

## The dialectics between language and culture

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**Abstract:** This paper takes point of departure in the view that “No particular language or way of speaking has a privileged view of the world as it “really” is” (Romaine 1999: 20). Neither the structure of a language nor the way people speak about the world is given by nature; they are negotiated and constructed by language users. Language and language use reflect different conceptualizations of the world and are related to the culture in different communities. When children are born, they grow up as members of a linguistic community based on earlier members' conceptualizations and negotiations over time. They integrate the constructed linguistic items and their own conceptualizations and culture are influenced by the language and language use. Gradually, they themselves become part of the negotiations of language and new conceptualizations are handed down to new members. This means that language and culture are dialectic by nature. The aim of this paper is, within a societal dimension, to discuss the dialectic interplay between language and culture; how linguistic items emerge, what they reflect and what impact they have. This is done on the basis of constructivist ideas combined with ideas from the frameworks of Cultural Linguistics and Cultural Studies.

**Keywords:** language, culture, cognition, conceptualizations, (social) constructions.

### 1. Introduction

In a sequence of *El Botón de nácar* ('The pearl button'), a special type of documentary about the meaning of water and about the original people from the Chilean part of Patagonia, the filmmaker asks descendants from this area to translate different words from Spanish to Kawésqar, the original language from the area. At some point an interviewed woman is asked about the words for POLICE and GOD. The woman explains that they do not have words for these concepts; they do not need them. The example reflects an already known fact: many languages do not have words for concepts which are completely normal in other languages. Obviously, many similarities between languages can be identified, but the various languages in the world present a large variation, not only with regard to lexicon, but also with regard to grammar. Language reflects different conceptualizations of the world and is intertwined with different communities: worldviews, understandings, practices, etc., in short: culture.<sup>1</sup> This, however, does not mean that there is a one-to-one relationship between one nation and one culture. Janda (2008: 49) suggests that “the architecture of each language contains culturally specific features” and that “these include both lexical and grammatical characteristics”. Nevertheless, she explains, “The lexical characteristics are often the most obvious and tend to attract more attention” (Janda 2008: 49). I suggest that this is due the fact that lexemes as content elements introduce more substantial elements in a text: they form key constituents of the output-level understanding (see Harder 2007: 23). The examples put forward in this article are also lexical elements.<sup>2</sup>

The vocabularies of languages and their grammars are not given by nature, but are negotiated and constructed by language users. When children are born, they grow up as members of a

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1 Janda (2008: 49) presents various examples of so-called culturally specific features that include both lexical and grammatical characteristics. See also Wardhaugh (2006: 225 ff.) for examples of differences in languages with regard to both lexicon and grammar.

2 The paper follows the view from cognitive linguistics that both lexical and grammatical units are meaningful (see for example Janda 2007: 53). However, they do not provide meaning in the same way, as only lexemes are content elements. The grammatical – or functional – elements are “purely procedural”, i.e. they do not add substance of their own. However, we would not have access to the substantial elements if it were not for the procedural elements” (Harder 2007: 23-24).

linguistic community based on earlier members' conceptualizations and negotiations over time. They integrate the linguistic items and their own conceptualizations and culture are influenced by the language. At the same time, they themselves become participants in the negotiations of language and language use and have influence on language and culture. Language provides people with categories used for expression of thoughts, so it is therefore natural to assume that thinking, to a certain extent, is influenced by the language. However, language users are not restricted to thinking with the existing categories as if the inventory of categories were a static system. On the contrary, they can adopt new categories and change or abandon existing ones. This is illustrated by the fact that languages constantly change and evolve.

Another aspect of language is how language users utilize the language to speak about “things” in the world: objects, human groups, acts, phenomena, etc. What some people frame as “an opportunity”, other people may frame as “a problem”, and what some people characterize as “natural”, other may characterize as “uncommon”. The ways in which people speak about “things” in the world are not given by nature. They reflect different understandings and worldviews and are related to specific communities etc.

In a description of the development of the semantic development of the concept of culture, Fink (1988) refers to it as a *hypercomplex* concept. As he puts it, “[e]veryone speaks about culture; but it is not that easy to know what it is people are speaking about, when they speak about culture” (Fink 1988: 11). For this reason, every time someone discusses culture, it is necessary to explain what is meant by the concept. In the present paper the notion of culture refers to shared understandings, values, worldview and practices in a community.

Culture is often associated with communities based on nationality, but common practices and understandings might be identified in other types of communities as well, such as in communities based on ethnicity, age, kinship, professions, and workplaces. Also, there are various understandings, values and practices in a community based on nationality.<sup>3</sup> Two well-known approaches to culture are the functionalist approach based on an essentialist view of culture, and a constructivist approach based upon a complex concept of culture. Whereas the functionalist approach focuses on people's belonging to a more or less static national culture which makes people from one country different from people from other countries, the constructivist approach conceives of culture as dynamic and not the same for entire national groups. In this paper, the view on culture is constructivist.<sup>4</sup>

National languages are constructed through interactions between people. This means that language is negotiated and that an element of power exists to decide what concepts will be reflected through language. A national language reflects shared meanings, understandings etc., but this does not mean that everyone in a national community share the same values. However, as they live within a community and share the language, they commonly understand the meanings. Also, there might be more than one understanding related to a word, such as different connotations.

In this paper, the language-culture interplay does not particularly refer to national languages and cultures. One of the main points in Agar (1994) is that different understandings of the world/life not only occur between different languages, but also inside the same language. Agar (1994: 13-14) presents various personal experiences of how different ways of looking at things come to life in a common language. He also suggests that “misunderstandings that we usually associate with a

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3 The idea that people from the same nation have much in common is widespread. Anderson (1983, 1991) examined the creation and global spread of “imagined communities” of nationality. According to Anderson (1991: 6), “the nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.

4 For a critical discussion of the two approaches and the concept of culture in in academic and public discourses, see for example Cristoffani (2012).

*foreign* language happen inside the same language all the time” (Agar 1994: 14).<sup>5</sup>

The idea that language is influenced by culture, and culture is influenced by language can be referred to as a dialectical relationship. Exploring this interplay is relevant and important in order to understand human communication. The present paper is a theoretical contribution to discussions about the interplay and dialectic relationship between linguistic items and language use on the one hand and culture on the other hand. The main idea that the article aims to put forward is that ideas from Cultural Studies and Cultural Linguistics based on an explicit social constructionist view may be able to account for the dialectical relationship between language and culture. As the purpose of the article is to contribute to a theoretical discussion, rather than to systematically examine and uncover a specific area of the social world, the examples I discuss do not belong to a specific societal-cultural area; moreover, the analyses of the examples serve primarily illustrative purposes.

Two well-known approaches to culture are the functionalist approach based on an essentialist view of culture, and a constructivist approach based upon a complex concept of culture. Whereas the functionalist approach focuses on people's belonging to a more or less static national culture which makes people from one country different from people from other countries, the constructivist approach conceives of culture as dynamic and not the same for entire national groups. In this paper, the view on culture is constructivist.<sup>6</sup>

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 and 3 are dedicated to the theoretical approaches whose ideas about language and culture I will use in this paper, Cultural Studies and Cultural Linguistics. Section 4 is an outline of the scientific-theoretical foundations upon which the paper is based: social constructionism. In Section 5, I bring it all together analyzing examples linguistic items from various areas to illustrate the ideas discussed in the paper.

## 2. Cultural Studies

Back in 2001, Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski suggested that, for some time, Cultural Studies had played a pivotal role in the linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences with scholars from this paradigm arguing that language is the central means and medium by which we understand the world and construct culture (Barker & Galasinski 2001: 1). According to Barker & Galasinski (2001: 1), “it is a core case of Cultural Studies that language does not mirror an independent object world but constructs and constitutes it”. This constructivist idea is shared by discourse analysts, and in fact Barker & Galasinski (2001) is a suggestion to forge dialog between Cultural Studies and critical discourse analysis (CDA)<sup>7</sup> and bringing together capabilities from the two investigating culture and language.<sup>8</sup> One of the pioneers in the field of Cultural Studies who also took an interest in language was Stuart Hall, according to whom (Hall 1997c: 18) culture is about shared meanings. He suggests that people who belong to the same culture share “broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways” (Hall: 1997c: 18). Language is considered to play an important role in relation to culture. Language allows for the construction of meanings and the sustentation of the dialog between participants which enables them to build up a culture of shared understandings and interpret the world in roughly the same ways because it operates on a representational system (Hall 1997b: 1). Hall (1997c: 17) uses the term *representation*

5 This happens in everyday life, but also in other contexts, such as in politics. Lakoff (2002), for example, analyzes the unconscious worldviews of liberals and conservatives, which give rise to talking past each other with little understanding much of the time (Lakoff 2002: 12).

6 For a critical discussion of the two approaches and the concept of culture in in academic and public discourses, see for example Cristoffani (2012).

7 See for example Fairclough (1989, 1992).

8 In a more recent publication, Chris Barker offers “a comprehensive account of [C]ultural [S]tudies, including summaries and discussions of its main arguments and substantive sites of intellectual enquiry” (Barker 2012: 3). Cultural Studies is a broad area, but this work stresses “that version of [C]ultural [S]tudies which places language at its heart” (Barker 2012: 4).

to refer to “the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language”. In this process, there are two systems of representation involved. The first one is the conceptualization system. Through this system all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts (Hall 1997c: 17). This “enables human beings to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences between things, people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc., and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps” (Hall 1997c: 19). According to Hall, human conceptualization is as much a cultural as it is an individual phenomenon. He argues that, although individuals interpret or make sense of the world in different ways, as individuals are unique, at the same time, groups of people that belong to the same culture broadly share the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. This is why people are able to communicate (Hall 1997c: 18). Communication mainly occurs through a shared code: language. This is the second system of representation according to Hall (1997c: 18). Language represents the concepts and the conceptual relations between them and together they make up the meaning-systems of our culture (Hall 1997c: 18).<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Cultural Linguistics

Another framework with interest in the relationship between language and culture is Cultural Linguistics. This explores the relationship between language, culture and conceptualization from an explicitly cognitivist vantage point. Two pioneers of this framework are Gary Palmer and Farzad Sharifian. Palmer (1996: 4-5, Chapt. 4) describes Cultural Linguistics as a synthesis of Boasian linguistics, ethnosemantics and the ethnography of speaking. Boas (1966: 59), for example, stated that “language is one of the most important manifestations of mental life”. Cultural Linguistics has developed from Cognitive Linguistics (e.g. Langacker 1987 and Geeraerts & Cuyckens 2007) and connects culture and language to each other by means of cognition (e.g. Palmer 1996; Sharifian 2011, 2015). In recent years, Cultural Linguistics has been in a process of developing a theoretical framework that affords an integrated understanding of the notions of 'cognition' and 'culture', as these relate to language (Sharifian 2015: 476). This framework “proposes a view of cognition that has life at the level of culture, under the concept of *cultural cognition*” (Sharifian 2015: 476). The notion of cultural cognition embraces “the cultural knowledge that emerges from the interactions between members of a cultural group across time and space” (Sharifian 2015: 476). Like Stuart Hall, Sharifian (2011: 3) suggests that human conceptualization is as much a cultural as it is an individual phenomenon. Cultural Linguistics explores conceptualizations that have a cultural basis and are encoded in and communicated through features of human languages (Sharifian 2015: 473). This paper follows the idea that conceptualizations are always culturally based as they emerge throughout people's encounters with the world in their cultural environments. However, it may seem more interesting to identify and explain conceptualizations that are singular for specific communities. The idea that conceptualizations operate at a cultural level of cognition involves a description of them as being *distributed* across the minds constituting a cultural group (Sharifian 2011: 3-8, 2015: 477-479). Cultural conceptualizations are not equally shared by all the members of a group, but heterogeneously distributed. This means that essentialist and reductionist tendencies associated with the notion of culture are avoided (Sharifian 2015: 477). Sharifian (2011: 3) suggests that the members of cultural community continuously negotiate “templates” for their thought and behavior in exchanging their conceptual experiences. In the same lines, Sharifian (2015: 476) suggests that cultural cognition is dynamic as it is constantly being

<sup>9</sup> I am aware that *language* to Hall and other scholars from Cultural Linguistics does not exclusively refer to the writing system and the spoken system of a language, but also to other items that express meaning. Hall (1997b: 19) speaks of for example *the language of fashion, the language of clothes* and *the language of traffic lights*. In the present paper, *language* is used in the narrow sense to refer to the writing system and the spoken system of a language and its use.

negotiated and renegotiated within and across the generations of the cultural group in question, also in response to the contact that members of that group have with other languages and cultures. This dynamic approach is in line with the constructivist approach to culture suggested earlier in the paper and elaborated in Section 4.

Sharifian (2011) addresses different types of cultural conceptualizations, such as schemas. He gives an account of various types of schemas that are often discussed in the literature (2011: 8-11), for example event schemas, role schemas and emotion schemas. The event schema is exemplified by events such as FUNERALS and WEDDING. For example, the Western-Christian schema of WEDDING usually includes subschemas of church ceremony and reception. Individuals from a different cultural background than the Western-Christian may have another schema of WEDDING. This means that the word *wedding* may evoke different schemas in individuals from different cultures. The role schema is about specific ideas of and expectations to roles, for example a mother or a teacher. The word *mother* for example evokes different schemas in different cultures, for example regarding obligations and responsibilities. In a similar vein, Holland & Quinn (1987: 4) use the term *cultural models* as “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it”. Addressing the topic of intercultural communication, Sharifian (2015: 485) suggests that individuals can have access to new conceptualizations as a result of living in a particular cultural environment or having interacted with speakers from other cultures.

Cultural Linguistics has contributed to investigations in various domains, such as World Englishes, second language learning, intercultural communication and analysis of political discourse in what is referred to as applied Cultural Linguistics. Regarding World Englishes, Cultural Linguistics approaches the exploration of varieties of English from the premise that “varieties of English may be distinct from each other when their respective cultural conceptualizations are taken into consideration” (Sharifian 2015: 483). As for second language learning, teaching a second language may require explaining cultural conceptualizations associated with features of the language to be learned (Palmer & Sharifian 2007: 3). In the field of intercultural communication, cultural conceptualizations are considered relevant in explorations of communication/miscommunication between individuals (Sharifian 2015: 485). In cultural-linguistic explorations of political discourses, such discourses are argued to be influenced by culture and entrenched in cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian 2015: 487).<sup>10</sup>

As pointed out in the introduction, it is important to remember that, in this paper the language-culture interplay does not particularly refer to national languages and cultures as different understandings of the world/life not only occur between different languages, but also inside the same language (see Agar (1994).

Another scholar who has addressed Cultural Linguistics is Laura Janda. According to Janda (2008: 49), cultural concepts are embedded in language, and all languages contain culturally specific features, both lexical and grammatical. She finds that every language meets the expressive needs of its speech community (Janda 2015: 52). This idea is also expressed in Boas (1966: 60-63), who, in relation to an earlier claim that the conciseness and clearness of thought of a people depend to a great extent upon their language, discusses the relation between language and thought. Boas (1966) does not agree that language blocks people from certain ways of thinking, but that, if certain forms of expressing do not exist in a language, this is because they are not required; however, they would develop in the moment they are needed. These ideas are in line with the constructionist view on language in the sense that linguistic items emerge through human interaction within a community.

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10 For specific examples of studies in these areas, consult for example Palmer & Sharifian (2007), Sharifian (2011, 2013, 2015).

#### 4. (Social) constructions

Conceptualizations of the world trigger categories, and the categories are labeled via lexemes. In other words, lexemes are linguistically constructed expressions for human thoughts. They are constructed socially among people, which means that language is not an objective reflection of the world.

This view on language is consistent with basic social constructivist ideas. It is well-known that social constructionism is a broad area and that it is approached in social science as well as in humanities within different areas such as political science, social psychology and education. According to Burr (1995: 2), there is no single description which would be adequate for all social constructionists. However, drawing on Gergen (1985), Burr (1995: 3-5) lists, a number of key points which are basic to social constructionism:<sup>11</sup>

- 1) We have to take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world. The nature of the world cannot be revealed by observation. The categories with which we apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions.
- 2) The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts that we use, are historically and culturally specific.
- 3) Our understandings of the world are constructed between people in the course of social life.
- 4) Social constructions invite to social actions. Therefore, different constructions of the world bring with them different kinds of social action.<sup>12</sup>

There is variation within social constructionism in terms of how much attention is paid to language, depending on whether the main orientation is mainly sociological or mainly discursive.<sup>13</sup> Since the aim of this paper is not to uncover a specific area in Society, but to illustrate the relation between language and culture at a more general level, our focus is specifically on language. The above-mentioned idea from Cultural Studies that “language does not mirror an independent object world but constructs and constitutes it” (Barker & Galasinski 2001: 1) is consistent with the assumptions put forward by Burr (1995). In the same lines, Hall (1997c: 25) suggest that “Things do no *mean*: we *construct* meaning, using representational systems”. He also suggests that

(...) it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about the world meaningfully to others. (Hall 1997b: 25).

This also holds for categories from nature, such as a stone, which obviously exists. Saying that STONE is socially constructed refers to the conceptualization of a stone in our mind and the subsequent construction of the word *stone*, the labeling of the category. According to Czarniawska-Joerges (1992: 34), “a stone exists independently of our cognition; but we enact it by a *cognitive bracketing*, by concentrating our attention on it. Thus 'called to life', or to our attention, the stone must be socially constructed with the help of the concept of a stone, its properties, and uses.”<sup>14</sup>

11 Both Burr (1995) and Gergen (1985) are psychologists, but these assumptions are so basic and general that they seem to be able to cover the area of social constructionism in general.

12 The reproduction of the assumption is here merely a summary.

13 A well-known example is Fairclough's discourse analysis, which emphasizes the important of language in social life (see for example Fairclough 2003).

14 Ecological psychologists call this *affordances* (see Reed 1997). Thanks to an anonymous peer reviewer for pointing this out to me.

Although the existence of some categories, such as categories that designate objects from the nature like *STONE*, may seem more obvious than others, it is not given by nature what will be conceptualized and labeled. In principle, there could be things out there that we have not called to life and thus not labeled. People also conceptualize “things” that are not physically “out there”, such as phenomena. For example, in earlier times, the concept of *RACISM* did not exist, although today it is a widespread belief that this phenomenon actually happens. Another example is the labeling of different historical periods, such as *The Renaissance*, *The Baroque* and *Romanticism*. These labels were not made during the periods, but afterwards in a categorization to describe a development in Society. That language does not mirror an independent object world is confirmed by the fact that categories are not the same in all languages. In the words of Romaine (1999: 20), “[n]o particular language or way of speaking has a privileged view of the world as it ”really” is. The world is not simply the way it is, but what we make of it through language.” Social constructionism has been accused of suggesting that “there is no reality”, but this is not the case. In the words of Gergen & Gergen (2004: 11), “[t]he important point is that whenever people define what “reality” is, they are always speaking from a cultural tradition”.

Some categories are not constructed on the basis of a previous conceptualization of something, but are direct results of people's inventions. Some very concrete examples are *CAR* or *WASHING MACHINE*. In these cases, the constructions and labels may emerge more or less simultaneously with the inventions themselves. Some of these categories exist by virtue of some constitutive rule systems, constructed socially in a society. D'Andrade (1984: 91) distinguishes between cultural categories for objects such as *TREE* and *STONE*, which exist whether or not they are labeled, and cultural categories such as *MARRIAGE* and *MONEY*, which are created by the social agreement that something counts as an entity solely by adherence to a constitutive rule systems that define them and without the ones they would not exist. Building on D'Andrade, who does not suggest a term for this type of phenomenon, I characterize categories such as *MARRIAGE* and *MONEY* as *institutionalized categories*. They are embedded directly in a part of society's system, for example the legal system.

If linguistic constructions are seen as reflections of conceptualizations of the world, it is relevant to ask the question “when does something become a linguistic category?” For something to have the possibility of being encoded linguistically, it must be conceptualized and considered important for at least a group of people that for some reason wants to be able to speak about it. This is because what someone conceives of as for example a phenomenon, others may not conceive of as such. The process is a negotiation process. The part that wants the linguistic construction of category to happen must enter a negotiation process and try to win it. Normally, the negotiations about new linguistic expressions and how to refer to things happen “naturally” among the members of a community over time, but, in some cases, such negotiations can be more “artificial” in the sense that categories can be imposed by authoritative participants in the negotiation. In Denmark, for example, in an effort to create more respect for low-status professions, it was decided to replace the titles of some of them.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, difficult to change everyday language in this way, probably because the new words do not emerge through natural negotiation among people. It can also be questioned whether the shifting in terminology in this case is actually accompanied by a shift in the perception towards the professions.

Until now, our focus has been on the construction of categories, but the use of category labels is also relevant with regard to the relation between language and culture, as the use have consequences for people. Language and language use influence people's understanding of the world and their practices. The existence and the use of linguistic items, in this case lexical words, are

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15 Examples are *renovationsmedarbejder* ('renovation employee') as a replacement for *skraldemand* ('dustman') and *rengøringsassistent* ('cleaning assistant') as a replacement for *rengøringsdame* ('cleaner')

constructed on the basis of culture, and they themselves influence people's culture: they are mutually constitutive. In the next section, I will show how a combination of the different theoretical approaches presented in this paper can be useful to account for the dialectic relation between language and culture.

## 5. Language and culture – conceptualization and construction

This section serves to illustrate the dialectic relationship between language and culture through ideas from Cultural Studies, Cultural Linguistics and social constructionism by means of selected examples. Some of the examples are lexemes from national languages, and some of them go across national languages.

### 5.1. Categories pertaining to gender

The first example I would like to put forward are gender-related categories. In the previous section, I suggested that the conceptualization of something and the subsequent construction of a label are about people's understanding and giving meaning to the world. Like the *STONE* category that we discussed earlier, the gender categories *MALE* and *FEMALE* may seem obvious, because of the distinct physiological differences, which are “real”. However, it is through the labeling that we give meaning to these categories (cf. Hall's 1997c concept of representation as “the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language”). It is no news that labels pertaining to gender are not only understood and used about physiological differences, but also about psychological differences between the two. It has been, and is being discussed, in parts of the world in modern history whether or not there are natural psychological differences between human males and females. The conceptualization of these categories as being different from each other has led to different possibilities and expectations and to different social roles in all parts of the world.<sup>16</sup> Although men and women are still not treated equally, a historical flashback shows that the conceptualization of gender categories has changed, i.e. the cultural models/schemas have changed (cf. Holland & Quinn 1987: 4 and Sharifian 2011: 8-11). This is due to the fact that conceptualizations are cultural. In addition, male and female categories are conceived of differently in different communities (not only in national communities). People have different cultural models of the categories – not only across national boundaries, but also in the same place at different times. This example illustrates that the conceptualization of the categories, the linguistic construction of it, and the use of the label are related to culture. The culture in a community is reflected in the meaning of the categories, and at the same time the actual meanings influence the culture through interactions within a community. However, even though the relationship is dialectic, we are not dealing with an unbreakable circle. Societies develop and new meanings and practices are negotiated by social agents. The example is very illustrative of the basic assumptions of social constructionism presented by Burr (1995: 3.5): that we should have a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, that the categories and concept we use are historically and culturally specific, that our understandings of the world are constructed between people in the course of social life, and that different social constructions brings with them different kinds of social actions. Regarding the last assumption, the way the biological sexes are constructed socially as genders has consequences as it brings different possibilities and expectations to people. It is both important how the labels are used, and when they are made relevant. For example, they are sometimes used as explanations of behavior or even specific incidents. It goes without saying that the conceptualizations of the gender categories and the way these are expressed in language have consequences for the way individuals from the two sexes are met in different contexts.

16 It is worth mentioning that some languages lexically distinguish between the cultural and biological aspects of gender while others do not. For instance, English lexically distinguishes between *gender* and *sex*, while in Danish *køn* covers both aspects.

Through language people reproduce expectations to individuals based on gender membership.

A number of categories have been constructed from the more “basic” gender categories. In Danish, for example, the word *pigefnidder* has been constructed on the basis of a conceptualization of a certain behavioral phenomenon among girls. The lexeme *fnidder* refers to something like “small disputes and power struggles”, whereas *pige* means GIRL. The compound noun refers to a special kind of problem between girls which normally is associated with certain behavioral patterns and emotions, for example jealousy. If the same problem occurs among a group of boys, it is not conceived of in the same way, and Danish does not have a lexeme for this. In a similar vein, Danish has a word pranks made by boys – namely, *drengestreger* – but not a word for pranks made by girls. The cultural models of gender categories have consequences for both boys and girls on different occasions in the Danish society as they are not met on the same conditions and understandings of the individual child are lost. Other examples of categories constructed on the basis of gender are GENDER DISCRIMINATION and GENDER QUOTA. These categories are reflections of two competing characteristics of a culture: 1) that the genders are exposed to being treated differently, and 2) that it is a generalized idea that this is not acceptable. Presumably, cultures with a clear-cut division of labor between men and women do not have the concept for GENDER DISCRIMINATION and therefore not a label. GENDER QUOTA (and, to some extent, GENDER DISCRIMINATION) are examples of what I characterize as institutionalized categories, i.e. categories that have existence by virtue of some constitutive rule systems, constructed socially in a society (cf. reference to D'Andrade 1984: 91 in Section 4).

### 5.2. *Categories pertaining to ethnic identity*

Another example are categories based on nationality, ethnicity, etc., such as *second-generation immigrant*, a concept which refers to children of immigrants, who themselves are not immigrants. This notion transcends national borders and is lexicalized in other languages than English, such as Danish (*2. generationsindvandrere*), German (*Einwanderer der zweiten Generation*) and Spanish (*inmigrante de segunda generación*). Constructions of social categories such as gender categories or categories based on nationality or ethnicity are made because somebody identifies some specific characteristics of a group for example regarding some practices that they want to be able to make relevant for some reason.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the group is made relevant without an explicit reason. According to Potter & Wetherell (1987: 116), category membership is an important and pervasive part of people's discourse: “Pick up any newspaper and many stories will concern people who are described, evaluated and understood not in terms of any unique features of their biography but through their category membership.”

### 5.3 *Categories pertaining to legal systems*

Many of the institutionalized categories are categories connected to the legal system, for example crime categories. In a democratic society, legal categories are constructed through time on the basis of generally shared cultural values and moral. Like other categories, these have been constructed through negotiation over time. Consequently, they have undergone changes throughout the history of their existence (and some have disappeared while new ones have been introduced) and, thus, legal categories are not uniformly identical in all parts of the world (as the legal systems are not). Importantly, they are not given by nature, but by culture. A category such as TAX EVASION, for example, requires a tax system, which in itself forms part of a culture. The dialectics of legal categories is, on the one hand, that the categories are based on already existing values, and therefore

<sup>17</sup> Baker et al. (2013) have made a corpus driven analysis of representations around the word *Muslim* in a word corpus of British newspaper articles. An analysis of noun collocates of *Muslim* found that the following categories were referenced: ethnic/national identity, characterizing/differentiating attributes, conflict, culture, religion, and group/organizations (Baker et al. 2013: 255).

form part of a culture and, on the other hand, that they themselves influence values and moral for the members who are born into the society in question because they tell people what is right and what is wrong. Another, more direct, set of consequences of this type are obviously the legal consequences.

English and Spanish both have lexemes for the phenomenon of a woman being killed because of her gender: *femicide* and *feminicidio*. The Spanish version was entered in Real Academia Española, the official institution in Spain responsible for regulating the Spanish language, in 2014, after Spain and other Hispanic countries had experienced a long period in which violence against women, often with fatal outcomes, committed by their partners. In an essay, the group According to Feminicidio.net, a website with the aims at raising awareness of femicide and the group behind it, “Murders of women need a linguistic and a political-legal category both in Spain and in other countries” (my translation).<sup>18</sup> The group argues that the term is new in Spain, but that the people do not use it. This means that for something to be considered a phenomenon, it needs a linguistic construction, a word. In addition, the group wants a more direct institutionalization of the category. They want it to be reflected in the legislation as a crime category with legal consequences (<http://www.publico.es/sociedad/espana-mata-mujeres-mujeres-mito.html> 24/4 2015). The linguistic category and the legal category of the concept will reflect that this phenomenon is a problem in society and that society does not accept it. Otherwise it could be seen as a reflection of a culture that accepts this kind of act. If a language does not have a word for this phenomenon, it can be because the society in question does not experience the problem or because the Establishment does not conceive of it as a problem (which, in the case of non-recognition of femicide as a category, could be reflective of a non-democratic patriarchy). In other words, the linguistic construction or the absence of the linguistic construction is a reflection of a certain cultural model.

Legal categories can also have the function to exempt individuals from punishment or to reduce it. Examples of this are the institutionalized categories of CRIME OF PASSION and HONOR KILLING. The notion of honor is to a great extent a cultural phenomenon. In some cultures, the legal system exercises “understanding” of the homicide of a member of a family by other members, due to the perpetrators' belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonor upon the family. A concept as HONOR KILLING is linguistically coded in many languages even though it is not a category from the legal system of the societies where these languages “belong”. This is due to the fact that different societies do not exist isolated from other societies, but are in contiguity with each other.

#### 5.4. *Diagnosis categories*

As the last example I will mention a specific type of categories, which crosses national boundaries and the actual status of which is an obvious reflection of a widespread culture in modern Society: the diagnosis-culture. Diagnosis-categories are constructions of diseases based on symptoms. Sets of symptoms have been grouped and labeled as diseases through history. Diagnoses are not constant, but develop over time and are constructed socially. Naturally, this does not mean that the symptoms are not real; it only means that the decision as to which symptoms in combination lead to a diagnosis, is negotiated and constructed socially. In addition, although many groups of symptoms are categorized in the same way in many parts of the world (for example as THE FLU or TONSILLITIS), they are not the same in every part of the world. Many diagnoses are institutionalized categories in the health system. An example is neurodevelopmental psychiatric disorders, for example ADHD). According to Conrad & Potter (2000: 561), psychiatric diagnoses are historically and culturally situated, and certain diagnostic categories appear and disappear over time. Medical categories such as ADHD, ANOREXIA, CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME, REPETITION STRAIN INJURY, FIBROMYALGIA, PMS, PTSD, and MCSD belong to a wide range of new medical categories that did not exist previously

18 <http://www.publico.es/sociedad/espana-mata-mujeres-mujeres-mito.html> 24/4 2015

(see Conrad & Potter (2000: 560). Disorders are identified with point of departure in a conceptualization of normality, which is culturally determined and not static (cf. Sharifian 2011: 3 regarding members of cultural communities negotiating 'templates' for their thought and behavior).<sup>19</sup> The widespread diagnosis-culture is a reflection of a common understanding regarding feelings, behavior, etc. In the case of neurodevelopmental psychiatric disorders, the negotiation and the constructions are very concrete and observable. ADHD figures in ICD-10, which is the 10th revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD), a medical classification list by the WHO. The list contains codes for diseases, signs and symptoms, etc., and is revised from time to time. As such it is the result of negotiations. It is discussed why some many children today suffer from a neurodevelopmental psychiatric disorder (especially ADHD): is it because the diagnoses were not constructed earlier (but the children were the same), or because the world has changed? In any case, diagnoses are constructed on the basis of culture. This is one of the sides of the dialectic interplay between this type of category and culture. The other side is the direct consequences – positive and negative: getting a diagnosis of a neurodevelopmental psychiatric disorder gives (at least in many countries) direct access to help from the health system – but it also stigmatizes people.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to discuss the interplay between language and culture within a societal dimension, and to illustrate that the frameworks of Cultural Linguistics and Cultural Studies based on basic social constructionist ideas are useful to this purpose. The combination of the cognitive foundation and the constructivist view allows us to grasp the process from the very conceptualization of a category to the linguistic construction of it into a linguistic item. This process is related to culture as both conceptualization and construction is a cultural matter. As social constructionism not only focuses on construction of language, but also on the consequences of language use, this aspect can also be discussed within the topic of the relationship between language and culture. The interplay between language and culture is seen as dialectic as language, on the one hand, reflects culture, and, on the other hand, influences culture. Language and language use are seen as reflections of different conceptualizations of the world. Conceptualizations are culturally based as they emerge throughout people's encounters with the world in their cultural environments. As such, language is not an objective reflection of the world. National languages and their use reflect various conceptualizations, and conceptualizations and constructions can also be similar across national languages. The existence and the use of linguistic constructions influence worldview and as such culture, but not in the sense that they determine people's culture, as both language and culture are dynamic by nature.

My paper should be seen as a theoretical contribution to the discussion about the interplay between language and culture, and the discussed examples are from different areas and serve to substantiate the points put forward in the paper. I suggest that these points could serve as a theoretical basis for investigations within specific areas of Society, such as the relationship between legal categories and culture or categories from the social system and culture.<sup>21</sup>

19 In earlier times (and still in some places in the world), for example, homosexuality was considered an abnormal condition and, as such, a kind of disease.

20 For readers with special interest in the subject of diagnosis-culture, I would like to draw attention on an ongoing research project at the University of Aalborg, Denmark: "Diagnostic Culture: The experience, history and social representation of depression and ADHD" directed by Svend Brinkmann, see <http://www.communication.aau.dk/research/Research+Projects/dc>. See also Brinkmann (2016), which presents findings from this project.

21 McLaughlin (2009), for example, seeks to trace the development of the terms that have been used in British social work to identify the relationship between those who commission or provide services and those who are in receipt of those commissioned or provided services, including *client*, *customer*, *consumer* and *service user*. The article seeks to

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examine the different ways this relationship has been conceptualized and the implications of these conceptualizations for social work practice.

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