

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE CULTURAL AWARENESS OF HUNGARIAN STUDENTS CONCERNING THE UK AND THE USA

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Summary

This paper presents a complex study highlighting the role of cultural awareness concerning the English and American cultures among students, and making an attempt at determining to what extent these cultural elements are known among students of English and Translation Studies in Hungary. The first stage of the research was a process of finding out about previous research and then selecting British and American cultural items that might be relevant for Hungarian students. These are presented as a list in the introduction. Ten instances, where the semantic and cultural meanings are ambiguous or misleading for Hungarian language learners, have been singled out for further analysis in the second section, which also gives information about these cultural and lexical items and the possible sources for student errors. This section also offers information about a survey conducted among a group of students of English and Translation Studies, underlining the need for intercultural education in both courses. More information including students' personal insights can be found on the beliefs and perceptions of students of English about language and culture in a previous paper (Szele, 2019), and some results of a cultural survey similar to the present one in another (Szele, 2020). The third section of this paper offers a conclusion, suggesting that cultural awareness and good language skills go hand in hand, and both need more focus in language teaching in Hungary.

Keywords: British and American culture, intercultural competence, mediation, false friends

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1. Introduction

This section describes the definitions of “culture” and “cultural competence” the research was based on, and discusses the cultural items involved together with the methodology of the research.

The selection of cultural items to be used was based on the following definition of culture: it is *the context within which the language is lived and spoken by its native speakers*. This, as Kramersch says, would include „the native speakers' ways of behaving, eating, talking, dwelling, their customs, their beliefs and values” (Kramersch, 2016: 13). Neuner's definition is similar: “Culture in its widest sense can be understood as a specific way of thinking, acting and feeling about one's own actions and the actions of others. This includes conscious or underlying explanations of the world and one's own and other people's place within it. It also encompasses beliefs, faiths, ideologies and world views, which we call upon to assert reality, truths, values and ideas of good and bad”. (Neuner, 2012: 21)

Corbett asks the intriguing question whether native-speaker competence – and the underlying cultural competence – is still important. He argues that being a competent speaker involves the use of what he calls international communicative competence, and that competent

language users will naturally become ambassadors of both their mother culture and their target culture. They will understand language and behaviour, and will be able to explain it to others, they will understand and appreciate both similarities and differences between their own and cultures of the communities/countries where the target language is spoken (Corbett, 2003: 3). Byram and Risager take this further by saying that cultural competence should enable the learner to become “a mediator between cultures”, which is essential from a communicative point of view since “it is mediation which allows for effective communication” (Byram and Risager, 1999: 58). Similar ideas are stressed in descriptions and recommendations of the European Union (cf. *Common European Framework of Reference For Languages*). This also implies that good speakers know and understand differences, and are willing to admit if they do not know a term sufficiently well.

A need for intercultural competence arises naturally in the case of translation, which draws on students’ intercultural competence. Harald Olk agrees that if translation is regarded as an act of communication in which a text produced for readers in one particular context is rendered for readers in another, students need to take on the role of intercultural mediators and identify culture-specificity in the source text. When it comes to the final translation, students “have to try and explain one culture in terms of the other when seeking a communicatively satisfactory mediating position for cultural divergences” (Olk, 2009). Witte (quoted in Olalla-Soler, 2019) defines translators’ cultural competence as a translator’s ability to compare cultural phenomena of a foreign culture with one’s own culture and to then translate them into the target culture in a manner appropriate to the translation brief while maintaining communicative interaction.

The idea of the complex research to be presented here was conceived when the author of this paper, a teacher of English language, culture, and translation studies, after many years of teaching, began to realise that cultural awareness and information was much more important in language study and, especially, translation and mediation, than what most coursebooks and university materials suggest. Students themselves also tend to be unaware of the importance of cultural skills: they are not sufficiently familiar with cultural items belonging to the cultural context of the texts they work with to deal with them appropriately in tasks requiring some form of mediation.

2. Methods and process

In the first stages of the research it had to be found how cultural knowledge and competence can be measured. In the pilot research mentioned in the introduction, 70 percent of the respondents had said “a quality speaker must know TL culture and customs” and 80 percent had said “I know and understand the differences between Hungarian and TL culture and behaviour” – slightly fewer (about 70%) respondents had also said that they could also explain these differences to others. These figures and personal interviews with students conducted by the author of the present paper indicate that most students overestimate their knowledge of British and American culture, and most are inclined to say they know a phenomenon just because they heard about it or just saw it somewhere. As no similar research to start out from was found, expert advice was solicited, and on the basis of this, a simple method of to-the-point questions and answers was chosen. The best way of finding out about students’ real knowledge of culture was asking about cultural phenomena one by one – also asking students to explain them – and thoroughly analysing their answers.

The stages of the research were as follows:

1) Setting the scope and the objectives. It was decided that a questionnaire on specific cultural items would be the best tool to address students. The research had the following objectives:

- uncover deficiencies in students' intercultural competence;
- raise awareness of issues in intercultural communication;
- enhance students' competence.

2) Identifying relevant cultural items. The relevant items were selected from the prestigious *Angol–magyar kulturális szótár* [English–Hungarian Cultural Dictionary] (Bart, 1998) and *Amerikai–magyar kulturális szótár* [American–Hungarian Cultural Dictionary] (Bart, 2000) and were several times cross-checked and completed from other resources. The selection was based on two considerations: which items might be useful for students, and which are truly representative of British/American culture in some way.

3) Selecting cultural items to be included in the research. The cultural items selected from the sources mentioned above included 122 items from British, and 89 items from American culture (these are fully listed in the Appendix). The final questionnaire included 35 British and 30 American cultural items. This narrower selection was representative in a way: the selected items included cultural items in the fields of 1) dining; 2) society, politics; 3) education; 4) particular expressions typical of the country; 5) geography. Experts and natives were asked to comment on the final list, and add new items, if necessary.

The list of items selected for the research questionnaire:

British: afters; agony column; babes in the wood; bag lady; baker's dozen; bangers and mash; barrister; bedside manner; Bond Street; cafeteria; Chippendale; dandelion clock; diploma; East End / West End; finishing school; free house / tied house; Further Education College; high street bank; Kent; Kermit; lollipop man / lady; Marmite; Mills & Boon; mincemeat; nineteenth hole; Number Eleven; pillar box; Poets' Corner; poppy; sportsman; stiff upper lip; third party insurance; Tom, Dick, and Harry; Whitehall; yard.

American: ACT; affirmative action; American Bar Association; Big Three; Black Maria; brown bag; club; Danish; Dear John letter; Deep Throat; egg roll; fence mending; first floor / ground floor; first-class mail; flapjack; gumbo; homecoming; Inc (Am) = Ltd (Br); logrolling; MVP; national bank; PAC; plum; pork; rider; small town; soda; Tinseltown; Trail of Tears; wedding band.

4) Setting the research questionnaires. This was mainly a technical issue carried out in Google Forms. Two questionnaires were created, one covering British, the other American cultural items. Students were free to answer either or both. The formula for the questions was: What is "X"? The two possible answers were "I know", or "I don't know", and if a respondent marked "I know", he/she was required to explain the term briefly in a free text box. This was done to eliminate phoney "yes" answers. The questions were deliberately formulated to give no hints (e.g. What is "mincemeat"?), and included a lot of ambiguities and generalisations so as to see whether respondents see the culture-specific associations linked to the individual terms. One example could be "plum" or "pork" in the American questionnaire, which both have very specific associations in the USA, namely "plum jobs" and "pork barrel projects". In the end, 377 students were sent the questionnaire link (*132 Translation Studies, 245 English BA*).

5) Administering the questionnaire and analysing the results. The administration took place in late 2019 and the answers were collected, checked, and stored for later use. There were 21 answers for the British and 18 for the American questionnaire. The respondents were given feedback on their work and were sent a list of further interesting cultural items as a little reward.

3. Analysis of the questionnaire results

In the present paper, five British (barrister; cafeteria; Chippendale; mincemeat; sportsman) and five American (Bar Association; first-class mail; national bank; soda; wedding band) terms that are seen as well-known and typical in their target cultures are explained and discussed. All these terms are in some way tricky or ambiguous. Hungarian language learners either do not have the same concept in Hungarian culture, or may associate the word with a false friend. These problems are going to be discussed in detail in the following two sections.

3.1. British cultural items

To check the five British terms chosen are indeed used and well-known in the target countries, extensive searches were carried out on the websites of high-circulation daily papers from both the UK (*The Guardian* and *The Times*) and the USA (*The New York Times* and *New York Post*).

Table 1

Problems and search results (UK)

Term	Problem	Search results (TG+TT)
barrister	the concept is not known in Hungary, the Hungarian term “ügyvéd” (lawyer) has a different meaning / also similar to ‘barista’, (coffee specialist)	27100 + 15839
cafeteria	the word is used as a term for “perks” in Hungary (something extra given for your job) / rings similar to ‘café’ in Hungary	4170 + 720
Chippendale	the same word applies to male strippers	742 + 455
mincemeat	very similar to ‘minced meat’	1650 + 545
sportsman	very similar to Hungarian “sportoló” (athlete), a job, where the original connotations are missing	11100 + 7694

The short summary of the problems shown in Table 1 is extended in this section.

The first term, **barrister**, is a type of lawyer in the UK, Australia, and some other countries, who can give specialized legal advice and can argue a case in both higher and lower courts. A barrister seems to have a high prestige among lawyers. The hypothesis of the research was that, as this differentiation is not known in Hungary, and the Hungarian term “ügyvéd” (lawyer) has a different, much broader meaning (it means ‘lawyer’, ‘barrister’, ‘solicitor’, and ‘attorney’ – anyone, who can help people with legal affairs), many students would not exactly know the meaning of the term. In addition, the term is very similar to ‘barista’, which is absolutely different, with a meaning of ‘coffee specialist’.

The second term, **cafeteria**, is a restaurant (often in a factory, a college, or an office building) where people collect food and drink from a serving area and take it to a table themselves after paying for it. The problem lies in the fact that the word is used as a term for “perks” in Hungary (something extra given for your job), which is a meaning used primarily in America, and, in addition, it is similar to ‘café’, which is rather a fancy place for spending money, not a cheap restaurant.

The third term, **Chippendale**, refers to Thomas Chippendale (1718?–79), English cabinetmaker and furniture designer, or as an adjective means “of or in the style of Thomas

Chippendale”. The question posed – What is “Chippendale”? – is misleading to Hungarians, who associate the word with ‘male strippers’ who perform at parties. The term is perfect to put students to the test of how much they know about English–American culture, whether they know this culture-specific meaning. The newspaper title *Record-breaking Chippendale furniture fails to sell after owner replaces ivory* is easy to understand, but the humorous meaning of *Crochet and crafts at the hen party where the only Chippendale is the sofa* is easily missed by students who do not know the term well.

The fourth term, **mincemeat**, refers to a sweet, spicy mixture of small pieces of apple, dried fruit, and nuts (but not meat), often eaten at Christmas in mince pies. It is generally known as dessert, not as meat. It is important to note that there is a secondary meaning “minced meat”, but it is also clear that a good speaker of English would know that if the questionnaire asks What is “mincemeat”?, the answer is unlikely to be ‘minced meat’, firstly, because it is almost identical with the original question, secondly, as there is nothing special about minced meat in English culture. So the term was judged to be perfect for checking the cultural skills of language learners.

The fifth term, **sportsman**, refers to a man who plays sport, especially one who plays it well, and also to someone who plays sport in a way that shows respect and fairness towards the opposing player or team, so he is a ‘fair player’ (like in the newspaper title *James Scott’s stunning lack of sportsmanship infuriates victorious Celtic*). The term is very similar to Hungarian “sportoló” (athlete), a job, where the original connotations are missing, so it is easy for students to think they know the term well.

Table 2 summarises the results of the student questionnaire. “Know minus wrong” means the number of students who said “yes, I know” but then got the answer wrong.

Table 2

Summary of the questionnaire results (UK)

Term	Know minus wrong	Don’t know	Other information
barrister	16–4	5	2 students put ‘mixer’, 2 students put ‘barista’ / plus five of the answers were unclear, only referring to “some kind of lawyer”
cafeteria	19–3	2	2 students put ‘café’; one associated it with the American use only (perk); one answer was unclear
Chippendale	14–9	7	9 wrong guesses at “male strippers”
mincemeat	18–10	3	10 wrong guesses at “minced meat”
sportsman	10–6	11	6 wrong or incomplete guesses: 1 “does sport” / 1 “only watches sport” / 4 “professional athlete”

When analysing the results, the basic idea was to see whether students know the terms together with their real cultural connotations, so non-cultural, general references or erroneous ones were not accepted. In the case of **barrister**, 7 students knew the term quite well, 5 knew it was some kind of lawyer, but no more, whereas 2 students put ‘mixer’, 2 students put ‘barista’. In the case of **cafeteria**, 16 answers were correct, 2 students put ‘café’, and one associated it with the American use only (perk). In the case of **Chippendale**, only five students knew the correct answer, whereas there were 9 wrong guesses at “male strippers”. In the case of **mincemeat**, 8 students knew the answer well, and there were 10 wrong guesses at “minced

meat”, which might be regarded as correct as well, but the researcher would then miss the point of the research. In the case of **sportsman**, the number of “I know” answers was only 10, so the respondents might have felt this term was somehow tricky, and six of these were incorrect: 1 students put “does sport” / 1 put “only watches sport” / 4 put “professional athlete”. The results show that students need more education in target language cultures to be able to function well in language-related jobs.

3.2. American cultural items

The number of search results for the five US terms is summarised in Table 3. The frequent use of the terms has been validated by the results of the term searches on high-circulation daily papers from the USA (*The New York Times* and *New York Post*). Table 3 also summarises the culture-specific problems contained in the terms.

Table 3

Problems and search results (US)

Term	Problem	Search results (NYT+NYP)
Bar Association	some people would not associate the term with law, but pubs and drinking	89075 + 6705
first-class mail	sounds as if it was an exclusive and expensive service	33407 + 4220
national bank	sounds as if it was owned by the state or as if it was the FED	326066 + 9850
soda	in Hungary, the term is used for 'carbonated water' or 'fizzy mineral water'	36426 + 3323
wedding band	might be associated with a group of musicians, but dictionary entries confirm it is usually a ring	12114 + 1705

The short summary of the problems shown in Table 3 is extended in this section.

The first term, **Bar Association**, is a professional association made up of members of a particular bar, specifically, the American Bar Association (ABA), founded in 1878, which is a voluntary bar association of lawyers and law students, which is not specific to any jurisdiction in the United States. The ABA’s most important stated activities are the setting of academic standards for law schools, and the formulation of model ethical codes related to the legal profession (Wikipedia: “American Bar Association”). The question – What is a “Bar Association”? – might be misleading to anyone not familiar with the American legal system.

The second term, **first-class mail**, refers to an affordable and easy postal service to send envelopes and lightweight packages. It might as well be called “ordinary mail”, so the name is misleading as it suggests an exclusive and expensive service. The related internet search yielded a lot of articles about price changes and the service itself, suggesting that a lot of people use this service and they are somehow affected by the changes reported.

The third term, **national bank**, refers to a bank operating under federal charter and supervision, basically a private banking institution that has subsidiaries in several states. In Hungary, anything called 'national' is owned by the state, this might make the term misleading for some students. It must be noted that there is a Federal Reserve System (FED) in the USA, which is seen as the national bank of the country.

The fourth term, **soda**, refers to sweet drinks consisting of soda water, flavouring, and often ice cream. In general, any kind of fizzy soft drink is a soda. In Hungary, soda is a term used for 'carbonated water' or 'fizzy mineral water' only. There is a secondary meaning denoting 'soda water' in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, (Merriam-Webster: "soda"), so this answer might be seen as correct, but then, as the cultural reference is missing, the researcher would miss the point of the research.

The fifth term, **wedding band**, is in some way similar to the fourth (soda). Although the general dictionary meaning is 'wedding ring' (Merriam-Webster: "wedding band"), many people associate the term with a band that plays music at wedding parties. Newspaper articles support both meanings: *Men Who Don't Wear Wedding Bands – and Why*, or *Not Your Ordinary Wedding Band* (speaking of music). If a respondent puts e.g. "a music band", the cultural reference is lost, so the correct answer for the questionnaire is 'wedding ring'.

Table 4 summarises the results of the student questionnaire. "Know minus wrong" means the number of students who said "yes, I know" but then got the answer wrong.

Table 4

Summary of the questionnaire results (US)

Term	Know minus wrong	Don't know	Other information
Bar Association	7	11	7 answers were perfect
first-class mail	8–7	10	wrong guesses include: priority, fast, next day, airmail; only one answer correct, albeit imprecise ("USPS postal service")
national bank	11–8	7	guesses include: federal bank, bank owned by the state; 3 answers not perfect, but OK ("commercial bank")
soda	14–3	4	3 students put "fizzy water"
wedding band	11–4	7	4 students put "musicians"

When analysing the results, the basic idea was to see whether students know the terms together with their real cultural connotations, so non-cultural, general references or erroneous ones were not accepted. In the case of **Bar Association**, 7 students knew the correct answer, and all others marked "don't know". Respondents were careful this time, and no reference to pubs was made. In the case of **first-class mail**, however, there was only one correct answer, all other respondents entered an incorrect solution or marked "don't know". 'First-class', without knowing the cultural context, proved to be truly misleading. In the case of **national bank**, the number of correct answers is only 3. All guesses were wrong, either identifying the term with 'federal bank', or 'a bank owned by the state'. The results in the cases of **soda** and **wedding band** are very similar. Three students put "fizzy water", 4 students put "musicians", so, finally, there were 11 correct answers for "soda", and 7 for "wedding band". These results show that American cultural items are even less-known for the average Hungarian student than British ones, so more education in this area is absolutely necessary.

4. Conclusion

The research described in this paper was designed to find out about the cultural knowledge of students of English and Translation Studies in Hungary concerning British and American culture. The whole process took a long time, since the right method had to be found after a pilot survey and the research material had to be selected carefully. The set of cultural items used for this research was further narrowed to fit the requirements of this paper, so altogether ten items were selected for further analysis, each of which has some kind of difficulty for Hungarians: either the written or the pronounced form, or the surface semantic reference is misleading. Being aware of the cultural context and underlying information would fix the correct meaning of the term itself in students' brains. The conclusions of the research and some further implications are discussed in this section.

The first thing to see is that students clearly need guidance in terms of factual knowledge about culture, and their cultural awareness and mediation skills need to be developed. It is alarming to see that even among "professionals", be they practising or future ones, very little is known about British and American culture (the survey done might not be representative, but the implications are, nevertheless, clear). As a result, new teaching ideas and materials focussing on intercultural differences and ways of translating these into other languages have been developed and feedback from students has been requested by the author of this paper. The experiences and results of the survey can be used later for educational purposes too, to refine the focus of the classes and find the most motivating topics. As a spin-off, the same process of identifying and defining was used during some classes to identify and explain Hungarian items to foreigners to make students see how the process can be done in both directions.

The research and the cultural items included can lead to more detailed research and open up new paths in teaching intercultural studies at Kodolányi University. A focussed analysis based on thematic categories (e.g. food, education, politics, history, language, etc.) would be very useful. Further papers can analyse the remaining results of the survey and try to draw more conclusions about students' cultural knowledge to be able to give them a better understanding of British and American culture.

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Appendix

British cultural items: advocate; affidavit; afters; agony column; ale; angry young man; arcade; The Ash Grove; attendance centre; attorney; Attorney General; Auntie Beeb; Aunt Sally; babes in the wood; bag lady; baker's dozen; bangers and mash; bar billiards; barrister; bedside manner; Bench and Bar; Bond Street; breadline; the Burke; BYOB; Cadbury; cafeteria; cereal; chancellor; Charing Cross; Chippendale; Civil List; club; consolidated fund; cornflakes / Kellogg's; council; Country Life; Dacron; dandelion clock; devil; diploma; Ealing Studios; East End / West End; Eton; fair play; father of the house; finishing school; first past the post; poppy; Fleet street; footsie; Forth Bridge; free house / tied house; Further Education College; Great Ormond street; Gretna Green; high street bank; homicide; hopscotch; hunting vs. shooting; ICU; John Doe / Jane Doe; the Joneses; Kent; Kermit; Laurel and Hardy; Law Lords; lollipop man / lady; mace + woolsack; Magistrates' Court; The Mall; Marmite; maternity pay / allowance; Mayday; Mills & Boon; mincemeat; Mr Nice Guy; muffin; mumbo jumbo; MYOB; Newgate; nineteenth hole; noname vs. label; notary public; Number Eleven; Number Ten; OAP; Official Birthday; Old Bailey; Oxo; parent-teacher association; pillar box; Poets' Corner; political; port; Premium Bond; public lending right; pudding club; ; rain check Regina vs. XY; Scotch; Secretary (of State); sportsman; Square Mile; stiff upper lip; Stork; terraced house; third party insurance; the Old Lady of Threadneedle street; timber frame; Tom, Dick, and Harry; Trivial Pursuit; U and non-U; UB40; Unilever; Vice Squad; West End; Whip; Whitehall; woolsack; yard; youth court.

American cultural items: Academy Award; ACT; administration; affirmative action; agency; agent orange; Alcatraz – The Rock; American Bar Association; Arlington; Attorney General; Band-Aid; bank holiday; Beagle Boys; bee; big stick diplomacy; Big Three; Black

Maria; Blair House; BLT; bourbon; Bronx; brown bag; Brownie point; caucus; club; cracker; Danish; Dear John letter; Deep Throat; deli; department; dinner; donkey / elephant; egg roll; Evil Empire; Fed; fence mending; filibuster; fireside chat; first floor / ground floor; first-class mail; 501; flapjack; food stamps; frank; fried bread; gerrymandering; Gibson girls; Gotham; Grand Old Party; greenbacks; gumbo; Harlem; homecoming; hot dog; hunky; impeachment; Inc (Am) = Ltd (Br); litigator; logrolling; MVP; Mothers' Day; Mrs Mop; national bank; nickel / dime; PAC; pemmican; Peoria; plum; Ponzi scheme; pork; redneck; rider; Saturday night special; shower; shrink; small town; soda; State of the Union address; subpoena; Surgeon General; Thanksgiving; Tinseltown; Trail of Tears; veep; Wall Street; WASP; wedding band; yard.