Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Ildikó HORTOBÁGYI[1]

Abstract: *In a highly mediatized world, where the new media have the great potential to change existing cultural languages, one might assume that differences in communication tend to become levelled off. Or with the emergence of an apparently chaotic network of individual voices, a more thorough insight into the elements of different identities as well as into the verbal and non-verbal components of intercultural communication proves indispensable.*

Key words: *cultural identities, plurality of identities, multifaceted identity.*

1. Introduction

In the process of communication in general, and intercultural communication in particular, for a proper decoding of the messages it is of paramount importance to recognize to what an extent people's identity contributes to formulate and convey the information.

As the United States of America with its tremendous ethnic diversity has always proved a most exciting terrain for linguistic research, the cornerstones of multiculturalism and the impact of intercultural relations on linguistic development and language use could be considered a first step in presenting the impact of identity on communication. Based on the model of the Ethno-Racial Pentagon borrowed from Hollinger (1995), the five main blocks, namely the Euro-American, African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic (Latino) and Indigenous Peoples (Native American) can be replaced with items that form an indivisible unity within the interdisciplinary field of multiculturalism. Moreover, to highlight this strong unity one can bring forth the idea of the Pentagon itself - a building, an institution, a symbol - the headquarters of the United States Department of Defence, one of the world's largest office buildings, virtually a city in itself where both military and civilian employees contribute to the planning and execution of the U.S. defence. Architecturally the building is so well conceived that despite its 17.5 miles of corridors, it takes only seven minutes to walk between any two points of the building. As such, figuratively speaking, equipped with a wider knowledge and empathy towards any individual, in the myriad of the present-day media channels, easy access to understand the *Other* is fully facilitated. With these facts in mind, a new pentagon model (Hortobágyi, 2004) can be designed, where ethnicity, identity, discourse, language and education form a permeable unit based on a common core, namely the omnipresence of the linguistic element, which is by all means the most expressive mirror of one's identity.

[1] University of Pannonia, Institute of English and American Studies, Veszprém, Hungary.

BDD-A20280 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:02 UTC)

2. From *E Pluribus Unum* to *E Pluribus Plures*

According to Kallen (Steinberg, 2000), the United States is less importantly a union of states than it is a union of ethnic, racial, and religious groups – a union of otherwise unrelated "natives". The Great Seal of the United States carries the motto E pluribus unum, "from many, one", which seems to suggest that manyness must be left behind for the sake of oneness. Once there were many, now they have merged or, in Israel Zangwill's classic image, have been melted down into one. But the Great Seal also presents a different image: the American eagle holds a sheaf of arrows. Here there is no merger or fusion but only a fastening, a putting together: many-in-one. The adjective American seems to describe this kind of oneness and would point rather to the citizenship than nativity or nationality. The history of the American society has proved a pluralism, in which there is no movement from many to one, but rather simultaneity and coexistence, a group affiliation so remarkably expressed by the motto of the 21st century: E pluribus plures, "from many, many".

2.1. Identity – a Monolithic or a Dynamic Category?

Presently one can choose one's roots freely, bearing in mind that the United States is endowed with a non-ethnic ideology of the nation, has a predominantly ethnic history and can create for itself a post-ethnic future in which affiliation on the basis of shared descent is more voluntary than prescribed.

In each ethnic, racial, cultural or gender-related speech community language use is of vital importance. Although each individual community has its own norms, codes and forms of communication, language is used not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of the speaker's cultural identity. A speech community may decide to maintain the commonly agreed rules and norms, but may just as well decide to gradually change them according to the communication environment. In addition, in all communities there is a certain individual deviation from the norms, as not all the members of a speech community communicate in the same way in a specific situation or interaction.

In a multicultural setting, when engaging into a conversation, one has to presuppose that the members of a speech group usually share the same code and an entire system of symbols, signs and meanings. By definition, we speak about intercultural communication when the participants who communicate represent a different communication system. Differences, which may often lead to clashes or even conflicts, occur both at verbal level – certain expressions can be employed to assert belonging to a group or on the contrary to discriminate and exclude – and at non-verbal level, when for instance eye-contact, gestures, turn taking can be determined by the speaker's identity.

In the complex background of the rapidly evolving political, socio-economic and financial world, cultural identities become multifaceted, thus often displaying different degrees of ambiguity. In the process of socialization, under the influence of the above mentioned factors, the cultural groups reflect the surrounding reality; consequently they are continuously negotiating, re-enforcing or on the contrary redefining their cultural and ethnic identities to fit societal needs. This process of reshaping also depends on the amount of personal history and experiences embedded in the current socio-economic realities of each society.

In the turmoil of new types of regional conflicts, as early as 1993 Samuel P.

BDD-A20280 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:02 UTC)

Huntington's in his paper entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?", which led to his famous book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of New World Order" recognized the paramount need to redefine and reinterpret the role of civilizations in general and the role of the individual in particular. Accordingly, with the end of the Cold War, "the Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology" (Huntington, 1993, 31) in a world where conflicts are usually spreading along the fault lines separating the major civilizations, namely Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and African civilizations, which are basically differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and religion. The members of these civilizations also display largely different views on the basic relations between God and the individual, the individual and the group, parents and children, husband and wife, the state and the citizen, rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. Although identities are basically negotiated and re-negotiated in the communication process, cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable, thus less easily open to compromise than political and economic ones. In a world which is currently experiencing ideological realignment, an individual might chose to change political affiliation (sometimes even switching between two extremes), might have to get along with an altered economic status, but cannot and would not deny his/her national identity. "In class and ideological conflicts, the key question was "Which side are you on?"… In conflicts between civilizations, the question is "What are you?" (Huntington, 1993, 27).

As mentioned above, cultural identities are in fact manifestations of social reality. But what does the concept of "cultural identity" cover? Generally speaking, cultural identities usually encompass both race and ethnicity, two categories which develop during the individual's early socialization and constitute the core of a person's drive for an ethnocentric interpretation of the world. Race is generally interpreted as a classification of an arbitrary selection of physical characters which separate people into value-based categories, defined in relation to common descent and heredity. Along this line, ethnicity seems to be an extension, an elaborate prolongation of race, as ethnic identity is primarily a cultural marker that mirrors not only ancestral origins, shared heritage, race and traditions, but also economic, cultural, religious and linguistic background. Identified historically or psychologically, ethnicity is more an emotional bond shared by the members of a group. Since it is extremely difficult to trace the sharp delimitation of these two categories, from the end of the 1990s the terms *ethnicity* and *race* have been less commonly employed, instead the term cultural identity has been preferred.

3. Plurality of Identities

In communication and daily interactions people define who they are and negotiate their identities with people who are similar to them or different from them.

3.1. Types of Identity

Each person has multiple dimensions of identities, usually depending on the nature of the social interaction. The sources of identity range as follows (Huntington, 2004, 27):

Ascriptive (age, ancestry, gender, kin (blood relatives), ethnicity (extended kin), race);

BDD-A20280 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:02 UTC)

Cultural (clan, tribe, ethnicity (way of life), language, nationality, religion, civilization);

Territorial (neighbourhood, settlement, country, geographical area, hemisphere, etc.);

Political (faction, clique, leader, interest group, movement, party, ideology, state, etc.);

Economic (job, occupation, profession, work group, employer, industry, economic sector, labour union, class);

Social (friends, club, team, colleagues, leisure group, status).

3.2. Properties of Identity

When dealing with the properties of identity, we distinguish two basic elements i.e. *avowal* (how a person perceives himself or herself) and *ascription* (how others perceive and communicate a person's identity). As far as the modes of expression are concerned, identity expresses itself through core symbols, names and labels, and norms. The core symbols manifest themselves in the form of cultural beliefs, which are actually people's interpretation of the world and of the functioning society. In addition, cultural groups, which share these core symbols, create norms for proper conduct and appropriate behaviour in relational contacts.

Social and cultural identities may just as well be classified according to the following taxonomy:

Gender identity, which is influenced by the way people are treated in every culture. In each society there are shared norms according to which communication and interactions are considered either feminine or masculine. Nowadays the media influences what is considered feminine or masculine identity;

Age identity (cultures treat people of different ages in different ways; deep respect or on the contrary lack of respect is usually overtly expressed in language);

Spiritual identity (depending on the culture and context, spiritual identity can be more or less apparent, this identity may sometimes lead to severe conflicts);

Class identity (which usually influences the way individuals communicate with each other. Often this identity is noticed only following an encounter with a person representing another social class);

National identity (a person's citizenship of a nation, which often might be dominant over the individual's cultural identity – racial and/or ethnic);

Regional identity (which may carry positive, negative, real or presumed generalizations about people living in a specific region of a country, often this identity is stronger than the national identity).

Relations among identities are complex and often carry strong elements of differentiation. Occasionally an individual residing and working in a multicultural background has to manage the conflict between family identity and job identity. Broader identity (national, cultural) might include narrower identities (territorial, religious), which at times could be exclusive. People may assert dual nationality, sometimes dual citizenship, but very rarely dual religiosity.

In the process of communication all the manifestations of a person's identity are expressed either through verbal or non-verbal means. Rarely do people internalize that non-verbal communication is a most powerful form of communication. Multicultural differences in body language, facial expression, use of space, and especially, gestures are often prone to misinterpretation. According to a study concluded at UCLA up to 93 percent of communication effectiveness is determined by nonverbal cues. Another study indicates that the impact of a performance was determined 7 percent by the words used,

BDD-A20280 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:02 UTC)

38 percent by voice quality, and 55 percent by the nonverbal communication. (Heathfield, 2009).

3. Identity and Discourse

A critical post-modern analysis of racial and ethnic categories of difference points to the multilayered and fractured construction of individual identities. Ethnic identity is socially constructed and can be reformed in discourse and political struggle. Racial identities are unstable and have shifted according to the drifts of political trends. For instance once defined by the U.S. Census Bureau by race, Hispanics are now identified by ethnic categories as Central American, Mexican-American, Cuban and so on.

Giroux (Hortobágyi, 2004)) tackles the radical post-modern notion that identities are shaped in discourse through language use and the content of what for instance students are allowed to voice in the classroom. By stressing the importance of the self, Giroux argues that little space is available for human action. In the social context of urban schooling, it is clear that much pedagogical practice rests on the assumption that ethnic dialects interfere in the goal of assimilation for minority students. Many students of multiple cultural background, for example, immigrants and Mexican-American students in border towns and states, are therefore silenced or forced to make a choice of survival, rejecting one of the multiple identities in favour of assimilation. Clearly, individual identities are woven in discourse, privileging specific use of language and silencing other uses.

Research on African-American discourse, verbal genres and interactions has been copious, covering the fields of linguistics, folklore, anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, and literary criticism. The way African Americans talk to each other not only reveals how languages are socially constructed, but that speech events, activities, participants and context display unpredictable modes of expression.

It is also worth mentioning that much research was consecrated to the exploration of verbal and discourse genres and practices which constitute for instance the African American speech community. Discourse genres refer to language and communication styles which commonly occur in socially, culturally and politically defined contexts. In contrast, verbal genres refer to the speaker's use of culturally significant varieties and styles which mediate, constitute and construct contexts. Thus, while both discourse and verbal genres may co-construct various contexts, verbal genres can conflict with strongly framed discourse norms eroding or disrupting well-defined social contexts.

How can we exploit the advantages of a multicultural or intercultural background? In the process of developing conscious sensitivity to decode the message-carrying elements of identity, it is very important to presuppose their omnipresence. The first step would be to admit and recognize the complexity of people's cultural identity in terms of how they want to represent themselves. In case of a person who comes from a country whose society is complex and multifaceted, the layers and the depth of such a complex society are as a rule visible, thus will be shown in communication as well. In these societies the identity is not only multifaceted but is also continuously shifting. Consequently, in order to understand the complexity of an event, one has to look at it from different angles.

3. Conclusion

Successful intercultural communication should grow from an understanding of

BDD-A20280 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:02 UTC)

people, culture and society in general. In the process of conscious multicultural education it is important to be able to deconstruct a given experience or situation and decompose it into discreet elements which allow greater insight and reveal presumed sources of prejudice. In this process not so much national differences are relevant, rather the different senses of belonging to community, class, occupation or gender. Two approaches a successful management of intercultural communication should follow are the essentialist and the reductive ones. The essentialist approach presumes that there is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in each particular culture; whereas the reductive one argues that cultural behaviour is reduced to concrete factors. The synergy of these two approaches leads to the development of certain basic principles indispensable while interacting with different individuals in different contexts.

"Where do I as an individual fit into the global competition and opportunities of the world, how can I, on my own, collaborate with others globally?" (Friedman, 11) In the "Global Village" of the technologically flattened world, *We* and *Them* have to negotiate our individual identities to allow the emergence of unbiased, prejudice and manipulation free communication. The construction of multiracial and multiethnic identities has been dynamic over the past two decades. But all over the world, educators have to develop radical pedagogical structures which provide students with the opportunity to exploit their own cultural identities and linguistic realities as a basis of oral and written communication.

References

1. Friedman, Thomas. *The World is Flat.* 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
2. Heathfield. Susan. "Listen with Your Eyes. Tips for Understanding Nonverbal Communication." *About.com.: Human Resources*, 2009. Web 28. 04. 2009.
3. Holliday, Adrian et al. *Intercultural Communication. An Advanced Resource Book*. 2004. London/New York: Routlege, 2007.
4. Hollinger, D.A. (ed). Haley's Choice and the Ethno-Racial Pentagon. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism.* New York: Basic Books, 1995.
5. Hortobágyi, Ildikó. "Ethnicity – Identity – Discourse – Language – Education: a New Pentagon". *A Nyelvek Vonzásában (Language Attraction)*, eds. Kurtán Zsuzsa et al. Eger/Veszprém, 2004. 272-282.
6. Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* A Foreign Affairs Reader. New York: Foreign Affairs, 1993.
7. Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* London: Touchstone Books, 1996.
8. Huntington, Samuel. P. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.
9. Luoma, Irmeli. *Introduction to Intercultural Communication. Theme Two: Identity*. University of Jyväskylä, 2005. Web. 24.02.2007.
10. Steinberg, Stephen. ed. *Race and Ethnicity in the United States: Issues and Debates*. Blackwell, 2000.

BDD-A20280 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:02 UTC)