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The Blending of Cultural Patterns in Texts of Teenagers

Rita PLETL
Department of Applied Linguistics,
Faculty of Technical and Human Sciences, Târgu Mureş
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania
pletlrita@freemail.hu

Abstract. My paper examines how the cultural attitude of teenagers develops in the dual force field of the public pedagogy mediated through the school and that of environmental culture. More precisely, I would like to track the changes and alterations of cultural attitude in a force field defined by several cultural patterns determined by different codes.

Keywords: cultural patterns, cultural attitudes, environmental culture, literacy

The public pedagogy transmitted by the school is very closely connected to high culture. The school as an educational institution intends to continue the traditions in which the task of filtering and arranging information was fulfilled by science and art. Literacy is the core of the transmission of knowledge and erudition, and it builds on a code that is suitable to transmit the human knowledge and erudition fixed and accumulated in the different professional disciplines. The basis of the cultural pattern being formed by the environmental influences is constituted by the popular taste strongly determined by popular culture. The effect of the latter is more powerful as it dominates the everyday world, it takes into consideration the expectations of the average receiver and builds on a code that everyone understands and enjoys. The main medium of popular culture is visual culture (movies, TV, magazines, video). As for the visual information, popular culture had the possibility to become almost totally dominant in forming taste as school (except for a few special forms of training) does not teach students to see in the best sense of the word, and the "glasses" that are created and offered by visual arts and through which we perceive the world are missing (Eco, 1976).

The problem is that there is a great distance between the two cultural patterns and, while the transfer between canonic and consumable culture is theoretically possible, in the everyday practice, the free choice of any of the artistic spheres

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proves to be problematic as the biggest issue is that "the equation is not symmetrical". This means that the receiver brought up in the popular culture cannot step into "the sanctuary" of high culture as he/she does not have the necessary literacy, competence, or training. It is also true that he/she does not want to (Almási 2003, 14–15).

Thus, the main feature of the field forming the cultural behaviour and attitudes of teenagers is that it is filled with contradictions and tensions. The patterns offered by the school have a higher social prestige than the patterns of the environmental culture, as they aim to achieve the requirements of socially sanctioned literacy in the case of teenagers, the significant part of whom, on the other hand, are watching the orientating patterns that need mental effort and work from the medium of popular culture ensuring entertainment and relaxation, consider them hard to understand, boring, or sometimes outmoded. There are radically different orientation patterns existing side by side; their effects prevail and they form the attitudes of the teenagers towards their environment, towards the arts, towards knowledge, their aesthetic preferences and the action patterns to follow in a contradictory manner.

The conflicting orientation patterns result in hesitation, which is mostly reflected in the modifications of aesthetic attitudes and the changes in taste; on the other hand, they give birth to eclecticism due to the interaction between the patterns, as the effects migrate from one sphere to another. The compositions of the students reflect the complicated system of conflicts and interactions; the texts created in the different text production tasks (a specific communication situation) are the best indicators of literacy; that is why, based on them, the changes and alterations in the students' cultural attitudes can be best studied.

The research is preceded by the study of the level of written communication competence, which made it possible to analyse a large number of texts written in different genres by the subjects of a representative sample. The phenomena outlined during the assessment of the results (the significant drop in performance in "adult" tasks, the ambivalence of the texts, the significant differences in the level of performance and skills in the text design and text editing operations) signal the duality between the opposition and intertwining of the different patterns. The characteristics of the compositions suggest that behind the ambiguity of the texts there is a contradiction that arises from the conflict between the receptive patterns organizing experience and the patterns that formulate them and direct text production. The processes present in the compositions, the text-editing solutions as well as the stylistic characteristics suggest that the receiver's attitude is formed by the environment; text production is however directed by educational patterns.

Based on these experiences and realizations, I designed the empirical tests which aim to study the relationship between the receiver's attitude and text production

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practices. The target population of the study consisted of high school students. I chose this age-group because this stage of the educational process prepares for university education and it forms the communicational literacy of the future intellectuals. I included every class in the study as I wanted to trace the changes (if any) during the four years of education regarding the relationships between the different cultural patterns. I also tried to identify the factors that limit the validity of the educational patterns in the specific communicational situations.

Data collection began in the school year of 2006 and it was carried out for three consecutive academic years in such a way that the first measurement was exploratory in nature, designed to see whether the repeated tests would justify the previous experiences and insights. The results proved the hypothesis that the eclecticism of the texts is caused by the intertwining of the different patterns and by the specific combinations between them. The following two surveys were carried out on an expanded sample: besides the students attending a theoretical high school, it also included secondary vocational school students. It featured students living in cities and students from villages, commuting to smaller towns.

The instruments of the study consisted of text production tasks. The students had to write two types of essays: a descriptive and a narrative one. I chose these two because the descriptive essays show the worst results on the national level, while descriptions contain features which indicate that the attitude towards the reality to be described forms text production in a specific way. In the case of the narrative essays, the Transylvanian students had the best results, but the compositions reflected a distorted perception of time and space, and this ambiguity was also present regarding spelling and in reference to stylistic norms.

The first text production task requested the students to create a text describing a landscape in which they could freely choose the text-organizing concept, the only restriction being presenting a landscape that is well-known for them. The second task requested the narration of a personal experience or a fictitious life event, the restriction consisting of assigning the experience with a given title (Accident on the ice). Both tasks had to be performed during one class each. The students were aware of the fact that they were participating in a study and that their compositions will not be corrected and graded. This aspect was important as it freed them from the constraints of the school and of the teachers, they could freely form the material in accordance with their taste and personal ideas.

When reading and evaluating the collected material, it became clear that based on the national criteria developed and applied one can qualify the level of text production skills; however, these are no longer suitable in describing the characteristics of the text. Another surprising phenomenon was that neither the descriptive nor the narrative compositions reflected the stratification of the sample according to settlement, type of school, and grades. They could not be grouped according to the aspects of the compilation of the sample. Despite the

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diversity and variety of the texts, they showed the specific characteristics of uniformity both in the descriptions of landscape and in the narratives.

One of the main features of the descriptions of landscape is that the combination of real elements create fictional worlds, the elements of the natural environment create some kind of an artificial natural world, which is adapted to the aesthetic ideals of the students, and in which the general rules of perspective do not apply, the laws of biology and physics learnt during classes are unknown.

The main characteristic of the compositions is being constructed from panels. The stories suggest the feeling of "I have seen this before". The texts create worlds that resemble the real world from afar, but in which everything (the plot, the heroes, space and time) is subordinated to the requirements of curiosity and "uniqueness". The strive to be interesting can be traced in the unexpected plot twists and the high number of bizarre ideas, as well as in the representations of space and time. The strangest solutions result in the achievement of the aims of originality: the details are drawn upon the well-known storylines operating according to specific algorithms, which are in fact "original"; however, their impact is not calculated properly as they break the time structure of the narrative, they transport the events in the virtual world, they query the credibility of the previous parts of the narrative, and they result in humour where the events are dramatic in fact. In the light of all the above, it seems that behind the strive for originality there is a thirst for novelty, the single aim of which is novelty itself and, as it lacks all content or aesthetic motivation, they often promote the appearance of kitsch.

In addition to the differences arising from the specificities of the genre, the compositions (both in the case of the descriptive and the narrative ones) show surprising similarities in the way experience (connected to nature or to some life experience) is processed and expressed. Both the descriptions of nature and the narratives lack the sense of experience that makes the story credible. This results in a number of paradoxical situations. In the descriptions of landscapes, the writers – ignoring the laws of perspective – represent the invisible as well; the reality of space and time expressed by linguistic tools (adverbs, adverbials) is suddenly overwritten by the presentation of simultaneous actions unfolding in this narrow space. The narratives contain descriptions of first person singular events presented as if the narrators were external spectators (for example, in one of the compositions, the narrator uses the following words about an accident: "suddenly I disappeared from the horizon..."). The lexical and grammatical information connected to the verb are not aligned in time with the events or are even in a conflict with them; the actor or the narrator falls out of role too often (sometimes linguistic errors that can be interpreted as a slip of the tongue also highlight this, for example: "Suddenly he falls out of balance."). All of these reveal the lack of the force of an authentic experience that generates unity.

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The compositions (both types) reflect the intention of the writers to create texts that can be considered literary. This pursuit is materialized most obviously in the linguistic expression, perhaps exactly in the endeavour to meet the language standards, to elaborately formulate the texts, to use stylistic and artistic devices so that the representation is illustrative, the presentation smooth and interesting. Nevertheless, as opposed to the legitimate and commended aims, the procedures reflecting artistic creation, the chosen stylistic devices achieve a different effect from what they were designed for.

They apply stylistic devices to create expressive descriptions, but they do not achieve the desired effect as they do not get the necessary images from the appropriate resources or they ignore the emotional unity of the context. Examples from descriptions of landscape: "Behind the distant mountains, like a big red tomato, the sun was setting slowly and reverently." Or: "The moon already hid behind the shining cloak of the sky. The sun shines as a victorious warrior in the blue sea. The wild geese slice the air as knife slices butter. Not far from me, a river was flowing. The fish were shining in the water like little stars." Similar solutions from narrative texts: "I found a pair of ice-skates in the legs of my trousers. White, shiny, not a scratch on them; like a bride: untouched, shiny, chaste." Another example: "I suddenly heard a strange noise, like someone breaking nuts. By the time I noticed, I was in the water, I didn't feel anything as it was as cold as if my heart had stopped, like the watch that was not wound." Finally: landscape description in the narrative: "The moon shined its teeth on the surface of the lake, like a little lantern."

The students seek elegance in their writing, but sometimes their style becomes complicated or stilted. "Spots of snow rest on the evergreen branches. The darkness reigns above the tall trees, only the moon, this bright face, and the distant lights, small diamonds, the stars show the way. In the total silence and above the fabulous scenery, two strong, wide wings are spread, their owners a lonely mountain eagle" (description of landscape). "It was Christmas Eve. Beautiful atmosphere. The most beautiful holiday in the world. It was cold outside, it was snowing, the house was full with the members of the family, we took part in a festive supper" (narrative).

Another characteristic appears on the level of language use, and it can also be considered general. The phenomenon is connected to specific modalities of linguistic form, when the writer uses a proper linguistic form (at least the pupil thinks so), but its meaning is problematic. In this case, the linguistic form means something else than what it means to express. In the following examples, it becomes obvious that for the student it is not the truth in the text that is most important but the fact that he/she considers the discovered linguistic expression to be a hit. "The small creek majestically flowed in its bed". (There is a semantic opposition between the subject and the predicate, the small water

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yield of the creek cannot flow, let alone majestically, maybe gurgle). "We rapidly crawled home". (The adverb is logically inconsistent with the predicate, one can only crawl slowly). "The water in the creek clattered beautifully in my ear" (the onomatopoeic verb to clatter refers to an unpleasant sound effect, which contradicts sounding beautifully).

The cited examples suggest that the pupils understand artistic form differently than they were taught in school. Therefore, it would be interesting to study what the pupils consider literary, as the intertwining and mixing of the patterns of the classical and popular interpretation of art can be best traced in this approach.

The compulsory curriculum of secondary education includes literature, and the pupils know that Hungarian and Romanian literature is a compulsory subject in their final exams, with a national system of requirements, including both an oral and a written examination. The process of teaching literature starts in primary school and by secondary school it reaches a phase in which the pupil can enrich his/her already acquired knowledge (based on the ideal goals of the curriculum) with information in the field of the theory of literature, of genre, of stylistics, of textology, and of aesthetics and (if possible) can create readers enjoying art. The aim of text-centred interpretation is not simply guiding the pupils through the history of literature, but to teach them the techniques of attribution of meaning with the help of interpreting works that belong to the classical arts or their renewed forms in classical modernity and avant-garde. The school still needs to offer the cultural patterns (inherited system of symbols) with which the work of art can be approached.

The teachers of literature need to make the pupils aware that the receiver does not interpret arbitrarily, but he/she needs to adapt to the guidelines coded into the work. This is the first level of reception, the frame drawn by the work (Iser calls it the primary code), one function of which is to transfer the receiver into the secondary code (Iser), where interpretation is expanded, as the receiver activates his/her own world of experience and searches for the meaning of the work in order to find answers to his/her own self-interpretation as well.

Thus, the school offers the values of high culture, and with the help of analysing and interpreting practices support the development of the receiver's attitudes that can independently and competently relate to the values transmitted within the institutional framework of cultural heritage. The question is whether the level of education can guarantee the knowledge transmitted by the school to become a competence based on a personal value or not.

The texts of the pupils seize the situation in which the receiver's behaviour is determined not by the school but by the intellectual-sociological background of the environment, which is characterized by total enclosure by the popular (Almási 2003: 15). One of the main consequences of the reign of popular culture is that it fundamentally changes the intentions vis-á-vis the work, determined

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by motives outside aesthetics (the desire to be entertained, the prestige of knowing and having seen, the decorative function). This attitude of the recipient does not assume either the aesthetic orientation of the receiver or the aesthetic embeddedness of the work. Aesthetic orientation is important because it is based on the differentiation of life and art, it requires an active and interactive cultural behaviour, as aesthetic orientation starts with the contemplative relationship with the work (Almási 2003: 174). The receiver needs to assume the intellectual effort required by contemplation: he/she surrenders to the world of the work, collating fiction with the elements of reality, evaluating and making judgements. The popular arts do not require this type of differentiation, "work" in aesthetic contemplation can be avoided; thus, it offers the pupils a pattern which is much more convenient to follow and which works against the pattern of the school.

The aesthetic embeddedness of the work is important as it becomes part of the general communicational shift of symbols. In Hartmann's conception, the essence of a work of art is that it has two layers: the physical, which is identical with every other object, and the intellectual, which speaks only through the act of the receiver (Hartmann 1977: 137–157). If this embeddedness is terminated, the character of the work calling for interpretation cannot prevail as it blends into the environment as a decorative element (for example, the pharaoh statuette around the neck of the pupil, the copy of one of the works of art on the series-produced pencil-box or even the picture of a celebrity). This emphasizes the notion that art means to be some kind of decoration or background music, or even a status symbol, the tool to become a star in a group, but certainly not anything serious or even a troublesome practice. (Is it by chance that the majority of pupils consider acquiring general knowledge important in order to become socially successful?)

The diverse and varied offer of popular culture reaches everyone with the help of modern mass communication, through new types of media. Since it works with loud effects, it attracts attention, and due to the use of the simplified code, it can address anyone. It is only natural that its effect has a powerful impact upon cultural attitudes (Propp 1975).

One of the main consequences of the modifications in the attitude of the receiver that organize experience is that the relationship between reality and fiction is changed. This phenomenon can be very precisely identified in the texts of the pupils: contours and boundaries are blurred, everything is (can be) intertwined; there is a possibility to swap between the paradigms operating under different codes.

The reports of change: "Under the bushes, insects and small animals run back and forth. On the branches of the bushes, birds eat the ripe nuts. The little stream winds near the canopy. Sheep drink from the water. (...) Finally, the trail reaches the top of the pine forest; there it is swallowed by a pasture, where sheep, lambs, goats, and cows graze. Next to the herd, the cowherd is sadly playing on his flute. (...) The fresh snow is glistening. Over the clouds, the dim light of a few stars and

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the yellow half-sickle of the moon can be seen, which signals that the night is here and from now on darkness has the power."

Reality or fiction? It is both, and it is neither. It is a description of landscape, as the task requested. The narrator complies with the requirements of the genre, consistently applying the editing principle of receding, carefully formulating the sentences; selects adjectives to represent vividly. Nevertheless, the credibility that creates unity, either that of reality or that of fiction, is missing. Small elements query this unity, such as the simultaneous presence of three seasons (canopy, ripe nuts, fresh snow), the forms of relief and time of day which are completely independent of the grazing habits.

Another portrayal: "I am standing in the middle of the nature. There is a meandering river in front of me. The sound of water beautifully rattles in my ear. At my feet, a highway enters to infinity. Under the highway, a hill is covered by a beautiful pine forest. On the other side of the river, a farm can be observed. In the middle of the farm, the tower of the church stands proudly. It seems to reach up to the skies and suddenly disappear into infinity. Next to the farm, cows are grazing, the shepherd is lying asleep on his coat."

The text is based on the "original" combination of literary effects. He is inspired by the poems of Gyula Juhász (Evening in the lowlands) and Petőfi (The Tisza). He builds up his text with elements of the landscape, but he also places himself in the plotted landscape; starting the presentation from a given point, using the editing principle of receding, expanding dimensions into infinity, both in vertical and horizontal directions. The spatial features are indicated by adverbs; there are twelve adverbs of place in the short passage, however, it cannot be decided where things are located compared to one another. The description does not evoke a sight that we can imagine. It might only recall snatches of the original verses: "... stretches shivering into the starts,..." (the poplar in the yard); "The road slowly ambles (...) and suddenly vanishes into infinity." Based on these, a characteristic lowland landscape is invoked, without hills and pine forests.

The stories also imply the mechanism described by Umberto Eco, having intertextuality at the heart. The main idea here is that whole series are made of the same material. Students also have familiar stories: the frames of the stories are the same, the details differ; motifs wander from one story to another, characters only change their clothes and situations, but remain the same.

Several compositions could be entitled *Birthday on ice*. The stories centre on the celebration of a birthday. The requirement formulated in the introductory part: "This has to be a surprise." anticipates that the characters, who want to quit the everyday monotony, will begin the intrigue with an unexpected, unusual, surprising idea. Everyone is happy about the idea of celebrating the birthday on the frozen lake: "No one could take the smile off their faces, but we tried to remain ordinary. I was the main organizer, everyone helped me." The rush begins,

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everyone is doing their duties according to the plan; there was only one problem: "They said that the weather would be warm next day. Since it was February, it was pretty cold, but spring was just around the corner. Everything was settled, the only problem was the ice..." Finally, "the big day has arrived"; after lunch, "we thought that now is the best time for the surprise: we blindfolded her (the celebrated) and put her in the car. We went to the lake and made her stand in the middle of it; I was carrying the cake, while my brother had the skates. We were already on our way, while our friends were watching gleefully my mother's face, but my brother stumbled on the slightly wet and lumpy ice. He dropped the skates; the weight of which cracked the thin ice, so the orphan skates popped under the water."

So, the goal was reached: "The surprise gift was even more surprising because everybody was trying to pull out the lonely, soaked skates from the ice-cold water."

The narrator is so overwhelmed by the "great idea" that the presentation of the story is full of contradictions, inconsistencies, and even absurdities: for example, the arrival of the spring scheduled for a certain day, how the celebrated is held by the thin ice, so on and so forth – because every paragraph of the text contradicts the previous one.

The narrators, who have chosen the stories based on the idea of celebrating on ice, do try their best in order to be "original". In the following composition, where the celebrated is a classmate, an even bigger surprise is prepared. "I remembered that our neighbour had an old car; I bought this car as a present. The big day had arrived and everyone was helping me in taking the car on the ice and covering it. We managed to do it, but we didn't think about that the weather would later warm up, so the ice would not hold for sure the weight of the car." The acme: "After all, the accident occurred at 3 pm, when everyone handed over their gifts on the ice. When I unveiled the car, Szabi sat in. Once he shut the door, the ice crashed in under the car, and it started to sink in the cold water. Everyone ran there to pull out Szabi from under the ice, and they took him to the hospital with a car for further nursing." The sequence of events ends with the hospital visit; the final sentence features the events as an unforgettable experience.

What patterns could inspire the narrations which are based on bizarre ideas, always ignoring the reality and constantly dropping back there in a clumsy way? There is a huge advertisement in Mureş County that could bring us closer to understanding. It can be seen, for example, on the busy route between Târgu Mureş and Sighişoara, and it lures young people to hold their weddings in the middle of a lake. The image depicts a summer landscape with lush vegetation, a blue lake with an island in the middle of it, where a slender female figure in wedding dress is standing. The landscape is familiar from the descriptive compositions of the students, while any element of the presented scenes can be replaced with another one.

The principle of content adequacy learnt in writing classes at school prevails in most of the texts. The bottom line in forming the story consists of the memories

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recalled by the title, the evoked material of experiences, and the activated narrative patterns. It is remarkable how the title of the writing task does not bring to surface personally experienced life events, which can be turned into authentic narrations in accordance with the known rules of forming the story. On the contrary, such story frames are used that function on the base of a well-defined algorithm, and which offer the stereotypical roles as action patterns to be played. So, the personal experiments are not being formed into a story, but the already existing frame needs to be supplemented with details, the offered roles need to be played, and the emergent story needs to be narrated.

Cindy Sherman's procedure sheds light on the essence of this "reverse" technique, based on which she created her series named Untitled Film Stills. The criticism considers the exhibition to be "the brilliant elaboration, graphic visualization, and careful analysis of the stereotypical behavioural patterns mediated by the rhetorical photo vision and the film" (Sebők 2003: 151).

The artist's procedure: after watching dozens of films, mainly B-movies, she tried to simplify them, to deduce them in certain algorithms. After detecting the stereotypical roles offered to the viewers as action patterns, she played these roles, and she exhibited the photos taken about the acting as stills from the movie. Their impact is special because the copy is not defined by the original, but the original is stimulated by the copy, the creation of different narratives in everyone's imagination. The viewer gets help from mass culture in re-creating the story from the movie.

On the basis of the test sample's analysis, it can be stated that there is an internal contrast between the receptive attitude that organizes experiences and the creative attitude that composes the text. This inconsistency is projected on the text, determining one of its main characteristics, the eclectic nature. The school is unable to provide the cultural training for high school students (future potential intellectuals), which would familiarize them with the artistic paradigms operating by different codes while preparing them to choose consciously. This is also proven by the fact that during the years of education there is no significant change in the relationship between different patterns.

The interaction of the two cultural patterns (educational and environmental) can be observed both in the narrative and descriptive compositions, as well as how they switch from one to another. However, the narrations present the rhapsodical nature of the changes more powerfully; while the kitsch cannot be captured only in the approach to nature, in the banality of the reflections on nature but also in human behaviour, gestures, poses, positions and modes of acting, communication situations.

The eclectic nature of the text is manifested in its complexity by revealing something about the technique that serves as a basis for it. Since students want to meet teachers' expectations, they try to adapt the patterns of text production

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learnt in school. They manage to do this by moving the used elements from their original place, from popular culture into a construction where the rules of traditional narratives or descriptions are decisive. The experiment is not very successful because the dialectical relationship between the whole text and its fractions is often compromised in many ways.

Since the patterns function based on two different codes, the incompatibility results that frequent changes need to be made, which could affect various levels of text, which will always have an unexpected or unpredictable impact.

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