

The Role of Culture in the Humanities

The term 'culture', derived from Latin 'cultura' (®'agrum, hortum, arbores colere'), has gone through a permanent transformation along with the evolution of human societies. Since the Roman Age its original meaning has been abstracted toward the social context of human societies. Giving care, thought, time, etc. in order to develop something, even one's mind or friendship, and cultivate this object of dedication that seems to be worthy of improvement and refinement, especially man's own way of life, has been the aim of culture until today, and this idea has outlasted all the spiritual storms, floods and droughts in the history of human societies.¹

Cicero's 'Cultura ... animi philosophia est ...' was modified after the Roman Age. 'Cultura' was no longer limited to the boundaries of 'philosophia' then, but it was applied in a wider sense as 'cultura animi', i.e. education by philosophy, science, ethic and the fine arts.

This is how the term was still understood by Pufendorf² in the 17th, and by Adelung³ and Herder in the 18th century, and like this it has been handed down to us as the humanistic concept of culture. This concept of culture can be widened or narrowed, depending on the point of view of men of culture in their own society, e.g. the education by philosophy, science, the arts etc., further man's creative influences on the environment, the effects of this process on the social development of citizens, or ultimately, a society's ideological influence in this process.

An excellent representative of Herder's concept of culture is Goethe's 'Novelle', one of his last masterpieces⁴, which shows rather than 'cultura animi' in Cicero's sense the traditional features of chivalry along with the culture traits of his century:

An old family castle that had to be restored because of damages caused by a fierce natural surrounding serves as a symbolic representation of culture ('art and handicraft') that has to be restored and protected against nature ('wilderness'). Honorio, the duke's yeoman, was taking care of the duchess who went on a ride on horseback while her husband went hunting. Suddenly they saw a tiger which had escaped from the circus of the nearby village. Honorio had to kill the tiger in order to protect the duchess. This act of bravery triggered the young man's passion for the young lady, visible in his red cheeks, and he offered the tiger's fur as a present to his lady. The lady warned the yeoman, however, not to think of her in the presence of death, which would be sacrilegious. In consequence, the young man became conscious of the rules of his society, tamed his feelings and, as if in a sudden reaction out of piety, fell on his knees. Thus he asked her permission to leave the country to go to America as many other fortune hunters of his time, at the same time making the gesture of the medieval knight and expressing his high esteem of the lady.

Though being a follower of the classic concept of culture as 'cultura animi', Goethe created a new understanding of culture. Like Humboldt, he was aware of an intercultural relevance of all kind of art that included the use of language as a cultural mediator. Words like 'Weltbürger' and 'Weltbild'⁵ are used without translation in many cultures that accept the shaping function of language in an international sociocultural transformation process. Humboldt and Schleiermacher used a classic-romantic concept in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding with respect to the function of language: For them language is a key to the understanding of the world. At the same time it is a dynamic mediator, or as Humboldt said: It is *energeia* not *ergon*, i.e. energy not an artefact.

In the 19th century, the Marxists based their concept of culture on the hypothesis that all the cultures are determined by the way the different classes of their society participate in production and possession of material and spiritual values, which itself depends on the economical basis and the

1 Cf. Klaus, G. und M. Buhr (eds.) 1964/1971, the German Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 629-30.

2 Pufendorf 1672: *De iure naturae et gentium libri octo*.

3 Adelung 1782: *Versuch einer Geschichte der Cultur des menschlichen Geschlechts*.

4 After his visit in Jena in February and March 1797, Goethe told Schiller about his idea of an epic poem similar to the just finished *Hermann and Dorothea*, but he did not carry out his plan until 1828, when he wrote the *Novelle* in prose which was published in his edition of 1828.

5 'Weltbürger' to be translated as "intercultural citizen" and 'Weltbild' as "intercultural concept of the world"

social hierarchy of each nation. The development and evolution of the individual in his struggle to dominate nature, and especially his own social environment, is seen as the essential aim of all kind of cultural evolution from a Marxist point of view.

A more humanistic concept of language as a tool of *cultural transformation* has been used later by *sociolinguists* since Vygotsky (1934/ 1986).⁶ One of his followers, Lantolf (1994), refers to Vygotsky in his review on sociocultural theory and language teaching as the founder of *symbolic mediation* as a linguistic concept:

"Vygotsky developed his proposals on *symbolic mediation* based on analogy with the process through which humans mediate their *interaction* with the world of *objects* through the use of physical *tools*. Mediation, whether *physical* or *symbolic*, is understood to be the introduction of an auxiliary device into an activity that then links humans to the world of objects or to the world of mental behavior. Just as physical tools (e.g. hammers, bulldozers, computers, etc.) allow humans to organize and alter their physical world, Vygotsky reasoned that symbolic tools empower humans to *organize* and *control* such mental processes as *voluntary attention*, *logical problem-solving*, *planning* and *evaluation*, *voluntary memory* and *intentional learning*." (Lantolf 1994: 418)

This concept questions a mere instrumental use of language as a means of communication, and also a purely structuralist view of language and context. Charaudeau (1983), a French linguist who made an outstanding analysis of the emergence of culture at the discourse level, asserted that a speech act, rather than being the mere production of a message by one sender to one receptor, is a dialectic encounter between four participants:

- an addresser;
- an addressee;
- a communicator;
- an interpreter.

Halliday (1990) defines language as a social as well as a semiotic phenomenon:

'Language is at the same time a part of reality, a shaper of reality, and a metaphor for reality'.

Kramersch (1993) used Hymes' (1974) eight aspects of the speech situation in order to analyze the dynamics of a relational context:

- genre;
- norms of interaction and interpretation;
- instrumentalities/code;
- key;
- act sequence;
- ends;
- participants' roles;
- setting.

⁶ Although Vygotsky's main work 'Thought and Language' had been edited immediately after his death in Moscow in 1934, it didn't receive the official approbation for more than twenty years. The book was not available in translation until the 1960s.

Kramersch observed groups of students focusing on each of these aspects in turn, with the following result:

"In sum, the notion of context is a relational one. In each of its five dimensions: linguistic, situational, interactional, as well as cultural and intertextual, it is shaped by people in dialogue with one another in a variety of roles and statuses. Because language is at the intersection of the individual and the social, of text and discourse, it both reflects and construes the social reality called 'context'." (Kramersch 1993: 67)

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