THE WEIGHT OF LINGUISTIC INTERACTIONS IN THE LITERATURE OF ACCOMMODATION

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Abstract: This paper aims to show the role played by language shift in the economy of relocation narratives. Reaccounting cross-border experiences, the works pertaining to the literature of accommodation become indicative of the variety of stages characterizing their narrators' process of building up their plurilingual competence. The identification of the different functions undertaken by linguistic interactions all throughout these intercultural encounters enables the analysis of cultural openness manifestation.

Keywords: linguistic interaction, intercultural competence, identity, sense of belonging, representation

Introduction

First issued as a type of personal narrative addressing the quest for adaptation and sense of belonging of Americans settling in France, to the culture of their new home, the literature of accommodation (as presented by Edward Knox in his paper published in *French Politics, Culture & Society* in 2003) progresses on two strains, depending on the French setting chosen by the foreign residents. There is the strain of the province-based writing, the one dealing with the Americans' attempt at seeking out „sensuous experience through food and climate as well as village or rural life as a form of contact with a past soon to be, if not already, lost." Then, there is the Paris-based writing, tending to „deal more with issues of intellectual and artistic culture, as well as institutional practices." (E. Knox, 2003 : 95). Expanding the substance of this kind of literature to the literary works of the British writers going through the same experience, we shall analyze the extent to which the linguistic interactions between English (as the mother tongue) and French (the language of the new dwelling-place) account for the array of difficulties overcome by the narrator in the succession of stages leading to his successful accommodation process.

Functions of the Language Shift

The „love letter to Paris and some of the people of Paris" (Peter Mayle) written by Michael Sadler in 2000 was published in France by l'Archipel, bearing the title *Un Anglais à Paris*, and in Great Britain in 2002 by Simon and Schuster Uk Ltd, as *An Englishman in Paris – L'éducation continentale*. From its very title in the English version, or, more precisely, from the coexistence of the English title with the French subtitle, this relocation narrative refers its reader to the importance borne actually by the coexistence of the two languages in the mind of the narrator. The act of acknowledging this twofold linguistic presence its valuable role in the acquisition of the intercultural competence by the British author can but contribute to an accurate understanding of his identity reconstruction process.

The bilingual association of the peritext elements represented by the title of the book *An Englishman in Paris* and its subtitle *L'éducation continentale* gives rise to an entire

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intertextual network, internationalizing the cultural journey of adaptation taken by the author by bringing together three locales, The United States of America, the British Isles and France. The title echoes the love-story between the „exuberant American expatriate Jerry Mulligan, a World War II veteran trying to make a reputation as a painter" (*IMDb*), and Lise Bouvier, a French girl, depicted in the Oscar-winning musical romance directed by Vincente Minnelli in 1951, *An American in Paris*. The subtitle, alluding to Gustave Flaubert's novel written in 1869, *L'éducation sentimentale,* situates the reader plainly in the French literary scene while evoking the insular position setting England apart from the rest of the European continent it belongs to. The British Isles versus continental France, both pertaining to the same continent, anticipate two views upon the world which will be finally reunited thanks to the intercultural competence professed by the narrator. The direct and indirect references made to American, English and French origins through the realization of the two languages in the peritext also anticipates the constant interspersing of French phrases into the discourse that is to be delivered in English.

The omnipresent linguistic interactions stemming from a developed plurilingual competence consist in the irruption of French words and phrases in the English discourse. The causes of their appearance are manifold. They may occur either as language units designating French realities which are not familiar to the Anglophone culture, and in this case they come out of sheer necessity. They may also occur as the continuation of a thought that has just been verbalised in English and prolonged in French, a language shift meant to show the steps taken by the Englishman towards intimacy with the new language, which little by little comes more and more natural to the foreign resident in Paris. They may also be intended as a stylistic reinforcement of already-expressed ideas in English; by resorting to rephrasing in French, the narrator will then show his newly-attained level in the foreign language. And this is to name but a few types of language interactions between English and French.

The book opens on a chapter recalling the narrator's trip from the English village Abesbury under Lyme to Paris. In fact, this large toponymic framework can be figured out only after perusing the second chapter, as well, as the space-related information must be reconstructed from the recollection of what prompted this journey across the Channel and on what purpose, the whys and the wherefores being therefore disclosed gradually. The initiating sequence set in Dieppe, which will later on be understood as happening on the route to the French capital, consists of a scene whose protagonists are the author and a French cheese. The scene is delightfully humorous, but beyond the humour it is pervaded by, it contains the first element of the constant parallel underlying this relocation narrative: the English and the French realities, as well as the English and the French ways of doing and owning things: „The Englishman looked at the cheese and the cheese looked at the Englishman." (M. Sadler, 2003 : 1)

The opening sentence, built on two symmetrical clauses, names the two characters who will make the object of this memoir and who are not, as it may seem at first glance, the narrator and the cheese, but the Britishness of the narrator and the Frenchness of the environment he is about to settle down in. The mention of the former in the third person, by means of his nationality, and then of the French milieu he had chosen to immerse himself in by means of a metonymy from the gastronomic field – the cheese, is not insignificant. It dramatically sets a scene of what seems to take the form of a confrontation between the two participants. Yet, while the atmosphere appears to be confrontational, the following chapters of the book will reveal the narrator in the process of building up and strengthening his intercultural competences, those psychological and at the same time sociological skills "enabling people to cope with complex difficult situations engendered by the multiplicity of cultural referents in unequal psychological and sociological contexts" (*cf*. A. Manco, 2000: 49). Thus, what is initially sensed as a confrontational climate will soon give way to a cross-

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cultural negotiation in terms of a reshaping process regarding representations of both self and otherness. By enhancing his cultural intelligence (Early, 2002), that is his "capability to deal effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds" (D. Thomas, 2006: 78) - the French one, in this particular case -, the English narrator will equally muse upon the way his mother tongue and the foreign language verbalize reality, by making them meet and coexist as his discourse unfolds.

What follows the first sentence is the confirmation of the tonality embraced by the whole reaccounting of French experiences. This is one of gentle irony towards the new culture interwoven with self-deprecating humour, all combined in an open attitude of critically analyzing while espousing the values of the adoptive territory: „The Englishman was me. The cheese – soft, fat, orange and too big for its box; a rubicund monk against a backdrop of smiling cows – was a Livarot. We were both in Dieppe high street. The cheese knew I was just off the ferry. It knew I wanted it." (M. Sadler, 2003: 1). The breaking of the symmetrical rhythm characteristic to the inaugural sentence by the length of this next passage speaks volumes of the intercultural openness the book will stand for. The clarifications brought to the identity of the Englishman and that of the cheese are uneven in dimension: there is a concise one for the human being, disclosing that the narrative will actually be a first-person, contradicting the readers in their first impression, and a lengthy one for the cheese, which, after being initially described in terms of texture and visual appearance, will also be personified. The ample scope of this depiction, next to the use of the artistic device of personification, illustrates the importance of this gastronomic product as a vector of iconic elements peculiar to the adoptive culture. In the confrontation atmosphere set out by the inception sentence, the cheese spilling lavishly out of its box may be seen as the new culture imposing itself to the attention of the foreign visitor, whilst already aware that it is coveted. Livarot, the name of the Normand cheese coming from the name of the commune it originates in, is a culturème, referring the author to a French reality he had never had access to before through rights of ownership. Thus, in order to fully grasp the tension and importance of this humorous confrontation, the reader needs to be familiar with the place held by the Livarot cheese in the hierarchy of internationally-known cheeses protected by Appélation d'Origine Contrôlée: „I've never had a Livarot on my own. I'd often given them surreptitious glances as they lounged voluptuously on the marble slabs of shady *crémeries* but, until now, I'd always managed to rein in my enthusiasm with arguments such as: 1, they stink; 2, you can die of them. But today, if I wanted to, I could. *Pourquoi pas* ? I was going to learn my lesson the hard way. Buying a Livarot is one thing; living with one is another kettle of fish. I opened the door of the *épicerie fine*." (M. Sadler, 2003 : 1).

The linguistic interaction between the English and the French languages does not take long to make its presence felt. The first one consists in the naming in French of the language unit „dairy store": *crémeries*. Given the above-mentioned confrontation, the presence of the French word is voluntarily actuated by the narrator, as displacing the *fromage* in question from its French environment would have been incongruous. The same explanation is valid for *épicerie fine*, as it refers to a kind of shop destined to sell French-made products; while in its turn, it does have a correspondent word in English, that is *delicatessen*, the German origin of the word would have caused losing the authenticity of the account of the French experience.

The next interaction is represented by the verbal expression *Pourquoi pas?* which casts a totally new light on this confrontation episode placed at the very outset of the book: "But today, if I wanted to, I could. *Pourquoi pas*?" The French rhetorical question prolonging the feeling verbalised in English emphasizes the likeliness that the narrator's long-nurtured desire to own a Livarot may become reality. This relaxed continuation in the language of the cheese producers is also a challenge, for as it will soon be made apparent that buying and transporting such cheese is not something to be trifled with.

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The purchase of the long-covited produce is related, as it happened, in French: „The proprietor in his long white apron oozed out from the back of the shop where he'd probably been spending the morning humming Georges Brassens to the inmates. He was like his cheeses: large, ripe, and at least 60 per cent fat. „*Je voudrais un Livarot, please*", I managed to dribble. „*Un colonel, monsieur*?" „*Excusez-moi*?" Livarots, he explained, come in various sizes: S, M, L, XL and, the largest of them all, the *colonel* – the rank indicated by five green strands of raffia tied around his waist like a cummerbund on a Welsh baritone. „*Je prends le colonel, s'il vous plaît*" A whole brigade were brought out on parade, squeezed and lifted to the nose.[...] I left the *épicerie*, my heart beating fast." (M. Sadler, 2003: 2)

The introductory description of the new agent performing in this scene besides the narrator is presented in English. The proprietor emerges from an atmosphere *supposed* to be marked by a French iconic figure – the songs of the cult songwriter and singer Georges Brassens. The modalisation of what the seller had been doing „where he'd probably been spending the morning humming Georges Brassens to the inmates" through the adverb „probably" is highly relevant in this context, as it shows that the narrator does not actually recount what he had observed that the *vendeur* had been doing, but an action he presumed the latter to be performing: humming Brassens' songs. The presence of the modifier „probably" is first and foremost indicative of the representation held by the English writer regarding the habits of what a social category pertaining to a national culture could be doing while practicing their occupation. By culture, we mean here the significance attached, in the distinction made by Robert Galisson in his work *De la langue à la culture par les mots* between « cultivated culture » and « shared culture », to shared culture (culture partagée) which consists in « savoirs et pratiques transmis et partagés par un groupe social qui a une langue en commun » standing at foundation of living in society and taking the shape of "traditions and customs, values, beliefs, rites and representations". As Galisson puts it, this type of culture is a "*culture action*", recognizable in undertaken actions and contributing to the construction of a collective identity**.**

The insight into the narrator's representation horizon on French culture is followed by the physical description of the French seller, achieved by way of a transfer from the cheese features to the human being by means of a simile: „large, ripe, and at least 60 per cent fat." The conversation is rendered in the language it took place in, that is French. The exchange is brief: the narrator asks for a Livarot cheese: "*Je voudrais un Livarot, please."* (which he remembers jocularly to have done with some effort, as pointed out by the English comment „I managed to dribble"), the seller replies by a question inquiring what type of Livarot cheese: „*Un colonel, monsieur*?", whereupon the dialogue already grinds to a halt, on a speech act by which the narrator admits defeat and asks for clarification, as he fails to understand the meaning of the previous question: „*Excusez-moi*?". The subsequent conversation which the reader is let to believe to have proceeded in French is now narrated in English, as it seems that the linguistic effort would have been too great to have it reproduced entirely in its original language. The narrator supplies his reader with a summary of the Frenchman's utterances under the form of reported speech in English, which revolves around the explanation of what the French culturème in relation to Livarot, *colonel*, means. The name of the cheese will be preserved in French, which is signified by the italic characters, as the name also exists in British English, but referring strictly to the military domain. The conclusion of the French verbal exchange related to the purchase of the long-awaited cheese which did not prove to be as simple as it may have seemed at first is however rendered in French: „*Je prends le colonel, s'il vous plaît*". This scene finishes on a sentence addressing the mood the narrator was in upon leaving the dairy-shop: „I left the *épicerie*, my heart beating fast." The culturème *épicerie* naming the setting where a heroic plurilingual act has just been accomplished is

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preserved, as proof of the new territory where „battles" will be fought and won in the valiant attempt at successfully living intercultural experiences.

Concluding the chapters

Equally important in determining the weight detained by the linguistic interactions in understanding the intercultural journey taken by the narrator is the fact that most of the chapters of this account end in a brief French phrase meant to draw a conclusion in relation with what has been presented along the previous pages. Thus, the first chapter which dwells on the narrator's first experience of buying and carrying an impressive Livarot on his car all the way from Dieppe to Paris, which, for anyone knowledgeable about French cheese, implies subjecting oneself to a pungent smell, ends as follows: „When the colonel, the car and myself finally made it to the motorway toll-booth, the girl behind the desk got a full whack of roof-ripened Livarot between the eyes. I tried to temper her shock with my second French joke. I smiled, as for a photograph, showing my teeth. „*Fromage*!" Jokes travel as badly as cheese." (M. Sadler, 2003: 5). In adopting the new language of the new country, attempts at linguistic humour are made, which is indicative of the openness to make use and take advantage of any possible transfer between the mother tongue and the language of the new locale. The unfortunate loan translation into French of the English linguistic ritual when taking somebody's photograph, the instruction "Say cheese!", by the noun "*fromage*", although unsuccessful in making the lady at the toll-booth smile, is not of little value. It shows the narrator armed with resilience and hardiness in embracing the experiences lying ahead of him in his adoptive country, convinced, as he concludes in the second chapter of his relocation narrative, that „England had been my pillow. *La France serait mon réveil*." (M. Sadler, 2003: 11).

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