On the logical necessity of a cultural connection for all aspects of linguistic structure

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Cognition:
Inference in understanding our surroundings

There is a human instinct to try to understand the world through inference.

The inference involved is largely abductive inference.
One part of trying to understand the world is trying to understand what other humans are doing by inferring their intentions when they do what they do.
One part of trying to understand what other humans are doing is inferring their intentions when they are purposefully trying to get you to infer their intentions.
The nature of communication: ostension and inference

Communication is not accomplished by an exchange of symbolic expressions, but by the addressee’s successful interpretation of a communicator’s intent in performing a communicative act.

The person wishing to communicate something does an ostensive act (i.e. does something that makes it clear s/he wishes to communicate something).

The other person must infer (guess) the communicative intention behind the ostensive act. Communication then involves ostension and inference.
The speaker makes inferences (guesses) as to what the hearer will be able to understand, and then uses the ostensive act most likely to facilitate the inferential process of the hearer.
Communication can take place with or without language.

Functional MRI studies show that non-linguistic and linguistic communication are processed in the same areas of the brain, including those referred to as “Broca’s area” and “Wernicke’s area”. (Xu et al. 2009)

Language helps to constrain the inferential process to make it easier for the hearer to infer (guess) the speaker’s intention. The difference between non-linguistic communication and linguistic communication is a difference of tool or mode, with resulting differences in precision, like the difference between ripping bread into pieces with your hands and cutting it carefully with a knife.

The inferential process can be more or less constrained, but never constrained completely (in a fully deterministic way).
In (1), A1 to A6 all have the “same” meaning, but constrain the inferential process to different degrees:

(1) Q: *Do you want something to drink?*

   A1: (points with hand)
   A2: *I have soup.*
   A3: *No. I have soup.*
   A4: *No, because I have soup.*
   A5: *No, since I have soup, I don’t need anything to drink.*
   A6: *No, I don’t want anything to drink. Since I have soup, I don’t need anything else to drink right now.*
(2) Guest:  (Sitting at dinner table, looks at hostess and points up and back with raised eyebrows).
   Hostess:  *It’s the first door on the right.*

(3) Teacher calling role:  *Alain?*
   Student points to empty chair:  *Toilet.*

(4) Sign in front of computer classroom:

   *Lecture in progress*
   *Students not attending the lecture should go to another room and be quiet.*
(5)  I have had lunch.
     I have been to China.

(6)  Woman:  (picks up keys)
     Me:       $m^{21}\text{-sai}^{35}\text{-la}^{55}$ ‘no need’
     Woman:  (sits down) $m^{21}\text{-sai}^{35}\text{-la}^{55}$, first come first served
The degree to which the hearer is forced to deduce a particular interpretation depends on the degree to which the form of the utterance constrains the hearer in choosing the contextual assumptions necessary to achieve an interpretation that makes sense in that context.

The form doesn’t need to be familiar to the addressee as long as the addressee can infer the speaker’s intention:
Please diarise Thursday 22nd June for the next Professorial Lunch. (memo from University)

9 ROOMED EARLY CONTEMPORARY ON ALMOST 1/4 ACRE. (real estate ad)

An 80-year-old woman has become one of Victoria's oldest hoons after she was allegedly clocked speeding at 164km/h in the state's north this week. (The Age, 8 July, 2010)
Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by itslef but the wrod as a wlohe.

Extract from 'Feersum Endjinn' by Iain M. Banks:

Well, Ergates sez (& u can juss tel she's tryin 2 b payshint) aside from the fact that it is folly 2 fro away even 1 life out ov 8, & thi eekwilly sailyent poynt that in thi present emerginsy it mite b fullish 2 rely on thi effishint funkshining ov thi reeincarnative possess, ther is my own safety 2 think about. (Banks 1994: 18) (The whole book is written like this.)
The nature of language: Language is culture

**Culture:** The evolved sets of social conventions for carrying out particular tasks.
Western Formal Dinner Place Setting
Informal Chinese Dinner Setting
Relation between different aspects of the culture:

Hong Kong closed kitchen vs. Australian open plan kitchen

Jingpo lack of toilet in house
**Language:** The set of conventions for carrying out the task of communication.

The ‘rules’ of language and language use are evolved sets (systems) of social conventions for constraining the process of interpretation.

Meaning is use. Lexical and grammatical meaning is conventionalized use. Grammaticalization and lexicalization are the processes which create language structure (words, phrases, and grammatical forms). They are in fact simply conventionalizations of repeated patterns.
Language is a phenomenon of the third kind, like an economy or a path through a field (images from Keller 1994:15-16):
What gets repeated, and what extensions of meaning are evidenced in the usages, is related to the cognitive categories and construal of the world of the speakers, and so the patterns that get repeated will reflect the culture and cognitive construal of the people; the language will embody the culture and conceptions of the people. (“Ethnosyntax”).

Different uses of ‘good morning’ due to different conceptions of ‘morning’
Lack of ‘toilet’ in Jinghpo (interaction of different parts of a culture)
Javanese caste and respect levels
Qiang directionals
Use of 横猪 (lóu-zhū) for disliked topic initiator on discussion list
Borrowed words and patterns may introduce new concepts/tools, but the ultimate meaning of the word or pattern will be determined by the use to which it is put, and so it is the same process as that for native words and patterns.

English *gungho* ‘to have great spirit or enthusiasm’ < Chinese 工合 *gōnghé* ‘industrial cooperative’

Meaning of the fork and spoon in the Philippines and Thailand.
Philippine use of *vs.* (both from Philippine Inquirer, Sept 4, 2007):

*Trader to testify vs. Abalos*

*Chinese firm says raps vs. broadband deal baseless*

Taiwan use of *vs.* (ad for TV show):

曹兰  vs. 李连杰

Email about Dean’s lecture:

*Please note this event is now fully booked out. No further RSVPs will be taken.*
Competing motivations:

English *y’all*

Multiple motivations:

Philippines: use small packages due to poverty and also humidity

Hong Kong: closed kitchen due to cooking style and use of maids
Culture is habit

We are very much creatures of habit, and once we have a habit, it is hard to change, including habits of language and even thought.

Rituals

Sensibilities
Language use is a habit

Our language use is a set of habits we form, which are very hard to change.
The most simple example is the habits we form in learning our first language: we learn to categorize certain sounds together as allophones of a single phoneme, and to distinguish other sounds that our language treats as distinct phonemes. This is entirely a habit, but as anyone who has learned a second language knows, it is difficult to change the habit and make distinctions we’re not used to making.

The habit even influences our perception, as (for example) a native English speaker will really “hear” a voiceless unaspirated stop as a voiced stop (e.g. hear the initial sound in $pe^{312}$-$tɕiŋ^{55}$ ‘Peking’ as /b/).
Another good example is the phonotactics of syllable type. There is a set of permissible syllable types in English, and the habit of speaking those types and only those types is so strong that when a writer makes up a new syllable, it will invariably conform to that template. This is also what is involved in second language learner accents. The point is not that you can't learn another set of phonotactic constraints, just that it is difficult.

Philippine use of linker even in English phrases or compounds, such as *square na plate* for ‘square plate’.
It is also difficult to learn a new way of thinking, especially if you try to do it using words and concepts that are part and parcel of the old way of thinking.

It isn’t that language fully determines thought; the language evolves the way it does because of the importance the culture puts on constraining inference in certain ways, and this process is always on-going, as language is always changing, so the culture and cognition of the people (how they profile events, etc.) influences the language, but then once it becomes a convention in the language, it is passed on to future generations, and so will influence how people think about those things, and what they pay attention to. Once you have a word for something, it makes it a lot easier to think about and talk about, and you end up thinking about it and talking about it more.
When we speak a language we subscribe to the conventions of meaning associated with that language, and those conventions influence the way we talk about things and ultimately how we think about them.

**English:**  *shrimp, prawn, lobster*

**Chinese:**  *xia* (‘shrimp’)

  *dà-xiā* (‘big shrimp’)

  *lóng-xiā* (‘dragon shrimp’)

In China tomatoes  西红柿  [*west red persimmon*] are a kind of fruit, and so will be served on a fruit platter.
To say that the original development of a particular pattern is motivated does not imply that the motivation will always be transparent. In many discussions of ethnosyntax, the opaqueness of certain structures is taken to be evidence that it is not possible to show a link between language and other sets of conventions.

Yet in many aspects of our lives, once a particular way of doing something is conventionalized, the original motivation may be lost, while the conventionalized behavior continues, simply because it is already a convention, such as the habit of pouring the milk before the tea in Britain, or the following:
The double plural in *children* (George Bush: “Childrens do learn!”)

Expressions such as

*pig in a poke*
*pass the buck*
*put it in the hopper*
*the stars in the firmament*
*dial a phone*
*RSVP*

Chinese ‘crow’ *wū* (< *ʔa*), *yínháng* ‘bank’ (< ‘silver company’).

Final Remarks

The view I am presenting here is that the fundamental aspect of communication is not the linguistic structure, but the interaction of the speaker and hearer in performing a communicative activity.
The role of the context in the performance of this activity involving the interpretation of utterances is not to simply supplement semantic meaning; the context is the base on which all communicative activity depends. That is, rather than saying that the context constrains the interpretation of the linguistic form, I argue that it is the linguistic form that constrains the context (i.e. constrains the creation of the context of interpretation).

Culture and cognition are the fundamental organizers of experience, and so necessarily influence the construction of the context.
As language structure is formed from repeated discourse patterns that constrain the hearer’s interpretation in particular ways, it necessarily must be the case that those aspects that were being constrained were salient to the speaker and also assumed by the speaker to be salient or relevant to the hearer, at least in the contexts where the pattern was used, otherwise the extra effort to constrain the interpretation in that way would not have been necessary.

That is, though we give examples of the most striking connections, the point is that ALL aspects of language are determined by the culture.
THANK YOU!
REFERENCES

