

Cultural Conceptualizations in Persian Language: Implications for L2 Learning

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Abstract

Intercultural communication is concerned with communication across cultures. Since cultures as well as languages differ from one another in significant ways, speakers conceptualize the world around them in different ways. These cultural conceptualizations form part of the collective cognition of a speech community or cultural group. This paper is an attempt to delineate some cultural schemas in Persian cultural conceptualization which are quite prevalent in Iranian culture and language which may crop up in everyday conversations. For this purpose, cultural schemas of 'maram', 'marefat', and 'gheyraat' are selected based on their frequent use in Persian language and Iranian culture. These schemas are elaborated and some implications for L2 learning are suggested.

Keywords: culture, conceptualization, schema, intercultural communication

Introduction

Language and culture are inextricably intertwined. Language is a cultural activity and is also embedded in cultural models and values. Every linguistic or discourse event is structured in a way by the culture that surrounds the speech event and speech community. This nexus of language and culture is referred to as linguaculture and languaculture by Paul Freidrich (1989) and Michael Agar (1994) respectively. According to Langacker (1999), language is an essential instrument and component of culture, whose reflection in linguistic structure is pervasive and quite significant. Langacker (2001) maintains that: The expression itself –overt linguistic elements and the notions they directly encode– is of course merely the tip of the iceberg. The expression per se is part of a usage event, i.e. an actual instance of language use, comprising the interlocutors' full contextual understanding of the expression, including their apprehension of its interactive force. The usage event is usually part of a longer discourse, and is one facet of the interlocutors' overall social interaction. The interaction takes place in a particular situational context, which in turn is embedded in a culture, which develops as a way of coping with the world. (p. 14)

In the same vein, Lakoff (1987) holds that experiential domains structure complex categories, which may be culture-specific. The concurrence of language-as-culture and language governed by culture is referred to as cultural linguistics (Palmer, 1996). Cultural linguistics, with a broad interest in language and culture, maintains that language is a cultural form, and that conceptualizations underlying language and language use are largely formed or informed by cultural systems. It studies language in its social and cultural context, paying special attention to cultural schemas and cultural models that shape language evolution and govern language use (Palmer 1996; Sharifian 2002, 2003). Moreover, cultural linguistics places a great emphasis on

cultures as a source of conceptualizing experience through cognitive structures such as schemas, categories, metaphors and scripts (Sharifian & Palmer, 2007).

Language is shaped by a wide spectrum of factors such as power relations, economic and political forces, socio-historical events and socio-cultural experiences, to name just a few. It is this cultural aspect of language that is the focus of this paper. In what follows, we elaborate on the concept of cultural schemas and cultural conceptualization and some Persian cultural conceptualizations will be outlined.

Cultural Schema

Schemas are generalized collections of knowledge of past experiences that are organized into related knowledge groups; they guide our behaviors in familiar situations. Cultural schemas do not differ from other schemas, except that they are shared by certain cultural groups rather than individuals (Garro, 2000). Schemas unique to individuals are created from personal experiences, whereas those shared by individuals are created from various types of common experiences (Garro, 2000). Cultural Schema Theory proposes that when we interact with members of the same culture in certain situations many times, or talk about certain information with them many times, cultural schemas are created and stored in our brain (Nishida, 1999). The experiences which are unique to individuals allow them to acquire personal schemas. Societal schemas may emerge from a group's collective knowledge and are represented across the minds in a society, enabling people to think as if they are one mind (Malcolm & Sharafian, 2002). However, when one's cultural environment provides experiences to which every member of that culture is exposed, his/her experiences allow every member to acquire cultural schemas (Nishida, 1999). Cultural schemas are conceptual structures which enable individuals to store perceptual and conceptual information about his/her culture and interpret cultural experiences and expressions. If a person is not equipped with the appropriate cultural schema, she/he may not be able to make sense of culturally unfamiliar situations (Malcolm & Sharafian, 2002).

Cultural Conceptualization

Palmer (1996) believes that languages are systems through which people express different conceptualizations of a wide range of experiences. These conceptualizations, however, do not stand in a one-to-one relationship with the entities in the real world; rather they are often negotiated and re-negotiated with other members of our cultural community who share the same collective cultural cognition. Two inherent aspects of cultural cognition are cultural conceptualizations and language. Cultural conceptualizations are the ways in which people across different cultural groups construe various aspects of the world and their experiences (Sharifian, 2003). Besides, in cognitive linguistics language diversity is viewed as a result of discrepancies in the ways speakers of different languages conceptualize experiences. For instance, different people from different cultures may view and conceptualize the world, nature, time, space, love, hate, etc. differently. The conceptualization of heart 'Del' in Persian may be different from that in Chinese, African languages, or western ones. A good wealth of these conceptualizations is so culture-specific that lack of knowledge about them could lead to cultural misunderstandings in intercultural communications.

Language is a central aspect of cultural cognition in that it serves as a collective memory bank (Frank, 2003, 2005; wa Thiong'o 1986) for cultural conceptualizations. It is shaped by the cultural conceptualizations that have prevailed at different stages in the history of a speech community and these can leave their traces in current linguistic practice (Sharifian, 2009). The lexicon of a language is perhaps directly linked with cultural conceptualizations in the sense that

lexical items act as labels, and hence "memory banks", for conceptualizations that are culturally constructed. In short, the lexical items of human languages need to be viewed as capturing and storing cultural conceptualizations such as cultural schemas and categories (Sharifian, 2009).

This has got relevance to L2 learning contexts because in an L2 learning environment there is a multitude of cultural differences that learners have to overcome. Since learners are from a different culture with different cultural conceptualizations, misunderstandings and miscommunications may arise. Gudykunst and Kim (1992) argue that in intercultural interactions two types of contexts come into play: external context and internal context. The former refers to settings and locations where the interaction takes place whereas the latter is the culture the interlocutors bring to the encounter. In intercultural communication, misunderstanding is much more likely to occur because the internal contexts, that is, the ways interlocutors use to conceptualize and perceive the situations, the world, and each other can differ greatly from one culture to another.

Persian Language and Culture

Persian (Farsi) is the language spoken by about half of the Iranian. There are different accents and dialects spoken in different parts of Iran, but the official language is Persian. Despite different dialects, consequently different cultures, spoken all over the country, Persian is the dominant culture which distinguishes it from other neighboring cultures and countries (Assadi, 1980; Eslami Rasekh, 2004; Keshavarz, 2001). Persian is greatly influenced by Arabic language and Islamic culture. As Sharifian (2007) holds, the distinctiveness of Persian culture is deeply embedded in the social and conceptual basis of the Persian language.

The Cultural Schema of 'Maram'

One of the social schemas in Persian collective cognition is the concept of 'maram'. The Aryanpour progressive dictionary (2010) lists the meanings of 'maram' as follows: doctrine, ideology, aim, object, platform, plank, tenet, precept, dogma, persuasion, and creed. All of these equivalents have the meaning of belief or way of thinking in political or religious sense of the word. Surprisingly enough, none of these equivalents captures the cultural conceptualization of the concept 'maram' as used in Iranian socio-cultural interactions. Maram is culturally conceptualized as something beyond these dictionary meanings. In every day parlance, 'maram' carries the meaning of 'caring for others or helping in difficult conditions' as in the following expressions:

Ba maram (with maram) 'caring for others'

Khosh maram (good maram) 'ready to help others'

Maram dashtan (maram having) to have the quality of maram

Maram terekundan (maram burst) to have a lot of maram when you least expect it (informal use)

On the contrary, if one does not have this characteristic, he or she is referred to as:

Bi maram (without maram) not caring for others

Bad maram (with bad or negative maram) not having this quality

Maram nadashtan (maram not having) not having this quality

As was shown, the socio-cultural shades of meaning attached to this culture-specific concept are completely different from those equivalents listed in a well-trusted dictionary. This concept is so deeply embedded in Iranian culture and everyday life that it makes it difficult for people who are not familiar with the culture to understand this cultural concept or manage the situations involving this behavior. Further, this cultural schema is so rooted in the culture that it is quite impossible to render a translation of it in the L2 as is shown in the following sentences:

I wonder how 'bi maram' he is in his behavior toward his parents
 I really like your 'maram' sir
 You are really 'ba maram' to give me such a grade
 Donyaye 'bi maram'
 Akhare 'maram'
 Rafighe 'ba maram'

These examples hint to the notion of untranslatability of this cultural schema. Even lexical items such as nice and cool do not capture the meaning of 'maram' in Iranian culture. In English, if you are 'nice', you are friendly, kind, and polite, whereas in Iranian culture you can be 'ba maram' even toward your enemy or you can show some degrees of impoliteness but still show your 'maram'.

The Cultural Schema of 'Marefat'

Another cultural schema in Iranian culture which is closely related to the schema of 'maram' is the schema of 'marefat'. The Aryanpour progressive dictionary (2010) defines this concept as understanding, insight, politeness, education, etc. but in social interactions it connotes almost the same conceptualizations as that of 'maram'. Take the following examples:

Bacheye ba ma'refatiye: He is a 'ba marefat' guy
 Kheyli tazegiya bi marefat shodi ke dige ye sari be maa nemizani: You have become so 'bi ma'refat' that you don't even drop by
 Enghadr marefat dasht ke ye zang bezane soraghe baabaa ro begire: He had enough 'marefat' to call and ask about dad

It should be noted that 'marefat' is sometimes used with 'maram' in the same context as lexical collocations complementing each other and intensifying the meaning as in the examples given below:

Ba maram o marefat (with maram and marefat)
 Bi maram o marefat (without maram and marefat)

The Cultural Schema of Gheyrat

Another cultural schema deeply rooted in Persian cultural conceptualization is the schema of Gheyrat. The Aryanpour progressive dictionary (2010) defines this term as zeal, ardor, backbone, sense of honor, etc. but gheyrat is a concept beyond these dictionary definitions. Gheyrat refers to an extreme sense of honor that a man should have toward his family members, especially female ones such as mother and sisters. This means that one has to pay a lot of attention to how their sisters and mother behave (and are treated) in the public. One has to even control the way they dress, walk, talk, etc. In Iranian culture, a man has to show a tremendous amount of gheyrat in order to save the family's aberu (face). If an Iranian girl does not behave according to the codes set by the society or family, and disgraces her family, an Iranian man may become gheyрати and (physically) punish or even kill the girl (usually in the past). The gheyrat schema often surfaces in Persian conversations in the form of expressions such as the following:

Ba gheyrat (with gheyrat)
 Bi gheyrat (without gheyrat)
 Gheyрати (with gheyrat)
 Gheyrat be kharj dadan (to show gheyrat)
 Gheyрати shodan (to become gheyрати)
 Gheyrat dashtan (to have gheyrat)

This schema is also closely related to the care one should give to *harfe mardom* (people's talk). If you are not *gheyrati* then you may lose your *aberi* (face) and consequently you have to encounter with *harfe mardom*. According to Sharifian (2008), the notion of *mardom* may imply an anonymous social force rather than a particular group of people. In fact, it is mostly the concepts of *aberi* and *harfe mardom* that forces one to show *gheyrat* toward their family members, in particular, wife, sister, or daughter.

Another definition for the concept of *gheyrat* can be traced back to one's religious beliefs and orientations. If one has strong or radical religious ideas, they may show greater degrees of *gheyrat*. Such people believe that if they show *gheyrat* toward their family members, they are doing a great service to the Islamic values. This schema is quite absent in western or even eastern cultures. In western cultures, people do not care a lot to *harfe mardom* 'people's talk' as do men in Iranian culture.

Conclusion and Implication

Speaking a language is more than a linguistic tool in the service of speakers. Rather, it is cultural tools and values which shape and dictate the way speakers in a language conceptualize and view the world. When it comes to intercultural communication, the notion of cultural conceptualization plays a significant role in the success or failure of communication. In this paper, we elaborated on the cultural context of cultural conceptualization of *maram*, *marefat*, and *gheyrat* in Persian language and culture. The study shows how some cultural schemas can be differently conceptualized from one culture to another. In cases where there may seem to be some degrees of overlap between the two languages, the cultural schemas and categories do not have a one-to-one correspondence. Therefore, in intercultural communication it is important to take these cultural conceptualizations into account.

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