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Understanding Culture and Language

Mario R.J. Corbin

Department of Humanities

Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

“...looking across at our primate relatives learning local traditions, using tools, and manipulating symbols, we can no longer say comfortably that ‘culture’ is the heritage of learned symbolic behaviour that makes humans human.” R. Keesing (1974: 73)

1. Expanding Our Understanding of Culture

A consequence of human evolution that has had the most profound impact on human nature and human society was the emergence of *culture*. A term credited uniquely to humans, however over the course of the last century new developments in animal behaviour have been introduced, indicating perhaps that our understanding of culture is too limited, despite there being a vast amount of theoretical approaches to culture. Before we can further attempt to understand whether or not culture can be attributed to animals, we must first closely examine the concept of culture from a human perspective, including a detailed analysis of the role which language plays in maintaining culture. It could be argued that if animals were attributed with the ability to sustain culture, the very notion alone would bring into question humanity's, albeit arrogant view, that as a species we are more than an animal. The term *human* in itself purposefully separates us from all other living creatures on this planet. An aspect that has affected the world over ecologically as in every known part of the world where humans reside, the environment during the last century alone has suffered consequences of humanity's so-called 'superiority'. It serves to segregate '*the other*'; in this case being any other species than human whilst also segregating humanity from an innate connection with this world, that is humanity has lost touch with its symbiotic relationship with earth. Thus, the debate over whether or not culture solely exists amongst humanity is in itself arguable as it is through various forms of culture, albeit some more complex than others, that all species can adapt and survive in any given eco-system and or environment.

Emily Schultz & Robert Lavenda (1995) argue that culture makes us unique as a species as we are more dependent than any other species on learning for survival because we have no instincts that automatically protect us and find us food and shelter. They also argue that we have come to use our complex intelligence in order to learn from other members of society what we need to know to survive, otherwise known as enculturation. This teaching and learning process is a primary focus of childhood, which is longer for humans than for any other species.¹ Within the anthropological perspective, it is culture; according to Schultz & Lavenda that is central to not only understanding why humans are the way they are but also why as a species we behave the way that we do. Thus, a human behaves the way he or she does because of the process of enculturation and not as a result of his or her being genetically programmed to be a certain way. It is fair to insinuate that most anthropologists reject explanations of human behaviour that force them to choose between biology and culture as the cause. Rather, anthropologists prefer to emphasize that human beings are biocultural organisms. As Schultz and Lavenda state:

“Our genetically guided biological makeup, including our brain, nervous system, and anatomy, makes us capable of creating and using culture. Without these biological

endowments, human culture as we know it would not exist. At the same time, our survival as biological organisms depends upon learned cultural traditions that help us find food, shelter, and mates, and that teach us how to rear our offspring. This is because our biological endowment, rich as it is, does not provide us with instincts that would take care of these survival needs. Human biology makes culture possible; human culture makes human biological survival possible. (1995: 5)

Does human biology make culture possible? Is it truly a uniquely human attribute or are there different ways of life that transcend humanity all together, that in their own right are working social structures not unlike the concept of culture itself? It is undoubtedly true that human culture makes human biological survival possible for the most part, but as we have seen through the history of human evolution, food, shelter and clothing did not always consist of mini malls, McDonald's and Ralph Lauren shirts and Calvin Klein jeans. Indeed, such attributes to human survival are still only unique to certain parts of the globe, particularly western cultures. Consequently, these notions of the superiority of the human condition predominate many of the discussions revolving around the concept of culture, often treating our ability to survive as not simply the only way a human being can live and breathe on this *spaceship* called earth, but as well as the more favorable, civilized way of life. Thus, excluding all other non-human mammals from the concept of culture and treating them as savages in our midst, allowing to live or let die, depending on the particular needs of the culture which happens to be overlapping with earth's other inhabitants is inherently *savage* in itself of our species. However, before we can continue to explore this concept, which will be referred to as *animal culture* for argument's sake, let us first turn to the different concepts and attributes of culture that have been discussed by other anthropological and sociological minds.

According to Roger M. Keesing (1974) applying an evolutionary model of natural selection to cultural constriction in biological foundations has led anthropologists to ask with increasing sophistication how human communities develop particular cultural patterns. How have cultures developed and what forces shape them? How are cultures learned? How do shared symbolic systems transcend individual thought words? How different and unique are cultures really? Do universal patterns underlie diversity? How is cultural description to be possible?ⁱⁱ These are but some of the questions being sought when trying to understand and answer the increasingly more complex question of what culture truly entails. From the standpoint of cultural theory, however, the major developments have come from evolutionary/ecological approaches to cultures as adaptive systems. The foundations laid by Leslie White have been creatively recast by such scholars as Sahlins, Rappaport, Vayda, and Harris for instance.ⁱⁱⁱ This is not to say that a consensus has been met but rather, increasingly, most scholars such as the exchange between Service (1968), and Harris (1969), Marxist critiques of Harris' cultural materialism, the gulfs between cultural ecology conceived by Vayda & Rappaport (1968)... all attest to the diversity and disagreement of the concept of culture. The broad assumptions that most scholars do agree on, according to Keesing (1974) are:

“(a) Cultures are systems (of socially transmitted behaviour patterns) that serve to relate human communities to their ecological settings. These ways-of-life-of communities include technologies and modes of social grouping and political organization, religious beliefs and practices, and so on. When cultures are viewed broadly as behaviour systems characteristic of populations, extending and permuting

somatic givens, whether we consider them to be patterns of culture or patterns for behaviour is a secondary question.”

“Culture is all those things means whose forms are not quite under direct genetic control which serve to adjust individuals and groups within their ecological communities.” (Binford, 1968: 323)

“The culture concept comes down to behaviour patterns associated with particular groups of peoples, that is to ‘customs’ or to peoples’ ‘way of life’ (Harris, 1968: 16)

(b) *Cultural change is primarily a process of adaptation and what amounts to natural selection.*

“Man is an animal and, like all other animals, must maintain an adaptive relationship with his surroundings in order to survive. Although he achieves this adaptation principally through the medium of culture, the process is guided by the same rules of natural selection that govern biological adaptation.” (Insert italics mine!) (Meggers, 1971: 4)

[Culture is s]een as adaptive systems, cultures change in the direction of equilibrium within ecosystems; but when balances are upset by environmental, demographic, technological, or other systemic changes, further adjustive changes ramify through the cultural system. Feedback mechanisms in cultural systems may thus operate both negatively (toward self-correction and equilibrium) and positively (toward disequilibrium and directional change).

(c) *Technology, subsistence economy, and elements of social organization directly tied to production are the most adaptively central realms of culture. It is in these realms that adaptive changes usually begin and from which they usually ramify. ... [Harris, Marxists, Rappaport and Vayda]... would view economies and their social correlates as in some sense primary, and ideational systems-religion, ritual, world view- as in some sense secondary, derived epiphenomenal.*

“Similar technologies applied to similar environments tend to produce similar arrangements of labor in production and distribution, and ... these in turn call forth similar kinds of social groupings, which justify and coordinate their activities by means of similar systems of values and beliefs.” (Harris, 1968: 4)

(d) *The ideational components of cultural systems may have adaptive consequences-in controlling population, contributing to subsistence, maintaining the ecosystem, etc; and these, though often subtle, must be carefully traced wherever they lead:*

[However,] “...it is necessary to consider the total culture when analyzing adaptation. Superficially, it might be assumed that attention could be confined to aspects directly related to the environment... [But] whether analysis begins with religious practices, social organization, or some other sector of a cultural complex ... [it] will... reveal functional relationships with other categories of behaviour that are adaptive.” (Meggers, 1971: 43)

(Keesing, 1974: 75-77)

The above illustrates the similarities and yet the stark contrast between theoretical approaches to better understanding the notions of culture. Culture in itself embodies what humanity has achieved through millennia of evolution and natural selection. However it is Meggers (1971) whom seems confident in linking humanity itself to the bare truth, that humans are animals. Like most living creatures on this planet, humanity is by its innate nature a social entity. One which must adhere to natural selection and in so doing must facilitate its existence by utilizing the very tools nature bestowed unto us,

primarily *language*. However, before language can be considered let us first further examine culture by introducing it not as a recent phenomenon, but rather one that has existed since the birth of humanity whilst taking into consideration that language in and of itself is in fact a recent phenomenon. One which only takes into consideration modern society negating the possibility, if not almost purposefully ignoring that cultures were not always as sophisticated as Marxists, Harris, or Keesing would have us believe. Cultures are located in time and space by the temporal and spatial distribution of the individuals sharing them.^{iv} They exist only in the minds of the people sharing that culture and although one can not underestimate nor dilute the vast accomplishments humanity has succeeded in bearing; it too can not go unaccounted for that, like all animals, we have evolved from a point of existence where culture simply consisted of a set of ideas and way of life. A way of life that, as we have seen through primates, are distant echoes of a time when humanity was as vulnerable as those animals that live under our rule today.

Thus what forms culture can take inevitably depends on the ability of the group and of the individual to think of, imagine, and learn. As well, an innate ability to be able to pass this information on to new members either through rearing of children (enculturation) or assimilation of another group must be accomplished within a simplistic means of acculturation for the latter. Thus, cultures must be thinkable and learnable as well as livable in that the ecosystem also plays a role in helping develop the type of condition and life style that will take place. It is through such adaptationist theoretical frameworks that one may consider human culture as the ideal, but it can also be used to explain how animal culture itself exists. However, ideational archetypes exist about culture, attempting further to distance humans from that inner animal which seems to cling at our consciousness as we strive to be more than the sum of our biological parts. Keesing distinguishes three different ways of approaching cultures as systems of ideas. First, cultures must be seen as a cognitive system. According to Ward Goodenough (1957):

“Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behaviour, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them.” (167)

Second, are Cultures of Structural systems, where Levi-Strauss views cultures a shared symbolic systems that are cumulative *creations of mind*; he seeks to discover in the structuring of cultural domains- myth, art, kinship, language- the principles, he feels of the mind that generates cultural elaborations. Thus, the physical world which humans live within may provide the raw materials necessary to make their visions into a reality, however, the mind in itself imposes culturally patterned order, “... a logic of binary contrast, of relations and transformations, on a continuously changing and often random world.”^v A symbolic polarity develops, one between that of Nature vs. Culture. Levi-Strauss himself becomes concerned with ‘Culture’ rather than with ‘a culture’:

“...he sees American Indian mythic structures as overlapping, interconnected patterns that transcend not only cognitive organization of [the] individual ... but in a sense transcend as well the boundaries of language and custom that divide different peoples.” (Keesing, 1974: 79)

Third, Keesing introduces Cultures as Symbolic Systems, where Clifford Geertz, like Levi Strauss, has over time become increasingly systematic. Unlike Strauss, however,

he finds inspiration for work in the individual in real life settings, such as his work regarding the cock fight, a funeral, and a sheep theft. According to Keesing:

"[Geertz] ...sees the cognitive view of Goodenough and the 'new ethnographers' as reductionistic and spuriously formalistic. ... symbols and meanings are shared by social actors- between, not in them; they are public, not private." (1974: 79)

Thus, cultural systems become ideational while such cultural patterns themselves are not reified or metaphysical but rather, like rocks and dreams, "they are things of this world."^{vi} Geertz himself views his notions of culture as 'semiotie'- thus, to study culture is to study shared codes of meaning. Geertz refers to cultures as being like old cities: or rather, the problem of cultural analysis is as much of determining independencies as interconnection, gulfs as well as bridges he states. According to Geertz:

"...The appropriate image, if one must have images, of cultural organization, is either the spider web nor the pile of sand. It is rather more the octopus, whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated, neurally quite poorly connected with one another and with what in the octopus passes for a brain, and yet who nonetheless manages to get around and preserve himself, ... as a viable, if somewhat ungainly entity." (1966: 66-67)

Thus, Geertz argues that culture in and of itself is best seen as a set of behaviour patterns, concrete yet complex which include customs, usages, traditions, and habit clusters, however, they also work as a set of control mechanisms for the governing of social behaviour amongst individual participants within a given culture. Thus far we have seen that, amongst many things, culture is a system of knowledge, shaped and constrained by the way the human brain not only acquires information, but also by the environment in which a culture must exist. It is also the ways which humans organize and process the information and create an internal model of reality, albeit only valid when within their own particular culture. At this elementary definition of culture, it can be argued that animals do possess the capabilities of understanding and creating a system of knowledge and tools to pass on learned information from one generation to the next. For the purpose of this argument we will examine shortly the social structure of primates, particularly, chimpanzees. However, first we must take a closer look at the way culture is transmitted from one generation to the next and what, according to many theorists makes us *superior* to animals. Naturally, we are talking about language and mind.

2. Of Language and Mind

"Speech is a non-instinctive, acquired, 'cultural function'." Edward Sapir (1949: 4)

The human mind, it would seem, would be the natural equivalent to the lion's teeth and claws, or rather more humbly, the varied stripes of a zebra. Its origins have long been a popular subject, as some reasonable and other not so reasonable claims have been proposed: 'Exclamations become words; sounds in nature were imitated, or people simply got together and assigned sounds to objects and actions.' Such wild speculation on the origins of language inevitably led to a ban imposed in 1866 by the *Societe de Linguistique de Paris* against papers on linguistic origins.^{vii} Due to the wealth of information gathered over the last century on primate brains, the development of linguistic competence of children, more human fossils that can tentatively be used to reconstruct what brains and vocal tracts must have been like, and a better understanding

of early hominid way of life have all given way to new theoretical developments in answering the question whether or not language determines culture or whether culture determines language. Nevertheless, language is a tool which allows us to survive in a world where we have no other means of protection. As Geertz surmises, through trial and error humanity managed to thrive in the process of natural selection. His approach to the acquisition of language as a system of communication in order to pass on information and understanding of the cultural view of the world in which one lives would fall in adequately with the above notions of culture.

However, it is not until one stumbles upon Noam Chomsky (1968) and Eleanor Ochs (1998) do we get an understanding of how language during contemporary time helps not simply to enrich our minds, but that has become the medium necessary to maintain the industrial world. The mind is a complex web of information, how the mind is conditioned within any given human culture (initially) can only be acquired via language. Language, it is argued, is the sole means in which a human acquires culture; this entails one's understanding of reality and sets forth a set of grammatical rules that ensure our ability to properly understand it. It serves a purpose, that is to allow humanity to maintain its idealized fiction of the world, however it does not serve as a means of creating culture, but rather, it simply maintains it within human culture. Ochs surmises that the process of socialization enables us to determine all facets of culturally social acceptable behaviour. Thus, as we constantly strive to better ourselves as a species, including our understanding of the physical world around us in relation to how our minds perceive it, so too then must language be changed and improved upon to accommodate the needs of the group. One can claim that the concept of 'mind' from an anthropological point of view clearly stipulates that the mind can not function to its full potential without the use of language, nor can language in and of itself exist without the mind to put it into practice. Thus, in this sense, the mind utilizes language as a tool which is embedded in our sub-conscious but can only function through the process of socialization. Once we have attained the basis for but one single dialect of language, the mind then becomes capable of learning other languages, inevitably aiding humanity's efforts to continue perceiving the world through various views whilst still enriching the individual's own understanding of how our own minds function in relation to the world around us.

Nevertheless, the debate between Ochs' and Chomsky's two contrasting positions regarding the acquisition of language can perhaps be placed into two categories; that of 'innateism vs. socialization.' Ochs' own view discusses further the process in which children must learn a language as governed by their respective culture via a process that is relational to their own environment. She gives an example using the Samoan discourse of language acquisition. In it she discusses how Samoan children learn their language in context to their setting (i.e. Front of house, back of house & side of house) and relationship with the individual the child is communicating with, (i.e. doctor-patient, student-teacher, child-child, etc.). Caregivers encourage children to use only 'good language' (Written Samoan) as opposed to 'bad language' (Slang-Non-Written Samoan).^{viii} In doing so, children learn their language in contrast to their environment. Thus, it can be argued that the process of acquiring language is situational and can not be undertaken without the condition(s) of a group's environment. In such an instance, both language increases the awareness of their mind and environment while the reverse takes place as well.

However, according to Noam Chomsky, the acquisition of language can be understood as an innate ability that human kind possesses. His work, a reflection of how language contributes to the environment of our mind, indicates that there is no concrete proof that human language is not already part of our innate abilities as a species. He states that though humanity requires at any age to be taught the rudimentary elements of their respective language, humanity nevertheless have within us a working knowledge, albeit sub-consciously, of what language is and how it functions.^{ix} Both Chomsky and Ochs attempt to show that language is in itself the building blocks of how we understand and perceive not only the world in which we reside, but each other and, as well, ourselves. Their two different approaches compliment each other in that Chomsky's view of humanity having an innate ability to understand language coincides with Ochs' theory of socialization. Combined, these two theoretical approaches to the acquisition of language also allow us to better understand humanity's ability to distinguish between the many facets of language, such as meta-communicative markings, symbols and signs.

This innate ability to be able to speak is what many social theorists claim as the driving force behind humanity's success. Geertz (1973) adds to this notion by surmising that an evolutionary approach must be undertaken and discusses the process of acquisition of language through the necessity to communicate information from generation to generation.^x Chomsky elaborates on this innate ability by discussing how human language itself is shared by all humans, a sense of *a priori knowledge* and *psychic unity*, if you will, and is in essence not merely unique to only human kind, however just as importantly it is vital to our survival as a species; a claim that echoes the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*: The view/belief that language determines the way in which we perceive the world around us. These two views are as follows- the weak view, where language is viewed as an influence on thought itself vs. the strong view, where thought is determined solely by language.^{xi} This notion was studied indepthly by John Lucy (1972) who surmised further that in contemporary theoretical approaches today the view tends to hold that both language and thought (mind) must work together in relation to understanding and expanding on one another. Jurgen Habermas (1988) implements this approach developing a theory of social order in which he postulates the existence of a background of universal, pereflexive, unthematic knowledge called the *Lifeworld*. This 'Lifeworld' is manifested through a specific type of speech act called communicative action. Communicative action enables access to the '*binding and bonding of energies of language*' and is composed of structural constraints that together create an internal connection between meaning and validity.^{xii}

This pragmatic and non-semantic theory of meaning draws on Speech-Act theory and represents an epistemic turn in truth conditions as it goes beyond the linguistic utterance for validation while still recognizing the subjective positions of both, the speaker and hearer. Participants in a communicative act are able to "connect up" view his notion of the Lifeworld. Habermas extends his communicative theory to a theory of social action, to explain how social order is possible. In his view, society is woven from webs of linguistically mediated interactions that draw upon the unthematic knowledge of the Lifeworld, and, through communicative acts, shape this knowledge into cultural paradigms, legitimate orders, and personality structures. Habermas sees these as the three interrelated and interdependent components of the Lifeworld. They reciprocally interact through communicative action with the Lifeworld, creating the possibility for social cohesion. Although Habermas proposes a theory that looks beyond the structural components of language to see how communicative action makes social

cohesion possible, in doing so, he places the power of language not as an entity in and of itself, as has been done many times before him (i.e. Chomsky) but as a tool used by people. Indeed, the idea that two humans can connect in a communicative way so as to reach an understanding about the world must be the basis for cultural development, but the ways in which such a process is made possible has seemed to be often taken for granted.

3. Conclusion

These approaches work well in formulating and determining the nature and function of language in human culture, as Geertz (1973) continues to stipulate that the mind functions in processing and identifying information through a “concept that denotes a class of skills, propensities, capacities, tendencies, and habits.” (47-48). This is achieved through *primary* and *secondary* cognition where substitution, reversal, and condensation are but a few aspects of the mind that come prior to directed, logically ordered, a human’s capability to reason. He examines the growth potential of this ability through the evolution of the human species by both biological and social means of interpretation. Based on a biological perspective, the human brain in and of itself is three times larger than our ancestors. It is through a social outlook, however, that one can determine the growth of social behaviour by the *stimulus deficit* and *stimulus discovery*. The first refers to an innate sense of curiosity that needs to be fulfilled whilst the latter is the satisfaction of our curiosity through trial and error. It is through *motivational problems*, Geertz asserts, that culture and language evolve, a process linked directly to the notion of *psychic unity* where all human cultures share the same patterns of evolution but during different periods in time depending on such circumstances as environment. However, though the above illustrates the purpose of the advancement of language, rather than of its origins and though it can be said that it allows any rational, intelligible person to derive the same conclusions when serious thought is given to the origins, nature and function of culture and language, it does not however answer the question clearly and concisely as to whether or not language is truly innate or not? Thus, let us turn our attention to the notion that language itself merely defines what it is that a person or an animal feels. That language as a tool can only strive to better itself in defining the complex emotions and thoughts that humans sense. According to Edward Sapir (1949):

“...there are only organs that are incidentally useful in the production of speech sounds. ... Physiologically speech is an overlaid function, or, to be more precise, a group of overlaid functions. It gets what service it can out of organs and functions, nervous and muscular that have come into being and are maintained for very different ends of their own. ... Language is a purely human and non-instinctive (*italics mine*) method of communicating ideas, emotions, desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory ... much instinctive expressions and the natural environment may serve as a stimulus for the development of certain elements of speech, however, much instinctive tendencies, motor and other, may give a predetermined range or mold to linguistic expression. Such human or animal communication (*italics mine*) ... as is brought about by involuntary, instinctive cries is not, in our sense, language at all.” (8-9)

Despite his claim that an utterance or the vocal sound of pain or joy does not, as such, constitute language or a symbolic meaning, it does however; serve as a more or less automatic over flow of our emotional energy. Rather, sound imitative words do not directly derive out of nature but instead are suggested, played with, hence the onomatopoeic theory of the origin of speech, the theory that would explain all speech

as a gradual evolution from sounds of an imitative character, really brings us no closer, according to Sapir, to the instinctive level than is language as we know it today.^{xiii} Still questions persist, ‘Can thought be possible without speech?’ If so, do primates not regularly utilize thought processes and judgments to maintain social cohesion, or to begin a war with neighboring groups? Does not the Feral Child think without the concept of language as understood and defined by contemporary humanity? Questions that will continue to persist as anthropologists continue to explore other forms of communication other than language. Thus, language itself can be argued to be as limiting as it has been progressive for the human mind and has given us both our concepts of sameness and differences between us and ‘*the other.*’

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