

At the Edge of Language and Certitude: The Construction of Cultural Identity within the Context of Globalization

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Construction of individual identity has long been associated with socio-linguistic factors. If an individual from one culture is sufficiently exposed to another culture, will identity construction around a particular global issue represent mixing and matching of the two cultures or something else entirely? A growing volume of cognitive science and neuroscience research into psychological awareness points to individuals structuring reality largely based on the logic of a particular set of embodied linguistic frames. How does this evidence bear on the construction of cultural identity? Specifically, where does individual identity find itself situated in the contemporary state of globalization? The current paper suggests that individual identity may be altered in positive ways by intercultural communication at the edge of dominant cultural-language bound narratives, where the absolute certitudes of language are put into question by fresh and diverse thought. The result of this interaction may be agency that arises from embodied participation in the natural world.

With respect to the stability of individual identity, to no small extent, when a given category of intelligible thought is, “put into contact with the exterior, it assumes an air of freedom,” voices Giles Deleuze (1985) in interpreting the edge of framing cultural systems (p. 147). But, why would the exterior be any more “fresh” than the interior? The answer following on the Dionysian sense implied by Deleuze depends on the individuals’ subjective experience of shifting identity in the face of a continuous flux of intensities that originate neither in the individual nor in a particular socio-linguistic source. The construction of identity thus conceived depends critically upon the discipline of a constructed culturally mediated socio-linguistic interior, but also leaves open the possibility of a source of abundance that may well be “the world itself” (Parkes, 1994, p. 360).

By removing society as constructing agent, have we resigned ourselves to tracing identity construction into mysticism or metaphysical speculation? Both of these options are rejected here from the outset. If we live in an age of the modesty of human consciousness, the individual human body in direct relation to the natural world may offer the most interesting leads for tracing the edge of language and the certitude encoded in it. To this end, following below, we will first expand on the understanding of “the world itself” and “the exterior” for the current paper before moving on to introduce the embodied cognitive science view of language’s foundation in the action of the body in the natural world. The question of agency will be raised again in the context of breaking through the edges of a given frame. Here, the possibility of fresh thought will be closely tied to non-cultural, embodied factors as these enter into identity formation as active images in cognitively constructed “mental spaces.”

An “exterior” implies an “interior,” and an edge dividing the two spheres. Edges, of course, are necessary boundaries, enclosures of meaning and limitations to identity within a

particular cultural system of thought. A certain “certitude” to meaning and identity is thus allowed for intelligible thought, as if there was something foundational about the discursive representations that present essence in the truths revealed within the boundaries of these edges. As Michel Foucault (1980) made clear about such boundaries, both within and without culturally defined spaces, “To think within the context of categories is to know the truth so that it can be distinguished from the false; to think ‘a-categorically’ is to confront a black stupidity and, in a flash, to distinguish oneself from it” (p. 189). The codes implicit in such categories set up an artificial edge that is stable only at the exclusion of other cultural constructs, and even then in a porous sort of way.

I will argue in this paper that categories are necessary but forced borders to an exterior that is porous to other cultures and buttressed by the natural environment. The increasing event of intercultural communication across sociolinguistic environments presents the question of edges within the concept of the flux of nature, an approach through which we may explore the construction of identity within the context of globalization. If one accepts the anti-essentialists’ argument that identity is a continually shifting reference of similarity and difference, that individual identity represents a series of discursive cultural constructs, then qualitative analysis of an intercultural meeting across socio-linguistic borders may prove fruitful.

Is Deleuze’s (1985) “air of freedom” the entry of the possibility of embodied individual agency? Once again, we need not look to mysticism or metaphysical speculation for the answer. In the context of the current scientific age neither proposition seems necessary, especially given recent findings in the field of embodied cognitive neuroscience (e.g., Damasio, 1994, 1999). In fact, a growing volume of cognitive science research into psychological awareness points to individuals structuring reality largely based on the logic inscribed into a particular set of embodied linguistic frames (e.g., Barsalou, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since the key for this paper is the concept of embodiment, we should spend time fleshing out exactly what “embodied” means when considered in relation to language, certitude, and the air of freedom.

In *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1992), the authors discuss the critical importance of the body and its experience in nature as foundational for human intelligence and agency. Rather than the computational model of the mind, these authors argue that the frames of language and thought lie in the flow of nature itself. As part of their support for this claim, the authors present research from the field of artificial intelligence that seems to indicate that, “the essence of intelligence . . . resides only in its embodiment” (p. 209). This may seem sufficiently broad of a statement to leave open to interpretation. For the current paper, we will follow Blanke and Metzinger (2009) in positing a “pre-reflective bodily foundation of selfhood [that is] independent of explicit cognition and linguistic abilities,” and, importantly, “can function as enabling conditions for conceptually mediated” constructions such as “agency” (p. 8).

The point needs to be made clear in another way, since the argument posited in this paper depends on the idea that agency and identity construction do not reside solely in socio-linguistic structures, though such structures are critically important in the process. Let us look at a paper titled “What Can Artificial Intelligence Show Us?” by Arnold Smith (2008),

formerly a senior scientist at the National Research Council of Canada. In that paper, he makes clear the relationship between thinking and embodiment: “What the failure of AI shows us, if we didn’t know it in other ways, is that access to vast amounts of information, even along with sophisticated deductive and inferential machinery to operate on it, is not nearly enough for intelligence” (p. 71). The type of intelligence involved in developing identity requires continual relatedness to the surrounding nature which flows into the linguistic frame like flows of intensity buttressing the logic inscribed therein. For this paper, then, “embodied linguistic frames” will be understood as a framing linguistic mechanism based directly on the body’s continual connectedness in the surrounding world.

However, even though the question of fresh thought and identity formation will be left open for what the current paper takes on as an “exterior” to the certitudes of cultural constructions, the function of socio-linguistic communication will be theorized to be always potentially enactive of individual embodied experience in the world rather than functioning as a recombination or pastiche of various cultural certitudes. From this view, subject position construction may not always be the result of social forces, a point that leaves open the possibility of individual agency, but not in the tradition of individualism.

More specifically, I propose there is a divide between culture-bound intelligence constructed along human moral lines, and nature-informed intelligence fluxing in relation to amoral aspects of human participation in the broader natural world. This “amoral” sense is not, obviously, informed by a particular moral system, though it may refresh and invigorate the moral metaphors of all languages. I therefore suggest that when two culture-language bound paradigms come into contact there exists an opportunity for true intercultural dialogue at the edges of metaphor where disintegration of moral certitude becomes evident. This brief point in time may support a reformulating of intelligence and identity both buttressed by cultural paradigms and by the body in relation to the immediate natural world. The points of disintegration/re-integration of metaphor therefore define the target of the discussion at the end of this paper.

Method

The methodological design attempts to take into consideration the several fields of study employed in this paper, finding preliminary resolution in a close qualitative discourse analysis of an English subject living in a Japanese cultural context: “preliminary” in that this work is part of a much larger testing of the theoretical framework herein considered. Included in the wider approach, dealing with the same issue of over-fishing, is a comparative qualitative discourse analysis of both English and Japanese recorders (Foster, 2009) and a large-scale comparative discourse analysis of Japanese university and college students now underway in Kagoshima, Japan. In the latter study, both positive and negative aspects of human activity in the oceans are considered, allowing for a more generalized discussion of findings in the current paper and a more representative display of cultural frames. The findings of two further papers that test the theoretical framework herein considered will be presented at separate summer 2010 conferences. In an attempt to expand the testability of the theoretical

framework, both of these papers deal with a different issue, and both seek to explicitly address discursive and non-discursive elements.

The respondent we focus on in the current paper was presented with a paradoxical situation in order to constellate a connotative cognitive frame (Barthes, 1972) for the construction of meaning in which to begin positioning his identity. At the connotative level, he was expected to connect signifiers to the wider English cultural concern. That is to say, the initial question was expected to evoke reflection on “what constitutes appropriate comment” (Tannen, 1993, p. 35), and to stimulate the construction of a cognitive frame that would describe a specific pattern in a manner that had all the elements of a timeless truth (Levy-Strauss, 1963, p. 209). As we will see in the discussion section of this paper, the assumption here is that this level of thought is less conscious, more mythical, or extant at what might be called the unconscious level.

The question itself invites the image of a current global issue with implications for future international harmony and discord that, for many contemporary individuals, likely seems to have no conceivable resolution. The particular global issue we will deal with here is the question of over-fishing of the oceans. Though this is, to a growing degree, a contemporary issue, it is likely to become even more pressing as one of the key international social and political issues of the future based on current trends, and fishing in the oceans will thus likely emerge as a crucial problem of volatility for intercultural relations. I have also chosen the question with one eye toward future human problems requiring intercultural solutions within a participating global natural system. The lead-in question I posed to my respondent was this: “What do you think about the potential loss of fish in the ocean?”

After the connotative framing of the issue in a timeless mythic narrative had been completed, the subject was expected to develop a series of denotative frames that should relate to the connotative structuring of meaning and thereby to the larger culture seen in the initial frame. Following “Blending Theory” as described by Grady, Oakley and Coulson (2007), I assumed that certain “mental spaces” would be structured by domains relevant to the issue at hand. These authors theorize the rise of emergent material into these new frames resulting from the incongruence of incoming elements with available cognitive structures.

How the subject relates his English (UK) subjective identity to his Japanese life serves provisionally to allow speculation on the point of rupture at the edges of the frame where fresh thought becomes possible. The respondent was chosen for his having been a long-term resident of Japan with an attitude of integration into the life of the local city. He is a long-time language teacher, musician, and (important for this study) a chef operating a restaurant in Kagoshima city. He is also a self-avowed environmentalist with interest in the particular issue of globalization considered in this paper. As we will see later, his stance represents the anti-globalist perspective that defines globalization in negative language, a perspective that sets the focus of this paper.

Questions were asked in English, but care was taken to have him answer the questions in an environment where the Japanese culture would be prominent. I chose the staff room at a liberal arts college. All members of the staff were fluent in both English and Japanese, culturally savvy in both socio-linguistic frames, and the spectacle of the interview provided a cross-cultural event to be embodied into the frames developed by the respondent.

The choice of the second question was deliberately designed to evoke a particular aspect of the Japanese culture. The respondent, as I have mentioned, is a chef with a long history in Japan. Half way through the interview I asked him this question: “Do you, yourself, eat fish?” We had discussed food several times before the interview, and I knew that the respondent was familiar with Japanese *Kaiseki Ryori*. The prominent relevant feature of this cuisine to the current paper is its focus on the seasons, the multiple-sensual revealing of the seasons in every aspect of the course. The natural balance implicit in this cultural construction, I believe, affects most long-term residents of Japan, especially those particularly sensitive to such concerns like my respondent. I hoped to bring into the blending of his framing mechanism, at a key point, the Japanese culture at its balancing best.

Results

In response to the question, the respondent created a timeless spatial frame in which human evolution occurs directly dependent upon fish for three critical human thinking factors: intelligence, language, and analytic ability. Whether this is scientifically true does not matter in this frame since this construction acts as a conceptual map to which later denotative conceptual frames will relate. The connotative level of Extract 1 operates like a myth does, providing, in addition to the above, meaning in relation to absent material herein that is fully active within the larger culture.

Extract 1

Well, reading recent reports, I read that the most recent speculative report is that within 50 years there will be no, ah, source-able fish stocks, ah . . . Considering recent evolutionary theory seems to be centered around the idea that human brains received there first, ah, stimulus toward intelligence, language, analytic ability from fish, from eating fish, I’d say this was a disaster.

Um, we’re eradicating the thing which is, many researchers believe is, responsible for our progress in the, ah, within the world to become arguably the top species. Ah, it’s outrageous. But there are . . . umm, can I talk about hope?

What absent material is slipped into this frame? Notably, the presence of an original “pure state” in which the capacity existed for propelling humankind toward what are considered our defining features, indeed our position as the “top species.” In this pure state, humans act intelligently and are related to fish and nature in a way that is morally high. This is not simply Darwinism since there exists in the meaning structure all of the elements of a cosmic system of origin, even of Eden and the fall.

In the next frame, the respondent describes a current television show that deals with the problem of cultivated fish in Canada. The denotative story situates the fall in a particular geographic place and time, with a fallen human—“with William Shatner as the idiotic lawyer,” already fallen—and degenerated, “diseased” fish infecting “pure,” “natural” fish. The “impure” states described here derive their meaning in relation to the original connotative

story. We also see the theory of Grady et al. (2007) developing here as the respondent blends domains like “crooked lawyer,” from popular culture with “decreasing intelligence” from the connotative frame providing meaning. The entire frame has developed entirely outside the Japanese context.

However, the ending of this story leads into a different story closer to his home. He discusses his area of Kagoshima where fish farming is booming, importing elements of the Canadian story directly into the frame. Importantly, he now relates the story to other elements of the unconscious connotative frame. Now, the result of cultivating fish will lead to a re-positioning of these animals from the “pure state” to the “impure state” in a different way than the disease-infected animals of the Canadian story. In particular, the respondent makes the comparison with beef, which he says once had been a very healthy food. Fish will soon be “bad” for you, rather than “good” for you *in a culinary context*. This shift to food consumption from infectious disease, I suggest, arrives first from the Japanese embodiment, but not as I had predicted. It seems here that the frame for what I have dubbed as “*Kaiseki Ryori*” already was a well-developed domain when the respondent began blending the frame.

A further story, graphically violent, on the inhumane treatment of dolphins in a specifically-identified time of the year and area of Japan leads back into the re-constellating of the original connotative frame, again along timeless lines.

Extract 2

Although this is not a threat to the population of dolphins, our treatment of fish in that situation, it’s a threat to our own moral existence. Especially with dolphins being acknowledged as highly intelligent beings which possibly at one time or another, lived and moved and breathed on Earth rather than the sea, on land rather than the sea. And, we organize a murdering festival . . .

Interestingly, however, the new frame conjures up a distant past that seems to invite comparisons to humans of an equally distant past: “lived and moved and breathed on Earth,” though not in an explicit, scientific, or Darwinian sense. The comparison is incongruent to the statement on current dolphins, which are referred to as “fish,” even though he has just implied that these creatures were at the very least mammalian. Nevertheless, these animals are “intelligent.” The elements of human action here seem to have been linked to destruction of intelligence in a different but related way to early versions.

Next, the respondent makes a comparison with land-based agriculture, emphasizing the chemicals that are thrown into the land without an attempt to make something of the land from its own health (impure). He then returns to the spatial field of his own life in Japan and continues the metaphor of throwing things into an area without consideration of its health, this time with regard to the sea (impure).

At this point I asked the question designed to embody the *Kaiseki Ryori* Japanese identity: “Do you, yourself, eat fish?” The respondent constellates a very personal frame in which he describes his early shopping at the special “fresh” (pure) fish markets in his neighborhood. While describing this scene the respondent visually relaxes and smiles for the

first time in the interview, and even tells a few jokes. However, the talk of markets soon leads to local supermarkets participating in the globalization of “petro-dollars” (impure). Thereupon he begins another frame uniting the sea and land damage theme (impure) before returning to a more relaxed mode again. He again visually relaxes and smiles slightly before beginning.

Extract 3

My great hope for Kagoshima is that there are many farmers who still do that. . . um, plant a crop of rice and then a crop of beans rather than stick extra nitrogen in the soil just to get a quick crop out. There are still many traditional farmers in Kyushu, I believe, and that gives me some hope.

Hope here seems to be linked with both a denotative story grounded in his home area of Kagoshima, Japan, and an unconscious connotative reference both to his original element of human intelligent action and to a “traditional” place where farmers are close to the ground, in tune with the rhythms of nature. The Japanese element of *Kaiseki Ryori* seems to have entered in to alter the harshness of the original story.

Discussion

To begin this paper we discussed a broad, interdisciplinary theoretical approach to understanding the edges of linguistic frames and their certitude. The main goal of the theoretical approach has been to entertain a way into cross-cultural research that opens the possibility of considering a nature-influenced agency induced by the disintegrating effect on coding systems when disparate cultural frames come into close contact.

The terms “edge” and “certainty” appear prominently in the title of this paper due to the influence of a body of work that emphasizes perspective and social construction of identity, a view of identity that has placed human agency exclusively in the hands of social construction. The current paper has made no attempt to refute these claims; on the contrary, the seminal work of authors like Deleuze (1962, 1985) and Foucault (1980) have been treated as foundational and functional in bringing the interpretation forward, even when such authors and their work are not always explicitly stated in the argument.

Nevertheless, the goal of positing the body as fully engaged and relational with nature has necessitated bringing together specific theories derived from the field of embodied cognitive science from which we may then look into intercultural communication and its effect on traversing the edges of culture’s framing certitude. The “text” we have looked at above provides some limited and provisional understanding of what the implication for communication across socio-linguistic borders might mean for issues related to globalization. As was mentioned in the Method section, more qualitative and empirical studies with a broader base would provide further insight into the issues addressed here. Let us finish this paper by considering related experimental empirical evidence from various fields in the context of our qualitative results.

Experimental results from the field of embodied cognitive neuroscience in particular have started producing a picture of the human subjective identity as buttressed by the fluid nature of the surrounding world much in the way described by Deleuze (1962, 1985) and Foucault (1980), developed in cognitive science theory (e.g., Clark & Chalmers, 1998), and in the results seen in this qualitative analysis. For example, Jostmann, Lakens, and Schubert (2009) have recently reported empirical experimental research in *Psychological Science* that reveals the importance of non-linguistic embodied experience in applying value to abstract concepts. In their work, “Weight as Embodiment of Importance,” early exposure to gravity not only sets increasing heaviness in line with increasing importance as a framing mechanism, but also points to the continual influx of cues reflecting this relationship into every cognitive decision. For our respondent, I suggest, full immersion in the Japanese culture—specifically, the cuisine culture of *Kaiseki Ryori*—may have served such a role. Much more work is needed, however, to support the claim here that the non-discursive features of *Kaiseki Ryori* represent as fluid a channel between culture and nature as assumed in this paper.

Further to these findings, we might ask what a scientific study of the presence of an incongruent cultural atmosphere would imply to the certitude of cultural frames. Proulx and Heine (2009) have added to this understanding with their recent work published in *Psychological Science*. In that work, they propose that learning increases with the arrival of incongruent thought that traverses conventional certitudes. Though we have not dealt with learning theory here in this paper, the suggestion that the creative level of thought increases under such circumstances, that learning may in such cases arrive from “one’s environment,” (p. 1130) provides an interesting thread of support for the results we saw with our respondent. Again, though, the findings here are provisional and await further support from the more comprehensive research underway in Kagoshima, Japan.

In our analysis we saw that the respondent utilized his conscious access to domains to create blends for denotative frames. Our proposal here has been that the “abundance of nature” flows into conscious thought, which has itself been disciplined into a cognitive form that is always open to the arrival of fresh thought. In terms of the separate functioning of conscious versus unconscious thought, recent experimental psychological research has proposed that conscious conceptual inattention to a problem allowed for the entry of unconscious thought into problem solving (Zhong, Dijksterhuis, & Galinsky, 2008). As considered here in this paper, the authors of that research see the discipline of study and conscious thought as providing a framework into which unconscious thought is born. For example, these authors suggest that, “unconscious thought cannot ‘create’ knowledge; conscious learning and processing are needed to establish a knowledge base” (Zhong et al., 2008, p. 917).

Finally, one of the differences in the approach of the authors currently active in similar research and that taken in this paper lies in the importance given here to the function of connotative framing. The function of this level of thought seemed for our respondent to be in its providing an overall structure to which the denotative framing might relate when the certitude of the socio-linguistic logic seemed unable to do so. How does this correspond with cognitive researchers like Zong et al. (2008) and Grady et al. (2007)? Most cognitive-science-based theoretical approaches avoid incorporating a mode of thought that embraces uncertainty

and its amoral nature-informed intelligence, a non-dualistic yet mythical level of thought as always potentially active in the way proposed here. The potential contribution of the current paper to identity scholarship may be in the tentative steps taken toward uniting the empirical science cognitive perspective on the one hand, and a view of the human mind that sees it running right down (or up) to the fluxes of nature on the other. A statement on this perspective was nicely phrased in the essay "Response to Barry Allen: What was Epistemology?" by the philosopher Richard Rorty (2000): When we "just talk about know-how, the distinction between human and non-human fades out" (p. 238). Nevertheless, more research attempting to relate the current proposal with emerging cognitive theory might provide more support for the results in this paper.

How do the results of the qualitative study considered here bear on the construction of identity within the context of intercultural communication across socio-linguistic borders? Specifically, where does the individual identity find itself situated in the contemporary state of globalization of cultural paradigms? The suggestion in this paper has been that individual identity is altered in positive ways by intercultural communication at the edge of dominant cultural-language bound narratives, where the absolute certitudes of language are put into question by fresh and diverse thought. Though the findings are still tentative and the scale of the research to this point is of limited use in generalizing, some support seems possible for the proposition that a culturally-mediated, socio-linguistic interior constructs identity buttressed by the abundance of "the world itself," and that intercultural communication can therefore lead to individual agency arising from embodied participation in the natural world.

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