

Cultural Models: Learning How a Language Thinks

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Abstract

This paper reviews literature on cultural models, knowledge structures shared by members of a culture, and having profound effects on speech, understanding, and the propagation of certain beliefs. After addressing the construction of these models and their relationship to schema theory, some examples of models which have negative effects on people's sense of self and cross-cultural communication are discussed. Cultural models are part of people's cognition, and thus discussion of the related notions of conceptual metaphor and thinking for speaking are useful for understanding and seeing the possibility of cultural models as part of a language curriculum. The notion of cultural models needs more attention and development, as it provides a starting point to create more equal societies and better international cooperation through language and literacy education.

Keywords: cultural models, figured worlds, literacy education, foreign language education, cross-cultural communication

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Introduction

How should culture be taught in the language classroom? When it comes to foreign language classrooms, culture instruction often takes the form of teaching about holiday traditions and snippets of the target culture's history. While learning about holidays and history is interesting, and certainly can provide some insights into understanding the people whose language is being studied, how deep can this understanding really go? Learning surface forms of a culture—especially those which may only be given any attention once a year—does not go far enough in contributing to the learner's ability to communicate in daily social interactions. Historical events may give context to the way a modern culture has developed and occasionally provide fodder for conversation, but having knowledge of some past events doesn't often help one understand why people say what they say today, or to speak more like them. I thus suggest that more attention be given to the education of underlying aspects of a culture that take the form of shared knowledge structures and go a long way in affecting native speakers' speech, behavior, and even beliefs—what are frequently called cultural models.

There are a few varying terms in the literature that will be addressed as they arise,

but I want to settle on “cultural model” as a single, overarching term for ease of discussion. It is an intuitive term, and fits well the aims of this paper, wherein the models are approached as culturally-specific phenomena, being cognitive models held by a significant portion of a single culture or social group. The different terms are not at odds with one another, as they all describe a cognitive conception of some facet of the world which is held by an individual and widely shared by their surrounding community, playing an enormous role in their understanding of the world and behavior in it (Quinn & Holland, 1987; Ungerer & Schmid, 2008).

I certainly would not claim any model to be exclusive to only one culture, or to be held and utilized in the same way by all members recognized as being part of the culture. Rather these models should be seen as cultural tendencies widespread enough to effect members' conceptions of self and others, their society, and communicative events—and powerful enough to merit our critical recognition. These models are also by no means static; in the same way that ideologies and languages themselves are always adapting and changing, so can it be expected that cultural models swell and diminish, and transform or die away, according to the people who hold them (see the later discussion of *burik-*