

NARRATIVE AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES

The Era of Globalization started out with much promise and momentum at the end of the Cold War. But throughout the nineties, naughts, and into our current decade, the term globalization has taken on several different connotations. The promising notion of a "global village" is being chipped away bit by bit into something far less savory. With a glance across the political spectrum, from Europe, to the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, one may come away with the notion that the very word "globalization" has been doused with petrol and set ablaze in some locales, or at least turned into a sociopolitical buzzword, a surefire way to rile an audience.

How then did we get here? How, in the United States, did we get to a place in which a bombastic, orange-hued demagogue from New York City would win election for the presidency? Or that Great Britain would vote to throw geopolitical stability into flux?

The answers to these questions are multivalent and perhaps unanswerable. Everyone, regardless of political leaning or social status, has played a small part. But one aspect demands closer inspection vis a vis our role as language instructors: we got here through the battle over narrative control. The spins, pivots, dodges, deflections, half-truths, half-lies, outright lies, cover-ups, exposés, posts, tweets, blogs, reports and retractions we see each day, are the arrows in our quiver. And with the proliferation of social media, near-immediate connectivity and communication between billions of people, words and their meanings arguably have never mattered more.

The focus of this article is that with the rapid-fire bursts of symbols, words, and media, coupled with large segments of global societies pushing for more interconnectivity for myriad reasons, we are losing control not only of how words are used in discourse, but also how they are connected to our collective past.

Language instructors within this era of globalization are staring down a daunting task. On the one hand, language can and must be taught in a more scientific, synchronic approach, one that seems to be favored now and in which speaking is placed at a premium. Speaking is the quickest form of communication, and as long as the meaning of the speaker is conveyed to the listener effective communication has taken place. Context and history, diachronic concerns over a word's usage over time, these things are ignored. This should not be so.

Recent positions taken by linguists and language instructors from various places around the world indicate that more needs to be done to mend the dichotomy between what we say and what we mean. This is due to globalization because students in multi-cultural classrooms do not have a shared history and therefore no shared memory. The meanings behind words become more fractious as each user deploys them in speech or writing.

This paper aims to address and tackle some of these concerns. Included is the research from a handful of language teachers and linguists who have delved deeply into this field and line of reasoning. The goal here is not to arrive at a specific solution, which hardly exists at present. Rather, the author wishes to posit and address his concerns as a teacher of a foreign language.

Key words: *narrative, story, diachronic, empathy, teaching, foreign language.*

On a warm afternoon in May 2014, I scrolled through the inbox of my university email and stumbled upon a cold call for ESL teachers looking to pick up some summer work. I had just finished my first year as an adjunct instructor of composition and literature, a position that would never pay the bills in full but gave me the desire to pursue teaching in any capacity possible. The position would be for just two and a half weeks, and so I applied, was hired, taught students from Spain, Russia, France, China and Italy and accompanied them on their trip to New York City.

Fast-forward two years: I've now taught students in every age range, from six-year-olds to fifty-somethings, from 10 different countries. I've lived in three different countries, including Indonesia and Ukraine, crossed the Pacific Ocean twice, the Atlantic once, and I'm only a few time-zones shy of having been completely around the world. I've met great people, woke to the Muslim call to prayer (until I got so used to it I slept through). Leaving the U.S. was the best decision I've made in a long time, perhaps the best decision of my life. And it all began by hitting reply to a single email.

But it didn't take long for it to occur to me to ask why there are these opportunities all around the world for someone like me. Many of my own students were already bilingual and had experiences with language that far eclipsed my own. But for some reason, that I was a native English speaker gave them a reason to learn from me. Sure, I have degree in English, a Master's in writing, but while I delved deeply into my own language and culture, these young students appeared to have taken swaths from here and there. Many spoke one language at home and another in school or in public. And most surprised me by how well they spoke English already.

The answer, of course, is directly related to globalization, which has positioned me in a advantageous place simply because of the language and culture in which I grew up. In a recent English Club meeting here in Chernihiv, one of my colleagues posed a question to the audience as to why they choose to spend their free time on Sundays learning English. The answers varied, but those who appeared to have just started their working lives said that it was, in one way or another, a business decision. The English language is a currency; learning it was a transaction. Dr. Jinhyun Cho, a Korean-English translator and professor at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, describes it as "market capitalism combin(ing) with academic capitalism" in a neoliberal environment in which everything from government grants to an institution's ranking and competitiveness are linked to the English language. Underpinning this complex interconnectedness between students, teachers, and institutions is profit and profitability. Profit for the institutions and the ability to increase earning potential for the students.

It seems to me that anytime pure-form education bumps against profits and bottom lines, there must be a pause for reflection and a careful treading forward. Neoliberalism and its offshoot, globalization, which have set the stage in many ways for the goals of our foreign language instruction places, of course, a premium on individual choice and the free movement of goods, services, and people. This notion, *prima facie*, appears sound and sure: people and goods should be free to move about as they please, free from hard-handed government intrusion, and the culture that underlies these things will be freely moved and traded thusly. However, one look at recent headlines around the world is apt to jar one aback.

The very word "globalization," leaving aside its nooks and crannies, the complex economic and social ramifications of such a thing, seems to have been doused with kerosene and lit ablaze. Such is the furor the topic can bring about in certain circles. Last year, from halfway around the world in Indonesia, I watched closely and without disbelief as Donald Trump, that typhoon and buffoon of a tycoon, stormed his way to the front of the Republican race. He now stands at the threshold of the U.S. presidency, one of the most high-stakes positions in the world. It left many, if not most, baffled. But I was not surprised – in fact, I won a bet that he would be the presidential nominee. I say this not in self-aggrandizement, for I would have much preferred to lose that bet, but just that I recognized what it was that he was tapping into. Many Americans have been cartwheeling over themselves in trying to figure out how he could have gotten this far. Boiled down to its elements the answers are related to globalization – what it professes to lead towards, but, more importantly, what it will leave behind in its wake.

Professor Anne Freedman frames one problem succinctly. "If globalization truly had achieved – or could achieve – the free flow of people, goods, and ideas around the globe, then culture itself would be globalized, with no specificities impeding infinite mutual understanding. What it has produced, a contrario, is an array of diasporas, more or less precariously implanted in new habitats, more or less isolated, their sense of home dislocated between the near and the far" [2]. What we have seen with things like the U.S. presidential race and the Brexit vote, are the unsavory results of what can happen with perhaps too hasty globalized initiatives. The fact is that we do not change as quickly as our laws or noble ideas would have us. Rapid cross-pollination of disparate cultures leads of course to miscommunication at least or fear and aggression at worst.

In short, we are left to reevaluate, if not redefine, what culture really is. But that is a burdensome task. As it stands, we have attempted to define culture throughout the last two centuries, but no one definition seems to suffice. Psychologist and linguist Helen Spencer-Oatey of the University of Warwick in England compiled a slew of definitions in her 2014 article entitled "What is Culture?" She notes that as long ago 1952 two American anthropologists compiled a list of 164 definitions of culture. To put that in some context, there are 196 countries in the world today. Definitions have shifted from strictly aesthetic (i.e. high culture and low culture), to scientific or evolutionary delineations, finally landing in the anthropological field, in which every society no matter how primitive or advanced fits within a sphere of culture. Spencer-Oatey herself tries her hand at defining culture, stating in 2008 that "(c)ulture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his / her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" [3].

Working with Spencer-Oatey's recent definition, several things stand out. Chief among them is her near admission that defining such an abstraction as culture calls to mind a dog chasing its tail – that is, we all know it's there, and we spin and spin but we just cannot catch up with it to pin it down. Those "fuzzy set(s) of basic assumptions" that touch everything from our deepest moral beliefs to the more arbitrary procedures and laws that we erect to provide order and cohesion that "influence but do not determine" behavior and our interpretations of meanings behind it. Culture is indeed a flexible, if not altogether contorted, topic.

And yet, despite the mental gymnastics it takes to stick the landing on any one definition, teachers of foreign languages in higher education must not leave aside culture in their practice – particularly with the challenges that education in a globalized world presents. We know this already, and our knee-jerk reaction as educators is that we already do. After all we discuss holidays, customs, notable people and places and so forth. This is true, of course, and is displayed in great relief in the new-age textbooks and curricula that often act as

travel brochures or guided tours through one topic or another. But, as Helen Spencer-Oatey points out, culture reveals itself in layers, and so we most often concern ourselves with the "hows" and the "whats" of a given culture, but it is rare that we hone in on the "why" questions and attempt to dive into those underlying and pesky meanings [3].

I must pause here and admit quite freely: when I replied to that initial email which morphed into the salvos that have brought me to Ukraine, I hadn't a clue that I might find myself placed on the flanks of a discussion of globalization. I just wanted to travel and teach some English. Who could possibly have the time to deal with such nebulous things as culture when the more pressing concern is making sure my students understand, let's say, verb forms? It's mighty tiring teaching that already. It is easy to become rather myopic as a teacher, focusing so hard as we do on the classroom and the students before us, and the fact that they will go on and out into the world. But what has become evident in my years teaching is that the classroom cannot be viewed hermetically. The charge here is to keep the macroscopic view of the role of a teacher in sight – perhaps not day in and day out, but at least in curriculum preparation, development, and reflection.

It is in this broader view that the connection between language learning and culture can be seen most clearly. How students will interpret what one lesson or another is dependent, of course, on many things, but most crucially from the language and culture of their native country. But globalization presents another hurdle here as well. With the freer movement of people across the globe, adding new dimensions to notions of culture, teachers of English as a second language have to stay in key with not only the needs of the students but how the language fits in with the students' native cultures and the new circumstances and contexts in which they find themselves.

For Professor Anne Freadman, the divide between language and culture in the classroom is related to the shift in linguistics from a diachronic methodology to a synchronic one, in which communicative method and rule systems were inflated at the expense of a language system's development over time. She writes, "This overriding history (in linguistics) is reinforced in our own discipline by two major moments in the development of language teaching methodologies: the first is language taught as a system of rules, which simply applies a synchronic model, and the second is the development of the communicative method, which favors oral interaction of the face-to-face variety. In both, contemporary usage is the norm. We are left with the present, without any account of its formation" [2]. In our classrooms, with such an emphasis placed on communicative methodologies, lost in the mire are the very things that tether a language to a culture at all. Thus, as Freadman incisively points out, language and culture are disparate entities, with whatever cultural studies one soaks up in school deriving from social sciences and, to a degree, literature studies.

What remains starkly evident, as we witness the goings on around the globe vis-a-vis globalism, is that culture, or what one perceives as one's culture, remains that comforting cloak it has always been, at once warming and sheltering. Despite the rapidity and relative freedom of movement, both physical and informational, and in the face of diasporas and migrations, one's native culture makes a trusty and necessary travel companion. This should no doubt be so, because the very nature of globalization, in which one is continually positioned in scenarios untraversed, leads to periods of destabilization of both long and short term. The natural reaction to such alien moments is to retreat and cross back into safety – to wrap the cloak back around one's self.

We must not play fast and loose with this inclination as teachers of foreign language. Teaching language as a system is one thing. Uncovering the cultural roots of a language is quite another. But both are necessary because not only should our students be able to be understood, but they should also understand something about the people to whom they are speaking. The natural way we bridge this gap between what we do understand and what we do not often takes the form of storytelling. Through either invention, recollection, or investigation humans create narratives to solidify experience. And here is the reservoir from which we may draw as foreign language teachers. Freadman points out that narrative has the ability to be engaging, easily exchanged interculturally, interpreted in a variety of ways, and critically analyzed [2]. Each one of these skills is a part of the backbone of education, and there is no reason why they should not extend to the foreign language classroom.

A recent study reported in *Scientific American* magazine supports another key reason why addressing culture and memory through storytelling is important: reading fosters empathy. The study found that readers of literary fiction, specifically, displayed a remarkable improvement in their ability to "infer and understand other people's thoughts and emotions" which, in turn, indicates that "reading fiction is a valuable socializing influence" [1]. While this study shows improvement from readers of literary fiction, when taught with specific, contextualized goals in mind, there is no reason to believe that many other forms of narrative can produce similar results. As Professor Freadman states, "Storytelling is fundamental across the discursive arts; who does what to whom and why and where, who the heroes and the villains are, and who the victims, what changed as a result of the events, what was lost and what was gained: These questions stimulate curiosity and drive discovery" [2].

What does this mean for Ukrainian students learning English? By making them aware and consistently yet tacitly reminding them through their studies that their language learning is not occurring in a vacuum, they will begin to make connections and inferences and critically analyze a world beyond their own borders. If they begin to study the narratives and written documents of their target language, then they will not only become more adept in their understanding of important grammatical structures, vocabularies, idioms, and so on, but also they will begin to infer truer meaning of their target language. Take, for example, the highly fraught, electric word of "racism". In a pure form of systems, a teacher could present a given definition of what that word means and then the student would be able to apply it appropriately in every warranted context. But, as we know, even in places like the United States, mountains of dialogue and argument are still being built upon that word.

Definitions simply do not cut it. What if instead that teacher presented a recent news article illustrating just how alive and volatile that word remains today? The teacher could work in as many forms of multimedia as possible, ranging from interviews to historical documents that could shed light on such a multifaceted topic. No doubt such a presentation would spur curiosity and open up debate, with the goal being better understanding and realization of the relevance of what is being learned.

Such a shift cannot occur overnight of course. I do not pretend to have answers regarding the details of curriculum and implementation. But I believe that once students have reached the age and level of competency in English that is required at the university level, a shift needs to take place. We must remain mindful and indeed hopeful that our students will live diverse and expansive lives, and to teach them a foreign language, the very tool they will use to reach this globalized, ever-changing world, without setting in motion for them the desire to be at once curious and empathetic, then we are limiting the true power and scope of their potential.

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ВИКОРИСТАННЯ ПЕРЕКАЗІВ І КУЛЬТУРНОЇ СПАДЩИНИ У НАВЧАННІ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ

В статті піднімається проблема втрати словом його первісного значення, нерозривно пов'язаного з культурою народу. Це явище породжене глобалізацією та бурхливим наповненням мовного простору різноманітними символами, штучними словами й іншими засобами комунікації. Ми втрачаємо контроль над словом і його зв'язком з культурною спадщиною. Перед викладачами стоїть дилема – вчити іноземної мови за науковим синхронічним підходом, що відповідає прагматичним цілям спілкування, чи за діахронічним, який вимагає опанування історичного контексту вживання цього слова, але вступає в конфлікт з прагматичними цілями спілкування у глобалізованому світі. Особливо гостро є ця проблема в мультикультурній аудиторії, яка не має спільної культурної спадщини.

Ключові слова: глобалізація, перекази, культурна спадщина, діахронічний підхід, синхронічний підхід, навчання іноземної мови.

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ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ СКАЗАНИЙ И КУЛЬТУРНОГО НАСЛЕДИЯ В ОБУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННЫМ ЯЗЫКАМ

В статье поднимается проблема потери исконного значения слова, неразрывно связанного с культурой народа. Это явление порождено глобализацией и бурным заполнением языкового пространства разнообразными символами, искусственными словами и другими средствами коммуникации. Мы теряем контроль над словом и его связью с культурным наследием. Перед преподавателями стоит дилемма – использовать в обучении иностранному языку научный синхронический подход, соответствующий прагматическим целям общения, или диахронический, который требует освоения исторического контекста употребления этого слова, что противоречит прагматическим целям общения в глобализованном мире. Особенно остро эта проблема стоит в мультикультурной аудитории, не имеющей общего культурного наследия.

Ключевые слова: глобализация, сказание, культурное наследие, диахронический подход, синхронический подход, обучение иностранному языку.

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