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Languaculture as a key concept in language and culture teaching

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Abstract

Are language and culture inseparable, or are they separable? Neither of these positions is tenable, and in order to find a solution to this seeming paradox, it is useful to develop a theoretical understanding of the concept of languaculture. The point of departure should be a sociolinguistic one, seeing language primarily as linguistic practice going on in - small and large - social networks of various ranges, incl. the global range. Languages, i.e. language users, spread all over the world by various kinds of migration, and each language carries languaculture with it. The languaculture of each specific language is seen as encompassing three interrelated dimensions: a semantic and pragmatic potential, a poetic potential and an identity potential. Languages and their languacultures spread across cultural contexts and discourse communities. This view has a range of far-reaching implications for the content and identity of language teaching and learning.

Introduction

The relationship between language and culture may be viewed from two opposite angles: On the one hand language may be seen as closely associated with a culture: language and culture are seen as inseparable phenomena. On the other hand language may be seen as an instrument of communication that may be used with any subject and anywhere in the world: language and culture are seen as separated phenomena. The teaching of English as an international language is often accompanied by the second view.

None of these positions is satisfying. The first one emphasises that language is culture-bound, and one is not far from a conception of a closed universe of language, culture, history and mentality - a national romanticism that is misleading in the light of international and transnational processes in the (late-)modern world. The other one claims that language is culturally neutral; language is seen as a code, and one is not far from a reconstitution of the classical structuralist conception of the autonomy of language.

Language should be conceptualised an an integrated part of society, culture and the psyche. Language is always cultural in some respects. But how can we construct a model of the relationship between language and culture that does not lock language into a national romantic universe, and at the same time does not claim that language is culturally neutral?

I consider the concept of languaculture as very useful in the construction of a such a new understanding of the relationship between language, culture and society in a globalising world. Languaculture may be a key concept in the understanding of language as both a social and a cultural phenomenon. In what follows I will elaborate on this issue, dealing firstly with a view of language as a social phenomenon seen in a global perspective, secondly with a view of language as a cultural, i.e. meaning-making, phenomenon, and thirdly with some implications for foreign and second language studies[1] (for a more comprehensive analysis, see Risager 2003 and Risager forthcoming b).

A social view of language

The teaching and learning of languages since the 1970s has been influenced by the pragmatic turn in linguistics. Today it is common to state that language use should be analysed in relation to the context of communication, and that language teaching and learning should focus on the appropriate use of the target language, oral and written, according to situational and wider social contexts. This communicative approach is often characterized as sociolinguistic as it rests upon a concept of language that foregrounds language as a means of communication in social interaction. However, although I recognize the importance of a communicative approach, I want to develop a more dynamic view of language in a global perspective.

In doing so, I refer to the concept of social network, which is widely used in the social sciences (for instance Hannerz 1992). Social network theory makes it possible to examine social relations and chains of social interaction at various levels of social practice, from the micro-level of interpersonal interaction to macro-levels of mass-communication and communication between organisations and other collective actors.

As regards language, one may study how a specific (national) language is used and how it spreads in social networks of various ranges. The French language, for example, is used in many kinds of social networks at various levels in francophone countries. But it is also used in other places in the world. In fact French may be seen as a world language in the sense that speakers of French live in practically every country and region in the world - as tourists, students, business people, diplomats, doctors, journalists, scientists etc. etc. So languages such as French (i.e. people using French) spread all over the world, across cultural contexts and discourse communities. This mobility (which is by no means accessible for all) is made possible by modern technologies of transportation.

Connections between people all over the world in patterns of social networks are made possible by the means of telecommunication and the world wide web. For instance, I can correspond by e-mail in French with a colleague in Australia; I can read on-line newspapers produced in the German-speaking community in Argentina; I can talk in Danish by mobile phone to a relative of mine who is travelling in Poland. We are witnessing the development of more or less global linguistic networks. Many languages of the world take part in this process, not just the major languages that are taught as foreign and second languages.

The various language-specific networks meet locally, thus creating local multilingual situations of great complexity. Almost every country (state) in the world is multilingual in some sense. In a small

[1] Parts of this paper are identical with Risager 2004 and Risager (forthcoming a and b).

country like Denmark, for instance, maybe over 100 languages are spoken by various groups of immigrants.

Foreign and second language studies in a global context

Learning and teaching a language means contributing to the spread of the target language to new learners and new contexts. So any language teaching programme is an actor in the continuous formation and reformation of the global network of the target language. Foreign language studies should not confine themselves to the national scenes of the so-called target language countries. They should recognize that all states are multilingual in some sense, including the country where the target language is taught, and the countries in which the target language is the dominant first language. The target language is always in a state of competition with other languages that have perhaps a minority position.

That is why the notion of linguistic area (the French-speaking area, the Russian-speaking area etc.) is problematic. Languages are not territorially bound; of course the specific network of say Danish is especially dense on the Danish territory, but the Danish language network has a global range, as Danish-speaking people can be found in many parts of the world. States have boundaries, languages haven't.

When I speak of language users, I mean all that speak the language, whether it is as first, second or foreign language. In this context, a second language is a language that you learn in childhood or later, and that is the dominant language in the country where you live; so you need the second language to be able to participate in the social life as a citizen. Whereas a foreign language is a language that is studied mainly at a distance, in another country. Of course, one can think of many examples of overlapping between these two prototypical cases.
It is important to have this inclusive concept of language. The students participating in foreign and second (and first) language studies may have many differen linguistic backgrounds, they may speak the target language as a first language (native speakers studying their first language abroad), they may speak a minority language and speak the dominant language (for instance Danish in Denmark) as a second language – and the teachers may be equally varied[2]. Because of the strong monolingual focus on the target language, foreign language departments may in fact be multilingual without anybody really noticing it or exploiting it.

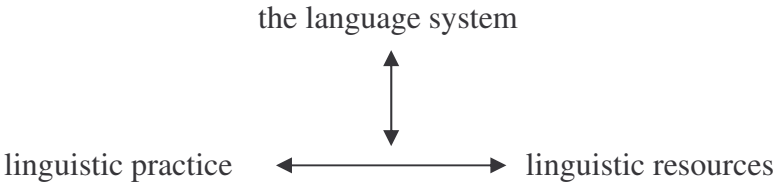
As far as target language countries are concerned, parts of the population speak the language in question not as a first language, but as a second language. So you miss an important part of the social and cultural life of the target language country if you restrict the horizon to those who speak and write the language as a first language (mother tongue).

So I would suggest that one way of transgressing the national and monolingual focus of foreign and second language studies should be to further an awareness of the target language as just one language in the whole ecology of languages. One of the objectives of foreign language studies might be to contribute to a multilingual awareness in a global perspective, for instance by way of course work or project work on sociolinguistic issues such as bilingualism, intercultural communication and code-switching (in everyday interaction or as represented in literature, film etc.) (see also Risager 1998).

[2] Teachers of French in Danish universities have had, among others, Danish, French, Belgian, and Icelandic backgrounds.

Linguistic practice, linguistic resources and the language system

Until now, I have been focusing on language use, or linguistic practice. This focus enables us to develop the image of language use spreading in social networks. But this is only one of the existential loci (or ontologies) of language. One has to distinguisth between three loci of language:



Linguistic practice is oral and written interaction in social networks, including the production and reception of literature and other cultural products. Linguistic resources are carried by the individual person; they are the socially constituted knowledge of language, developed as part of the life history of the person. These two loci of language presuppose each other: Linguistic practice cannot be produced and received without linguistic resources carried by individual people, and the linguistic resources of the individual cannot be developed without the experience of linguistic practice.

Whereas these two loci of language are both natural and necessary, the idea of the ‘language system’ is not. We have to deconstruct the idea that there is a language 'out there' that we can use and study as a natural object. The 'language system' is a construct or, in other words, a family of historically and discursively constructed notions ('English', French' etc.). At the same time it is important to note that this construct has consequences for linguistic practice and linguistic resources. The idea of the language system interacts with both linguistic practice and linguistic resources, being a kind of - more or less conscious - normative factor.

I emphasize these three loci in order to point out that there are many kinds of language study beside the sociolinguistic one. Foreign and second language studies should encompass both sociologically oriented studies of language use, and psychologically oriented studies of cognition and competence, and system-oriented studies of phonology, grammar and the lexicon. But these activities should be accomplished with an overall understanding of language as a social phenomenon not limited to the national scene of the target language countries.

A cultural view of language

There are many ways of theorizing the relationship between the social and the cultural. In this limited context, I just want to stress that all societal life may be considered as both social and cultural. The analysis of social life typically deals with relational, temporal and spatial aspects of activities, institutions and structures, whereas the analysis of cultural life typically deals with the production and reproduction of meaning and representations of various realities. The two sides cannot be separated from each other. All social life carries meaning, and all exchanges and negotiations of meaning are embedded in more or less shifting social structures and relations of power.

When we focus on language as a means of forming meaning, we enter an intellectual tradition very different from the sociolinguistic approach I have just outlined. The intimate connections between (specific) languages and (specific) cultures has been a fundamental theme in the nation building process in Europe since the late 18th century, not least in the German form of national romanticism. Foreign language studies since the 19th century have been deeply influenced by this figure of thought, and are just beginning to question the national paradigm and look for alternative ways of conceptualizing the study of language, literature and culture[3].

Inseparability or separability?

Nowadays, the most usual and easy way of dealing with the relationship between language and culture is to state that it is a complex relationship, thus verbalizing the difficulties of coming to grips with this thorny question. Those who do formulate an opinion on the issue, may largely be characterized as holding one of two opposite positions:

- language and culture are inseparable
- language and culture are separable

The first view is associated with the cultural turn in linguistics since the 1980s, and is maintained in various forms in research disciplines such as linguistic anthropology, translation studies, and studies of intercultural communication. This is of course also a popular belief among people in general, not least in Europe in the present process of political integration of nation states in a larger union. The second view is mostly associated with the study of English as an international language. In this case it is maintained that languages - and especially English - should be seen as flexible instruments of communication that may in principle be used with any subject matter by anybody anywhere in the world.

As I already said, none of these positions is satisfying. The first one emphasizes that language is culture-bound, and one is not far from a conception of a closed universe of language, people, nation, culture, history, mentality and land. This position is totally at odds with the social and transnational view of language that I have just presented. The other position claims that language is culturally neutral. Language is seen as a code, and one is not far from a reconstitution of the classical structuralist conception of the autonomy of language. To this I would say that no language is culturally neutral. All natural languages (i.e. their users) constantly produce and reproduce culture (i.e. meaning).

The generic and the differential level

At this point I want to emphasize an important thing: In the analysis of the relationship between language and culture, it is necessary to distinguish between on the one hand language and culture in the generic sense, and on the other hand language and culture in the differential sense.

In the generic sense we are talking about language and culture as general human phenomena. The generic sense may be found in two variants: a psychological/cognitive and a social. In the first-mentioned variant language and culture are seen as psychological/cognitive phenomena that have a

[3] In my D.Phil. thesis (Risager 2003) I have made a thorough historical analysis of the discourse on language, culture and nation within the discipline of culture pedagogy: the teaching of culture and society as part of foreign and second language teaching (for example: Byram 1986 and 1997, Kramsch 1993, Roberts et al. 2001, Byram and Risager 1999).

(neuro)physiological basis. In the second variant language and culture are seen as social phenomena that have been developed as part of the social life of mankind. At the generic level it doesn't make any sense to maintain that language and culture may be separated. Human culture always includes language, and human language cannot be thought without culture. Linguistic practice is always embedded in, and in interaction with, some cultural, meaningful context.

In the differential sense we are talking about different languages and different cultural phenomena: Specific forms of linguistic knowledge and linguistic practice relating to 'whole' languages, languages varieties, loan words etc. And specific forms of cultural knowledge and cultural practice: different meanings and meaningful forms relating to sign systems as pictures, fashion, food, music, dance etc., different norms and values, symbols, ideas and ideologies. Topics concerning language spread and culture spread belong to the differential level.

In my view much of the confusion concerning the relationship between language and culture may be ascribed to the fact that people do not generally distinguish clearly between the generic and the differential level. It is at the differential level that one may ask for instance: What forms of culture are associated with the Russian language? What forms of culture are associated with the English language?

Languaculture

I consider the concept of languaculture to be very useful in the construction of a new understanding of the relationship between language and culture (at the differential level) in a globalised world. The concept of languaculture has not been widely used until now, but the American linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar has developed it in a book published in 1994[4]. For Agar, languaculture is a concept that covers language plus culture, and he is especially interested in the variability of languaculture in discourse (verbal interaction), both among different native users of the same language, and among people who use the language as a native and/or a foreign language. Agar focuses on the semantic and pragmatic variability of linguistic practice, and invites the reader to explore 'rich points' in intercultural communication, i.e. points where communication goes wrong.

Whereas Agar uses the concept of languaculture in order to theorize the single universe of language and culture, I use it as a concept that may offer us the opportunity to theorize deconnections and reconnections between language and culture as a result of migration and other processes of globalisation. Languages (i.e. language users) spread in social networks, across cultural contexts and discourse communities, but they carry languaculture with them (this is also suggested in the alternative wording: 'culture in language'). So there are dimensions of culture that are bound to a specific language (languaculture), and there are dimensions that are not, for instance musical traditions or architectural styles. There may of course be lots of historical links between such cultural phenomena and the language in question, but the point is that the phenomena are not dependent on that specific language.

[4] He has borrowed this term from Friedrich (1989) who called it linguaculture (se also Risager 2003: 363).

Three dimensions of languaculture

The study of languaculture is the study of the various kinds of meanings carried and produced by language. But what exactly is that? I suggest that we distinguish between three dimensions of languaculture, corresponding to three cultural perspectives on language:

- the semantic and pragmatic potential
- the poetic potential
- the identity potential

The semantic and pragmatic potential is the dimension explored by Agar, and by many others interested in intercultural pragmatics and contrastive semantics. It has also been a longstanding focus of interest for linguistic anthropology since Boas, Sapir and Whorf[5]. This dimension is about constancy and variability in the semantics and pragmatics of specific languages: More or less obligatory distinctions between 'sister' and 'brother', between 'he' and 'she', between 'red' and 'orange', between 'hello' and 'how are you', between 'nature' and 'culture' etc. – and the social and personal variability that is found in concrete situations of use.

The poetic potential is the dimension related to the specific kinds of meaning created in the exploitation of the phonological and syllabic structure of the language in question, its rhymes, its relationships between speech and writing etc. – areas that have for a long time interested literary theorists focusing on literary poetics, style, literariness and the like.

The identity potential is also called social meaning by some sociolinguists (for example Hymes). It is related to the social variation of the language in question: in using the language in a specific way, with a specific accent for instance, you identify yourself and make it possible for others to identify you according to their background knowledge and attitudes. Linguistic practice is a continuing series of 'acts of identity' (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) where people project their own understanding of the world onto the interlocutors and consciously or unconsciously invite them to react. This dimension has been explored by those scholars within sociolinguistics that are interested in the relationship between language and identity[6].

As I have stressed above, languaculture is both structurally constrained and socially and personally variable. It is a bridge between the structure of language and the socially constituted personal idiolect. The most interesting potentials of the concept may lie in the study of the personal side with a focus on individual semantic connotations and language learning as a process that is integrated in the life history of the individual subject, as a speaker-hearer, a reader and a writer.

Languaculture in the linguistic practice

If we consider languaculture in linguistic practice, oral and written, there is usually a high degree of semantic and pragmatic variability in the process. When a text is produced, languacultural intentions are laid down in the text, intentions concerning how this text is going to function semantically and pragmatically in the situation of communication. What speech acts are intended, what refer-

[5] And before them, Wilhelm von Humboldt.

[6] In the following sections I will restrict myself to the first (semantic and pragmatic) dimension because of lack of space.

ences are given to the context, what representations of the world are to be conjured up? These languacultural intentions are restricted or expanded during the reception of the text. The addressees/the readers perceive and interprete the text according to their personal languacultures and their knowledge of the world. A negotiation of meaning is going on.

In situations where the language is used as a foreign language, there are many opportunities of adding even more variability than is the case with native language use, for instance as it is described by Agar in his comments on examples of intercultural communication in English between Austrians and himself.

Languaculture in the linguistic resources

The personal languaculture of the individual cannot be separated from his/her personal life history and social and cultural identity formation. It is not possible to distinguish denotative and connotative dimensions of the personal languaculture.

As for the case where the language is first language (mother tongue), it should be noted that the idea of an intimate relationship between language and culture is primarily about the language in its function as a first language, even if this is rarely explicitly stated. The national-romantic idea of an inner association between the language and the people/nation (and thus the national culture) is in fact about the people who have from their childhood grown up with the mother tongue and the mother tongue culture (in German: 'die muttersprachliche Kultur').

This idea of association between mother tongue and mother tongue culture at the national (or ethnic) level ignores the possibility of great variation between the linguistic and cultural upbringing of different individuals. The acquisition process is in any case socially diffentiated, and all human beings develop their personal linguistic and cultural repertoires with which they express themselves and interpret the world. Therefore language and culture are always different from individual to individual, characterized by a specific emotional and cognitive constitution, a specific perspective and a specific horizon of understanding. For example, the meaning of such notions as 'work' and 'leisure' may be quite different even within the same professional group or the same family.

What is the character of the relationship between language and culture when the language is a foreign language? A Dane who is learning German, for instance, especially in the first stages of learning, must draw on his/her cultural and social experience related to the Danish language. There are some semantic and pragmatic distinctions that are obligatory in using German, such as an appropriate distribution of 'du' and 'Sie'. But otherwise it will be natural to use the languaculture developed in relation to the first language (or other languages learnt). Personal connotations to words and phrases will be transferred, and a kind of language mixture will result, where the foreign language is supplied with languacultural matter from another language (in this case Danish, and possibly other languages learnt). From the learner's perspective, the alleged intimate association between German language and culture is a normative one, not a descriptive one. It is his/her task to establish an association, and this task has to be accomplished on the basis of a growing understanding of some of the associations common among native speakers. But even when the learner reaches a high level of competence, his/her languaculture will always be the result of an accumulation of experiences during the whole life history.

Languaculture in the language system

Since the language system is a discursive construction, the description of languaculture in the language system is a discursive construction too, where considerations of relevance and utility are to be expected. The description of languaculture may be placed on a continuum ranging from a minimalist description of the semantic and pragmatic potential of relative constancy – the denotative core of the language – to a maximalist description in the form of a gigantic encyclopedia supplemented by a gigantic handbook of patterns of linguistic practice in specific situations. It should be noted that the structuralist tradition has primarily focused (implicitly) on language as a first language. But some studies of interlanguage (learners' language in development) may be said to build on this tradition (making for instance descriptions of Danes' German interlanguage, or Germans' school English, and the like).

Language/languaculture and discourse in a global perspective

Languaculture is related to one or more specific languages. The concept is a theorization of the interface between language and the rest of culture. But the cultural view of language should also embrace the concept of discourse.

The concept of discourse may be used as an intermediary concept between the concepts of language/languaculture and the more general concept of culture. I refer to the thinking on discourse as for example represented by Fairclough (1992) and other proponents of critical discourse analysis (Wodak, Jäger, van Dijk). Discourse, and discourses, are primarily defined relative to their content: A discourse deals with a certain subject matter from a certain perspective. It is primarily verbally formed, but may be accompanied by for instance visual material.

Discourses may spread across languages. For example, a discourse on Christianity is not bound to any one language, although some languages are more specialized than others as to the verbalisation of topics related to Christianity. Discourses move from language community to language community (of from one linguistic network to another) by processes of translation and other kinds of transformation, and discourses are incorporated into the local language over longer or shorter periods of time. Some discourses are formed as various kinds of literature, and so literary topics, genres and styles spread from language to language.

So, specific languages and specific discourses do not necessarily spread along the same lines (see also Risager 2000). But they may exhibit parallel developments in an area or in a specific linguistic network. Pennycook is among the few people who have analysed relations between language and discourse in this way, with special reference to the question whether colonial discourses adhere to the English language (Pennycook 1998).

Thus the cultural view of language may be said to comprise two levels: the level of languaculture, bound to specific languages, and the level of discourse, not necessarily bound to any one language (but a discourse has to be expressed in some language at any point of time).

Languages/languacultures and discourses spread in partly different social networks across cultural contexts - a dynamic image of deconnections and reconnections, of disembedding and reembedding, of processes of cultural influence, domination and integration.

The general ideology of inseparability between language and culture seems to be attributable to two different, but related factors. On the one hand the individual has a tendency of projecting his/her own subjective feeling of association between his/her personal language/languaculture and his/her personal culture and identity onto the community, for example the nation, and thus imagine an association at the system level for which there is no empirical basis. On the other hand this psychological tendency is used politically in national propaganda, where an image is constructed of the nation state characterized by a common national culture expressed in a common national language. Two constructs are articulated together: the idea of the language system and the idea of the culture or cultural system.

Implications for foreign and second language studies[7]

The first implication for foreign and second language studies is that the empirical field in a geographical sense is not 'the language area', but the worldwide network of the target language. Where and in what situations do people speak, read and write the target language? How is the target language used on the internet by ordinary people and interest groups? What role does the language have in transnational migration of all sorts? What role does it have in transnational companies, markets and media? In international politics? In all these situations it is important to consider that the target language carries languaculture with it. It has specific semantic, pragmatic, poetic and identity potentials – both possibilities and limitations. It is partly different from any other language, and this specificity should be an important preoccupation for foreign and second language studies.

The second implication is that the analytical object is not only (texts in) the target language as first language, but also as second and foreign language. The target language is learnt and spoken by many kinds of people and for many different reasons. So an awareness of the complex functions of the target language opens up for studies of multilingualism and multiculturality in all places where the target language is spoken. How is the target language – French for instance – used by Arabic immigrants in France? How is it used by Chinese immigrants in Canada? These kinds of questions raise issues of relations between language and identity: the use and construction of linguistic identities and the role of language in the construction of cultural identities, national or ethnic, etc. They also raise issues of the role of languages in the power structures of society and the world. They may focus attention on various forms of linguistic and cultural encounters and conflicts, and on processes of translation and interpretation - linguistic and cultural. They may lead to insights into the great languacultural variability of the language in question.

The third implication is that the study of a specific language is not confined to specific discourses or specific thematic areas (disciplinary fields). As discourses, topics and genres may spread from language to language by various kinds of translation or transformation, a language community is never a closed discourse community, though there may be certain discourses that are preferred in certain local and social contexts at certain points of time. Thus it is not necessarily so that language studies should always focus on the (native) literature of target language countries. The link between the study of language and the study of literature is not a natural one, it is a historical construction that was once important in the nation-building processes. When this link is maintained today, it has to be specially motivated, for foreign language studies may as well focus on social studies, cultural studies, media studies, business studies, workplace studies, art studies etc. etc.

[7] As I have hinted at several times, I think these reflexions are also relevant for the teaching and learning of languages as first languages, but space prevents me from developing this issue further here.

The fourth implication is that it is necessary to construct foreign language studies that are characterized by an integrative view of both language, text, discourse and (the rest of) culture and society. For instance, the target language should be seen as a cultural phenomenon, and simultaneously literature and other texts in the target language should be seen as linguistic phenomena. Although texts are usually studied as cultural products carrying some kind of global content or meaning (representing cultural reality in some way or other), they are always also instances of linguistic practice in a specific language.

It is important to try to counteract the unfortunate traditional division between studies of language, literature and history/society in foreign and second language studies. This does not mean that the histories of the different academic traditions should not be acknowledged. But it means that the problems of modern (and not-so-modern) life should be approached as complex problems demanding a range a different means of analysis and interpretation. We need interdisciplinary approaches to everyday phenomena of intercultural learning and communication, oral and written. We need to study these phenomena with combinations of theories originating both in linguistics (incl. sociolinguistics and cultural linguistics), in literary studies (incl. studies of all sorts of texts in the media), and in social and historical studies more generally.

One way of furthering this idea is to introduce problem-oriented project work as a central form of study, supplemented by course work. The task of looking for and defining social and cultural problems may offer opportunities for students and teachers/supervisors to develop a sense of the interdisciplinary nature and potentials of foreign language studies. A project work (in French) on problems of intercultural understanding raised by the use of childrens' books, produced in France, in a small rural community in Bourkina Faso, would perhaps illustrate the necessity of applying both linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge (theories and methods) in order to understand the problems involved.

In conclusion, we need a redefinition of language and culture pedagogy that transcends the national paradigm and introduces a dynamic transnational and global perspective, including multilingual awareness, centering on the study of meaning as it is produced in the interface of languaculture and discourse[8].

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[8] Many of the ideas expressed in this paper have been developed into a Master's programme at Roskilde University. The programme is called 'Cultural Encounters', and focuses on studies of culture and language related to questions of identity, ethnicity, nationality, multilingualism and multiculturalism, discourse studies, post-colonial studies and studies of cultural and linguistic globalisation. There is no specific target language so the programme does not aim primarily at language learning. Thus it is not in itself a foreign language study programme, but foreign language studies may be inspired by it.

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