

UNIT 2

LANGUAGE AS A PRODUCT OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall;

- discuss how language, culture and society are related, and
- discuss society and culture help in the evolution of language.

On completion of the unit, you should be able to;

- understand the concept of language, culture and society, and
- understand how society, culture are related.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever asked yourself how we got here ? I mean from the Stone Age cavemen to the present civilized state; from the ape to homo sapiens—how the human species developed over time. What have been the major defining factors that have lead us here—intelligence and the faculty of language or rather the capability to use language. Can you imagine where we would have been without this unique gift ? It is one primary reason the cave men started to interact, live together, develop and grow.

2.2 LANGUAGE

Human language is unique among the communication systems of the natural world; it is socially learned and offers open-ended communicative potential. It is a complex and fascinating phenomena that has played a role in recording human thoughts, explorations and achievements. Human language is unique among the communication systems of the natural world

for interaction. It is our primary tool of thought and perception. Language not only reflects and expresses facts and observations; it also influences attitudes and behaviour. It is at the heart of who we are as individuals.

Languages are constantly changing, sometimes into entirely new varieties of speech, leading to subtle differences in how we present ourselves to others. It thus constitutes a vital component of the cultural prerequisites underlying societal development. However, the question that intrigues us all is – how is language, culture and society interrelated ? To do that, let's first examine each of the three words separately.

2.2.1 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : 1

SAY WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE TRUE ABOUT LANGUAGE.

- (i) Spoken Language is not unique to humans. _____
- (ii) It would have been possible to develop without language. _____
- (iii) Language has no role to play in our personality. _____
- (iv) Languages always had a complex structure and a rich vocabulary. _____
- (v) Only our language is responsible for our growth and development. _____

2.3 CULTURE AND SOCIETY

The overwhelming majority of mankind learns language within the context of an existing culture. There is no doubt that as people started living in groups they must have used some rudimentary sounds and gestures for communication which gradually evolved into some language over may be hundreds of years. It is possible to conclude that language is the precursor to culture. There are two points that should be noted. For either language or culture to evolve their need to be a community.

Although, there can be no absolutely conclusive evidence that language predates culture but it is possible that a group of humans could have created an elementary language that provided the framework for a culture. However without this cultural framework complex forms of language such as our own are not possible.

Many people use culture and society synonymously because both are so intermingled with us and the language we use. The language used by humans everywhere reflects the culture and society they belong to. Let us examine the terms society and culture in more detail.

2.3.1 What is Culture ?

The term culture comes from the Latin word *cultura* which means “to cultivate”. It is a Social Science. It is the way people live their lives and interact. All the norms, social rules, symbols, shared meanings, traditions, customs, methods of doing things, beliefs, rituals and interpretations of the world around, shared by a particular group or population can constitute culture.

So, **Culture** can be defined as a set of the beliefs, behaviours, objects, and other distinctiveness common to the members of a particular group or society. It is culture through which, people and groups identify or define themselves, conform to society's shared values, and contribute to society.

Thus, culture includes many societal aspects : language, customs, values, norms, traditions rules, tools, technologies, products, organizations, and institutions. We can also say that it is described as the people's way to live such as their learned behaviour, values, morals, art, law, symbols, lifestyle *which they accept completely without any second thought in mind.*

In general, culture is handed down through the generations, by communication, teaching and imitation. It is considered as the social heritage of the organized group. It can be said to be a pattern of responses (thinking, feeling, and behaving) developed by the Society for dealing with issues arising due to the interaction of the group members and the environment. This interaction is through language. Language is also transmitted culturally; that is, it is learned and language is also a transmitted part of culture. Language and the cultural environment in which it is spoken are interconnected. This interconnectedness is affected by the physical environment as well as the social and cultural environments in which the language is spoken. A clear example of the influence of culture and the physical environment may be noted in the differences between the forms of English that are spoken in different parts of the world, so we can say that language has played a key role in the transmission of culture across generation.

2.3.2 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : 2

SAY WHETHER THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE TRUE.

- (1) Language is a part of culture. _____
- (2) Culture is older than language. _____
- (3) Cultural heritage is passed on from one generation to another.

- (4) Cultural development is not possible without language. _____
- (5) Language is the medium through which different aspects of culture get expression. _____

2.3.3 What is Society ?

According to the Cambridge dictionary, Society is a large group of people who live together in an organized way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the work that needs to be done.

The Merriam–Webster's Dictionary defines society as :

- An enduring and cooperating social group whose members have developed organized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another.
- A community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests.

Society can also be a part of a community that as a unit is distinguishable by particular aims or standards of living or conduct : a social circle or a

group of social circles having a clearly marked identity. It can be understood as an organized group of people *who live and interact in such a way as to share a common culture*. The members of the society share common attributes like values, traditions and customs. They also share similar cultures and religion. It is nothing but an organized group of people who live together and are connected with one another. It is not exactly same as **culture**, which can be understood as the way of living of people living in a particular place or region. Every society has its culture, but they are not the same thing.

Let's look at some differences to get a better understanding

BASIS FOR COMPARISON	CULTURE	SOCIETY
What is it ?	It is something that differentiates one society from the other.	It is a community of people, residing in a specific area, sharing common culture over time.
What it does ?	It unites the social framework through influence.	It shapes the social framework through pressure.
Represents	Rules that guide the way people live.	Structure that provides the way people organize themselves.
Includes	Beliefs, values and practices of a group.	People who share common beliefs and practices.
Examples	Fashion, lifestyle, tastes & preferences, music, art, etc.	Economy, village, city etc

2.3.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : 3

SAY WHETHER THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE TRUE.

- (1) A common culture can unify many societies or communities.
- (2) Culture is already within us.
- (3) Culture is learned.
- (4) It is possible for many societies to exist within a culture.
- (5) The growth of culture is not possible without language.
- (6) Society is,
 - (a) A Political Entity
 - (b) The same as culture and nation
 - (c) Limited by geographical boundaries
 - (d) Organized interaction of people sharing distinctive culture in a geographic location
- (7) Culture includes,
 - (a) Only material things such as cars and jewelry
 - (b) Our thoughts, our beliefs and our possessions

- (c) The land we share
- (d) Only non material things such as values or beliefs

2.4 LANGUAGE, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

What came first : language or Culture ?

In mankind's earliest evolutionary period there must have been mere gestures and facial expressions and yells and grunts similar to what researchers observe in the great apes. But that is language. That is communication. There can be no doubt that language came first, for obvious reasons. For one, it is instinctive for both humans and the lower animals to communicate, even creatures as far down the scale as ants; or even a human child reared with no experience of human culture. Culture, on the other hand, implies being part of a group in which the members are free to act by individual choice. The separate “pieces” of culture – the urge to vocalize or a sense of rhythm, or the urge to gather food or to mate – are for sure based on instinct. But the culture–building sharing of values and resources and customs and all the rest of what makes up “culture”. It could never have started in the first place if some means of communication had not been already been established. So, Language had to come first. As human language develops, enculturation occurs, but again, this means language had to be the first step in its development – not the result. Man is a social animal due to language which is central to our existence. The overwhelming majority of mankind learns language within the context of an existing culture. It is possible to conclude that language is the precursor to culture. *There are two points that should be noted. For either language or culture to evolve there needs to be a community.*

Society and language are correlative terms. It is hard to think of ourselves, our societies, and culture without language. Culture unifies a community although there is within that unity. As we evolved, the need for language and communication became clear. It became almost like a natural need. Communication is necessary and vital to man just like the intake of water and food is essential for survival of mankind. Language is a primary means of socialization.

Language helps us in our everyday thought processes and also to merge into societies and be responsible for lifestyles. The pillar stones of any society are its population and human potential, both of which depend greatly on communication in the form of language. Communication of ideas and emotions is essential for the development of society and bonding among people and this has been made possible because of the formation of language.

Language is a social product, springing up with the first community, developing with the increasing needs of culture and civilization. It has been observed that if there is no community or society, language also disappears. Thus language happens to be the index of the progress of society. The longer a society exists, the richer is the language. Therefore, we can say that Society and language are mutually indispensable.

The phrase ‘language is culture and culture is language’ is often mentioned when language and culture are discussed. From the earliest times language can have developed only in a social setting and culture started when speech was available. Language itself is a mirror of society and culture. Their values can be reflected in its language. Language like society is constantly evolving and is subject to growth and change in much the same way as a living organism. It is difficult to think of a society without language which is the foundation of human progress. It is the flesh and blood of human culture and central to one's identity as an individual and as an indicator of a social group. The kinds of language we use help us identify ourselves with a social group or society.

There are several possible relationships between language and society. The varieties of language that speakers use reflect their regional, social or ethnic origin and possibly even their gender. It is also seen that particular ways of speaking, choice of words, and even rules for conversing are in fact highly determined by certain social requirements of the group in which that language is being used. For instance with the rapid explosion in the field of communication technologies and the availability of multiple social network platforms, people have quickly adopted theses for their everyday communication. It has been seen that there is a remarkable decline in etiquette in SMS language and other online conversation and correspondence. Use of traditional greetings like “hello” and “goodbye” are slowly disappearing and use of slang and universal loan words have become more prevalent. At times it becomes difficult to digest this loss of “netiquette” as it is now called. Language is evolutionary and the vocabulary and phrases which are used depend on a number of factors like place of residence, age, education level, social status etc.

Culture unifies a community though there is great diversity within that. India is a great example of this. The speech used by the youth is very different from the one used by the older generation. Similarly, different groups may speak one language but there might be subsets used by different groups of people. In other words, within the broad spectrum of culture, multiple societies, groups or communities can co-exist. These societies are bound by the uniform cultural norms and yet use a variety for communication in their groups. Common speech can serve as a symbol of social solidarity amongst the speakers of that language. Moreover, there are certain sub forms of a language which can be identified with a particular group like a family unit or maybe a young college group, club members, underworld dons, a labour union. These groups develop their own peculiarities of speech and this in turn differentiates them from the larger group.

Language has reflected the times in which it is operational. Just as the cultures and societies are dynamic, so are languages. Language grows and continuously adapts, evolving as we come up with better words that reflect our society or culture. In particular, it mirrors the complexity with which our lives are. As with technology, we strive to optimize language so we can communicate complex ideas, with most clarity in the most efficient way. There is no doubt that the amount of technical vocabulary and slang we use in everyday life is currently growing faster than ever before. With roughly

half of the world's population now connected to the internet, we see massively increased levels of communication. Ideas, words and phrases are being generated and circulated at a amazing rate. Previously, it took years for specialized language to make the transition from developer to the general public. Now, thanks to the growing influence that technology has on the economy and the use of social media, technical jargon can pass into everyday usage extremely quickly. We live in a connected world, where the internet and technological advancements affect our daily lives. As a result, the English language has to keep up-to-date with changing concepts and ideas and has seen the rise of new words such as Wi-Fi, Internet, YouTube, Wireless, Connectivity, Online, Web, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

We've also changed the way we communicate via devices such as tablets and smart phones, using slang and word abbreviations to explain what we mean and how we feel. Some of the most common examples of text speak include :

- LOL – this means ‘laugh out loud’ and is often thrown into verbal communication as well as written communication.
- BRB – this means ‘be right back’
- TTFN – meaning ‘ta, ta for now’
- TC – means ‘take care’

2.5 LET US SUM UP

We can conclude that language (even if it was the most primitive or rudimentary) must have played a key role in bringing people together into a community leading to the formation of societies and helped to develop a common culture. Culture and society are intricately related and cannot exist without each other. A culture consists of the “objects” of a society, whereas a society consists of the people who share a common culture. Both are intertwined and in both the cases, people need language because language performs various functions in a society. The evolving communities and societies have helped languages to evolve further. So, we can say that language is the product of society and culture. Language not only reflects and expresses facts and observations; it also influences attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, we can say that social changes produce changes in language and language is indeed a product of culture and society.

2.5.1 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : 4

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.
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- (1) Is growth of culture possible without language ? Why ?
- (2) Is it possible that within a Culture many societies can exist ?
- (3) Do you think the language spoken today will remain same in future ? Why ?
- (4) The language used by the person reflects his/her cultural background. Comment on this statement.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Enculturation : The adoption of the behavior patterns of the surrounding culture

homo sapiens : species to which modern man belongs; bipedal primate having language and ability to make and use complex tools;

Phenomenon : something that exists and can be seen, felt, tasted, etc. especially something unusual or interesting

Interact : act together or towards others or with others

Fascinating : capturing interest

Endeavour : Activity

Primary : one of the main

Norm : an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things that most people agree with

Rudimentary

Values : Principles or standards of behaviour; one's judgment of what is important in life.

Traditions : the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way.

Customs : a traditional and widely accepted way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a particular society, place, or time.

Indispensable : If you say that someone or something is indispensable, you mean that they are absolutely essential and other people or things cannot function without them.

2.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED AND REFERENCES

Language and Society, Raymond Hickey

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<https://prezi.com/f89kidijcb17/how-does-culture-and-society-influence-language/>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313098787_Language_Culture_and_Society_Implication_in_EFL_Teaching

<http://www.actforlibraries.org/which-came-first-language-or-culture-language/>

<https://arroseinaprose.org/2018/04/10>

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. False 2. False 3. False 4. True 5. False

Check Your Progress 2

1. True 2. False 3. True 4. True 5. True

Check Your Progress 3

1. True 2. False 3. True 4. True 5. True
6. D 7. A, B, D

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