

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Overview of the Study

For three-quarters of a century, the work of Sapir, Whorf, Boas and their followers claimed language, culture and thought were dominant aspects of communication. While these claims received general support, the extent to which these three aspects have influenced one another has been a subject of controversy. Current consensus views the three aspects as being so inextricably connected that each cannot operate independently of the other two. Valdes (1986), in fact, concludes that the lack of acceptance of artificial languages such as Esperanto may be attributed to their isolation of language from culture since it is very difficult to communicate thought without an underlying value system to underpin it. This, Valdes (1986) states, is so because no one can feel or think deeply in an artificial language.

Valdes (1986) continues that twentieth century research has produced a theory that a native culture poses as much interference for speakers in their use of a second language as in their use of their native language. Hall (1959) states that the existence of a non-verbal language which exists in every country of the world and among various groups within each country accounts for the elaborate patterning of behaviour which prescribes our time

management, spatial relationships and attitudes towards work, play and learning. Hall (1959:XV) reasons that apart from what is said in our verbal language, we often communicate "our real feelings in our silent language - the language of behaviour." At times the silent language is correctly interpreted by other nationalities, but often it is not. Therefore, as pointed out by Bamgbose (1994), there is a need to be aware of the subtle influence of the culture of a dominant language especially in intercultural communication.

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

In a series of papers, Benjamin Whorf (1952), presented a number of generalizations regarding the relation of thought and behaviour to language. These generalizations hold that the cognitive processes of all humans possess a common logical structure. Whorf is of the view that linguistic patterns determine an individual's perception of the world and how he thinks of it. As these patterns vary, groups utilizing different linguistic systems will have different world views. In short, Whorf is of the view that language actively shapes our ideas; it does not just serve as a mere vehicle for thought expression. Whorf's conceptualizations were a result of comparisons made between Hopi, Shawnee and Nootka Indian cultures with a family of languages known as SAE (Standard Average European). The Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis states that languages differ "in the same way" as the general cultures or surrounding environments of their speakers differ. What is

actually dealt with can be referred to currently as contrasts in codifiability, for example, Language X has a single term for a certain phenomenon whereas Language Y either has no such term at all or it has a few terms in the same area of reference. As a consequence, reference to a certain phenomenon is easier to make in certain languages than others.

While the strong version of the Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis has been rejected, a more moderate view of the relation between language and culture has developed. New forms of language determinism have also emerged such as Bernstein's (1962) work on language and class, Spender's (1980) language and gender, Clyne's (1986) language and racism as well as Halliday's (1993a), (1993b) language and environment controversies.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Since there exists a close bond between language and culture, Christoperson (1973) states that a bilingual person is invariably said to be bicultural. Grosjean (1982:157), however, strongly disagrees with the above notion. He states succinctly that "bilingualism and biculturalism are not necessarily coextensive". Therefore, some people who frequently use two languages on a regular basis are really monocultural. He reasons that in terms of cultural awareness, all bilinguals can be regarded as bicultural, but in terms of culture possession, not all bilinguals are bicultural.

Herein lies the problem. In using a second or a third language, there is a need for speakers to also learn the culture which the language encapsulates. If they fail to do this, Smith (1987) is of the view that speakers of a second or third language who are essentially monocultural may face communicative problems. Thus, a native or dominant culture is as much of an interference for a second language user as a native language. The researcher is of the view that unless and until the speaker recognizes the cultural base of his or her own behaviour, expectations and world views, and is aware of the existence of such dissimilarities between himself or herself and other nationals, s/he will not be able to communicate effectively with people of differing cultures and languages.

The need to communicate effectively in a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual society as that in Malaysia is of great importance. In any communicative encounter wherever there is cultural interference, the possibility exists for cultural conflict as a result of differing attitudes or expectations. The Chinese who came to Malaysia as immigrants at the turn of the century have adapted well to their environment and adopted the traits and customs of the locals. Although the Malaysian Chinese are Chinese by ethnicity, they are no longer the same as the Chinese of Mainland China. Ling (1995) for instance, is of the view that Malaysian Chinese have absorbed many traits and characteristics of the other races with whom they have come into contact. Therefore, it is logical to surmise that the Malaysian

Chinese outlook and world view are not homogeneous as a result of the varying degrees of exposure to various local cultural influences.

Mandarin or other Chinese dialects are still spoken by the local Chinese. For some Malaysian Chinese who were Chinese educated, Mandarin is spoken proficiently. In contrast, Malaysian Chinese in urban centres who were not Chinese educated spoke Mandarin or other Chinese dialects with varying degrees of proficiency. Although English is acknowledged as a second language, it is learnt as a third language by a majority of Chinese students who do not speak English at home. In terms of culture possession, these group of Chinese students are essentially monocultural as the influence of Chinese culture is dominant. Consequently, communication problems have occurred among Malaysian Chinese of differing first languages as a result of differences in interpretation or expectation of events or situations. Viewed in this context, the Malaysian Chinese is worth a closer look.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine if there are differences in world views of Chinese students with differing first languages through an analysis of their spoken discourse. To ascertain the above, the researcher will compare the world views of two groups of subjects. One group has English as their first language while another group has Chinese as their first language. The

researcher aims to elicit answers from subjects which reveal their expectations of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable, normal or abnormal, preferred or dispreferred practice.

The study also intends to investigate whether differences in world views among Chinese students using English as a means of communication are a result of individual differences or a result of influences in their native/dominant culture. This line of investigation is predicated on the observation that persons of the same race need not necessarily share the same world view or expectations of events and situations. This is due to the fact that differing first languages and environments can give people access to different cultures and different habits of thinking. The premise is that since the Chinese in Malaysia potentially learn three languages - Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and English - there is a possibility that investigating the world view of Chinese with different first languages may throw some light on the continuing debate on the extent and direction of the influence of language on thought. Moreover, English is learnt as a second or third language by Chinese students who do not speak the language at home. Investigating their world view may also provide information about the role of a second language or third language in shaping perception and world view.

The study therefore has two objectives:

- i) to examine if differences exist in the world view of students

with differing first languages.

- ii) to establish if differences in world view are a result of individual differences or a result of their native/dominant culture and environment.

#### **1. 4 Significance of the Study**

It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of benefit to teachers, researchers, parents and language planners as well as the layman. Living in a multicultural and multiethnic society like Malaysia, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the various cultures of the diverse races as misinterpretation and problems in communication are often a result of insufficient knowledge or understanding of the various cultures. Recognizing the influence of language and culture on thought and behaviour is of critical importance in communication as well as successful language learning.

This study is essentially about the integral relationship between language and culture and the world view a particular language and culture affords. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will throw some light on the influence of native or dominant culture on subjects' world views. It is also hoped that this exploratory study will contribute to a better understanding of the role native or dominant culture plays in intercultural communication and interaction.

The need also exists for teachers to be aware of the significance that culture can bring to the English Language classroom as language represents the deepest manifestation of a culture and value system. Swiderski (1993) states that although first language serves to encode culture, it is not identical to culture. He continues that culture is not acquired in the same way as language but language is not learned successfully until culture is. Similarly, Byram and Morgan (1994) and Kramsch (1991) are of the opinion that success in language learning is related to culture learning. Therefore, Swiderski (1993) views second language acquisition as coordinate and dependent on second language acquisition. Consequently, he proposes that culture learning is not a discardable option in language learning as all language learning takes place in a cultural milieu. Moreover, almost every Malaysian is a bilingual as theoretically at least two languages are learnt formally in the Malaysian classroom. Investigating the world view of the students will provide insight into the effectiveness of learning a second or third language. Hopefully, this study will lead teachers of English to include culture in the teaching of English and utilize appropriate methods to bridge the cultural barrier between native/dominant cultures of learners and the target language.

### **1.5 Limitations of the Study**

Since this is an exploratory study, questions asked were limited to five specified themes modified from the Nostrand Emergent Model (1974) for



culture analysis. With a sampling size of ten students, the study is in no way comprehensive. It is hoped that the results of this study will be a stepping stone for further research in this area.

The heuristic used here involves using linguistic output or discourse as an index of the mind or world view of the producers of a specific linguistic output. Although other kinds of data could be obtained from the corpus, only those related to the topic discussed will be dealt with. This is because the focus is on linguistic aspects that reflect the world view of the language producer and not other aspects such as pronunciation or grammar.

No attempt has been made by the researcher in gathering data to find subjects of similar economic status or other outside variables besides age. The researcher's aim was to explore the differences in world views as a result of cultural differences as encapsulated in languages and not on other aspects such as the influence of socio-economic status on language use.

## **1.6 Summary**

This chapter discusses the Sapir Whorfian Hypothesis as a background of the study. It outlines the statement of the problem by focussing on the Sapir Whorfian Hypothesis. It forwards the view that the Sapir Whorfian claims of language as an influencing factor of a person's world view may be verified when applied to a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic society as

Malaysia. It states the purpose of the study which is to examine the differences in the world view of Chinese students and to establish the probable cause/s for such differences. It also discusses the significance of the study in the context of effective communication and language learning. The chapter closes with a brief description of the limitations of the study which stresses on the exploratory nature of the study, limited subject population and variables as well as its focus which is limited to linguistic aspects of the data collected.