When the Intercultural Competence Takes the Shape of Subjective Dictionaries to Understanding the Otherness

Nicoleta-Loredana MOROŞAN
"Ştefan cel Mare" University from Suceava
nicoletamorosan@litere.usv.ro

Résumé: Décider ou bien être obligé de déménager et de changer non pas seulement de ville mais aussi de pays peut s'avérer être une expérience assez éprouvante du point de vue émotionnel. Parcourir avec succès les étapes supposées par l'acquisition de la compétence interculturelle et atteindre le niveau proactif peut mener par contre à des actions de partage inconditionnel. Une telle action est le dévoilement par écrit de ses propres expériences interculturelle fait dans le but de faciliter l'intégration du nouvel univers en question par des lecteurs non avertis. Dans cet article nous nous proposons d'analyser la manière dont l'écriture de dictionnaires subjectifs, destinés à introduire le public, à l'aide d'un discours imbu d'humour et d'ironie, à un mode de vie étranger, peut contribuer à la formation de la compétence interculturelle.

Mots-clés: compétence interculturelle, subjectivité, représentation, altérité, flexibilité, intégration.

1. An Incentive to the Development of Intercultural Competence

Changing one's life environment entails manifold consequences. Leaving one's native country to go live in a foreign one is inherently an inexhaustible source of comparisons to be drawn between the mentalities specific to the two areas.

For people who have the journalist calling, such an experience cannot but lead to delightful chronicles (and more often than not autobiographical novels) on how an expatriate, as the representative of a particular nation, sees his new fellow citizens, as representatives of the new culture

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in which he is making a living and, by way of consequence, sees himself given the new context.

The pieces of autobiographical writing thus produced are indicative of both the clash and the resemblances between different aspects of every-day life in the host country and the country of origin. They are also a testimony to the degree of acquisition of the intercultural competence by the people turned into characters involved in the cross-cultural interactions. Such is the case with the work of British expatriates in France, such as Charles Timoney. The success of his books (*Pardon My French. Unleash Your Inner Gaul*, 2007, *A Certain… Je Ne Sais Quoi. The Ideal Guide to Sounding, Acting and Shrugging like the French*, 2009, *An Englishman Aboard. Discovering France in a Rowing Boat*, 2013) is due to his sharp eye for noticing the environmental French peculiarities, or at least what is seen as an ensemble of environmental French peculiarities from a British man's perspective. For the author makes known his personal experience through these writings, first by telling it, directly or indirectly, and then by reflecting upon it, analyzing it, drawing parallels between the British and the French beliefs and reactions to different stimuli, and making generalizations. Overall, the thus-resulted critical discourse will be steeped in humour and irony.

The very selection of the characteristics pertaining to the French universe is actually indicative not only of the writer's host culture, which becomes the target of his writing, but implicitly of his origin culture against whose backdrop he seizes the existing differences in the views of the world. The discourse of these books will reveal not only the particular import attached to one fact of life or another by the French culture, but also the weight it has in the British one. Common gestures for the host country, such as opening the shutters and airing one's bedding in the morning, recycling plastic bottle tops while simply throwing away the plastic bottles in the bin or spending an entire lunch speaking about the recipe of a salad take on a whole new dimension with the British dweller in France who perceives them as "extra-ordinary" gestures, that is gestures "out of the ordinary" (considered within the framework of what is perceived as "ordinary" in the British culture) and branding a particular way of living. All of a sudden, in the foreigner's mind, these gestures are heightened to the level of key features of the culture in question, while some of them might just as well be absent from a local's speech, were the latter asked to describe his normative behaviour.

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2. Contributing to the Consolidation of the Intercultural Competence through Subjective Dictionaries

In what follows we shall dwell on the first two books written by Ch. Timoney which feature a similar structure, more precisely that of a dictionary with entries meant to culturally integrate their reader in the French way of doing things: *Pardon My French. Unleash Your Inner Gaul* and *A Certain… Je Ne Sais Quoi*. *The Ideal Guide to Sounding, Acting and Shrugging like the French*. As highlighted by the author in the peritext constituted by the *Acknowledgements* he brought to his French family, colleagues and friends and the *Introduction* parts to both these books, the idea of gathering a sum of words whose correct comprehension he considers to be an essential factor to a good understanding and (for those who wanted it) to a good integration into the French environment came to him on an impulse of aiding the British visitors fathom out the secrets of the Gallic lifestyle.

One of the psychological constructs implied by intercultural adaptation and adjustment is empathy. To be able to get his bearings and grasp the landmarks of the new society, the author has proven empathy with the people amidst whom he has been leading his new life. But the manifestation of this psychological skill vital to cultural intelligence is actually taken one step further by Timoney, for he has felt the need to share with a potential community of British/foreign readership the conclusions he reached during the trying times of his beginning to adjust to his adoptive culture. We witness here a case where the intercultural competence acquired by an Englishman along twenty years of French personal experience engendered the need to help peers likely to find themselves in the same situation acquire it as well. As a result, these two dictionaries overstep the boundary of the genre: they bear first and foremost the mark of subjectivity, do not have a key, do not feature any metalinguistic information whatsoever on their entries whose definitions are a mix-up of descriptive, narrative and argumentative discourse, referring the reader to personal aspects of the experience the author had been going through. Yet, for all the subjectivity they come out of and the pervasive humour and irony of their definitions, all these entries attempt at objective generalizations meant to grasp the profile of the French people.

The aim of his experience sharing is to aid the neophytes in their adaptation and adjustment process when dealing with French people. While adaptation is "altering one's behavior in response to the environment, circumstance, or social pressure", adjustment has a wider scope, referring precisely to the subjective experiences adaptation is accompanied by, being assessed "by mood states, self-esteem, self-awareness, physical health, self-

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confidence, stress, psychological and psychosomatic concerns, early return to one's home country, dysfunctional communication, culture shock, anxiety […]" (D. Matsumoto, H. C. Hwang, 2013: 850). In the introductions to these first two books, which prefigure the humorous ironic tone which will permeate the entire dictionaries and which are underlain by the conative communication function (*apud* R. Jakobson), the author confesses that his writing is utterly reader-orientated in the strictest utilitarian purpose: "It seems likely that many English visitors who spend time in France must have the same sort of experience. So, in order to give you, whatever your level of French, a better chance of following what people are talking about, making sense of what you see in the street, or even enabling you to leaf through a French newspaper and triumphantly think «Oh! I've heard of that!», I have made a selection of words that would certainly have made my life a lot easier had I known them when I first started work here all those years ago" (Ch. Timoney, 2007: XIII); "Not wishing you to go through the same traumatic experience, I thought I would share with you here the hard-on knowledge of all those years in France" (Ch. Timoney, 2009: XIII). The pragmatic value of these writings which carry the illocutionary force of advice stems from the affective dimension associated with the intercultural communication competence (besides the cognitive and behavioral ones) according to the taxonomy of Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005). The "traumatic" personal experience of settling down in a country whose official language is totally unknown in the beginning to the new resident is overtly turned by the author into an incentive of finding a way to help future new residents avoid the same "ordeal".

The uncovered mystery takes the shape of detailed explanations of key French words and phrases, which insist on the cultural connotations attached to these *culturèmes*, this way surpassing the objective definitions provided by the regular dictionaries; hence the recommendation they should be consulted by those aspiring to get a "useful insight into what is really what in France". The books do not concentrate on providing objective definitions, but subjective explanations, where the prominent marks of subjectivity are actually tantamount to as many guarantees for the validity of the advisory value carried by the presentations. Originating from years of fumbling about, the books are implicitly a statement and argument that had they existed on the market at the time the author had moved to France, had he been acquainted with their content would have definitely been a plus in day-to-day life: "The words have been chosen to be as useful as possible and to give you a broad understanding of French life: they are probably not words that you learned at school, nor are the defi-

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nitions the sort of thing you find in most dictionaries" (Ch. Timoney, 2007: XIV).

These dictionaries are devised as tools meant to develop cultural intelligence which "involves understanding the fundamentals of intercultural interaction, developing a mindful approach to intercultural interactions, and finally building adaptive skills and a repertoire of behaviors of behaviors so that one is effective in different intercultural situations" [D. C. Thomas, K. Inkson, 2004: 17]. By way of consequence, the succession of the entries is not strictly alphabetical, but thematic: Food and Drink, Education, Travel, Entertainment and Sport, Paperwork, Young People, Relations, The Business World (to name but a few topics tackled in *Pardon My French*); Une journée française – a typical day, Faire la bise – a guide to shaking and kissing, Je t'aime – the romantic side of things, Tu ou vous? – is it thou or you?, Oh, la, la! – how to gesticulate and exclaim (to name but a few subjects addressed in *A Certain… Je Ne Sais Quoi*). Although at first notice similar in form, the latter book represents a refinement on the former, continuing and enriching it at the same time: "In my earlier book, *Pardon My French*, I gave definitions for various useful words that I wish I had known when I first came to live in France. While those words will help you understand a lot of what you see and hear around you, there is much more that you could usefully know. I have kept the idea of key words but, rather than just defining them, I have used them in themes to illustrate various aspects of French life: a typical French day, how to get the best out of restaurants and bars, the perils of greeting people, a beginner's guide to gesticulating and more" (Ch. Timoney, 2009: XIV). To put it in a nutshell, "*Pardon My French* showed how to unleash your inner Gaul. However, in order to refine your inner Gaul, to enjoy France more and, hopefully, to avoid being spotted as a tourist too quickly, you will need that little extra – that certain *je ne sais quoi.* This book should help you find it" (Ch. Timoney, 2009: XIV).

Based on the writer's self-analysis in the preface to the latter dictionary, as well as on the suggestive titles and subtitles he attributed to both of them (*Unleash Your Inner Gaul*, and *The Ideal Guide to Sounding, Acting and Shrugging like the French* respectively*)*, we can conclude that while the former guide stresses first and foremost the importance of the first two components implied by cultural intelligence, that is the cognitive skills relative to the "knowledge of culture and of the fundamental principles of cross-cultural interactions" [D. C. Thomas, K. Inkson, 2004: 15], and the capacity of mindfulness or "the ability to pay attention in a reflective and creative way to cues in the cross-cultural situations encountered" [D. C. Thomas, K. Inkson, 2004: 15], the latter highlights the

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importance of developing particularly subtle behavioral skills, which render one competent across a wide range of sophisticated situations by "choosing the appropriate behavior from a well-developed repertoire of behaviors that are correct for different intercultural situations" [D. C. Thomas, K. Inkson, 2004: 15]. In order to have the capability to "deal effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity" (Ang, S., Van Dyne, L., Koh, C., 2006: 100), the reader is prompted to look for the ideal of French classical works of art, that ineffable attribute of *je ne sais quoi* which used to distinguish the *honnête homme* from the ordinary one. The cultural intelligence is far from being dismissive of intertextuality.

The presentation of the aspects that strike the foreign resident posing as many challenges to his understanding of the others' way of doing things reveals the various stages he went through while acquiring and consolidating his intercultural competence. As identified in the model developed by D. C. Thomas and K. Inkson in 2004 in *Cultural Intelligence: People Skills for Global Business*, the cultural intelligence supposes taking five steps in the form of periods of reactivity, recognition, accommodation, assimilation and being proactive towards the elements making up the new culture with each we come into contact. The pinpointing of culturally-specific views upon elements also found in the origin culture and their adjacent presentation which insists on the new scale they must be measured up against is done with humour: "Serrer la main à quelqu'un. "To shake hands with someone" in French is *serer la main à quelqu'un*. The English verb "shake" refers to the slight up and down movement that you traditionally make with your hand when shaking hands with someone and formally saying "How do you do?" When French people shake hands there is none of this up and down movement, you just grasp the other person's hand and keep your hand immobile during the grasping process. This is reflected in the French word *serer*, which means "to grasp" and not "to shake". The French are much amused by the British notion of shaking people's hands rather than just grasping them. This is brilliantly reflected in *Astérix chez les Bretons* where Astérix and Obelix go off and discover all that is odd on the other side of the Channel. In the French original text, the British characters speak French but use English expressions translated directly into French such as *bonté gracieuse* for "good gracious". […] when the character Jolitorax offers to shake hands with Astérix and Obelix he says, *Secouons-nous les mains!* instead of the proper French expression, *Serrons-nous les mains!* For French readers this conjures up images of the participants violently shaking their hands as though to get the dust off them. As I am known to be English, *Secouons-nous les mains*! is something that gets said surprisingly often when people greet me."

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Another component which pervades the entire discourse is irony. What prevents irony from turning into sarcasm is the successful completion of all the five above-mentioned stages known to lead to the acquisition of cultural intelligence.

3. Conclusion

Humour and irony make these two practical guides to living like the French a compelling read meant to enhance both our flexibility and critical thinking, two pivotal pillars in acquiring the intercultural competence.

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