

# Cultural Influence On Language

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Language is a universal concept. We all communicate in one way, using one language, or another. The topic of languages has been a much-discussed one and there have been several controversies on the subject. Several articles, whether scholarly or not have been written on the subject. Two of such articles are The Variations of English Words Across Cultures, With a Focus on Cameroon and Hong Kong, by Augustin Bobda Simo and Why Bilingual Is Better by Collin Baker. These are the two articles I used in this analysis and from which I shall take my references.

At first sight, it would seem as though these articles have nothing more in common than the fact that they both relate to languages, but when read further, one will notice that they bring up similar points. In some cases, one text will make the reader question certain aspects of the other text. In this critical analysis I want to discuss how culture affects language and language variations and how bilingualism fits into that. This may be useful for people travelling to other countries that speak the same language as their country. They will know what to expect when there.

Augustin Simo's article focuses on how culture affects the understanding of words in a language, while Collin Baker's article encourages people to become bilingual. Both authors however, mention that culture has a lot to do with language. Augustin Simo addresses this by saying, "Cultural practices and expectations can affect the interpretation of the denotative meaning of words in various, unpredictable and sometimes dramatic ways" (Simo, 378). He then follows this by giving examples of some such situations. Collin Baker said, "Access to two cultures: Being bilingual opens up two worlds of experience. With a language goes a wealth of idioms and sayings, folk stories and history, poetry, literature and music, both traditional and contemporary" (Baker, 1). From these quotes, one can clearly see that they both agree on the fact that culture and language are interrelated. It shows us that you cannot learn a language without learning the culture of the people who speak that language. But this also makes me wonder. In his article, Augustin Simo used this quote

“Culture, understood as a particular view of reality as shared by a group of people, is necessarily contingent upon political, sociological, historical, and geographic categories” (Wolf and Polzenhagen, quoted in Simo 375). If we use this definition of culture and we agree that a language varies depending on the region or place in the world, then can we say that we are bilingual if we know how a language varies from one region to another? Since it is an argument given by Collin Baker, would this variation be counted, if not as bilingualism, then as an alternative? Since the person in question knows how the different cultures affect the language some would argue that it could be used against Collin Baker’s argument for bilingualism.

In his article, Augustin Simo goes on to tell us that even some words that we tend to believe have a universal meaning can be misinterpreted depending on the culture. He shows this when he says, “Cultural practices and expectations can affect the interpretation of the denotative meaning of words in various, unpredictable and sometimes dramatic ways. The word sorry offers an interesting illustration” (Simo, *The Meaning of English Words Across Cultures With a Focus on Cameroon and Hong Kong*). He goes on to explain the misunderstanding that the word “sorry” created between the former US President Bush and the Arab League. The London-based ambassador of the Arab League and other listeners of his cultural background were angry when President Bush apologized by just saying “sorry”. According to their culture, the offender has to ask for forgiveness and the offended has to grant him forgiveness. This is supported by Baker when he points that “Bilingual people have to know which language to speak with whom, and when” (Baker, 1). Both these statement once again go back to show the role culture plays in our understanding of language and gives an advantage to bilingual people. It also goes to prove that the more languages you know, the more cultures you will be comfortable around and the less misunderstandings you will cause.

Further more, Collin Baker said “Cognitive benefits: Research has shown that having two

well-developed languages can give people particular advantages in thinking. In creative thinking, bilingual children have two or more words for each object and idea. When different meanings are attached to words in the two languages, a bilingual person may develop the ability to think more flexibly” (Baker, Why Bilingual is Better). This supports Simo’s point that “A word, even when considered monosemic, generally has a cluster of meanings, depending on the mental representation of the referent by the speaker/writer or listener/reader” (Simo, 375). I admit I had never thought that a word even as simple as chair could bring many different pictures depending on whom you ask. Given the examples Augustin Simo gives in his article and what the people I have asked told me, I have to admit that it is true. Now, seeing as this is the case, bilinguals are given an advantage. They are familiar with different cultures and therefore will probably have more ideas in mind for a particular word. This means that for each given situation all they need to do is eliminate the ideas that are out of context and they will most likely be left with the right one. This would explain why they are flexible in thinking, especially if they are used to switching languages continuously.

It is my belief that bilinguals and multi-linguals have a very big advantage over monolinguals. They can speak multiple languages and this allows them to communicate with more people than monolinguals. They can also work and live in more regions of the world than monolinguals. They can get to know more people on a more personal level by speaking in the person’s native language; it builds a different kind of intimacy between the two people. As Baker stated, “Where parents have a different first language, a child who is bilingual can develop a special relationship with each parent. It creates a bridge between generations – with grandparents, for example. This helps to build a sense of belonging to the extended family and to a community.” This, in my opinion, reduces feuds in that community creates a special bond between the individuals.

For most of the languages that exist there is at least one dictionary, it goes to follow that for

each region with pronounced variation in a language there should also be a dictionary. This will help others not familiar with the definition of words as used in that region to get to know them. This also gives the learner insight on the particular culture. Simo points out the need for dictionaries for different regions too as he says, “As a matter of fact, it is unrealistic to think of a single dictionary that would do justice to the specificity of each culture in which English is used. National and regional dictionaries, work on which is now started even in New Englishes, will be the solution”.

Language is very important and as such everyone learns to communicate using at least one language. It would have been much easier to communicate if there was only one language, but I think one language would not have been enough to convey all the different things that can be conveyed in different languages. Furthermore, words have different meanings in different regions of the world; therefore, it might have ended up sounding like another language altogether still. Knowing many different languages allow you to adapt and to grasp other languages or variations in a language more quickly. It is my opinion that knowing more than one language as well as certain variations in a language makes the person more open-minded. It allows the person to think on many more levels and grasp new languages more quickly, especially related languages.

### Work Cited

Augustin Simo Bobda (2009) The meaning of English words across cultures, with a focus on Cameroon and Hong Kong, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30:5, 375-389, 13 Nov. 2013 DOI: [10.1080/01434630802147882](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630802147882)

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