

# **Linguistic identity: the language-culture interaction in multilingual institutions**

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## **Abstract**

Cultural and linguistic relativism are primarily grounded on the postulate that linguistic structures impact the way individuals perceive and think about the world. Culture (a group-specific world-view) is transmitted and reproduced through communication, i.e. through language. As a logical consequence, a language is the privileged medium of a culture. This is commonly visible in the nation-states where a territory belonging to an administration geographically coincides with a national language (the French in France speak French, and belong to the French culture, in a conceptualization where status as a citizen, language and culture are covered by a common term). Linguistic relativism provides a theoretical basis for the exploration of linguistic identities, and stands against universalist approaches to language and cognition (such as Chomsky's universal grammar).

Culture is something people both possess and are part of and, according to Silverstein (2004) has to be essentialized in order to work as a common reference. Rituals take a huge part in implementing it. Acquiring a language is also a ritualized process. Institutions (and educational ones) take part in this process, as they bond the individuals under rationalized sets of normalisation and evaluations and contribute to shaping the language standards. Therefore, among the same community, signs are collectively recognized as meaningful units calling for unambiguous interpretation.

The idea that communities share values, and most importantly symbols and meanings is essential to creating a culture, understood as the part of the semiology individuals can identify as identical to the one of their peers. However, the language-culture couple requires further investigation. Reification of culture and language could lead to counter-productive simplification, whereas careful attention to the mechanisms by which they become stable categories helps to understand in which way they influence thinking and contribute to the sharing of symbols and semiotic processes. A dynamic interaction takes place between the subject (both a sign-maker and a sign-reader) and his/her environment, and different (and diverging) meanings could potentially be overlooked by hasty cultural categorizations.

Drawing on the works of language anthropologists Michael Silverstein (2004), Alessandro Duranti (1997), sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1982, 1991) and linguists Roy Harris (1996), Alastair Pennycook (2007, 2010), Deborah Cameron (2007), John Edwards (2009) and John Joseph (2006) amongst others, my ethnographic research on cultural dynamics in multilingual institutions is an investigation into the interaction between language and culture, focussing on how individuals make sense of and construct their communicative world. It aims at identifying the extent to which culture and language are mythical constructs which nonetheless have a power of shaping thinking, as the categories are integrated and relayed by

the people they categorize. My methodology is to confront the discourses about language and culture (especially focusing on English) in institutional, academic and official texts to the singular discourses of informants evolving in institutions where languages, cultures and worldviews are daily negotiated and where “the other” simultaneously belongs to the group and is excluded as belonging to a different linguistic-cultural one.