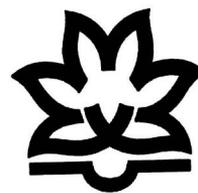




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## Culture in foreign language teaching

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### ABSTRACT

In foreign language education, the teaching of culture remains a hotly debated issue. What is culture? What is its relation to language? Which and whose culture should be taught? What role should the learners' culture play in the acquisition of knowledge of the target culture? How can we avoid essentializing cultures and teaching stereotypes? And how can we develop in the learners an intercultural competence that would shortchange neither their own culture nor the target culture, but would make them into cultural mediators in a globalized world? This paper explores these issues from the perspective of the large body of research done in Australia, Europe and the U.S. in the last twenty years. It links the study of culture to the study of discourse (see, e.g., Kramersch 1993, 1998, 2004) and to the concept of translingual and transcultural competence proposed by the Modern Language Association (e.g., Kramersch, 2010). Special attention will be given to the unique role that the age-old Persian culture can play in fostering the cultural mediators of tomorrow.

**Keywords:** culture; discourse; intercultural competence; modernist perspective; postmodernist perspective; foreign language

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## Introduction

Despite the considerable amount of research dedicated to defining the nature, importance and place of culture in foreign language study (see e.g., Byrnes, 2002; Kramersch 1993, 1997, 1998; Lange & Paige, 2003; Risager, 2006, 2007), culture remains a hotly debated issue in the teaching of foreign languages around the world. The debates involve school curricula, language teachers and language learners.

School curricula often delineate quite strictly language classes taught in the foreign language (L2) from literature or culture classes that are taught in the L2 or in the students' native language (L1). Indeed, under the influence of the communicative approach promoted by English as a Second Language, language pedagogy that focuses on communicative competence and the acquisition of conversational skills is often quite different from literature pedagogy that focuses on the analysis, interpretation and translation of texts from one language into another. While the first deals with small c culture of everyday life, the second deals with the big C culture of literature and the arts. So the first debate about culture is about which culture should be taught: the specific life style of specific speakers of the language? or a more general humanistic fund of wisdom as transmitted through literature and the arts?

Language teachers are supposed to teach nothing but language; culture is reserved for the professors of literature. However, culture becomes an issue when the language is taught by native speakers of the language. Many school systems prefer to hire native speakers (NSs) as language teachers because of their authentic relationship to the target language and culture, but native speakers don't necessarily know the home culture of their students nor the intellectual tradition of their school system. NSs represent an attractive exotic other but, as research has shown, they cannot act as models for learners who by definition will not become native speakers. Non-native language teachers have the advantage of having learned the language the way their students do but many of them feel inadequate when teaching an everyday culture

they are not really familiar with. They are afraid of falling into the stereotypes promoted by the textbook and the marketing industry and prefer to remain on the safe ground of grammar and vocabulary. So the second debate about culture is about the goals of language study: is the goal to raise students' awareness about Language in general (MLA, 2007)? ; to give them the skills necessary to communicate with L2 speakers in a global economy? ; to enable them to travel to other countries as tourists or to seek employment abroad? ; or to become literary scholars and academics?

Foreign language learners themselves are of different opinions regarding the cultural component of foreign language study. Some learners feel threatened in their L1 identity by too much emphasis on culture. Thus, for example, for the teaching of foreign languages in the U.S., some students say: "this is a language class. We don't want culture rammed down our throats" (Chavez, 2002). Others say: "the language classroom is not really the place to learn about values, history and culture. . . some German instructors want to raise our consciousness about us being Americans. It's debilitating." (Kramsch, 2011, p. 361). I suspect that for some who come from a modest social background, a feeling of inferiority or uncertainty about their own culture might lead them to reject culture altogether from language classes. However, these same students would find it quite all right for immigrants to learn not only the language but also the culture of their host country. Others, who come from a more middle class background, are eager to learn about exotic cultures but are reluctant to see themselves as cultural beings: they see their culture as universal and they learn another language and culture primarily to better appreciate their own (that is how I learned German in France in the fifties). Yet others, indeed a majority of learners of English around the world, are keen on learning the language precisely because it gives them access to a culture that they admire and a lifestyle they aspire to.

For economic or emotional reasons, youngsters see in the foreign culture new ways of dreaming of themselves (see Kramsch, 2009b). At an age when they are trying to find out who they are, the foreign language very often symbolizes other cultural

horizons. Of course, what they want to escape is precisely what they will seek to recover later, when they are 50 or 60. The challenge for the language teacher is to prepare them both for this voyage of discovery and for their return voyage when later in life, they will rediscover who they are in light of their encounter with the other. So the third debate about culture is about issues of national and social identity in a world of rapidly changing demographics and where computer technologies and global television have increased the gap between generations.

I will first propose a definition of culture in its relation to language and to discourse. I will, then, survey the two different ways in which culture has been researched in the last twenty years in applied linguistics, first from a modernist, then from a post-modernist perspective. I will finally suggest that we might want to think less of teaching 'culture' than of developing in our students an intercultural competence steeped in a deep understanding of their historicity and subjectivity as language learners.

## 1. What is culture?

When you step out of the Hall of Mirrors (*Galerie des Glaces*) in the palace (*Château*) of Versailles onto the *terrasse du château*, you have a magnificent view of a square pool of water (*le parterre d'eau*) with, at each corner, a stone statue of a reclining figure representing each of the four main rivers of France: la Seine, la Loire, le Rhône and la Garonne. This pool of water mirrors, by nice weather, the splendors of the interior architecture of the palace. It brings nature and culture in harmony with one another for the greater glory of the Sun King. From this heightened perspective, your eyes then follow the cascading terraces and symmetrical floral patterns of the *jardins à la française* around various basins and fountains, down a long rectangular grass lawn called *le tapis vert* (the green carpet), bordered with carefully trimmed oak and chestnut trees and adorned with marble statues of gods and goddesses, all the way down toward the spectacular water fountains of the *Bassin d'Apollon*, with its

flamboyant bronze chariot driven by the Sun God and his racing horses, on to the wide open space of the *Grand Canal*, an expanse of water that stretches to the horizon and from there - seemingly - to infinity. Such splendor was the product of Le Nôtre's imagination, of course, but this imagination did not emerge from the malaria-infested swamp that Versailles was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, nor from the gray skies and rainy climate of the *Ile-de-France*. As culture goes, it drew on the collective memory of other gardens, under other skies, in other times. The floral patterns of the Versailles gardens bear an uncanny resemblance with the intricate patterns of Persian carpets, the *parterre d'eau* echoes the delightful water pools of Persian "paradises", the symbolic relationship of in-door dwellings and outdoor gardens mirrors the alleys and arcades of Persian gardens, even if the purpose in Versailles was not to avoid the heat and to enjoy the fruit trees like in Pasargad , nor to celebrate the union of the sky and the earth as in the Persia of 3000 years ago, but to exalt the power of the French monarchy in the person of the King. But the Persian influence on Versailles is undeniable.

I come from Versailles. Versailles is my hometown. I left it when I was 25 to find out who I was in a foreign tongue, under foreign skies. In the same manner as nature and culture mirror one another in homes and gardens, and that Persian gardens have served as a mirror to French gardens that have themselves mirrored other gardens in other countries, language learners learn who they are through their encounter with the Other. They cannot understand the Other if they don't understand the historical and subjective experiences that have made them who they are. But they cannot understand these experiences if they do not view them through the eyes of the Other. It is only by understanding Versailles that I can understand the uniqueness of Babylon. In turn, Babylon helps me to understand the unique characteristics of my culture.

The Bakhtin scholar Michael Holquist (1990) calls this relationality of Self and Other 'dialogism'. Dialogism is a differential relation. Part of what it means to learn

someone else's language is to perceive the world through the metaphors, the idioms and the grammatical patterns used by the Other, filtered through a subjectivity and a historicity developed in one's mother tongue. For Bakhtin, cultural and personal identity do not precede the encounter with a foreign Other, but rather they get constructed through the obligation to respond to that Other, through dialogue. Dialogue, composed of utterances and responses, links not only two interlocutors in each other's presence, but readers to distant writers, and present texts to past texts. Learners of German recognize themselves in a Goethe poem, learners of English in a Hemingway story in ways they would never have expected in their mother tongue. Bakhtin calls the ability of speakers to see themselves from the outside "transgredience". Through transgredience, language learners learn not only to use the language correctly and appropriately, but to reflect on their experience. They occupy a position where they see themselves both from the inside and from the outside – what I have called a "third place" (Kramsch, 1993, 2009a) of symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2009b).

## **2. What's in a language?**

Several notions are essential to understanding language in its relation to culture.

In the dyad 'language and culture', language is not a bunch of arbitrary linguistic forms applied to a cultural reality that can be found outside of language, in the real world. Without language and other symbolic systems, the habits, beliefs, institutions, and monuments that we call culture would be just observable realities, not cultural phenomena. To become culture, they have to have meaning. It's the meaning that we give to foods, gardens and ways of life that constitute culture.

Unlike the linguistic system that is the object of study of theoretical linguists and the grammatical system taught by many language teachers, language-in-context is seen as a coherent symbolic system for the *making of meaning*. To borrow a phrase from M.A.K. Halliday (1978), it is a 'social semiotic', that is, a system of signs that are both

arbitrary in their form and motivated in their use. For example, the same landscape can be referred to in the French language by the letters *j-a-r-d-i-n'* (English: *garden*) or in Avestan by the letters *p-a-i-r-i-d-a-e-z-a*, both originally referring to a piece of nature surrounded by a wall (the indogermanic root of both *garden* and *jardin* is *gher-* = to enclose; the Avestan word *pairidaeza*, formed of *pairi* = around, and *daeza* = wall, also refers to an enclosure). He shows how arbitrary these signs are in their form as signifiers, but, of course, the choice of one sign over the other is not arbitrary at all, indeed, in this case the signified is historically motivated. It says something about the symbolic meaning that gardens have had in different societies in different times.

In its use, the linguistic sign means more than its dictionary definition. M.A.K Halliday (1978) developed a systemic-functional way of describing language as social semiotic. He asked: How does the structure of language reflect, express and shape the structure of the social group in which it is used? He found that language as symbolic system has a triple relation to social reality. (1) It *represents* social reality by referring to the outside world (e.g., a world of gardens and dwellings); (2) It *expresses* social reality by indexing social and cultural identities (e.g., the social stratification of people's roles and functions); (3) It *is a metaphor for* reality as it stands for, or is iconic of, a world of beliefs and practices that we call 'culture' (e.g., in the case at hand, habits of work and leisure, gardening and cooking).

Because language is essential in the way reality is given meaning, applied linguists like Alastair Pennycook (1994) and James Gee, Glynda Hull & Colin Lankshear (1996) have used the term 'discourse' instead of language when they study the links between language and culture. Pennycook sees verbal discourse as only one of the many modalities in which culture gets constructed: "discourse does not refer to language or uses of language, but to ways of organizing meaning that are often, though not exclusively, realized through language" (Pennycook, 1994, p.128). Gee, Hull and Lankshear broaden the notion of discourse to encompass all aspects of what we usually call 'culture': "A Discourse is composed of ways of talking, listening, reading,

writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects, in particular settings and at specific times, so as to display or to recognize a particular social identity” (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996, p.10). For him, cultures are not only national entities, but any group linked by common interests or history. For example, law school teachers and students enact specific social identities or ‘social positions’ in the Discourse of law school. This definition brings to the fore the tension between social convention and individual creativity that characterizes both language use and cultural context. Discursive practices have offered a fruitful methodological framework for studying the language, context and culture nexus (Hanks, 1996; Kramersch, 1993; Risager, 2007; Young, 2009) as well as intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

There are roughly two different ways of looking at culture in language teaching, depending on one’s disciplinary and intellectual orientation: modernist and postmodernist. These two perspectives on culture coexist today in the theory and practice of language learning and teaching.

### **3. Teaching culture: Modernist perspectives**

Until the 1970’s, culture was seen as the literacy or humanities component of language study and was associated with the grammar-translation method of teaching foreign languages. In the 70’s and 80’s, following the communicative turn in language pedagogy, culture became synonymous with the way of life and everyday behaviors of members of speech communities, bound together by common experiences, memories and aspirations. In both cases, speech communities were seen as grounded in the nation - the national context in which a national language was spoken by a homogeneous national citizenry.

### *Big C culture*

As a humanistic concept, culture is the product of a canonical print literacy acquired in school; it is synonymous with a general knowledge of literature and the arts. Also called ‘big C’ culture, it is the hallmark of the cultivated middle-class. Because it has been instrumental in building the nation-state during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, big C culture has been promoted by the state and its institutions (e.g., schools and universities) as national patrimony. It is the culture traditionally taught with standard national languages. Teaching about the history, the institutions, the literature and the arts of the target country embeds the target language in the reassuring continuity of a national community that gives it meaning and value. National cultures are always bound up with notions of the ‘good’ and ‘proper’ way of life which is why they elicit pride and loyalty. Because they are imbued with moral value, language learners who have grown up with other values find it often difficult to understand foreign cultures on their own terms. They find refuge in cultural stereotypes or in literary fiction. The fact that foreign languages are still taught for the most part in ‘departments of foreign language and literature’ and that the curriculum for foreign language majors still puts a heavy emphasis on the study of literature is a reminder that language study was originally subservient to the interests of philologists and literary scholars, not anthropologists or sociologists. With the advent of communicative language teaching, the humanistic concept of culture has given way to a more pragmatic concept of culture as way of life. But the prestige of big C culture remains, if only as *lieux de mémoire* or sites of remembrance (see Nora, 1997) in Internet chat rooms named, for example, *Versailles*, *Madison Avenue* or *Unter den Linden* - cultural icons of symbolic distinction.

### *Little c culture*

With the focus now on communication and interaction in social contexts, the most relevant concept of culture since the 80’s has been that of ‘little c’ culture, also called

‘small cultures’ (Holliday, 1999) of everyday life. It includes the native speakers’ ways of behaving, eating, talking, dwelling, their customs, their beliefs and values. Research in the cultural component of language learning has been deeply interested in cross-cultural pragmatics and the sociolinguistic appropriateness of language use in its authentic cultural context. To study the way native speakers use their language for communicative purposes, the convention ‘one language = one culture’ is maintained and teachers are enjoined to teach rules of sociolinguistic use the same way they teach rules of grammatical usage (i.e., through modeling and role-playing). Even though everyday cultural practices are as varied as a native speaker’s use of language in everyday life, the focus is on the typical, sometimes stereotypical, behaviors, foods, celebrations and customs of the dominant group or of that group of native speakers that is the most salient to foreign eyes. Striking in this concept of culture is the maintenance of the focus on national characteristics and the lack of historical depth.

The sociolinguistic concept of culture takes on various forms depending on whether the language taught is a foreign or a second language. In foreign language (FL) classes taught outside of any direct contact with native speakers, culture is mostly of the practical, tourist kind with instructions on how to get things done in the target country. FL learners learn about the foreign culture as an exotic curiosity; they try to adapt to it or temporarily adopt it as their own when they travel to the country. In second language (SL) classes taught in the target country or in institutions run by native speakers abroad (e.g., British Council, Goethe Institute, Alliance Française, Confucius Institute), culture can also take the form of exposure to debates and issues of relevance to native speakers in the target country or of discussions about living and working conditions for immigrants. In the same manner as children are schooled into becoming proper citizens, so are immigrants acculturated into the habitus of nationally defined native speakers, they acquire a national home they can be loyal to and a national identity of which they can be proud. Culture as a process of nurturance and socialization is achieved mainly through schooling in its written, literate tradition (Kramsch, 1998).

#### **4. Teaching culture: Postmodernist perspectives**

If, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the globalized geopolitical landscape and the spread of computer-mediated technology have changed the nature and the role of culture in language teaching (Risager, 2006), they have not necessarily changed the modernist way culture is studied and taught. Most researchers in educational linguistics still view culture as tied to identifiable speech communities that share common values and common memories. In many cases, the old-fashioned national community has given way to multiple, real or imagined, multidimensional, and dynamic communities based on common interests or practices. However, these communities, defined by ethnic, professional, familial, or gendered ties, are still viewed from a modernist perspective as preexisting social structures; they decide whom to include and whom to exclude; they reproduce a given social order, centered this time on the goal-driven, strategically motivated individual, who strives to manage his life through participation in a variety of communities of practice (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). This individual is still seen as an autonomous social agent participating with other autonomous agents in a common task to realize common goals.

The fact that increasingly language learners do not agree on the definition of common tasks, do not share the same goals and values, the same historical memories and interpretation of events as other speakers of the language has prompted some applied linguists to adopt a post-modernist (Giddens, 1991) or ecological approach to the teaching of culture (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). They stress the relationality of self and other across multiple timescales in a decentered perspective, where the meaning of events emerges in a non-linear way in interactions with others, and social reality is constructed minute-by-minute in the ongoing discourse. In this perspective, language learners do not change their identity by learning a foreign language but they might be led to change subject positions. This is the perspective I have been taking with French and Persian

gardens. Seeing the two cultures echoing each other across time and space might foster in students a post-modern subjectivity, that applied linguists, following Bhabha (1994), have located in the third place of discourse (Kramersch, 2009a) - a symbolic competence that focuses on the process of meaning making itself (Kramersch, 2009b).

In online or face-to-face interactions, students are seen as constructing their own and others' subject positions through the questions they ask and the topics they choose to talk about or to avoid. These subject positions constitute over time a discursive practice that we call 'culture'. They are acted out on a much larger scale in national debates like, for example, the one surrounding the wearing of the Islamic veil in French public schools. This cultural debate cannot be taught in a French classroom in Iran through mere explanations of cultural difference. It has to be constructed with the students by making explicit the presuppositions behind their own religious beliefs; how educational history is constructed differently in the two countries; how French secularism is constructed in the foreign press, how freedom of religion is constructed in France; and how the separation of Church and State is talked and written about in different countries. The subject positions that emerge from this intercultural encounter are multiple, conflictual and they are likely to change as things are talked about differently in different times and places (Weedon, 1997).

In a postmodernist perspective, culture has become a discourse, that is, a social semiotic construction. Native and non-native speakers are likely to see their cultural horizons changed and displaced in the process of trying to understand others, or, as Clifford Geertz said, in trying to "catch 'their' views in 'our' vocabularies" (Geertz, 1983, p.10). A postmodernist definition of culture attempts to account for these new realities. If culture is no longer bound to the territory of a nation-state and its history, then we have to see it as a dynamic discursive process, constructed and reconstructed in various ways by individuals engaged in struggles for symbolic meaning and for the control of subjectivities and interpretations of history. These struggles take place simultaneously on multiple and conflicting time scales (Blommaert, 2005): the 21<sup>st</sup>

century time of global ecological concerns clashing with the 20<sup>th</sup> century time of national industrialization and modernization as well as with the much older time of cultural traditions. As 'layered simultaneity' (ibid, p.130), culture cannot be read directly into behaviors and events, it has a meaning that depends on who does the reading and from which historical position in society. Culture, then, is the meaning that members of a social group give to the discursive practices they share in a given space and time and over the historical life of the group. Learning about a foreign culture without being aware of one's own discursive practices can lead to an a-historical or anachronistic understanding of others and to an essentialized and, hence, limited understanding of the Self.

## 5. Intercultural competence

The term 'intercultural' emerged in the eighties in the fields of intercultural education and intercultural communication. Both are part of an effort to increase dialogue and cooperation among members of different national cultures within a common European Union or within a global economy (for a review, see Jackson, 2012; Kramsch, 2001). Intercultural education as a component of a humanistic education is pursued with particular intensity in the Scandinavian countries (e.g., Hansen, 2002; Risager, 2006, 2007), in Germany (for a review see Königs, 2003) and in France (Moore, 2001; Zarate, 2001).

In foreign language study, the concept of intercultural competence emerged in Europe alongside the concept of communicative competence (e.g., Byram, 1997; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Bredella & Delanoy, 1999; Burwitz-Melzer, 2001; Jordan & Street, 2001; Krumm & Portmann-Tselikas, 1998; Roberts, Byram, Barro, Guilherme, 2002; Zarate, Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier & Penz, 2004; Liddicoat & Scarino, forthcoming) with a social and political orientation (for excellent surveys, see Corbett, 2003; Risager, 2007). Byram and Zarate (1997) identified five *savoirs* or capacities that constitute intercultural competence: *savoirs* (knowledge of self and

other; of interaction; individual and societal); *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills to discover and/or interact); *savoir comprendre* (skills to interpret and relate); *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness, political education); *savoir être* (attitudes: relativising self, valuing others). Recently some European educators (see e.g., Hu & Byram, 2008) have used various ways to evaluate intercultural competence, based on the Common European Framework of Reference and on Milton Bennett's model of intercultural relativity (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003). In the U.S. the development of intercultural competence is at the core of genre-based literacy curricula (Byrnes, 2002) and online telecollaboration (Ware & Kramsch, 2005) at the college level. It has been recently promoted in foreign language departments as an organizing principle of the curriculum (Kramsch, Skogmo, Warner & Wellmon, 2007; Schulz & Tschirner, 2008). In all these cases, culture is tied to the characteristics of native members of a national community who speak the national language and share in its national culture. But such a modernist definition of culture is being challenged by a lingua franca like English that knows no national boundaries and by global social actors who contest the supremacy of the native speaker as well as the notion of neatly bounded speech communities. A post modernist view of culture manages not to lose the historicity of local national speech communities while attending to the subjectivity of speakers and writers who participate in multiple global communities.

The concept of intercultural competence has been given a new meaning through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to foster interaction in the L2 between native and non-native speakers (NNS) and among NNS, and to enable them to access and manipulate foreign cultural environments (Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Thorne, 2003). The direct access to L2 speakers and the cultural immersion provided by CMC enhance the illusion of semiotic immediacy and cultural authenticity. The increased use of CMC to develop communicative competence in the L2 has led to a reorientation of language learning toward conversational fluency, online chatting ability, the negotiation of surface features of speech and a focus on common experiences in the here-and-now. It has not, however, necessarily led to the

in-depth exploration of cultural difference, the negotiation of incompatible worldviews and a focus on different interpretations of historical events – which used to be the impetus behind previous approaches to language teaching, from grammar-translation to communicative language teaching. Intercultural communication online has been focused instead on participation in on-line communities (Lam, 2008; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), collaboration, joint problem-solving and the development of hybrid identities that are both liberated from the social constraints of the real world (Baym, 2000) and subjected to peer pressure and to the collective constraints of online communities. It is no wonder that an increasing number of applied linguists (Levine & Phipps, 2010; Kramsch, forthcoming) are eager to put history, memory and the subjective aspects of language learning back into the language classroom, as well as a reflection on what it means to ‘operate between languages’ (MLA, 2007), based on one’s own cultural background.

## **Conclusion**

I have used the transcultural metaphor of Persian and French gardens to illuminate the fact that culture in language study has to be seen as a way of making meaning that is relational, historical, and that is always mediated by language and other symbolic systems.

Outdoor gardens have no meaning in themselves unless they are related to and contrasted with indoor apartments and dwellings. Persian gardens have meaning today not only through their intrinsic beauty but because they have been responded to directly and indirectly, verbally and non-verbally, by landscapers, architects and poets from all over the world. It is this dialogue across time and space that constitutes Persian culture, not the individual paintings and tapestries that one finds in museums. The teaching of culture will always experience a tension between, on the one hand, the need to identify, explain, classify and categorize people and events according to modern objective criteria and, on the other hand, the desire to take into

account the post-modern subjectivities and historicities of living speakers and writers who occupy changing subject positions in a decentered, globalized world. Both needs are reflected in language, which makes the task of the language teacher both more complex and more relevant than ever.

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