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The place of memory studies in rethinking the language-culture nexus

Abstract

This is a programmatic paper. I introduce memory studies in a proposal for solving two problems associated with the teaching of ‘culture’ in languages programmes. The first of these is political: how do we reformulate our argument, that ‘culture is indissociable from language’ in such a way as to convince the administrators of our universities of its truth. I argue that for as long as we maintain a synchronic account of ‘language’ based on a face-to-face account of communication, we will fail to do so. Both the administrators, and our students, will persist in the impoverished notion of language learning that results in the reduction of our work to the teaching of ‘skills’. The second is conceptual: what concept of culture best serves the aim of cultural literacy integrated with language proficiency? A ‘palimpsestic’ conception of cultural time is my answer. If we devise our teaching and learning curricula on this basis, then the dissociation of language from culture is no longer possible, and the administrators’ view of our work will be seen to be dissonant with our disciplines.
I want to start by stating two presuppositions. Firstly, in the view of Andreas Huyssen (2003), memory studies are symptomatic of a change in our relationship to modernity. One of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies, a turning towards the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity. (Huyssen 2003: 11)

Huyssen views memory studies as crucial for analysing the present, using the trope of the palimpsest as a way of representing the layering of time. It is a useful metaphor that suggests an alternative to the crippling dichotomy that opposes the contemporary to the past and forces us to choose between them.

Secondly: I am presupposing a generalised objective of ‘cultural literacy’ for the teaching of language and culture. This in turn must be based on discursive literacy, construed capaciously (that is, without pre-empting choices between the oral and the written, or choices of media).

Keeping these propositions in mind, I’d like to tell a story: I was teaching a first year subject in French in which we were reading stories that focussed on issues of post-colonial identity. Not simply post-colonial, as it happens, but post slavery. A competent student was elected to be class representative, and she did her job very well, talking to everyone in the class and coming to me to give a nicely nuanced and detailed account of what students wanted her to tell me. Generally the response to the stories was that the French was hard, but that most students were happy with the sense of achievement they were getting as they learned to manage it. They were beginning to like the stories. Then I asked the student what she thought herself, and this was her response: I’m a commerce student, and I am learning French so I can get a job in France. I want to communicate with French people when I’m there. I don’t need to know the history of the French involvement in the slave trade for that. So I asked her who she thought her clients and customers would be.

This student thought she knew what would be most useful to her: what she meant by “communicate” was talk about the things that she always talked about, with the people whose relations with their surrounding society, cultural assumptions and experiences were similar to her own. She wanted to be able to discuss the topics she was already interested in, and she specifically mentioned climate change. An advantage of the kind of teaching she wanted is that you are sure to have lively discussion, and your students will respond by feeling that their fluency and their vocabulary have improved. I’m sympathetic to that, but I think those aims are too modest for the task university language teaching has to fulfil in the modern world. Our task is to foster intercultural understanding, and this goes way beyond the fragmentary, dissociated “topics” that have been the currency of language teaching for a long time. Intercultural understanding involves considering our students as cultural subjects who are both open to, and resistant to, experiences that challenge their current assumptions. The case of my student was very interesting from this
point of view. She was far from unresponsive to what she was reading. Her resistance came, I think, from two sources. In the first place, she, like most of the young private school white girls in the class, had giggled when they saw the photograph of the author — Maryse Condé — on the front of the book. I began to understand that they couldn’t read her gender — presumably because her genotype prevented them from mobilising their habitual expectations of femininity. How could she have anything to say to them? she was just too foreign! In the second place, my student had internalised a view of what it was to learn a language: you go on interacting in the same way as you always have, with similar people preoccupied with similar things — you just do it with different words and grammatical structures. If there was cultural difference between French speakers and Australian, it was a very safe and reassuring difference indeed — glamorous, exotic, something to be souvenired. The resistance, in other words, was to the cultural challenge she was faced with.

The stories by Maryse Condé (1999) fall into the category of writing now known as memory writing; it puts the individual person right into the middle of historical events. “Identities, as Stuart Hall writes, are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past” (Huysens 1995: 1). Accompanying the stories, we put together a dossier of material for the students to build up a context for making sense of what they were reading. In the collection was a video of the first ceremony held in 2006 to memorialise the abolition of slavery. Such official memorialising is also part of the field we now know as memory practices. It claims the ethical duty to remember for the society as a whole.

This range — between personal and the public — gives us a sense of why memory studies matter to cultural learning. It demonstrates how subjectivity is locked into the historical experience of groups, and it also demonstrates the presentness of memory. “The past is not a foreign country” (Palmié 2010: 363), and memory — the way it inhabits and haunts our present and the ways we have of dealing with it — memory is a corrective to formal historiographies that seek to keep the past in the past. I want now to cite a second example. This comes from the memoirs of Jan Karski (2011), who was a very prominent member of the Polish Underground during the Nazi occupation of that unfortunate country. I knew about Karski from an interview he did for a French documentary, so when I saw his memoirs for sale, I bought them. They are fascinating. They were written and published in America in 1944, while the war still raged and before the Soviet Union occupied Poland after the defeat of Germany. One of the stories he tells is of particular interest for my present purposes: he did a lot of work for the Polish underground press. He writes:

I also took a more personal interest in the press. Amateur collecting has always been one of my habits. [...] During my stay in Warsaw, aware of its historical importance as well as its appeal to me, I amassed what is probably the richest collection of Polish underground material existent – newspapers, pamphlets, and books. At intervals, I packed them away in cases and hid them in a safe place. I hope to reclaim them after the war and believe they will be interesting museum material. (Karski 2011: 287)
Karski knew that he was in the middle of a major historical struggle, and he wanted the material practices of that struggle to be available to Polish memory. His collection forms an archive, and he imagines its being housed in a public institution where it could be used to provide the material for future narratives. The memoirs and autobiographical stories tell us that ‘history happens to people’, that the big stories are not abstract and separate from the little stories. But equally, the big stories told by archives, museums, monuments, and public ceremonials are strategies for forging connections across the generations. Alongside school curricula, this is how a society teaches its citizens, how it involves them in maintaining collective memory.

The idea of collective memory was the brainchild of a French sociologist called Maurice Halbwachs in the 1950s (Halbwachs 1980), and his project was pursued by historian Pierre Nora in the 1970s (Nora 1984). In their conception collective memory is above all national memory, and Nora in particular works on official sites of memory devised for the construction of the national narrative. For this reason, they have been subject to serious critique in more recent work on memory. The debate is significant, because many textbooks and most tourism are constructed on the basis of this kind of memory. It propounds a homogeneous collectivity that is deemed to own that memory, and the memory it owns is often celebratory and self-congratulatory. In Australia, the ANZAC legend is a case in point: even the most dreadful military defeat can be construed as an act of heroism and as the foundational moment for the most revered of national qualities. Moreover, there may be things of which a nation does not wish to be reminded: slavery, for example, and colonial injustices of all sorts. Official memory is deeply ideological, and it is bound up with the exercise of power. Despite this, I don’t believe it is a good idea just to forget about official memory. On the contrary. We must always ask under what circumstances, why, and how, a society chooses to remember some things, and we must also ask what it chooses to forget. The relation between memory and forgetting is an important aspect of memory studies. Such things are often contested, among groups, between individuals: these contests, too, should be our business.

My third example will demonstrate this. In a discussion some time ago with a young French person, I remarked that in order for our students to understand the present-day tensions around French relations with its minorities, the Dreyfus affair was a significant precedent. My interlocutor responded that nobody remembered Dreyfus, and that it was therefore irrelevant nowadays. The Dreyfus affair was a scandalous miscarriage of justice, and it was also the boiling point of the rabid anti-semitism of the late nineteenth century in the country that calls itself the mother of human rights. Now it so happens that my interlocutor was not right. There is considerable contemporary work on the Dreyfus affair and particularly on its contemporary relevance, and there is also quite a lot of public memorialising. I suspect that these public gestures show us a society making efforts to make up for its own forgetfulness. Marcel Proust told us this many years ago. The Dreyfus affair figures prominently in his great novel about memory, and he remarks on how conversations changed at the point where Dreyfus was rehabilitated. It’s as if it had
never happened, he writes. Forgetting Dreyfus has been a major fact about the French twentieth century; this too is presently being corrected, but we must note that official commemorations happen when such things are safe — or indeed, as a way of making them safe:

Let us not mince words here. Both ‘history’ and ‘memory’ ultimately revolve around and in turn aim to fashion, authorize, and motivate specific definitions of moral community in the present (Palmié 2010).

One of the problems with official memorialising is that it has the tendency to attribute a singular meaning to an event. It is homogenised in retrospect. In this respect, it contrasts sharply with personal memory, in which the meanings attaching to memories are highly unstable. I recall with amusement the spectacle organised by the Hawke government in 1985. Seeking to do something special to memorialise the battle on its seventieth anniversary, it collected together all the living veterans of the Gallipoli campaign and took them back to Turkey for a photo shoot. There is an act of appropriation inherent in official memorialising such as this, an act that has the effect of obliterating the memory of the lived experience. But aside from this individual variety, the event itself may be contested. The old men at Gallipoli that day were dutifully interviewed by the media; what are your memories, they were asked, and what are your feelings as you revisit this beach? One tremulous old man hesitated for a second then said: “We shouldn’t have been here in the first place. Why are they bringing us back?”

He was distinctly unsentimental about the whole episode. But official memory is apt to wax sentimental; it can be inaccurate; it can serve ideological ends and it can work in the service of power. It can empower minorities, but it can also disempower them, and it can make the past safe when it threatens our complacency. Above all, like sport, it supports the illusion of a national consensus. All these are reasons to work critically with memory, but they are not reasons to avoid working with it. These simplified, legendary, nostalgic and sentimental, safe, official accounts of the past are a real and present danger for the culture learning of a student of modern languages. We need to take on the challenges of memory studies, with the critical care and analytical attention they impose; we need to teach our students to think about the issues raised by cultural memory at the same time as giving them access to it.

And first, we need to give them access to the wealth and variety of memory practices associated with the groups and societies that speak a language. In this second part of my talk, I want to turn to why I think memory studies might help us to solve some problems in the devising of curricula in language-and-culture programmes. And first, I need to indicate what those problems are.

The first problem is the reduction of language learning to the acquisition of skills. Many university administrators think of language and culture as separable, and our colleagues in other disciplines — literature, history, film studies, cultural studies — are inclined to try to keep us out of what they regard as their territory. Our response
to the dangers these pressures expose us to is to reassert ad nauseam that languages
and cultural learning belong together. But we have repeated it long enough to know
that the administrators don’t believe it. This is for a reason that can be documented
historically. For at least twenty years in this country, the case for languages has been
made in terms of their vocational usefulness and the national interest. This discourse
lends itself to the reduction of language learning to the acquisition of skills. It has
brought us enrolments in the early years, but has weakened the disciplinary base
for our work. Our administrators’ view of what we do turns out to be a self-fulfilling
prophecy, and to date our arguments have failed to carry the day against it. They will
not change their discourse unless we do. My point is just that we need a compelling
account of what culture means for the purposes of language studies so that we can
demonstrate – and not just argue - what we believe: that you can neither understand
a language, nor interact with its speakers, without a substantial cultural component
as part of the learning experience. I want therefore to suggest that memory studies
may help us to rethink the language and culture nexus in a way that will be helpful
for this purpose.

There is no single definition of culture that could possibly capture its essence.
Indeed, there is no ‘essence’, because culture is what culture does, and what it
does is multifarious. We may need to combine different approaches for different
competence levels. The conception of culture that I am proposing has particular
value in relation with what I take to be a central problem in our understanding of
what we do: this is the incompatibility of a ‘synchronic’ conception of language,
with a diachronic conception of culture. This incompatibility requires us to either
conceive of culture as exclusively synchronic also, or to work the diachronic into our
understanding of language by means of the palimpsestic conception of cultural time.
For reasons that I hope to have made clear, a synchronic conception of culture is
severely impoverished.

About half a century ago, we learnt to think of language as a self-consistent
system of rules. This was ‘structuralism’, under which a language was distinguished
from its uses, and frozen in time. Of course we have moved on from this, and the
study of language now includes such fields as pragmatics and socio-linguistics.
Nevertheless, linguistics has left unquestioned one of the informing structuralist
assumptions: To describe, and hence to teach, ‘a’ language, is to arrest it in time. This
is the synchronic assumption; its associated methodologies are contradictory with
a study of language in use. If we study a language in use, we need to take account
of it as a mobile thing, ever changing, and carrying with it the history of its previous
uses. This is the diachronic dimension. If you use a good monolingual dictionary, and
if you teach your students to use it, what they find in it is broadly two things: you
find grammatical information about the word, and you find a history of its usage. A
language has a memory, and the dictionary records and details that memory. This
memory is the culture – or rather, the cultural range - germane to the language as
it has concretely and practically been deployed to manage and interpret its world.
Once we accept that, we must accept that what we think of as the connotations of a word, or even the rules of its use in particular contexts, derive from its history. Lexical meaning, too, is palimpsestic.

To teach our students this is to teach them to understand the unspoken assumptions of a conversation – of the cultural conversation in the broadest possible sense. It is also to teach them that interlocutors and texts from different backgrounds may use words in different ways – ironically, for instance, like Maryse Condé’s (1999) use of the term ‘en métropole’ for speaking of her parents’ visit to France from Guadeloupe. Our students need to understand the variety of subject positions, or ‘identities’, in the mixed societies that are now the norm in a world of mass migration, and why this heterogeneity may correspond to differences in the use of the language.

To close, I return to the general objective of cultural literacy. If this is our aim — or at least the aim of some of us — then discursive literacy is its base. We do not teach ‘the language’, we teach ‘discourse’ — language in use. In the course of the curriculum reform process that the Head of the School of Languages and Linguistics at Melbourne University (Alfredo Martinez-Exposito) told the conference about, we received advice concerning the difficult issue of the progression of competency objectives. We are advised to start from narrative genres, to move towards the genres of argument, and to start from the personal and interpersonal genres, proceeding towards the genres of public discourse. I hope it is clear that memory studies lend themselves admirably to this progression. Memory is produced through story-telling, and the personal stories, told as it were ‘around the campfire’ are the stuff of social exchange. They are mobilised in multiple media — notably film, television and comic albums. Such stories, however, are subject to variation and contestation: there are different versions, serving as premises for different arguments, opening the story-telling of a society to debate and critique. They need to be unearthed in hidden assumptions, in the language used in public life, in text-books, in the press. Memory studies, I suggest, may provide a coherent set of principles for a pedagogy of culture knitted in to the pedagogy of language. If this is true, then we may end up with a nexus of language with culture, instead of the brave but ultimately feeble little conjunction ‘and’.

References