

International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

The influence of language on the collective perception of alterity: A study on the image of Turks in the Greek media and the potential for education

Oana-Camelia Stroescu ^{a*}, Dorin Popa ^b

^a*Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, 11 Carol I Blvd., Iași, 700506 Romania*

^b*Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, 11 Carol I Blvd., Iași, 700506, Romania*

Abstract

‘Eat your food, child, or else the Turk will come and take you away’. This is a common Greek stereotype about the Turks, illustrating them as bogeyman. But why Greeks have a bad image of their eastern neighbors? The present study has its source of inspiration in a wider research we are currently undergoing, related to the Greek-Turkish relations in the second half of the 20th century and the stereotypes about the Turkish people, promoted by the Greek media. In this paper we aim at remonstrating that the Greek press reinforces ethnic categorization and stereotypes during the bilateral crises, thus cultivating a negative image of the neighbor.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Dr. Zafer Bekirogullari of Cognitive – Counselling, Research & Conference Services C-cres.

Keywords: Aegean crises; alterity; education; Greek press; language; stereotype

1. Introduction

In a society where globalization favors the emphasis on common notes, similarities, socio-economic homogeneity and the affirmation of the self, the identity seems to have left for expression only the cultural repertoire, mainly, the linguistic one.

Resistance to the seized force of the adhesion to globalization has led to a sort of re-discovery of the charm of national languages in relation to the internationally spoken English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese or Arabic. The

* Oana-Camelia Stroescu. Tel.: +40-332-230031
E-mail address: oanacameliastroescu@yahoo.com

call for culture launched in most of the world countries is seen in all cases as a return to national / ethnic literature and to the language imbued by the local mythology. Language is not just a way to present ourselves to others, to differentiate us, but more - and more relevant to this paper -, language represents also a tool that others use to project their own perception about our identity. Language, as a tool and process to configure an identity, is essentially dynamic, dependent of a spatial and temporal context. How we perceive ourselves - as a group or nation - change with this community of practice, so that our identity is in a constant process of change. The role of language is essential in the process of self defining and self identification in relation to the alterity. Goffman showed in his works (1963) that the whole approach of defining the self is essentially dependent on the speech. Therefore, any identity is built on discourse, at the junction of self-perception and otherness (alterity), the latter being crucial in shaping and fixing an identity.

The alterity in this study refers to the Turkish people, as it is described by the Greek daily newspapers after the Cyprus crisis of 1974. The language used by the Greek press seems to be a version of the educational language used in the history textbooks of the primary and secondary education in Greece. In times of bilateral tensions during the second half of the 20th century, one may observe the revival of the categorization of the Turks in the Greek newspapers. The language influences the collective perception of Alterity by creating simplified and negative images of the 'other'. This perception is induced to students and public and perpetuates negative feelings towards the neighbors. The methodology applied for this study is the content analysis of the front page articles of major Greek political newspapers for a period of three months: one ahead of the crisis, during the crisis and one month after it. An attempt will be made to refer to social identity theory issues, that is, a social psychological theory that sets out to explain group processes and intergroup relations.

2. Brief historical background of the Greek-Turkish relations

Greece and Turkey are two neighboring states with wide coastlines at the Aegean Sea. The bilateral dispute is related to oil exploration and exploitation rights and thus to the sovereignty over certain areas in the Aegean. After World War II, the diplomatic relations between the two states passed through a crisis almost every ten years, because of the interethnic conflict in Cyprus and the disagreement regarding the sovereign right over some areas in the Aegean Sea. After 1974, this dispute took the shape of an energy dispute and referred to the disagreement over the interpretation and application of international law. On the one hand, Turkey's position was that the Greek islands in the Eastern Aegean were not entitled to a continental shelf region and the delimitation line of the continental shelf should pass, from North to South, through the middle of the Aegean. The Turkish Government believed that the Aegean should be shared in equal parts between the two states, in order to have equal economic and defense opportunities in the area. On the other hand, Greece's position was in favor of the delimitation of the continental shelf using the median line between the Greek islands in Eastern Aegean and the western shores of Turkey.

In the summer of 1976, the tension took the shape of a crisis when the Turkish research vessel 'Sismik I' was sent out in the Aegean Sea to conduct oil research in the disputed continental shelf – considered by the authorities in Athens to be Greek. Consequently, Turkey and Greece appealed to the United Nation Security Council and to the International Court of Justice at The Hague and both international bodies had urged the neighboring states not to make use of violence in solving the Aegean Sea issues and to continue with bilateral negotiations in order to achieve a solution in the best interest of both countries. But in 1987 and 1996, after years of either failed bilateral negotiations or inactivity, the Aegean dispute rapidly turned into new diplomatic tensions, which could have had a negative impact on the peace and security in the wider region of Eastern Mediterranean.

These two countries found themselves again ahead of an imminent armed conflict. The 1987 crisis stroke in March, after the Greek Government announced its intent of nationalizing North Aegean Petroleum, company that was preparing drilling operations in the most contested Aegean continental shelf area. The authorities in Ankara announced their intent of conducting drillings in the same region – east of the Greek island of Thasos – in the continental shelf considered to be Greek and thus stirring up old animosities.

As ‘in the Mediterranean people easily get their blood up’ (Kosmadopoulos 1984, p.204), another crisis stroke in the area in 1996. The Imia dispute arose on the occasion of a naval accident in December 1995, when a Turkish vessel, called ‘Figen Akat’, ran ashore on a small rock of the Imia islets complex, near the Greek island of Kalymnos, in the Eastern Aegean. The captain refused to be rescued by the Greek coastguard, claiming that he was on Turkish territory. The incident was hardly reported by the Greek media and it was not widely known until one month later, in January 1996, when a Greek magazine ran a story. The event brought severe reaction from the Greek media which was followed by the Greek flag on the rocks. Turkish journalists flew to the rocks and raised the Turkish one, thus escalating tensions. Moreover, Turkey began to lay claims to a larger number of rocks in the Aegean, regarded as indisputably Greek by Greece.

The two perspectives always differ on the distribution of the blame for the tensions in the Aegean. Leaders’ references to a “just and lasting solution” rarely accommodate any understanding of what constitutes a fair outcome according to the other side.

3. Identity and stereotypes

The social groups that shape the identity are characterized by membership criteria and boundaries; in other words, they include some people and exclude others. Although it is not necessary for these boundaries to imply any tensions between groups, in practice relations between groups are far more likely to be “antagonistic than complementary” (Stephan, Ybarra & Rios Morrison, 2009, p. 43). And even when a threat from an outgroup leads to nonhostile behavioral reactions (e.g., negotiation, compromise, deterrence), the emotional responses to threat are likely to be negative. Threats occur in the ongoing relations between groups and their antecedents and consequences are interactive and recursive. That is, the behavior of a group affects the perceptions and reactions of the other group.

Alterity is inevitably a condition and a tool for identity construction and identity dynamics - an ongoing process, never fixed or determined. National identities are politically determined communities (imagined political communities, Anderson, 1988, p. 15), as are the discursive determined communities (produced, re-produced, transformed and deconstructed by discourse). The idea of a national character becomes reality in the context of certain beliefs and convictions, reified by figurative speeches of politicians, intellectuals, mass-media and disseminated through the educational system, the mass media etc.

Whether they are social, economic, political, cultural or technological, changes occurring in modern societies entailed the reconfiguration of conflict paradigm; thus identity becomes both cause of conflict and its outcome. In fact, one of the stakes of this paper is to address ethnic identity as a social process. Thus, we accept as a starting point the definition of social identity as a set of distinctive features of a person or a group shown in comparison with other person or group, when the bearer of an identity realizes the need to resemble to or to distinguish himself from another by self-identification and by identifying the other. (Giddens, 2000, pp. 620-626). Social identity embraces the idea of a more or less obvious social distance and that of the relations of inclusion or exclusion of individuals and groups in a given social context. We will emphasize how Greek media discourse on Turkish people updates the two major socio-cognitive processes specific to identity construction: a) ‘categorization’ – which defines inter-group boundaries, with regulatory role in the distribution of individuals of certain representative categories and b) ‘self-enhancement’ - a process that favors the in-group by intergroup stereotypes (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995, p. 260).

Stereotyping, as an extension of the fundamental cognitive process of categorization, involves structuring of events, objects and experiences and attribution of meanings. Simplifying operations and labeling emphasize certain similar features of identification, distinctive compared to those of differentiation. Beyond the identification of generic categories, stereotypes bear undifferentiated judgments on those they categorize. Although media discourse encourages and fosters forms and activities of stereotyping, we consider that under these circumstances, they spread rather unfavorable and destructive images of the alterity and the latter does not have enough discourse power to change them.

In a media discourse, the stereotype – as a prefabricated unit of language, thinking and representation through which the ‘other’ reveals itself – mediates our relationship with reality. Stereotypes create and maintain a sense of belonging to a community or, on the contrary, of total cleavage of two communities, thereby shaping – indeed, only partially – the collective identity of two groups. From this perspective, stereotypes used in the Greek media discourse on Turkish people should be integrated into a broader perspective, in a discussion aimed not to question the originality of the discourse, but, rather, its veracity and its effects on the sense of belonging. These questions are too complex to receive a fair consideration in the limited scope of the paper. Instead, the present analysis is limited to narrowing the focus to one specific dimension which entails the question of stereotypes and alterity perception.

Stereotypes, as systems of conditioned reflexes (composed of images, representations, concepts, beliefs, ideas and judgments), are formed by way of repeating in the same conditions; they can be reproduced and could reproduce indefinitely. Media speech exploits (and often abuses of) the reflexive side of the stereotype. We admit, of course, that stereotype is essential to the declarative and representative media activity; it designates and notifies, explains and enforces, it is a social catalyst, but it can also become a truly social disrupter, a source of tension and conflict, especially when the subject of stereotyping is a group located at some distance (physical or social) and without any possibility of feedback.

4. Images of Turks in the Greek daily newspapers

Michael Bilig argued that the distinction between ‘patriotism’ (rather positively valued) and ‘nationalism’ (presumably equated with extremism) can overlap the implied distinction of ‘us versus them’. He argued that nationalism is the discourse of the ‘others’ (Bilig, 1995, p.16). Therefore, nationalism is more than talk about the nation: nationalistic discourse engenders emotional responses in both the speaker and the audience. The aim of our research is to show that in moments of crisis, the Greek press constructs the problem to represent the other side negatively and indirectly maintains the Greek-Turkish tension by creating and promoting stereotypes about the Turks. In all the Greek daily political newspapers that we here analyze (‘Makedonia’, ‘Kathimerini’, ‘Eleftherotipia’, ‘Ta Nea’ and ‘Eleftheros Typos’), stereotypes refer to the negative image of the other (hostility and offensiveness). In their front page stories, these publications display mostly the Greek interests and criticize the other side. Turkey is perceived as a state that takes advantage of the Greek Government’s goodwill and considers the Aegean Sea an area of claims. Ethnic categorization encountered in the old Greek history textbooks is present in the media as well. Turkey’s responses and reasons are considered claims, a term that strips from the beginning the Turkish arguments of any possible legal validity. Instead, Greek actions are deemed legal and obviously, they purpose to defend Greece’s national interests. Both sides seem to believe that the idea to concede to the other’s demands will lead to a vicious cycle of new threats and open the way to a new series of concessions.

Although newspapers like ‘Makedonia’ and ‘Kathimerini’ are neutral or positive to bilateral dialogue, the front pages envisage some doubts about Turkey’s will to solve the dispute in the Aegean. Papers rely on terms as ‘defiance’, ‘tension’ and ‘escalation’, which are characteristic for describing Ankara’s decisions regarding the Aegean, emphasizes Turkey’s commitment and determination to pursue its political goals. Turkey always ‘asserts’ and ‘pretends’ (Kathimerini, July 22nd, 1976), while Greece ‘firmly answers to threats’ (Kathimerini, July 17th, 1976) and ‘fights’ for its rights. More, in the 1976 crisis, the lead story of July 24th headed ‘Demirel is fishing votes with the help of Hora’ (Kathimerini, July 24th, 1976), describes the traditional Turkish festivity that took place at the vessel’s launch almost like a strange ritual due to lamb sacrifice. This tradition, awkward to Orthodox Christianity, is perceived as a barbarian custom which underlines the cultural differences between the two countries and does not promote mutual understanding. In other words, newspapers do not contribute to reducing negative stereotypes which have already been historically and culturally developed, but to perpetuating them through their stories. Moreover, self-criticism aspects displayed in the Greek media are insignificant.

‘Eleftheros Typos’ is a newspaper that uses strong and accusative headlines and numbers or quantities to express the extent of the national problems. It is considered that the Turks launch clear and continuous threats by sending their research vessel ‘Sismik I’ for oil prospection in the most sensitive area of the Aegean Sea continental shelf. More dramatic than other newspapers on the Greek market, the daily Eleftheros Typos’ technique is to display

violent front page headlines to demonstrate the diachronic threat coming from Turkey, the same ‘threat from the East’ that is overused in the history textbooks. Moreover, negative declarations of Turkish high military officials demonstrate that the information is objective and comes from both sides of the Aegean, but seems to be harmful, as they are perceived by the readers as the official position of Turkey as a state and not as individual declarations. This assertion leads to stereotypes, as Turkey is seen as a country that provokes threats and is ready for conflict and war.

Newspapers tend to focus on persons (Özal, Papandreou, Mitsotakis or Turkish high military officials) and not on countries. It is normal to mention politicians on the front page of a newspaper, but stereotyping is intended for the Turkish people as a whole, because stereotypes are applied to all members of a group. Turkish policy is seen as the new-Ottomanism, deceitful and treacherous. On February 4th 1987 edition of ‘Ta Nea’, a small headline, built on equivocal terms, announces the upcoming tension: ‘Özal is threatening Greece with a lesson’. The article continues on the third page mentioning of Özal’s dream of recreating the Ottoman Empire. The editors pick up some fragments of his statements which bring into question the status of the Aegean islands under Greek sovereignty: ‘Turkey is a big country and their islands are right under our nose. They cannot obstruct our exit to high seas’. This is the point where editors’ ethics play a crucial role, as publishing selected fragments of speech could mislead public opinion and create negative images and perceptions about other people and cultures.

Moreover, an aggravating factor in the analysis of Turkey’s recent history is its dictatorship in the 80s which meant violation of human rights, that was against all fundamental elements of Europe as a community. On the front page of March 6th 1987 edition of ‘Makedonia’, the main article entitled ‘New provocations from Ankara. Turkey claims all Aegean and threats to take all measures if Greece doesn’t stop its activities east of Thasos’ presents the Turkish ‘threat’ and Greece’s ‘immovable position’ and reminds the readers that the Greek prime minister calls for Turkey to come to The Hague instead of making dialogue with ‘propagandistic’ declarations. For its March 28th 1987 edition, ‘Ta Nea’ chooses a very bold headline: ‘Ready to fire’. The paper writes about Turkish provocations being the cause of a future military confrontation in the Aegean, as Turkey seems to reject the Greek peace proposal to defer the problem to the International Court at The Hague. Another striking headline is the one on March 31st 1987 edition of ‘Ta Nea’: ‘Özal gives in’ and the column is headed ‘In principle, he accepts Papandreou’s proposal’. The article refers to Özal’s decision to accept the appeal to the International Court of Justice at The Hague, in order to solve the Aegean issue, but the headline induces the feeling of a supreme national victory upon the Turkish threat. The verb “to give in” may be interpreted as humiliating for the Turks and overestimated for the Greeks. It is used in the context we presented above, that is that Turkey is always presented as a traditional foe.

In case of the Imia crisis, when the Greek press discovered the story, they raised nationalistic questions of sovereignty over the rocks. In January 1996, the Mayor of nearby island of Kalymnos raised a Greek flag in order to stress that the rocks were Greek territory. A few days later, a team of journalists of the Turkish newspaper “Hurriet” flew to Imia and replaced the Greek flag with the Turkish one. The next day the Greek flag was raised again, by the Greek commandos placed on the largest of the two rocks in order to protect the national symbol. Tension rose dramatically when Turkish commandos landed on the smaller of the two Imia/Kardak rocks. The crisis was eventually diffused by the US pressures, due to “on the phone diplomacy” between Washington, Athens and Ankara and the ‘status-quo ante’ was restored. The Greek government viewed the withdrawal as a victory, as the sovereignty was maintained, but it was criticized by the political opponents, who considered the situation as ‘national humiliation’ because the Greek sovereignty was not in fact defended. ‘Eleftherotypia’ newspaper was preoccupied whether the Turkish flag on Imia/Kardak ‘would be removed or not during the Turkish withdrawal’. The flag seems to be a strong symbol of national pride and sovereignty for both of the states.

On its February 6th edition, ‘Eleftherotypia’ wrote: ‘Ciller now wants 3000 islands. It got up her appetite’. The center-right ‘Eleftheros Typos’ was raged by the rise of the Turkish flag and wrote: ‘They rose undisturbed the Turkish flag in Imia. Shame! The Turks humiliated us’. The editors blamed the Greek Government of submitting to Richard Holbrooke’s orders: ‘They pulled the national guard out of 25 rocks!’

A central rhetorical strategy used to bring into focus the issue of blood sacrifice in most nationalistic discourses is the invocation of emblematic figures of the past who, through their acts, serve as model o behavior. The invocation

of widely known Greek names was displayed in 'Eleftheros Typos' March 27th edition: 'the bones of Kolokotronis, Diakos, Karaiskakis, Papaflessas, Makrigiannis (i.e. heroes of the 1821 Greek Revolution) would crack now if they'd know we answer with such defeatism to the Turks', trying to underline that the Government movements towards defending the national sovereignty were weak. The rhetorical force of past sacrifices and heroes seems to have legitimizing power, but yet, this can be considered as an isolated example. Both Greek center-right and center-left newspapers presented the Imia/Kardak crisis as an attack to Greek national sovereignty and 'Ta Nea' specifies in its March 18th edition that the Turks permanently contest the Greek sovereignty over the Imia rocks trying to create a 'fait accompli' in the area: 'The question of the Greek sovereignty is permanent. The Turks set up a second Imia'.

We recognize that the views of the limited group of newspapers under study may not be representative of the views of the entire Greek media or indeed of the views of all Greek population. However we believe that the discourse of the selected newspapers is significant for collective identity construction. Rather than aiming to generalize, our analysis attempts to understand the way in which stereotypes function to express feelings of nationhood.

5. Conclusions and prospects

Stereotypes have the virtue of simplicity; they follow the law of absolutes - of good and evil, of 'us' - the ingroup - against the 'other' - the outgroup. History and people are too complex to be reduced to simplified terms, characteristics and ideas. Stereotypes distort perception through oversimplification, but they are also dangerous breeding grounds for fear, resentment, irrationality, animosity and ethnic conflict. In this process of typification, ethnic identities are made simple. Stereotypes maintain and promote bilateral rivalry and don't give the 'other' a chance to argue his position or side of the story. Our research shows that the Greek press achieved a rhetorical construction of the collective identity through the strategic deployment of the difference between the Greek 'us' (responsible, peaceful) and the Turkish 'them' (deceitful, treacherous). Our observations suggest that the employment of 'archetypal metaphors' (Michael Osborn, 1967, pp.115-126) in a message tends to produce emotional reactions of agreement or disagreement.

Greece's position is presented as legal and compliant to international law, while Turkey's actions are considered illegal and dangerous. In the 20th century history, Turkish policy is seen as new-Ottomanist and treacherous and Turkish decisions are seen as provocations. The Greek state's relation with Turkey is based on suspiciousness and prejudice. As well as the educational language, the language used in the media is often ethnocentric; it does not promote a suitable climate for solving the bilateral problems and does not encourage good neighboring, as the Turks are always depicted as downgraded. The Greek media along with the history textbooks display a simplified image of the 'other' on the background of exaggerated conflicts and readers may and will perceive the alterity with a childish reasoning of good or bad and black or white, leaving no space for mutual understanding.

Avoiding stereotyping and ethnic categorization could eliminate this source of conflict and pave the way for historical reconciliation. During the period covered by this study, stereotypes have tended to promote bilateral rivalry. The newspapers emphasize the positive self-presentation of 'us' and the negative representation of the Turks. The misrepresentation of the latter may be considered to be a hidden obstacle in the reconciliation process between the two neighboring countries, though some changes have been made in the late 90s in the Greek history textbooks and in the Greek media as well. Media discourse must be built as to overcome stereotyping phenomena and create good attitudes towards other nations, whether they were historical enemies or not. The comprehension of the cultural heritage is crucial for understanding the historical background of a nation and overcoming prejudices, nationalism, chauvinism and xenophobia.

Negative images of the 'other' create negative public perception and prevents from achieving reconciliation. Instead of promoting stereotypes, media must raise public awareness of the hate speech problem in relation to history and to work in favor of eliminating the obsolete stereotyping phenomena from its discourse. Therefore, media professionals and educators must seek permanently to avoid any form of nationalistic discourse, propaganda,

prejudice and stereotype while presenting the events or drawing conclusions, in order to prevent nationalistic approaches of different topics and to contribute to rediscovering the identity of 'us' and 'the others' through culture and education. Perhaps a more fruitful avenue of future research would be instead to compare these phenomena with the similar found in the Turkish printed media and history textbooks.

Acknowledgements

This paper is a result of the project 'Transnational Network for Integrated Management of Postdoctoral Research in Communicating Sciences. Institutional building (postdoctoral school) and fellowships program (CommScie)' - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financed under the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

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