



The Relationship Between Culture and Language: An Anthropological Linguistics Study

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ABSTRACT

The interplay between culture and language is a central theme in anthropological linguistics. Culture encompasses values, beliefs, norms, and traditions passed down through generations, and language plays a fundamental role in expressing and preserving these cultural elements. This paper explores the reciprocal relationship between language and culture, illustrating how language not only reflects but also shapes the social and cultural realities of a community. By examining various examples, such as the use of honorifics in Japanese culture and the transmission of oral traditions in indigenous communities, the study highlights the role of language as a medium for cultural continuity. Additionally, it delves into how cultural changes, such as technological advancements, lead to the evolution of language, especially in the development of new vocabulary. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language and culture mutually influence each other, facilitating the ongoing process of cultural preservation and transformation.

Keywords: *anthropological linguistics, culture, language*

Article history: Submitted October 2024 | Revised November 2024 | Accepted November 24

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a concept that encompasses the entirety of a way of life, values, beliefs, norms, and traditions passed down from generation to generation within a community. Language, as one of the most fundamental elements of culture, serves not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for expressing and preserving culture. There is a profound reciprocal relationship between language and culture, where language not only reflects the social and cultural realities of a society but also shapes the way people think, their behavior patterns, and their worldview. Cultural theory seeks to understand and explain the complexity of various elements that constitute culture, including how these elements interact with each other and play a role in the daily lives of communities. In this context, the

relationship between culture and language becomes crucial because language acts as a vehicle for conveying cultural values and serves as a defining feature of a community's identity. Therefore, a deep understanding of a language requires an understanding of the culture that surrounds it.

Anthropological linguistics, as a branch of linguistics, places language within a social and cultural context. This field examines not only how language is used for communication but also how it reflects social dynamics, power structures, beliefs, and norms within society. Anthropological linguistics also explores the role of language in shaping both individual and group identities, as well as how language interacts with cultural factors in the evolutionary process of humans as social beings.

Through the study of the relationship between culture and language, as well as the application of anthropological linguistics methods in research, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interconnection between language and culture in human life. Furthermore, the paper will elaborate on how language serves as a crucial tool in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture from one generation to the next. This understanding will not only enrich linguistic studies but also offer insights into how culture and language mutually influence each other in the process of sustaining human civilization.

2. METHOD

This research is a literature review study, which is a comprehensive summary of research already conducted on a specific topic to show readers what is known about that topic and what remains unknown, to seek the rationale for previous research, or to generate ideas for further research (Denney & Tewksbury, 2012).

Data were collected from various sources, including journals, books, documentation, and the internet. Data retrieval was conducted through a literature search published on the internet, using the Research Gate and Scholar search engines with keywords: culture and language relationship, linguistic anthropology, and anthropological linguistic methods. The inclusion criteria for this study were: 1) Articles with themes related to the culture and language in anthropological linguistic research; 2) Articles in both Indonesian and English languages; and 3) Articles in full-text format. Literature that met the inclusion criteria was then collected, summarized, and analyzed using the critical appraisal method.

In the course of this literature review, we systematically examined a total of 21 articles related to the culture and language in anthropological linguistic research. While these articles provided valuable insights into various aspects of the topic, it is worth noting that the available literature may not encompass the entirety of this multifaceted subject. The relatively limited number of articles reviewed indicates that more comprehensive research efforts are warranted to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and prospects associated with the culture and language in anthropological linguistic research.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The close relationship between culture and language has long been acknowledged by linguists and anthropologists, making discussions about the interplay between these two fields a well-established topic in the scientific

community. Below are some of the ways in which language and culture are interconnected, along with explanations:

3.1 Language as a Tool or Medium of Culture

In this context, language functions as a tool or medium of culture, facilitating its development, transmission, and documentation. Indonesian culture, for instance, has been developed and enriched through the use of the Indonesian language. The integration of regional and foreign cultural elements into Indonesian culture is carried out using the national language. The richness of Indonesian culture is also disseminated or explained through the language, as the acceptance of a culture can only be realized when it is understood, appreciated, and respected by the community that possesses it. Thus, language plays a crucial role. It is often said that culture emerges when language exists because language drives the formation of culture. Language is used as an expression of cultural values.

Cultural values transmitted through language, as a conduit of culture, can be categorized into three interconnected aspects: expressive culture, traditional culture, and physical culture. For example, in oral literature (folktales, poetry, pantun), language plays a role in conveying cultural expressions through literary works passed down from generation to generation. In the folktale "Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih," for instance, moral messages and cultural values regarding kindness and justice are communicated, reflecting expressive culture that involves creativity and the articulation of values through the medium of language. Similarly, in traditional culture, such as traditional ceremonies (weddings, funerals, religious rituals), language serves as a means of preserving and conveying rituals and customs practiced within society. For instance, in Javanese traditional wedding ceremonies, speeches or prayers in "Javanese Krama Inggil" (high Javanese) symbolize reverence for ancestors and the values of politeness maintained across generations. As for physical culture, such as cultural artifacts (batik, traditional architecture, "keris"), language plays a vital role in preserving knowledge about the creation process, the philosophy behind it, and specific functions of these objects. For example, in batik, specific terms in Javanese are used to describe particular motifs, such as the "Parang" motif, which symbolizes strength and resilience. These three aspects of culture are interrelated, and language serves as the main connector in communicating, preserving, and teaching the values embedded within each of these cultural dimensions.

3.2 Language as a Part of Culture

Language is considered a part of culture because the vocabulary of a nation (Alisyahbana in Lafamane, 2022) represents the spiritual and material wealth of the people who speak that language. Everything that is thought, done, experienced, and even perceived through the senses by a society consciously becomes part of their understanding of life, manifested in words, and becomes part of the vocabulary richness of that nation. Here are some examples:

- 1) In Inuit, the language spoken by the Eskimo community, there are numerous words to describe different types of snow, such as *qanuk* (falling snow), *matsaaq* (melting snow), and *piqsirpoq* (snow drifting with the wind). This reflects that snow is an integral part of the daily life of the community. The

richness of vocabulary mirrors their connection with their environment and life experiences.

- 2) Another example is in the Balinese language and culture, where the concept of *Tri Hita Karana* is well known. It teaches about the balance of relationships between humans and God (*Parahyangan*), humans and others (*Pawongan*), and humans and nature (*Palemahan*). These terms are not merely words but representations of the Balinese way of life, emphasizing the importance of maintaining harmony across these three aspects of life.
- 3) With the advancement of technology, many loanwords have been adopted from foreign languages, such as "internet," "gadget," and "software." These words reflect social changes and the adoption of technology in everyday life, becoming part of the vocabulary wealth of the Indonesian language.

3.3 Language as a Product of Culture

Language is seen as a product of culture (Levi-Strauss, in Lafamane, 2020), meaning that the language used or spoken by a particular community reflects or mirrors the entire culture of that society. For instance, during the performance of ritual ceremonies, each of which uses language, such cultural events give rise to specific linguistic expressions.



Figure 1. The Ma'nene Ritual in Tana Toraja
[Source: YouTube - Tribunnews]

An example is the *Ma'nene* ritual in Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, where the preserved remains of ancestors are exhumed, cleaned, and dressed in new clothes as a form of respect. During this ceremony, the Toraja language is used in prayers and conversations, expressing reverence for the ancestors. The language includes specific words related to concepts of death, ancestors, and the afterlife, as well as ritual phrases passed down through generations. This event gives rise to specialized vocabulary associated with ancestor veneration, such as terms for soul provision or spirit summoning, which are unique within the cultural context of the Toraja community. This illustrates how cultural practices can lead to the creation of specific language that reflects the values, beliefs, and traditions of a society, making language a product of its cultural heritage.

3.4 Language Only Has Meaning Within Its Cultural Context

The same linguistic form can carry different meanings depending on the culture that provides its context. When comparing two ethnic groups, we can observe these differences in meaning. Here is an example where a word or

expression has different meanings when viewed through different cultural lenses, such as the word "*saudara*" in Indonesian and Javanese. In Indonesian, the word "*saudara*" generally refers to relatives or people who share a blood relationship with us, such as siblings. Beyond that, "*saudara*" is also used as a polite term of address in formal settings, such as in speeches or official meetings. In the Javanese cultural context, the word "*sedulur*" (meaning "*saudara*" or "sibling") holds a deeper significance. In Javanese society, this term encompasses not only blood relations but also spiritual bonds. For example, there is the concept of "*sedulur papat lima pancer*," which refers to a spiritual belief about four mystical siblings who accompany a person from birth. This illustrates how the same word can take on different meanings when embedded within different cultural frameworks, highlighting the importance of cultural context in interpreting language.

3.5 Language as a Requirement of Culture

The concept of language as a requirement of culture can be understood in two ways. First, language serves as a cultural prerequisite diachronically (through time) because we learn culture through language. Language functions as a tool for transmitting culture from generation to generation. Culture is not limited to customs or artifacts but also includes knowledge, values, and social practices that are passed down through language. For example, in Balinese society, the concept of *Tri Hita Karana* (the three harmonious relationships) is passed down through folktales, ancient manuscripts, and formal education, all using either the Balinese or Indonesian language. A deep understanding of this philosophy, which encompasses the relationship between humans and nature, God, and fellow humans, can only be learned and transmitted through language.

Second, from a more theoretical perspective, language is a cultural prerequisite because it is composed of the elements that form the entire cultural structure, such as logical relations, oppositions, and correlations. Language acts as a structural tool that shapes the reality of culture itself. It is not only used for communication but also determines how humans perceive the world, create categories, and build connections between concepts within culture. This perspective shows that language plays a role in shaping and organizing culture through logic, opposition, and correlation.

For instance, the structure of language in social etiquette, such as speech norms in Japan, reflects the social hierarchy. The levels of formality in the Japanese language, like the use of *keigo* (honorific language) versus *tameguchi* (informal language), highlight oppositions and correlations between social status, age, or job position. Japanese culture manifests this hierarchical structure through language, making language a foundational element of the culture itself. These two perspectives illustrate that language is not merely a tool for communication but also a support and shaper of culture, both historically and structurally.

3.6 Language Influences Thinking.

Language and thinking are two fundamental and interrelated aspects of human life. These two elements distinctly separate humans from animals. Through language, people communicate with themselves and with others, while through thinking, they can solve various life problems they encounter. Thinking is an effort

made by organizing and using various concepts, considerations, habits, and rules before taking action.

The language we use influences how we understand and interpret the world around us. Differences in language structures can lead to differences in how people think about the same concepts. For example, speakers of languages that mark every noun with a gender (such as German, Spanish, or French) tend to associate objects with gender traits. In German, the word for "bridge" (Brücke) is feminine, leading German speakers to describe bridges with feminine attributes like "graceful" or "beautiful." In contrast, in Spanish, the word for "bridge" (puente) is masculine, and Spanish speakers are more likely to describe bridges as "strong" or "sturdy." This illustrates how language can influence our perception of the world.

3.7 Thinking Influences Language.

Conversely, there is an assumption that the way of thinking influences how language is used, or in other words, thought (as part of mental culture) shapes language. In this context, the culture of a society (Wardhaugh in Lafamane, 2020) is reflected in the language they use. Thought (mental culture) directs language to be meaningful, purposeful, and functional. Damage to a person's thought process can affect their language. Although the language of a person with mental illness may still be understood, its meaning, purpose, and intent might not be clear. Language, as a communication system, must convey understandable meaning and purpose, especially for participants in communication (the speaker and the listener).

The way a community thinks can influence how language develops, particularly in the addition of vocabulary or changes in word meanings. For example, in Japanese culture, the concepts of respect and social hierarchy are highly important, which is reflected in the Japanese language through different levels of formality known as keigo (honorific language). Japanese people are very conscious of social status and interpersonal relationships, and this mindset affects their language use. When speaking to someone older or of higher status, they will use more formal and polite language. Here, the mindset about social status influences how language is used in everyday interactions.

Another example from modern times is the evolving way people think about gender inclusivity, which has impacted language use. In some English-speaking countries, for instance, the use of the pronoun "they" as a singular pronoun has become more common to accommodate individuals who do not wish to be identified strictly as male or female. This change reflects a more inclusive and flexible way of thinking about gender identity, and as a result, language has adapted to reflect this way of thinking.

3.8 Language Etiquette is Influenced by Cultural Norms.

Another important aspect to consider is that in communication, we adhere to cultural norms. A person's language etiquette may not align with the cultural norms prevalent in the society where the language is used. If a person's language etiquette does not conform to these cultural norms, they may be perceived as odd, egotistical, arrogant, indifferent, uncultured, or even uncivilized



Figure 2: Javanese Language Etiquette (*Unggah-ungguh*)

The majority of the Javanese ethnic group uses the Javanese language for daily communication. Interestingly, Javanese has specific intonation and vocabulary rules based on the relationship between the speaker and the person being spoken to, commonly known as *unggah-ungguh*. Another fascinating aspect of the Javanese language is the script that has existed for hundreds of years. There are levels of communication in Javanese, such as *ngoko*, which is a more casual form of the language usually used when speaking to younger people. The next level is *krama madya*, used when addressing peers, and the highest level is *krama inggil*, a formal language used for those who are older or respected.

The correct use of language levels in Javanese culture is essential, as it not only serves as a communication tool but also reflects attitudes, respect, and understanding of the social values upheld by the community. Incorrect use of *krama inggil* can have significant repercussions, especially since the Javanese language has levels that express respect, politeness, and social hierarchy.

3.9 Language is Transmitted Culturally.

This means that language ability is transmitted from generation to generation through learning processes rather than genetically. This statement does not deny that children are born with innate (internal) abilities for language; rather, it emphasizes the distinction between human language and animal communication systems.



Figure 3: Diversity of Mother Tongues

The use of a mother tongue is the initial language system provided by parents to children to develop proper language behavior. With the social standards of the child's environment, the use of the mother tongue by parents during interactions can represent the language acquired by the child, or the use of the mother tongue by the child is derived from interactions within the family. The use of the mother tongue by parents can be reflected in the child's language.

Research on the use of the mother tongue, as implemented by parents as a representation of the child's language within the family environment in South Samondung village, shows that the Madurese language has various levels of speech (*ondhag bhasa*): *enjek/iye*, *engghi/enten*, and *engghi/bunten*. Meanwhile, Indonesian is also accepted by the community. This bilingual pattern of mother tongue is widely adopted by young families in general. The pattern of using the mother tongue influences children's social abilities, understanding of language politeness, and facilitates the acquisition of a second language (L2) in the school environment. Children whose mother tongue is Madurese, with its different levels of speech, find it easier to socialize within the community, especially when interacting with older individuals.

3.10 Culture is a Result of Communication.

The fundamental essence of culture, as explained above, is everything within the scope of societal life that results from the learning process. This includes ideas, actions, and human creations. All three are created and become meaningful in human life through interactions among individuals within a community. Human interaction can only happen if there is communication. Without communication, there is no interaction. That is why interaction is often associated with communication.

For example, in the oral traditions of indigenous communities, many traditional cultures are formed and sustained through verbal communication. Indigenous societies often convey their values, norms, history, and mythology through stories, songs, or poems passed down orally from generation to generation. An example is the "*Petik Laut*" ceremony in Probolinggo, a traditional ritual performed by coastal communities whose livelihood is fishing. "*Petik Laut*" is carried out as an expression of gratitude by the fishermen to God Almighty.



Figure 4: Petik Laut Ceremony in Probolinggo

The "*Petik Laut*" ceremony has been passed down through oral narratives that describe the traditional rituals. Without this verbal communication, the culture of "*Petik Laut*" would be difficult to preserve because most of its traditions are oral and not documented in written form. Continuous communication creates a living and enduring culture.

3.11 Cultural Change Influences Language Change.

Another important aspect of the relationship between language and culture that needs attention is the way cultural changes lead to language changes. Language changes driven by cultural shifts are more prominent in the lexical aspect (vocabulary) than in other linguistic aspects, both in form and meaning.

For instance, technological advancements have changed how we live and interact, directly impacting the vocabulary used in everyday language. New words have emerged to describe things that did not previously exist or were unknown. For example, words like "selfie," "influencer," "streaming," or "hashtag" were not part of everyday language before the advent of social media. As the culture of using social media grew rapidly, these words became part of the common lexicon. Their usage became widespread due to changes in how people communicate and share information.

Changes in lifestyle also affect a language's vocabulary. When society undergoes changes in how they live, work, and engage in activities, new vocabulary emerges to reflect this. Terms like "WFH" (work from home) or "digital nomad" have arisen due to changes in modern work patterns. A more flexible and remote lifestyle, driven by digital technology, has introduced new vocabulary to describe how people work and live.

4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that language and culture are inextricably linked, with each influencing and shaping the other. Language serves as a crucial medium for expressing and preserving cultural identity, norms, and values, enabling communities to maintain and pass down their heritage. The dynamic relationship between language and culture is evident in how linguistic structures and vocabulary adapt to reflect social changes, technological advancements, and shifts in cultural norms. Furthermore, understanding this relationship is vital for appreciating the role of language as more than just a communication tool but as a vehicle for cultural continuity and evolution. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of linguistic and cultural studies in fostering a deeper understanding of human societies and their development over time.

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