

# LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND SOCIETY: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF STUART HALL'S REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFYING PRACTICES

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## ABSTRACT

Language and culture are familiar issues in human life. In fact, some people do not realize that they, as a member of society, produce meanings to their life called 'culture'. Commonly, culture is comprehended as the way of behaving or the way of living. In addition, ordinary people who do not clearly understand this concept think that culture involves traditional performances or some ritual events of a group. Some other people, including the writer, interpret culture as arts creations, such as painting, music and literature. In fact, Hall's concepts on culture have opened up the writer's view on culture.

This paper is aimed at exploring Hall's concept of culture in relation to language and society. To make this concept more understandable the writer would like to apply this concept into a specific context in our daily life and the writer's cultural experiences.

**Key Words:** language, culture, society

## INTRODUCTION

When the world is seen as a global village, understanding of the complex and subtle relationship between language, society and culture becomes an essential condition for peaceful co-existence among its villagers. On the basis of this assumption, Language, Society and Culture (LSC) is produced. It is a refereed international internet journal publishing articles and reports dealing with theoretical as well as practical issues focusing on the link between language, society and culture within a socio-cultural context or beyond its boundary.

## HALL'S CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFYING PRACTICES IN A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

Stuart Hall (1997: 1) in his introduction defines culture and discusses its relationships with language and society. He mentions about '*circuit culture*', that is a circulation of how culture is regulated in society through language, which then he argues it operated as a representation system. Representation, according to Hall, is a system by which language works by using '*sign*' and '*symbols*' to stand for or to represents ideas, thought, feeling, expression and emotion. However, the term is not limited to spoken or written language only. It is more to stand for or to represent something. For example, a musician uses music to represent his feeling and music uses notes and sounds as its sign or symbols. Spoken language uses sounds to construct meaning, while written language

uses letter and words. Body language uses gestures, and traffic light system uses colors to deliver message of traffic rules.

One could represent sadness to other people. Tears in this sense could be a sign or symbol to represent sadness. By this way one can communicate with other people so that they can comprehend the 'tears' to indicate a 'sad' feeling. This is how Hall explains the '*signifying system*'.

Furthermore, Hall argues that culture is about '*shared meaning*'. Culture involves the practices of giving meaning to people, objects and events. They carry meanings and values that need to be interpreted by others. Culture produces meaning or a sense of identity of different groups in a society, and these groups exchange meaning through social interactions. They use language as the media to produce and consume meanings among them. These meanings are the results of process of '*coding*' the conceptual map in brain through a system called '*signs*'. However, it's not easy to decode one concept in other's brain without getting the '*linguistic codes*' that will help one to translate the signs into related concepts. Though, these codes are subjective, depending on social principle culture.

Two people may have the same culture as long as they can interpret something (material) in the world similarly. For example, in Batak culture, the regard of '*ulos*' such as '*mora*' is dressed for the highest position in the family and '*kahanggi*' is for the lower position in the family that will be understood by other member of Batak ethnic as a '*symbolization*' of their position and power in the family. Normally it wears in a traditional ceremony. This tradition may not be able to be decoded by people from Aceh ethnics or Sunda ethnic.

In a broader application in a society, Hall's concept implies that cultures share a universal meaning. For example, Riau ethnic, Melayu Deli ethnic from North Sumatra, and the Malay ethnic from Malaysia have a similar concept about '*Japirf*' dance even though they come from different places (countries). The other example of this concept is, although the social systems in Bali and in Java are different, they share a common idea that the community understood it as their spiritual or political needs. The Balinese have '*Banjar*' system to divide the territory where the members of the community share the same kinship and are lead a priest, whereas in Java the territory is divided into '*desa*', and '*pedukuhan*', which the chiefs are elected by the member off community (Koncaraningrat, 1990: 3-4). This concept is constructed by their tradition which has similarity as Malay (Melayu) ethnics. This process may explain Hall's 'representation system in human's circuit of culture, where language works through a representation, which circulated or practiced in a certain culture.

In a society different groups have their own culture; however, one may belong to a group but still maintain his own identity by having individual interpretations (p.2). For example, a plate form a sink Titanic can be a symbol of something that could be interpreted in different 'meanings' depends on its participants in making sense of it. Economists may interpret it as a profitable thing for antique trades; Historians may interpret it as the achievement of the culture from the past; anthropologist may interpret it as a cultural value of human being and their civilization at that time. In the other hand, a house wife may interpret it as a beautiful collection of food -serving tools.

Another example of Hall's representation system and signifying practices is when a mother teaches her child about the meaning of the traffic light rule. She may draw a red ball as a sign to represent a '*stop*', green to represent '*go*' and draw yellow to represent '*be ready or be aware*'. In the other case, a child in Indonesia who never sees a real Koala bear can learn from a picture in a book. The picture or the image of koala represents a real koala.

Another example can be adopted from Indonesian glossaries which can be symbolized in different words as signs. For example, the Javanese call *gabah* (the padi seeds), *beras* (rice or peeled padi seed), *las* (rice's skin), *wew* (broken rice), *sego* (cooked rice), *upo* (single cooked rice/part), and *karak* (dried cooked rice), to signify the concept of 'staple food', which in English called 'rice'. This is because the English do not practice eating rice, yet they have bread as a similar concept of staple food. Though, as soon as one of them lives and stays in Javanese family and eat rice, *sego*, *inenir*, or *karak*, he would understand a new concept of another sign of rice as staple foods. Therefore, to understand one cultural meaning precisely one needs 'cultural codes' through which the meaning can be explored in a particular context with language as the best media. There are many expressions that may be some other examples of the cross-culture confusions which need cultural codes happens in a relations between cultures. For example, a native speaker of Bahasa Indonesia will not call elder people only by names. One should call his mother in law also with *ibu* (mother) or *tante* (aunty), while in Western culture one can call his mother in law only by her name. A child from western culture will call elder people (friends) by name, while in Indonesia children should call them by predication such as uncle, aunty, sister, or brother.

All of those different examples exist as 'different practices in produce meanings. This could be different from one to another in order to 'make sense' and to express thought and ideas of the world about people, object and events. Though, in order to communicate and deliver all ideas and thought, the same linguistic codes are important so that people may have meaningful dialogue exchanges. The above concept belongs to the semiotic approaches, according to Hall (1997: 6).

...semiotic approaches is concerned with the 'how' of representation, with how language produces meaning-what has been called 'poetics'; whereas the discursive approach is more concerned with the effect and consequences of representation- its politics.

## DISCURSIVE APPROACH

Hall explains that *discursive approach* examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which particular discourse connect with power and construct identities and define the way certain things are represented, practiced and studied. Discursive approach is emphasized at the historical specificity of a particular form of how they are deployed at particular time in a particular place. Furthermore, language in discursive power circulated through several different processes and practices to give sense of identity. It can be changed and temporarily stable depending on where and when is a person at the moment. Those powers are horizontal, vertical and neutral.

In the following examples, the writer tries to express what Hall means by discursive approach in a representation system by exposing some expressions and practices in Indonesian settings. For example, speakers of Bahasa Indonesia use several words to express 'you', such as *kamu*, *anda*, *saudara*, *kau*, *lu*, and *dikau*, in different discourses, while some other speakers use the words *saya*, *aku*, or *gue* to express /

The word '*kamu*' is used for formal and polite expression. It usually uses by people in different level of ages, or by different social status, even though they are in the same age. The word '*anda*' or '*saudara*' is commonly used in a very formal situation and usually function at a meeting and formal setting (indicating vertical power relations) The words '*kau*' and '*lu (or do)*', commonly are used by particular group of young people in

a friendship context (street talk or vernacular language) which indicating a horizontal power relations. "The words '*engkau*' and '*dikau*' usually function as literature words or poems that use in neutral power relations

On the other hand, the word '*saya*' is used to express T in formal setting and to show politeness of the speaker. It can be used as a vertical power relation but also can be used in a horizontal power relation to express respect to the listener, especially to the elders or colleagues. The word '*aku*' or '*gue*' are used in informal conversation or in friendship contexts. It indicates horizontal power relations. The following table will give a clear understanding of how words are used.

*Table 1: the examples of vertical, horizontal and neutral power in different discourses*

no	words	expressions	Discursive power
1	kamu	a) <i>Kamu sudah makan?</i> (did you eat?).  b) <i>Kamu harus kerjakan soal nomor 5</i> ( you must do the task number 5).  <i>Kamu mestinya lapor saya dulu!</i> (You should tell me first!)	a) A mother to her son (vertical).  b) A teacher to the students (vertical).  A Boss to a secretary (vertical)
2	Anda/Saudara	Anda berdua diharapkan untuk datang dalam rapat tahunan (Both of you are expected to come to the annual meeting)	Office spokesman or government officer to the lower employees or from other departments (vertical)
3	Lu, elo	Apa dia udah bilang ke elo? ( did he tell you yet?)	Close friends conversation (horizontal)
4	Kau	Nanti kau bisa datang kerumah ku? (Can you come to my house?)	Close friends conversation but sometime offensive in a certain part in Indonesia ( horizontal)
5	Dikau, Engkau	Dikaulah /Engkaulah bidariku ( You are my angel)	In a song or poem (neutral power)

6	Saya  Saya	a) Saya sebenarnya keberatan atas pendapat saudara ( I object to your opinion). b)Tadi sore saya datang ke rumah tante (I came to your (auntie's) house this afternoon)	a) Formal conversation between colleagues or/and staff officers ( vertical horizontal)  b) Conversation between cousin with his aunt (vertical)
7	Gue/gua	Gue kan udah kasih ke elo kemarin ( I gave it to you yesterday, didn't I?)	Close friend conversations ( horizontal)
8	aku	Aku gak keberatan untuk kasih kabar ke tante kamu ( I don't mind to inform your aunty)	Close friend conversation (horizontal)

As the table shows, there are three different powers as the effect of representation in a sense of 'discursive' approach. They are vertical, horizontal and neutral powers. Vertical power is a condition when the speaker is in a position of giving order, such as a teacher to a student, a mother to a son, or a director to an employee. Horizontal power is when the speakers are in equal level like friends or when they are in the same position in social status. Neutral power is when the speakers use the words for any discourse freely, such as using it in poems or songs. The poem will not consider the discursive level or power considerations in writing their poets for the listener of the readers. The confusion may arise from this situation when other people who do not belong to the same culture of the speaker use these words.

However, the examples above can always be analyzed in a different form, such as from a *semantic structure analysis*. It is an analysis of meaning with using the component analysis. Component analysis means to analyze the component of words. It is a distinctive analysis between '*appreciates*' or '*less appreciates*' thing (object). It can be analyzed by making a list of criteria of the object (Tlatim & Munday (2004, pp.34-39). Therefore, the words such as *kamu* and *saudara* or *kau* can be analyzed in a semantic structure by using several criteria, such as the similarity of the words, as shown as the following table. Note that + (positive sign) is to indicate *appreciate* the object while the - (negative sign) is to indicate *less appreciate* object. By listing the criteria such as *single, formality, adult, or closeness*, the differences among the words can be easily comprehended by others.

Table 2: *Semantic structure analysis of words.*

<b>kamu</b>	<b>anda/saudara</b>	<b>lu/elo</b>	<b>kau</b>	<b>dikau</b>
+ single	+ single	+ single	+ single	+ single
+ formality	+ formality	- formality	- formality	- formality

+ adult	+ adult	+ adult	+ adult	+ adult
+ closeness	- closeness	+ closeness	+ closeness	+ closeness
- offensive	- offensive	- offensive	+ offensive	- offensive
+ politeness	+ politeness	- politeness	- politeness	+ politeness
+ powerful	+ powerful	- powerful	- powerful	- powerful
- literature	- literature	- literature	- literature	+ literature

## CONCLUSION

One therefore conclude that Hall's argument about representation system is positively about how language works in using sign and symbols to communicate ideas and interpretations about the world. The 'semiotic' and 'discursive' approaches are obviously functions in how representation works through language and culture. Moreover, a representation system functions as a bridge between the signifying practices as language in produce meanings and the discursive formation as the identity of using the language in the circuit culture or cultural regulation in a society.

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