Overview:

This virtual/online activity enables participants to discover and assess linguistic patterns using digital textual analysis that indicate the cultural attitudes of characters in a piece of fiction. They will compare and contrast the cultural attitudes of different characters in a piece of fiction using Voyant Tools.

Note: The creator of this activity used excerpts from chapters of Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, with each excerpt told from the point-of-view of a different character. Any text may be used, but the students should have read the texts in advance of completing this exercise.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Discover and assess linguistic patterns using digital textual analysis that indicate the cultural attitudes of characters in a piece of fiction.

2. Compare and contrast the cultural attitudes of different characters in a piece of fiction.

3. Gain basic familiarity with Voyant, a browser-based textual analysis tool.

Time:

1 hour

Group Size:

Pairs

Materials:

A computer with access to the internet, a digital version of the texts to be analyzed, Voyant Tools (in Links), word processing software.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Curiosity:

- To ask complex questions about other cultures.
- To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Preparation:

Prior to completing this assignment, students will have read chapters 1, 2, and 5 of Ursula LeGuin's *The Word for World is Forest*. They should have previously demonstrated basic comprehension of the story. Each chapter is written from the vantage point of a specific character, and these characters belong to different cultural groups. Chapter 1 is written from the perspective of Don Davidson, who is a military officer from Earth responsible for the colonization of New Tahiti. Chapter 2 is written from Selver's perspective; Selver is a native of New Tahiti (in his language, it is called Athshe) who started a rebellion against the colonists. Chapter 5 is written from the perspective of Raj Lyubov, an anthropologist from Earth who had built a relationship with Selver and understands Athshean culture from an outsider perspective.

Note: For using excerpts from another text, it is necessary to select excerpts that are clearly written from the vantage point of a particular character, and that character's cultural positionality should— at least on a surface leve— be explicitly mentioned in the text. The purpose of this activity is to use textual analysis tools to delve deeper into identity markers, patterns of cultural behavior, and thought process.

Activity Instructions:

1. At the start of the lesson, show students how to use Voyant Tools. They can upload the text or copy/paste it into the text box at voyant-tools.org. Particularly relevant tools within the software are the Cirrus wordcloud tool, the Links tool, and the Trends tool. It is important to also show students how to "define options for this tool," where they can edit the stopwords list to exclude irrelevant terms.

   Note: [This introductory video](#) explains the Voyant Tools interface.

2. Paired Activity: Have students—working in pairs—copy/paste the text into Voyant Tools, and then allow them some time to freely explore the different tools.

3. Paired Activity: Ask student pairs to discuss and write down answers to the following questions. These questions will help students describe** in detail the patterns that they see, which can be further examined during group debrief.

   • What patterns did you notice when analyzing the three texts independently?
   • What patterns did you notice when comparing the three texts? What vocabulary, ideas, characters, relationships, settings, etc. were present/absent?
   • What tools did you use to find these patterns? What tools did you not use?

   Note: If it is not possible to complete this activity in one session, it is recommended to complete steps 1-3 in a single session and then to complete step 4 in a second session. Steps 1-3 could also be assigned as preparatory work to be completed prior to step 4.

4. Group Debrief: As a group, ask students to discuss the following questions. These questions will help students examine** the outcomes of the activity and articulate their learning.**

   • In what ways did you succeed during this activity?
     o What patterns were clear?
     o What tools yielded strong results?
     o Why was that the case?

- In what ways were you challenged during this activity?
  - What was ambiguous, unclear, or challenging?
  - What about it made you feel that way?
- What do the patterns for each character's texts reveal about their relationship with [wilderness]?* What insights did textual analysis offer that you hadn't thought of while reading the text prior to class? Give specific examples of terms, relationships, and tools, and include any relevant visualizations that you generated.
- How would you describe the different cultural groups present in the novel, based on the language patterns from these three texts?
- Worldview: Le Guin's writing is heavily influenced by the anthropological study of other cultures. How would you describe the worldviews of the two cultural groups—Athsheans and Terrans—present in the novel? Consider that Davidson and Lyubov are from the same culture, but they have very different attitudes toward [wilderness].
  - In what ways do they agree and disagree?
  - How do you account for that difference?
- Curiosity: If you were going to read another chapter from a new character's point of view and you wanted to understand how their cultural perspective influenced their relationship with [wilderness], what questions would you need to ask yourself as you were reading? How would you make sure you found answers to those questions?
- What are some real world examples of different cultural attitudes toward [wilderness] that you can think of, either from this class or from your own knowledge? How do the ideas and questions generated in this activity make you think about the real world differently?

*The course for which the author designed this activity is called "Wildernesses," so the facilitator should substitute whatever the relevant content is for their class.

**Activity steps #3 and #4 follow the DEAL model of experiential learning reflection, adapted from Ash, S.L. & Clayton, P.H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: the power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, 1(1), 25-48. http://hdl.handle.net/1805/4579

Related Tools:

- Danger of a Single Story
- If the World Were a Village
- Language, Culture, and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis
- Martians at the Airport
- The Sentry