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## Culture and Power in Cultural Studies

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Let me begin by first thanking the organisers (Rachel and Alan) for inviting me to speak at this workshop. I am honoured and delighted to be here. The title of my paper is 'Culture and Power in Cultural Studies' and my intention is to strip down cultural studies to its basic assumptions about culture and power in the hope that this may offer something productive to the study of Modern Languages (the success of which I have worried about since Alan first invited me). This hope will be most explicit when, towards the end of the paper, I connect Raymond Williams's work on keywords to the Cultural Studies (hereafter, CS) model of culture and power.

Cultural Studies works with a very particular concept of culture; that is, it defines cultures as networks of meanings that are performed and made concrete in particular social practices; what Raymond Williams (1981) calls culture as 'a realized signifying system'. Culture defined this way (i.e. culture as meanings that are embodied, embedded and realized in social practice) consists of the shared social meanings that give our social worlds stability and coherence. This is not to reduce everything to culture as a realized signifying system, but it is to insist that culture defined in this way should be seen, as Williams (1981) argues, 'as essentially involved in *all* forms of social activity'. While there is more to life than realized signifying systems, it is nevertheless the case that 'it would [...] be wrong to suppose that we can ever usefully discuss a social system without including, as a central part of its practice, its signifying systems, on which, as a system, it fundamentally depends'. In other words, culture defined in this way is fundamental to all social life; it is not, therefore, restricted to the arts or to different forms of intellectual production, it is an aspect of all human activities

According to this definition, cultures do not so much consist of objects and actions. Rather, cultures are the shifting networks of signification in which objects and actions are *made* meaningful and understood as meaningful. For example, if I pass a name card to someone in China or Japan the polite way to pass and receive it is with two hands. If I pass or receive it with one hand I may cause offence. This is clearly a matter of culture. However, the 'culture' is not *just* in the social gesture, it is in the 'meaning' of the gesture. In other words, there is nothing essentially polite about using two hands; using two hands has been made to signify politeness. Nevertheless, signification has become embodied, embedded and realized in a material practice which, in turn, can produce material effects (i.e. cause offence and the consequences that might follow from causing offence). As Williams (1977) explains, 'Signification, the social creation of meanings' is 'a practical material activity'.

To share a culture, according to this preliminary definition, is to interpret the world, make it meaningful and experience it as meaningful, in recognisably similar ways. So-called 'culture shock' happens when we encounter radically

different networks of meaning: when our ‘natural’ or our ‘common sense’ is confronted by someone else’s ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’. But cultures are never simply shifting networks of shared meanings. On the contrary, cultures are always both shared and contested networks of meanings. Culture is where we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other, and of the social worlds in which we live. This idea is first made explicit in Williams’s explanation of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony:

[Hegemony] is a lived system of meanings and values. [...] It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people . [...] It is [...] in the strongest sense a ‘culture’, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. (1977)

This is as much an explanation of Williams’s ‘mature’ concept of culture as it is an explanation of hegemony.<sup>1</sup>

There are two lessons we can draw from this way of thinking about culture. First, although the world exists in all its enabling and constraining materiality outside culture, it is only in culture that the world can be *made to mean/made to signify*. In other words, culture constructs our sense of ‘reality’ (‘a lived system of meanings and values’); signification has a performative effect in that it helps bring into being what it seems only to describe. As Gramsci (2007) points out:

It is obvious that East and West are arbitrary and conventional (historical) constructions, since every spot on the earth is simultaneously East and West. Japan is probably the Far East not only for the European but also for the American from California and even for the Japanese himself, who, through English political culture might call Egypt the Near East. [...] Yet these references are real, they correspond to real facts, they allow one to travel by land and by sea and to arrive at the predetermined destination.

East and West [...] never cease to be ‘objectively real’ even though when analysed they turn out to be nothing more than a ‘historical’ or ‘conventional construct’.

In other words, East and West are historical constructions directly connected to the imperial power of the West. However, they are forms of signification that have been realized and embedded in social practice. Cultural constructs they may be, but they do designate real geographic locations and guide real human movement.

As Gramsci’s example makes clear, meanings inform and organize social action. Therefore, to argue that culture is best understood as a realized signifying system is not a denial that the material world exists in all its constraining and enabling materiality outside signification. Williams (1979) makes this very clear: ‘the natural world exists whether anyone signifies it or not.’ But what is also absolutely the case is that the natural (or the material) world exists for us

layered in signification and that how it is made to signify helps organise our relations with it.

The second lesson we can draw from this way of thinking about culture concerns the inevitability of struggle over meaning. That is, because different meanings can be ascribed to the same object or event meaning making (i.e. the making of culture) is, therefore, always a potential site of struggle. The making of meaning is always entangled in what Valentin Volosinov (1973) identifies as the 'multi-accentuality' of the sign. Rather than being inscribed with a single meaning, a sign can be articulated with different 'accents'; it can be made to mean different things in different contexts with different effects of power. Therefore, the sign is always a potential site of 'differently oriented social interests' and is often in practice 'an arena of . . . struggle'. Part of the 'normal' processes of hegemony is 'to make the sign uni-accentual', to make what is potentially multi-accentual appear as if it could only ever be uni-accentual. In other words, things do not issue their own meanings; they provide the material for the articulation of meaning, variable meaning(s), as things are re-articulated in different contexts.

Academics and students (like ourselves) continually acknowledge the multi-accentuality of the sign. We do this when we describe an interpretation as a feminist reading, a queer reading, a post-colonial reading, a Marxist reading, etc. Doing this we implicitly acknowledge that the text in question has been made to mean from the critical perspective of a particular reading practice. Gender identities are also an example of the multi-accentuality of the sign. Masculinity and femininity have real material conditions of existence ('biology'), but there are different ways of representing masculinity and femininity, different ways of making them signify. Therefore, although masculinity and femininity exist in biological conditions of existence, what they *mean*, and the struggle over what they *mean*, always takes place *in* culture.

This is not simply an issue of semantic difference, a simple question of interpreting the world differently. The different ways of making masculinity and femininity mean are not an innocent game of semantics, they are a significant part of a power struggle over what might be regarded as 'normal'; an example of the politics of signification; an attempt to make what is always multi-accentual appear as if it were only ever uni-accentual. In other words, the struggle over signification is about who can claim the power and authority to define social reality, to *make the world (and the things in it) mean* in particular ways. Therefore, rather than engage in a fruitless quest for the true or essential meaning of something, a critical CS always fixes its gaze on how particular meanings acquire their authority and legitimacy and it is this that makes culture and power its primary object of study.

So how does this model of culture and power relate to the study of modern languages? Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1976), is the most obvious example of thinking seriously about language in relation to a critical cultural studies model of culture and power.

In *Keywords* Williams is concerned with the ways in which words change their meaning in relation to changed and/or changing political, economic and social contexts and processes. However, as he makes clear,

This does not mean that the language simply reflects the processes of society and history. On the contrary, [...] some important social and historical processes occur *within* language. [...] New kinds of relationship, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways: in the invention of new terms (*capitalism*); in the adaptation and alteration (indeed at times reversal) of older terms (*society* or *individual*); in extension (*interest*) or transfer (*exploitation*). But also, as these examples should remind us, such changes are not always either simple or final. Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested.

My own research (Storey 2005) on the word 'popular' for *New Keywords* showed how the various struggles over the word's meaning eventually produced different concepts of popular culture. So, for example, the rediscovery of the 'folk' (late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) generated two opposite concepts of popular culture: the 'structure' of so-called mass culture (always urban) and the 'agency' of so-called folk culture (always rural).<sup>2</sup>

Studying a modern language could reveal similar processes at work. One means of understanding the society whose language one is learning is to see how certain keywords make available a history (or histories) of meanings and values that have been articulated in different ways in different contexts with different effects of power. And by doing this kind of critical analysis it would allow one to understand what these struggles over meaning(s) reveal about the society in question. In this way, then, the learning of a modern language would also involve an investigation of the critical relations of culture and power.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Williams' development of this 'mature' definition, see Storey 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See also Storey 2003