INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – THEORETICAL NOTIONS

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Abstract: Intercultural communication is a field of interest born out of other fields, such as: history, geography, anthropology, and sociology. It has become an independent science branch during the last years, along with the functioning mechanisms taken from practice. My article attempts to examine some important terms for this field: multicultural education (very active under the circumstance of establishing the European Union), stereotypes connected to their birth and preservation mechanisms, acculturation and its manifestations, and the adaptation to today's world's ideology.

Keywords: multicultural education, stereotypes, acculturation, identity, otherness, migration, minorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication is a hybrid, artificial domain born at the end of the last century. Its contents resulted from the combination of the two terms, that is, culture and communication. Essentially, the term "culture" refers to "all the material and spiritual values created by mankind in the process of social-historical practice, as well as the necessary institutions to convey these values. In other words, having extensive knowledge in various fields" (*Dictionarul limbii romane pentru elevi*, 1982:199). At the same time, "communication" means "notice, news, reports, relationships, bonds, presentation of a paper in an inner circle (*Dictionarul limbii romane pentru elevi*, 1982:199).

Intercultural communication as theory and practice is accomplished by means of several sciences. History offers the oldest information regarding human life on earth. Also, historical convulsions (wars, plagues, natural or human catastrophes, etc.) as well as interpersonal communication are historically proven. Borders changes as a consequence of human and natural factors accounting for migration (or colonization) has also been identified by historians.

Myths and their corresponding rituals and the birth of the world's first religions belong to the field of history of religions. Ethnology offers data concerning human cohabitation in a limited area, forms of private life preservation, or, on the contrary, and the extinction of certain occupations. The preservation of traditional aspects is particularly relevant to communication.

Sociology studies the evolution of social relations, of the relations between political power and various social categories, and their social manifestations and quantification in a particular natural or legal framework.

Anthropology, a more recent field of activity (associated until the last century with history and demography) analyzes certain communities' behaviors and the preservation or transformation of some mundane habits.

Beside these well defined fields of interest, others have appeared recently, such as historical demography, human geography, socio-anthropology, demographic statistics, etc. All these subject matters provide us with information necessary to develop the arguments for intercultural communication.

As a curricular subject matter, intercultural communication was imported from the North American territory, where it started to be studied during the 60's. European thinking, at least two millennia old and based on two pillars – the French and the English schools – was reluctant to accept this new field of

interest. The fast social-economic changes occurred during the last decades, as well as the media evolution and the creation of new European structures (i.e., European Union) catalyzed the acceptance of intercultural communication in Europe during the 90's.

In Romania, it became a part of the curriculum of communication schools, and is prone to substantial developments in the years to come.

2. FUNDAMENTALS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

There are numerous theoretical tools used in this field of knowledge. We have selected some which I considered to be most important, as follows: cultural education, cultural stereotypes, migration, ethnicity, acculturation, and identity.

2.1 Cultural education is shaped in two sequential environments: family and school. The first knowledge comes from the family, and is related to traditions, language, blood connections, and religion. First such information comes from the parents, regardless of whether one belongs to a majority, or to a minority established in a state. In the case of ethnicity, the preservation of language and religion is accomplished inside the family. The subjective perception of cultural education has led to many conflicts such as racism or apartheid. Therefore, at the middle of the last century some laws and application methodologies were developed in order to protect the minorities' cultural rights. The wider framework is regulated by the UN Chart (1949), which states the protection of human rights regardless of race, gender, sexual preferences, and religion.

The internal laws of each state, Constitutions, reiterate these rights along with the organization principles linked to minorities' cultural manifestations, with an emphasis on respecting the differences in others.

Another significant educational framework is school. In the Middle Ages' Romanian territories such as Transylvania or Banat, education in German or Hungarian was a reality.

As far as studying the minorities' history and culture is concerned, this has been justified and done at the same time. However, one can notice the danger of identity closing in some European areas. An example was set by Canada, where numerous laws have been passed in order to avoid discrimination and to protect linguistic diversity. "Intercultural education means the recognition of values, ways of life, and symbols to which human beings related at a certain moment in time" (Dasen, Perrgamu, 1999:145).

2.2 Cultural stereotypes are based on prejudice, which is why the two terms are frequently used interchangeably. As far as the former is concerned, Montesguien said: "I would be the happiest mortal if I could do something in order to heal people of prejudice. By prejudice, I don't mean ignoring certain aspects, but ignoring ourselves" (*Dictionarul alteritatii si al relatiilor interetnice*, 2005: 627). Prejudices are inherited or acquired during our lives.

Every historical age has had its own prejudices: in the pre-Christian age, believing in more than one God was a reality (which becomes the Roman empire's justification to persecute Christianity and its supports), underpinned political power (e.g., in ancient Egypt, the pharaoh was the embodiment of Ra, the most powerful Egyptian god), or justified attacking another country (Hitler's Arian doctrine, which led to invading Czechoslovakia and Poland followed by hunting down the Jews).

Popular traditions are the fertile soil for prejudice, also called superstition. Their existence accounts for events or phenomena that ordinary people could not explain, such as the prejudices related to pregnancy, child birth, werewolves, or evil spirits. Although nowadays we have scientific and logical explanations of these phenomena, prejudices have remained. At the same time, most of us have prejudices linked to things we cannot logically explain.

Stereotype is an evolved form of prejudice "initially used in printing to designate a matrix made of lead in order to make a cliché. In 1922, the term is used in humanistic sciences by Walter Lippmann, who thus referred

metaphorically to ready-made and quickly-elaborated opinions" (*Dictionarul alteritatii si al relatiilor interetnice*, 2005:11).

According to our degree of knowledge, we often tend to label the people we hardly know. We do not give them the chance to act and communicate, and we disregard and ignore them from the very beginning. This reaction is triggered by over-sizing our own identity, which blurres our perception of others. One may also talk about certain mentalities that apply even to peoples: Germans are disciplined, English are conservative, etc. As for Romanians, our self perception is positive, whereas others define us by means of three elements: chaos, lack of organization, and laziness. Consequently, the stereotype creates a general picture starting from a particular situation, and has negative effects as it induces isolation and false judgments. Stereotypes come from our families, and may disappear in time and be replaced with others. Nevertheless, the adults' capacity to preserve some stereotypes is much greater than the children's.

Throughout years, cultural stereotypes have caused numerous conflicts, such as: crusades – economically sustained, although the Catholic Church claimed its superiority to the Eastern Church, the conquest of Central America by the Spanish conquistadors, which resulted in the local population's spiritual destruction and their embracing Christianity, etc. More often than not, stereotypes lead to exclusion and discrimination.

2.3 Acculturation is a phenomenon that accompanies migration. "Promoted by the cultural school, it designates the learning and socialization mechanisms, and the individual's integration in an unfamiliar environment by interactions or direct contacts with different ethnic groups during invasions, colonizations, or migration" (Dasen, Perrgamu, 1999:103).

When approaching the phenomenon of acculturation, scholars regard it as a spontaneous process consisting of several acculturation stages: "1. reinterpretation or adoption of the features and models of the dominant culture of the public sector, 2. synthesis, which generally affects the second generation of children, 3. syncretism or the

birth of an entirely heterogeneous nation, 4. assimilation – a negative phenomenon which results in destroying the initial values, 5. counter-acculturation or the process of brutal and sudden rejection of the emerging culture in a colonial situation" (*Dictionarul alteritatii si al relatiilor interetnice*, 2005:14).

Invasions and colonizations are the oldest forms of acculturation. Territorial conquests took place for economic and political reasons and incurred a state's establishment or consolidation of political power. The contact with other civilizations is now achieved by imposing the conqueror's characteristics (i.e., language, administrative structure, etc.). At the religious level, syncretism took place by combining the local gods with the newly come gods.

Colonization occurred mainly for economic reasons, that is, the lack of food in a certain territory made a part of population to migrate to another geographical area. This is why colonizations did not impact as negatively upon the new territory as invasions. The best known example is that of the colonies organized by the Greeks on the Black Sea and Mediterranean coasts in the 7th century BC. These colonies represented the original towns at a smaller scale by bringing along the Greek language, traditions, and administrative structures. The contacts with the locals were peaceful, and the colonies' economic potential helped the neighboring areas to develop.

Migration is the process of one population's moving from the original areas to other locations. The best known example is that of the great migrations from central and southern Asia to Europe during the 3rd – 9th centuries. Thus, new peoples were born (the Angle-Saxons, Celts, and Francs formed the English or French kingdoms), or the migratory populations mixed with the Latin populations (in the Italian peninsula or Spanish kingdom).

Emigration refers to an acculturation phenomenon that started in the 17th and 18th centuries. It consists of the migration of a large number of individuals to remote areas. The phenomenon had numerous causes:

-   religious (the reformed discrimination due to the counter-reform reaction). Therefore,

many Irish and French people left Europe for the New World,

- economic (the reduction of food supplies in Europe led to massive migration to North America, Canada around the year 1900,

- political (Eastern Europe's totalitarian regimes) made the Polish, Romanians, Hungarians, etc. leave for the USA and Canada.

When discussing emigration, one may notice both a slow assimilation of the characteristics of the new civilization and their complete rejection. The new state can offer the proper conditions for the new-comers, but they still bear the characteristics of the original civilization. Therefore, one may encounter phenomena such as counter-acculturation, inadaptability, and rejection. The second generation of emigrants has a different perception, though, since their identity was born under new circumstances.

2.4 Identity. Identity is the quality of being the same with yourself. Within the Nations' Society, in 1920, the concept of minority is first defined as a community's identity. This definition has resulted in three attitudes regarding minorities:

a. Pluralism – various identities living together in the same area by preserving their own characteristics.

b. Assimilation – the act of coercing minorities to give up on their specificity.

c. Segregation – maintaining minority groups in state of isolation and separation.

Every state must acknowledge and respect minorities' rights.

Every individual is defined by means of their belongingness to a certain social group and according to its values. In its structure, identity may take three forms:

- Natural belongingness (by gender, race, etc.),

- Born belongingness (ethnicity, religion, nationality),

- Gained belongingness (intellectual development or organizational belongingness).

Identity exists in three main forms:

1. Cultural identity – manifested by means of traditions and customs specific to each minority. Part of it is due to the family environment, and education. Every state

stipulates the constitutional right to ethical structures' freedom of speech and cultural manifestations.

2. Religious identity – as a form of communities' cohesion and resistance, e.g., the Jews' mosaic religion, which helped them withstand all the difficulties regardless of the geographical or historical conditions. Also, every state must guarantee its citizens' right to religious freedom.

3. Linguistic identity – as a method to preserve the community. As history evolves, old languages disappeared, and new languages were born. Minorities' right to use their own languages is a right that every minority enjoys nowadays.

Identity represented both by belonging to a community and individuality within it is a value actively displayed in Europe during the last years. As a result, identity is born at two levels: real one – territorial frontiers, common language, etc., and an imaginary one – identity with the ancestors and historical myths.

2.5 Otherness – is a "quality or essence of the other" (Cucos, 2000:136).

This perception has always existed, but the theoretical concept is rather recent. In delineating its conceptual features, one may notice five pillars:

a. The child's perception of the other. The parents explain the child who the others are and what makes them different. In most cases, the child is shy and reluctant to interact with strangers. Freud studies these reactions in detail, and put them down to the people's general preservation instinct.

b. Each individual's alter-ego, which psychologists describe as our second personality or consciousness, which makes us choose our actions. Its manifestation depends on each person's imagination, and is more present in childhood. This explains why many children have imaginary friends to play with. This inner reaction is refrained in adulthood.

c. The other one is seen as an enemy or the rival that threatens one's own position. This perception underpins numerous military conflicts throughout the history.

d. The other one is perceived as another form of otherness. All religions urge us to honor the strangers coming into our homes

based on the peaceful attitude that governs this perception.

e. The other one is seen as your friend who needs support. It is the manifestation of charity and mercy for orphans, widows, or poor people. This sustains the nuns' congregations from Western Europe staring from the 18th century, as well as the establishment of the Red Cross.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Collective memory leads to the development of myths materialized in national holidays, commemorations, etc. that bear special significance in people's minds. Culture and its educational nature can become a manipulation weapon or a tool to distort reality, e.g., racist or communist theses, which enjoyed significant support at certain moments in time. Building a European consciousness is a painstaking endeavor due to several impeding factors such as nationalism or xenophobia, to name but two. The most negative form of nationalism is the one that justifies one social groups' action against its own nation. The ideologists of the universalist conception attempt to disseminate the idea according to which identity culture should give in to a unique, universal culture. This ideology has been imported from across the Atlantic, where it was possible in a state born from various identities about two centuries ago. In Europe, on the other hand, there are bigger ambitions, as well as stronger tendencies to identity preservation.

A more plausible option would be for the identity culture to manifest in a larger European or worldwide environment. This is neither a fast nor an easy process, as we have witnessed for some time. Moreover, the progress is even slower in Eastern Europe, including Romania. Among the Romanians that have left the country during the last two decades, one may notice two opposite trends:

-   The former denies identity and leads to uprooting and alienation.

-   The latter exaggerates one's own identity, which results in inadaptability and cultural shock, for the emigrant tends to judge the new realities from his/her original standards that are often inappropriate.

Adaptation is the desired attitude and involves learning new languages, new social codes, and new values specific to the new culture. Compromising the two trends is the right way, but it is a hard process.

Intercultural communication is another coordinate of today's world "by perceiving the new culture through the lens of that particular culture". This is achieved by intercultural education, which comprises aspects such as: human rights, democracy and civic spirit, tolerance, environmental protection, peace, etc. These topics have been included in academic curricula across Europe for a long time, and lately have become relevant in Romania, too. The fundamentals are taught in the educational formal framework, but their actual assimilation and growth take place in adulthood.

European values, which initially generated various reactions, are still valid by means of dimensions such as Christianity, humanism, or Romanism. In Romania, they have gained specific connotations, since all the aspects of intercultural communication change and evolve permanently.

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