

# Memories, metaphors, maxims and myths

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“**C**ulture” is an inherited wealth in which all share, but it is passed on to us from different sources, and we share it in different parts with different groups to which we belong. Definitions then are in order.

*If No Man is an Island, entire of itself*, it is because all men and women are presented with given conventional features of their social environment (that is, their “Culture”) to which they must react through Dormouse-like compliance or Mad-Hatterlike revolt. We may term these features

- memories
- metaphors
- maxims
- myths.

And I have already used one of each.

Memories are the substance of group recall. Many “British” people remember the date of the Battle of Hastings (although they may not know who won it); many people of my age remember what they were doing on the day that John F. Kennedy was killed (but not which political party he belonged to); most of my colleagues will, like, me recall the quotation from John Donne (but not his dates). Groups of different kinds thus define themselves and communicate in part on the basis of shared knowledge. And we all, of course, belong to many groups—the love couple, the family, the generation group, the nation, the language group, the universe of humankind and many in between.

Metaphors are not shared knowledge but shared perceptions, captured in language through metaphor, simile and cliché. Inherited wealth (my first sentence) is a metaphor, one whose distribution it might be interesting to test. Is its force the same, for example, in Calcutta as in Calais or California? An interesting study looked at the relative interpretations in Egyptian Arabic and American English of such similes as “She shone out like a neon light among candles” and “Life is like

a plastic bag". The body of metaphor and analogy which a group, generally a language group, conventionally uses is a major insight into underlying shared values and assumptions.

Maxims refer to implicit and explicit guides to behaviour in a group. I have made explicit (at the end of my first paragraph) the maxim that in quasi-academic prose such as this it is useful to define and categorise your terms. Much of contemporary applied linguistics is concerned with making conversational and behavioural norms explicit, and this preoccupation shows itself in some current language teaching materials. The Gerard Hoffnung joke (When entering a London underground train, it is customary to greet all the passengers in your carriage) is a classic example of such cultural instruction gone wrong.

Finally myths: the literary myth (my second paragraph — from Lewis Carroll), the religious myth (the Good Samaritan), the contemporary myth and role model (Madonna). Public education is concerned in part with passing on the canonical myths of religion, of national history, and of literature (from nursery rhymes on), while the media encourage the power of the majority to recognise contemporary myth (the worlds of sport, the pop culture, soap opera, the doings of the Royal family).

A shared culture then — and I will now drop the inverted commas — is an agglomeration of common knowledge, perceptions, values and tradition, common between members of whichever group is in focus in a particular context.

In addressing the issue of "intercultural communication" we are concerned with transferring to members of another language group those common elements which, with personal variations, bind together the members of our own.

Bearing these questions in mind, let us try a few exercises. In each case, the questions to answer come first; the issues raised follow in italics; the answers, where there are any, come at the end of the article.

### Trivial Pursuits

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| 1) Who said, "Veni, vidi, vici."?          | _____               |
| 2) In what sports would you see            | a throw in? _____   |
|  | a lineout? _____    |
|  | an off break? _____ |
|  | a chicane? _____    |
| 3) What is the date of Thanksgiving?       | _____               |
| 4) How many inches are there in a yard?    | _____               |
| 5) What were the names of the Beatles?     | _____               |
| 6) If you set out from London on the M4,   | _____               |
| in which direction would you be heading?   | _____               |
| 7) What happened in 1992?                  | _____               |
| 8) Who was Don Quixote's sidekick?         | _____               |
| 9) Is A4 larger or smaller than A3?        | _____               |
| 10) Who said, "Am I my brother's keeper?"? | _____               |

### What do these mean to you?

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 11) What are the connotations of these colours?         | green _____   |
|   | white _____   |
|   | yellow _____  |
|   | red _____     |
| 12) What are the qualities of these animals?            | sheep _____   |
|   | goats _____   |
|   | donkeys _____ |
|   | dogs _____    |
| 13) What does it mean to say that an                    | _____         |
| Englishman's home is his castle?                        | _____         |
| 14) She found me in a bit of a stew.                    | _____         |
| 15) Life is like a bowl of cherries.                    | _____         |
| 16) Life is like an onion.                              | _____         |
| 17) It's forty miles as the crow flies.                 | _____         |
| 18) He had the looks of a film star -                   | _____         |
| but more Woody Allen than Paul Newman.                  | _____         |
| 19) The neighbourhood was a maze of streets and alleys. | _____         |
| 20) It was raining stair-rods.                          | _____         |

### Whose rules are these?

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| 21) Children should be seen and not heard.             | _____ |
| 22) Turn the other cheek.                              | _____ |
| 23) PAYE   | _____ |
| 24) Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.        | _____ |
| 25) Penalty for improper use: £50.                     | _____ |
| 26) Two's company, three's a crowd.                    | _____ |
| 27) The customer is always right.                      | _____ |
| 28) Good fences make good neighbours.                  | _____ |
| 29) Neither a borrower or a lender be.                 | _____ |
| 30) Do not test the depth of the river with both feet. | _____ |

### Can you identify the pairs?

- |                      |       |                       |       |
|----------------------|-------|-----------------------|-------|
| 31) Romeo and -      | _____ | 42) Noddy and -       | _____ |
| 32) Jack and -       | _____ | 43) Simon and -       | _____ |
| 33) Radha and -      | _____ | 44) Saatchi and -     | _____ |
| 34) David and -      | _____ | 45) Hansel and -      | _____ |
| 35) Orpheus and -    | _____ | 46) Torvil and -      | _____ |
| 36) Laurel and -     | _____ | 47) Jules et -        | _____ |
| 37) Napoleon and -   | _____ | 48) Abbott and -      | _____ |
| 38) Lancelot and -   | _____ | 49) Ann Zeigler and - | _____ |
| 39) Bouvard and -    | _____ | 50) Morecambe and -   | _____ |
| 40) Sodom and -      | _____ | 51) Tom and -         | _____ |
| 41) Tweedledum and - | _____ |                       |       |

### The Memories

(1) - (10) involve straightforward factual recall shared memories. The issue they raise is best put by asking the simple question: which group of people might you expect to know the answer in each case? And would translation into their own language help? In few cases in fact is the distribution of a high response rate likely to correlate with a language group. Culture in the sense of factual knowledge, group memory, is multifaceted.

Thus the answer to (1) would be generally expected throughout Europe and translation is barely necessary. In (2), with the aid of translation, you would get a very wide global response to the first; a limited and oddly distributed one to the second; a limited and Anglophone one to the third; the fourth could be difficult to predict. (3) would be so obvious in North America as to be barely worth asking, but would get a limited response elsewhere. (4) has increasingly limited distribution as use of the metric system spreads. (5) at one time spread well beyond national boundaries, but is now subject to the transitory nature of contemporary fame. Few outside the UK would make much of (6), and translation would not help. The response to (7) would vary depending where you asked it, but within Europe the question would hardly require translation. (8), suitably translated, would be widely answerable, extending across a widely spread linguistic grouping but also across an international community of the "well read". (9), with translation, would mean something in particular occupational or professional circles. And (10), with translation, would distribute on religious grounds.

### The Metaphors

These are more difficult to give a firm answer to since they call for perceptions rather than facts. Experience suggests there are interesting and sometimes unexpected responses to questions of this kind — as there are to poetry and other literature which regularly uses such verbal artifices.

In (11), for example, a standard 'European' response will associate green with fresh, young, spring-like, and therefore now ecologically sound; white with purity, cleanliness; yellow with (in the cliché) cowardice, and perhaps autumn; and red with heat, blood, danger and conventionally "stop". But these are not all universal values: try with a mixed cultural group a word association game based on the colours, and find out for instance whether black or white is the conventional colour of mourning.

The animals in (12) generally carry similar connotations to those in English: in

countries where the animals are not endemic, the connotations have often been imported through colonial patterns of education. (13) translated would draw an interesting range of responses from speakers of other languages. (14) probably has culinary analogies in stewless societies: are there direct translations (casseroles and cocidos) in Europe? (15) would mean little even in English if it had not been enshrined in song. (16) is a new phrase: translated, it would probably elicit the same two responses in any language. (17) might cause problems in crowless societies. (18) would be definitely restricted, though not to a particular language group. (19) could be interestingly widespread insofar as the maze or labyrinth is a motif in many traditions. (20) is less familiar than the cliché "cats and dogs", and the visual impact may be best understood in societies that have houses that have stairs that have carpets that have rods.

Surprisingly little ethnographic research is available to language (and literature) teachers on the proximities and distances in terms of metaphor and allegory between speakers of different languages: the notion of "idiom", which like these exercises incorporates some of the more banal instances of allusion, is perhaps overdue for a come back in foreign language teaching. It would take a longer article than this to explore the deeper issues concerning metaphor in relation to cognition and language.

### **The Maxims**

Considering (21) - (30), it is interesting to note the sources of their authority: common usage (21), though likely to be disputed in the post-Spock society; holy writ (22); national institutions of the day-to-day variety (23, 25) or those with fundamental authoritative status (24); literature (28, 29).

Another aspect of maxims, not demonstrated here, is behavioural conventions of the kind that communicative language teaching, and particularly work in discourse and pragmatics, is often concerned with: how to address people, how to start and finish letters, when to use *vous* and *tu* etc. The gamut then from recognising the tune of the National Anthem and knowing what power it has for a people to knowing how to interpret the winking of an eye.

### **The Myths**

Since these are by definition the longest to describe and expand on, I will attempt to do neither but leave you with this challenge. First, to complete the pairs listed in (31) to (50) and to note their derivations (contemporary media, literature, classical

studies, taught history etc). Secondly, to capture the flavour of each allusion: what is it, in being familiar with the pairing (and you will not be familiar with all of them), that you are to some extent attuned to? The answers will include story lines; shared childhood memories; literary traditions; the spirit of a decade; and other parts of your own cultural kaleidoscope.

The questions that encircle intercultural communication are numerous and fundamental. Among them are these:

- Given the complexity of culture, is intercultural communication a feasible objective?
- If we believe that it is, can we define cultural features by the language group as powerfully as by some of the other groups that I have mentioned? Can we prioritise cultural components for the learner, and decide what we need to teach and what they will have somehow (probably by exposure) to acquire? And is it our aim to help the learner replicate such features or only recognise them?
- Is it possible to teach about culture, which is all about group values, in a way which is not itself value-laden and perhaps a distortion or diminution of the culture of the learner?
- Finally, where are our sources? For there are no dictionaries or reference grammars of culture — unless, perhaps, that is a definition of literature.

### The Answers

- 1) Julius Caesar, if we are to believe Suetonius or Plutarch.
- 2) A throw-in: soccer (association football). A lineout: ruggie (rugby union football, but not rugby league). An off break: cricket (but not as often as you used to, at least in Britain). A chicane: grand prix motor racing (note the polyglot flavour of the terminology, and the eclectic list of grand prix venues).
- 3) It depends on the year, but the fourth Thursday in November.
- 4) 36, unless one is thinking cubic.
- 5) John, Paul, George and Ringo (usually in that order).
- 6) Westward Ho!
- 7) In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue;

in fourteen hundred and ninety three, Columbus sailed the deep blue sea. In 1992 (or 1993 to be precise), symbolically at least, the European Single Market takes effect.

- 8) Sancho Panza, providing (more than did his master) a model for dozens of Westerns.
- 9) An A4 sheet of paper is half the size of A3 American A4 is annoyingly different from European standard.
- 10) Cain, according to Genesis 4:9 and (more recently) Jeffrey Archer.
- 11) See note above.
- 12) Sheep are blindly obedient; goats stubborn, and indiscriminating eaters; donkeys dumb but noisy; dogs invariably man's, and occasionally woman's, best friend.
- 13) Free, tradition would have it, from the constraints of law and the dictats of convention. This, like many of the sayings of the kind, is not actually true.
- 14) Or in a bit of a pickle perhaps. Interesting that I could probably not get away with "in a bit of a hotpot", whereas "in a bit of a boeuf bourguignonne" would be a definite bon mot.
- 15) The song continues: "don't take it serious, it's too mysterious". What mystery surrounds a bowl of cherries is not clear.
- 16) It brings tears to the eyes. But also (I have heard this said most often about cities, like Calcutta) you can keep stripping off layers of society and always finding others underneath.
- 17) To my mind a goose would have been a better choice: but still a nice visual image as you draw your line across the map's contours.
- 18) Physical attractiveness is, of course, to some degree race-specific.
- 19) The meander, maze or labyrinth appears in similar base form in many religious and design traditions. 1991, incidentally, is the English Tourist Board's Year of the Maze.
- 20) Or pestles and mortars (in English). Or *cordes* (in French). Or buckets (in both). A rich source of linguistic and dialectal comparison.
- 21) An old proverb, less heard these days. Biblical.
- 22) Pay as you earn (familiar to British tax payers as an abbreviation for income tax paid at source).
- 24) From the American constitution.
- 25) Warning on the 'communication cord' or emergency signal in British

Rail trains: the amount has changed over the years.

- 26) An old proverb, probably with its counterpart in most languages.
- 27) A practical motto for the shopkeeper—which, according to Napoleon, England is or was a nation of.
- 28) An old saw, well used by Robert Frost:  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
*He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'*
- 29) From Shakespeare, with the Bible the richest source of common lore.
- 30) Unlikely to ring many bells with English speakers, though the meaning is easily enough thought out. The source is African.
- |               |                |                   |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 31) Juliette  | 39) Pécuchet   | 46) Dean          |
| 32) Jill      | 40) Gomorrha   | 47) Jim           |
| 33) Siddartha | 41) Tweedledum | 48) Costello      |
| 34) Goliath   | 42) Big Ears   | 49) Webster Booth |
| 35) Eurydice  | 43) Garfunkel  | 50) Wise          |
| 36) Hardy     | 44) Saatchi    | 51) Jerry         |
| 37) Josephine | 45) Gretel     |                   |