

Cultural Linguistics and Intercultural Communication

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The relationship between language and culture is the core issue in intercultural communication. For native language learners, their native language and local culture are in perfect harmony; while for foreign language learners, they often unconsciously separate the two, resulting in the phenomenon of “half-cooked rice” in foreign language education. This phenomenon makes us reflect on the purpose, content, and methods of foreign language education and seek theoretical guidance. Foreign language teaching aims to improve intercultural competencies, so it must face language and culture in intercultural communication. As a branch of cultural linguistics with multidisciplinary origins, intercultural linguistics focuses on the relationship between language and culture in intercultural communication. In the process of exploring how to apply linguistic theories in second language acquisition, it shows that intercultural linguistics not only has important enlightenment and application value, but also needs further studies.

Keywords: cultural linguistics, intercultural competence, SLA, intercultural linguistics

Foreign Language Education and Intercultural Communication

In the process of second language acquisition (SLA), the challenge students encounter is not only the “accuracy and fluency”, but also the “authentic and appropriate” expression in intercultural communication. This reflects the role of cultural factors in second language acquisition. For instance, the influence of Chinese traditional and popular culture is inseparable while we deal with pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and writing system in Chinese linguistics. Language records and carries cultural concepts, while culture reshapes and produces new cultural concepts in interaction.

With the rapid development of technology, what are the main challenges in foreign language teaching? Electronic translator has undoubtedly removed many obstacles in communication between different languages. However, due to many changes in society, new words and various expressions have emerged in an endless stream, with distinct cultural characteristics and obscure implications, which has brought challenges to foreign language learning. Even foreign language learners who have studied for many years are often confused in intercultural communication. For example, Chinese young people often use “tall, rich, handsome” or “white, rich, beautiful” as the criteria for choosing a boyfriend or girlfriend, while American young people often ask

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“why”, even though they understand these words literally.

A Chinese short article told a story that a family hostess saw that the house was not clean, so she wrote that it was everyone’s responsibility “人人有责” to keep the house clean; her son saw it and added a horizontal line to the character “人”, changing it to “大人有责” (parents’ responsibility); her husband saw it and added another horizontal line, changing it to “夫人有责” (wife’s responsibility). When Chinese people read this short story, they not only understand it, but also find it interesting. Through the minor changes on one Chinese character, they can see the different cultural concepts in modern Chinese families. However, foreign students learning Chinese usually cannot appreciate the cultural connotations and mysteries in it. Another example, found in *Deutsche Welle* (2024-01-10). A Chinese citizen wrote, “This can only be regarded as slapping flies. Everyone understands it”, after former national football coach Li Tie confessed that he bribed to get promoted and selected players with benefits. People may not know the “flies” refer to whom and people “understand” what.

Chinese people also encounter similar problems when learning English. For example, “YOLO” is a word that represents American values, but it is difficult for Chinese people to understand its real meaning. Even if people know that “YOLO” is an abbreviation, that is, “You Only Live Once”, the ideological connotation and the cultural value that it represents are not fully understood or agreed with by Chinese people, especially middle-aged and elderly Chinese. For another example, Mr. Blinken, the US Secretary of State, instructed staff to use gender-neutral language, such as, avoid using “ladies and gentlemen”, “mother/father”, “son/daughter”, “husband/wife”; recommend and approve the use of non-gender-indicating words such as “folks”, “partner”, and “spouse”. According to traditional Chinese culture, people often find it hard to understand and accept these language taboos. In contrast, gender-sensitive words are very important and popular in Chinese. From ancient times to the present, there are dozens of ways to address husband and wife. In contemporary China, many more new words for women. In addition to the general terms “Miss” and “Ms.”, there are also “pretty girl”, “hot chick”, “ladylike woman”, “little jasper”, “independent woman”, “white collar lady”, “female gold digger”, etc. Among them, the Chinese word “leftover woman” is interpreted as “3 Ss (Single, born in Seventies, Stuck)” in Japanese, but there is no exact translation in English to explain its Chinese cultural connotation. For men, in addition to general terms for “Mr.” in Chinese, there are also “handsome brother”, “rich young man”, “Mr. dreamy”, “straight man”, “scumbag”, “sissy young man”, “fresh-faced young man”, etc. These words all bear the imprint of times and culture.

“What to learn” and “how to learn” have long been questions for discussion in second language acquisition. These two issues are actually pointing to one concern: What is the purpose of foreign language education? It is important to set up the criteria to measure the effectiveness of foreign language teaching. Modern technology, such as AI, on the one hand, is leading the development in various fields; on the other hand, society is complicated and changing rapidly. Even if people are with same language and cultural background, they often get confused, misunderstood, or misled in communication. Intercultural communication will be more obscure, complex, and challenging. Therefore, it needs more research. The fundamental purpose of second language education is to improve the competencies of intercultural communication. Modern technology and AI cannot replace intercultural communications; on the contrary, a deep understanding of both culture and language in intercultural communication is not only the purpose of foreign language education, but also the goal of humanistic studies. Intercultural communication will also provide abundant data and corpus support for high-tech fields such as AI or Chat GPT.

Linguistic Theories and Teaching Practices

In the field of second language acquisition, it is expected that the teaching effect will be twice as good as expected. Taking Chinese as a second language (CSL) as an example, the goal pursued by teachers and students is to speak the target language accurately and fluently with correct pronunciation. However, the results of learning are often not satisfactory. Students spent a lot of time and energy, but the Chinese they learnt was still in a foreign accent, so called “pidgin Chinese” or “half-cooked rice”, and they usually cannot express their meaning comprehensively and appropriately in intercultural communication. This phenomenon poses a great challenge to the research and development of linguistics.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proposed 5 Cs as the standards for foreign language learning (World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages—5 Cs). The following chart takes CSL as an example, not only lists the learning goals, but also spells out the classification of intercultural competencies.

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages(ACTFL) “World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages” —5 Cs

美国中小学中文学习目标 Learning Standards for Chinese Language

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| • Goal 1: COMMUNICATION 沟通 | • Goal 3: CONNECTIONS 贯连 |
| • 1.1 Interpersonal Communication 理解诠释 | • 3.1 Making Connections 触类旁通 |
| • 1.2 Interpretative Communication 语言沟通 | • 3.2 Acquiring Information 博文广见 |
| • 1.3 Presentational Communication 表达演示 | • Goal 4: COMPARISONS 比较 |
| • Goal 2: CULTURES 文化 | • 4.1 Language Comparisons 比较语言 |
| • 2.1 Practice of Cultures 文化习俗 | • 4.2 Cultural Comparisons 比较文化 |
| • 2.2 Product of Cultures 文化产物 | • Goal 5: COMMUNITIES 社区 |
| | • 5.1 School and Community 学以致用 |
| | • 5.2 Lifelong Learning 学无止境 |

Source: Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary School-CLASS
by Luqian ZHU

Figure 1. The goals for foreign language education.

In order to achieve the goal of foreign language education, linguists have put forward many hypotheses and theories. Among them, there are five influential theories:

- (1) Krashen's Monitor Model Theory;
- (2) Interlanguage Theory;
- (3) Cognitive Theory;
- (4) Universal Grammar Theory;
- (5) Acculturation Theory.

Those theories have made in-depth theoretical approach to the process of language generation and acquisition from different perspectives. However, the relationship between language and culture in intercultural

communication has not received enough attention and lacks in-depth discussion. This is one of the core issues in second language acquisition and cultural studies.

There are basically four different interpretations of the relationship between language and culture. The following chart attempts to vividly express these four different relationships: (1) Parallel relationship, unrelated; (2) language is dominant, and culture is subordinate; (3) intersecting, with both division and integration; (4) one point and two sides, integrated into one.

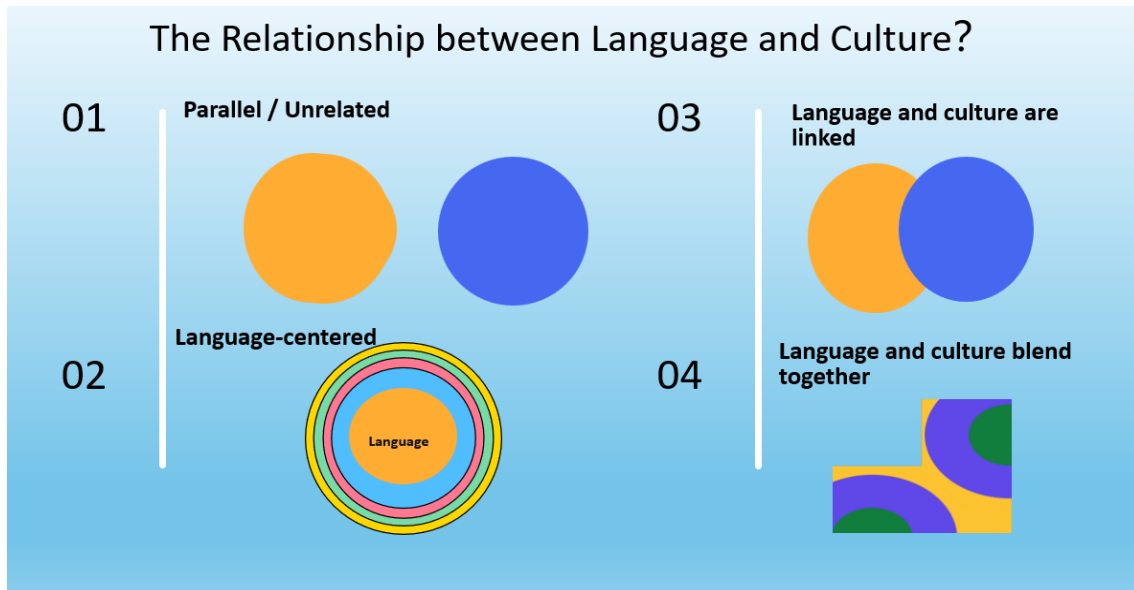


Figure 2. The relationship between language and culture.

What is language? In short, language and the study of language include the following components:

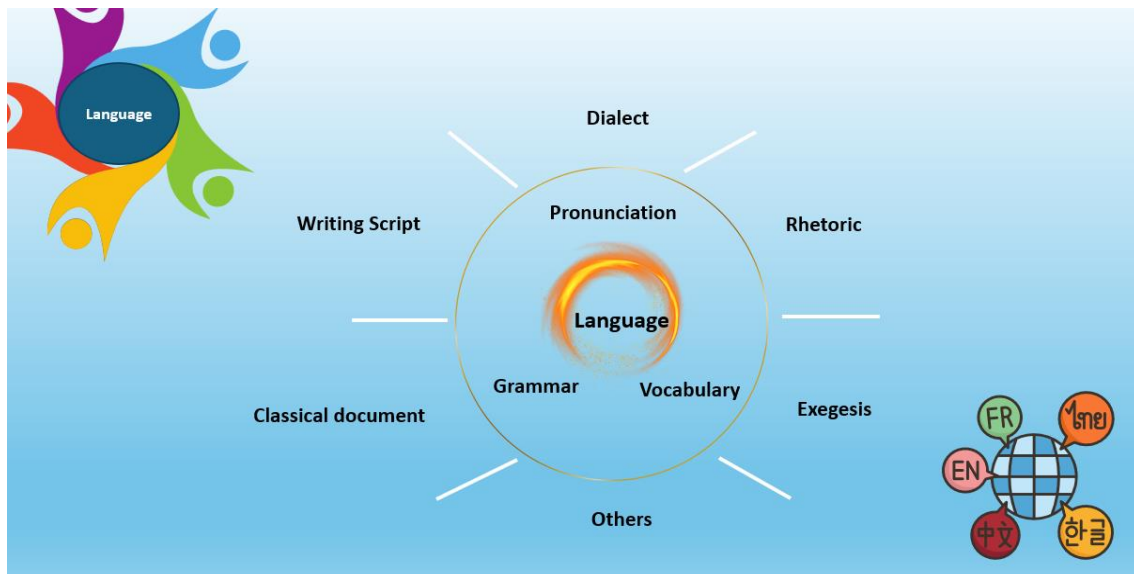


Figure 3. The components of a language and language studies.

What is culture? There are various cultures in the world, involving all aspects:

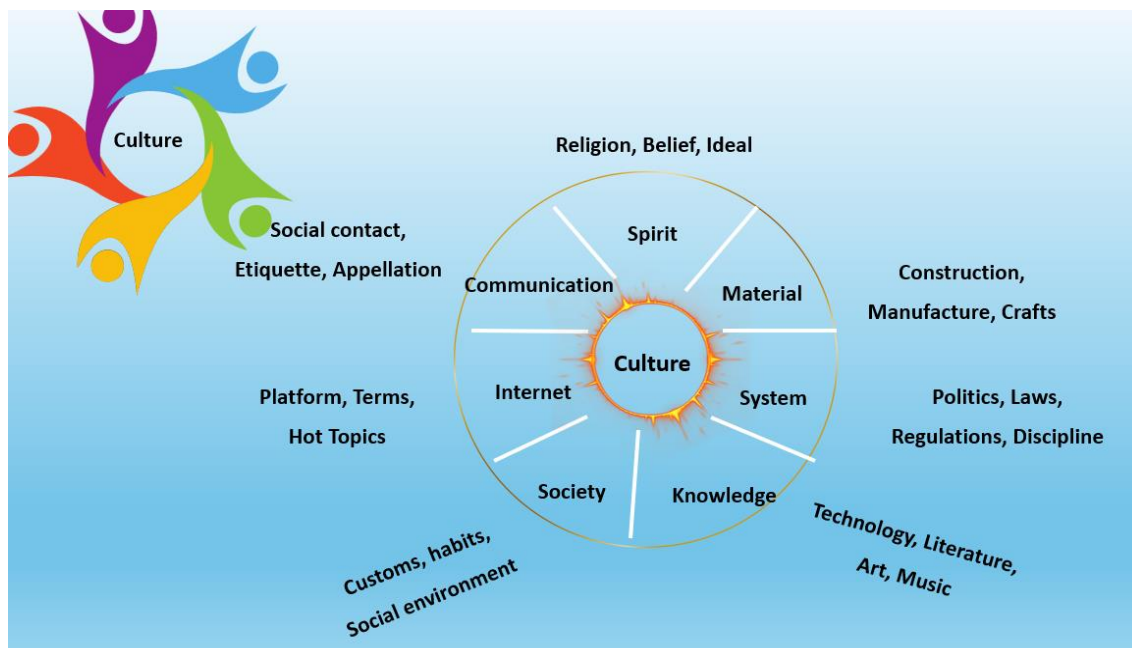


Figure 4. The elements of culture.

In intercultural communication, not only mother tongue and local cultural knowledge are needed, but also foreign language and foreign culture. Only by integrating multiple languages and multiple cultures can intercultural competence be enhanced. Intercultural competence not only includes attitudes and behaviors in communication, but also involves self-cognition, openness and transparency, mutual respect, empathy and sharing, flexibility and agility, and being good to understand each other, so as to achieve the purpose of mutual understanding. This kind of interaction is not only very important between different languages and cultures, but even when communicating between people of the same language, the differences in age, gender, background, etc., cannot be ignored. As a Chinese proverb say, “knowing yourself and others, you will win every battle”.

There are different interpretations of the definition of intercultural competence. Among them, Deardorff (2006, pp. 241-266) pointed out that intercultural competence is “communication and behavior that is both effective and appropriate when interacting across difference”. The cultivation of this ability is exactly the purpose of our foreign language education and humanities education, which aims to fundamentally improve people’s interaction, mutual trust, mutual understanding, and mutual respect between different languages and cultures. The intercultural competencies also provide inspiration and direction for linguistic research.

From Cultural linguistics to Intercultural Linguistics

Cultural linguistics is a discipline based on cognitive linguistics. The term cultural linguistics was first used by Ronald Langacker, one of the founders of cognitive linguistics. In the history of the development of linguistics in the world, the relationship between language and culture has attracted widespread attention from the academic community as early as the late 18th and early 19th centuries. For example, Marcel Granet and Henri Maspero of France left relevant works. In China, the theoretical interpretation of the relationship between language and culture has a long history, and there is a tradition of combining language to cultural studies. For example, Yang Xiong’s *Dialects* in the Western Han Dynasty investigated and recorded synchronous dialects, reflecting the cultural differences between different regions. The pioneering work of linguistic research on culture and language

in contemporary China can be attributed to Luo Changpei and his book *Language and Culture* (1950). This book can be considered as the cornerstone of cultural linguistics in modern China.

Culture includes both spiritual civilization and material civilization. Culture is the foundation of language. Language is the crystallization of culture. Language is a special phenomenon of culture, a carrier of culture, and a way of spreading culture. Culture and language are interdependent and keep pace with the times. Modern linguistic research focuses on the practical application of language, actively moves towards the application field, and tries to make linguistics “humanistic”. Cultural linguistics was born for this reason, focusing on exploring the relationship between culture and language, and is based on multiple branches of linguistics.

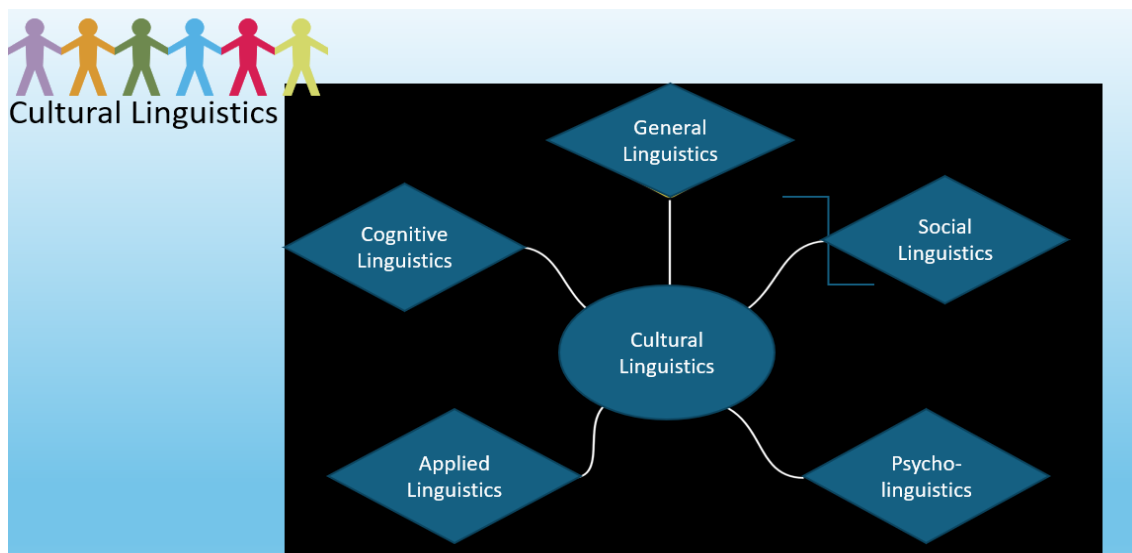


Figure 5. Cultural linguistics and its relation with other branches of linguistics.

In intercultural communication, the relationship between language and culture is more complicated. There is not only a relationship between the mother tongue and the local culture, but also a cross-relationship with foreign languages and foreign cultures. Therefore, it can be said that intercultural linguistics is a new branch of cultural linguistics:

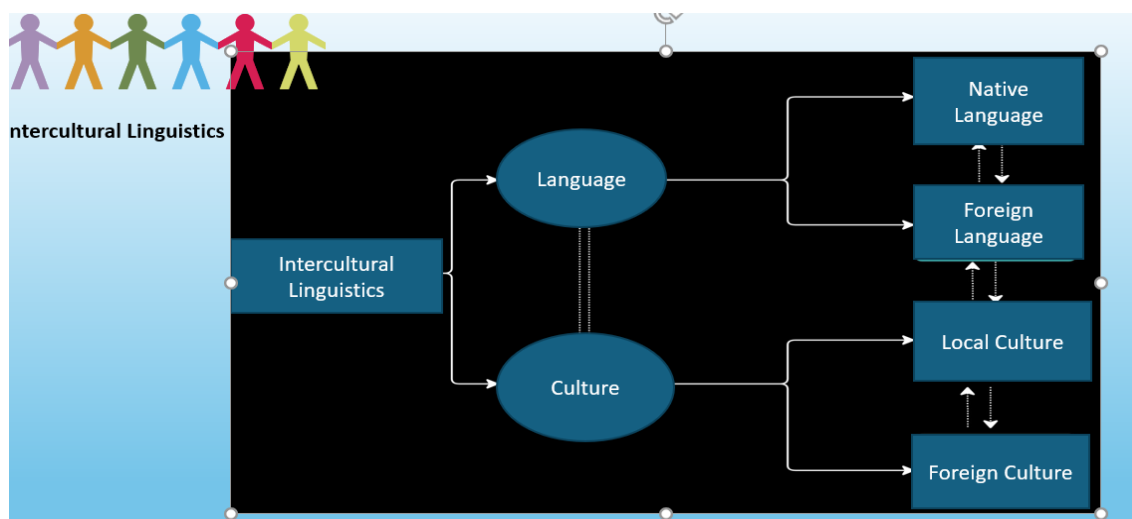


Figure 6. The components of intercultural linguistics.

Intercultural linguistics provides inspiration for the construction of intercultural competence:

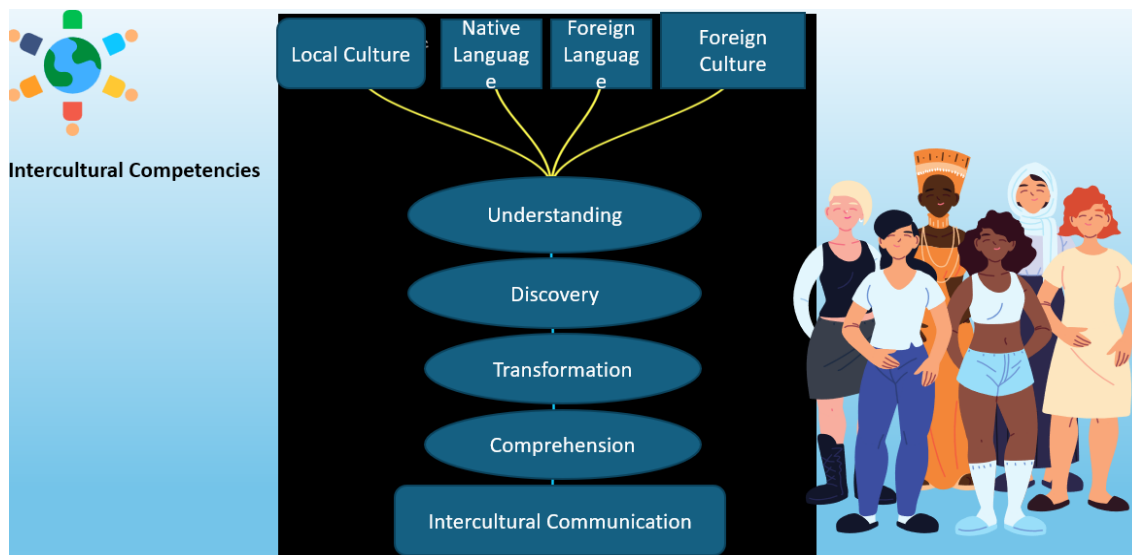


Figure 7. Elements and process of intercultural communication.

According to the guidance of intercultural linguistics, the level of intercultural communication competence can also be established:



Figure 8. The levels of intercultural competences.

In summary, we can preliminarily establish the connection between intercultural linguistics and intercultural competence:

Teaching objectives: Intercultural communication competence
Teaching content: Interlanguage and interculture
Teaching methods: Establish the intrinsic connection between interlanguage and interculture
Teaching theory: Intercultural linguistics, focusing on the relationship between language and culture, especially between interculture and interlanguage

In fact, it is almost impossible to separate language and culture. In intercultural communication, culture, as the foundation and soul of language, contains many elements that influence and restrict the quality of communication, such as social factors, artistic factors, literary factors, historical factors, philosophical factors, religious factors, emotional factors, cognitive factors, etc. Only by clarifying the relationship between these factors and language expression through multidisciplinary and multimedia comprehensive discussions can we achieve the desired effect.

The discussions of the relationship between intercultural linguistics and intercultural competence are attempts to combine theory and practice. Theory guides teaching practice, and teaching practice is the application and verification of theory. Theory can help with curriculum design, teaching methodology, and promote professional development. Our discussion of intercultural linguistics is only a preliminary attempt.

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