Evolving Role of Culture in Language Studies in the (Post)Digital Revolution Era: Reviewing Applications of Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

The study of the symbiotic relationship between language and culture, along with the call for a rigorous theory and systematic investigative framework, has been a longstanding pursuit. In the past decade or so, Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics (CL) has demonstrated its potential as a robust theoretical framework and a sharply honed investigative, analytical instrument with a multidisciplinary origin (including English as an International Language (EIL) to explore the interplay between language and culture. The present paper aimed at reviewing the applications of the CL approach and methodology in language-related studies. Arguing for the evolving role of culture in language education and research in the era of (post)digital revolution, this paper attempted to demonstrate the insights the theoretical and analytical frameworks of CL could bring to the realm of language teaching and learning. In so doing, as a starting point, the paper provides a concise overview of the principles and practices of the relatively novel interdisciplinary field of CL. First, the theoretical frameworks of the CL approach are described. This is followed by an explanation of the analytical frameworks of the CL methodology. Finally, some critical reflections on the CL's approach and methodology are offered. This synopsis is then followed by a state-of-the-art account of the application of CL in language-related studies in the era of (post)digital revolution. The paper concludes with the future directions in such an interdisciplinary venture.

KEYWORDS: Cultural conceptualization (CC); Cultural linguistics (CL); English as an international language (EIL); Language studies; (Post)digital revolution

1. Introduction

In the present era, the landscape of language education and research has witnessed a transformative evolution in its linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions as a result of the integration of innovative, inspiring theoretical frameworks within the domain of language-related studies. This evolution is primarily shaped by the emergence of challenging paradigms such as English as an International Language (EIL) (Sharifian, 2009, 2014, 2017c) or English as a Lingua Franca (House, 2024; Mair, 2024) and World Englishes (Mair, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2023; Sharifian, 2015b; Sadeghpour & Sharifian, 2019; Sharifian & Sadeghpour, 2020, 2021). On one hand, the former mainly deals with the widespread use of English as the dominant, "obvious transitional lingua franca" (Mair, 2024, p. 255) for intercultural communication across the globe, commonly known as globalization.

The advent of recent waves of "globalisation, and in particular the "three M-s" –migration, media and mobility— have profoundly changed the world's language ecology over the past three decades" (Mair, 2017, p. 83). In fact, according to Mair (2021), "no analysis of global English is satisfactory unless it takes into account the multilingual contexts in which the global language is used" (p. 28). On the other hand, the latter celebrates diverse local variations and varieties of English produced by the so-called 'non-native' speakers through the process of localization. In other words, English is "employed 'globally' to negotiate various systems with speakers of World Englishes, and simultaneously used to interact 'locally' with associates of the same cultural background" (Heidari Tabrizi & Chalak, 2025). The consensus between these two perspectives can be encapsulated best in the illustrious ethos: Think globally, act locally. This dual and concurrent phenomenon of localization stemming from globalization aligns with what Sharifian (2018a) echoes as 'glocalization.' Reconciling the two ends of a continuum, he argues, the process of glocalization involves interacting with the "modification of a global product to meet local needs and norms" (p.1).

The decisive transition from English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL) to the paradigm of ELI inevitably called for revisiting the role of culture in language learning and language-related studies. In other words, as Mair (2021) proclaims, "most heated language-ideological debates revolve around lingua-franca uses of English" (p. 28). With the most extensive chances of cross-cultural interactions on the rise due to more global mobility, Sharifian (2013c, 2013d, 2018b, 2018c) argues that the focus has shifted towards prioritizing intercultural communication generally and, more specifically, to developing intercultural competence. As the ultimate goal of ELT curricula, this competence, when acquired by language learners, can enable them to act as "effective and strategic translanguaging users of English in multilingual communication contexts" (Xu, 2017, p. 704). This has resulted in emergence of two competing or complementary roles for teaching globalized versus localized English. According to Chen and Le (2018), "This paradox of the double-functions of foreign-language education leads to the perplexing issue of how to deal with the relations between home culture and foreign culture" (p. 1).

The third millennium has also witnessed a paradigmatic major shift in language as well as translation studies "away from text- and linguistically-oriented approaches to socially and culturally oriented ones" as a result of what is usually known as the 'cultural turn' where "one does not translate languages but cultures" (House, 2015, p. 6). The term 'cultural turn' (or 'cultural shift') is employed in language studies to recognize the significance of culture as an integral part of all language activities. EIL has developed a rich body of research to study the cultural features and facets of the intercultural communication process. Moreover, the emergence of social networks has brought people together, interconnecting them as members of one global community (in the words of Noam Chomsky, 'international integration'). Thanks to technology-facilitated mass communication, nowadays, people can be 'connected' to and be in contact with individuals and locales across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. The unstoppable growth, as well as the ubiquity of new communication technologies, has resulted in ever-increasing interactions among individuals who do not understand one another's language or culture. In effect, language has transformed from a typical means of communication into a barrier among human beings living in the so-called 'global village.' The dynamic and ever-changing globalized digital environment demands the involvement of language-related studies in a novel, diverse array of emerging contexts and scenarios. In the present globalized world, any communication across cultures is always mediated by language. In fact, in an era characterized by expanding migratory networks and transnational residency, citizens in their daily lives are much more in demand of immediate better intercultural communications to help them overcome the barriers caused by not only linguistic but also cultural differences across many contents, contexts and channels. In addition, as Heidari Tabrizi and Chalak (in press) explained, "In recent two decades, by massive spread and proliferation of Social Networking Services (SNS) and the ever-increasing use of social media, a virtual dimension has been added to the daily face-to-face interactions" in human intra/intercultural communications.

As a result, various cultural models can now be found in the literature for teaching culture within the paradigm of EIL. These models are often influenced by the context in which English is being taught and learned. Accordingly, two prominent, ground-breaking cultural frameworks are particularly shaped and advanced by Michael Byram and his advocates in the context of the UK and by Claire Kramsch and her proponents within the US setting, contributing significantly to the EIL pedagogy (Chen & Le, 2018). Both models aim to respect cultural diversity and foster intercultural competence among learners, enabling them to communicate successfully and navigate cultural differences in English-speaking contexts. In short, effective EIL pedagogy tailor English instruction to meet the diverse educational priorities, needs, and backgrounds of learners, often drawing on elements from different cultural models. Accordingly, modern, alternative, more sophisticated approaches and methodologies are needed to study the relation of language and culture, considering these new concepts and contexts. In the new millennium, one such approach is the relatively young interdisciplinary approach of Cultural Linguistics (CL) proposed by Sharifian (2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017d). In fact, in the past decade or so, CL has demonstrated its potential as a robust theoretical framework and a sharply honed investigative, analytical instrument with a multidisciplinary origin (including the EIL) to explore the interplay between language and culture, stressing the dynamic nature of the latter (For a comprehensive account of Sharifian's contributions, see Heidari Tabrizi & Chalak, 2023).

Thus, the present paper aimed at reviewing the applications of the CL approach and methodology in language-related studies. Revisiting the role of culture in language education and research in the era of (post)digital revolution, this paper attempted to demonstrate the insights the theoretical and analytical frameworks of CL could brought to the realm of language teaching and learning. In so doing, as a starting point, it is more convenient to provide a concise overview of the principles and practices of the relatively novel interdisciplinary field of CL. First, the theoretical frameworks of the CL approach are described. This is followed

by an explanation of the analytical frameworks of the CL methodology. Finally, some critical reflections on the CL's approach and methodology are offered. This synopsis is then followed by a state-of-the-art account of the application of CL in Language Studies in the era of (post)digital revolution. The paper concludes with the future directions in such an interdisciplinary venture.

2. Cultural Linguistics: an overview

The study of the symbiotic relationship between language and culture, along with the call for a rigorous theory and systematic investigative framework, has been a longstanding pursuit. Historically, research inquiries into the interplay of language and culture, as "the two major factors of 'soft power'" (in the words of Mair, 2021, p. 28), faced challenging criticisms stemming from several reasons. The foremost issue is that definitions of culture are vague due to the intricate ontological and epistemological inherent complexity and the abstract nature of the elastic term 'culture,' which have led to varying interpretations among scholars. In fact, any attempt to define culture both theoretically and practically has fostered divergent conceptualizations and posed significant challenges. This vagueness often led to the formation of stereotypes, the tendency to make broad generalizations, and the risk of "essentializing speakers" (Sharifian, 2017a). Furthermore, within the scope of such investigations, culture is often conceptualized and approached as a fixed set of facts shared uniformly among language users, perpetuating a static perspective. Palmer's (1996) "theory of cultural linguistics" stands out among the pioneer contributions in studying the "uncontested duo" (in the words of Kramsch, 2015) to transcend this perceived problem. Palmer's theory, employing a cognitive-oriented perspective, primarily revolves around the concept of 'culturally constructed and defined imagery.' Nowadays, Palmer is widely credited with laying the groundwork for what has evolved into the internationally renowned domain of study known as cultural linguistics.

Against such a background, Sharifian (2011, 2017a, 2017b, 2017d) advanced the discipline further and developed his burgeoning field of Cultural Linguistics (CL) (with capital initials), where the term is employed in a more precise sense. Drawing on the language-thought-culture paradigm, CL can be construed as an emerging domain of study that deals with "understanding the relationship between language, culture and conceptualization" (Sharifian & Sadeghpour, 2021, p. 28). In an attempt to avoid the ambiguous, nebulous term 'culture,' Sharifian employs a more dynamic, adaptable view of Cultural Conceptualizations (CCs) as a process of meaning construction, replacing the abstract, static portrayal of culture as an inflexible analytical instrument. Within the CL framework, language is posited to be "firmly grounded in a group-level cognition that emerges from the interactions between the members of a cultural group" (Sharifian, 2013b, p. 1). In the following sections, the CL theoretical as well as analytical frameworks are explained followed by some critical reflections on its approach and methodology.

2.1. CL approach and its theoretical frameworks

2.1.1. Cultural cognition/conceptualization and language

In essence, CL's theoretical frameworks are mainly built on 'cultural cognition and language.' In an attempt to avoid the ambiguous, nebulous term 'culture,' Sharifian employs a more dynamic, adaptable view of CCs as a process of meaning construction, replacing the abstract, static portrayal of culture as an inflexible analytical instrument. Within the CL framework, language is posited to be "firmly grounded in a group-level cognition that emerges from the interactions between the members of a cultural group" (Sharifian, 2013b, p. 1). In short, cultural cognition is aptly described as "networks of distributed representations across the minds in cultural groups" (Sharifian, 2011, p. 5). Frank (2015) explains further that cultural cognition is "a form of cognition that ... is not represented simply as some sort of abstract disembodied 'between the ears' entity" (p. 494). As a dynamic notion that continually undergoes negotiation and renegotiation, cultural cognition "embraces the cultural knowledge that emerges from the interactions between members of a cultural group across time and space" (Sharifian, 2015a, p. 476). Sharifian (2017a) positions cultural cognition as a key feature of CL, where language, as one strategic aspect of cultural cognition, serves simultaneously both as a "collective memory bank" and "a fluid vehicle for the (re-)transmission of cultural cognition" (p. 2).

As a relatively young multidisciplinary field of inquiry, CL has both gained advantages from and made substantial contributions to diverse fields, intersecting with disciplines such as English as an International Language, World Englishes, cross-cultural pragmatics, intercultural communication, and political discourse analysis, eventually enriching and being enriched by these engagements (Sharifian 2011, 2017a, 2017d, 2018b, 2018c, Sharifian & Sadeghpour, 2021). Just like other cognitive sciences, including cognitive linguistics, CL views culture as a cognitive system intricately linked to language. This connection, in turn, originates from the conceptual faculties inherent in human beings who use language as a means of expression. However, Sharifian (2013d) argues that CL is different in terms of the much greater importance it gives to "the cultural construction of the conceptualisations that serve as the basis for particularly the semantic and pragmatic components of language" (p. 5). He illuminates that at the heart of CL lies the concept of 'meaning as conceptualization.'

By emphasizing heterogeneously disseminated, culturally-built conceptualizations (rather than culture itself), according to Sharifian and Sadeghpour (2021), CL "explores how features of human languages and language varieties are entrenched in

cultural conceptualisations" (p. 1), exhibiting diversity between and within groups as well as individuals. Sharifian (2013a) advocates for embracing such diversity (i.e., language users' varieties and variations) in CCs, particularly in the context of English as an International Language, viewing them "as assets rather than liabilities" (p.111). Underscoring the diversity in cultural understanding and cognition across language speakers within a social community, the advocates of this perspective reject the notion of homogeneously- and uniformly- shared, absolutely defined cultural norms as putative universals, advocating instead for recognition of the diversity of cultural understandings and access to CCs by language users. Instances of miscommunication in intercultural encounters signal the cross-cultural variations in the ways in which culturally heterogeneous interlocutors conceptualize their feelings, thoughts and experiences. By so doing, Xu (2017) argues that CCs act as "a dynamic, ongoing, and interactive process of cultural cognition, (re)schematisation, and (re)negotiation among members of cultural communities" (p. 705). CCs are typically indexed by many forms and features of human languages. The more CCs are shared by the individuals involved in intercultural communication, the more likely it would be for them to read between the lines (or even behind/beyond the lines) and to make indirect inferences and conjectures, and the less the likelihood of miscommunication.

Sharifian (2013d) explains further that CCs usually "feed into the semantic and pragmatic levels of meaning, providing speakers with pools of meaning which are to some extent shared across the community of speakers" (pp. 6-7). Within the CL framework, CCs are typically manifested, embodied, and mirrored in several aspects and forms of natural languages or cultural creations, including religious rituals, paintings, and literature. Nevertheless, these instantiations are not limited to verbal forms; they can also be embedded in non-verbal forms (e.g., in silence) using paralinguistic devices. For instance, in ELT textbooks, CCs are entrenched in texts as well as illustrations (Heidari Tabrizi & Chalak, 2025). In sum, the chief theoretical units of CL are brought together in the collective term CC to refer to the outcomes of human cognition processing (Sharifian, 2011, 2017a, 2017d).

2.1.2. Metacultural competence

As an essential part of the CL theoretical framework, metacultural competence is defined as the ability to navigate and mediate between multiple cultural conceptual systems (Sharifian, 2013c, 2013d, 2018b, 2018c). This competence involves understanding, managing, and applying different cultural frameworks, perspectives, and practices in communication and interaction in various contexts. It goes beyond surface-level cultural knowledge to include several key components such as cultural awareness (recognizing the existence and significance of cultural differences and similarities), cultural sensitivity (being sensitive to the impact of cultural differences on communication and interactions), cultural reflexivity (the ability to critically reflect on one's own cultural assumptions and those of others) and cultural adaptability (the capability to adjust one's behavior and communication strategies according to the cultural context). Sharifian (2018b) explains that "unlike very broad and binary notions of culture (source culture versus target culture), the concept of metacultural competence focuses on a dynamic and pluralistic view of cultural encounters and experiences" (p. 262), focusing on CCs rather than culture itself. Metacultural competence "develops as a result of exposure to and familiarity with various cultural conceptualizations associated with English." (Sharifian, 2018c, p.2). In effect, he argues that the concept of metacultural competence, as an offspring of the CL approach, can be regarded as a new element of the revisited and expanded notion of language proficiency. Within the perspective of the EIL paradigm, the primary aim of English language instruction is to foster the acquisition of abilities that empower language learners to engage effectively and adaptably with diverse speakers during intercultural interactions.

Among these interwoven proficiencies stands Sharifian's metacultural competence, which enables language users to navigate intercultural communications smoothly while also being aware of their own cultural identity and biases. Thereby, the landscape of language literacy and proficiency in EIL contexts is enriched by this additional competence. By nature, metacultural competence is dialogical and pluralistic; that is to say, it involves frequent and recurring negotiations and discussions among language users about heterogeneous CCs and other interculturally-constructed meanings. Metacultural competence goes beyond simply being culturally aware or sensitive; it involves a deeper level of self-awareness and introspection. Metaculturally adept language users possess the ability to communicate flexibly and appropriately in intercultural interactions and demonstrate proficiency in introducing, expounding, negotiating, and elucidating cultural concepts seemingly unfamiliar to their conversational partners. Such individuals are able to recognize the complexities and nuances of intercultural interactions and are skilled at bridging cultural gaps, managing misunderstandings, and building meaningful connections across maximally heterogeneous contexts. In essence, alongside individuals' linguistic and communicative skills, metacultural competence emerges as a fundamental, strategic requirement for acting effectively in intercultural communication within EIL environments. According to Sharifian and Jamarani (2013), this competence is potentially acquired through adequate "exposure to different systems of cultural conceptualizations, either explicitly, for example, through training, or implicitly through extended engagement in intercultural communication" (p. 7).

Sharifian (2018c) further explains that metacultural competence encompasses awareness of conceptual variations, strategies for explication, and negotiation. Awareness of conceptual variations is an essential aspect of metacultural competence, which "develops from the awareness that one language can be used by different speech communities to express differing cultural conceptualizations and is further consolidated as a result of growing familiarity with the different systems of cultural conceptualizations used by interlocutors" (Sharifian, 2013c, p. 74). Metacultural competence extends beyond mere

awareness-raising to encompass the development of abilities necessary for successful intercultural communication, such as employing strategies like explication and negotiation. Explication strategy involves intentional efforts made by speakers to elucidate strange, 'foreign' CCs for other interlocutors engaged in cross-cultural communication. This strategy mainly aims to describe the CCs by explanation. The complement to the explication strategy is negotiation, such as pursuing clarification of CCs, which enhances the smoothness and effectiveness of interaction among language users involved in intercultural communications. This could be illustrated by requesting elucidation of seemingly obvious concepts and expressions, which conceal much deeper layers of meaning. Figure 1 depicts the principal elements of metacultural competence as articulated by Sharifian.

Figure 1. Key components of metacultural competence (adopted from Schluer, 2021, p. 209)

Sharifian (2011) demonstrates the efficacy of employing specific metacultural strategies as a means to mitigate misunderstandings arising from the clash of divergent networks of CCs. He goes on to illustrate how a commonly presumed universal schema (for instance, friendship, privacy) can be interpreted divergently by language users coming from varied cultural contexts. According to Sharifian (2011), while such cultural schemas can best be described as "a category with specific culturally defined boundaries," they can evidently be associated with "widely different cultural conceptualisations and hence expectations depending on the culture in question" (p. 97). In addition to this, it is pertinent to consider how individuals may associate particular conceptual frameworks with corresponding linguistic expressions influenced by their personal beliefs and life experiences. All in all, through the standpoint of the CL theory, metacultural competence "specifies intercultural communication under awareness and strategies, including awareness and anticipation of different cultural conceptualisations by different speakers of Englishes and strategies of clarification, asking for clarification, and negotiations" (Dinh & Sharifian, 2021, p. 18). It "does not only involve students' multicultural knowledge but also their intercultural presence and academic stance through intercultural explanation and negotiation" (Xu, 2017, p. 718). In conclusion, Sharifian (2018c) emphasized that metacultural competence is still in its nascent phase, requiring further theoretical exploration, empirical investigations, and refinement of data analysis methods to enhance its depth.

2.2. Analytical frameworks of CL methodology

Within the framework of CL, the principal analytical tools of CCs encompass three closely interlocked, strategic concepts: cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors. These tools pave the ground to explore the multifaceted connections between language and CCs.

2.2.1. Cultural schemes

As the first key component of the CCs, cultural schemas are defined by Sharifian (2021) as "beliefs, norms, rules, and expectations of behaviour as well as values relating to various aspects and components of experience" (p. 10). These schemas, endlessly negotiated and renegotiated from one situation to another, are cognitively developed at the level of the cultural groups, not individuals. In fact, they emerge as a consequence of the interactions among the minds forming the cultural community. In short, according to Sharifian and Sadeghpour (2021), these macro-level "cultural schemas capture encyclopaedic meaning that is culturally constructed for lexical items of human languages" (p. 3). For instance, the cultural schema of FRIENDSHIP is the interconnected networks of ideas delineating 'friendship' in regard to diverse settings and variables. Every individual also collects and internalizes the cultural schemas by interacting with other members of a cultural community. Cultural schemas are not picked up in a homogeneously dispersed way. As explained by Sharifian (2017b), "some, but not all, components of a cultural schema" (p.61) are acquired by each member of the same cultural community. In other words, cultural schema internalization is a process that is partly shared and partly idiosyncratic. Sharifian concludes that "cultural schemas capture pools of knowledge that provide a basis for a significant portion of semantic and pragmatic meanings in human languages" (p. 480).

Sharifian (2011) contends that cultural schemas should not be seen as if they are fixed, universally shared repositories of knowledge. As a major category of CCs, he argues, they have a 'more or less' nature that "does not lend itself to such reductionist accounts" (p. 11). An extensive description of various categories of cultural schemas can be found in one of the earlier works of Sharifian (2011, pp. 8-11). He specifically refers to event schemas, role schemas, image schemas, proposition schemas, and emotion schemas. Additionally, context schema, procedure schema, and strategy schema can also be incorporated into his taxonomy. Various speech acts are also carried out and interpreted on the basis of cultural schemas (Sharifian, 2018b). Table 1 provides an overview of the classification of different types of cultural schemas, detailing their meanings, unique features, and common examples.

Table 1. A classification of cultural schemas (adopted from Heidari Tabrizi & Chalak, 2025, originally based on Sharifian, 2011)

Cultural Schemas			
#	Types	Short Definition	Example
1	Event	Abstraction from an individual's experience of certain events	Birthday; Funeral; Wedding
2	Role	Abstraction from behaviors expected of individuals in particular social roles or positions	Mother; Friend; Secretary; Teacher; Bus Driver
3	Image	Intermediate readily-imagined abstractions related to physical or social experiences	Building image schema; straight/circular/spiral path
4	Proposition	Abstraction serving as representations of thoughts and behavior	MARRIAGE IS ENDURING; WORDS CAN KILL
5	Emotion	Abstract association of a particular feeling or emotional state with certain activities/people	Shame; Shekasteh-nafsi (modesty); Ta'arof

2.2.2. Cultural categories

As another analytical tool, CCs employ cultural categories defined by Sharifian (2011) "as patterns of distributed knowledge across the cultural group" (p. 5), entailing "those culturally constructed conceptual categories that are primarily reflected in the lexicon of human languages" (Sharifian, 2017b, p. 4). Categorization represents a cornerstone cognitive function inherent to all human beings. In so doing, objects, events, and human experiences are classified into culturally-loaded cognitive categories. These categories, built around diverse domains such as age, relationship, and food, contribute to the formation of networks and hierarchies, with linguistic lexical items acting as labeling terms for the categories and their instances. In fact, the lexico-grammatical system of a language typically encodes cultural categories. For example, the words 'food' and 'fast food' denote a category and its subcategory, and instances of that category can be words like hamburger, pizza, and pasta. However, it is important to note that cultural categorizations, as employed earlier, are not merely labels; instead, they are associated with specific linguistic as well as behavioral expectations and standards. Language users with various cultural backgrounds may have the same or different sets of CCs for a given cultural category. That is to say, even in situations where food items are shared between two different cultures, categorization can vary, potentially being regarded as specialized knowledge within one culture while considered general, common knowledge within another.

2.2.3. Cultural metaphors

Another component of CCs is the concept of cultural conceptual metaphor, which has its roots in cultural systems. Within the CL framework, cultural metaphor holds significant importance as it directs attention toward investigating the cultural underpinnings of metaphorical expressions. Sharifian (2017b) aptly describes cultural metaphors as instances of "cross-domain conceptualizations that have their conceptual basis grounded in cultural traditions" (p. 4). He defines them as "cognitive structures that allow us to understand one conceptual domain in terms of another" (Sharifian (2013a, p. 1591). For instance, in societies shaped by clock and calendar systems, time is characteristically perceived as money, which is represented in linguistic metaphorical expressions such as saving, spending, wasting, or budgeting one's time. Another example is the instantiations of human body parts employed for culturally mediated conceptualizations of an individual's emotions and beliefs, known as embodiment (THE HEART AS THE SEAT OF LOVE). Likewise, Chalak (in press) argues that taboos, as culture-specific and culturally loaded lexical items, and their suitability or "inappropriateness can be interpreted differently by its users in different sociocultural settings"; moreover, "due to the changes in the language and culture and globalization, the concept of taboo is changing in different societies among the new generations."

Sharifian (2015a) argues that "many aspects of human languages are closely linked with cultural metaphors" (p. 482). To him, "in terms of their cognitive and linguistic status and… processing" (Sharifian, 2017b, p.18), these metaphors are best treated along a continuum (moving from the worldview-metaphor end to the most rhetorical, figure-of-speech end). These conceptual structures help language speakers understand a variety of culturally determined encounters. The process of

interpreting one domain in terms of another through analogy is shaped by culturally negotiated and cognitively constructed factors, and it evolves through social interaction over time and within specific contexts. In other words, the analogous relationships between particular lexical items and their associated meanings are not universal but culture-specific. In sum, these cross-domain conceptualizations, rooted in cultural belief systems, traditions, and practices, shape language users' interpretations and behaviors in social interactions, both within and across cultures. These cultural systems encompass worldviews, sociocultural norms, practices in ethno-medicine (folk medicine), and spiritual religious systems (beliefs and values). Figure 2 concludes this section by summarizing the elements of the CL's theoretical and analytical frameworks, illustrating how CCs embody various linguistic features and levels and, in turn, how they are reflected, indexed, and entrenched by language. These frameworks pave the ground for exploring CCs and their manifestation in language.
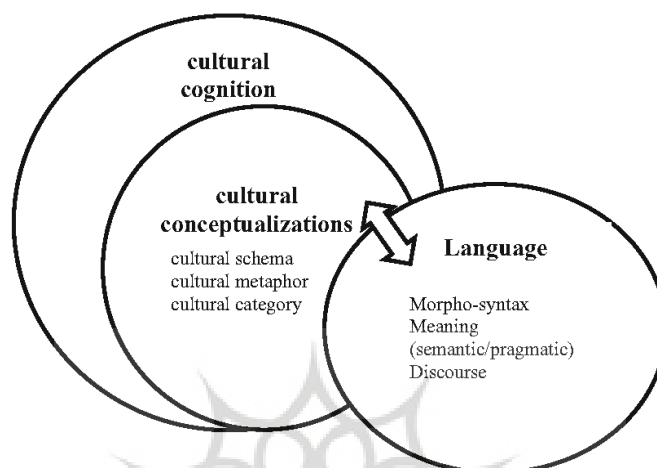

Figure 2. CL's theoretical and analytical frameworks (based on Sharifian, 2017b, p. 6)

2.3. Challenges CL faces: some critical reflection

The CL approach and methodology offer valuable insights into the intersection of language and culture, emphasizing that linguistic meaning is often culturally situated rather than universally shared. Through analyzing cultural schemas, metaphors, and categories, CL helps uncover subtle, culturally specific meanings that might otherwise go unnoticed. However, CL also faces some controversial issues and should cautiously be employed. Most scholars have used the CL approach and methodology in their empirical studies; recent improvements have been found in the analytical tools. We expect the number of CL analytical tools to increase. To the best of our knowledge, however, major theoretical advancement has not happened yet beyond Sharifian's seminal works (and especially after his sad demise). We believe that CL theoretical and analytical frameworks should be extended and expanded in order to tackle the following challenges. We encapsulate our critical evaluation in the following major concerns.

As mentioned earlier, in the CL approach, culture is seen as a cognitive system intricately interconnected to language. One may argue that as language, culture, and communication fundamentally represent social constructs indeed, how would it be feasible to confine them within a cognitive framework? While this statement is true, this does not preclude them from being understood through a cognitive lens. In CL, culture is viewed not merely as a set of social norms or practices but as a cognitive system that influences how individuals perceive and interact with the world. This aligns with the notion that our understanding of language is grounded in our embodied experiences, which are shaped by cultural contexts. We acknowledge that reducing language and culture solely to cognitive systems can be limiting. However, CL aims to bridge this gap by examining the dynamic interplay between cognitive processes and social constructs. Thus, while CL emphasizes cognition, it does not ignore the broader social dimensions of language use; in fact, CL sees these two constructs as interdependent. Sharifian (2011) argued that cultural cognition, as an emergent system, is the direct result of "the interactions between the members of a cultural group across time and space" (p. 21). In sum, we intended to highlight how CL provides valuable insights into the cognitive underpinnings of cultural phenomena while recognizing their social nature. We believe that this dual perspective enriches understanding of language as a tool for both individual cognition and collective cultural expression.

Our major conceptual concern is related to CCs as the cornerstone of the CL approach; we believe that Sharifian did not adequately elaborate on where CCs originate from or whether they are linked to or grounded in the values upheld by a group. Sharifian's writings, as well as contributions made to his approach, have not provided a comprehensive analysis of the exact nature of the interplay between CCs and values, though it is generally known that cultural values crucially account for cultural differences.

Moreover, the CL analytical framework apparently consists of three interconnected mechanisms that overlap with each other. Each of these analytical tools also has its sub-classes, which, in turn, are interrelated with each other, thus forming complex networks of CCs. For example, Sharifian and Tayebi (2017) argue that "the cultural schema of *adab* [politeness] is an over-arching macro schema that includes several lower-level cultural [sub]-schemas" (p. 395) encompassing *ta'arof* (the language of politeness and praise)*, rudarbâyesti* (modesty)*, sharmandegi* (the feeling of being ashamed)*, shekasteh-nafsi,* and *âberu* (honor). That said, we think that some criteria are missing within the CL frameworks to determine which ones are schemas, categories or metaphors and which ones are not and then recognize them in a given culture. For instance, how can we determine whether *mehmannavazi* (hospitality) is a cultural schema or not?

Our main methodological concern is that the CL frameworks lack rigorous empirical grounding and highly rely on inevitably subjective interpretations of CC. That is to say, intuitive knowledge often overshadows empirical evidence due to a lack of logical coherence in the methodologies employed within the CL frameworks. We think that some tools should be developed to establish intersubjective agreement for determining and classifying CCs. Similarly, it is clear how much data is required for a given schema, category or metaphor to reach empirical adequacy in order to be documented as a CC. In addition, should we explore CCs using a bottom-up, inductive method or a top-down, deductive one?

We think that another controversial issue is related to challenges CL may face with regard to cross-cultural applicability and globalization. With increased intercultural interaction and the global spread of ideas, languages are constantly borrowing and adapting cultural concepts from one another. This fluidity can challenge CL's ability to clearly delineate culture-specific meanings, especially in multilingual or cosmopolitan settings. For instance, cultural metaphors may not remain stable as languages interact and communities adopt words or concepts from one another, reshaping meanings along the way. It can be argued that this approach may struggle to explain how shared meanings evolve in such hybrid cultural contexts. We can also question whether the theoretical constructs of CL can adapt to these cross-cultural, global influences. Addressing these concerns requires flexible, context-sensitive approaches that balance the study of shared cultural meanings with an awareness of individual and cross-cultural variation. This balance helps CL remain a relevant and valuable framework in our increasingly interconnected world (for a detailed discussion of the challenges CL faces, see Shahi, 2023).

3. CL and its applications in language-related studies

The past decade has proved that CL can serve as a viable, fully-fledged theoretical and analytical framework to explore the intertwined association between language and CCs in different fields of study. In brief, the majority of research employing the CL framework is centered around the three key dimensions of CCs: cultural schemes, categories, and metaphors. Sharifian (2015a) asserts that applying the CL framework has "enabled fruitful investigations of the cultural grounding of language in several applied domains" (p. 473) across neighboring disciplines. He claimed that generally speaking, "any area of inquiry that involves the interaction between culture and language will significantly benefit from adopting the framework of Cultural Linguistics" (p. 488). Above all, Sharifian's (2017c) ground-breaking edited book, *Advances in Cultural Linguistics*, approves this claim. It collects into a single volume a vast panoply of 30 studies spanning a diverse range of subjects, "from the very conceptualization of life and death to conceptualisations of emotion, body, humour, religion, gender, kinship, ageing, marriage and politics" (Sharifian, 2017b, p. 26).

Most recently, *The handbook of Cultural Linguistics* (edited by Korangy, 2024 in honor and memory of Professor Farzad Sharifian) covers a kaleidoscope of diverse contributions organized in 45 chapters, which are allocated to theory and trends of CL as well as empirical studies mainly on Persian and global CL. As it is promoted in its blurb, the handbook provides "a comprehensive introduction to issues in cultural linguistics, addressing the peculiarities of the field under the rubric of localized studies, and speaking to the possibilities." Likewise, Wolf et al. (2017), in their editorial to the special issue of *International Journal of Language and Culture on CL Contributions to World Englishes*, affirm that "with a broad range of applicability and a rich array of methodological approaches…, Cultural Linguistics provides much meeting ground for scholars working within various frameworks and from different perspectives" (p. 121). These applied domains of investigation in the realm of language studies may include, but are not limited to, EIL pedagogy and practice, World Englishes, and intercultural communication, among others.

For instance, to explore intercultural communication, CL offers a theoretical-analytical framework which is strongly interpretive and meaning-oriented in nature, as Sharifian (2013c) has illustrated. In fact, the term 'intercultural communication' has gained an expanded definition and conceptualization in the new millennium as a result of the ever-increasing processes of globalization, digitalization (technological advances including online social media platforms and networks as well as interactive, virtual, telecollaborative, web-based tools) and international mobilization. According to Sharifian (2018c), these processes have brought with them a transformative shift in the contexts, the channels, and the contents of intercultural communication, making it "the default context of communication in everyday life" (p. 260). As such, for many people, especially those living in multicultural settings, intercultural communication competence is not just an asset but rather a must; that is, "an integral component of global citizenship in the twenty-first century" (p. 266). Thus, considering these expanded novel definitions and uses of intercultural communication, which entails a promising "meeting place" (Sharifian, 2015a, p.

487) or point for various cultural systems at conceptual level, CCs, as a core element to the CL framework, may offer a basis for analyzing intercultural meanings which are eventually constructed, interpreted, recognized, and negotiated in terms of their CCs in intercultural communications among language users with different cultural background (Sharifian, 2013c). He offers examples that impede mutual understanding and, more often than not, result in detrimental miscommunication between speakers in intercultural encounters due to their unfamiliarity with different systems of CCs. In the same manner, Schroder (2021) applied the CL framework to study Brazilian Portuguese Jeitinho as a CC in German-Brazilian multimodal intercultural interactions.

In a similar vein, some scholars have developed an interest in the potential contributions the CL theory and methodology may have for lexicographic studies. For instance, Cummings and Wolf (2011) used the CL approach in compiling the entries in a dictionary of Hong Kong English. Sharifian (2015a) regards this approach as a revolutionary one, "for it allows readers to become familiar with the cultural conceptualizations underlying certain expressions in the given language or the language variety… in many cases, the underlying conceptualizations themselves have their roots in older cultural traditions" (p. 848). Similarly, Carls et al. (2017) employed the CL framework in developing a dictionary of Indian English, which is characterized by the systematic treatment of Indian English with word-formation processes in focus.

Not much has been done to study the interplay between language and CCs in the field of ELT curriculum in general and materials preparation and evaluation in particular. Traditionally speaking, many studies can be found in the related literature exploring the role of culture as an abstract notion and cultural presentations in ELT textbooks. Among the most recent ones, to name but a few, are Ghasemi and Chalak (2017), Gheitasi et al. (2020), Mizbani and Chalak (2017a, 2017b), Tajeddin and Abolhassani Chime (2021), Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2015), and Torki and Chalak (2017). In the last couple of years, however, the attention of some scholars, including Sharifian himself, was attracted to the analytical tools of CL as effective mechanisms to explore CCs, which can be mainly instantiated in verbal discourse as well as visuals of ELT instructional materials at a profound level. In a set of cutting-edge research, Dinh and Sharifian (2017, 2021) and Dinh (2017) reported the findings of their CC analyses from a multimodal perspective, as reflected in the reading materials and visuals of locally produced English textbooks used in high schools in Iran and Vietnam. Dinh and Sharifian (2021) elaborated on the potential contribution the CL framework may have to the EIL curriculum, pedagogy, and instructional materials, including textbook preparation as well as evaluation.

More recently, other researchers have also been attracted to studying different facets and features of the ELT curricula (such as instructional materials and textbook evaluation) through the lens of the CL framework. As an example, Peters and Mundt (2021) introduced some "novel applications of the cultural linguistic paradigm in the pedagogy of languages, expanding the scope by contributing insights that are built upon a solid empirical basis" (p. 16). In this edited collection, Schluer (2021) used a video-based cooperative approach to explore the crucial role of L2 metacultural competence in interpreting, elucidating and negotiating CCs in a receptive language skill (English reading). Most recently, Alemi and Tajeddin (2025) edited a collection of empirically-based studies, all framed by the CL approach, that deals with the ELT curriculum and textbooks. In the same collection, for example, Heidari Tabrizi and Chalak (2025) explored CCs of friendship as included in the verbal and visual contents of locally produced English textbooks used in Iranian ELT institutes. Some other studies employing the CL-oriented framework to ELI pedagogy and practice include, among others, Dabbagh and Atai (2022), Dinh (2017), Dinh and Sharifian (2017, 2021), Mohebbi and Rahimi (2019), Sahraee Juybari and Bozorgian (2020), and Xu (2017).

During the last couple of years, the CL methodology has begun to garner attention within the Translation Studies community, too, as the application of CL to different areas of Translation Studies seems to be promising (Heidari Tabrizi & House, 2025a, 2025b). In one of the pioneer studies, Heydon and Kianbakht (2019) proposed a model of analysis based on the CL framework and its CCs for translating humor as a culturally built concept to arrive at a taxonomy of culturally loaded conceptual structures. In another study, Kianbakht (2020), for the first time, employed the framework to address the much-debated concept of equivalence through the lens of CCs. He suggested the 'cultural conceptual model of equivalence,' which he claims "is capable of capturing, unpacking, and analysing *cultural conceptualisations* underlying lexical items in the source text, and deconstructing them into the new linguistic reality of the target text" (p. 139). Likewise, Hrystiv (2020) explored, from the perspective of Ukrainian BA students of English translation, the extent to which ethnolinguistic-positioned metacultural competence was useful in teaching translation and training translators. The findings of these pioneer research explorations are certainly inchoate, immature, and inconclusive at best, showing the urgent need for further research studies. Most recently, Heidari Tabrizi and Mair (2025) demonstrated the common grounds between the two disciplines and the potential capacity CL approach and methodology has in enriching Translation Studies.

4. Paper's contributions

This paper hopefully contributed to the field of CL and its applications in language-related studies in several ways. The authors provided a state-of-the-art review of how Sharifian's CL framework has been applied in various language-related domains, particularly in the context of the (post)digital revolution. They attempted to synthesize insights from diverse studies, offering a consolidated understanding of CL's theoretical and analytical frameworks. By revisiting the role of culture in language

education and research, the paper highlighted the dynamic and emergent nature of CCs and their role in meaning-making. It positioned CL as a robust interdisciplinary framework for addressing challenges in intercultural communication and globalized language use. As for future directions, the authors tried to identify critical gaps in the current CL framework, proposing future research directions, such as integrating CL with digital communication, multilingualism, and AI-powered language learning. The paper emphasized the need for interdisciplinary approaches to expand CL's applicability in emerging contexts. These contributions hopefully underscore the paper's role in advancing theoretical and practical discussions in CL and language studies.

5. Conclusion remarks and future directions

As mentioned earlier, Sharifian (2015a) believed that the CL theory and model are substantially and undeniably valuable for any field of study exploring the complex interplay between language and cognition and CCs. According to Yu (2007), CL "maintains that language is a cultural form and that conceptualizations underlying language and language use are largely formed or informed by cultural systems" (p. 65). Contemporary language education and research, as a field of study that examines the role of language as a cultural mediation in intercultural communication in the present globalized digital world, definitely falls among such fields. At the macro-level, the CL theory can inform policymakers and curriculum designers involved in developing language programs on the significance of incorporating metacultural competence in language curricula for undergraduate and graduate studies. At the more practical level, the CL analytical framework can be used by practitioners in the field to address a wide range of issues and problems. All in all, the CL approach introduces a comprehensive and unified model to the interdisciplinary field of language education and research to explore various existing issues systematically by appreciating the underlying CCs embedded within linguistic elements.

As the literature shows, the contents of ELT curricula and the instructional textbooks are "relatively devoid of pluralistic culture pedagogy, cultural diversity, and cultural dialogism" (Heidari Tabrizi & Chalak, 2025). They promoted a rather biased, Anglophone-dominated cultural 'monologism' which is in full contrast with the EIL and World Englishes paradigms, which highly acclaim the representation of a diversity of cultures in ELT textbooks, "highlighting English as a pluricentric entity attached to a multitude of cultures" (Dinh & Sharifian, 2021, p. 13). This lack of diversity, together with the full alienation of learners from cultural variances, creates a cultural gap that definitely hinders the process of learning EIL and certainly leads to cultural misunderstandings for the learners when they try to interact in real-life situations with people from different cultural backgrounds. Left unprepared and unequipped for such intercultural communication events, ELT learners are highly vulnerable to contextual misapprehensions and confusion. According to Sharifian (2017c, p. 3), the "risk is heightened when a common language is used to encode different conceptualizations, rendering these differences almost invisible." Another possible consequence for ELT learners is "a loss of self-esteem in expressing their own cultural identity" (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015, p. 191).

By delving into the cultural nuances embedded within language, language users can do their job more effectively, accounting for sociocultural norms and CCs, as well as the cultural connotations associated with them, that may otherwise be lost in intercultural communications. The CL framework transcends the constraints of conventional linguistic analysis in dealing with the role of language in intercultural encounters by exploring the interplay of different facets of cultural cognition and their realizations in language, employing CCs instead. This approach fosters greater cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, transcending mere linguistic transfer to encompass the broader context in which language and culture systems operate. In sum, the CL approach can make prospective inroads into language-related studies.

The future directions in the multifaceted interplay between CL and language-related studies are poised to explore deeper connections between language, culture, and cognition, emphasizing the dynamic and emergent nature of meaning-making in general and CCs in particular. There is also growing interest in applying Cultural Linguistics to address global challenges, such as fostering cross-cultural understanding and mitigating linguistic biases. Scholars are likely to focus on expanding the framework to incorporate emerging fields such as digital communication, multilingualism, AI-powered language learning, and intercultural pragmatics, where cultural conceptualizations play a critical role in shaping interactions. They may explore how cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors evolve in multilingual and multicultural contexts, particularly in response to globalization and (post)digital revolution. Interdisciplinary approaches integrating the empirical methodologies with theoretical insights from cognitive science, anthropology, and sociolinguistics will further illuminate how cultural conceptualizations shape language use and vice versa. Additionally, advancements in corpus linguistics and computational methods will enable large-scale analysis of cultural-linguistic patterns across diverse languages and communities. Offering transformative perspectives, applied studies may also expand into areas such as intercultural communication, language education, and translation, fostering greater cross-cultural understanding and uncovering new dimensions of how cultural cognition is encoded in language. Ultimately, this interplay will continue to highlight the inseparable relationship between language and culture, offering new insights into human cognition and social interaction. These directions highlight the more-than-ever interdisciplinary nature of modern digitalized language studies, emphasizing the need to consider cultural, social, cognitive and technological factors in the process of intercultural communications and interactions.

In conclusion, the exploration of CL in language-related studies in general and CCs in particular underscored the importance of understanding cultural nuances in language education, as it influences how individuals communicate, form relationships, and navigate social interactions. As EIL curriculum developers strive to create inclusive and culturally relevant learning materials, acknowledging and embracing diverse cultural perspectives is of paramount importance. By promoting a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding, language education can serve as a powerful vehicle for fostering meaningful connections and enriching global dialogue. In a 'global village' where language is strongly instrumental in fostering communication across cultures and shaping perceptions and worldviews, the importance of culturally informed language studies cannot be overstated. In fact, in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world, characterized by escalating advancements in technological innovations and an ever-growing demand for more and better intercultural communication, there is an urgent need to develop novel frameworks such as CL for discussing and conceptualizing language related issues that comprehensively address the profound changes within the digital domains and spheres. As globalization continues to bring different cultures closer to each other, the role of CL in language-related studies will become increasingly vital in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Future research and practical implementations will further illuminate the best practices for incorporating CL into different subfields of language education and research.

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