

The cultural imperative: Global trends in the 21st century

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The information age, the current phase of globalisation and the influence of the Internet are changing the way we think about cultures and communities and, as language and cultural trainers, potentially about what and how we teach. This paper explores how Western culture and economic power have grown to dominate the world, particularly through international business, international relations and social trends. Using the Lewis Model of three types of culture (linear-active, multi-active, and re-active) the author explains how traditional linear-active cultural dominance is declining in the 21st century and is being replaced by values of the new great powers. The paper identifies four key cultural influencers, China, India, Russia and the West and discusses the role of Japan and Canada in this era of change. The two key cultural values coming to the forefront are Asianisation and feminine values and the author discusses their implications for language teaching and learning and the development of cultural awareness.

KEYWORDS: cultural awareness, language learning, teacher training, globalisation, the Internet, the Lewis model, Asianisation, feminine values



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2018 I was invited to speak at the 18th international Likhachov conference in St Petersburg, Russia, an event reported as the largest 'humanitarian forum' in the world, with 1500 affiliated organisations. The conference theme was *Contours of the Future in the Context of the World's Cultural Development*. This conference was being held at a time when cross-culturalists are engaged in a lively debate about the future course of humankind in the 21st century. In an age of developing globalisation, questions are being

raised about the importance and impact of cultural differences that in all likelihood will impede rapid progress towards the standardisation of rules and behaviour and uniform acceptance of mutual goals.

With the increasing internationalisation of trade and the ubiquitous presence of the Internet, are cultural differences on the decline? Or are the roots of culture so varied that a worldwide convergence of ideals can never succeed? Will the currently detectable examples of rising nationalism

continue to increase? Will considerations of gender, growing in importance, outweigh those of national characteristics? Will shifts and alliances among nations occur along civilizational fault lines, as Huntington (1996) prophesied, or will national traits continue to dominate? Did history really end in 1989, as Fukuyama (1992) suggested? Are cross-cultural universals, programmed into us by evolution, in danger of being eliminated by genetic engineering? These are the kinds of questions that educators need to address both in the selection and teaching of languages and the teaching of cultural understanding.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Genetic and economic determinism

When positivism took over the social sciences in American universities in the 1950s, cultural diversity was depicted as a 'soft' subject based on uncertain knowledge, itself culture-bound. It became fashionable in the closed world of academia to seek an explanation of human behaviour in two 'reliable' theories: genetic determinism and economic determinism. On February 12th, 2001, (Darwin's birthday, incidentally) genetic determinism received a deadly blow. Two groups of researchers released the formal report of data for the human genome, revealing that all humans, with all their evident diversity, were found to share 99.9% of their genes. According to this finding, all human beings

should be extraordinarily alike, if genetic code determines behaviours. But, of course, we are not alike. A study of economic determinism proved it to be equally irrelevant.

2.2 Cultural determinism

This leads us to a third recourse: cultural determinism. Harrison and Huntington (2001) reiterate assertions made by Hall (1959), Hofstede (1980), and myself (Lewis, 2018), namely that culture counts most in economic development (not the other way round). Can one not point to a cultural development emerging from Classical Greece and Rome, the Christian religion and the European Renaissance? Can this momentum of 2000 years be stopped that easily? Unbroken cultures have strongly defined modern humanity in China, India, France, Spain, Japan and elsewhere. Culture is passed on from a number of sources – parents, peers, social institutions – but governments have a vested interest in their citizens sharing cultural values in order to reduce the potential for cultural or regional conflicts. Education systems transmit and reinforce national culture (Hammerich & Lewis, 2013); history is taught 'thoughtfully', often being 'remodelled' in a concern for the consolidation of commonly shared values, even myths. Figures such as Napoleon, Peter the Great, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Queen Elizabeth I are depicted frequently in a favourable light, as part of the cultural heritage.

A nation's culture is its blueprint for survival and, hopefully, success. It is worthy of note that the current trends of rising nationalism are most evident in countries or peoples that have a traditional obsession with survival – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Korea, Austria, Catalonia and the Kurds. Poland and Korea are vulnerably sandwiched between powerful neighbours; the Hungarians, Czechs and Austrians mourn the loss of territory; Catalonia is under pressure from Madrid, the Kurds – from Turkey. Nationalism, or populism, is also showing its teeth in the English-speaking world. BREXIT, which made no sense politically, and even less economically, was purely a cultural decision, reflecting British insularity and uneasiness with 'foreigners'. American working-class culture, with its growing feeling of insecurity and loss of agency, enabled Trump to champion nationalism ('America First').

One realises that if liberalism was a clear legacy of the Enlightenment, so was nationalism, successfully embedded more securely in global politics than ideological systems, such as communism, capitalism, even liberalism. The most energetic attempt at minimising nationalism was the foundation of the European Union, which, though eliminating war between its members, now lives with restlessness and criticism in the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Hungary and other Eastern European countries, not to mention Italy's

problems with the Eurozone and, of course, the Brexit body blow. A union seemingly on course for effective economic and political cohesion by mid-century may struggle to survive that long if popular parties continue to gain ascendancy (even in founder states such as France and Germany).

2.3 The three cultural categories

The Lewis Model (Dimensions of Behaviour) proposes a tripartite division of cultural categories, namely: linear active, multi-active and reactive. *Linear-actives* (e.g. Germans) are task-oriented, highly-organised planners, who complete action chains by doing one thing at a time, in accordance with a linear agenda. *Multi-actives* (e.g. Latins) are emotional, loquacious and impulsive people who attach great importance to family, feelings, relationships. They like to do things at the same time and are poor followers of agendas. *Reactives* (e.g. Asians) are good listeners, who rarely initiate action or discussion, preferring to listen to and establish the other's position then react to it.

3. THE FOUR KEY CULTURES DRIVING CHANGE

3.1 Driving forces of the 21st century

Which forces, cultural, civilizational or otherwise, are likely to mould the contours of human activity during the 21st century? History would seem to indicate that peaks of civilisation have proceeded with some consistency, in the direction of East to West. Cultures have flourished successively

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through Ancient China and India to the Middle East (Mesopotamia, Egypt), Greece, Rome and the European Renaissance, Britain (in her Empire days), motoring on to 20th-century America. In the light of this momentum, it would seem that now it is the turn of China again. In view of recent economic developments in China, this prediction no longer appears so naïve.

The merits of globalisation notwithstanding, there is some evidence to suggest that the driving forces guiding human destiny will be limited in number (four, five or six) and will be linked to size (population, land area, wealth of resources or military power). The 21st-century stage will have a cast of Big Actors, with leading or dominating roles. Smaller, stand-alone nations will have lessened influence and be swept along with the major players (in possible alignment).

3.2 The four key cultures

The engines of power and progress in the present century have to be China, India, Russia and the West (Europe plus North America). China and India pick themselves by dint of their staggering populations and longevity of culture. Russia, if she holds on to her mind-boggling landmass, has the Eurasian breadth of vision and military prowess to

lead. The fact that Russian territory and governance embrace two continents – Europe and Asia – endows the intellect of many Russians with a Eurasian mindset unmatched by any other nationality. Russians have a long history in Europe therefore they possess a European breadth of vision responding to and often wider than western European nations. The West, though seemingly in decline, must not be underestimated. This is because of its belief in linear-active superiority.

3.3 The ‘dark horses’

No description or assessment of the contours of political, economic or world cultural development in the 21st century would be complete without a mention of two countries alongside the major players of China, India, Russia and the West. These are Japan and Canada. Japan’s influence on world events has been underestimated in the past and her record of economic stagnation over the last 20 years has cast a shadow over her current profile. However, in 2018 she ranked an easy third in world GDP. Her world role in the future is likely to be linked to her manner of alignment. Will she balance the scales, siding with East or West? Canada is more of a dark-horse. With a land area of 10 million square kilometres, her territory is second only to Russia. While much of this consists of frozen wastes, the rapid warming of the Arctic Ocean in the second half of the century will transform Canadian agriculture and resource exploitation, not least the vast reserves of Arctic oil

fields, which she will share with Russia and Norway. Canada is already tenth in world GDP and with a rapidly-growing population aided by a wise immigration policy is poised to become more active in world affairs. Her easy access to the huge US market is a unique advantage.

3.4 Religion as a cultural influence

The four largest religious groups in the world, ranked in order of adherents (2015), are Christianity (2.38 billion), Islam (1.8 billion), Hinduism (1.1 billion), and Buddhism (0.5 billion). Historically, conflicts and confrontation between religions have led to numerous wars throughout the centuries from the times of the Crusades, the Muslim 'occupation' of Spain from the 8th century to 1492, and the dominance of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled large parts of Europe and the Middle East for 650 years. Religious disputes have waxed and waned in different ages, and though Hindus and Buddhists have figured in prolonged struggles with Islam for centuries, the modern era has been characterised by the fiercely intensified confrontation between Christianity and Islam culminating in the 9/11 disaster, the subsequent American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rise of Isis (Daesh), affecting the lives of millions of people in Syria and elsewhere. The present-day antagonism of the two major religions contrasts sharply with the idyllic coexistence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism when Al-Andalus (Andalusian) society enjoyed its 'golden age' of

religious tolerance. Can we hope for reconciliation again between Muslims and Christians? As Wiatr (2017) points out, ideological conflicts are harder to resolve than those of opposing national interests. While skilful diplomacy can create acceptable compromise over a border issue or a trade war, it is extremely difficult or even impossible for zealots to abandon an entire philosophy or cherished creed.

If I may allow myself one final note of optimism with regard to religious or ideological altercation, I will take the liberty of referring to a factor I deem important, but seemingly overlooked, by political commentators and futurologists. Of the much-discussed, almost two-billion-strong multitude of Muslims in the world, about one billion of them are women. There are strong indications to suggest that the twenty-first century will witness a period of rapidly-rising female influence and empowerment, from which Muslim women cannot be indefinitely excluded.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The linear-active sense of superiority

Linear-active behaviour is an Anglo-Germanic phenomenon originating in North-Western Europe and rolling out through colonisation to North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Among non-Germanic peoples only Finns have joined this category and even they are partly reactive. Two continents – North America

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(minus Mexico) and Australia – are completely linear-active. The strikingly different destinies of North and South America (the latter colonised by multi-active Spaniards and Portuguese) are an indication of the yawning behavioural gap between the two categories. How history would have been different if Columbus had continued on a north-westerly course to Florida or if the Pilgrim Fathers had been blown off course (like Cabral) and settled in North-eastern Brazil!

It is important to note that, through a quirk of fate or historical accident, the Anglo-Germanic bloc from the 18th century onwards began to regard itself as superior in efficiency, both in commerce and ability to rule, than other cultural categories. This conviction of superiority, with its accompanying drive, may have had its roots in cold climate competence and energy, Protestant reforming zeal or German thoroughness. It certainly blossomed subsequent to the English Industrial Revolution, the rapid development of British and American manufacturing (fuelled by

the abundance of coal) and the continuous existence of democratic institutions in the Anglo and Nordic communities. This belief was, bolstered by the fact that the linear-active ‘powers’, though numbering only 700 million, leading up to and after two World wars, emerged with de facto world leadership based on military might and, even more significantly, over 50% of global GDP.

This sense of pre-eminence, particularly in the English-speaking world, but also shared in no small measure by the Germans, Dutch, Swiss and Nordics, has not yet subsided. Western complacency has not yet been eroded. There is still a lingering notion among the linear-active countries that their systems of governance, their concepts of justice, their attitude to human rights, their intellectually vibrant societies, cocktail of work and leisure, their right to lead and advise others, their business methods and ability to maintain levels of production and high living standards are viable for the future.

4.2 The non-linear-active majority and its consequences

However, there are other points of view. Around 2011 – 2012 statistics indicated that the GDP of the non-linear peoples of the world (multi-active and reactivities combined) overtook that of the linear-actives. After all, there are more than six billion who are non-linear and the rapid

development of the Chinese economy would suggest that the ratio of the West's contribution to world production will decline indefinitely. Predictions indicate that the Chinese economy will overtake that of the United States and that hungry India will become the world's biggest market (forecast population by 2030 is 1,500 million). Other burgeoning populations will create demanding markets in Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Mexico and Ethiopia, in that order.

4.3 Whither the West?

The demographics cited above are somewhat gloomy seen from a western perspective and Robert Samuelson (1999) questions the dominance of the West in the 21st century. He cites the dangers of nuclear proliferation, anti-Western terrorism, recessions, swings in financial markets and technological sabotage.

But it can be a mistake to write off the West. We must remember what happened in two World Wars when Western civilisation was threatened. Next time, it is likely that Germany will be on the team. The durability of a balanced West resides not only in its military and economic strengths, formidable though these still are, but also in the matured resilience of Western values. These values were forged in the crucible of the Greek city-states and were tempered through the centuries by the Reformation and the Renaissance,

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by embracing democracy and by vanquishing the bogeys of Nazism and Communism. An advantage of the West, in addition to these core values, is a plethora of social and semi-political institutions. They number in the thousands – between the bedrock of the family and the authority of the state. In many societies, there is a social vacuum between home and job. In Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries in particular, but also in Europe, clubs, societies, associations, activities, sports, courses and hobbies of all types keep people busy. This is the dense fabric of Western society – active, throbbing, inventive, in every sense self-perpetuating and indomitable, with a momentum all of its own. If such social vibrancy is Western in essence, it is epitomised in the United States, as journalist Hamish McRae wrote as he watched Americans rise phoenix-like from the ashes and rubble of Ground Zero, *'the future starts here'* (McRae, 2010).

4.4 Asianisation

The overwhelming victory of the Allies in 1945 led to main European (and other) nations accepting a

strong dose of Americanisation, imitating US business techniques in production, accounting, marketing and sales. It did not kill their cultures, and the material benefits outweighed the misgivings and disadvantages. Later, however, the negative effects of Americanisation began to be experienced in the gradual erosion or dilution of (European) values, as impressionable youth embraced many aspects of the American lifestyle.

American business and management techniques began to lose ground in the 1970s and 1980s, as the Asian Tigers adopted the successful Japanese model. In the 1990s, significantly, the West frequently demonstrated that it was ill-equipped to deal with Asian sensitivity.

4.5 A new modus operandi

Westerners need to establish a new modus operandi for the new century if they wish to be successful in globalising their business and exports. Linear-active (Western) societies have everything to gain by developing empathy with reactive and multi-active ones. Technology has now made East and West intensely aware of each other; some synthesis of progress and cooperative coexistence will eventually emerge. The size of Asian populations and markets suggests their eventual dominance. Just as there were obvious benefits to be obtained from Americanisation in 1945, there are now advantages to be gained from an Asianisation policy in the 21st century. Both

Europeans and Americans would do well to consider this. Acceptance of a certain degree of Asianisation would facilitate better understanding of Asian mentalities, and perhaps pre-empt future Chinese hegemony in the commercial and political spheres. The West should study Asian values, as well as patterns of communication and organisation, and learn from these. There are visible benefits in Asian systems. They should also study the 'Asian mind' and how it perceives concepts such as leadership, status, decision-making, negotiating, face, views of morality, Confucian tenets and so forth.

4.6 The rise of feminine values

Fortunately, the rise of feminine values in the West at cross-century smooths the way for a degree of Asianisation, as many of these values coincide with Asian values. Just as the Americanisation (of Europe) progressed from influencing business practice to permeating the social scene, a similar phenomenon may well occur with Asianisation. That is to say, Westerners can be influenced by and adopt aspects of Asian lifestyles that will have a lasting effect on their own behaviour.

4.7 Feminine values and gender equality

The implication of such a shift in Western thinking and comportment are mind-boggling, if not cataclysmic. Societies, such as the French, American, Swedish, and possibly the British and German, are successful in their own right and may

be less inclined to modify their cultures in an Asian direction than are less powerful nations. The Americans currently find little wrong with their economic model, nor do the French, with their cultural one. Nevertheless, a degree of feminisation has already taken place in most Western countries, and the growing distaste of the younger generation for the hard-nosed exploitation of people and natural resources will make Asianisation an attractive policy. After all, business is business, and there are billions of customers out there.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

5.1 Cultural awareness in teaching materials

This topic demands a much longer and more detailed treatment than is possible here but certain trends are becoming clear.

First of all, is the danger that most international books on the teaching of European languages, especially English, are still far too western-based with an emphasis on 'international language use'. As well as teaching language, our textbooks can do much more to include African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American subjects of interest in our reading passages, teaching dialogues and tasks. This becomes especially important since globalisation stresses international communication and the development of trust between people of very different backgrounds.

One of the keys to building good international relations is showing interest in the country or cultural background of the person or people you are dealing with. However, our teaching materials still focus on the culture of the country or region whose language we are teaching. Our textbooks need to show how to build relationships with people from other cultures, as well as focusing on the 'transactional' functional aspects of language use. The feeling that the teaching materials relate in some way to the learner's experience and interests is also a tremendous motivation in learning a new language, as was illustrated, for example, by Santaridou and Prodromou (2018). We are doing better than we used to but we could do a lot more. Writers and editors take note.

5.2 Diversity and gender equality

In many countries throughout the world, gender equality and how it is understood is still a mystery. For over forty years writers of language learning textbooks have been assiduous in avoiding possible accusations of gender bias but we can still do more on diversity management and showing how people can change their lives, the culture of the organisations they work in and even the culture of the communities and cultures of which they are a part. We are not just talking about gender differences. Other diversity areas such as race, religion, disability and sexual orientation are all relevant. We know that materials content and marketing are frequently

dependent on the political culture of a community, which has an important role in determining whether a particular course or set of materials can be adopted for use in educational institutions. However, the question remains, in order to understand better the backgrounds and cultures of the people whose languages we are learning, can materials writers and publishers do more to cover these areas?

5.3 Feminine values

This paper mentioned the importance of ‘feminine values’ in understanding global cultures but particularly in ‘multi-active’ societies. However, there is a difference between feminine values and the feminist agenda, although the two overlap to some extent. In *The Cultural Imperative* (Lewis, 2007) I described the difference between societies expressing masculine and feminine values as follows.

‘Masculine societies focus on power, wealth and assets as opposed to the feminine focus on nonmaterial benefits. Similar masculine-feminine corollaries would be facts versus feelings, logic versus intuition, competition versus cooperation, growth versus development, products versus relations, boldness versus subtlety, action versus thought, results versus solutions, profits versus reputation, quick decisions versus right decisions, speed versus timeliness (doing something at the right time), improvement versus care and nurture,

material progress versus social progress, individual career versus collective comfort versus sense of proportion’ (Lewis, 2007, p. 194-195).

Although some cultures may be more masculine-values oriented and others more feminine-values oriented, we all as individuals and organisations have something of both. It is important to understand and teach the difference, as it influences leadership and decision-making in different economies at national, regional and organisational levels. For example, it means that people may approach international negotiations very differently according to where they are coming from. Given the way the world is currently developing, we could also suggest that the climate change debate also reflects the difference between masculine and feminine values. Once again, it is important that materials and teaching reflect the importance of feminine values in understanding other cultures.

5.4 Is the English language English anymore?

You can, of course, argue that English hasn’t been British English for many years; not since the USA became the world’s leading economy and a superpower, and the dominance of the British empire came to a close. And yet we have to recognise that British English is still important in large parts of the world. However, it is also important to know that the teaching of British English is moving beyond Britain to many

European institutions, for example in the Netherlands and Germany, and that the People's Republic of China now has more English speakers than the UK. Therefore, the English we teach is now world English, no longer British or US English. The structure of the language may be British or US vocabulary, pronunciation and syntax (with influences from other parts of the Commonwealth, including India, Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore) and different countries may focus on UK or US English as the key varieties to be used and taught, but we need to recognise that English, as the Indian academic Braj Kachru showed, has far more non-native speakers than native speakers (Kachru, 1992). This puts an emphasis on the markets that we are teaching in our materials and teaching activities, including China, India, Russia and the West. It does not nullify the importance of teaching US and British English, but it does suggest that we pay far more attention to the cultural context in which the language is taught.

5.5 Is Mandarin the new world language?

There is a strong possibility that China will be the world's leading economy in the next few years. Schools and universities are already increasing their teaching of Chinese language and culture through the Confucius Institutes worldwide and through individual schools and colleges. However, this paper makes the point that given the universality of the English language, the culture is

at the root of appreciating and building good international relations. The key to this in China, for example, is the concept of 'Asianisation', the recognition and understanding of values and attitudes incorporating '*values and motivating forces across a vast community stretching from the Indian subcontinent in the west and Indonesia in the south. China of course is the beating heart of this mentality*' (Lewis, 2007, p. 193-194). As I describe in *The Cultural Imperative*, Asianisation '*is not overly difficult to achieve but it has to be learned and it demands intense focus. Without internalising certain concepts, values, core beliefs and communication styles Westerners will never deal successfully with Asians. On the other hand, acquisition of a sound basis of understanding and cross-cultural competence will quickly elevate them to a position from which they can compete successfully with Asians*' (Lewis, 2007, p. 194). In brief, learn the language by all means, but the culture will come first.

5.6 Implications for teacher and trainer training

The UK and the US have pioneered new approaches to the way we teach the English language using the communicative approach and task-based learning as opposed to the traditional grammar and translation approach. This means in English teaching and the teaching of other languages that we have increasingly adopted an interactive classroom based significantly on group and pair work and focused practical usage rather

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than the traditional teacher-based 'cours magistral' or lecture-based approach, focused on theory and examinations. How will this style of teaching go down with more traditional 'teacher-talk-led' education styles? Evidence suggests that more and more education systems around the world are keen to adopt a more open and group-based approach to language teaching, due both to language policy changes and to teachers attending teacher training courses in the UK, the US and Australia. Patricia Williams-Boyd of East Michigan University showed how teachers in China were eager to adapt their teaching styles to a more interactive method as it dramatically improved students' motivation for language learning. Her work (Williams-Boyd, 2017) shows that student

involvement in the learning process is a key motivational factor in successful education.

6. CONCLUSION

I am of the opinion that gender-liberation issues will be higher on women's agenda than lending continuing support to the supposed destruction of the West, whose way of life embodies the social qualities and advantages they ultimately seek. However, as this paper argues, it is time for a rebalance. If we accept that the world is changing and that the dominance of the West will increasingly be balanced by the re-emergence of Asianisation and the increasing influence of feminine values (not just gender equality) on international business and culture, we can all work together towards a world not where cultures combine – our cultures are too long established and too rich for that – but where they harmonise to produce a better life for all and perhaps adopt a truly global approach to the greatest 21st century problem of all, our planet's biological culture.

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