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Linguistic cultures and literary multilingualism

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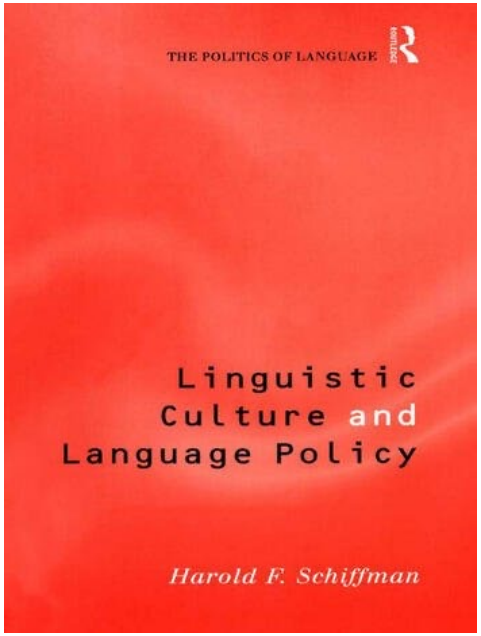
What is “linguistic culture”?

- “the sum totality of ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious strictures, and all the other cultural ‘baggage’ that speakers bring to their dealings with language from their culture” (Harold Schiffman) – involving
  - values, beliefs and myths connected with (a) language (also folk-linguistic ideas about a language’s history, relatedness, value, intelligibility etc.);
  - pragmatic conventions concerning diverse aspects of language use; linguistic aspects of communication culture;
  - attitudes about literacy and literary culture;
  - relationship between language and religion, language and political orientation, language and ethnic identity (language as a “core value”) or other identities (shibboleths etc.).



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Folk attitudes about language (Schiffman 1996 < Hoenigswald 1966)

- What do people think about language?
- What do they think about their own versus other languages?
- Is their language part of or intelligible with languages in another language family?
- What do they think of multilingualism?
- What do they know about (or think about) language differences that are correlated with social differences (age, sex, race, etc.)?
- Where do names come from, and what power derives from naming people or things?
- What do bilingual communities think about each other?
- Where does language come from?

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“Linguistic culture” in 21st-century research

- “Linguistic culture” (or, synonymously and interchangeably, *language culture,* e.g. in Lunde 2017) is often used in connection with
  - explicit and implicit language planning, norms and conventions of language use and style, or
  - language policy and language legislation, or
  - ethnographic analyses of word semantics, language use or communication cultures (e.g. politeness), especially as concerns East European or Asian languages/cultures.

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In fact, linguistic culture can include or involve a broad range of phenomena:

- **Language policy**: implicit (e.g. recruitment policies, publication guidelines) or explicit regulation of linguistic practices. Language policies are (socio-)cultural constructs and reflect ideologies or, more widely, linguistic cultures.
- **Language ideology**: (complex and multilayered) sets of beliefs and ideas about language(s) (and their use).
- **Communication culture**: culturally determined sets of practices, conventions and ideas about lingual and non-lingual aspects of communication – including **communication styles**.

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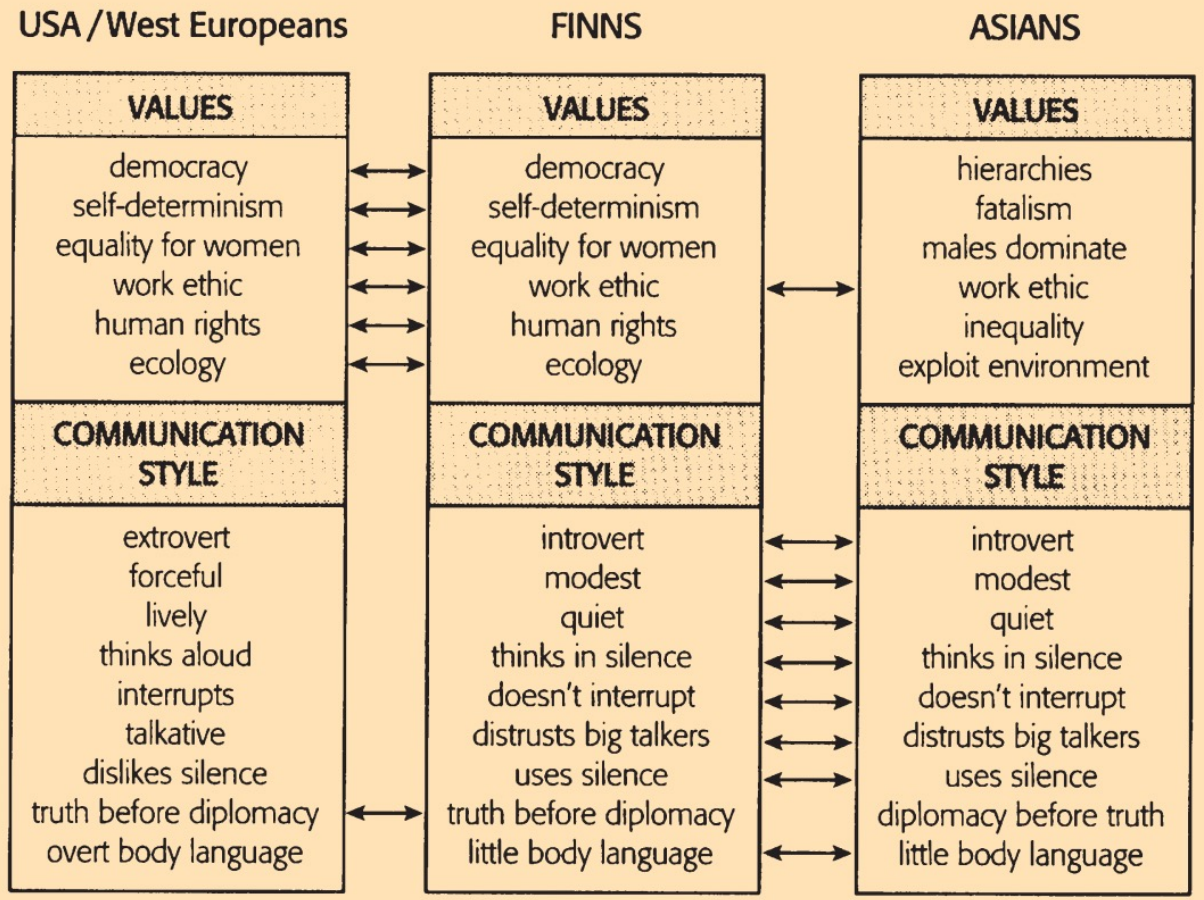
- Comparison of (business) communication cultures and styles, quoted in Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella (2008: 784) – communication culture reflecting more general cultural values
- Focus on "culture" – mainly on issues of (business/political) communication and interaction, e.g. politeness

Table 2. Finnish values/communication dilemma (Lewis, 2005, 68).



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Linguistic cultures may also differ as concerns...

- **Language awareness**: "explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use" (ALA)
  - *languageness:* the way of thinking of language as a structured system with clear borders and not just holistically, as "one possible way of saying things"
- **Standards of language education**: What kind of language skills *and* metalinguistic knowledge is a person expected to acquire?
- **(Degree of) linguistic prescriptivism (standard language ideology)**: values assigned to standard language as technically, intellectually or aesthetically superior (by authorities, experts or "grassroots prescriptivists")
  - **purism** and the idea of a "pure" ("authentic") language

Languageness and cultural knowledge

“But if some day you would come to me and tell me that your wife has fallen ill, how would you say it in your language?”
“Oh, she was healthy all right when I left home.”

“I wouldn’t know if she has fallen ill since then.”

“All right. Let’s hope she remains in good health.”

Famous anecdote about M. A. Castrén (1813–1852), the pioneer of linguistic fieldwork in Siberia, and his Nenets informant who refused to translate the sentence “My wife is ill”.

From *M. A. Castrén ja Siperian kielioppi* (‘M. A. Castrén and the grammar of Siberia’), written by Pauli Kallio, drawn by Pentti Otsamo (Helsinki: Otava, 2008).

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Why “culture”?

- Definition (from tieteentermipankki.fi): ‘values, ways of assigning meanings, communicating and doing, as well as ideas, beliefs and knowledge systems which are acquired and shared by a certain community’
- No deterministic nor exhaustive explanations: cultures (like languages) are complex phenomena with fuzzy borders
- “Linguistic culture” as an overarching concept can also accommodate
  - (expectations concerning) language skills and metalinguistic knowledge;
  - use of metalinguistic elements (comments, explanations etc.);
  - attitudes and conventions behind the (non-)use of code-switching…

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Example: Metalinguistic knowledge about “Finno-Ugric”

- Finnish linguistic culture includes the knowledge that Hungarian, Estonian, and a number of less well known minority languages are “related” to Finnish...
- ... and more or less vague ideas about “relatedness” as “similarity” (there being at least a few words which “sound the same”).
- Many Finns also know stories about early Finno-Ugricists and their fieldwork, including the anecdote about M. A. Castrén and his Nenets informant. Daniel Katz in his humoristic novel about the fantastic history of a Jewish family in Finland, especially the grandfather’s pre-immigration adventures in Russia, makes use of this anecdote and a fictive “Mock Finno-Ugric” language.

Daniel Katz, *Kun isoisä Suomeen hiihti* [‘When Grandfather came skiing to Finland’, 1969]

Metsästäjä hän oli, sen näki, ja hän osasi venäjää. Hän kertoi metsästävänsä niillä main ja kyseli mitä vaimolleni kuului.

– Hän on kuollut, minä vastasin.

– Minun vaimoni elää, sanoi metsästäjä.

Silloin minä pyysin häntä sanomaan omalla kielellään, että hänen vaimonsa oli kuollut.

– Jon kalmana akkain, sanoi metsästäjä auliisti.

Kun minä katselin häntä vähän ihmetellen, hän kiiruhti vakuuttamaan: – Jon, jon!

Silloin minun olisi pitänyt tajuta, että miehessä oli jotain outoa ja epäilyttävää, sillä ostjakit, marit, syrjäänit ja muutkaan siperialaiset eivät koskaan sanoisi elävästä vaimostaan että hän on

Jon kalmana akkain is modified Finnish, employing archaic/dialectal forms *(akka-in* for *vaimo-ni* ‘my wife’, *kalma* ‘death’ [poetic or elevated style]), un-Finnish word order (VXS) and arbitrary modification (*jon* for *on* ‘is’).

‘He was a hunter, that was obvious, and he spoke Russian. He told me that he was hunting thereabouts and asked me how my wife was doing.
– She’s dead, I answered.
– My wife is alive, the hunter said.
Then I asked him to say in his own language that his wife was dead.
– *Jon kalmana akkain,* the hunter willingly answered.
I gave him a somewhat surprised look, and he hurried to assure: – *Jon, jon!*
At that point I should have understood that there was something strange and suspect about this man, because Ostyaks, Maris [!], Zyryans and other Siberians would never say that about their wife, if she were alive.’

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Example: Asymmetric (hierarchic) bilingualism as part of the target readers' linguistic culture

Russian in dialogues in modern Mari literature (Gavrilova 2013):

– Откатить пушки налево!

– Товарищ капитан, надо стрелять, – öршдымö лейтенант тудын ваштареш лие, – раздавят!

– Слушай приказ: немедленно поверните пушки налево и вон туда, в то логово, понял, сопляк!

'– Turn the cannons to the left!

– Comrade captain, we must fire, – the clean-shaven lieutenant objected, – they'll crush us!

– This is an order: quickly turn the cannons to the left and over there, towards that hole, d'you understand, you snot-nose!'

Expectations concerning target readers' language skills in 19th-century Finland-Swedish literature...

Zacharias Topelius: *Gröna kammarn i Linnais gård* (1880)

– Jag trodde likväl, – invände fröken Anna, – att min fars konsideration för vårt gamla namn och våra förfäders minne ...

– *Mais si, ma chère!** Och har du attenderat till* alla de förändringar vårt namn undergått under tidernas lopp?

– *Mais si, ma chère!** C
förändringar vårt namn
Jag talar ej om våra hedr

20 ***Mais si, ma chère!*** – (fra.) ung. Naturligtvis, kära barn!

Many untranslated French and Latin phrases in the dialogue; the digital edition from 2020 (topelius.sls.fi) has added translations (along with other comments and explanations).

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… and in 20th-century Soviet Estonian literature

- Foreign words and phrases in Jaan Kross's historical novels, for instance, translated and explained in footnotes…
- … also in accordance with the strong tradition of linguistic revision and careful editing

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Global English in today's minority literatures

Contra (Margus Konnula), South Estonian author (https://wi.ee/voro/kiranigu/contra/)

mul om tavass egä riidi	I have this custom each Friday
osta laseringist tsii-dii	to buy a CD at "Lasering" [a record shop]
umma rahavaruq napiq	if my money funds are sparse
sõs ma sõsardõga klapi	then I'll make a deal with my sisters
õdagu ta tsuska tullõ	in the evening I shove it into the fire
timä palamist sõs kullõ	and then listen to it burning
siuke on-the-fire-metal	such on-the-fire-metal
om mu jaoss kui taivaretel	is for me like a ladder to heaven

Unexplained linguistic pun based on English, anchored into the matrix language with the rhyme.

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Why “linguistic culture”?

- Literary multilingualism has been researched from the viewpoint of
  - authors: translingualism, translingual / multilingual identities;
  - texts:
    - representations of multilingual real or imagined worlds;
    - effect of multilingual realities on the choice of topics and genres;
    - linguistic dynamics of codeswitching;
  - readers: playing with the (il)legibility of multilingual texts:
    - “the multilingual text generates different levels of meaning and has different effects on different kinds of readers” (Bar-Itzhak 2019)
  - spatiality and spaces
  - essentialized “languages”

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The “agency” of essentialized languages?

- Languages can be “ethnified and essentialized”:
  - expectations of authenticity e.g. in minority or migrant literatures;
  - “ethnolinguistic assumption”: naturalization of the connection between ethnicity and language.
- Even studies which highlight the fluidity and constructed character of languages and language-based identities and attempt to distance themselves from the monolingual bias of traditional philology may end up essentializing languages as fixed entities:
  - *…hur glossering inte bara är en översättning från ett språk till ett annat, utan hur det är ett spel mellan språk, där språken kommenterar varandra på olika sätt*… [‘how glossing is not only a translation from a language into another but how it is a play between languages, in which languages comment on each other in different ways’] (Tidigs 2014: 286)

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Summing up

- Languages are *both* structured entities in their own right *and* complex social constructs with fuzzy borders.
  - This concerns not only how languages function but also how they are perceived, thought of, depicted and regulated.
  - [N]o single dimension of multilingualism – focusing on the monolingualism or multilingualism of the medium, or the form in which the elements of the other language appear, or on the ideological or stylistic functions of switching and mixing in constructing hybrid identities, or on the roles of different languages – can alone do justice to the diverse forms and uses of multilingualism in literature. (Laakso 2020: 109)
- The concept of **linguistic culture** covers the cultural aspects of how people deal with (a) language and language-based categories (such as ethnicity) or how their actions are influenced by language – but it is in principle distinct from "language", "ethnicity", or any other category.

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