

Language and culture

(Claire Kramersch, *Language and culture*, Oxford University Press, 1998)

Claire Kramersch's study aims to give a thorough description of the relationship between language and culture. The two dimensions are inseparable, since words that people utter express facts or ideas and refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. In his attempt to clarify the relationship between language and culture, the author begins his study with two fundamental questions "What is language?" and "What is culture?". Language is defined as "a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value" (*Language and culture*, 1998: 3), while culture "refers to what has been grown and groomed" (*Ibidem*: 4).

The specific culture-language connection is firmly expressed in Sapir's words "No language can exist unless it is stepped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language."

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, formulated in 1940, is mentioned to reveal how the structure of language influences the way in which people think and behave. The author agrees to this hypothesis only to a small extent, instead he strengthens the role

of context in complementing the meanings encoded in the language.

Two frequently used concepts are *semantic cohesion* which relates word to word and *pragmatic coherence* which relates speaker to speaker within the larger cultural context of communication. Beyond individual nouns and sounds, words relate to other words by various cohesive devices which come to be associated in the discourse community's semantic pool.

On the other hand, the study focuses on the differences between written language and spoken language, the former carrying more weight and prestige and the latter being transient, additive, redundant and loosely structured grammatically and lexically. Therefore, language acts according to the medium used. The spoken medium bears the marks of more or less literacy and cultures themselves are more or less literate according to the uses their members make of the spoken and the written language in different contexts.

Language and cultural identity are also approached in a detailed analysis which establishes a connection between words and our attitude towards their meanings. Accent, vocabulary, discourse patterns help to identify the members of a

community. The author speaks about group identity, regional identity and national identity which may be linked or in conflict with one another.

The study concludes with the concept of *appropriation*, emphasizing the advantages of acquiring another person's language within a new cultural context. The ability to get familiar with a new

culture and retain one's own values is a more general ability to mediate between several languages and cultures, called intercultural or multicultural communication.

Kramersch's work is a necessary tool to understand language as an integral part of ourselves which pervades our very thinking and way of viewing the world.

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