

Embodiment in Transculture Conditions

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss cultural embodiment and the role that the human body plays in culture from a philosophical perspective. In the transcultural world where any culture influences and is influenced by other groups, the classical externalist definition of culture, which considers it as a well-organized unity of artifacts and a system of customs seems ineffective. A psychological or internal definition of culture that may see it as something like a computer program installed in us, has a serious problem. Culture is not an abstract system of representation and grammar like a computer application, but is rather incorporated into our body in ambiguous and polysemous ways. Cultural customs, such as language, knowledge, religion, rites, etiquette, and so on, are realized as a network of interactions among different and heterogeneous actors, including different people and artifacts. Once we acquire cultural customs, we intentionally begin to use or perform them, and at the same time we are possessed by a layer of meanings they incorporate. Our body is an arena in which these myriad of voices coordinate, contend, reconcile, conflict, integrate, and split. Cultural embodiment is, therefore, a fundamentally political phenomenon, as it is a continuous negotiation, opposition, struggle, mediation and reconciliation, comprising multiple different voices.

KeyWords: Culture, Embodiment, Transculture, Phenomenology, Philosophy of mind, Distributed View of Culture

1. Introduction

In this paper, we discuss, cultural embodiment and the role that the human body plays in culture from a philosophical perspective. Cultural embodiment can be defined as a phenomenon where the human body expresses cultural meaning, represents itself as cultural symbol, and/or behaves in accordance with cultural codes. Culture is expressed in artifacts such as paintings, sculptures, and architecture, books, illustrations, symbols, buildings, cities, and so on. It is also expressed as a system of symbols, language, moral, and laws. It appears in the use of the body, corporeal performance, customary behavior, rituals, celebrations, skills, make-up, dress, and body modification. It can be found in classical and traditional societies as well as in modern societies.

Cultural embodiment is an important theme for different human and social sciences such as anthropology, ethnology, psychology, clinical psychology, cognitive science, history, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy. We argue how human physiology and social custom, conceived as culture, interact in the subject-body and explore what cultural embodiment is for an individual from the perspectives of phenomenology and philosophy of embodiment.

First, we examine the classical definitions of culture and the new aspects of it that emerge in our globalizing world. Second, we examine the basic assumption in classical concepts of culture that culture that it is modeled on language. We affirm that the basic assumption that culture/language is made of rules is fundamental misleading in the understanding of culture/language. We propose a new idea of a distributed view of culture/language, one that observes culture as a network of interactions among heterogenous actors such as humans and artifacts will be proposed. Finally, we discuss what kind of role that the lived body plays in culture, and conclude that when we have acquired cultural customs, we begin to intentionally use or perform them, and at the same time, are possessed by a layer of meanings they incorporate. Our body is an arena in which these multiple-voices coordinate, contend, reconcile, conflict, integrate, and are split.

2. Two major definitions of culture

The meaning of the term “culture” has been highly contested. The term, as understood in the West is based on the ideas of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC- 43 BC), the Ancient Roman philosopher and orator. He wrote of “cultivation of soul” or “cultura animi” as the highest possible good for human development (Cicero 1945). His ideas had two important implications for the later conceptualization of culture: the metaphor of agriculture and “educationalism”. The term “culture” is etymologically composed of “cult”(habitation) and “ure”(place). The metaphor of agriculture implies that to be cultural is to inhabit a place for long enough and to intensively cultivate and harvest (profits) from it. Educationalism means that the idea that culture is all the way in which human beings overcome their original barbarism, and through artifice, become human being is not fully human without culture so that human beings must be educated to have a culture. This idea is found in the philosophy of Enlightenment and opposes the Romantic idea of natural perfection of humanity as Jean-Jacques Rousseau affirmed. These implications seem to remain in the contemporary conception of “culture”.

“Culture” is most frequently used in the domain of anthropology than any other domains among the humanities. The classical definition is given by Edward Tylor (1832-1917), the founder of cultural anthropology, who said that culture is the “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Tylor 1871, p.1). He believed that all societies passed through three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. Tylor’s definition is controversial and problematic as it contained too many different sorts of assumptions about how we understand the idea of “culture”.

Subsequent definitions of culture can be classified into two opposing categories: externalist and internalist. The first is often observed in cultural anthropology. A simple and sophisticated example of the externalist definition is that of Malinowski (1931, p.623) who said “Culture is a well-organized unity divided into two fundamental aspects—a body of artifacts and a system of customs”. According to him, culture refers to artificial things and socially shared behavioral practice that can be observed from the outside. The theory of “cultural materialism” of Marvin Harris (2001/1979), an American anthropologist, is another example of the externalism. Cultural materialism is the view based on a refined Marxist theory on superstructure and base (Harris, 2001/1979). Cultural variations and changes can be best explained by the factors of the base structure involving material variables, such as ecological conditions and technologies.

The internal definition is often given by psychological or cognitive anthropological approaches to culture. For the internalist approach, culture consists in rules that are said to be implicit because

ordinary people cannot tell you what they are. Sperber defined culture as “widely distributed, lasting mental and public representations inhabiting a given social group” (1996, p.33). Boyd and Richardson (2005, No.98) claimed that culture is “a pool of information, stored in the brains of a population, capable of affecting individuals’ behavior that gets transmitted through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission”. These external definitions imply that culture is not reducible to the mental states of individuals, whereas the internal definitions, especially that given by cognitive psychology implies the opposite.

According to Soliman and Glenberg (2014), a commonly accepted psychological characterization of culture has two working assumptions. The first is that culture is a package of propositional constructs like values, beliefs, and world-views. They form rule-like structures that specify the normative or prescriptive social code prevailing in a group. The second is that this cultural grammar or norms provides frames to make sense of incoming information and simultaneously functions as a motivational force that biases behaviour in predictable directions (Soliman and Glenberg 2014, p.207).

Thus, psychological characterization likens culture to a computer program installed in the brain. Sociologists and philosophers know that this idea of culture in psychology is close to Durkheimian idea that the concepts and categories of logical thought arise out of social life (Durkheim 1912). Durkheim argued that categories such as space and time are not *a priori* nor universal as Kant affirmed, but are acquired out of a society’s categorization and language. The category of space, for example, depends on a society’s grouping and geographical use of place. However, once the categories are acquired, they work as frameworks of perceiving and thinking, as if they were *a priori* categories in the Kantian sense.

3. The problems in the concept of culture

We notice that in both definitions, culture is considered widely shared by members of a social group by virtue of belonging to that group. However, what does a “social group” mean? Think about a martial artform like kung fu. Most practitioners of kung fu world over would share a certain amount of knowledge, belief, art, rules, morals, customs, and other capabilities particular to kung fu. In this sense, kung fu can be called as a culture. Bruno Latour (1988) carried out ethnographic research of a system of beliefs, customs, rules, and behavioral patterns that scientists share in the laboratory. Based on this, we can talk about a culture of laboratory scientists. Accordingly it is quite possible to write an ethnographic sociological book on the worldwide society of kung fu as well.

However, do we hesitate a bit to say that kung fu or a scientific experiment is a culture in the ordinary sense of the term? It is possible that for some people, being a practitioner of kung fu would be hundreds of times more important than having the nationality of a country. For some, being a scientist may be at the core of their identity, while their religion, which is inherited from their family, remains merely peripheral. A profession or a lifelong hobby can be an irreplaceable aspect of one’s identity of in their life and personality. Nevertheless, we wonder if many people hesitate to say that kung fu is seen as a science or a culture. This is because professions and hobbies are usually freely chosen by individuals of their own volition. One consciously decides to become a kung fu practitioner and a member of the kung fu society, or a scientist and a member of a laboratory. The membership and the identity that one intentionally chooses may not be considered that of a social group for culture, no matter how important that membership and identity may be for the individual.

Here, the metaphor of agriculture introduced by Cicero is worth nothing. To be cultural is to

inhabit a place in order to cultivate it. “Agriculture”, then rather means the sense of belonging to the land than being a member of a profession, business, or hobby. “A social group” in the context of “culture” is a regional, often ethnically homogeneous community, and neither a society of profession nor that of hobby. Culture is generally conceived based on the place into which one was born or passively thrown into. Culture, in this sense, is like destiny. The intentional and conscious devotion to a profession or hobby cannot be normally called culture.

Another important feature is that culture is considered local, particular, and peripheral, not central or universal. In Japan, people rarely say, “the culture of Tokyo” although “the culture of *Shitamachi*,” downtown parts of Tokyo, is commonly used. “The culture of Tokyo” sounds a bit strange in Japanese, although not entirely unusable. Considering this nuance, the term “culture” can be seen as implying being local and particular in contrast with being central and universal. Tokyo as a metropolis is a place where extremely diverse people gather with their local and particular cultures. It is thus difficult to find common features among people and their behaviours. This meaning of “culture” also comes from the metaphor of agriculture. Therefore, we can say that the term “culture” has some hidden political implications: it is widely shared by members of a local, particular, and peripheral social group. Tokyo as a metropolis can compare to a market rather than farmland.

When we focus on the content of a culture, it is inadequate to say that it exclusively belongs to a certain society. For example, Japanese food is an important component of Japanese culture. However, there is no border or boundary that circles Japanese food and distinguishes it from other foods. Japanese food is, historically speaking, a mixture of different food traditions: East-south Asian and Chinese are the most basic elements, while Western food traditions also has been imported from the Tokugawa Era. There are also foreign-made Japanese foods. For example, a new style of sushi was invented in the US, and is made of “exotic” ingredients such as avocado, beef, mayonnaise, chili sauce, and so on. It is far from Japanese classical sushi, but is certainly a kind of sushi that is innovative and tasty. You may say the same thing about any food or any sort of cultural phenomenon in the world: knowledge, art, literature, law, morals, custom, religion, and so on.

Thus, any culture in any country or region contains dynamism, diversity, obscurity, historical changes and layers, fusion or mixture with other cultures. Any cultural phenomenon is hybrid in its content. It should be wrong to suppose that a culture has the boundary that clearly distinguishes it from other cultures. The term ‘culture’ often implies that it has some essential, pure, stable, and ahistorical characteristics. The idea of “culture” itself can imply a certain type of essentialism. This “cultural essentialism” involves the risk of committing to the kind of “orientalism” that Edward W. Said (1994) strongly criticized as inaccurate cultural representation with the exaggeration of difference, the presumption of one’s own culture and the devalorization of different cultures. Such essentialism can also commit to cultural conservatism that tries to preserve classical but problematic customs and beliefs in the name of “culture”.

Although cultural phenomena have no boundaries, why do people often suppose that they do? The reason is that culture has political implications. Most classical and ordinary definitions consider culture something that is shared widely by members of a social group by virtue of belonging to that group. However, this “social group” neither means “an association of professional” nor “that of hobby” and “that of ideology”, but rather a political, often ethnic, society such as local community, an ethnic group, and nation state. A political local society must have a boundary that distinguishes inside from the outside and its members from outsiders, as politics needs the opposition of the inside of the group to the outside. When we use the term “culture”, we tend to identify it with that of a political

society, which is often regional, particular, and/or marginalized. Its members are forced to belong rather than join of their own accord.

We should not reduce culture to mere mental states, traits, personality, and cognitive functions by neglecting the political, economic, historical, and technological conditions and social institutions such as laws, norms, and rules. No cultural phenomenon can be explained without referring to politics, government, economy, and scientific knowledge (Rose 1996; Vitz 1977). The term “culture” can explain political, economic and historical phenomena in the, as defined by internalists, psychological or cognitive scientific terms.

4. Transcultural conditions

Cultural phenomena such as “knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom” or “a body of artifacts and a system of customs” have been always changing, moving, and being transmitted and diffused from one place to another or from a generation to another. They have been exchanged across countries and regions. No culture is unique. However, all cultures influence and are influenced by other groups, culture, and share common features and components with them. It is impossible to define and demarcate the culture of a social group as it is too complex, vague, divergent, multilayered, and has many subclasses. The members of a society do not acquire their culture in the same way and degree. They also have very different attitudes toward the culture of their society: accepting, pretending to accept, succeeding, refusing, changing, interpreting, improving, and being indifferent.

Accordingly, culture is transcultural from the beginning. However politics tries to draw clear lines of demarcation among cultures. The difference between Flemish and Dutch seems to be no larger than that between Tohoku Kagoshima dialect. But some Belgian people strongly claim that Flemish is different and independent from Dutch, and not a dialect of it. We have never heard the people in Kagoshima prefecture claim that they speak a language different from that of Tohoku prefecture. In reality, they complain that they often cannot catch at all what Tohoku people say. We believe that this is a good example of how political and/or religious conditions divide a linguistic continuum into two languages.

There has always been a movement of de-demarcating, de-appropriating, de-politicalizing, and de-terrorizing culture world over. This movement should shake one’s political and social identity from a cultural perspective. No society in our times has been described by anthropologists as being one isolated from other societies, especially from modern ones. Even societies in which people have lived relatively traditional ways has been undergoing rapid and fundamental changes over the past few decades under the influence of the globalizing world. Mikhail Epstein wrote thus:

While culture frees humans from the material dependencies of nature, it also creates new, symbolic dependencies—on customs, traditions, conventions, which a person receives as a member of a certain group and ethnos. Among the many freedoms proclaimed as rights of the individual, there emerges yet another freedom—from one’s own culture, in which one was born and educated. Transculture is viewed as the next level of liberation, this time from the “prison house of language,” from unconscious predispositions and prejudices of the “native,” naturalized cultures. (Epstein 2009, p.327)

According to Epstein, there are the two tendencies in contemporary societies: globalism and

multiculturalism. Both provoke social problems. The former homogenizes the world by forcing a model of development on all countries and nations and the latter is tantamount to locking people in an insurmountable dependency of culture on the gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation of its representatives. “The rigid frameworks of these concepts leave no freedom of choice for the individual who is destined to be globalized and homogenized or serve as a specimen of some ethnic or gender identity.” (p.329) Transculture is a new sphere of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures and shakes the isolation of their symbolic systems and value determinations. Epstein(2009) proposed that transculture is a different model of cultural development by broadening the field of “supra-cultural” creativity, and an alternative to both leveling globalism and isolating pluralism.

5. Is culture/language made of rules?

If we live in a transcultural world, the external definition of culture by Malinowski that “culture is a well-organized unity of artifacts and a system of customs” seems ineffective. Psychological, internal definition of culture that likens to a computer program installed in us has serious problem because it presupposes the notion that culture has a consistent system of representation and grammar. The fundamental presupposition that both definitions of culture commonly share is that the model of culture is language, which is understood as a unified system of vocabulary and grammar. Computer programs were invented in the images of the language I just described, but now language has come to be understood as an analogy to computer programs. The external definition sees culture as a language all local people share, and the internal definition sees it as a language that all local people have installed.

Can a natural language we use be compared to a computer program? Is a language we acquired and use in an ordinary life a consistent system comprising definite terms and rules? When we communicate with others, do we generate sentences according to the rules and vocabularies installed in the head? We should have fundamental doubts on the existing presupposition that culture is compare to language and language is comparable to computer program.

It is fair to say that theories of human linguistic communication have been based primarily on the information processing model. The message from the sender, that is, things like ideas and concepts, are encoded into physical speech and reaches the receiver who then decodes the series of physical sounds within himself and understands it as the original message. In this context, it is supposed that the sender and receiver share the same systematic rules, that is, the grammar for coding and decoding, that they generate and speak sentences according to these rules, and that they understand the speech by the same rules.

The problem lies in the idea that language users have acquired a learned systematic knowledge of the language before individual interpretive situations present themselves, and that linguistic communication is only possible because of this. This may seem like common sense in many domains of human science like linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, and so on. Many may ask how we can understand language if we do not have the internal linguistic ability to interpret speech. However it may be a false assumption that we can understand language because we have acquired the systematic rules of language in advance. There are many reasons to doubt the idea that our understanding of a language is based on learned rules and conventions.

Donald Davidson (2005, Paper7) made a radical claim about linguistic conventions in his article

titled “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”. He radically questioned our assumptions about linguistic communication. The first meaning (literal) is governed by learned conventions and regularities, that is, the systematic knowledge or competence of a speaker or interpreter is leaned ahead of occasions of interpretation and is conventional in character. These are also the assumptions of the information processing model. According to Davidson, this assumption is completely unsustainable.

In support of the argument, Davidson took up malapropism which is a literary technique of replacing one word with a wrong, but similar sounding word. The strange and ridiculous expression “Familiarity breeds attempt” is a malapropism of the actual expression “Familiarity breeds contempt”. This expression is not covered by prior learning. However, we readily recognize such expressions as malapropism. We can easily see what the actual uttered expression would look like if it were constructed correctly, even if it were grammatically incorrect or incomplete. We can interpret words we have never heard before, correct misspoken words, and cope successfully with the new personal language (Davidson 2005, p. 151). Anyone who has ever had a conversation with inadequate foreign language skills has experienced this. If you make a terrible mistake in your grammar or vocabulary, a native will rephrase it appropriately. We do the same thing with our children. We often use language in deviant ways, but even when we do so, we can get through to the other person and continue the conversation. If a child uses a strange word, we can correct them. If there is a mistake or misunderstanding, we have a deeper understanding of the other person's intentions to correct the semantic error.

What should be shared in communication if this is the case? Davidson answered that question by drawing a distinction between the *passing theory* and the *prior theory*.

For the hearer, the prior theory express how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he does interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter's prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use. (2005, p.101)

The prior theory indicates that the prior linguistic knowledge, abilities, and conventions are considered necessary for linguistic communication, as assumed by ordinary linguistic theories. The passing theory is concerned with how each individual understands certain utterances in certain situations. It is in the passing theory that the coincidence between the speaker and interpreter is most significant. The passing theory includes not only changes in the list of proper names and self-serving interpretations of words, but also all uses of language that are correctly interpreted, irrespective of how far removed they are from everyday use. The speaker and the interpreter understand what the other is trying to say through communicative exchange. In doing so, the prior theory is not a prerequisite for successful communication. What is necessary, though, is the passing theory in which the speaker and interpreter agree on the same real world. Every deviant use of language acquires meaning as long as the speaker and interpreter are in agreement with each other on the spot. What the speaker and interpreter know in advance is not shared. Thus, a language is not governed by rules or conventions. What we must share in communication is the passing theory.

What, is the ability to communicate with others interpret or speak to someone else in the first place? It is “the ability that permit him to construct a correct, that is, convergent, passing theory for speech transaction with that person” (Davidson 2005, p. 106). It is no more than the ability to understand and to be understood by someone. The listener only needs to understand what the speaker

is trying to say and the intention behind the speech, and the speaker only needs to make the listener understand his/her own intentions. To see linguistic communication as an understanding of intention of others is to erase “the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally” (Ibid. p.107). Thus, as Davidson argued, we are forced to abandon the notion of a shared structure of rules and conventions that language users acquire and apply to the individual communicative act. Any attempt to unravel how we communicate by appealing to language conventions must be abandoned in the first place.

6. An ecological view on language rules and conventions.

An idea similar to what Davidson proposed was by Paul Thibault (2011). From his perspective of ecological psychology, Thibault made a distinction between first and second-order language. The former is grounded in the intrinsic expressivity and interactivity of human bodies-in-interaction. First order languaging involves synchronized inter-individual bodily dynamics on a short timescale. Second-order patterns emanate from the cultural dynamics of an entire population of interacting agents on longer, slower cultural-historical time-scales. The second-order is what most people think of language and lexico-grammatical patters. According to Thibault the second order, guides and constrains first-order languaging.

The fundamental affordance that underlies verbal communication is our responsiveness or addressivity and answerability. This addressivity and answerability happens in first-order languaging. According to the Thibault, the structure of language is not located in individuals, but exists across the groups that use it. Language cannot be divorced from a human’s non-linguistic behaviors, and if it is divorced, it ceases to be a language. The smallest unit of language is not a sentence without context, but a conversation between two or more people about a subject. It is completely persuasive, as Thibault said:

Over time, these [first-order] patters are further solidified as conventional patters of word co-occurrence as they become institutionalized. The resulting “grammatical” patters are enforced as normative and conventionalized usage patterns. They are second-order patterns that culturally transmitted and socially enforces as community standards through schooling and other informal learning situations. (Thibault 2011, p.10)

For Thibault, second-order language is a social institution and norm. A social institution such as grammar cannot be abstract, but is situated within a regular activity with which language-games are interwoven. However, grammar should be interpreted neither as an internalized program in our mind which defines and orders our behaviors, nor as a custom or disposition that the speaker has within. Grammar should not be identified with a social “system” that integrates individuals’ behaviors as parts in concordance with a definite purpose. Rather, grammar can be compared to the law in legal practice. When we do nothing contrary to the law, the law is still outside of us. Similarly, rules must always remain exterior regulations that social authorities impose on us. We do not break the law in many cases. However, in most cases, we neither know the law nor apply it to our individual actions, and do not have a detailed, systematic knowledge of the law, either. Often, even if we know the law, we ignore it and do not follow it, or rather use it to our advantage. The actual linguistic expressions that we make and the conventions of language (the prior theory for Davidson and the second-order

language for Thibault) are just as divergent as our actions and the law.

For example, you will never understand the following cell phone dialogue between teens, even if you master standard Japanese language.

「間あくて買った～井伊んだケドね！」
「(*´・ω・`)ノ夜露死苦音、(´・ω・*)」
「°.+:。 (ノ・ω・) ノ〇〇°.+:。 \ (・ω・ゞ) たん°.+:。 (σ・ω・) σでいす♪°.+:。」

The authors of this paper, Japanese native speakers, do not read them either, although it is possible to vaguely understand what they wrote. This text-message exchange is grammatically incorrect. All the words are slang, and are understandable only among a small group of playfellows in a high school. They use small emojis in place of words. It clearly deviates from standard forms of Japanese expression. This conversation on cell phone is a practice of first-order language use. The teens who wrote the dialogue would never use their “language” for adults. They may talk with adults in a very different manner, that is using standard Japanese. In a sense, they are using two different languages. However, school teachers, authorities of Japanese language, and adults in general would be most reluctant to accept this as kind of invention or a new “language”. Thus, there is both power opposition and struggle between adults and teens.

We can see similar phenomena in the opposition between a “dialect” and “standard” or “official” language as well as in the formation of colonial languages such as pidgin and creole. Speakers communicate with other actors by assimilating, using, resisting, and/or nullifying the power of linguistic authority. Psychological and linguistic research on language learning often focuses exclusively on the acquisition or internalization of external, existential norms of language conventions. However, it has implicitly fallen to authoritarianism. Without a perspective that depicts language acquisition as a conflict in actor networks, it remains a one-sided theory to understand human linguistic communication.

From this perspective, Thibault and other ecological psychologists proposed the “distributed view on language”, wherein linguistic structures, lexico-grammatical patterns, are not located in individual brains, but are distributed across population.

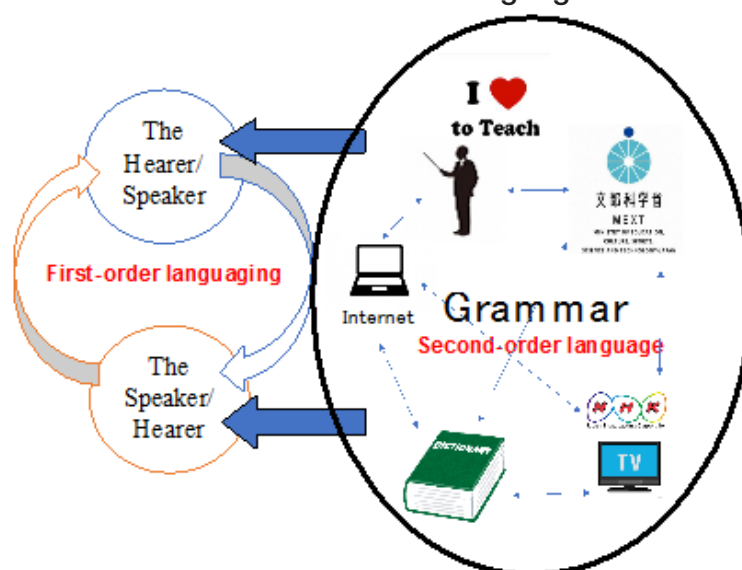
Language is essentially a kind of social institution, something created by a community of speakers over generations, and is not separately represented in the memory of each speaker. (Port 2010, p.306)

Language, on the distributed view, is radically heterogeneous phenomenon that is spread across diverse spatiotemporal scales ranging from the neural to the cultural. (Thibault 2011, p. 210)

Language is not a system of rules and conventions that are installed in an individual’s brain as the psychological, internal definition of culture supposed. However, we should extend this distributed view of language to the point where social institution such as language are interpreted as a network of heterogeneous actors that exist outside the speakers, and that regulate and control the speaker’s linguistic activities. Linguistic grammar is not abstract. In reality, it is a dynamic network of heterogeneous actors including different people and artifacts like speakers, authorities in language (parents, teachers, grammarians, linguists, the Ministry of Education, and so on), grammar texts,

books on linguistics, mass media, internet media, etc.

Distributed view on language



Ecological psychologists arrived at the same conclusion as did Davidson, who stated: “There is no such things as a language,...we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.” (Davidson 2005, pp.106-7) Language is neither an abstract system of rules, conventions, or customs, nor a program in each speaker’s brain. It is realized as the combined behavior of many heterogenous actors including humans and artifacts. Linguistic communication is fundamentally dynamic, embodied as an aspect of corporeal, interpersonal coordination, and embedded in a larger natural and social context. The “language system” is nothing more than a frozen pattern of the dynamic process of communicating.

7. Cultural embodiment

We saw in the last section that language should neither be substantialized as conventions in society nor as programs in the head. Language as a social convention or an internal program is an abstract from living linguistic communication. Rules become rules only when they regulate the behaviour of an individual or a group. Rules need agents to regulate their behaviour, teachers to instruct how to interpret and apply them, and judges to examine the agents of rules. Rules should be written in books, at least if they are complicated. Thus, rules are realized as a network of interactions among different and heterogeneous actors like authorities, agents, books, teachers, people who should be regulated, and so on. They are distributed across things and humans, and are not a system in the form of an abstract entity. I think this characterization of language can be applied to culture in general ¹.

If a culture is a network of interactions among heterogeneous actors, how can the relationship between culture and an individual be understand? We acquire social customs and cultural behaviours just as we learn language. Just as we use language as a habit, culture also becomes a behavioral

¹ In the domain of anthropology, Clifford Geertz’s proposed a different definition of culture, semiotic understanding of culture. For him, culture is like a text, a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, which needs to be interpreted through the investigation of symbols. His idea to see culture as a text has common ground with this paper’s position, if the symbols Geertz concerns also expressed by the corporeal behaviours. (Geertz, 1973).

habit. Traditionally, social meanings are considered private, subjectively constructed, or created by interpretation in the mind. Meanings are ideas bestowed on physical activities. However, recent sociological theories, including feminist-theory, tend to think that social meanings are neither mental representations nor subjective interpretations, but are rather real and embodied forms of power; meaning that they exist in the world.

Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu pointed out the embodiment of social meanings. The prototype of the idea can be found in the study of “techniques of the body” by French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1936) as well as on “techniques” by French ethologist and historian, AndréLeroi-Gourhan (1943).

Foucault noted, in *Surveiller et punir* (1975) that in the 18th and 19th centuries, modern society developed a new mode of controlling and regulating people. “Discipline” is a highly refined form of training one’s body and molding one’s conduct. It has been practiced in the modern institutions such as prisons, hospitals, factories, military organizations, and schools to make people conform to standardized and uniform ways of behaviour. Discipline is a political tool that controls the smallest and most precise aspects of a person’s body and behaviour. The concept of “habitus” proposed by Bourdieu (1980) also expressed the embodiment of social meaning. Habitus is a corporeal habit that is charged with meanings of social structure such as hierarchical order or gender. One’s “personal way of behaving” may represent his or her class customs. Habitus is the inculcation of social structure in a personal set of dispositions of perceiving, thinking, and behaving.

The tradition of French anthropology has paid much attention to the unique role of the body in culture, Psychological approaches to culture have not been concerned with cultural embodiment thus far. However, the theory of embodiment has recently evolved in the domain of cognitive science under the influence of phenomenology and the philosophical argument on embodiment. Merleau-Ponty is best known as the philosopher of embodiment (cf, Gallagher 2014).

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962, original 1945), our body is ambivalent, as it is active and passive at the same time. The body is externally observed and internally lived and experienced by the subject. It has natural existence determined by the biological and physiological conditions of the individual, and social existence is conditioned by cultural institutions through learning and experience. We acquire social customs and institutions such as language through our corporeal ability to imitate others, but use the customs and institution in our own ways for our own sake. We immerse in and breathe the environment, but act upon it through motor intentionality. The body is, thus, an arena where there is coordination and conflict between the internal and the external, the active and the passive, the individual and society, and nature and society.

Phenomenology tries to understand the world, which is full of meaning, from a first-person perspective. It is about how human understand and live in the world with the lived body that is situated in the environment of “here and now”. Merleau-Ponty affirmed that humans are bodily subjects that immerse themselves in a particular situation and try to act on and change it. Human consciousness grasps the world kinetically through the body before it understand it intellectually. For the bodily subject, the world is, a place that is given meaning through its own “motor intentionality” or in Husserl’s term, “I can”.

According to Merleau-Ponty, motor intentionality has a scheme by which different sensory and motor processes function together in synergic unity (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962,1964,1973). This scheme provides us a way to access the world and its objects. He calls the schematic function of intentionality “corporeal schema”, whose prototype, “postural schema”, was introduced by Henry

Head and Gordon Holmes to explain how one knows a posture and positions of the parts of the body. However corporeal schema for Merleau-Ponty (1962, p141) is “not only an experience of my body, but an experience of my body in the world”, because the schema appears as an attitude directed toward the existing or the possible in the environment. It is rather apt to say that it is through the organization and renewal of corporeal schema that we grasp objects and inhabit the world.

The acquisition of habit shows how we incorporate objects in our corporeal schema. If I have a habit of driving a car, I can enter narrow opening without comparing the width of the opening with that of the car. “To get used to a car, a hat or stick is to be transplanted them, or conversely to incorporate them into the bulk of my own body” (p.143). A typist experiences a keyboard not as an idea or as an object, but as a present and real part of his living body, that is, as a stage in his movement toward the world. Intention governs the movements of the typist on the machine, but such intention is not the consciousness of the objective locations of keys (Ibid. p.145). Our habit, thus, depends on the schematic organization of our perceptual and motor organs, and, the acquisition of a new behavior as habit is a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema.

8. Gender as bodily habit

One of the most prominent examples of cultural embodiment is gender. Based on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological framework, feminist phenomenology sheds light on women’s bodily experiences (such as a breasted body, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause), which have been overlooked by conventional phenomenology so far (cf. Heinämaa 2013).

In contrast to gender theories that explain gender discrepancies as “the interplay of social, cultural, and biological forces,” feminist phenomenology describes “how the sense of sexual difference is established in personal and interpersonal experiences.” (Heinämaa, p. 216) From this perspective, gender is defined, as S. Heinämaa, as “a difference in ways of intending realities and idealities, and being motivated by experiences and experienceable objects” (p. 216).

I.M. Young, in her essay (1980) focusing on differences between masculine and feminine motilities (such as ways of throwing a ball, walking, running, and sitting), analyzed “inhibited intentionality” and “discontinuous unity with surroundings” which characterize “feminine motility” and opposes the so-called “normal” (male-biased) motility, on which Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is based. Along this line of reasoning, Yu Miyahara, a Japanese feminist phenomenologist, points out that in Japanese society, menstruation is considered laden with sexual meaning and is considered an internal problem, which implies that it should be excluded from social and ordinary communication. By bringing it back to the way one encounters the world, Miyahara suggested that it is possible to make public and share women’s needs concerning menstruation.

These phenomenological analyses begin with the fact that “femininity” and “masculinity” are experienced not by recognizing some biological or physiological features of a woman’s (or man’s) body, but by immediately perceiving typical ways of dressing, moving, and encountering the world. Beginning with this does not undermine the objectivity of these analyses. It is true that the features of the female body as feminist phenomenology analyzes them (e.g., how to throw a ball “like a girl” or pregnancy) are not possessed by all women (e.g., there are women who do not throw “like a girl” or choose not to be pregnant). Moreover, all these features cannot be experienced by all women (e.g., there are women who cannot get pregnant). However, as these features play important roles in our understanding of what “feminine” is, they constitute a “typical essence” of “feminine corporeality,”

which we—including men who usually understand themselves in contrast to women—presuppose in order to understand our own gender and gendered embodiment in our cultural contexts. Therefore, in feminist phenomenology, the term “femininity” and “masculinity” are intended to mean not an ahistorical essence with an “exact” definition (such as the mathematical notion of a “triangle”), but what Husserl called an “empirical type,” namely the one that is “pre-constituted passively or constituted automatically, prior to any activity” (Embree 2013, p. 239) and is “sedimented” in our habitual way of perceiving others.

As social constructivists noted (Butler 1990), gender, taken as an “empirical type”, is socially and culturally constructed. Our gender norms are far from natural and depend on social and cultural conditions. What counts normatively as “feminine” or “masculine” in contemporary Western culture is different from what it is called in the “Third world”, as Western feminists sometimes reduce the difference by “cast[ing] Third World women in terms of “ourselves undressed”” (Mohanty 2003, p. 22).

The phenomenological mode of understanding gender as an empirical type enables us to take into account cultural differences between what counts normatively as “feminine” and “masculine”, as well as its trans-cultural traits that are fleshed out in unique ways for each society and culture. From the phenomenological perspective, analyzing gender in terms of cultural bodily habits, brings us back to the fact that we experience our own gender neither by recognizing some biological or physiological features of our own bodies nor by blindly conforming to cultural gender norms, but rather by “responding to” these norms through individual bodies, that is, by moving one’s own body in accordance with or against these norms.

In this respect, although cultural gender norms or customs precede our consciousness or bodily experience (therefore our body is not completely free from these norms), our bodily experience is not totally determined by these norms. It is always possible for us to “resist or refigure” them. Therefore our body should neither be deemed a transparent medium nor a mere social construction but rather, a “negotiating forum” where one becomes a subject by imitating gendered bodies and gestures of people he or she encounters in immediate interactions (e.g., family members, friends, or next-door neighbors) and by responding to social and cultural norms.

9. Poly-voicedness in imitation and habit

Imitation, Merleau-Ponty (1962) asserted, is based on this synergic sensorimotor ability of corporeal schema. It is ordinarily supposed that children imitate others by two things: they observe and understand what provokes the other’s actions and then reproduce it. Merleau-Ponty criticized this classical view and maintained that in the process of imitation, there is no double translation from the effect to the cause and then from the cause to the effect. Infants try to arrive at the same result of the other’s act on their own, There, they happen to perform the same movement as that of the model’s. This initial imitation presupposes that a child directly grasps the body of others as a carrier of structured behavior. It also presupposes that a child experiences his own body as a permanent and global power that is capable of realizing gestures that are endowed with a certain meaning. “The perception of behavior in other people, perception of the body itself by a global corporeal schema are two aspects of a single organization that realizes the identification of the self with others” (Merleau-Ponty 1975, p.36).

Thus, Merleau-Ponty maintained that it is the ability of corporeal schema that “ensures the

immediate correspondence of what he [child] sees done and what he himself does” (1962, p.354). In other words, it is through the corporeal schema that the visual image of the other’s act can be immediately transferred to one’s motor ability and interpreted as one’s possible movement. When we perceive the other, “my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them. This conduct which I am only able to see, I live somehow from distance. I make it mine” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p.118). This theory of imitation or empathy by Merleau-Ponty can predict the findings of the mirror system or neuron (Rizzolatti et al. 1996).

It is the function of the corporeal schema that enables us to identify ourselves with others. The corporeal schema ensures the immediate correspondence of what one sees done and what one him/herself does. The corporeal schema provides the basis for empathy toward others. Merleau-Ponty (1973) stated in his *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* that to learn language is an extension of a corporeal relationship. A newborn baby laughs and smiles by simply imitating another’s smile without any intention or any meaning. Language acquisition is an extension of this co-action or resonant movement enabled by the corporeal schema. A child is attracted and enthralled by the movements of dialogue around him/her, tries it out. Thus, “This [language acquisition] already presumes a relationship with others, which precedes the language that will appear in this context” (Merleau-Ponty 1975, p.13).

Language communication is embedded in general corporeal interactions with others in a certain situation. Learning a language is different from installing an application on a computer. We learn language through imitation and empathic interaction with adults; it starts from borrowing an adult’s voice. It intends something through others’ intentions. This learning is embodied and situated. A caregiver’s speech incorporates not only his/her own intention, but also the influence from surrounding environment, subtle nuances in dialogue, rhythm of exchange, and the use of typical expressions. We learn how to use language by imitating caregivers’ pronunciation, tone, facial expressions, and gestures, and their entire corporeal presence in a situation. Then, we gradually appropriate another’s voice into our own speech. Language acquisition is also the incorporation of others’ behavior into one’s system of behaviors.

As we acquire language, the text surrounding the utterances is also taken in. Even if we learn a language and produce it of our own volition, we are forced to begin by imitating and borrowing the voices of others, dragging with us the way the other person’s speech was produced when we learned it. There is no other way to acquire words except to say them as they are borrowed, and then gradually make them one’s own. Eventually, in one’s speech, and at the end of one’s lips, the faint voice of others continues to remain.

However, this appropriation of language is not complete. Human imitation is neither intended to perfectly copy the other, nor to create a completely original way of communicating. Half our speech continues to remain that of others. Whole utterances and individual words can retain their alien expression, even though they can also be re-accentuated by the speaker. There are some utterances one can use, but these are assimilated with difficulty in one’s own context. They remain borrowed even though we use them frequently. We should supplement Merleau-Ponty’s theory of imitation with Bakhtin’s (1981,1986) idea of poly-voicedness which represents the estrangement that necessarily accompanies learning language from others. According to Bakhtin, all our utterances are filled with others’ words, varying degree of otherness or “our-own-ness,” of awareness and detachment. “These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” (Bakhtin 1986, p.89). Once the other’s speech is incorporated into mine,

it serves to express my intentions, but in a refracted manner. It serves multi speakers at the same time and expresses different intentions simultaneously: the direct intention of the speaker and refracted intentions of others. Speech always constitutes a poly-voiced or a “possessed”. Bakhtin wrote as follows:

Others’ utterances and others’ individual words—recognized and singled out as such and inserted into the utterance—introduced an element that is, so to speak, irrational from the standpoint of language as system, particularly from the standpoint of syntax. The interrelations between the inserted other’s speech and the rest of the speech (one’s own) are analogous neither to any syntactical relations within a simple or complex syntactic whole nor to the referentially semantic relations among grammatically unrelated individual syntactic wholes found within a single utterance. These relations, however, are analogous (but, of course, not identical) to relations among rejoinders in dialogue (Ibid. p.92).

10. Conclusion

What we saw about language acquisition and usage can be said about culture as well. As our utterance is poly-voiced, the cultural behaviours or customs we acquire are also poly-voiced. Once we have acquired cultural customs, such as language, knowledge, religion, rites, etiquette, moral, arts, laws, and so on, we intentionally begin to use or perform them, and at the same time, we are possessed by a layer of meanings they incorporate. Our body is an arena in which these multiple voices coordinate, contend, reconcile, conflict, integrate, and be split. Linguistic grammar is not an abstract entity, but a dynamic network of heterogeneous actors. Our body is such a network too. Cultural embodiment is, therefore, a fundamentally political phenomenon, as it is a continuous negotiation, opposition, struggle, mediation, reconciliation, and comprise among multiple, different voices.

We tend to believe that we are normally able to consciously control our face and body. However, this is a view from physically and/or mentally healthy, young enough, maybe masculine bodies. We often come to be able to handle our body. Our bodies have a kind of inertia comprising physiological settings and habits that we acquired in our early childhood years. The reason why social class, gender bias, and so on are difficult to remove is that these social orders are not merely conceptual, but are also deeply embodied in each person’s corporeality as habit. However, after we are born in a society that surely has various cultures in many aspects, those cultures permeate us in explicit ways of teaching or/and in implicit ways of imitating. Later, we interpret, appropriate, change, negotiate with, or deny the cultural meanings that are passively acquired from our surroundings and unconsciously incorporated into our body. In this sense, the living body as a subject realizes (undertakes, takes over) culture and can change (elaborate, develop, modify, and abolish) it.

Cultural embodiment as an arena of different voices will become a most important and remarkable theme for different research domains in our transcultural age.

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