

ROLE OF LANGUAGE AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INSTITUTION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses role of language as a social and cultural institution on the basis of literature review or documentary study. Language is defined as a social institution on the basis of premise that there is a close relationship between language and society and the relationship is symbiotic-reciprocal as language exists in society and society exists in language. The relationship is reflected in the features of language used by a society as members of a social group in social contexts in which the meanings stored in the forms of language used comprise an organized system of norms and structures to regulate social life and to maintain solidity, solidarity, stability, and continuity. Language is defined as a cultural institution as there is a close relationship between language and culture belonging to a society as members of a social group. The relationship is symbiotic-reciprocal as language exists in culture and culture exists in language. The role of language as a cultural institution has wider scope because language used by a society as members of a social group serves as a potential resource to uncover various cultural aspects along with its function as an element, index, and symbol of culture.

Keywords: *cultural institution; language; meaningfulness; social institution;*

It is a truism that there is no society on this earth living without language because language makes the life of a society as members of a social group meaningful. The meaningfulness of language can be clearly seen in its use as a means of communication between and among a society as members of a social group. Many facts show that, even though there are many different symbolic media of communication used by a society as members of social group to fulfill their basic needs as human beings, language is the most effective one (Cassirer, 1987; Foley, 1997). This is because language they employ serves as a vessel or vehicle that allows them to express their complex thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions, and experiences in the world (Trudgill, 2000; Wardaugh, 2006; Wardaugh & Fuller, 2015).

The view comes closest to the idea of Vito (1970) defining language as a potentially self-reflective, structured system of symbols which catalog the objects, events, and relations in the world. The world conveyed through language used by a society as members of a social group involves the material world and the symbolic world which refers to the world in which the objects as the referents of language used are imaginative in nature as the objects exist in their cognitions or minds (Cassirer, 1987). The use of language as a system of symbols enables them to develop their culture and inherit cultural values from one generation to another. This implies that language in its use as a means of communication between and among members of a social

group is the reflection of culture they share and language in this light dual functions as the window of their world and the window into their cognitions or minds as well (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Bustan, 2025).

As every language has different ways in viewing and making sense of the world, it is also true to say then that language in its use as a means of communication between and among members of a social group is not only seen as a linguistic phenomenon, but also as a social phenomenon and a cultural phenomenon. In terms of its nature as a social phenomenon, language is defined as a social institution, as reflected in a certain social context of communication. While in view of its nature as a cultural phenomenon, language is defined as a cultural institution, as reflected in a certain cultural context of communication (Suriasumantri, 2001). Both the social context and the cultural context of communication are the nonverbal settings or environments in which that language is used and interpreted in accordance with conceptualizations or meanings ascribed in the cognitive map of its speakers as the frames of reference. Apart from the different contexts of its use, it is worth noting that there is no clear cut between the role of language as a social institution and the role of language as a cultural institution. The basic reason that culture shared by a society as members of a social group finds its reflection in language they employ or, in other words, language is the reflection of culture they share. The meaningfulness of language as the reflection of culture shared by a society as members of a social groups can be seen in various levels of interaction that include macro-interactional levels and micro-interactional levels like in a certain speech event and speech act (Duranti, 2001).

Bearing the matters stated above in minds, this paper addresses the role of language as a social and cultural institution. In accordance with the two roles of language, therefore, the aims of this paper are of twofold, that is (1) to describe and explain the role of language as a social institution and (2) to describe and explain the role of language as a cultural institution. The materials which are brought together in this paper are based literature review or documentary study with reference to general documents such as books and special documents such as articles and research results as the sources of data. In line with its aims, it is expected that the paper might be beneficial as an additional source of reference for the readers, especially for those who are interested in conducting research on the interconnectedness of language, culture, and society, to enrich their stock of knowledge regarding the relationship of language and society as the main concern of study in the field of sociolinguistics (Trudgill, 2000; Wardaugh, 2006; Wardaugh & Fuller, 2015; Bustan, 2016) and the relationship of language and culture as the main concern of study in the field of cultural linguistics, etnolinguistics, and anthropological linguistics (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Foley, 1997; Bustan, 2025).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a literature review or documentary method. The purpose of the method was to collect, interpret, and synthesize existing theoretical and empirical works related to the role of language as a social and cultural institution. The design was appropriate for this study because the main objective was not to generate new field data but to build an integrated conceptual understanding derived from the works of previous scholars in linguistics, sociolinguistics, cultural linguistics, and anthropological linguistics.

Type of Research

This research was descriptive and qualitative in nature. It focused on describing and explaining theoretical insights and concepts derived from existing literature concerning the

interrelationship among language, society, and culture. The qualitative nature of this study allowed for an in-depth examination of the symbolic, social, and cultural dimensions of language through the interpretation of textual data and scholarly sources.

Sources of Data

The data of this study were collected from both general and specific documentary sources. The general sources included foundational books and theoretical works that provide essential concepts on language, society, and culture, such as those written by Cassirer (1987), Foley (1997), Trudgill (2000), Wardhaugh (2006), and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015). The specific sources consisted of scholarly articles, journal publications, and previous research findings focusing on sociolinguistics, cultural linguistics, and anthropological linguistics. These sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the central theme of this study.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected through systematic document analysis. The process involved identifying, reading, and reviewing books, journal articles, and research reports relevant to the topic. Keywords such as *language as a social institution*, *language as a cultural institution*, *language and society*, and *language and culture* were used to locate the relevant materials. The selected documents were examined to extract theoretical premises, conceptual frameworks, and analytical insights that directly address the relationship between language, society, and culture.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted through content analysis, following the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

1. **Data reduction** involved selecting and classifying the most relevant concepts, definitions, and theoretical arguments related to the dual roles of language as a social and cultural institution.
2. **Data display** consisted of organizing these concepts thematically under two major analytical domains: the role of language as a social institution and the role of language as a cultural institution.
3. **Conclusion drawing and verification** were carried out by synthesizing the findings to reveal the symbiotic-reciprocal relationships between language and society as well as between language and culture. The process also entailed interpreting how the reviewed theories contribute to understanding language as a symbolic medium for expressing identity, maintaining social cohesion, and transmitting cultural values across generations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the research findings. The findings obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research results and the discovery must be the answers, or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part. The findings section consists of a description of the results of the data analysis to answer the research

question(s). The findings should summarize (scientific) findings rather than providing data in great detail. Please highlight differences between your results or findings and the previous publications by other researchers.

This section discusses in more depth the role of language as a social institution as well as a cultural institution on the basis of its use as a chief means of communication between and among a society as members of a social group as the speakers of that language. The matters of discussion include basic premises, principles, and some relevant conceptions and insights that should be taken into account regarding two related aspects, that is the role of language as a social institution and the role of language as a cultural institution.

Language as a social institution

Language holds the role as a social institution on the basis of premise that there is a close relationship between language and society and the relationship is symbiotic-reciprocal in nature as language exists in society or language is in society and society exists in language or society is in language (Duranti, 2001). This supports the truth, as aforementioned, there is no society on this earth living without language as language makes the life of a society as a whole meaningful. The relationship between language and society is reflected in the forms and meanings of language used in social contexts in which the meanings stored in the forms of language used comprise an organized system of norms and structures as the frame of reference to regulate the social life and to maintain solidity, solidarity, stability, and even continuity. In this light, language as a social institution is concerned with how people use language to create and express identities, relate to one another in groups, and seek to resist, protect, or increase various kinds of power (Trudgill, 2000).

The aim implies that language as a social institution serves not only as a cement to unify the members of a family and a social group, but also as an instrument to organize their patterns of behaviors when communicating or interacting in the context of living together. The patterns of behaviors are reflected in verbal forms and in nonverbal forms that imply the meanings of solidity, solidarity, stability, and continuity. The role of language as a social institution can be seen in macro-interactional levels as well as in micro-interactional levels like in a certain speech event. The speech event is identified as the social event in which the meanings stored in the forms of language used imply social meanings related to establishment of social order, creation and reinforcement of identity, shape of social reality, and maintenance of social structure (Trudgill, 2000).

In accordance with the role of language as a social institution, according to Burke and Peter (1987), there are four basic principles that should be taken into account. The four basic principles are as follows: (1) different social groups use different varieties of language; (2) the same people employ different varieties of language in different situation; (3) language reflects the society in which it is spoken; and (4) language shapes the society in which it is spoken. The principles reveal that the role of language as a social institution is reflected in language variation within a society in which that language is spoken. Some fundamental facts dealing with language variation existing within a society include idiolect and dialect, style and register, standard and non-standard dialect, language standardization, pidgin and creole, and bilingualism and diglossia (Trudgill, 2000). On the other side, the role of language as a social institution reflects and shapes the social identity of a society as members of a speech community. Regardless different ideas in defining a speech community, in general, a society is identified as members of

a speech community as they speak the same language and share the same norms of interpretation on the features of language they employ (Bustan, 2016).

Language as a cultural institution

Language is defined as a cultural institution on the basis of premise that there is a close relationship between language and culture belonging to a society as members of a social group. Similar to the relationship of language and society, the relationship between both language and culture are symbiotic-reciprocal in nature as language exists in culture or language is in culture and culture exists in language or culture is in language. This is because language in its use as a means of communication between and among a society as members of a social group reflects culture they share or, in other words, culture they share finds its reflection in language they employ. The role of language as a cultural institution can be seen in macro-interactional levels as well as in micro-interactional levels like in a certain speech event. The speech event is identified as cultural event in which the meanings stored in the forms of language used imply symbolic meanings or cultural meanings which refer to meanings in culture as the parent culture in which that language is embedded (Geertz, 1973).

On the other side, it is worth noting that language is defined as a reflection of culture belonging to a society as members of a social group because, besides being an element of culture, language they employ also serves as an index and symbol of culture they share. Apart from its function as an element and index of culture, the function of language as a symbol of culture shared by a society as members of a social group enables them develop and inherit their culture from one generation to another. The development and inheritance of their culture are manifested through continuous process of socialization in their contexts of living together for years or for a long period of time and even across generations (Foley, 1997; Trudgill, 2000; Bustan, 2011; Bustan, 2016; Bustan, 2025).

Since there is an interconnection interplay between language and culture, it is propounded by Wierzbicka (1991) that there are four points as the basic principles that should be taken account in regard to the role of language as a cultural institution. The four basic principles that should be taken into account in are as follows: (1) in different societies and different communities, people speak differently; (2) the differences in their ways of speaking are profound and systematic; (3) the differences reflect different cultural values or, at least, hierarchies of values; and (4) different ways of speaking and different communicative styles can be explained and made sense of, in terms of interdependently established different cultural values and cultural priorities. The four points are of fundamental importance not only from the point of view of knowledge and understanding the world conveyed through language, but also from a practical, social point of view, and in particular from the stand point of view of cross-cultural understanding (Bustan, 2016).

The views parallel to the conception of Humboldt that the diversity of languages is not merely the diversity of signs and sounds, but the diversity of cultures (Miller, 1968; Foley, 1997). The conception comes closest to the theory of linguistic relativity proposed by Sapir and Whorf that the varying cultural concepts and categories inherent in different languages affect the cognitive classification of the experienced world in such a way that the speakers of different languages think and behave differently (Sharifian, 2013; Sharifian, 2018; Bustan, 2025). As every language has its way in viewing and making sense of the world, the basic principles that should be taken into account when we explore the differences between languages are as follows: (a) we perceive the world in terms of categories and distinctions found in our native language

and (b) what is found in one language may not be found in another language due to cultural differences (Sapir, 1949; Goodenough, 1964; Miller, 1968; Bustan, 2025).

The principles reveal that language is a cultural activity and, at the same time, as an instrument for organizing other cultural domains because language used by a society as members of a social group is shaped by their special and general innate potentials as human beings as well as their physical and sociocultural experiences (Palmer, 1996; Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Sharifian, 2013; Sharifian, 2018). Language in this light serves as a display regarding how they organize their ways of thinking about items, behaviors, and beliefs which take place in cultural domains. In terms of the meanings stored in the forms of linguistic phenomena used, language is defined as a central aspect of their cultural cognition which refers to the tendency to fit their perception of risk and related facts to their group commitments (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Birx, 2011; Alshammari, 2018). As aforementioned, in addition to being the window of their world, language they employ also serves as the window into their cognitions or minds (Sharifian, 2011; Sharifian, 2013; Sharifian, 2018; Bustan, 2025).

In line with the conception that language is the reflection of culture shared by a society as members of a social group as the basic premise of viewing the role of language as a cultural institution, culture is defined as the source of conceptualization of their experiences in the contexts of living together for years or a long period of time and even across generations (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Palmer, 1996; Wallace, 1981; Birx, 2011). In this regard, according to Foley (1997), culture shared by a society as members of a social group is a cognitive map which refers to a mental map as the frame of reference for them in viewing and making sense of the world (Goodenough, 1957; Wallace, 1970). Along with its significance as the identity marker of a society as members of a social group, according to Ochs (1988), culture is also defined as a system of implicit and explicit ideas that underlies and gives meaning to behavior in society, as a system of symbols and meanings, and as premises that order and organize thoughts or ideas and feelings (Bustan, 2025; Bustan, 2011; Bustan, 2025).

The relationship of both language and culture is manifested in conceptualization as the fundamental cognitive processes which naturally lead to the development of schemas, categories, and metaphors. The term conceptualization is equated with meaning which refers to symbolic meaning or cultural meaning or meaning in culture which is conveyed through language as its carrier. This supports the idea that language and meaning are cultural realities as the shared world of understanding created by its society through common beliefs, norms, values, and behavior passed down from generation to generation through the continuous process of socialization.

The ways a society as members of a social group conceptualize their experiences in cultural domains are cultural conceptualizations that contain such cultural aspects as beliefs, norms, customs, traditions, and values. The cultural conceptualizations are not only embodied through language, but also through cultural arts, literatures, emotions, rituals, cultural events, and even more. As cultural conceptualizations and language are the two intrinsic aspects of cultural cognition, the cultural conceptualizations have conceptual existence and linguistic encoding. As it is a central aspect of cultural cognition, language serves as a collective memory bank for a society as members of a social group to store and communicate their cultural conceptualizations, past and presents (Bustan, 2005; Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Bustan, 2025).

On the other side, language also serves as a fluid vehicle to retransmit the socioculturally embodied cultural conceptualizations because language is shaped by cultural conceptualizations that have prevailed at different stages in the story of its speakers and the different stages can leave their traces in current linguistic practices. Language is a primary mechanism to store cultural conceptualizations as well as to communicate cultural conceptualizations. The cultural conceptualizations distributed across the cognitions of a society as members of a social group that represent their cognition at the cultural level are linguistic imagery which refers to how they speak about the world that they themselves imagine (Bustan, 2005; Palmer & Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2007; Sharifian, 2011; Langacker, 1999; Bustan, 2025).

The role of language as a cultural institution has a wider scope because language serves as a potential resource to uncover various cultural aspects related to the elements of culture. As the role of language as a cultural institution is complex in nature, as aforementioned, language is seen from three related perspectives, namely language as an element, index, and symbol of culture. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the function of language as a symbol of culture is regarded as the prominent feature because language as a symbolic medium of communication holds power to accommodate the basic needs of its speakers as human beings in general. The forms of actions in various domains of human beings like prayer, social behavior, and thinking abstractly are mediated through language as its vessel or vehicle. Even the expressions of their thoughts or ideas, feelings, emotions, and the organization of experiences in the world are almost always agreed upon language (Bustan, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Language is defined as a social institution because there is an interconnection interplay between language and society in which that language is spoken. The relationship is reflected in the forms of language used in social contexts in which the meanings comprise an organized system of norms and structures as the frame of reference to regulate their social life in an attempt to maintain solidity, solidarity, stability, and continuity. The role of language as a social institution is reflected language variation, as can be seen in such fundamental facts as idiolect and dialect, style and register, standard and non-standard dialect, language standardization, pidgin and creole, bilingualism and diglossia. Language serves as a cultural institution because there is an interconnection interplay between language and culture belonging to a society as members of a social group. The role of language as a cultural institution has a wider scope because language serves as a potential resource to uncover various cultural aspects along with its function as an element, index, and symbol of culture. The function of language as a symbol of culture is prominent because the function of language as a symbolic medium of communication holds power to accommodate the basic needs of its speakers as human beings in general. The forms of their actions in various domains like prayer, social behavior, and thinking abstractly are mediated through language as its vehicle or vessel. Even the expressions of their thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions, and experiences in the world are almost always agreed upon language.

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