

The Analysis of Chinese International Students' Culture, Language, Identity and Difference: Mediation, Adaption and Expansion

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Abstract: China has continuously provided international students studying abroad, whose number has mounted to over 2 million in the past four years. While even-more people paid attention to their learning difficulties, seldom did they notice the issues such as identity loss. In this essay, the author discussed the concept about culture, language, identity and difference, the relationship between them on the basis of own experience as an international student in Australia. Facing the unfamiliar environment as well as the challenges, international students may accept the differences, adapt the attitudes and expand the horizon to embrace new culture.

Keywords: International students; Chinese cultural identity; Cultural identity change

1. Introduction

China's Ministry of Education (MOE) has addressed the data about the number of students studying abroad in Year 2019 (2020), in which the amount has rocketed to about 703,500 (see the data in Figure 1.1). The increasing number has also caught the researchers' attention and the scholars began to investigate the learning difficulties or language barriers the students had been through. However, as an international student before, the author would like to discuss another issue that bothered the international students similarly: the sense of identity. In this essay, the relationship of language, culture, identity and difference, the author's own story and the reflection will be presented.^[1]

To figure out the definition of language, we cannot neglect the connection between language with representation and meaning. Not only the dictionary, but earlier research regard language simply as a tool to communicate with counterparts in verbal or non-verbal pattern (Hall, 2013). People viewed the world in their unique "conceptual map" that constructs, organizes and sorts the feeling and understanding towards everything around, and language is another system of representation that interprets and expressed the concepts in mind. Generally speaking, language generates the meaning of two-dimension concepts to referable three-dimension items.^[2]

But culture is also an indispensable element when mentioning language. From sociocultural perspective, language is an individual tool at the same time a sociocultural resource that the "individual uses of language assume at those moments draw from their historical, conventional meanings in relation to their situated, immediate contexts of use" (Hall, 2012, p. 17). Hence, different language usages symbolize different meanings in different contexts, which are regarded as meaningful places to reside language—culture. Language enables people to negotiate the means and express feelings whilst culture helps convey our individual identities, build our interpersonal relationships, and construct the sense of belonging in our social groups and communities (Kramsch, 1998).^[3]

In Chinese dictionary, "culture" is "Wen Hua": "Wen" means characters and language; "Hua" means civilization and revolution. Kramsch concluded culture as a dynamic discourse community in which people share a common history, current society and future imaginings like the material heritages, national spirit or traditional habits, festivals and beliefs. Even if members left the community, they will keep same criteria to perceive, believe, evaluate and act.^[4]

Language and culture are inseparable (Marchand, 1975; Kramsch, 1998; Hall, 2012; Hall, 2013). We may have all faced up the situations that texted messages or book pages cannot convey the feelings thoroughly without certain cultural context. In the same vein, the relationship of language and culture is mutual. On the one hand, culture shapes and socializes spoken or written language, including what is proper to speak or write in what circumstances or which pattern is appropriate to use (the application form, the business letter), because they are authorized by cultural regulations (Kramsch, 1998; Hall, 2012). Members of a community not only exchange experience but create experience through language. Thus, language embodies cultural reality. On the other hand, language retains the continuation of culture, at the same time between a storage of culture and a tool by which culture is created (Hall, 1998). Any study of language is in essence a study of culture (Hall, 2012).^[5]

Culture cannot express meaning unless linguistic codes are possessed to interpret concepts into language, vice versa (Hall, 1998). Therefore, different people from different culture have different understanding of connotations based on the fixed denotations. If culture is such a transformable action that need to be understood, roles and identities of whom involved should be de-constructed and understood (Kim, 2003).^[6]

Hall (2013) once introduced “meaning is what gives us our sense of identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’ - so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups” (p. xix). “Identity” is complicated to define – it is not simply the answer of “Who am I?” but “a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1997, p.52). In other words, identity, instead of the tags such as nationality, gender or culture, becomes the production people perform through language and representation.^[7]

Identity is the individual’s concept of the “self”, including the understanding of the social definition of the “self”, within their inner mind or the wider society (Kramsch, 1998). Individuals can identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view the language as the mark of their social identity as they share the same understanding of the meaning (Woodward, 1997). Spindler and Spindler (1994) gave three dimensions to the “self”: the enduring self—is the social identity that one had in the past, an individual permanence in experience and meaning; the situated self—an instrumental concept that is continuously adjusted to the use of language in daily routines and to new settings in a new context; the endangered self — appears when the accommodation of the situated selves conflicts with the enduring self.^[8]

Culture can be regulated from one generation to another that culture is being re-created, re-defined and re-structured by identities (Spindler & Spindler, 1990). Identity, therefore, is also one process of representation that linked with language, culture, and meaning: representation produces meaning; language and culture influence this production, exchange and share the meanings as a social practice; representation establishes identity and meaning produced the sense of identity; identity can be compared via cultural difference. The relationship of culture, language, identity, difference, representation and meaning can be presented in Figure 1.2^[9]

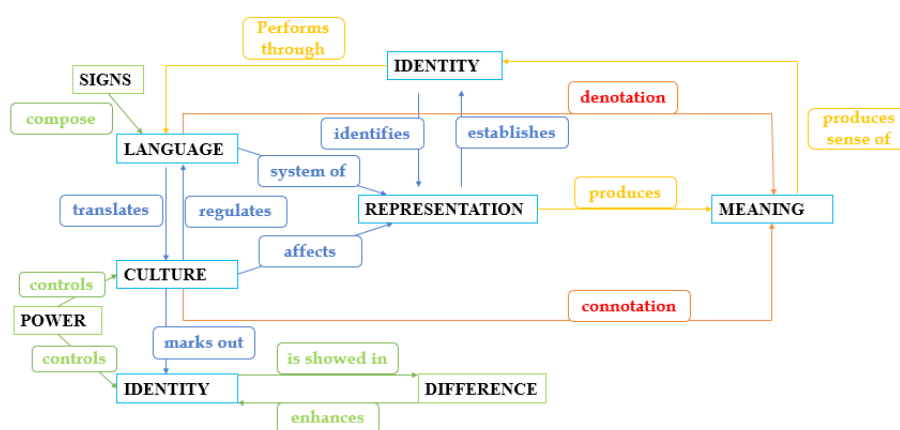


Figure 1.2 Relationship of language, culture, identity and difference

How meaning will be represented makes us (re)consider, question, agree or disagree with the different ways we understand ourselves and ways we are understood by others (Hall, 2013). The reason why difference matters in identity is that difference between cultural groups contributes to the construction of identity (Woodward, 1997). Hall (1997) addressed that identity is also dynamic, ongoing and not static as people are involved in the process of turning into the favored self in their social work.^[10]

In the next section, the author’s own story about culture and identity might give an inspiration.

2. A Personal case: “You are not like a Chinese as I think before.”

Studying in Australia forced me to face up with the struggle: whether to fit in or “keep it real”. At first, I found it unbearable to swallow pasta or bakery here comparing with China — “Paradise of Meals”. Besides, it was difficult for me to understand the assignments as I was more accustomed to reading in Mandarin. Poor English proficiency even made me fear of answering any phone calls. The transportation, payment method and even the opening hours of the shops were totally different, which bothered me a lot. For the first time in my life, I doubted the purpose and significance of being abroad and felt uncertain about the national pride. The uncertainty and insecurity rocketed to the highest level when I watched a video on YouTube named “The more I became un-Chinese, the more I got popular”. I asked myself: Should I abandon all Chinese habits and change myself to fit in Australian society?^[11]

The turning point occurred after I participated in a program organized by campus. Exchanging ideas within multicultural interactions and being encouraged by partners made me realize that my own culture is profound and unique in the Westernization trend. Alterations happened spontaneously: I invented my special menu with Australian ingredients but Chinese cuisine; I remembered the bus time and metro route map just to catch appropriate transportation; I invited foreign friends to have dumplings and Chinese dishes in my home; and I presented my friends with Chinese traditional items such as Panda doll or Peking Opera CDs.^[12]

One day, a friend from Bangladesh asked me: “I found an interesting thing about you. You are not like a Chinese people as I think before! From Chinese movies and newspaper reports, I thought Chinese people were kind of narrow-minded as some of them refused to admit they were from China to avoid being underestimated. But you are so proud to spread Chinese culture, and you get along well with the environment.” “Well”, I laughed, “Because I lived in Australia in a Chinese style.”

3. Reflection

In the story presented above, “I” had to solve the problem of settling down in a new cultural background. The dilemma of recognizing identity and whether to mediate led to the confusion. According to Kim (2013), if culture is dynamic and reconstructed, and culture establishes identity, furtherly identity is done through language, then learning a new language at least to some extent equals

getting a new identity.^[13]

Originally, “my” enduring self is a Chinese since “I” was born and raised in China. After studying in Australia, the situated self of adapting to Australia life entered and disagreed the enduring one from numerous aspects such as sense of value, habitual lifestyle or diets. But instead of adjusting “myself” to a brand-new identity, the enduring self and situated self-compromised with each other and expanded to a new identity—a sense of self-approval. And no matter how much I changed, in the core of my soul, I am still proud to be a Chinese.

The Spindlers (1994) stated that individuals respond to such conflicts with a re-affirmation of their social identity, adaptation, removal, and antagonistically actions, which are responses to avoid self-destruction. In this story, even confused and lost encountering differences from the beginning, “I” chose to cope with the exotic life and attuned to a more comfortable stage: self-reconciliation. Combining Chinese people’s attitude “Take the world as it is” with Australian popular and energetic society, “I” got inner peace and reaffirmation of the identity.

Culture and language habituates identity. Sapir-Whorf (as cited in Kramsch, 1998) yielded the hypothesis that “language decides thoughts”. To be more specific, the language and the culture behind it habitually influences one’s thinking manners. When “I” met the difficulties, “I” reflected the Chinese idiom “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” and then got involved in. And after learning English here for 2 years, the cognitive mind went through a new process. “I” can acknowledge English idioms, collocations, habitual sentence patterns and writing style to accommodate myself to professional learning. And “I” could think or talk in English smoothly and fluently as language more or less affected my cognitive development.

So as a current teacher, here comes the question: whether learning a second language reduces the sense of identity. From the emotional aspect, Bright (2017) worried that teachers and students’ representation produced through difference can entrap individuals as the identity reduced within a subtle gap of regularity and aberration, constrain and limit the possibilities of what students can think, do, or become. Some students may frustrate and give up when meeting the culture boundaries.

Trueba and Zou (1994) conducted a research in China among an ethnic group named “Miao”. They got the results that learning a second language and a new culture did not deviate from but on the contrary make they feel proud with their identity and strongly affiliate to their ethnic group. In “my” experience mentioned in the last section, learning English boosted my national pride as a “heir of dragon”, and somehow increased the sense of honor. Likewise, power and receptivity of the majority do something to identity. Kramsch (1998) and Cummins (1986) claimed that status and power relations could determine minority students’ failure of identifying. Imagining if “I” went to an exclusive country and found out that people there did not welcome my arrival, could I confront squarely to my identity? Learning a new language does not mean being able to be accepted by local speakers, but willingness to learn a new culture and get a development in certain life phases. Especially in Chinese EFL (English as Foreign Language) context, learning English becomes compulsory from primary school to senior high school. Young people absorbed western culture and gradually in English class, national identity comes across the “symbolically and emotionally charged views of English as a language of power” (Torres-Olave, 2011, p.318). How to keep the balance of western culture, English language and Chinese national identity became the hit in Chinese pedagogy field.

In conclusion, leaning a new language means learning a new culture, equivalently a new identity. Making mediation to get adaption to the new environment, finally can expand the sense of national identity. The teaching methods of how to teach English meanwhile triggering Chinese national identity will be my future research.

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