

Language and Cultureⁱ

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Culture is a social construct that binds a group of people with shared ideals, values, attitudes, goals and way of life. It is acquired through membership in a particular group or society. It defines the world view of the people in its domain. It molds their concepts, perceptions, and outlook. It bestows upon them an identity fostered through the years and handed down from one generation to the next. These world view and identity are anchored on things which unite them and strengthen their bond as a people—their beliefs, way of thinking, aspirations, customs and traditions, heritage and determination. Each person is nurtured in a culture which initiates him or her into the different roles that he or she is expected to play in society in a manner that conforms to its norms. This culture is one's roadmap to charting a journey towards a fruitful and satisfying life.

Culture is embodied, expressed and handed down through language. While children are learning their native language, they are also gradually acquiring their culture. The words in the lexicon of a language are a strong indication of its people's way of life and world view. For example, each group of people has its own terminology in reckoning time: the farmers, through planting and harvest seasons; factory workers, count eight hours each day and wait for payday; and students consider time in terms of semesters, finals, and vacations. In addition, the lexicon of a language signifies things that its speakers give importance to. It is observed, for instance, that Filipinos have many words for rice – *palay* (unhusked rice grains), *bigas* (milled rice), *kanin* (steamed rice), *lugaw* (porridge), *sinangag* (fried rice), *puto* and *bibingka* (rice cakes), etc. And there are different varieties of rice: *malagkit* or *pilit* (glutinous rice), *denorado* or *rosa* (fragrant, oftentimes unpolished, rice), etc. The Americans, however, only have one term for all these – *rice*. So they say, rice grains, steamed rice, fried rice, etc. Conversely, while Filipinos don't have a word for snow, as it is non-existent in their world, the Eskimos have many. Here are a few examples: *qanuk* (snowflake), *kaneq* (frost), *kanevvluk* (fine snow), *natquik* (drifting snow), *nevluk* (clinging debris), *apun*, *qanikcaq* (snow on ground), *muruanek* (soft deep snow), *nutaryuk* (fresh snow), *qanisqineq* (snow floating on water), *qengaruk* (snow bank), *navcaq* (snow formation about to collapse), *pirtuk* (snowstorm), and many more.ⁱⁱ In the same manner, Hawaiians have 139 words for rain. Here are some of them: *noe* (mist or fine rain), *noenoe* (fine mist, fog or rain), *paka* (raindrops), *pakaku* (rain falling in large drops), *pakapaka* (a heavy shower of large raindrops), *paki'o* (showery rain), and *paki'oki'o* (to rain in short showers and often).ⁱⁱⁱ

Language is the vehicle of culture and of cultural transmission. It comes with a structure for categorizing the world around its speakers and their experiences. Categories differentiate external realities between cultures, as shown by the examples above. Another example is how cultures look at the concept of [+animate]. This is within the sphere of cognitive categories. Some cultures consider the sun, moon, sky, rocks and other non-living nature formations as animate, or having life, because these are very important in their lives; a few cultures even worship them. Social categories, on the other hand, establish kinship terms and define individuals within its realm through social associations. Additionally, there are forms of addresses which mark the social status of the addressee vis-à-vis that of the one addressing. Moreover, there is the category of gender: biological gender, male-female; grammatical gender, masculine-feminine; social gender, distinction based on social roles of men and women.

Such is the importance of language to culture. It gives form to every context in a culture on one hand and gives meaning to all socially related constructs and experiences on the other. It is the medium by which culture is acquired, understood, transmitted, preserved and valued not only by the people within the culture but also by those outside of it.

Conversation: Talking Points

1. How do you define culture based on your experience?
2. How important is culture to you?
3. What are the important things in your culture which are called by many names in your language?
Why are these things important?
4. Can language exist without a culture? Justify your position.
5. Can culture exist without a language? Justify your position.

ⁱ Rubrico, Jessie Grace. 1999. Wika at Kultura. http://www.languagelinks.org/onlinepapers/wika2.html#w_4

ⁱⁱ Counting Eskimo Words for Snow. <http://www.putlearningfirst.com/language/research/eskimo.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ William Hartston. Weather: Forget Eskimo snow - here are 139 Hawaiian rain words. *The Independent* (2 February 1998). <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/weather-forget-eskimo-snow--here-are-139-hawaiian-rain-words-1142513.html>