



# A CRITICAL NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURE PART 1

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## Introduction

According to Nayar (2008) Cultural studies sees culture of masses that is popular culture and everyday life of the large section of the people. It is art, mass cinema, popular music, comic books, graffiti, radio, fashion and sports primarily consumed by large section, non-elite members of society. These forms of art were disregarded as 'inferior' for very long time. The word, 'mass culture' was used with its intention to belittle and the culture of elite members was considered as only 'true culture'. Culture of rich minority people is presented as 'true' culture. Even though large section of society never reads classical authors, academic studies were focused on 'classical authors' or 'works of art'. Only certain forms, genre and authors were respected as 'culture' especially the elite forms. In other words, the very word, 'culture' was associated with few upper-class elite members, a smaller section of society who legitimize some artefacts as 'culture'<sup>1</sup>.

In cultural studies, it is argued that culture is about meanings generated in society or community and for such a process to happen in not easy because people in power try to control meanings<sup>2</sup>. And this is also the reason why other forms of art are disregarded as 'inferior'. Cultural studies argue that forms of art, values, beliefs and practices shared by large number of people is popular culture and such artefacts and objects used by the larger section of population should be taken seriously. Culture is produced and it is not a natural thing.

According to Nayar (2008), *“the production and consumption of culture is linked to power and identity”*. Therefore, production and consumption is related to people in power because they decide on what is to be produced based on who can afford it and how it is to be presented. Nayar points out that decision about cultural practices are not just cultural questions but involve questions of power and politics since such practices get legitimacy and value because somebody has decided that they are valued and legitimate. Therefore, culture is about power. Based on initial work by Stuart Hall on culture, Nayar states that discourse and textuality are crucial to cultural studies. Identities, relationships and subjects are manufactured from discourse and present meanings exclusively in the act of differentiation<sup>3</sup>.

Stuart Hall’s work can be summarized as structures and practices, network relations and infrastructure of broadcasting institutions, manufacture the message. Structures then give meaningful discourse in the form of encoded messages. For the messages to have effect, it must be given into language to be coded as meaningful discourse. The message then reaches people as meaningful discourse, which ‘decodes’ and gets the meaning. These decoded meanings influence behavior, thinking, sentiments, ideology and politics. Hall also argues, culture or society have a tendency to dictate its categories of cultural, social world, which forms an order of dominant culture.

Raymond William’s definition of culture continues to be the fundamental basis for cultural studies:

*“Our description of our experience comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization ... since our way of seeing is literally parts of our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change.”*

William’s definition of culture is very important to cultural studies because studying society is not only about politics or economics but also about culture. Meanings, values and their expressions of views are part of specific ‘culture’. In a society, meanings and values show its political and economic systems. Therefore, study of meanings is nothing but study of culture.

In any society, culture is about meanings and its role, and sharing of such meanings. These meanings are not fixed but they generate through expression of views and process of negotiation. Cultural studies examine the processes by which specific meanings are generated in a specific culture. It also states that process by which meanings are produced are linked to the power and its structures in society. Based on the power of the sources, certain meanings become more important than the other meanings which become less important.

The process of producing meaning is representation, which includes word and meaning or concept. Representations can be a word, a concept, an image or a sound. It uses words to produce meaning. In other words, representation is like the alphabet, which is used to create meaningful sentences. But language is not transparent or neutral, it is linked to issues of power, class, ideology and context in which it expressed or interpreted. The context in which use of language and expressions are present is called discourse<sup>4</sup>. Culture studies depend on discourse and such a concept of language, and sees, all things in society are language<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, cultural studies views culture as a text formed by word/sign and producing meaning. It uses theories such as from structuralism and linguistics to express the text of culture. It uses effectively the redeeming aspects of the contemporary theory, and current cultural studies have gained most of its analysis from many different theories that it has fully understood and changed according to its own interests<sup>6</sup>. In cultural studies, all things in society and culture are associated and attached to power relations. Each of them is restricted, bounded and conditioned by power. Power creates cultural artefacts, communication, types of representation, identities and social relations<sup>7</sup>. Cultural studies use features of contemporary theories to examine power and how it is manifested in culture.

### **Structuralism:**

Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) in his work “A course in General Linguistics” briefed three basic presuppositions. Firstly, the meanings we give to words are completely arbitrary and imposed only through agreement and usage, and there is no natural link between word and meaning. The word does not convey the meaning and they are not found in the word. Thus, language does not reflect the world. In other words, the relation between word and meaning is arbitrary.

Secondly, all words have meaning and make sense since they are different and not same from other words. Thirdly, language represents our culture and our world. It is through use of language; we need to understand how meaning is generated. Also, need to analyze the structures in language that empower us to express in word and make sense.

Structuralism looks at, how meanings are produced that is how the text generates meaning. The text here in this concept is not just word printed but includes forms of representation or communication such as verbal, visual, gestural and aural. The novel, sports, music videos, our identities, speeches are all text manufactured in language by means of relation with other things and difference from others.

According to structuralists cultural systems works in binary oppositions. In other words, culture operates through relation and oppositions, while language operates through relations and differences.

According to Barthes's "Meaning is a combination of the two – the grammar of the text and the grammar of the cultural context." For example, caps are to be worn on the head, as opposed to shoes which are to be worn on the foot. Similarly cotton fabric clothes are worn in summer as opposed to woollen clothes worn in winter. Here, binary oppositions are between different clothes and, between seasons and cultural or social context.

### **Poststructuralism and Deconstruction:**

In relation to work of Jacques Derrida, poststructuralism and deconstruction presents entirely new approach to language, interpretation and narratives.

### **Derrida and Difference**

According to poststrucralism, language is not at all fixed. Meaning is the result of difference which is ending process of differentiation. Meaning is certainly not present in sign/word, because the sign points to another sign. In other words, every term is explained through another new terms. Meaning does not reside in one term only but it refers to more new terms.

Therefore, reading or understanding is moving from one term to another term or chain of signs/words, trying to get temporary meaning at a time from each sign. This indicates that every signifier i.e., word refers to another not final-signifier, which directs to even more. This means that meaning is not fully understandable and all the times end meanings gets deferred. And, since a sign can be reproduced at any instance of time and place, its meaning can also be different every time it repeats in other context. It is never possible that we come across or face the same sign every time in its repetition. It can also be stated that if meaning is not fully understandable then our identities which are the result of language are also not fixed.

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