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THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

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TOWARDS A THEORY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY FILTERS

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Definition of the subject matter

Humanities, more precisely, studies in arts, cultural studies and education are facing novel challenges brought about by the globalizing tendencies and gradually growing and fastening changes of modernity, along with the already existing issues of cultural development and connections. The homogenizing orientations force cultures to make more dynamic responses and act in ways that may not fit in their existing set of customs and habits. The responses given to challenges brought about by the above tendencies in contemporary political, religious, social and related issues are culture-specific in most of the cases merely due to the complexity of cultures; yet there are common and even universal characteristics as well. The intricate web of internal relations defines the fundament for each culture and the external connections further shape them. Due to the very nature of culture, it is difficult to give a simple and unambiguous definition of the concept, subsequently, an approach to culture cannot be easily developed either.

This dissertation is aimed at providing the foundations for an approach that is capable of outlining cultures, more specifically, the cultural background beyond products of cultures. This idea originates from the very fact that anything you can encounter during your life is only segments of a culture, not the culture itself as a whole, and, in order to gain the most extensive set of information, a holistic view upon interrelations must be achieved. Consequently, for the development of an approach of the kind, an interdisciplinary aspect must be internalized and employed, and, due to the complexity of the observed subject, the focus of examination must be narrowed to a reasonable measure.

Hypotheses

A) *The primary hypothesis claims that it is possible to identify characteristics of cultures through the analysis of cultural products.*

The notion of culture has been defined in so many different ways and so many dissimilarities have emerged that the notion has become indefinable in a single universal way. Subsequently, scholars tend to provide purpose-oriented definitions shaped by specific research objectives. In this the present dissertation is not an exception, yet it does not aim to develop a definition on its own, but, as the objective is to outline a relatively novel approach to culture, to borrow the most appropriate and useful definition from an involved field of science. For such a purpose, it is wisest to observe universal characteristics so that the definition can be brief and unambiguous.

The notion of culture, the very belief in the existence of the notion, belongs solely to humanity, which ensures that culture is primarily a cognitive entity. The products of cultural processes manifest in either material or immaterial form: works of art, of crafts, unique and mass products as well as individual and community issues of any kind are shaped and controlled by cognition. Moreover, these phenomena are interrelated and they also relate back to cognition, thus creating a complex ever-changing dynamic system. In this sense even people are cultural products as well as their ways of behaviour and any kind of activities are controlled by cognition, that is, humans represent culture, they are cultural filters.

Culture is, then, a social phenomenon and is a complex system of sub-systems. As a result, any of the cultural phenomena you may encounter can provide information about itself and the system as a whole.

B) The secondary hypothesis claims that among cultural products it is verbal art that provides the most inclusive and valid representation of culture.

As soon as culture as a whole becomes the subject of investigation, the need for certain limitations on sample selection emerges. The aim is, then, to choose the most representative vehicle of cultural self-expression in order to reduce the amount of samples while keeping the most extensive view upon culture.

As cognition functions as initiator and supervisor in all kinds of cultural activity, the most apt vehicle is the one that stands closest to cognition and is best capable of representation. Due to that there is no human activity that cannot be depicted by linguistic means; the best candidate is obviously verbal. Although the focus of selection has been narrowed, the amount of potential samples is infinite, and unavoidably includes several types of items that are incapable of representing in a valuable way.

Among the possible choices, it is verbal art that is apt for transmitting cultural information in the most comprehensive way because of it richness in stylistic tools and diversity in content. This paper involves written forms of verbal art, including poetic works and works of short prose, excluding longer pieces of literature because of extent limitations.

The current theory regards literary works as filters of cultural identity, based upon the above discussed characteristics of cultural products; this idea guarantees that the findings in each piece of writing are valid. The diversity of cultural overlaps worldwide makes it very difficult to explore culture-specific features among universals and similarities, but as soon as some are identified, the image of cultural background can be drawn. The more culture-specific characteristics are identified, the clearer the image becomes. It follows from this that such an approach to cultural analysis must be a quantitative type with as many samples from the same source as possible.

The dissertation takes samples only from the Anglophone body of world literature, mostly from colonial minorities so as to contrast cultures living by the same language, but it also uses examples of the so-called British literature for specific purposes.

The approach

A) Introduction
As an interdisciplinary approach, the theory of Cultural Identity Filters involves a joint terminology and a mixture of viewpoints from various related fields of science so that the most all-inclusive picture of the cultural background will be achieved. For the analysis of a complex system, a network of relations, system-theoretical and semiotic aspects are at hand, and they serve as the framework within which other scientific methods and techniques can work. Related fields include anthropology, ethnology, sociology, folklore, literary criticism, history, philosophy, and economy – just to mention the most significant contributors. The joint effort results in a holistic view upon the nature and functioning of culture, and thus provides the most detailed description of the system as a whole.

B) Types of analysis
The theory of cultural identity filters is primarily concerned with the ways cultural phenomena produced by community members transmit cultural content.

Naturally, it is an analytical approach to the subject matter, to the textual formations of culture, aimed at exploring and interpreting meanings transmitted in verbal forms. The intricate web of meanings present within the framework of a piece of writing, of the author's thinking, of culture, consists of two basic constituents: nodes and links, similar to a cobweb, that represent meanings and their relations.

As every natural phenomenon is mutually dependent on one another, the complete and perfect description of any of them would only be possible if all the other phenomena in direct contact were completely and perfectly described, but that is, obviously, a hopeless task. Two ways are at hand in terms of the amount of analytical samples: A) select one single phenomenon and try to define its distinctive features as accurately as analytical limits allow by detecting its relations to the surroundings; B) select the highest number of phenomena possible as subject matter and try to define them separately and within the web of relations. This type of distinction refers to the number of cultural phenomena to be examined, and the types are called *selective* and *holistic*.

Another aspect of cultural analysis focuses on intercultural relations, to what extent and in what quality and quantity various cultural phenomena are present in different cultures or cultural cycles. The interrelatedness of cultures can, thus, be analysed through the comparison of similar phenomena, and the qualitative and quantitative differences may reveal universal, shared and culture-specific aspects. This type of distinction refers to the number of cultures to be involved, and the types are called *exclusive* and *comparative*. The exclusive type refers to the analysis that involves only one culture and aims to map various phenomena solely within its framework, whereas the comparative type involves more cultures and focuses on similarities and differences.

The possible variation of analytical types moves along a third axis, which represents time. Ferdinand de Saussure invented the concept of synchronic and diachronic approach that focus on a particular linguistic phenomenon either in its contemporary status or its historical framework. Such a distinction may be applied to the examination of cultural phenomena as well, with the aim of characterising its changes through time. Subsequently, the third pair of analytical types consists of a *synchronic* and *diachronic* type. A significant addition to this type of distinction is that the historical aspects of any phenomenon can only be described when the phenomenon itself has already been described thoroughly.

The coordinate system combines the three analytical dimensions and allows for a number of possible variations so as to meet research needs. The combination of dimensional pairs makes up a set of possible basic types, but there are some analytical factors that make difference in their application.

Suggested steps

A) Introduction

Every scientific research consists of four stages: 1) science is not present; 2) mapping, data collection; 3) speculative stage, hypothesis; 4) application of experimental data. However, there is no valid optimal order of analytical steps that can be applied to every text. According to the given research objectives, there is a necessitated hierarchy of the types of analysis applied, and within each type there is a logical order of steps. The theory of cultural identity filters suggests a three-step order that apparently works well regardless of the personality of observers. The suggested

steps are initial data collection, first reading, second reading and, finally, drawing of conclusions about the source culture.

B) Initial data collection

The first step of the analytical procedure focuses on available background information A) about the work itself, its creation and reception; B) about the author, his or her personality and cultural status; C) and about the source culture.

C) First reading

The first reading provides the reader with a general understanding of the work and a view on its content and form. It is an introductory phase, which, although it literally involves only one reading, may consist of repeated readings of the whole work and some of its passages. Major questions occurring during the first reading phase help the reader identify who or what appear in the work, under what circumstances the depicted events occur, and they also provide some clues about the main theme of the work, thus establishing the horizon of expectations.

D) Second reading

The sequence of repeated readings extends and sharpens the image that has appeared in the reader's mind during the first reading. In this phase, the reader really enters the work itself, explores the layers of meanings and, by doing so, grounds the last analytical step.

The repeated readings involve and combine syntactic, semantic and pragmatic observations, mixed in the way they will reveal the qualities of textual components and their relationships in order to explore the network of meanings.

E) Drawing conclusions

The last phase of the analytical process consists of a summary of intermediate findings and of making up a system of references. The network of identified connections is transformed into a network that represents the source culture, a hypothetical framework of interrelated meanings and their manifestations. Initially, conclusions are drawn about the cultural phenomena that appear in the text and then the phenomena are placed in a coherent system.

The three-step analytical procedure results in a system of hypotheses made about the source culture, but, as discussed above, the analysis of a single piece of writing is never an end in itself. The findings must be compared and contrasted to other findings of similar analyses and the evaluation of work-related findings on the basis of correspondences will finally present the observer with a list of valid characteristics of the source culture.

Practical application

The dissertation includes exemplary analyses done by the author in order to show various types of application; obviously, without the intention to cover all the possibilities.

The final chapter presents an experiment: a large number of people of different cultural, social, educational and linguistic background volunteered to complete a task sheet where a single poem was to be analysed with the help a list of guided questions. According to results, the respondents, regardless of their knowledge about any theories

concerning culture, gained largely similar impressions and drew a somewhat similar image of the cultural background of the poet, thus validating the theory.

In sum, the theory of Cultural Identity Filters may become an active contributor to cultural studies and education, and to self-identification with both individuals and communities.

Biography

Iván Illésfalvi was born April 5, 1976 in Veszprém, Hungary. He received the Master of Arts in English Language and Literature from Veszprém University in 2004, with a specialisation in applied linguistics and translation. He later on specialized in teaching foreign languages to students with special needs and made extensive research on the effects of live music in the language classroom.

Both orientations were dominated by a novel attitude to learning and teaching resulting in the need for the development of a semiotic approach to foreign language teaching. He has been serving as language teacher at Öveges József Comprehensive School in Balatonfűzfő for seven years, and has given several talks and workshops on various aspects of the theory and application of the approach both in Hungary and abroad.

Selected list of publication and presentation in the field:

2010: *A nyelvhasználat vizsgálatának aspektusai.* In.: Szemerkényi Ágnes (Ed.) Folklór és Nyelv. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, p451-460.

2010: *Another Approach to Cultural Analyses.* In.: Filkó, Veronika – Kőhalmy, Nóra – Smid, Bernadett (Eds.) *Voigtloristica. Tanulmányok a 70 éves Voigt Vilmos tiszteletére.* Volcloristica 11. ELTE BTK Folklore Tanszék, Budapest, p301-312.

2008: *Analyses in Cultural Narration.* Paper presented at the 7th International Students' Research Conference in Riga, Latvia.

2008: *Kik vagyunk a tengerben? A kulturális önmeghatározás technikája.* In.: Haraszti, László (ed.) *Egy csepp tudomány.* University of Pannonia, Jedlik Ányos Szakkollégium, Pannon Egyetemi Kiadó, Veszprém, p37-51.

2008: *Cultural Identity-Filters in the Educational Context.* Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Linguistic and Intercultural Education. Aeternitas Publishing House, Alba Iulia.

2007: *The Economy of Indigenous Writings of North America, Australia and English Speaking Africa.* Paper presented at the HUSSE8 Conference, Szeged, Hungary.

2006: *Identity Markers – Non-English Elements in English Literature.* Paper presented at the 1st International Conference on Nation and Identity in the 19th and 20th Century Literature in English, UCAM, Murcia, Spain.

2004: *Like Feeble Bough from the Trunk of a Tree.* Master's Thesis, University of Veszprém.