

**European Masters
in InterCultural Communication (EEMIC)**

**Semiotics of cultures
Culture, language and translation**

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Semiotics of cultures II :

The notion of « linguistic culture »

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1) The natural language

Natural languages are, for example, French, German, English, ...

A natural language is a **verbal sign system** where each sign is characterized by a set of linguistic and communicative functions:

Example: the word "*student*" in the phrase "the young student learns English":

1. is a lexical morpheme (and not a grammatical one);
2. belongs to the category "noun" (and not, for instance, to the category "verb", "adverb", ...);
3. is in singular nominative (1st case) mode (and not, for instance, in plural nominative, singular accusative, ...),
4. forms – with two other signs – the nominal phrase (NP) in the position of the grammatical subject of the phrase above (and not, for instance, the NP of a direct object, the PP, ...),
5. possesses the meaning of a human engaged in a knowledge acquisition process ("student"),
6. is a part of the content of an affirmative proposition (i.e. a "fragment" of a discourse where the "speaking subject" ascertains that 1) there is a student, 2) who is young and 3) who learns English),
7. is a written (printed) sign (and not, for instance, a speech object).

a) Natural language as the (knowledge) object of linguistics

a natural language as a sign system :

- is not only composed of **signs** (such as lexical or grammatical morphemes)
- but also – and even more crucially - of **schemas** or **patterns** for communication.

Linguistic schemas:

1. morphological schemas (example: composition schemas of a lexical stem and "word endings");
2. lexical schemas (example: composition schemas between different lexical signs);
3. phrase schemas (example: composition schemas of nominal phrases, verbal phrases, ...);
4. etc.

These (and other) classes of schemas or patterns: constitute la "**langue**".

La langue is:

1. a cognitive resource for a social actor called "**linguistic community**";
2. a cognitive resource for designing objects and situations in the "world", actualising and organising them as **information** in "texts" (very broadly speaking) and communicating this "texts".

b) Study of la langue – different perspectives, different problems

language typology

identification, description and classification of languages in "language families" following their (morphological, lexical, phonological, ...) characteristics (examples: the indo-European language family, the Austronesian language family, ...)

language evolution

(hypothetical) reconstruction of the historical phases of one language, a language family or the human language itself (example the reconstruction of the historical stages of German; the reconstruction of an hypothetical proto-indo-European; the hypothetical reconstruction of human language genesis, ...)

features of a universal grammar of human languages

(hypothetical reconstruction of features that are supposed to be common to all human languages (such as schemas of word ordering, schemas of how to express linguistic temporality, schemas of how to express a possessive relationship, speech act schemas, ...)

language functionality

description and explanation of the (morphological, lexical, phonological, ...) characteristics of a language with respect to their roles and tasks within human society and communication (such as the varieties of personal pronoun systems with respect to a given social stratification of a society or an ethnies, etc.)

c) La langue vs la parole

la "parole":

the **use** of linguistic schemas or patterns in given social contexts for producing and communicating information

La parole recovers:

- the **conform and appropriate use** of a linguistic resource with respect to a given social context (example: private family rituals, formal teaching and learning rituals, shopping rituals, religious rituals, ...);
- the **(individual or collective) performances** of users of a linguistic resource in a given social context which are classified in form of preferential "speaking styles" ("correct", "poor", "elegant", "classic", ...)

La parole: object of different approaches and disciplines –

- socio-linguistics,
- pragmatics,
- socio-semiotics,
- discourse and text analysis,
- conversational analysis,
- genre description,
- ...

2) The linguistic community

One of the most central functions of a natural language is to **enable**, **evaluate**, **sanction** and **justify** communication and all forms of verbal exchange between the participants within a social actor called "**linguistic community**".

Examples:

- the French speaking community (i.e. French speaking people leaving in France, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, or in any other country or place);
- the German speaking community (i.e. German speaking people living in Austria, Germany, Switzerland or in any other country or place)
- the English speaking community in the world,
- etc.

An individual belongs to a linguistic community:

if he/she has an access to a given natural language as a symbolic resource for communication;

"access" means:

- **knowledge of a given language**,
- **knowledge of how to use a language in specific social contexts**
(cf., infra, chapter 3)

A linguistic community:

- Is a **specific type** of social actors (i.e. it cannot be reduced to other types of social actors such as, for instance, nations, ethnies, religious communities, ...);

- But it maintains always and necessarily tight relationships with other social actors.

Example:

- 1) French as the national language of France;
- 2) French as a minority language in Canada;
- 3) French as the dominant language in Bretagne, Alsace, etc;
- 4) French as a second language (not "mother tongue") in France (Corsica, south France, Alsace, ...);
- 5) French as an official ("administrative") language or a language of a political and economic elite in ancient French colonies and protectorates;
- 6) French as a privileged language of local (intellectual, artistic, ...) elites all over the world;
- 7) French as a classical language of diplomacy;
- 8) French as a "creolized" language in the Antilles, Réunion, Tahiti ...;
- 9) French as a specialised language in the medias, in technology and science, in marketing...;
- 10) Etc.

3) The linguistic and pragmatic knowledge

"linguistic and pragmatic knowledge" = point of view of an individual ("person") participating in a linguistic community and its culture (i.e. the "speaker" or, more generally, the "user of a language")

Knowledge of a given language: **linguistic knowledge** (broadly speaking): grammar, lexicon, phonetics, discourse types and genres, ...

Knowledge of **how to use** a language: **pragmatic knowledge** (broadly speaking): the appropriate use of a language in situations which are relevant for a social actor

Example for relevant situation types of a social actor:

- Actor "family": parents/children *educational situations, contact situations* between the family and outside (invitations, receptions, daily life routine situations like shopping, ...); *intimate situations*; etc.
- Actor "university": teacher/student *educational situations*; student/student *formal contact situations*; student/student *informal contact situations*; etc.

Such types of social situations constitute the **framework** or again the specific **contexts of use** of a natural language.

Remember: a social situation

- is characterised by "**rituals**" of doing (interacting, performing, ...) and behaving;
- constitutes the **social context** of the appropriate use of a language.

Strategies of use of a language

The "use" of a language can be broken down in:

- ***strategies of selection*** of appropriate signs and sign systems (vocabulary, grammatical forms, discursive and rhetorical forms, discourse genres, speech features such as intonation or pronunciation, etc.);
- ***strategies of combining*** selected natural language signs with other signs for communicating and exchanging (gestures, mimics, proxemics, ...);
- ***strategies of performing*** ("realizing" and "managing") a concrete discourse and of interacting in order to maintain or change a communicative situation.

Example: a medical consultation situation

First type of strategies:

privileged selection of medical language related lexical signs (medical or pseudo-medical vocabulary; lexical locutions able to identify and communicate on relevant objects and problems; interpersonal conversational schemas, descriptive, narrative and prescriptive discourse genres, ...)

Second type of strategies:

Situation adapted gestures and mimics (concerning for instance the identification, circumscription and gravity of symptoms, etc.), choice of appropriate face-to-face interaction schemas, etc.)

Third type of strategies:

"Staging" of a consultation session (the principal "acts" or "scenes"), etc;

Remember:

The three different types of strategies = refers to the **pragmatic knowledge** of a user of a natural language sign system in a given situation belonging to a type of social situation.

"Access" of an individual to a natural language resource:

- based on his/her knowledge of this resource
- "linguistic knowledge" (the language)
- pragmatic knowledge (the exploitation, use of it)

This linguistic competence of a user and his/her pragmatic competence are parts of the **communicative competence** of a user.

Linguistic competence as a symbolic capital (P. Bourdieu)

“Access” to the specific sign resources constituted by a given natural language: **learning processes** such as

- first language acquisition ;
- second language acquisition ;
- acquisition for professional uses ;
- etc.

But « access » means also :

- **Forced, obligatory access** to a specific sign resource such as a « dominant » language », a « lingua franca”, a “common language”, etc.

Furthermore “access” is unequal:

- extreme cases (pathology, ...);
- social inequalities;
- political and economical inequalities;

In this sense, linguistic knowledge constitutes a **symbolic capital** in the sense of Bourdieu:

- symbolic capital: good speakers, nobles, efficient people in communication, etc.

Finally: “access” to a linguistic resource and its use constitutes also the source of **(socio-)linguistic changes**.

The "linguistic person":

An individual **always** belongs to a linguistic community (excepted some rare and pathological cases)

This means that one of the most fundamental dimensions of a social person is his **linguistic identity** (i.e. his belonging to one or more linguistic communities)

4) Definitions of "linguistic cultures"

Four definitions of "linguistic culture":

1) **language pattern** that characterizes a social actor (a family, a group, an ethnique, a national state, ...)

2) the "**indigenous**" **theories**, ideas, philosophies and also policies of language, the origins of language, the function of language, of the use and norms of language, etc.

3) the **socio-linguistic competences** (abilities, skills, ...) of members of a social actor or again of people who have to deal with a social actor. (i.e. social reproduction and linguistic competence, acquisition of a language in a social setting, training via high cultural vs low cultural capital, ...)

4) the (**covert or overt**) **policies** of a social actor "regulating" (ruling out) the norms and appropriated uses of languages (cf. H. Schiffmann: "Language Policy has to do with decisions (rules, regulations, guidelines) about the status, use, domains, and territories of language(s) and the rights of speakers of the languages in question")

5) Bi- and multilingualism

A monolingual speaking speech community in a narrow sense seems to be a rather exceptional situation

Different cases:

- a family or group of immigrants possesses their language of origin (such as Turkish, Chinese, Arabic, ...) and the language of the "hosting" country (such as German, French, English, ...)
- The MSA (Modern Standard Arabic) as a "common" language for all Arabs and the Arabic dialects which may be classified in four distinct groups: a) the Maghrebi, b) the Egyptian, c) the Levantine, and d) the Arabic of the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulfⁱⁱ.
- Germans or Austrians possesses the "Hochdeutsch" and a "dialectal" form of German.
- A multilingual speech group (students, professionals, ...) working together and choosing one lingua franca to communicate (i.e. English)
- A "professional" social group: professional ("specialised") language + a "common" language

Questions:

1. Do there exist, in a given linguistic culture, a typical **social distribution** of two or more "varieties" of one language with respect to their social function, their communicative function?
 2. Do there exist traces of "switches" between two or more languages in the communicative and discursive attitude of bi- or multilingual speakers and what does these switches signify ?
 3. Do there exist remarkable changes in the structure of the language used principally for communicating with other social actors ("foreign" ones)?
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Note:

- We will discuss here more extensively only the first question !
- The **second question** refers to the problem called "codeswitching" between two or different languages.
- The **third question** – very popular in actual intercultural studies – refers to the problem of "creolization" (i.e. the confluence of two or more different languages in order to form a new "indigenous" language like the Kreol in Mauritius)

6) Diglossic speech communities

Term introduced by Charles Fergusonⁱⁱⁱ : "Diglossic communities" possess a **High variety Language** that is very prestigious and a **Low variety Language** with no formal or "official" status.

Example:

High variety : literary discourse,

Low variety : ordinary conversation.

Diglossia identifies a typical (and widespread if not universal) *pattern of linguistic behaviour* where there exists:

- a) a **typical role assignation** to each one of the disponible languages or language varieties
- b) a **complementary** distribution between the roles.

Roles:

"H" (high variety)

"L" (low variety)

Complementarity: in a given diglossic situation:

H – languages (language varieties) fulfil functions that cannot be fulfilled by L-languages (and vice versa) without a risk to exhibit an inappropriate (and therefore sanctioned) linguistic behaviour.

Examples of H-norms:

"... 'Formal' domains such as public speaking, religious texts and practice, education, and other prestigious kinds of usage are dominated by the H norm...iv"

Examples of L-Norms:

"... the L norm is used for informal conversation, jokes, street and market, the telephone, and any other domains (e.g. letter writing, cinema, television) not reserved for the H norm". (H. Schiffman^v).

Dynamic changes within diglossic patterns: from an historic point of view, a L-language can become a H-language

Example:

- the formerly L-language *demotiki* which has replaced the prior H-language *katharevousa* in present-day Greece;
- the former L-language Swiss German which replaces the H-language Schriftdeutsch,
- etc.

Example:

- The French in French Canada has been considered and politically confined in a L-position during a long period;
- Actually, it occupies in French Canada the H-position (with English)

Linguistic relationships of diglossic situations:

"classic diglossia" (**in-diglossia** or again **endo-glossia**, following H. Schiffman) :

- diglossia between two (genetically, typologically) related languages (i.e. Schriftdeutsch and Swissgerman; Modern Standard Arabic and Arabic dialects, High German and German dialects,

"extended diglossia" (**out-diglossia** or again **exo-dglossia**, following H. Schiffman):

- diglossia between two genetically (typologically, ...) not or unrelated languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Russian, English, ... in modern Israel ; Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay, Latin and national languages in Early Middle Age in Europe, ...).

Discussion, consequences of the diglossic linguistic culture pattern

1) diglossic language situations: expressions, manifestations of a **specific form of a linguistic culture** of a social actor (with a distribution of two or more varieties of one language or two or more different – genetically related or unrelated - languages on a H-/L-norm scale).

2) a diglossic pattern is a **historical** one: it changes through especially social pressures (i.e. social practices within a social actor or a community of social actors). L-languages may become H-languages or again there may be linguistic policies to “elevate” L-languages (like Swiss German or again the elevation dialectal forms in German as “official” languages”, languages for artistic production, etc.

3) A diglossic pattern is **one specific pattern** of linguistic culture of a social actor. Other – more or less – similar patterns are:

- “secrete languages”,
- “group specific languages”,
- “specialized languages”,
- “creolized” or “pidgin” languages,
- the possession of a “foreign language” (second learned language),
- etc.

Such forms of language co-exist with another "official" or common language.

The distribution of these two different types of languages must not always must not always follow a H-/L-scale.

It can also follow a distribution corresponding to their communicative functions (cf. the relationship between specialised languages and a common language or again the relationship between a second learned language and a "mother tongue").

4) More generally speaking, this means that a social actor that possesses two or more languages, **assigns to each one of these languages typical roles and communicative functions.**

In other words, bi- or multilingualism as a socio-linguistic phenomenon is **not an unorganized** one but refers to the fact that a language (or a language variety) is shaped and used by **specific norms** of linguistic usage relevant for a given social actor.

5) Again more generally speaking, a diglossic pattern represents a specific linguistic culture of a social actor that is a **part of its semiotic culture**.

Understood in the broader semiotic sense, a language as a system of (linguistic or non-linguistic signs) is always shaped and used following **specific norms relevant** for a given social actor.

Examples:

- the strategic and appropriate use of gestures ("behavioural signs") and a given verbal language in a social situation;
- the coherent and appropriate use of "second modelling systems" (music, literature, ...) and verbal languages;
- the coherent and appropriate use of "socio-semiotic" sign systems (clothing, consumption products, services, ...) and verbal languages, etc.

ⁱ Harold Schiffmann, Language policy – introductory remarks (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/540/polintro/polintro.html>)

ⁱⁱ Andrew Freeman's perspective on diglossia (http://www-personal.umich.edu/~andyf/digl_96.htm)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ferguson, Ch. 1959. *Diglossia* Word 15: 325-337

^{iv} Harold Schiffman, Diglossia as a sociolinguistic situation (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/messeas/diglossia/handbuk.html>)

^v Harold Schiffman, Diglossia as a sociolinguistic situation (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/messeas/diglossia/handbuk.html>)