Catherine Taylor-Škarica

THE AMERICAN VIEW OF TIME IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE STUDY

In courses for teaching general skills in a foreign language, the importance of familiarizing students with the traget culture is universally recognized. But adequate presentation of social-cultural considerations and the aspects of culture that we wish to deal with in the classroom are not always easy to define. There are differences between cultures on so many levels that are relevant to language-factors in the language itself, paralanguage, kinesics (body language), spoken and unspoken beliefs, stylistic variation according to various parameters like relative status and social context, material culture (cultural products), and so on — that it can be hard for us to put our finger on just what we mean when we say that culture should be an important part of our language curriculum.

As Wilga Rivers and Mary S. Temperley point out with reference to dialogs in their *Practical Guide to the Teaching of English,* it is not enough to give "snippets" of specific factual information on how people go about doing things in a target-culture situation. If situational (etc.) differences are to remain relevant year after year as habits in the traget culture change, and if they are to interest students lesson after lesson rather than just making them wonder why the speakers of the target language are so crazy, they must in some way reflect basic values and attitudes. Rivers and Temperley give an example from U. S. culture which does this: In the U. S. the prepackaging of relatively large quantities of most foods cuts down labor costs for service to shoppers. This reflects the American business-minded approach to daily habits, a basic value, and in addition shopping in a supermarket is an appropriate setting for a realistic dialog.[1]

I have no intention of deprecating instruction designed to teach students who feel the need how to handle specific limited tasks and interaction in a target culture and language, whether or not these can be seen to illustrate its basic value system.[2] But teachers must deal with limited class time — selection according to some criteria is inevitable — and basic attitudes and values definitely furnish a set of valid criteria for determining whether the way we handle culture in a language course is adequate.

---

[1] Wilga M. Rivers and Mary S. Temperley, *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 31—32.

[2] The dialogs in Michael Ockenden's *Situational Dialogues* (Longman), for example, would obviously be very useful to a learner of English who was planning to visit an English-speaking country.

How else besides through dialogs are cultural factors introduced in the language dassroom? Of course, we can use lessons that talk explicitly about them. Punctuality, for example, is a salient value shared by both U. S. and British culture, so it is not surprising to find statements about punctuality in English courses from both countries.[3] From them the perceptive learner can pick up tips for appropriate behavior in specific contexts in these target cultures, and at the same time he is exposed to a basic value which he can "extrapolate" to other situations as well. Of course, he is also given some linguistic means to talk about this value himself (most obviously vocabulary). The topic is very well-chosen.

Actually, the American view of time, with its various aspects including punctuality, is an extremely important part of the U. S. worldview which differs somewhat from that in Europe (including Yugoslavia). Yet if we keep giving lessons about this same topic or even dialog situations obviously chosen to illustrate it, we can end up laboring the point. Perhaps the way to increase the attention we devote to such values in proportion to their importance in the target culture is through variety. What other than dialog situations and topical discussions can be exploited?

One obvious place to look for cultural information relevant to language teaching is in the language itself. Much has been made of the relation between the grammar and lexis of a language and the way its speakers think (esp. by proponents of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), and comparisons of widely dissimilar languages can give fascinating, even shocking, examples of correspondences between worldview and language. The Quechua Indians of Peru, for example, think of the past as being before (in front of) them because it can be "seen" in one's memory; but in English we think of the past as being behind us, and expressions such as "to go back in time" reflect this.[4] In related languages like S—C and English, however, such striking differences are not so easy to put our finger on. To give a structural example, it would be hard to relate the progressive aspect in English as opposed to the imperfective aspect in S-C to differences in our viewpoints toward time! With regard to lexis, Eskimo languages with their many words for snow, an abundant and important part of the Eskimos' environment, are a much-cited instance of the relation of language to culture. But again, with related language such quantitative comparisons of sets of words in a field of reference would probably not be as easy to compile or as interesting to contrast. Even if we found similar sets of words how we could present them to a language (not anthropology!) class would be a problem.

This does not mean, however, that we cannot relate word study to culture study with relatively close languages like S-C and English. The extent to which lexical items are or are not equivalent, i. e. the extent to which their meanings overlap, and instances of false (sometimes only partially false) pairs are so-

---

[3] See, for example Gladys G. Doty and Janet Ross, *Language and Life in the U.S.A.* 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 291—93; and L. G. Alexander, *Developing Skills.* (London: Longman, 1967).

[4] Eugene Nida, *Customs and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 206 cited in Janet Ross and Gladys Doty, *Writing English*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 29—30.

metimes relatable to contrasting attitudes and values among the speakers of such languages.[5]

To go back to punctuality, the fact that the translation into S-C of this word, *točnost,* refers to exactitude but not necessarily in terms of time, that the context must specify the time factor, in other words, may be enlightening. If we point out the relation between the time-specific word *punctual* (and its near-synonym *promt*) and the way we value these concepts, and time in general, in American culture, the two observations reinforce each other. *Efficiency* and *efficacy,* the two most likely words available to translate S-C *efikasnost* provide a similar example. *Efficacy* focuses on attaining a goal, while *efficiency* is time-specific in that it involves the economical use of resources, including time, to attain a goal.

In some contexts the words *pedantan* in S-C and *pedantic* are false pair, and the difference in meaning has to do with the use of time. In English *pedantic* means, with reference to both academic and non-academic situations, overly concerned with details, a condition which clearly involves not making the best use of one's time (cf. the dictionary definition in S-C, e. g. *pedanterije* in the *Rječnik Akademije*). But in colloquial S-C *pedantan* often implies that the speaker feels the quality of the subject's work is worth the longer than average time needed to achieve it.

An "English-English" topic that could be utilized to point out tendencies on both the purely linguistic and the cultural levels is the ease with which nouns undergo conversion and compounding in English. The word *time* furnishes many excellent examples of this which also reflect the American preoccupation with this concept: to time something, a time-saver or time-saving tool, timing (good or bad), timers (egg-timers, "day-timer" calendars), space-time, etc.

Yet another linguistic "window" into worldview is provided by linguistic folklore, particularly the shorter forms such as sayings and idioms. In an article called "Thinking Ahead",[6] American folklorist Alan Dundes points out that folklore is a useful tool for understanding worldview — specifically, in this case, the American "future orientation", another aspect the American approach to time. Dundes' conclusions are intended mainly for anthropologists, but because his train of thought and examples also appear relevant to teaching language and culture, I will give a brief summary of his conclusions.

It is widely recognized that Americans are more future-oriented than most peoples. We have a strong belief in progress, in future successes, and this emphasis on the future is related to the desire to attain certain goals or ends. "It is the end that counts", says Dundes. Thus we have the proverb "A stitch in time saves nine". Note that in this proverb we get our goal by doing something in time, by being prompt about it.

Dundes contrasts our extreme future orientation in the U. S. with the traditional past-orientation in Europe, and his observations are largely applicable to Yugoslavia. One has to do with birthday customs. Dundes points out that a Norwegian child, on his or her eighth birthday, celebrates the year just completed. Similarly, I have noticed that in Yugoslavia people often give a child's

[5] The question of whether or not the relation can be proved to be causal or to fit into some sweeping linguistics theory will not be taken up in this discussion, since we are dealing with connections we can draw in presenting the language and culture to students.

[6] In Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980).

age as *Napunio (navršio) je osam godina,* he's finished his eighth year. An American would never express himself this way. When midnight of a child's eighth birthday strikes he is eight, period (cf. the S-C alternative *Danas on ima osam godina*). Asking for someone's year of birth (*Koje ste godište?*) is another way of expressing age that is past-oriented, and except in special contexts (like filling out forms) Americans consistently ask "How old are you?" instead. Note that in explaining how these formularized ways of expressing age can be seen to reflect a basic cultural value, we have also specified one linguistically correct way to talk about one's age and two incorrect, unidiomatic ways for the student to avoid.

(Dundes's other examples are 1) Halloween, a children's holiday in the U. S. derived from a European past-oriented holiday, All Souls' Day and 2) the way European schools stress much more memorization of facts about the past than U. S. schools do. These are topics suitable for topical discussions *about* culture.)

It is not difficult to think of additional examples of linguistic folklore that make evident our great appreciation in the U. S. of "making good use of one's time". Back to proverbs, here are some more, in thematic groups, several of which have equivalents in S-C:

I. Never put off for tomorrow what may be done today.
(Što možeš uraditi danas, ne ostavi za sutra.)
No time like the present.
One today is worth two tomorrows.
Mañana, mañana (sarcastic, note the Spanish-American influence)

II. Time is money. (*Vrijeme je novac.*)

III. The early bird catches the worm.
(*Tko rano rani dvije sreće grabi.*)
Early to bed and early to rise
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

IV. Today is the first day of the rest of your life (a recent concoction reminding people to be optimistic and get going).

A realization of the value of time in American culture can also help clarify many idioms. For example, "big-time" means important and successful whereas "small-time" means unimportant and second rate. "Pacesetter" (or "pacemaker") can mean a model to be imitated, in other words a successful and innovative person in his or her field that others want to emulate. "Quick", with no further modification, can mean bright or intelligent in a sentence like "She's quick". Similarly, "slow", "not too swift", "not too speedy" can mean the opposite, and the word "retarded" is related to tardy, another time word.

Now we have covered a fairly wide range of ways that language and language differences can communicate cultural facts even when we are dealing with relatively similar languages. Specifically, we have discussed the American view (to a large extent shared in Britain) of the importance of time. As a final note I would like to add that other basic values should be amenable to the same kind of comparative consideration, e. g. the work ethic in proverbs, compounds and coins such as "workaholic", and so on.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, L. G. *Developing Skills.* London: Longman. 1967.
Doty, Gladys G. and Janet Ross. *Language and Life in the U.S.A.* 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row., 1960.
Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press., 1980.
Ockenden, Michael. *Situational Dialogues.* Longman.
Rivers, Wilga M. and Mary S. Temperley. *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English.* New York: Oxford University Press., 1978.
Rječnik hrvatskog ili srpskoga jezika Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti, Zagreb (posljednji svezak objavljen god. 1976).
Ross, Janet and Gladys Doty. *Writing English.* 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row., 1975.