



What's the state-of-affairs in Cultural Linguistics? A review of Farzad Sharifian's *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language*

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1. Introduction

Cultural Linguistics is an emerging field within linguistics that focuses on the interrelation between language and cultural cognition. Over the last decade or so, Cultural Linguistics has witnessed tremendous growth and development theory-, methodology-, and application-wise. While the initial step towards Cultural Linguistics was taken by Palmer (1996) with his important monograph, and Holland & Quinn (1987) addressed the connection between language and cultural cognition even earlier, the trailblazing spearhead figure within Cultural Linguistics is undoubtedly Farzad Sharifian who has written several key publications since the early 2000s. In 2017, Sharifian published the monograph *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language* (henceforth CL). As the eighth volume in John Benjamins' book series *Cognitive Linguistic Studies in Cultural Contexts*, CL provides an overview of the state-of-affairs in Cultural Linguistics and demonstrates how a Cultural-Linguistic perspective can contribute to other fields of research within the humanities.

2. Synopsis

The volume consists of thirteen chapters. Whereas the chapters are not organized into parts, it is nonetheless possible to divide them into thematic clusters, with the four first chapters addressing Cultural Linguistics itself and its theoretical, analytical, and methodological framework, while chapters five to eleven provide examples of Cultural-Linguistic analyses applied to a range of different phenomena within and beyond language, culture, and cognition. The last

two chapters deal with Cultural-Linguistic research as such: chapter twelve positions Cultural Linguistics in relation to linguistic relativity, and chapter thirteen provides an overview of recent research publications in Cultural Linguistics.

2.1. Cultural Linguistics and its theoretical, analytical, and methodological framework

The first chapter provides an overview of the principles of Cultural Linguistics. It opens with a brief overview, based on Duranti (2003), of the three primary paradigms in the history of the study of language and culture: anthropological linguistics, linguistic anthropology (or ethnography of speaking) and social constructivism. This is followed by a description of the analytical and theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics, which also addresses how cultural cognition relates to language and other aspects of human life (such as emotion, art, rituals, and cultural events). Cultural cognition and the notion of cultural conceptualization – which is central to Cultural Linguistics – are defined, and Sharifian accounts for how culture and language are seen as complex adaptive systems (e.g. Waldrop 1992) in Cultural Linguistics. It is further argued that cultural systems are instances of heterogeneously distributed cognition. The chapter also introduces the cultural conceptualization phenomena of cultural schemata, cultural categories and cultural metaphors, which are the three key notions in Cultural-Linguistic analysis and theory.

Chapter two goes into more detail with the analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics, delving into the above-mentioned three major types of cultural conceptualization. Cultural schemata are defined as a culturally constructed subclass of cognitive schemata, which are typically culturally specific. Regarding cultural categories, Sharifian argues that “[c]ategorisation is intrinsically cultural” (p. 15), such that most, if not all, cognitive categories are culturally constructed in one way or another. Lastly, cultural metaphors are conceptual metaphors that figure in members of cultural groups’ thinking and behavior. Here, it should be mentioned that ‘cultural group’ is the term in Cultural Linguistics for a community with a shared set of cultural conceptualizations as a heterogeneously distributed cognitive system. Sharifian provides examples of all three cultural-cognitive phenomena and how they are reflected in language. For instance, in Australian Aboriginal English, the lexeme *cat* appears to evoke underlying spiritual cultural schemata in which CATS can be MESSENGERS from the SPIRIT WORLD, bringing WARNINGS OF BAD THINGS TO COME. A list of nominal classifiers, compiled by Walsh (1993), from the Aboriginal language Murrinh-Patha serves as an example of how cultural categories can be linguistically encoded. For instance, the *kardu* classifier signals membership of an ABORIGINAL PEOPLE and HUMAN SPIRITS category, while the *mi* classifier signals membership of a category of PLANTS, VEGETABLE FOODS and FECES. The *thamul* classifier signals a category of SPEARS, and the *thu* classifier signals a category of OFFENSIVE WEAPONS, THUNDER, LIGHTNING, and PLAYING CARDS. Regarding cultural metaphors, an example from ancient Chinese philosophy (see also Yu 2007) is the conceptualization of the HEART AS THE RULER OF THE BODY. Sharifian also discusses cultural metaphors in Australian Aboriginal English and suggests a distinction between worldview metaphors which emically do not have metaphor status, because they are

part of the worldview of the cultural group in question, and figures of speech which are both emotionally and etically metaphorical. An example of the former type is THE LAND AS PROGENITOR as reflected in the expression *The land is me*, while an example of the latter is captured by the compound verb *foot falcon* (TRAVEL A LONG DISTANCE ON FOOT). These two metaphor types form a continuum according to Sharifian, such that “as we move from the worldview-metaphor end of the continuum to the figure-of-speech end, speakers become increasingly conscious that the expressions they produce involve cross-domain conceptualization” (p. 23). In other words, the continuum is presented as a way to account for the cognitive processing of metaphors in Cultural-Linguistic descriptions.

The third chapter discusses the nature of embodied cultural metaphors. Already introduced in the previous chapter, embodied cultural metaphors constitute a subclass of cultural metaphors in which the human body serves as the source domain. This chapter first discusses the notion of embodied cognition (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999; Johnson 1987) as such and then moves on to discussing metaphors in Persian that draw on the concept DEL (roughly, ABDOMEN) as source domain, and on linguistic reflections thereof. Sharifian shows that DEL serves as the conceptual base of a large number of meanings in Persian, many of which have to do with emotions, intellect and personality, and tracks this conceptual tendency via Sufism back to ancient Iranian religions, worldviews, and traditions.

In the following chapter 4, Sharifian provides an overview of research methods that have been applied so far in Cultural-Linguistic research. More specifically, the chapter covers conceptual-associative analysis, conceptual analysis of story recounts, (meta)discourse analysis, corpus-based analysis, ethnographic-conceptual textual/visual analysis, and diachronic and synchronic conceptual analysis, as he discusses and summarizes Cultural-Linguistic studies in which these analytical techniques are used.

2.2. Applications of Cultural Linguistics within and beyond linguistics

The next seven chapters showcase how Cultural Linguistics can contribute to other disciplines in linguistics and, more broadly, the humanities. More specifically, the research areas addressed are pragmatics, emotions, religion, political discourse, World Englishes, intercultural communication, and Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL). Needless to say, this particular cluster of chapters should be of broad interest within the humanities.

The first of these chapters – namely, chapter five – offers a Cultural-Linguistic take on speech acts. Drawing on Mey’s (2001) theory of pragmatic acts, Sharifian proposes the notion of pragmatic cultural schemata. In Mey’s theory, a *pragmeme* is a prototype of a pragmatic act which can be performed in one or more particular contexts, while a *pract* is a particular realization of a *pragmeme*. Thus, GREETING A NEW EMPLOYEE is a *pragmeme* while *Welcome aboard* is one of the *practs* that can realize this act. Sharifian adds two further components in the form of a speech act/event and a pragmatic cultural schema. Referring to this four-tier hierarchy as a *pragmatic set*, Sharifian uses several illustrative examples from Persian. For instance, the

pragmatic schema of SHARMANDEGI (roughly, BEING ASHAMED) “underlies the enactment ... of speech acts such as expressing gratitude, offering goods and services, requesting goods and services, making apologies, formulating refusals, and accepting offers” (p. 53). In contexts where this pragmatic cultural schema applies, the pragmeme is then EXPRESS SHARMANDEGI. For instance, the speech act of expressing gratitude for a favor, calls for this pragmeme which can then be linguistically instantiated via different practs. Pragmatic cultural schemata are portions of knowledge of how to express pragmatic meaning within the speech community, or cultural group, and may consequently be considered schematic knowledge representations of communicative practices.

The sixth chapter turns to the conceptualization and expression of emotions, arguing that cultural conceptualizations are at play in the linguistic encoding of emotions. Using examples from Persian, Polish, British English, and Aboriginal English, Sharifian discusses how cultural categories and cultural metaphors figure in the linguistic encoding and expression of emotions. For instance, the Persian cultural category QAM and its label qam subsume and encode a range of emotions that have separate categories and are encoded into different lexemes in Western varieties of English such as PAIN, GRIEF, WORRY, SORROW and SADNESS. Another example that Sharifian provides, with reference to Wilson & Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017), addresses PRIDE categories in Polish and British cultures and their lexical encoding in Polish and in British English and shows that Polish encodes a more detailed and fine-grained set of PRIDE categories and subcategories than does British English.

The following chapter 7 addresses the role of cultural conceptualization in spiritual/religious systems, as Sharifian provides Cultural-Linguistic analyses of lexical items pertaining to Sufi life (among other things, by revisiting DEL), eulogistic idioms relating to death in Buddhist and Christian traditions, and the surfacing of conceptualizations relating to sacred sites in discourse in Australian Aboriginal English.

Chapter eight focuses on political discourse. Using examples such as the cultural reconceptualization of DEMOCRACY in Ghanaian culture (in which it is intertwined with a schema of POLITENESS), metaphorical conceptualizations of the NATION AS A BODY in several countries, and metaphors of AUSTERITY in Portuguese, Spanish, and Irish newspapers, Sharifian makes a clear case for the role of cultural conceptualizations in political discourse. This chapter also includes a subsection on cultural metaphors in Military English, based on a study by Wolf (2017) in which it is argued that a Cultural-Linguistic approach to international military conflict and peacekeeping operations can cast light on intercultural communication in such situations, and may even feed into actual communicative practices in connection with military conflict.

Chapter 9 takes its starting point in global localization (or ‘glocalization’), which covers processes of culturally localizing linguistic forms of a global language (Sharifian 2010). Given that English is a global language with a colonial past and current global cultural influence due to Anglophone cinema, TV, popular music, literature etc., several local varieties of English, or World Englishes, have emerged around the globe, most of which feature localized vocabularies. In a Cultural-Linguistic perspective, glocalization involves linguistic units from, in this case, English, becoming embedded or anchored in local cultural conceptualizations. For example,

Sharifian discusses how in Aboriginal English, *language* and *country* are associated with local cultural schemata absent in Western varieties of English, of how in Singaporean English, *aunty* evokes a particular social category of MIDDLE-AGED UNEDUCATED WOMAN, and how in Cameroon English, *brother* in utterances like *They took bribes from their less fortunate brothers* draws on an underlying metaphor of the COMMUNITY AS KINSHIP. Moreover, this chapter presents some summaries of recent papers on World Englishes (primarily from Sharifian 2017).

The next chapter 10 illustrates how cultural schemata, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors figure in intercultural communication and can be the source of miscommunication between members of different cultural groups. Using several examples of conversations between Australian Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, Sharifian convincingly shows how much miscommunication arises among interlocutors drawing on different cultural conceptualizations in encoding and decoding utterances.

Chapter eleven addresses the field of TEIL and discusses notions such as globalization, the native speaker, communicative and cultural competence. This chapter argues for the importance of including training in intercultural communication in teaching English as a foreign language, through incorporating an awareness of differences in cultural conceptualizations across varieties of English into the teaching. This, it is argued, can help learners develop meta-cultural competencies that can be applied in actual situations of intercultural communication.

The purpose of this cluster of chapters is clearly to showcase how principles from Cultural Linguistics can be applied in, and enrich, research in other disciplines within and beyond linguistics. In using several examples from extant Cultural-Linguistic research, Sharifian makes a compelling case for adopting Cultural-Linguistic perspectives into pragmatics, emotion research, research on spiritual/religious systems, political discourse analysis, the study of English as a global language, and TEIL.

2.3. Research in Cultural Linguistics

Taking his starting point in Leavitt (2015), Sharifian offers a Cultural-Linguistic take on linguistic relativity – primarily addressing points of discrepancy between linguistic relativity and Cultural Linguistics – in the penultimate chapter 12. The chapter first covers work on language and culture by Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf which has fed into the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Then the author moves on to addressing differences between Cultural Linguistics and the linguistic relativity hypothesis. A central difference, according to Sharifian, is that culture as an overarching abstract notion is replaced with cultural conceptualizations. Rather than proposing a singular culture of a people (a practice that Sharifian ascribes to proponents of the linguistic relativity hypothesis), Cultural Linguistics suggests, as mentioned earlier, that culture is a heterogeneously distributed cognitive system that emerges from interactions among members of a cultural group, and that cultural conceptualizations are spread within this system, such that they are heterogeneously shared by the interacting members of the cultural group. The circular nature of this type of system is no accident, as a basic premise in complexity theory is that the relation between the interacting agents and the emerging system

is that of a feedback loop, such that the cultural system is characterized by recursive causality (Frank 2015: 494-497). It is the same premise that is at the heart of usage-based language theory within cognitive linguistics (Beckner et al. 2009; see also Torre 2015); ultimately, Cultural Linguistics is itself a usage-based framework of linguistic analysis. I doubt any Cultural Linguist would take issue with this classification of Cultural Linguistics; in fact, Frank (2015: 502) herself writes “Cultural Linguistics and other usage-based models of language”, thus overtly categorizing Cultural Linguistics as a usage-based model of language.

The final chapter 13 addresses recent research on language and culture, providing summaries of those chapters in Sharifian (2015) and Sharifian (2017), that are not discussed elsewhere in *CL*. Furthermore, this chapter briefly discusses recent and forthcoming work on cultural conceptualizations in connection with vernacular architecture.

3. Evaluation and discussion

The year 2017 was an important year in Cultural Linguistics, as it saw the release of two key publications in the field – namely Sharifian (2017) and *CL*. Sharifian (2017) is an anthology containing more than thirty chapters that report on current research within Cultural Linguistics and, in many ways, point to future endeavors and developments in Cultural Linguistics. In contrast, *CL* very much offers an overview of the state-of-affairs in Cultural Linguistics and accounts for how Cultural Linguistics got to where it is today. While Sharifian (2017) presents entirely original research, *CL* draws primarily on extant research from the inception of Cultural Linguistics up until today. In that sense, *CL* serves as a map of the Cultural-Linguistic landscape. This makes it an important and useful monograph in a number of ways.

Firstly, it is very relevant if one is interested in the scope and applicability of Cultural-Linguistic research (as this review hints at, Cultural Linguistics has quite a broad scope). This, I think, primarily owes to Cultural Linguistics rejecting a monolithic notion of culture and adopting cultural conceptualizations and as well as to its interdisciplinary nature; it draws on, among other fields, cognitive linguistics, cognitive anthropology, complexity science, anthropological linguistics, and cross-cultural pragmatics (for more, see Sharifian 2011: xvii). I would argue, following Fischer (2016), that interdisciplinarity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the object of research than narrow research paradigms do. It makes sense that, with such an interdisciplinary hinterland, Cultural Linguistics should be applicable within a broad range of disciplines within the humanities. *CL* very clearly illustrates this. Arguably, the parent disciplines of Cultural Linguistics may also benefit from insights generated within the field. For instance, with the social turn in cognitive linguistics and the rise of cognitive sociolinguistics, many cognitive linguists will undoubtedly pay more attention to social and cultural cognition. Many of the points presented in *CL* are potentially very useful to these cognitive linguists.

Secondly, *CL* is useful to researchers in language and culture who are looking to contribute to Cultural Linguistics itself. Here, chapters one, two, four, and twelve are particularly relevant. The two first chapters gently introduce the basic tenets of Cultural Linguistics, offering a good point of entry into the field; one should probably at some point read Sharifian (2011), though, as it provides

a more detailed description of the theoretical and analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics. Chapter twelve is particularly important to this group of potential readers, because it maps the ways in which the Cultural-Linguistic take on culture differs from the linguistic relativity-based take that remains widespread within linguistics and communication studies today. Lastly, chapter four, in providing an overview of methods and techniques applied in Cultural Linguistics, may help researchers decide which methods and techniques to use (or not to use) in their own projects.

Thirdly, seeing that the volume draws mainly on extant research and contains summaries of many papers in Cultural Linguistics, *CL* may also serve to help people select readings that are relevant to them. This will be relevant, not just to researchers looking to contribute to Cultural Linguistics, but also to university teachers looking to find readings for courses on language, cognition, culture and the like. Students working on projects on language and culture should also find this aspect of the book helpful as it can help them select readings for their projects.

While primarily aimed at fellow researchers, the monograph is written such that it is relatively easy to read, and even novice academics (such as BA students who have been introduced to academic writing), should not find tackling the monograph a daunting task. The chapters are relatively short, but still substantial and in no way thin content-wise. They are written in a very accessible style, making it quite easy for readers to process what is conveyed in the chapters, and the monograph is overall very well structured.

While *CL* draws primarily on extant research in Cultural Linguistics, and some of the chapters are reworked versions of previous publications by Sharifian, some might criticize the monograph for its many summaries of research papers and its reliance on extant research. I think this would be misguided criticism for three reasons. The first reason is that, as mentioned above, *CL* maps out the Cultural Linguistics landscape, which is not only helpful to the groups of readers mentioned above, but also important, as it can help prospective, novice and even veteran Cultural Linguists navigate the landscape of Cultural-Linguistic theorizing and findings. Also, it is arguably important for any research paradigm to stop and take a retrospective look at its own path to its current status to see what it has gained (and perhaps also what it has lost or missed out on). The second reason is that the monograph does contain chapters that present original research by Sharifian himself. For instance, chapter five offers a comprehensive account of Sharifian's theory of pragmatic cultural acts in such a way that readers can apply it in their own analyses. Likewise, chapter twelve offers Sharifian's own view on how Cultural-Linguistics is positioned in relation to other research programs and approaches in language and culture. Consequently, *CL* does, when all is said and done, not have an exclusively retrospective vantage point. The third reason is that the primary purpose of *CL* is clearly not to present new research findings and theoretical insights, but to map out Cultural Linguistics and its merits. Readers have to seek out Sharifian (2017) for cutting edge and groundbreaking research in Cultural Linguistics. In a way, *CL* and Sharifian (2017) can be seen as each other's companions with *CL* looking at the present and at the past, and Sharifian (2017) looking at the present and at the future. In other words, criticizing *CL* for drawing on extant research is simply misguided because it would be predicated upon a complete misunderstanding of the very purpose of the monograph.

As a researcher and educator working within the humanities myself, I would argue that – giv-

en the witch-hunt on the humanities that politicians in many European nations have instigated, based on the, in my opinion, false argument that research and education in the humanities are, at best, inferior to research and education in the hard sciences and, at worst, completely useless – the publication of *CL* is very timely. It repeatedly illustrates that research in language and culture (which for me lies at the heart of the humanities) can and will make valuable contributions at both a societal micro-level and an international macro-level. For instance, research into intercultural miscommunication which is due to different cultural conceptualizations can feed into improving public and institutional communication in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies as well as cross-cultural communication at a global level. The point is perhaps made the clearest when Sharifian quotes Wolf's (2017: 696) statement that "a Cultural Linguistic take on military conflicts and peacekeeping missions in international contexts could contribute to better intercultural understanding and hence, possibly, de-escalation". Similarly, chapter 11 presents a range of insights and suggestions for tools that can be implemented in TEIL, which may assist teachers in prompting their pupils and students to develop a meta-cultural awareness which could without doubt in the long run improve communication in English as a lingua franca. Overall, while Sharifian does not – it must be pointed out – set out to make an educational-political statement or to overtly defend the humanities, it can be inferred from reading *CL* that studying cultural conceptualization can enrich the humanities in terms of theory, methodology and applicability. Now, most researchers and educators in the humanities already know very well how valuable the humanities are, but much of the content of *CL* could be synthesized to provide further ammunition for the defense in the increasingly politically institutionalized war on the humanities and the false arguments it is based on.

Farzad Sharifian's *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language* is highly recommended to Cultural Linguists, as it maps out the current state-of-affairs in the field and, in a way, follows up on Sharifian (2011). For the same reason, the book under review, along with Sharifian (2011) and Sharifian (2017), is recommended to researchers from other areas in linguistics who are interested in making contributions to Cultural Linguistics. It should also be of interest to cognitive linguists with an interest in cultural cognition, as well as to cognitive anthropologists, cognitive ethnographers and other cognitive scientists with an interest in culture. Moreover, it is recommended that researchers within the fields addressed in the book – namely, pragmatics, emotion research, religion studies, political discourse analysis, the study of World Englishes, intercultural communication research, and TEIL – read the volume, or at the very least the chapters in the first cluster and the chapters that relate to their respective fields. Seeing how important metaphor, categorization, and cognitive schemata have become within and even beyond cognitive-functional approaches to language, Sharifian's work is incredibly relevant to any researcher, teacher, or student with an interest in language and culture.

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