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TITLE: Using Translation in Foreign Language Teaching to Understand a Foreign Culture

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PAGES: 32-48

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/618572>

## Using Translation in Foreign Language Teaching to Understand a Foreign Culture

Yabancı Bir Kültürü Anlamak için Yabancı Dil Öğretiminde Çevirinin  
Kullanılması

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain how teaching a foreign language benefits from taking images of its culture into account, through presentation of curiosities related to the respective culture, cultural background and knowledge of the context of communication. The paper brings an interdisciplinary studies approach to foreign language teaching, by looking for efficient teaching methods going through the fields of foreign language teaching, evolutionary psychology (the humans' need for stories), pragmatics, cultural curiosities, linguistics and student psychology. The conclusions of the paper show that the tendency towards visual thinking in learning leads to efficient ways of teaching techniques in order to fix new notions. The linguistic theories claiming that different languages can offer different ways of understanding and looking at the world may be used to arouse interest and motivation in learners. We notice in YouTube video tutorials for foreign language learning, such as a *Russian in Three Minutes* video, the tutor mentioning that in Russian, the equivalent for the English greeting "good morning" is, literally, "kind morning". Such examples can help learners form a true picture in their minds of the different mindset and the different perspectives the foreign language they learn opens up to them.

**Keywords:** Visual thinking, pragmatics, imagination, mindset, linguistics.

### Öz

Bu makalenin amacı yabancı dil öğretiminde, karşı kültürün imgeleri dikkate alındığında, edebi ve kültürel çevirinin dil öğretimi teknikleriyle bir arada nasıl kullanıldığını göstermektir. Yabancı dil öğretiminde kullanılan bu imgeler, ilgili kültürle, kültürel mirasla ve iletişim bağlamı bilgisiyle ilgili olup öğrenme motivasyonunu artırır. Bu makale yabancı dil öğretimi, evrimsel psikoloji (insanların hikayelere olan ihtiyacı), edimbilim, kültürel merak, dilbilim ve öğrenci psikolojisi alanlarındaki etkili öğretim yöntemlerini ortaya çıkararak yabancı dil öğretimine disiplinlerarası bir çalışma yaklaşımı getirmektedir. Makalede varılan sonuçlar, öğrenmede gösterilen görsel düşünme eğilimi sayesinde yeni öğrenilen kavramların düzeltilmesi için etkili öğretim tekniklerinin geliştiğini göstermektedir. Farklı dillerin farklı anlama ve dünyaya bakış açıları sunabileceğini iddia eden dilbilim kuramları, yabancı dil öğrenen kişilerin ilgisini çekmek ve motivasyonlarını arttırmak için kullanılabilir. Youtube'daki *Russian in Three Minutes (Üç Dakikada Rusça)* videosunda ders veren kişi, İngilizcede günaydın anlamına gelen "good morning" ifadesinin

Rusçadaki bire bir karşılığının “kibar sabah” olduğunu söyler. Bu tür örnekler, öğrendikleri yabancı dilin kendilerine sunduğu farklı düşünce yapılarına ve bakış açılarına dair zihinlerinde gerçek bir resim oluşturabilmeleri için yabancı dil öğrenenlere yardımcı olabilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Görsel düşünme, edimbilim, hayal gücü, düşünce yapısı, dilbilim.

## Motivation

The human being is well-acquainted with stories ever since the earliest ages. Humans have listened to and created stories ever since the paintings in the cave:

A story is the simplest way of organizing time, of putting it in (our view of) order, and trying to make it stay, wait, desist from its passage. It is the currency human beings felt they could buy their way out of time with.

It all began with the mural images in the stone-age caves, with incidents that continued to live after the death of the animal, the death of the hunter, the loss of the real moment, and with its prolongation into image, imagination, memory and expectation, prediction. In the beginning, art was born out of the need to save the moment and keep it as experience. (Vianu 5)

The stories are not necessarily fiction; they can be used in order to explain theories of all kinds. They can also be used in order to motivate students during classes, by setting examples that explain the basics of the respective object of study. Concepts become more vivid and easier to understand by creating a story around them. Small details such as the fact that, in Russian, the equivalent for the English greeting “good morning” is, literally, “kind morning” can be exploited in order to arouse spontaneous interest from the students and in order to make them more receptive to the explanations of various theoretical concepts, related to equivalence in translation and specific attitudes of a certain culture. The teacher can also use this opportunity to show situations where substitution is necessary, in examples related to colours, especially. Different cultures associate different colours with emotional states or with qualities; extralinguistic, background knowledge is required for translators; therefore, and they need to look up the associations of colours in various cultures in order to be sure they convey the right message.

The conclusions which students of foreign languages can be left to draw for themselves would be the following:

1. There is a strong connection between translation and culture. Cultural context needs to be taken into account at all times, in order to avoid mixing up symbols such as colours which can have different significance in various cultures.

2. The issue of literal translation vs. adaptation appears directly from the previous point. It is an age-old discussion which never ends, and, rather than presenting it as an abstract idea, the teacher can show students directly and in a concrete way what it is about, through point (1).
3. Through the choice of words in various usual, daily expressions, different languages and, consequently, different cultures, have specific frames of mind. As Edward Sapir and the monists claimed, "Each linguistic community has its own perception of the world, which differs from that of other linguistic communities, implies the existence of different worlds determined by language" (Grant and McLaughlin 115).
4. Foreign language teaching as a domain is inseparable from translation studies, culture and civilization, and psychology. When you teach and learn a foreign language you cannot learn it separately from a cultural background, as it always helps you when you translate. You cannot learn a foreign language completely without translation, as you need to understand what certain concepts mean in words not just in images and through gestures. You cannot learn and teach a foreign language without psychology as you need to know what motivates someone to learn and you need to communicate efficiently with that person.

The present paper will go into details of the issues presented above to show how the interdisciplinary connections of the domains above work.

### **Visual Thinking, Stories, Imagination and Cultural Stereotypes**

Learners sometimes need to picture the concepts visually in their imagination, and this is why taking the aspect of the stories which have accompanied mankind from the times of the paintings in caves is significant. Mankind has tried to understand the way the world and different natural phenomena works through composing stories, myths and legends. These were the first theories before science and they were composed through the help of imagination. Whenever someone needs to learn something new, they will resort to the same age-old mechanism, of trying to explain new concepts through stories which confirm their own observations. Teachers sometimes try to provide their learners a grid of understanding the way a language works. The examples related to "good" and "kind" morning open the way to the perception of a different culture, of looking at reality through a different perspective by learning that language. "Kind" morning looks to us like a personification and we come to feel the morning as opening so many possibilities after we have a good night's rest. The morning looks friendly and has a great attitude just like an optimistic person in the learners' imagination who have a first contact with the realities of this culture.

The process of understanding itself works visually. We use visual images to think, and we can use the image of a “kind” morning in Russian to memorize the expression more efficiently. According to Parkinson (1),

People think using pictures. John Berger, media theorist, writes in his book *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1972), “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak”. Dr. Lynell Burmark, Ph.D. Associate at the Thornburg Center for Professional Development and writer of several books and papers on visual literacy, said, “[...] unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear”. (1)

Since language is part of a social life, it cannot be separated from the social life of the respective culture. Once teachers give students an exercise involving dialogues among students, imagining the respective social situation, with all its cultural specificities, is necessary:

“having language” is taken to mean knowing a set of words of the language (vocabulary), knowing a set of the possible syntactic structures of the language (grammar), knowing how to pronounce sentences composed of words (pronunciation) and knowing how to use the language appropriately to perform culturally recognized acts (apologising, thanking, warning, advising, conversing, requesting, etc.). (Brown, et al. 25)

The teaching with video technique can be included in the same category, exploiting the motivation of the visual thinking which is very helpful to learners: “one of the main advantages of video is that students do not just hear language, they see it too. This greatly aids comprehension, since for example, general meaning and moods are often conveyed through expression, gesture [...], and other visual cues” (Harmer 282).

Visual thinking and understanding is also an ability which helps learners to understand from context what certain words mean. Thus, students can practice understanding what a word means, visually, when they watch a movie or picture a situation of communication, and not go to search for the respective word in the dictionary right away:

One message that seems to be popular these days is not to rush to the dictionary. Although using the dictionary only as a last resort may be too extreme a position, there are advantages in not using the dictionary as a constant crutch. The dictionary is good for checking those words that keep coming up and that are not readily understood from context. It is also good for finding the meaning to unknown words that seem to be crucial to the meaning of the utterance. It can also serve to provide intermediate or advanced learners especially with a more finely tuned meaning or set of meanings for a word with which they have some familiarity. (Cohen 33)

The understanding of the context of communication resorts to imagining it. Role-play activities fulfill this role in the domain of foreign language teaching. Role play

is an activity that can make students aware of both cultural aspects that are present in social interaction and of the spoken language register specific to such situations. Students are encouraged to use their knowledge of language adapted to the specific social situations. Role play activities can be chosen in such a way as both to encourage students to use the English language to communicate and as a way of making them aware of the rules of communication which are specific to the English culture in a certain context. Such a type of activity can encourage students to use grammar rules, social interaction rules, knowledge of cultural aspects, and they can develop their communicative competence. The students' spontaneity can be encouraged. They will learn to apply the rules in a relaxed environment.

Putting those rules they learn into practice will help them improve their knowledge and understanding of those rules adapted to real life situations. Social interaction, even if it is just role play, will make students benefit from understanding how to apply language rules outside the classroom.

Politeness rules in conversation are always dependent on the social and cultural context. Students can be shown an interaction in an office in a business context on video. The teacher can explain to them the use of conversation strategies in such a context in the English culture. Then they can be asked to pay attention to the type of questions that are asked and their use, the type of language register, greeting formulas, and type of clothes appropriate for the business context.

Such activities are useful for students to put to use in practice their theoretical knowledge of English grammar, register, culture, and social rules of interaction. Learning a foreign language has as a purpose to facilitate communication and to establish connections with other cultures, to be able to function in a foreign environment. In order to do this, one needs to apply one's knowledge in order to adapt and integrate. It is not accidental that teaching English manuals have sections such as going to the store, asking for directions in the street, going for an interview, meeting a friend, etc. Students learn English to travel and find one's way in an airport, in a train station, in order to make foreign friends, etc.

Making up a dialogue during a role play activity can help students understand the rules of turn-taking in a conversation. They can learn during such an activity techniques for conversations (Underhill 45) and for "making appropriate responses" (Underhill 59). Such techniques include "taking the initiative, asking questions, expressing disagreement"; "all require a command of particular language features" (Underhill 45). What is more, students get to learn how to behave naturally in a conversation by using "tone of voice, pitch and intonation, and expressions of face and body language" (Underhill 45). Underhill suggests that, for the activity of making appropriate responses, students should be presented with "a number of short, unrelated situations that might occur in everyday life" (Underhill 59). Then, the students are asked to imagine themselves in the respective situations and give an appropriate response. The response will

be given by using functional language, “for example, to ask for information, to apologise, or to refuse an invitation politely” (Underhill 45). This task can be used as part of role play activities.

Other types of speaking activities suggested by Underhill are those including grammar aspects. For instance, role play activities can also take as components situations which ask students to exercise reporting speech, for instance reporting via the telephone (Underhill 85). Another type of activity can combine using role play and translating or interpreting (Underhill 79). One student can act as a “monolingual speaker of the learner’s mother tongue, and the other the role of a speaker of the target language only” (Underhill 79). The teacher will ask the learner to mediate between his colleagues. Underhill suggests the following situations for such a role play activity: “a tourist unable to understand the directions of a native, a native landlord complaining about the noise a foreign tenant is making, a foreign visitor who does not understand the bureaucratic procedure that a native official wishes to carry out, a foreign customer at a post office, a dissatisfied customer in a restaurant” (Underhill 79-80). The student who interprets will also try to mediate the conflict.

When we learn about a language and its culture, we inevitably think about their stereotypes, such as the way Englishmen are always polite, the Japanese are always disciplined, or maybe we associate them with anime and kawaii culture, the French culture is strongly associated with refinement and elegance, the Russian culture with writers of great talent such as Tolstoy, etc. These images are also part of an exercise of imagination, which promise a story which motivates us to progress through learning the language and culture.

The discussions about imagination can lead us to the time of the Romantic poets, but they are still relevant today and for the discussion of foreign language learning. Coleridge believed in the imaginative perception of the world:

For Coleridge, the imagination is “the living power and prime agent of all human perception ... a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” The imaginative perception of the world is a part of the divine act of creation: reality is not dead or fixed, but is dynamic, alive and changing and is being continually re-made in the creative act of the perceiver. The imagination perceived unity in the diversity of experience.<sup>1</sup>

Coleridge defines two types of imagination: primary and secondary. Primary imagination is spontaneous, while secondary imagination is created consciously. There is also fancy, which is “the lowest form of imagination,” according to Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*: “With fancy there is no creation involved; it is simply a reconfiguration of existing ideas” (Coleridge 378-395). Judging by this theory, the teachers’ and learners’ efforts belong to the imagination created

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.keatsian.co.uk/revision-notes-romantic-context.htm>

consciously, with a purpose, yet imagination of learners can also be spontaneous when it comes to stereotypical images which enter their mind unconsciously and instinctively.

Imagination in correlation with understanding social situations and contexts can lead to an introduction of the foreign languages students to the domain of pragmatics. The presentation of the domain of pragmatics to the students begins with drawing an opposition with semantics, that is literal vs. figurative meaning, focus on context not on language, and another opposition, that of narrow vs. broad context:

*The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy* underlines the importance Pragmatics gives to contextual knowledge, not just to words alone: “The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is, roughly, the distinction between the significance conventionally or literally attached to words, and thence to whole sentences, and the further significance that can be worked out, by more general principles, using contextual information.” (Davies 124)

The importance of context also draws attention away from literal and towards figurative meaning: “Pragmatists focus on what is not *explicitly* stated and on how we interpret utterances in situational contexts. They are concerned not so much with the sense of what is said as with its *force*, that is, with what is communicated by the manner and style of an utterance” (Finch 150).

The semantic meaning is associated, according to Recanati, with a narrow context, as is normal when we talk about literal meaning. When we talk about pragmatic meaning, we go beyond semantic, literal and narrow context. We take everything we know into account from our background knowledge and we also interpret body language and voice tone of the speaker. According to Recanati, “Wide context concerns any contextual information relevant to determining the speaker’s intention and to the successful and felicitous performance of the speech act. ... Narrow context concerns information specifically relevant to determining the semantic values of [indexicals]” (66).

An extreme example<sup>2</sup> meant to capture the attention of the students in order for them to efficiently remember the role of Pragmatics is an exercise of imagination related to a word where there would be no Pragmatics, meaning no pragmatic competence, with just relying on the semantic, literal meaning:

“Can you pass the salt?”

Literal Meaning: Are you physically able to do this task?

Literal Response: “Yes”

(Pragmatic Meaning: Will you pass me the salt?

Pragmatic Response: pass the salt to the speaker.)

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<sup>2</sup> from the site <http://all-about-linguistics.group.shef.ac.uk/branches-of-linguistics/pragmatics/what-is-pragmatics>



“What time do you call this?”

Literal Meaning: What time is it?

Literal Response: A time (e.g. “twenty to one.”)

(Pragmatic Meaning: a different question entirely, e.g. Why are you so late?

Pragmatic Response: Explain the reason for being so late.)

The above examples can be used to illustrate, in a humoristic way, the difference between pragmatics and semantics, narrow vs. broad context, as well as pragmatic competence. The effort of the hearer should be there in order to make sense correctly of what the speaker intends to say. This information having been given as an introduction, the students are then presented with the theory of speech acts, and they are told that language is also used to perform certain actions, not just to describe states of affairs. Their further knowledge can be fixed by illustrating the pragmatic theories with examples of translations. In this way, they will understand further why pragmatics is necessary in their lives, not just to communicate but also to translate and interpret.

The study of language in context could benefit from making parallels with the field of translation, and, of course, it can benefit from methods of learning from the field of Foreign Language Studies. Just as students can decode meaning of certain words in vocabulary exercises from context, so they could detect the intention of the speaker in video clips or in listening exercises or even in pair work with colleagues and understand the pragmatic meaning of various utterances. They could also be asked to imagine a context and various speaker intentions.

There have been studies regarding the relationship between translation and pragmatics by Newmark. Newmark claims that even readers decode, in a pragmatic type of way, the meaning achieved by the translator (133). Authors focus on the contextual knowledge and on the relationship of communication being established among readers, writers and translators.

Language awareness could be increased by introducing, for class activities, examples of situation of communication from novels, by comparing translations by different translators of the same novel, by showing students a video in class and by commenting the way the characters behaved in a business setting or among friends, as well as in various social situations. The professor could also mention the fact that in language learning handbooks they always had various situations of communication, such as at school, at work, at home, asking for directions, visiting a friend, going to a restaurant, visiting a museum, at the hotel, etc. They should be reminded that they were always required to develop “the ability to use language appropriately in a social context” (Taguchi, 3) during their foreign language classes so that Pragmatics would not seem such a distant, formal domain in linguistics to them. They should get a sense of the fact that Pragmatics is a very down-to-earth and practical domain in linguistics full of practical

application in their everyday lives. Anyone should have, as an adult, pragmatic competence. We need to understand properly the social situations and use the proper language and attitude.

Rueda (170-186) writes about developing pragmatic competence in a foreign language. Indeed, no student can learn a foreign language by ignoring the social situations. Handbooks plan lessons which make learners talk about their families, about their friends, their jobs, their hobbies, their school, their travels, and so on. They teach you to use language in a restaurant, during a meeting, while talking to a teacher, while asking a person you have never met for directions, etc. For talking with friends, the colloquial language is mentioned as being appropriate, while for formal situations, business meetings, conferences, etc. where there are persons you barely know you are taught to use formal language. In English, you are taught about modal verbs and their uses to express certainty, uncertainty, possibility, probability, obligation, as well as polite requests. If you use a modal verb in a wrong way, but if you use the proper, polite attitude, you could be excused as the native speakers who listen to you also interpret the situation and understand the fact that you are not speaking your native language and that mistakes can happen. The way speakers interpret other speakers' intention in a wrong way can be the subject of comedies, which are based on pragmatic competence gone wrong.

### **Cultural Specificities**

The cultural specificities of various cultures whose languages are taught can be used to show students the practical sides of translation concepts.

#### ***English indirectness***

The English language speakers have a specific way of communicating politely by means of being indirect. The British especially have a lot of polite requests that fit in this category. For instance, when asking someone to be quiet, they ask, "Could you please be quiet?" implying that those asked to do so are not behaving in a very polite way. When translating such a statement, Romanian students should think about a Romanian equivalent. By chance, the Romanian language also has a similar phrase for translation, very polite, "Ati putea, va rog, sa faceti liniste?" However, what is very common in English culture is seen as more reserved and unusual in Romanian culture, where, in a classroom, students could interpret the phrase as a word for word translation from English and not as a genuine polite request in their native language. The British are a high power distance culture, due to their monarchical past, and this is reflected in the language they use. The North Americans are an egalitarian culture, while the Southerners are a high power distance culture and this is also reflected in their requests when it comes to pragmatics. While Romania is also a high power distance culture, it is less indirect than the British culture when it comes to choice of certain words.

A visible example of difference between Romanian and English is when it comes to indirect speech acts in polite requests: “As opposed to the English whose pervasive indirectness is well-known, for the Romanian a high degree of indirectness could be considered a waste of the hearer’s time” (Drăgușin 109). What is more, when we make such requests in Romanian, although they sound direct, they are not impolite, as they would be in the case of the English language and culture: “A Romanian hearer does not automatically view a request as an imposition on his or her personal liberty, and a prospective negative response entails less face-loss for a Romanian than it does for someone with an Anglo-Saxon cultural background” (Drăgușin 109). The English, thus, value privacy more than the Romanian (Drăgușin 110-111) and this is reflected in the way indirect vs. direct requests are perceived:

**Table 1**  
**Translations of polite requests (Drăgușin 110-111)**

(1E) Can I have your Syntax lecture notes please?	(1R) Dă-mi și mie cursul de Sintaxă. <i>(Give me the Syntax lecture notes.)</i>
(2E) Could I have your Syntax lecture notes please?	(2R) Dă-mi și mie cursul de Sintaxă, te rog. <i>(Give me the Syntax lecture notes, please)</i>
(3E) Would you mind if you lend me your Syntax lecture notes?	(3R) Să-mi dai și mie cursul de Sintaxă. <i>(You should give me the Syntax lecture notes)</i>
(4E) Sorry, can I have your Syntax lecture notes?	(4R) Să-mi dai și mie cursul de Sintaxă, te rog. <i>(You should give me the Syntax lecture notes, please)</i>
(5E) Do you mind lending me your Syntax lecture notes?	(5R) Poți să-mi dai și mie cursul de Sintaxă? <i>(Can you give me your Syntax lecture notes?)</i>
(6E) Would it be OK if I borrowed your Syntax lecture notes? (7E) May I have your Syntax lecture notes please?	(6R) Ai putea (te rog) să-mi dai și mie cursul de Sintaxă? <i>(Could you (please) give me your Syntax lecture notes?)</i>

The table above from Drăgușin can be used to show students how in different cultures a polite request is formulated and how they need to keep into account the intention of the speaker so that the translation or interpretation does not alter the intention, by changing it into an opposite intention. English social etiquette is based on indirectness, while the Romanians are more relaxed in similar social situations. If students mix the two cultures and translate the speech acts literally, then the intention is wrongly interpreted by those who belong to a different culture. This knowledge related to culture is part of the background knowledge a translator and interpreter needs to rely on as belonging to the context of communication.

Apologies have a specific use of language in every culture and language, as well as

in any situation, friendly or formal. They are defined as “social acts conveying affective meaning” (Holmes 155). Students could practice by using listening activities for foreign language learning which include short dialogues where they are asked about what the speaker implies. This type of activity could be used for all social acts in a language. Students could also be asked to practice role play, by being given a certain situation with a question and where they could formulate the answer to it in such a way that it could sound like a polite apology in a formal situation or to a friend. Teaching with video could also be used, and students could comment on the way hints from the attitude of the speakers, the way they are dressed, the tone of their voice which show that they are genuinely sorry and wish to apologize in a polite way. Then, they could also make an analogy with their native language Romanian, where “Nu trebuia” is roughly an equivalent for “You needn’t have gone through so much trouble” but which cannot be translated literally to achieve the same effect. If you say in English “That’s ok” it is valid only for very informal situations.

### ***The cultural history of the perception of the colour blue***

Another story meant to capture the interest of students of culture and civilization has to do with cultural mindset and with the way we use present day perception and apply it anachronically to ancient times. This is the story of the way the colour blue was not perceived by the ancients. The story can help students understand the cultural associations around it and the way translators can adapt and can be influenced by their own age regarding their perception of reality.

*There’s Evidence Humans Didn’t Actually See Blue Until Modern Times* is the title of an article by Fiona Macdonald from April 7, 2018. This popular science article prompts us to think about the way human beings have perceived colours across history and what the reasons for this state of affairs could be. Macdonald draws our attention to the fact that ancient literature does not mention the colour blue<sup>3</sup>: Homer, in his well-known work *The Odyssey*, describes the ocean as wine-dark and never as blue. The Bible also never mentions the colour blue when it comes to describing the sea. The ancient tablets of Ugarit, the writings where the Bible originated from, also make no mention of the word *blue*. Ancient Chinese writings also never mention the colour blue in relation to such a normal reality in our times, when we associate the sea, the ocean and the sky, in a standard way, with the colour blue. Such a reality is inconceivable to us during our contemporary times, as we see blue as a symbol of royalty, of the military, of artistic tendencies, of business, as we associate uniforms worn in various domains with this colour. What is more, naturally, to us saying that the sky is blue is something extremely ordinary and it requires no more questioning. We even have the well-known phrase “to feel blue” which means to feel sad, and which we use constantly, to the

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<sup>3</sup> from <https://www.sciencealert.com/humans-didn-t-see-the-colour-blue-until-modern-times-evidence-science>

extent it no longer has any literary or figurative value. The phrase *blue blood* refers to aristocratic families and it was used due to the issues with poor blood circulation in historical times in such families. The blue city, named Chefchaouen in Morocco is now a well-known site on Facebook through constant sharing. This leads us to the question of how personal perception is, and to what extent it is influenced by cultural factors? Could our ancestors really not see the colour blue if they did not have a name for it back then?

The fact that each and every one of us perceives reality through a subjective perspective does not mean that we have one hundred percent a personal perception on the world. We are influenced by the way we have been educated to see various sides of reality. The question is how we manage to divide our attention between subjective and objective views on the surrounding reality. The way we have been educated throughout our formative years, the experience we have accumulated personally during our lives, as well as our unconscious drives as they are defined by psychoanalysis and even the language we use have influenced our perspective on the real world. What is more, our perception is organized by the patterns we create in an attempt to order and to better understand our experiences. By doing so, we manage to adapt so as to function normally in the everyday world. Once we understand the surrounding world we also need to share some common understandings in order to interact in an efficient way with the others in the community.

Experience comes, at first, in a raw, unstructured way, and we need to create in our mind means to structure and categorize experience. For Kant, the categories created by our mind for this purpose were innate and not subject to change in any way. Nowadays, it is believed that these categories are culturally and historically dependent. According to Stoica and Drobot,<sup>4</sup> a great deal of the evidence supporting such a culturally relative view on perception was brought up by linguistic anthropology. Language and thought are intimately related, one may say, along with Wilhelm von Humboldt, who claims that “language is the very fabric of thought” (Gericke 186). Language implies more than just expressing oneself or describing what we perceive. Languages help us categorize, distinguish, “create” the world in a certain way, according to a pattern. According to Edward Sapir,

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of a particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. The fact of the matter is that their “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up in the language habits of the group. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we

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<sup>4</sup> online at <http://www.agonia.net/index.php/essay/13951924>

do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (69)

There are patterns we apply to our perception involuntarily. Had we not lived in a certain community speaking and hearing a certain language, our perception of the world would have been different. For instance, as Ralph Strauch writes in *The Reality Illusion*, “something which we see clearly as a physical object, like a house, the Nootka perceive as a long-lived temporal event. The literal English translation of the Nootka concept might be something like “housing occurs”; or “it houses” (Strauch 62). It is difficult for us to think, perceive like the Nootka and the same goes for them. Moreover, had we not read about this we would not have perhaps thought that perceiving the house in this way was even possible.

The way we perceive the world has been modeled by the culture we have learnt since our birth and we cannot find it easy to look at the ways the cultural dependent perception works. The way we have been made to perceive the world has its origins in the culture we have been taught. It is difficult to break these patterns we have regarded as objective truth since a very early age:

People have always had the tendency to structure the world we live in. For this, we have ordered everything into categories, objects, persons, situations. We did this by understanding the way this world works, by naming objects and so on, by describing situations. And naming these, and language as a whole, have ended up by structuring our perception, in their turn. By doing so we should know what to expect from people or various events. Yet wouldn't we remain somehow “trapped” in this view of the world? (Stoica and Drobot, para. 27)

The conclusion of the essay by Stoica and Drobot is that perception is a mixture of subjective, personal experience as well as of the patterns we have been taught and educated to see and which have given an organization to the way we view the surrounding world. The culture we live in requires certain patterns of perceiving the world in such a way as to be able to function and to adapt as well as to communicate with the others. The structure of the language we speak also brings its contribution to the way we perceive and structure reality. Reality is what is outside, but this image is completed by our own mental image of it, an image which has been shaped by past and personal experience as well as by cultural and educational factors.

To us, living in the contemporary world, not perceiving and not naming the colour blue is something pertaining to a science-fiction world. There are fairy-tales telling of how the world came to be coloured, and reasons for this happening are a hero, a child, who travels the world and finds a colourful country and brings the colours to his own home town which was originally white, or a magical colourful bird who loses its feather and brings colours to a black and white world. The folk tales have a grain of truth when they talk about the world first being white, perhaps, if we think of the fact that etymologically, the word *blue* in Romanian,

*albastru*, originates from the word *albus*, the Latin for white, and which in Spanish and French means *dawn*.

The existence of the word *blue* in language has to do with whether or not this colour is perceived. In the seminal work titled *You Only See Colours You Can Name*, Kosara writes about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, claiming you cannot see something until you have a name for it in language. What accounts for this situation, of no word meaning blue in ancient cultures, could have to do, according to evolutionary psychology, to the lack of need for this for survival. Other colours, such as black and white, were immediately perceived, as when living in ancient times there was a need to distinguish between something basic such as day and night. Also, perceiving the colour red was a must, since it could signal danger: the blood is red and when we are wounded our organism acts immediately by lowering the blood pressure so that we would not lose too much blood and manage to survive. Green and yellow were significant colours, as in ancient cultures there was a need to distinguish among fruit that were ripe or not. However, blue fruit were not very common, and noticing the colour blue in the sky was not something vital. According to Taggart<sup>5</sup>, the ancient humans were colour-blind when it came to blue.

The colour blue was expensive in the ancient world, as well as in the Renaissance when used in jewelry and in art. In ancient Egypt, the colour blue was used for jewelry, and in the Renaissance, for painting. The shade of blue azurite is the first documented one of the colour blue, and it referred to a natural blue mineral. The Egyptians were the first to produce the colour blue, through the use of pigments. They used it for painting ceramics and statues; they also used it for decorating pharaohs' tombs. The Romans also used it.

Lapis lazuli was a semi-precious stone which started the tone for the ultramarine shade about 6000 years ago. The Egyptians imported it from Afghanistan and turned it into a paint, which they used for jewelry and headdresses. Lapis lazuli was used as a pigment called true blue for some Buddhist paintings belonging to the sixth century in the areas of Bamiyan and Afghanistan. *Ultramarine* can be translated as "beyond the sea," a phrase which originates from Latin, and it refers to the imported pigment by Italians in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries into Europe. Middle Ages artists in Europe were always looking for the royal blue shade, which was as expensive as gold. This shade was used in paintings for the robes of Virgin Mary. Vermeer used this colour a lot and his family was put into debt because of this (Taggart<sup>5</sup>).

Famous shades of blue are cobalt blue, used in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, for the colouring of ceramics and jewelry, then indigo, which was used for dyeing textiles and which was cheaper than the blue used for paintings, then marine blue, used

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<sup>5</sup> <https://mymodernmet.com/shades-of-blue-color-history/>

for British Royal army uniforms, and, afterwards, Prussian blue, used by Pablo Picasso when he used this colour a lot in his works, and by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai for his Mount Fuji woodblock works.

The association with the colour blue of the sea, ocean and sky is a normal reality nowadays, and it is fascinating to think back to the ancient world where this association never occurred. As a proof, when we imagine stories from the Bible and from Homer's *Odyssey*, we inevitably think of the sea, of the ocean and of the sky as blue. We have never thought about the fact that such a word was never mentioned in those early works. This proves that our perception is always influenced by the culture we live in. We have been taught to perceive the colour blue and to associate it to the world around us without giving too much thought to it. As a result, we never noticed the fact that the word was not mentioned in ancient texts until we were drawn attention to this interesting detail by popular science articles on the Internet.

### ***Colours: using substitution***

For colours, the use of substitution as translation technique is necessary because of the following aspects:

1. Colours are associated with reactions, emotions and qualities, which are different in different cultures.
2. The same colour in two different cultures can be associated with opposite qualities.

An example can be provided by English and Chinese. While in Chinese, red is used to express jealousy and envy, in English there is another colour associated with these emotional reactions: green. In English, we have an expression: "green with envy" which has no literal equivalent in Chinese culture and language.

The fact that a translator needs to be a good thinker is now beyond doubt. Otherwise, a translator cannot be a true mediator for efficient communication between two cultures.

### **Linguistic Specificities**

An example of language with extremely different linguistic features which cannot be translated word-for-word is Japanese. The reasons for this are the following features:

- Japanese does not have definite and indefinite articles.
- In Japanese there is no plural for nouns.
- Counting is subject to changes in the case of adjectives and pronouns.
- Verbs in Japanese are always positioned at the end of the sentence.



- Structural particles in Japanese are the equivalent of English prepositions. Their role is to contribute to the meaning of verbs.
- In Japanese, sentences do not always have a subject, grammatically.
- Japanese does not have the future tense.
- Abstract concepts in Japanese do not have an equivalent literally in English; there are words and phrases which cannot be translated in a literal way.

The Japanese language can suggest specific cultural traits of mindset, such as the fact that there is no future tense means that the Japanese pay special attention to the present moment. This feature can be found in their haiku poems.

## Conclusions

The language learner uses his cognitive skills in order to understand a new language and culture, together with its mindset. He also draws comparisons among the known realities of known languages and cultures. This specific trait goes hand in hand with imagination and visualizing the social realities. Social realities of communication can be imagined and thus, pictures visually when imagining a dialogue. Translators are first of all language learners and students who need to gain culture and civilization backgrounds regarding the known languages in order to correctly transmit the message further. Translation serves as a pretext in order to show the difficulties students encounter in their study of a foreign language. They will need to understand the grammar specificities as well as cultural specificities in order to become skillful language users and skillful mediators of messages. It is not without reason that Anderson calls a nation an imagined community and, what is more, that a language is one of the key components of a nation (6-7). A language generates patriotic feeling within a nation and holds its members together. It creates a social reality for them. Any language is strongly related to a particular social and cultural as well as emotional background of its speakers.

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