異文化教育研究所
Japan Intercultural Institute

Deep Culture Podcast – Transcript
The Deep Culture Podcast explores the psychological impact of intercultural experiences, informed by the sciences of brain, culture and mind. Join hosts **Joseph Shaules** and **Yvonne van der Pol** as we look at the personal growth that can come from travel, living and working abroad, learning a foreign language, growing up in a multicultural context—and the challenges of bridging different cultural worlds.
Episode 10 – Language, Culture and Mind
Why are some things—such as the Dutch word *gezelligheid*—so hard to translate? Will technology make language learning obsolete? Does speaking a foreign language change how you look at the world? In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Yvonne van der Pol explore such questions from the brain and mind science perspective. They talk about *linguaculture*—language and culture as two parts of a larger, complex, dynamic whole. They discuss *embodied simulation theory*, which proposes that language use involves an embodied process of mental simulation; it's much more than a manipulation of mental symbols. All this helps us understand why language learning helps us enter into other cultural worlds, and remains important for intercultural bridge people everywhere.

Time	Speaker	
00.00	Joseph	Get everyone's attention and then say, okay, dog…Hello, I'm Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the deep culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. This is a podcast for people who move between different cultural worlds. We talk about intercultural experiences, and we dig into the science and the psychology of culture and mind. I'm doing that today with Yvonne van der Pol as usual. How are you Yvonne?
00:40	Yvonne	Hi Joseph, great being here. I'm doing fine**.**
		Intro
00:45	Joseph	So the other day, one of my students asked me, do I think that technology is making foreign language learning obsolete, that because of technology we won't ever, we won't need to learn foreign languages anymore?
01:02	Yvonne	Well, that's an interesting question. After all, software is getting better and better at translation, you can speak into an app on your phone, and it will translate what you say. I did that in Japan and China and that was great!
1:15	Joseph	I want to try that. I've got my phone here. So let's experiment. How do you say "the 4th of July" in Japanese? *Shichi-gatsu yokka* (machine voice)
1:32	Yvonne	Oh, that seems pretty easy.

1;35	Joseph	Well, yes and no. I mean, it translated it as "July 4th", not "the 4th of July". And you got the difference, because as an American, there was a difference: The "4th of July" is American Independence Day. It's a national holiday. You know, you see fireworks, you're on picnics, but July 4th, that's simply the day after July 3d, but the phone translated it as July 4th, not the "4th of July"!
02:07	Yvonne	I learned that in the States when I lived there.
02:10	Yvonne	And when I would say, how are you going to celebrate the 4th of July? And I understood, I'm not going to ask how are you going to celebrate July 4th? So this is an interesting example of cultural nuance in language, something that's cultural bridge people deal with a lot.
2:25	Joseph	That's what we're going to explore in this episode, this language-culture connection. We're going to look at a few different questions. Why are certain words hard to translate? What precisely is the connection between language and culture, and does speaking a foreign language make you see the world differently?
2:50	Yvonne	And that brings us to Part One
		Part 1 - Gezelligheid and wabi sabi
03:10	Joseph	Yvonne, both of us have spent years learning foreign languages. So let's give our listeners a taste of our foreign language journeys. And of course English is my first language… (Yvonne and Joseph start exchanging in English, Dutch, Spanish, and continue with French, German, Japanese and Bahasa…) …
4:32	Joseph	Oh wait, wait a second. So we have three languages that we speak in common, English, French, and Spanish. And I'm comfortable in Japanese. I speak that pretty well, but that was German, right? Because I can't always tell the difference between German and Dutch because I speak neither of them.
4:50	Yvonne	Yeah. I get, you completely know they're closely related because they're in the same language group.
04:57	Joseph	(Speaks Indonesian**)**
5:02	Yvonne	I don't speak Bahasa the language of Indonesia, but I recognize it. So you've spent quite a time, quite a bit of time over there.
05:11	Joseph	My Indonesian is not really fluent. It's still a work in progress**.**
05:17	Yvonne	Oh yes, every foreign language is forever work in progress.
05:34	Joseph	So given that language learning is so hard, and we've got new technology. Why go through the trouble? Is it worth it?
05:44	Yvonne	Well, great question. Well, for me personally, absolutely. Yes, it's worth it, but it's also related to the first question we asked ourselves today. Why are certain things hard to translate from one language to

		another? And the language is not just a way to transfer information. It reflects the way of life, the values, the thinking of that family of speakers. So learning Spanish for me was a way to dive into another language group with a complete different structure.
06:14	Joseph	It was also a shock for me to discover how different it was using Spanish in real life. Not just making sentences in a classroom. When I was 19, I took a bus for 26 hours I think, to San Miguel Allende to study Spanish in Mexico. It changed my life. And I discovered that Spanish is not just, you know, words on a page. It's an entry point into this other world. And there I was walking on cobblestone streets, and I was buying *Chicharrón*, this fried pig skin from little stands on the street. And I was struggling to make sentences and talking to people, but it was really this soaking in this other cultural world. So the language practice is so closely related to this entering into another world.
07:05	Yvonne	Yeah, and this is also the reason that things are sometimes hard to translate. Language reflects culture.
07:12	Joseph	For example Yvonne, what words might capture some unique element of Dutch culture?
07:19	Yvonne	For sure that would be "*Gezelligheid*"…
07:24	Joseph	**"***Gezelligheid"…*
7:24	Yvonne	You say it nice …
7:30	Yvonne	Yeah, what it is, it translates in English in the best possible way as "coziness", but actually it's much, much more. It means that there is no set time and place for feeling close to friends and family in a nice and cozy atmosphere. And you shouldn't be watching the clock for instance, once you're having a good time with others…It is the proverb "coziness knows no time"…
07:52	Joseph	Oh wow, does that refer to like a cozy feeling that you share with people that you're close to like, like with friends and family?
8:00	Yvonne	Well, yes and no, because interestingly enough, it's even that meetings at work can be *gezellig* , and it means having a good time together with others while doing the work. That's really hard to grasp for foreigners, but it can also be the opposite actually, "and don't be so o*ngezellig* is what people then say and not *gezellig*, not cozy. And for instance, in my case, when I refuse cookies and sweets, because I'm allergic to sugar, they'll find that rather o*ngezellig!*
08:34	Joseph	All right. So that means, so when you, when you say no to cookies, you are, you're not being a *gezellig* person, is that right?

8:39	Yvonne	You're completely right, I'm absolutely untypical. I'm not *gezellig*. And you know, saying no creates like a kind of disharmony when you refuse something in a cozy atmosphere
09:06	Yvonne	What about Japanese? Are there words that are hard to translate in Japanese?
09:10	Joseph	Well, of course
09:13	Yvonne	I would imagine so, yes, well, there are tons of that
09:19	Joseph	Well, there are some really famous examples like *wabi sabi* which refers to a Japanese aesthetic, the kind of beauty that can be found in things that are imperfect or incomplete…
09:36	Yvonne	…and to get a sense for that, you need to experience the kind of scenes or objects that represent *wabi sabi*.
09:43	Joseph	This is something too, that linguistic neuroscience is teaching us, not to suddenly go to neuroscience here, but language is not just a set of labels for ideas. Language is very closely related to experience, and that's why dictionary definitions are never enough.
10:02	Yvonne	So I guess for you learning Japanese required getting a feel for how Japanese relate to each other
10:08	Joseph	Yeah. One reason it's so challenging is that Japanese has many honorific forms that depend on context, and so to practice them, you almost have to be in that situation.
10:22	Yvonne	Can you give me an example of this situational language?
10:24	Joseph	Well, if you ask me how to say *eat*, but I have to give you several different words each used in different situations, depending for example on the status of the people involved—it could be *taberu* or it could be *itadakui*, or it could *meshiagaru* or it could be *kuu* depending on the situation**.**
10:44	Yvonne	Wow, that's hard to imagine.
10:46	Joseph	Totally. Right. If I'm in a formal situation, I might ask someone *meshiagarimashitaka?* for "Did you eat" and that choice of words expresses deference to this other person. But if I'm talking about myself, if I want to say I've eaten already, I've had enough, I might say *juubun ni itadakimashita* because that word expresses humility towards myself, rather than respect to the other person, it really reflects the kind of deep elements of Japanese values. Yeah, I sometimes joke that, you know Japanese show respect by pretending that the other person is superior, whereas Americans show respect by pretending that we're all equal.
11:33	Yvonne	Oh yes. Well, this is also interesting, but it raises a deeper question. What's the relationship between language and culture?
11:43	Joseph	Well, and that brings us to Part Two

		Part 2 - Linguaculture
12:06	Yvonne	Most people understand that some words can be hard to translate. And any English speaker who has studied French for example learns that you have to make a distinction between *tu,* the familiar form of "you", and *vous* the more formal form.
12:21	Joseph	…and they also learn that making a cultural mistake can be worse than making a grammatical mistake. For example, using *tu* instead of *vous* in the wrong situation in French…
12:32	Yvonne	…because knowing that *tu* is more informal than *vous*, it doesn't really tell you when and how to use it.
12:39	Joseph	I know that I've been speaking French for many years, but I still hesitate sometimes on which one to use.
12:45	Yvonne	So to really get a feel for speaking French, you need to enter into the world of French speakers. But wait, if we say the world of French speakers, some people will think we're saying that there is like a single true or essential world of French.
13:00	Joseph	That's a good point. Well, we're not saying that there's one true essential world of French, obviously using French in Dakar, Senegal will be a very different experience from using it in Marrakech or Paris or Montreal. So it's not a single one thing.
12:17	Yvonne	And the world of French speakers is complex and dynamic, and ever-changing like with many other transnational languages, just think of Chinese, Arabic, English, Russian, Swahili, Spanish.
12:28	Joseph	So culture is also dynamic and complex in a very similar way. And there are people in fact who use the word Linguaculture to describe the relationship between language and culture as a single thing. The linguist Paul Friedrich first used this term, Michael Agar who's a linguistic anthropologist. He uses the term Languaculture.
13:55	Yvonne	Yeah, and in effect, by putting a language and culture together into one word, Languaculture, you are saying that language and culture are two parts of a larger whole…
14:05	Joseph	languages are alive…
14:08	Joseph	like a super organism. They're constantly changing and evolving, which reflects the lives of its speakers, their shared culture…
14:18	Yvonne	...which is why we might call Latin a dead language. There isn't a large enough community of Latin speakers to keep it alive and evolving in the same way shared cultural patterns emerge from the interaction in the community.
14:34	Joseph	Language and culture are both emergent properties. This idea of emergent property, it comes from complexity theory.

14:43	Yvonne	Here you are, but maybe you're getting a little bit too theoretical here Joseph!
14:48	Joseph	Oh, come on. I think our listeners love this stuff.
14:52	Yvonne	Okay, go ahead.
14:58	Joseph	So, an emergent property refers to how simple interactions create complex phenomena. So for example, individuals buying and selling stock, which is a simple interaction, creates complex, unpredictable patterns in the stock market. You can never predict what's going to happen. Emerging phenomena is complexity that emerges from simple interaction
15:21	Yvonne	and Languaculture too, right?
15:24	Joseph	So culture emerges from interaction and language develops in parallel to that. So, language and culture, Linguaculture, it's this larger whole of shared meaning.
15:41	Yvonne	Okay, if I got it right, language reflects shared cultural experience. So for example, the meaning of the words, *4th of July* reflect the experience that Americans share related to the 4th of July. With that in mind, let's move on to Part Three
		Part 3 - Seeing the world in a new way
16:20	Yvonne	You sometimes hear people say that they feel like a different person when they speak another language. Do you feel that way?
16:27	Joseph	Well, I definitely shift between different ways of expressing myself. Like I'm more reserved speaking Japanese than when I speak Spanish. I'm still playing my own music, I'm still being myself, but it's like playing on a different instrument. How is it for you?
16:45	Yvonne	But I do notice that's with speaking Spanish in the Central American context, for example, I feel so much at ease and speak as if I'm hanging out with people on a porch, just outside. Weather is nice. And I'm just hanging out and chatting a bit, but I'm still curious. Are we really looking at the world in a different way then?
17:07	Joseph	Now that's a difficult question. And that's something that linguists have been arguing about for a hundred years.
17:13	Yvonne	Do you refer here to the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis?
17:16	Joseph	Yes, the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis. That's the idea that language shapes perception, and it's been tested in lots of different ways. For example, some languages have fewer color words than others. So linguists will test whether people with fewer color words have trouble perceiving the shades that their language doesn't have words for. And there's some evidence that the language one speaks, can relate to our ability to distinguish shades of color.
17:50	Yvonne	That's interesting. What else?

17:52	Joseph	Well there's some quite clever research that I thought was interesting, that shows for example that when describing a key, so imagine a key in your mind, like the kind that you use to open a locked door, that when describing a key Spanish speakers tend to use descriptive words that emphasize the kind of curved or rounded quality that a key has. Whereas German speakers when describing a key are more likely to use words that emphasize its kind of jagged or rough nature.
18:26	Yvonne	But why?
18:27	Joseph	Well, those researchers will say that it's because in Spanish, the word for key is a feminine noun. And so their attention goes to the more feminine, stereotypically feminine aspects of the key, whereas in German, it's a masculine noun. And so that may affect the aspects of the key that people notice.
18:51	Yvonne	Wow, fascinating
18:54	Joseph	I mean, it doesn't seem that useful to me in terms of intercultural understanding.
18:59	Yvonne	I don't think Germans and Spaniards are often arguing about the shape of keys
19:05	Joseph	It's true.
19:08	Yvonne	There's a lot of other research that looks at language and cognition from the field of neuro linguistics or cognitive language linguistics for example
19:15	Joseph	The research that has really fascinated me is related to the cognitive processes related to language, and in particular, something called embodied simulation theory.
19:28	Yvonne	But is this going to get technical?
19:31	Joseph	Of course not, just stick with me here. For a long time
19:35	Joseph	the dominant idea was that language is basically a symbolic system, a set of concepts that we manipulate in our mind. So that language is like a mental code or a set of labels, for our thoughts.
19:53	Yvonne	So if I say, *dog*, you understand that I'm thinking about a dog because you know the concept dog.
10:00	Joseph	And I know that the sound *dog* goes together with that concept. So if that's the way that language works, then in order to learn a new language, what we're doing is learning a new set of labels for our thoughts.
20:17	Yvonne	Oh that makes sense.
20:19	Joseph	Well, it makes sense, but embodied simulation tells a very different story.
20:28	Yvonne	Does it tell a story about a dog?

20:32	Joseph	Well, in fact, it does tell a story about a dog in, I mean, it's a very different way of looking at how language works in the mind. Embodied simulation theory says that linguistic meaning is not primarily a manipulation of symbols. It's an embodied simulation, in other words, and here's where the dog part comes in, when I say dog, this triggers a simulation in your body and mind based on your experience with dogs.
21:05	Yvonne	So that simulation is like a re-creation of your experience with dogs. More like remembering than like mental manipulation.
21:16	Joseph	And if you want to test this yourself, you can try this experiment when you're at a party. Just when you're feeling cozy.
21:25	Yvonne	Okay, that's very *gezellig*
21:30	Joseph	Sorry, I couldn't remember how to pronounce it, but get everyone's attention and then say, okay, dog, and then ask everyone to tell you what kind of image comes to mind
21:40	Joseph	And people will not say that they had a kind of generic symbolic dog in their mind. Rather, they will give you a concrete answer. They'll say, oh, Dalmatian or poodle or German shepherd. And that's because the word dog, it's triggering a simulation based on their experience with dogs. So when I asked Japanese people this question, many of them answer, *Shiba* dog which is a breed of dog that is really common in Japan, and many Japanese probably grew up with.
22:12	Yvonne	No, we're hearing you talk about this. For me, it was like a dozen different dogs because every day I work in the nature by my house. And I'm the only person or almost the only person without a dog.
22:25	Joseph	Well, how about this? If I say "wet dog", what image comes to your mind?
22:31	Yvonne	Then I see this golden retriever that has just jumped in a puddle on the moors here and all wet and maybe shaking and running happily to his owner …
22:42	Joseph	That's a beautiful image, but interestingly, you are not simply putting two concepts together. You're not just putting the concept "wet" plus the concept "dog" together in a kind of mental manipulation. What you're doing is the words "wet dog" creates a simulation of experience that you've had with dogs.
23:04	Yvonne	Yeah, interesting. If that's true then learning a new language requires more than learning a new mental code.
23:14	Joseph	Exactly. So learning a new language means we have to create new mental simulations, and those simulations need to be based on our

		experience, not just some mental symbol or definition that we find in the dictionary.
23:31	Yvonne	I get that. But what about abstract concepts like governments or happiness? We don't really have mental images for those things.
23:40	Joseph	That's true. So that's the question about embodied simulation theory. How do you embody something abstract like government or happiness, and the research in that area focuses on metaphoric understanding that we understand these things metaphorically.
23:56	Joseph	So we say that we find happiness. We speak about happiness as though it's an object, or we talk about being full of joy. We're speaking about joy as though it were a liquid that has volume.
24:09	Yvonne	So can they actually test what's happening in people's minds when they are using language?
24:16	Joseph	Oh, there is a lot of research that does that. And if you're interested in that, I totally recommend the book *Louder Than Words* by Benjamin Bergen. It totally changed how I understand language. It introduces research like this. For example, they showed people a smiling face, and they asked what is this person feeling. When they asked that question in a library, people were more liked to answer "happiness", which is emotion as an object that you might look for, like you look for a book
24:52	Yvonne	Like a book in the library,
24:55	Joseph	right
24:55	Joseph	Whereas if you asked the same question in a bar, people are more likely to say this represents joy, which is emotion as a metaphoric liquid, something that you can be filled with**.**
25:07	Yvonne	Wow, that's interesting, and a bit weird. Is there anything easier to learn about this than buying a book?
25:15	Joseph	Well, if you just want a five-minute introduction, go to YouTube, do a web search for the Brain Dictionary. It introduces super cool research, which mapped the different areas of the brain that were activated by particular words.
25:34	Yvonne	Yeah. You can see a rotating brain with word maps onto it.
25:38	Joseph	And this research shows that language activates the brain areas associated with the related experience. So for example, if you hear the word "make a fist", it activates the areas of the brain that are used when you actually do make a fist
25:55	Joseph	even if you aren't visualizing the making of a fist.
25:59	Yvonne	So language use is not managed by some special or a separate language module in the brain. It's closely related to our lived experience.

26:08	Joseph	And we used to believe that there was some kind of special language module in the brain, but apparently that's not the way it works. Language is connected to our lived experience, and of course, shared lived experience is culture.
26:26	Yvonne	So can embodied simulation theory help us answer this question whether speaking a new language makes us see the world in a new way?
26:35	Joseph	I think it helps. Embodied simulation theory shows us that language is more than a code. It's not just a label for thoughts. It reflects the shared experience of the people that speak it. So to internalize it, to internalize a language, to get a feel for the subtle expectations of what things mean, of their unique flavor, you need that shared cultural experience.
27:01	Joseph	So if I really want to understand *Gezelligheid*, is that right?
27:08	Yvonne	That's right
27:12	Joseph	Then I need to share that experience with Dutch speakers. And it's that experience that will give me the sensation of entering into another world.
27:20	Yvonne	Well, actually recording this podcast with a cup of tea over a distance of 10,000 miles was pretty *gezellig*. You know, coziness knows no time, but by now it might be time for us to wrap up.
		Ending
27:32	Joseph	It has been great spending this time with you, this cozy *gezellig* time with you Yvonne!
27:39	Yvonne	And it was also with the flavour of wabi-sabi.
27:52	Joseph	The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am the director of JII. If you're interested in learning more about culture and the mind, one place to start is my book, *The Intercultural Mind*. In fact, I just learned that it's been translated into Turkish. I thought that's really cool. And check out Yvonne's wonderful book *Reflections on Intercultural Craftsmanship*. It talks about how the starting point for intercultural effectiveness is understanding the cultural patterns of our own mind. If you liked today's episode, we'd really like to hear from you. Leave a comment on apple podcasts, or write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org. Thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, and to everyone at JII. And thanks to you, Yvonne. Can't wait to get together again next month.
28:57	Yvonne	That would be wonderful. Well, thanks dear listeners for being with us today. Thanks, Joseph.
29:03	Joseph	See you again!

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