

**CULTURAL STUDIES: SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVES**

*The study entitled “Cultural Studies: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives” analyses various historical and present-day approaches to the field of research of Cultural Studies. The author of the study analyses theories of cultural studies (Hall, Zelenka, Zelenková) and supports the views of modern cultural-studies experts (Chenetier) who believe the subject should divert from a mere accumulation of information about the target country and incline towards a comparative approach with one’s mother country. This paper has been published as a result of KEGA 033UMB-4/2017 (E)migration as a Political, Linguistic and Cultural Phenomenon in the Era of Globalisation.*

**Keywords:** *American Studies, culture, cultural studies, minimal content.*

**Introduction.** Modern, post-2001 era, significant of globalisation and information revolution challenges the traditional core of academic subjects related to investigation of culture. These subjects include “cultural studies” targeted at students of humanities, language-training institutions as well as faculties of economics that study language and culture to enhance business negotiations.

In this study, we will explore the subject of cultural studies from diachronic and synchronic points of view. Attention will be paid to the development of the study of culture and to the current theories related to the cultural discourse.

Through analysis of historical development of the subject of cultural studies and its current derivations, we will try to formulate the role cultural studies (including studies of culture of specific countries and regions, e.g. American Studies, North-American Studies and Slovak Studies, to name a few) in the present-day floating world.

**Cultural studies: a diachronic perspective.** Etymologically, the word “culture” comes from the Latin word *to cultivate*, meaning improvement and enrichment [Barker 2006: 96]. Cicero, a Roman philosopher, political theorist and orator, is believed to be the first to use

the phrase “cultivation of the soul” (*cultura animi*) in his *Tusculanae Disputationes* (45 BC) in the metaphorical sense of the word.

In modern times, Cicero’s original use of the term “culture” has been extended to “all the ways in which human beings overcome their original barbarism, and through artifice, become fully human.” Nowadays, the term “culture” encompasses the teachings of many theorists and philosophers (e.g. Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emanuel Kant). In common speech “culture” usually refers to (1) identity (e.g. of a region, group of people, nation) or (2) cultivation of the original, authentic “self” [Barker 2006: 96-97].

Culture, however, is also a subject of professional research for many disciplines such as anthropology (the study of mankind, its origins, development and customs), ethnology (the study of different ethnicities), sociology, political sciences and many others.

Modern scholars recognize over 200 definitions of the term “culture”. Let us explore three of these – a linguistic (dictionary) definition, a sociological definition and a political definition:

**1. Dictionary definition: A.S. Hornby (1989):**

“Culture [means]:

- 1 ...a refined understanding and appreciation of art, literature, etc. (for example: a university should be a centre of *culture*).
- 2 ...the state of intellectual development of a society (for example: mass culture, 20th-century culture).
- 3 ...a particular form of intellectual expression, e.g. in arts and literature (for example: Greek culture).
- 4 ...the customs, arts, social institutions, etc. of a particular group of people (for example: Eskimo culture)” [Barker 2006: 291].

**2. Sociological (anthropological) definition: R. Murphy (1986):**

“Culture means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It thus refers to the norms, values, and standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the world and rendering it intelligible. Culture is [...] a set of mechanisms for survival, but it provides us also with a definition of reality. It is the matrix into which we are

born, it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged” [Murphy1986: 14].

**3. Political definition: The official UNESCO definition (2002):** “...culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” [UNESCO: 1].

All these definitions – linguistic, sociological and political – broaden the core of the term “culture” from their own perspective. Thus, studying culture from a political perspective (focused on fundamental documents, institutions and mechanisms of the examined society) inevitably differs from studying the same culture from the perspective of literature, education or the fine arts.

**Cultural studies: a synchronic perspective.** Not only the focus of attention of cultural studies but also the method of acquiring cultural information differs from other academic subjects. According to Michael Byram, the study and acquisition of culture includes information gathered consciously (by learning, practicing), but also subconsciously (by experience, imitating) [Byram 2013: 48]. Byram writes that mastering culture reaches “from the commonest greetings through use of public services [...] non-verbal behaviour, and the expectations of conversation turn-taking, rules of politeness and the maxims of normal communication”, and is as significant for successful communication as the native speakers’ conscious knowledge (historical, geographical, sociological, etc.) about their society along with linguistic knowledge. (Ibid.). What is more, some scholars point out that culture is not an “invariant and static entity made up of accumulated, observable, thus eminently teachable and learnable facts but a variable entity, changing with times and new social phenomena” [Moore 2013: 1]. As a result, cultural studies differs from all other academic disciplines: its subject of research is interdisciplinary and modified by the purpose of the study; unlike other disciplines, cultural studies examines both conscious and unconscious cultural knowledge of the target country and its inhabitants, and the focus of research is changeable and needs perpetual updating.

That is also a reason for a vast number of researches related to the subject of Cultural Studies in the present era. Paige and Jorstad define culture learning as “the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively” [Paige et al. 2013: 1].

Cultural studies (in Europe also known as “realia courses” and country studies) is an interdisciplinary subject that integrates information from many fields of research, such as sociology, politics, economics, geography, history, and the arts, as well as literature, philosophy, law, photography, gender studies and many others.

In 1994 Byram formulated what he called *minimal content*, i.e. the minimal scope of culture-based information and data that would provide the learner with the minimum necessary extent of data needed to successfully function in a new culture. These are:

- a) social identity, social groups (age, sex, class, region, profession);
- b) social interaction (verbal and non-verbal behaviour, familiarity);
- c) faith and behaviour (routine, natural group behaviour, moral and religious faiths);
- d) social and political institutions (state institutions and their values, law, health care);
- e) social and public life (family, schools, professions, religion, military service);
- f) national history (including present and historical events that are regarded as important by the members of the society);
- g) national geography;
- h) national cultural heritage;
- i) stereotypes and national identity (roots for stereotypes, their comparison).

Analogically, Slovak, Russian, Canadian or American studies is thus an interdisciplinary field that explores many areas of the political, social, cultural and daily life of the respective country. These studies do have their own terminology (e.g. the term *Americanization*, *Bohemisation*);

however, it also borrows some terminology and research methods from other disciplines such as law, economics, political sciences, arts, and many others. Cultural Studies, however, should not represent a mere gathering of data about the country of research. French Cultural-studies expert Marc Chenetier is one of those who warn against merely accumulating data from various fields; instead, he advocates the internalization of cultural studies and the necessity of a comparative approach [Chenetier 2008: 1-3]. The authors of this coursebook, in accordance with notable Slovak and international scholars [UNESCO 2013; Zelenka 2007; Zelenková 2009], also understand cultural studies as an interdisciplinary and comparative discipline, exploring a broad scope of USA-related data such as main historical and political events, the structure and functioning of fundamental institutions and organizations, the significance of major American documents, artistic, literary and technological achievements, nationally recognized holidays, famous American people in history and many other areas. Understanding these concepts will help the students to better and more competently use the English language in practical use as well as in translating.

**Conclusion: why do linguists and philologists study culture in the era of internet?** Studying foreign languages inherently incorporates the study of culture of the respective language. In this observation we rely on the research of Michael Byram, who observes that language has no function independent of the context in which it is used, and thus always refers to something beyond itself: the cultural context [Byram 2013: 1]. Slovak scholars Otrísalová and Gazdík also observe that “translations are not made in a vacuum but arise in a given culture at a given time” [Gazdík, Otrísalová 2012: 116]. Here are some examples:

- **Historical and geographical cultural context:** The vocabularies of many languages contain words that have rich and interesting historical backgrounds. Many of these words were originally borrowed from other languages and, therefore, often lack a Slovak (or European language) equivalent. For example, the first settlers in America borrowed many Indian words (mostly referring to regional flora, fauna and the way of life in America) which completely lacked any equivalent in Slovak (or any other European language). Instead of being translated, the original word has been used up to the present. For example: *catalpa* (a Catawba Indian word

for a specific plant; [Cothran 2003: 171]) is referred to in Slovak as *ca-talpa obyčajná*. Mere translation thus does not help to understand the meaning of the word; we need to learn more about American flora to know its shape, colour, flavour and use.

- **Linguistic-cultural context** (grammatical, phonetic, morphological etc.: As the English language “travelled” across oceans to America, Australia, Africa and many other regions of the world, many grammatical, phonetic, morphological and other types of changes occurred. For example, the pronunciation of the final “r” sound in the word “car” depends on the region where the word is used. Morphological and lexical changes also occurred, both internationally and nationally. For example, in most of the USA you stand *in line* but in New York you stand *on line*.

- **Social-cultural context:** mastering a foreign language means more than mastering its linguistic rules. As Ivan Zelenka [Zelenka 2007: 31] notes, it is equally important to master the “culturewise” level of the language. That incorporates many verbal and non-verbal elements (including proximity, gestures and movements, facial expressions and many others), social skills, codes and taboos, for example:

- proximity: how close people stand to each other,
- how loudly or softly someone speaks;
- when to and when not to make eye contact;
- socially acceptable and unacceptable topics for formal/informal situations;
- formulations of excuses, how to respond to feedback;
- how directly or indirectly one may ask for help or clarification of instructions, how to treat people of a different gender, sexual orientation, race, culture or age;
- how to say no;
- in what manner (tone, pitch, style) to criticize or praise other people’s performance;
- when to be casual and when to be formal;
- how to interpret the meaning of others’ behaviour [Gardenschwartz, Rowe 1991: 96].

Mastering non-verbal communication is also essential for successful use of a foreign language. R.M. Paige introduces the term “cultural

effectiveness”, referring to one’s ability to function in the foreign culture. That is the major aim of students of cultural studies [Paige et al. 2013: 171] in present-day globalised era.

## References

1. Barker C. Slovník kulturních studií. Praha: Portál, 2006.
2. Byram M. Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters // <http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/resources/litreview.pdf> [Accessed 01.07. 2013].
3. Byram M. Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1997.
4. Byram M., Morgan C. et al. Teaching and Learning Language and Culture. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1994.
5. Chenetier M. “New” American Studies: Exceptionalism redux? // European Journal of American Studies. 2008. No. 3-3. P. 1-3.
6. Cothran J.R. Gardens and historic plants of the antebellum South. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003. PP. 23-45.
7. Gardenschwartz L., Rowe A. How Culturally Aware are You? // The Diversity Tool Kit. London: Irwin Professional Publishing, 1991. P. 96.
8. Gazdík M., Otrisalová L. English Canadian Literature in Slovak Translation: the story of underrepresentation // Canada in Eight Tongues: Translating Canada in Central Europe. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2012. P. 116.
9. Hall S. Cultural Studies and the Centre: some problematics and problems. // Hall, S. et al. (eds.) Culture, Media, Language. London: Hutchinson, 1979.
10. Hohn E. Komparatistik im Kontext der literaturwissenschaftlichen Methoden // Zborník príspevkov zo VII. konferencie Spoločnosti učiteľov nemeckého jazyka a germanistov Slovenska. Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2004. P. 275-277.
11. Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
12. Mauk D.C., Oakland J. American Civilization – An Introduction. New York: Routledge, 2005.
13. Moore J. An analysis of the cultural content of post-secondary textbooks for Spanish: Evidence of information processing strategies and types of learning in reading selections and post-reading adjunct questions. Doctoral dissertation. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota // <http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/resources/litreview.pdf> [Accessed 10.07.2013].

14. Murphy R. Culture and Social Anthropology: An Overture. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1986.

15. Paige R.M., Jorstad H., Siaya L., Klein F., Colby J. Culture Learning in Language Education: A Review of the Literature // <http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/resources/litreview.pdf> [Accessed 10.07.2013].

16. Paige R.M. Education for Intercultural Experience // [http://www.pulib.sk/elpub2/FF/Olostiak1/pdf\\_doc/21.pdf](http://www.pulib.sk/elpub2/FF/Olostiak1/pdf_doc/21.pdf) [Accessed 10.07.2013].

17. UNESCO definition of culture. UNESCO and the Question of Cultural Diversity 1946-2007. Review and Strategies // <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001543/154341mo.pdf> [Accessed 10.07.2013].

18. Zelenka I. Languagewise or Culturewise? – k poslianiu literárneho textu na hodinách cudzieho jazyka // Pedagogické rozhľady. 2007. No. 4 (16). P. 32.

19. Zelenková A. Interkultúrne vzdelávanie ako súčasť cudzojazyčnej výučby na vysokej škole // Psychologie, Sociologie a Pedagogika. Mezinárodní Bařova conference pro doktorandy a mladé vědecké pracovníky. Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíne, 2009.

**Я. Яворчикова** (Словакия, Банска Быстрица)

## **КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ: СИНХРОНИЧЕСКИЕ И ДИАХРОНИЧЕСКИЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ**

*Настоящее исследование направлено на анализ различных исторических и современных подходов, применяемых в области лингвокультурологии. Автор рассматривает различные культурологические теории (Халл, Зеленка, Зеленкова) и поддерживает взгляды современного эксперта в области культурологии (Ченетье), согласно которому субъект должен отойти от простого накопления информации о стране, являющейся объектом исследования, и обратиться к компаративному подходу, подразумевающему сравнение с лингвокультурой родной страны.*

**Ключевые слова:** американистика, лингвокультура, культурология, минимальное содержание.