

# NEW TENDENCIES ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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## **Abstract**

*Europe counts on Intercultural Communication to survive under better conditions. Since May 2004, we have been watching a cultural amalgam increase significantly with the entrance of the ten new countries in the European Union; and in 2007, with the enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania, we see this evolution at its prime. Never have we assisted to such an increase of contacts among European Nations and the phenomenon of acculturation is developing under new forms. Learning and teaching languages under these conditions is becoming more and more essential, so that a healthy coexistence among all European peoples can occur. This paper is based on the belief that there is a tendency to what we might call a "European identity and culture with the Generation E". When we come to think about Intercultural Communication, we have to focus on subject matters such as different cultures connections. Questions such as how a culture can survive without interpenetration of other cultures or intermixing of different cultural traits and the role that learning and teaching a L2, L3 or even a L4 can have in the new tendencies of Intercultural Communication are raised here.*

**Key-words:** Europe, intercultural communication, learning / teaching languages

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## 1 Introduction

"I used to think anyone doing anything weird was weird.

Now I know that it is the people that call others weird that are weird."

PAUL MCCARTNEY

For this article, I briefly examine the problematic of relations among different European Nations, and define how they are in fact interrelated in the European Union context. Based on the observation of facts, the following research question is proposed: What are the new tendencies in Intercultural Communication and which contribution has learning / teaching L2 in this process? To answer this research question, I introduce some hypotheses, suggesting that there is a new generation in Europe – the Generation E – that embodies the processes of new tendencies in Intercultural Communication. First, I understand that with 27 different Nations together, Europe is facing new challenges in terms of integration. That is, the European Union, where there is the need to answer with one sole voice to global issues such as cooperation with developing countries or economic responses to other superpowers, actually needs to have integrated elements. It is not that respect for each individual Nation is ignored; on the contrary, a climate of tolerance and respect towards other partners is fundamental. Second, I briefly examine the role and the impact that learning / teaching different languages can have in the process of integration of the Generation E in a more united Europe, consisting on the new tendencies in Intercultural Communication. For example, when a person is learning a different language, she is adopting and adapting to certain cultural traits that are connected to the environment where that language is spoken. I first examine this issue by explaining what I understand by Culture and Intercultural Communication. Second, I synthesize the principles of the Generation E and the study of L2 as a new tendency in Intercultural Communication.

I would like to start by observing that cosmopolitanism, universalism and internationalism are possible ways of dealing with the relations between different European Nations always based on the respect for Otherness. It is amazing how people can come out richer intellectually speaking if they are

tolerant, co-operative and have a real interest in other cultures. The magical tool to achieve an effective intercultural communication is, undoubtedly, the proficiency in one or several languages other than the mother tongue. But so that people can communicate better, there is the need for an increased language planning and effective language policies from an early age onwards.<sup>1</sup>

## **2 Towards a Definition of Culture and Communication**

There are many ways of defining culture. Fred E. Jandt (2003 a) makes his distinctions among several perspectives, namely a *historical perspective* - in this sense, culture might be the traditions that are passed on to future generations. If we adopt a *behavioural perspective*, then culture might be the learned, shared ways of behaving in life; on the other hand, if we prefer a *symbolic perspective*, culture is formed by the arbitrarily meanings that a society agrees on and shares. But if we prefer a *structural definition*, then culture might be the patterns, and the interrelated ideas, symbols or behaviours of a group of people. Finally, for a *normative perspective*, culture is all that should be adopted as ideals, values and rules of conduct. For the sake of my argument, I will understand *culture* in a broad context, that is, I will understand culture as a learned means how to communicate in society.

Communication is sharing values, ideas, *Weltanschauungen*, as the Germans say. Communication is used for a better understanding among people, peoples, nations and civilizations. But an effective communication can only occur when there is a common ground, a relationship with empathy or, at least, sympathy. The misuse of communication can cause and be a consequence simultaneously of divergence and conflict among individuals and groups.<sup>2</sup> Besides, for Sylvia Vlaeminck, "Real communication is not about using the same words, it is about understanding and respecting other cultures and their values and customs" (Vlaeminck, 2003). I could not agree more with this than I do.

Still according to Jandt (2003 b), *intercultural communication* "refers not only to the communication between individuals of diverse cultural identifications but also to the communication between groups." I understand Intercultural Communication as the sharing between groups or individuals with different backgrounds and tendencies on what culture is concerned. It may involve different languages that have their statute recognised at the highest level as working languages or minority languages that are spoken at a restricted

geographical and ethnic area. If we want to communicate efficiently, what matters is not as much the sharing of the same code, but the understanding of what is behind and beyond words. Useful translation and interpretation can only occur when the agents involved in the process are culturally proficient both in the source language and in the target language. By this I mean that it is not sufficient to master expressions and the language rules - it is also necessary to know the cultural antecedents.

### **3 An Integrated Europe**

In Tom R. Reid's bestseller, it is stated that "Europe is a more integrated place today than at any time since the Roman Empire" (Reid, 2005). In fact, twenty-seven Nations, with different historical backgrounds and diverse cultures are sharing the same geographical space, the same principles such as democracy and freedom of speech and above all, the same legislation. Circulation of goods, capital, people and services is a reality today in Europe. I am not going to say that there are no occasional tensions; sometimes during the European Council summits at the highest scale, we see difficult negotiations evolve until a consensus is reached and decisions are taken.

In such an amalgam of diversity there is, however, some kind of unity. The European Union's motto is, in fact, *Unity in Diversity*. More than just words, Europe is defending the particularities of each Nation, and being together is the highest principle. The result of all this is a colourful Europe happily living in peace and towards economic prosperity. It is true that, somehow, there are still peasants who are paid *not* to produce or cultivate their best products because of agricultural quotas; wouldn't it be better if the money invested in those subsidies to pay the peasants *not* to produce, would instead be used to ship invaluable food to developing countries? It is true that, somehow, there are still entire populations who see their access to work abroad with legal difficulties, because there is always a transition period; wouldn't it be better if legislation would prevent Europeans from being considered differently when it comes to labour access? It is true that the Euro-sceptics consider the gigantic bureaucratic machine in Brussels as a well of hypocrisy, but wouldn't it be more productive if all Europeans worked together to the common well-being?

It seems to me that it is fundamental that economic solutions with practical beneficial consequences to the disfavoured at any level are found. We need a social Europe aware of rights for the minorities, with informed and critical

citizens who are creative and productive in all their actions. If we want that the Lisbon Agreement is fulfilled, than we have to work hard to be ahead of innovation, productiveness and excellence. We have to trust that the present and the future generations are efficient, prepared to face the challenges of the 21st century and, above all, that they can adapt to the new demands the world is imposing on us every day.

#### **4 The Generation E**

I defend the principle that there is a European identity, regardless of the fact that each people may have peculiarities that are only their own. Idiosyncrasies are, of course, allowed – what makes individuality possible is tolerance towards everybody and what makes Europe so interesting is, in fact, our diversity.

But we have been seeing a whole different generation growing up and this generation does not identify itself with national labels. Rather than being Greek, Belgian or Latvian, the Generation E relates to European values and not national values as much. If we consider a 12-year-old living in Brussels as an example and try to describe one day of her life, we might come to the following robot-portrait: she wakes up at the buzz of a Swedish mobile phone wake up sound and has her quick shower with Belgian water. She has Finnish milk without lactose, French bread with Irish butter or Dutch cream cheese after having her Spanish orange juice as breakfast. She is taken to school in her parents' German car and she has her English class with a Flemish teacher. She studies French with a Francophone teacher and Dutch with a teacher coming from Antwerp. She has her lunch at school with children from all over Europe and other countries as well: in today's menu, she will find Portuguese tinned sardines with Polish potatoes, lettuce from Luxembourg, Greek feta cheese and orange juice from Cyprus. In the afternoon, she studies European History, Science and Maths. She has her choir practice as well: they are presenting the Ninth Symphony from Beethoven at the next concert for the parents and other family members... When she comes back home, she listens to the latest Eurovision Song Contest for a while; her favourite songs come from Lithuania, Check Republic, Bulgaria and Denmark and her favourite singers are Austrian, Maltese, Hungarian and Slovenian. Her family is planning on a short trip to Slovakia in the winter to do some skiing or to Romania to the beach soon. She is studying some words in Latvian, because she's falling madly in love with a

Latvian boy she goes to school with – his parents come from Estonia and Latvia and have lived in Lithuania as well. She does her homework and has dinner with her family, that is, an Italian *pizza*. She plays a bit with her 7-year-old younger brother and, finally, goes to bed.

This may be a slightly caricatured picture of our 12-year-old from Brussels, but it might be a true story as well... What I mean to defend is that in such a globalised culture such as the European nowadays, there is no space for empty nationalisms or fake ideologies that, maybe in another context might lead to divergence or even war.

Another new tendency in Intercultural Communication is the way to stable and durable peace, which is very reassuring in fact, if we come to think about all the disputes that dilacerated Europe in the latest few centuries.

Therefore, the new Generation E is non-violent, tolerant, democratic, open-minded, and success-oriented and prosper. The elements of this Generation E love to travel for pleasure and are willing to study at a University in another country, doing an Erasmus interchange programme. They see working abroad with good eyes, they plan to have an international partner and raise bi- or trilingual children... And this is where learning L2s comes into:

## **5 When the Generation E is Studying L2, L3 and even L4**

Patrick Stevenson has presented the problem of policies relating to integration in Germany that are based on principles connecting language knowledge and “capacity for integration” (*Integrationsfähigkeit*): “The Immigration Law was passed by the Bundestag and ratified by the second chamber, the Bundesrat, in March 2002“. (Stevenson, 2006). This only shows that one of the new tendencies in Europe is to defend the national language knowledge as a sign of integration of migrants in a specific country. But the Generation E is no longer confined to any national borders because, theoretically, it can move all around Europe. Depending only on the fact that people can survive finding a job, we have to agree that the new youth of the Generation E has all the interest in learning a L2 and a L3 or more and as perfectly as possible.

That is why new policies about learning / teaching L2, L3 and L4 are required nowadays in Europe. Knowing a L2 is not only a vehicle to get to know the culture from the nation any longer; it is a matter of survival because it is directly

connected to the workforce being able to find a well-paid job – the more proficient you are in the local language(s), the better chance you get of finding a job corresponding to your career expectations. Of course that this tendency can be used by governments to hinder low-skilled labourers to come to work abroad, if knowing proficiently the national language becomes a condition to get a work permit. But it only shows that knowing a L2 or L3 and L4 reasonably can become a key that will open many doors when we come to think about career opportunities and development.

Among others, Vanessa Pupavac and Sue Wright have pointed out the implications of the category *linguistic minority* (Pupavac, 2006; Wright, 2004 a). Language is seen as an essential part of a community's identity and self-esteem and to separate language communities may lead to ethnic divisions and conflicts as well as social exclusion with ghettoisation. The states may maintain minority languages protected and also their communities, but this can also be a cause for discrimination on the basis of language. For Sue Wright, "It is hard to see why multilingualism at Community level can be presented as positive, a sign of vitality, diversity and creativity, whereas at national level it is divisive, economically disadvantageous and limiting" (Wright, 2004 a). In fact, probably not many people in Europe would consider multilingualism something negative whereas when they think about the problems the same phenomenon may cause at a national level, they would probably enumerate more negative than positive aspects. This observation leads me to refer that at the European Union level, only the speakers who master the *language of power* can be heard if their interest is lobbying, for instance – however, everybody has the right to see her language recognised, from a legal point of view, at least. When it comes to practice, it is true that the fittest to express themselves in the language of power have the best possibilities to be heard.

It is interesting to notice that along the times, different languages have been proposed to be the *lingua franca* in the European Union: considering the first Member States that founded what we now call the Union, the more natural language to communicate among the states was French. With time, Latin was also suggested to become the language of the European Parliament, just like the Israelis have done with their language in their country. But maybe because it would favour the Romance language speakers in relation to others or because Latin is associated with the Vatican State and the Catholic Church, the idea of Latin as a *lingua franca* was forgotten. Also Esperanto has been seen as a possible *global lingua franca*, but as it

is an artificial language that would, again, favour the Romance language speakers, the idea was dropped as well.

With the European enlargement in 2004 and 2007, twelve other countries have joined the Union and a new tendency in Intercultural Communication is occurring as you read this paper: undoubtedly, the English language is growing as a confirmed *lingua franca*. In their study about working languages in the European Union, Victor Ginsburgh and Shlomo Weber defend that there is an official multilingualism on one hand and on the other hand, "The increase in knowledge of languages among the younger generations is really remarkable" (Ginsburgh and Weber, 2005). It is also incredible how even the current UK government is trying to make an effort to give younger children the possibility to learn a L2, namely French, from the age of five onwards. In a BBC 2 programme called "The Daily Politics" broadcast on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December of 2006, Esther Rantzen, who had a programme called "Pardon my French" was interviewed and stated that although English is becoming more and more a *lingua franca*, it can only be beneficial to British children to be able to speak other languages than English. She also stated the fact that as soon as she lost her fear of making mistakes, she began to be more proficient in French. If we consider that usually children are not afraid of anything as it is the case with computer literacy, we can have much hope about the future generations' proficiency in L2 or L3 or even L4. We also have to aim at teaching a L2 with a *communicative approach*, rather than using dusty old grammar books or exclusively translation exercises in a language classroom. It is interesting to note, however, that even though people are proficient in L2, miscommunication across cultures can and does occur sometimes. Sometimes, intercultural communication is misled because of people's own cultural background. Yumi Nixon and Peter Bull have found fascinating conclusions after their study with British and Japanese subjects (Nixon and Bull, 2006). The Generation E will be subject to an immense psychological strain, considering that people will move more and more among borders from now on. Kinga Williams and Rose Aghdami have proposed what they call the "Mensana Model of Managing Migration" with a five stage psychological process that people who migrate should



undergo in order to deal healthily with culture shocks (Williams and Aghdami, 2005).

But apart from the problems that the Generation E may encounter with when going to work abroad, there are initiatives at the highest level that have been promoting language programmes and interchanges of various groups in Europe: the European Commission started promoting language learning back in 1990 with the Lingua programme; Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci have followed: Comenius, for schools, Erasmus, for universities and polytechnics, Grundtvig for adults and Lingua as well. The European Year of Languages was celebrated in 2001, the Erasmus Programme is celebrating twenty years of age and it has been so successful that it is now expanding to parts of the world other than Europe. And we have been undergoing an improvement in language teachers' trainings as well. This can only lead to better intercultural communication and two of the most remarkable new tendencies are the increase of relations and their improvement in terms of quality.

I may sound too much of a Euro-enthusiast and too optimistic on what language teaching and learning as good means to achieve quality of life in many respects are concerned; but how can we be otherwise? In fact, and according to Sylvia Vlaeminck, head of the Language Policy Unit in the Directorate General Education and Culture in 2003, "Some 200 projects (selected from some 1300 projects submitted) have been co-financed by the Commission. It is interesting to note that for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the co-ordinating institutions it was the first occasion to co-operate with the Commission" (Vlaeminck, 2003).

## **6 Conclusions**

Today's era is a time when Intercultural Communication has reached its prime. The increase in cross-cultural relations in quantity and in quality has been the cause and the consequence, at the same time, of the need to new learning and teaching techniques of L2 and L3 or L4 even. I would like to point out that, as Sue Wright has observed, "The philosophical underpinning of nationalist linguistics came under attack wherever there were currents of cosmopolitanism, internationalism and universalism" (Wright, 2004 b). There is such a movement with cosmopolitan characteristics nowadays.

Some of the new tendencies in Intercultural Communication in Europe with the enlargement of the Union that is now built of twenty-seven Nations could be synthesised as follows:

- tolerance and respect for Otherness
- more and better intercultural communication
- increase of circulation of goods, capital, people and services in Europe
- coexistence of globalisation and individuality
- more economic prosperity and more solidarity
- new forms of cooperation, acculturation and integration
- new values, ideas and a European *Weltanschauung*
- healthier and happier coexistence of nations
- better understanding and sharing among people, peoples, nations and civilizations
- more empathy or, at least, sympathy among individuals and nations
- more intermarriage and bi- and trilingualism
- less tensions, divergences and conflicts aiming at a stable and durable peace
- improvement and proficiency in languages other than the mother tongue
- better techniques for learning and teaching of L2, L3 and even L4
- increased language planning
- effective language policies from an early age onwards
- development of English as a lingua franca in Europe
- development of the Generation E under various aspects
- cosmopolitanism, universalism and internationalism and not nationalism

Maybe I could add many more to these new tendencies in intercultural communication in Europe; it might be, however, overlapping. What matters most, I believe, is the tendency to tolerance increase. I would like to conclude with an interesting quote from Eleanor Holmes Norton:

"The only way to make sure people you agree with can speak  
is support the rights of people you don't agree with"

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For several studies about learning languages from an early age onwards, see Marianne Nikolov and Helena Curtain (2000).

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<sup>2</sup> If you wish to know more about the role of language in the present and past development of social, national and cultural identity in Europe, see, for instance, Stephen Barbour and Cathie Carmichael (eds) (2000).

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