

Introduction to Issue 6(2)

by Prof David Crystal

Tell me where is culture bred? In reading these papers, I'm reminded of some lines from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

*Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?*

The lines are sung while Bassanio ponders his choice of three caskets, one of which contains the portrait of his love, Portia. If he chooses the right one, he wins her; if not... disaster. The singer avoids the two alternatives, answering his own question: '*It is engendered in the eyes*'.

And so it is with culture. Where is culture to be found? These papers suggest a similar response: look around you. And in looking we see that there are far more options than the two or three offered in the play. Wang finds it in group interaction – specifically, in the way non-verbal and verbal cues (in this study, eye gaze and amount of talk) – differ between home students who have had some intercultural training and those who have not. Tamimy, Zarai and Khaghaninejad also look for it in group interaction, but as manifested in a corpus, using various linguistic criteria (such as pronouns and adjectives) to identify traits of individualism and collectivism in a culture, and to spot changes over time. Swallow and Tomalin find it in classrooms where foreign students settling into another country find themselves having to deal with culture shock and (on returning home) reverse culture shock. Vovou finds it in metaphor, specifically in the way students of a second language encounter difficulty in mediating conceptual metaphors used in a multimodal task. Grigoryeva and Zakirova find it in the way an international language – a global one, in the case of English – has an impact on intercultural communication, helping users to achieve better mutual understanding. This is cultural awareness 'from without'. By contrast, Pavlovskaya and Ksenzenko focus on culture awareness 'from within', using Russian as a case study to explore the historical role of foreign languages in a country as a means of fostering cultural awareness and shaping national identity.

A recurring underlying theme is the way culture is coded directly into a language and the behaviour of its speakers. It raises the question: to what extent is culture encoded in this way? Or, putting this another way: how much of a language is influenced by culture? If we were

to take a bilingual dictionary and ask its compilers to identify those lexical items where they had difficulty finding a translation equivalent, and those where they had no problem, what percentage would be found? I actually had the chance to ask some lexicographers this question a few years ago, when developing the encyclopedia taxonomy I described in the first issue of this periodical. The plan at the time was for the items in the various categories to be translated into several other languages, so I asked the different editors to give me a rough idea of how much cultural influence they expected to encounter. Putting this crudely: in translating 'book' into French, is there a need to take a cultural factor into account, or is there a straightforward equivalent? To what extent is there a problem of the kind expressed by such familiar expressions as 'the French have a word for it'?

My French editor thought for a moment, and suggested 'about 5 percent of the words would give me a cultural problem'. An Arabic editor hazarded '20 percent'. A Chinese editor '50 percent'. Clearly, philological closeness to English was a factor. I didn't have a Russian editor, but I'm struck by the observation of Pavlovskaya and Ksenzenko: '*The Russian people easily digested foreign words, giving them a twist to make them their own*'. I wonder just how many words were treated in this way, and in what contexts. Results would be greatly influenced if the dictionary contained idiom and metaphorical expressions, of the kind explored by Vovou.

These figures have no research validity at all. They are only subjective impressions. But they do indicate a potentially fruitful methodology of enquiry for quantifying cultural difference in the lexicon. At the same time, the message of the papers in this issue is one of caution. There is no absolute notion of similarity or difference. Comparison requires a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective. We cannot simply say Language X is different from Language Y. Tamimy et al. point to the importance of genre differences; Wang to gender differences. Swallow and Tomalin sum it up when they talk about the essentialist paradigm of enquiry. '*Essentialism describes the situation where everyone is reduced to their national cultural profile, which inevitably leads to the danger of stereotyping*'. Any historical account immediately demonstrates the essentialist fallacy, as illustrated by Pavlovskaya and Ksenzenko's account of foreign language experiences in Russia. The diachronic dimension is critical: what is culturally significant at one point in time will change.

We have only to look at the copious notes in any edition of a Shakespeare play to see that, or the items identified in a dictionary of culture, where we are talking decades, not centuries. The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, compiled in the 1990s, is an illustration. This has entries that reflect the television programmes of the time, of interest now only to cultural historians. It is no longer being updated: it was a brave enterprise, but the scale of needed revision on a global scale was too demanding for any editorial team to maintain – let alone the question of how to present such increasing global cultural complexity in book form.

Not even decades. Change can take place dramatically within a generation. This was brought home to me when I was writing my *Little Book of Language*, aimed at young teenagers. I got a 12-year-old to read my draft manuscript, and told her to underline anything she didn't understand. When she got to the chapter on pseudonyms, in which I mention several famous people whose public name is not the one they were born with, she underlined John Wayne. She had never heard of him, nor of *Stagecoach*, and his other big films. Once I had got over this unexpected culture shock, it took us some time to find cultural equivalents that were from her world. We settled on some pop stars, such as Eminem. But in another generation's time, will not these be just as opaque to future readers? And even a generation is too long a period, as Swallow and Tomalin point out in their opening remarks about the pandemic, social media, and other factors that have motivated new paradigms of enquiry within a matter of a few years.

There is I think an unconscious assumption that culture, however it is defined, is unchanging. People readily talk about the 'Anglo-Saxon temperament', 'Russian culture', and the like. There are doubtless some features that remain constant across space and time, but I am more struck by the speed and diversity of cultural change, and wonder how that is to be studied. One way is through the use of a historical corpus, which can identify frequency differences in specific words and expressions over time and across genres.

Trends can be seen even in a contemporary corpus, such as the one used by Tamimy et al. They anticipate the future use of a historical corpus, but I would also point to the value of comparative corpora, such as the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE) which can be used to focus on cultural similarity and difference. Similarity is important. As Swallow and Tomalin say: *'Too much of intercultural practice focuses on what keeps people apart'*.

Another method would be an adaptation of the notion of crowdsourcing, used to great effect in the Urban Dictionary, Twitter, and similar projects, where we see options for people to vote ('like', 'retweet') for topics they consider to be important; and indeed the whole business of 'trending' is now a major feature in social media. Cultural linguists need to make more use of these sources of data, comparing trends in different countries or constituencies. The scale of the problem also demands some sort of crowdsourcing. I'm reminded again of my paper on the need for a cultural dictionary.

Such a project could never succeed without input from innumerable sources; but such large-scale enterprises are routine now in Internet settings, once the relevant website management is in place. This would solve the problem of presentation, as encountered in the Longman dictionary example.

I began with a quotation from Shakespeare, so let me end with another – this time in the closing scene of *The Tempest*, when Miranda sees the visitors to her father's island:

*How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't!*

Brave here means 'splendid, excellent', rather than 'courageous'. But when we apply this to our present topic, we need both senses. These papers illustrate the complexity as well as the fascination of studying language in relation to culture, and the challenges that arise when dealing with these issues in the classroom. *'We are entering a new cultural paradigm'*, say Swallow and Tomalin. I agree. It is indeed a brave new world that has such culture in it.