickona (1991), defined good character as the life of right conduct – right conduct in relation to other persons and in relation to oneself. In the same way Lickona himself conceived good character as knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good to become habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action.

How about the relationship between language and character? It seems remote or altogether nonexistent. But let us recall that character underlies behavior, and that behavior is mostly and necessarily communicated. Whereas most communication involves the use of language, and character involves thought as the internalized knowledge of culture, it is not difficult to see the important role of language as reflector of character. The language you use, good or bad, will reflect your "habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action".

Slightly modifying Goodenough's diagram of the relations between speech, language, culture, and thought, adding the

position of character into the interplay, we can draw the following new diagram:



Character being the internalized accumulation of one's knowledge, beliefs, and ability encompasses all the notions of thought, culture, language, and speech ready to be actualized in action. Above all, language (or speech in particular) as the main instrument for expressing all those notions can be seen as explicit indicator of one's character.

Like that between language and thought purported by Goodenough, however, the relationship between language and character is reciprocal. Your character determines the language you speak, and the language you speak to a smaller or larger extent shapes your character. A dishonest person, to take an example, will speak dishonestly, and vice-versa. A person who is used to speaking a standard language will usually hate insincerity, and will make friends with people of firm personality.

IMPLICATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The call for character education through schools has been sounded since early 1960's when educational observers throughout the world were alarmed by the worldwide decline of morality in the community (Vessel and Huitt, 2005). The world has witnessed all kinds of violence and wickedness demonstrated not only by the average members of the society but also by people of important social statuses. Abuses of power characterizing modern civilization have become a great menace to the world peace. Something has to be done to save the world from destruction, and that is by restoring good character of the whole citizens.

Restoring good character can be done through education by developing good habits of the mind, the heart, and the action. Language being the vehicle of thought, intention, and action can play a

very strategic role in character restoration. It is the task of a language teacher, therefore, to foster good language use through good language learning by the students. By teaching their students to think good, intend good, and do good with language it is not pretending to believe language teachers can take a great share in solving the world's biggest problem of this day.

REFERENCES

- Holmes, J. 2001. *An introduction to Sociolinguistics, 2nd Edition*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Hudson, R.A. 1980. *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Jung, C.G. 1961. Goodbooks. In <http://www.goodbooks.com/>. Retrieved January 25, 2014.
- King, M. L. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*. In Ralph E. Luker. 1993. *Church History*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Jun., 1993), pp. 303-305. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lickona, T. 1991. *Educating for character*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Piepmeyer, A. 2007. Collective consciousness. In *The University of Chicago: Theories of Media: Keyword Glossary*.
- Sapir, Edward .1929. In David G. Mandelbaum (ed.). 1983. *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*. University of California Press.
- Vessels, G., & Huitt, W. 2005. *Moral and character development*. Presented at the National Youth at Risk Conference, Savannah, GA, March 8-10. Retrieved [date], from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/briistar/chapters/chardev.doc>
- Wardhaugh, R. 1992. *An introduction to Sociolinguistics, 2nd edition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Washington, G. 1989. *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. New York: Applewood Books.
- Whorf, B. 1956. In John B. Carroll (ed.). *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. MIT Press
- Wolfram, W.1991. *Dialects and American English*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.