



INTERCOMPREHENSION – LANGUAGE TOOLS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION¹

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Abstract: *Speaking about the importance of intercultural communication in our globalised world has become more than obvious. Independently of the personal, social or professional context of our lives, our daily interactions are no more limited to the geographical small sphere of our nations or regions, but have to be placed in a much larger world which is characterised by diversity (ies). The language of communication is very often taken for granted: it seems we have only one option, English. However, the use of English in intercultural encounters is not the only possibility, and in many cases it may become a barrier to cultural awareness and to the actual needs of effective communication. How can we conciliate the naïve use of an international language and Wittgenstein's aphorism 19 (1953) «(...) to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life»? Intercomprehension, a quite recent concept that has been developed since the 1990's, may help us to find other ways to communicate that allow deeper understanding of otherness and the respect for cultural specificities, which include language use. In our paper, we will present this notion and analyse its effects on a new perspective of intercultural communication.*

Keywords: *Culture, intercultural communication, intercultural awareness, intercomprehension*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, when someone mentions “the community where I belong” or “the community where I live”, it is not an easy task to define the exact limits of what it is meant by those expressions. International mobility, virtual or real social networks, professional contexts, largely go beyond the narrow boundaries of the here and now, whatever “here and now” may mean today. The actual meaning of the word “community” is constantly being redefined, although its etymological root remains the same: “community” means a group of people who have something in “common”, a group of people who “communicate” with each other.

In this paper, I propose to characterize this new sense of community (Capucho, 2006) and

observe intercultural communication in this context.

But, in a world of linguistic and cultural diversity, how can we actually communicate? What are the tools that we may use to share our ways “of thinking, feeling and believing” as Clyde Kluckhohn (1959: 28) puts it? The question obviously raises complex issues linked to language choice and language policies, leading to the on-going debate on the use of English as a *lingua franca* vs multilingualism. I will discuss the various arguments put forward by experts in the last few years and conclude on the absolute need to preserve linguistic diversity in the world (and most especially in our case, in the EU, by showing the negative effects of the use of a sole international language on cultural awareness and intercultural effective communication.

Finally I will introduce the concept of Intercomprehension, “one of the most remarkable and challenging ideas for the

¹ Some of the ideas expressed in this paper, namely the debate between English as a *lingua franca* and plurilingualism, have been presented in an earlier publication, Capucho, 2010.

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realization of plurilingual education” (Doyé, 2005:7) and show how it may contribute to the harmonious development of the new various communities we live in.

2. WHERE DO I BELONG?

Several authors, such as Friedman (2000), consider that the globalisation process started many centuries ago, namely after the epoch of maritime discoveries with its consequent *Diaspora* and increasing contacts with parts of the world unknown or hardly known before the XVIth century. Nevertheless, we may locate the global shift of perspectives at the end of the XXth century. This shift originates in deep historical changes such as the fall of the Berlin wall, and also in the huge transformation caused by the sudden development of information and communication technologies: the global implementation of the Windows computer system, Netscape in 1995 and the Internet after 2000 (cf. Munshi, 2006). During the last 15 years, we have participated in a true technological revolution, centred on digital processes, which “remodèle à un rythme accéléré les fondements matériels de la société”² (Castells, 1998: 21). This revolution may be compared to the industrial revolution in the XVIIIth and XIXth century:

“With the convergence between Internet and mobile communication and the gradual diffusion of broadband capacity, the communicating power of the Internet is being distributed in all realms of society life, as the electrical grid and the electrical engine distributed energy in the industrial society.” (Castells, 2007: 246).

The new technological reality shapes our lives and the world at large, and has determined the development of the globalisation process. Even if we may wonder

whether globalisation is actually just a complex contemporary myth, the truth is that the phenomenon has affected society and the individuals themselves and created new cultural identities. However, the change may cover two distinctive, opposite results:

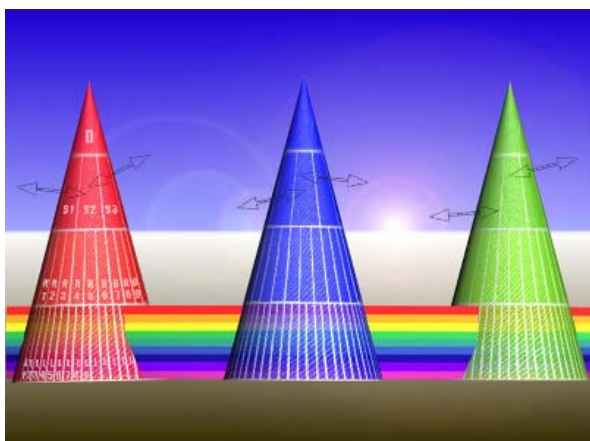
- The grouping of individuals around primary identities (cf. Castells, 1998:23), leading to an increasing social fragmentation which is opposed to the globalised networks. Identities grow more and more specific, thus more difficult to be shared. Fellow human beings become strangers and represent a threat. Fundamentalisms of all sort are thus spreading, based on religion (with all the negative consequences that we have witnessed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, and elsewhere), politics (with a growing importance of extreme-right parties in countries like Austria, the Netherlands, France and Belgium) or nationalist and regionalist beliefs (in the Basque Country, Cataluña and Belgium).

- The sharing of cultural identities, rooted in effective communication between social groups and/or individuals, leading to a sense of belonging to various international groups that exceed the borders of one’s native country. Individuals construct a new identity that is no longer simply based on their language, but which is built on enculturation processes that allow stronger links between people and cultures and contribute to the general development of society and of the self. As Benko (2002: 282) affirms: “Não precisamos apenas de cadeias de abastecimento, mas também de cadeias de almas que liguem os seres humanos uns aos outros com o fim de alcançarem o potencial da humanidade”³. This process of an harmonious cultural change is represented in the following image that I proposed in an earlier publication (Capucho, 2006):

² “reshapes in an accelerated rhythm the material foundations of society” (my translation).

³ “We do not simply need supplying chains, but also *chains of souls* that link human beings aiming to achieve the full potential of humanity” (our translation)

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On this picture, cultural national identities closely linked to languages are represented by the coloured cones, but at the basis, where social groups and individuals live, they are crossed by a colourful rainbow, which represents translinguistic cultural factors that may be shared amongst the different cultures. They correspond to geophysical, geodemographical, organizational, professional, generational, gender, ethnical and ideological elements that may link people independently of their linguistic/cultural background, establishing bridges of understanding and enabling individuals or groups to narrow the distances between them. Obviously, the colours of the rainbow do not erase the original colour of each of us, which remains as our solid background, but through a continuous process of enculturation, they create in each of us a colourful mosaic that brings us closer to the others and prevents the emergence of primary identities. The awareness of the importance of any of these 8 factors depends entirely on the possibility of actually sharing them with others, of creating new communities, and this is only possible through successful processes of intercultural communication:

People's lives are guided by their cultural perspectives, and when their worldview, beliefs, and values come under assault through social change, they can feel threatened and resort to extreme measures to maintain the status quo. A knowledge of intercultural communication, and the ability to use it effectively, can help bridge cultural

differences, mitigate problems, and assist in achieving more harmonious, productive relations.” (Samovar, Potter, McDaniel, 2012:8)

3. HOW CAN I SHARE?

Thus

“globalization provides a good opportunity to reflect on the efficiency of the tools which the intercultural enterprise so far has developed to promote intercultural understanding [...]” (Saint-Jacques, 2012:46).

And the basic tool is... language learning! How can we share without language? But which language(s)?

Let us take the EU as an example: 495 million people; 27 countries; 23 official languages, a context that is characterised by the diversity of the national cultures that compose its physical and mental space:

“[...] the European ideal is founded on two inseparable conditions: the universality of shared moral values and the diversity of cultural expression; in particular, linguistic diversity for historical reasons is a major component [...]” (Maalouf, 2008:8)

How can we communicate in this modern Babel?

The long debate about language policies in Europe can only have two outcomes: either we agree on using a common *lingua franca*, which is nowadays, obviously, English, or we become largely plurilingual. In fact, discussions opposing plurilingualism and monolingualism (the development of a *lingua franca* in Europe) are consistent and have not yet been closed.

Several authors argue for the use of English as the sole language of international communication and use various designations to name it: English as an International Language, English as a Lingua Franca, World Standard English or Global English (cf. Price, 2004) or even, in a recent jargon, Globish (cf. Baer, 2009).

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In 2004, De Swaan, insists on the same arguments that he had fully developed in his 2002 book: “In the general confusion of tongue, in which no indigenous language can predominate, English automatically imposes itself as the sole, obvious, solution”. Similarly, after presenting his arguments in favour of a sole lingua franca, Van Parijs concludes:

[...] we can accept without rancour or resentment the increasing reliance on English as a lingua franca. We need one, and only one, if we are to be able to work out and implement efficient and fair solutions to our common problems on both European and world scales, and indeed if we are to be able to discuss, characterise and achieve, again Europe- and world-wide, linguistic justice.(Van Parijs, 2007:243)

The use of Globish has even been presented as a sort of natural phenomenon akin to the sun rising and setting everyday (cf. Baer, 2009). However this somewhat extreme position hides some elements that somehow oppose active citizenship and the construction of a democratic European society or simply effective intercultural communication, as Tremblay (2009: 32) clearly denounces.

What are, in fact, the dangers of the acceptance of a lingua franca, in general, and specifically English?

- The use of a language that is not fully mastered by a majority may produce a democratic deficit: many citizens will be unable to participate in collective debates
- A growing loss of interest for the cultural diversity in Europe:

Le monolinguisme de l’anglais [...] donne l’illusion que tout le monde se comprend, que chacun fait partie de ce fameux village global où l’on écoute la même musique industrielle, regarde les mêmes films stéréotypés, porte les mêmes vêtements à la mode, et adopte les mêmes clichés politiques, culturels et économiques. Il peut en résulter une perte d’intérêt envers les cultures des autres, chacun pensant y accéder aisément grâce à l’anglais⁴ (Frath, 2009:4)

- Linguistic imperialism associated to social, economic and political imperialism may bring about a dual society divided up between the included and the excluded, the integrated and the marginal.

- The reduction of the cognitive capacities of individuals and subsequent reduction of knowledge.

The very notion of English as a *lingua franca* is, in itself, questionable. A *lingua franca* is the result of a combination of morphosyntactic elements that compose the languages that are spoken by the interactants and not a language that is the mother tongue of any of them (cf. Grin, 2008:22-23; also Frath, 2010). Grin also discusses the pseudo-economic arguments often put forward in favour of a *lingua franca*, which is supposedly cheaper to implement. He convincingly argues that, in the end, multilingualism is in fact the cheaper option...

On the other side of this debate, one is to find the official position of the European institutions that argue in favour of the development of multilingualism, by reinforcing the possibilities for citizens to learn several languages. But why should citizens be plurilingual?

The reasons that have been evoked by researchers and decision makers are diverse and they cover a vast number of fields:

Personal development of individuals:

Language learning is endowed, in the long run, with a high transversal value: “It supports cognitive functions such as attention, perception, memory, concentration, concept formation, critical thinking, problem solving, cognitive flexibility, and ability to work in teams. It supports both the cognitive

⁴ “English monolingualism [...] gives the illusion that everybody understands each other, that everybody belongs to the famed global village where one listens to the same industrial music, watches the same stereotyped films, wears the same fashionable clothes and adopts the same political, cultural and economic clichés. It may lead to a loss of interest towards the cultures of others, everyone thinking that they may easily have access to them by means of the English language.” (my translation)

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development of young children and the mental agility of old people.” (Commission of the European Communities, 2007:9).

Plurilingual groups present a higher flexibility of thought and larger creative capacities when compared to monolinguals (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002 : 19). Mastering various languages (at a higher or lower level) enables a multifaceted referential construction, thus multiplying life experiences and opening the way to various forms of thought: “Parler des langues, c’est accéder à des formes de pensée différentes, rencontrer d’autres constructions mentales et imaginaires”⁵ (Burdin, 2009:174).

- Social development

Plurilingualism opens the way to individual autonomy in a social environment, because it allows the freedom to name reality⁶ and freely found categories of thought. (cf. Supiot, 2005:155)

On the other hand, the personal benefits that were mentioned in the previous point are extensive to society as a whole and contribute to social progress “Language learning has a major impact on the level of education of an entire community, which in turn has been demonstrated to correlate with living standards, health standards and societal wellbeing in general.” (Commission of the European Communities, 2007:9).

Plurilingualism also favours social harmony by enabling openness to the plurality of cultures, respect of differences and the will to communicate with others:

Learning other languages has an intercultural value. In addition to openness to other people’s cultures and attitudes [...], language education can raise awareness of one’s own culture and values and stimulate the willingness and enhance the ability to communicate and co-operate with people across language and

cultural boundaries. (Commission of the European Communities, 2007:9).

- Economic improvement

Knowledge of foreign languages increases the capacity of transnational mobility and enlarges employment opportunities:

If current trends are anything to go by, mobility between jobs, geographical mobility, and transnational co-operation will become an accepted part of the working lives of a large percentage of Europeans. It will become increasingly difficult to predict the course of people’s careers. It is precisely because of this that the learning and knowledge of several languages is an important aspect of sustainable employability. The experience of learning several languages, and competence in several languages form a sound basis for learning additional languages if and when the need arises. (Commission of the European Communities, 2007:9)

- Political cohesion

Plurilingualism is a factor of social cohesion and enables the construction of a European identity:

Individual plurilingualism is a significant influence on the evolution of an European identity: Since Europe is a multilingual area in its entirety and in any given part, the sense of belonging to Europe and the acceptance of a European identity is dependent on the ability to interact and communicate with other Europeans using the full range of one’s linguistic repertoire (Council of Europe, 2003 : 10)

All these arguments may finally be gathered in a maxim that Nieder (2009:364) attributes to Charles the V: “un homme qui parle quatre langues vaut quatre hommes”⁷.

Nevertheless, the defence of plurilingualism and the respect for linguistic diversity is not contrary to the learning of English, as a language whose importance is

⁵ “To speak languages is to have access to various forms of thought, meet other mental and imaginary constructions” (my translation)

⁶ And thus to construct it.

⁷ “A man who speaks four languages is worth four men” (my translation)

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undoubtedly essential in our globalised world. As Maalouf (2008: 15-16) refers: “It is important for English to retain and consolidate the eminent place it holds as a language of culture rather than being straitjacketed in the role of instrument of global communication, a flattering but detractive role, and one which is potentially a factor of impoverishment.”

Yet, English is A language, not THE language, and its importance in the world of today should not lead to the submission (and the death) of all the other languages. Learning English for utilitarian immediate purposes will bring about the destruction of the English language itself – it will become a pidgin or, even worse, a collection of pidgins that are not mutually understandable. Interpreters often report difficulties in translating foreigners who think they speak English, but who are actually using some kind of pidgin that they are the only ones to understand.

Learning English is important, but let us not simply look at it as a code. Language is much more than a code, it is a way of perceiving and representing the world. English as a *lingua franca* will immensely reduce the possibilities of intercultural communication. If «to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life» (Wittgenstein, 1953), how can we actually express the cultural diversities of the world with a sole language? And, on trying to do that, aren't we erasing the differences, as if the world was a simple flat landscape where everything was neutrally coloured? How can we respect cultural diversities if we are not aware of the different ways of *saying the world*?

4. YES, BUT HOW TO ACHIEVE PLURILINGUALISM?

Speaking all the languages in the world, or even all the European languages, is an impossible task. It takes time, effort, commitment and a lot of money to learn but a few! Nevertheless, the learning at least two foreign languages may open unsuspected doors to a larger number of idioms and there are innovative approaches to language learning

that may help to extend the scope of individuals' competencies.

The EU authorities share this position and the official language policy of the EU Commission aims at supporting multilingualism⁸, especially since 2000, with the Declaration of Lisbon, which was reinforced in 2002 with the Declaration of Barcelona. It is thus recommended that all citizens learn at least two languages during their life. The same tendency is stressed in the Treaty of Lisbon, which was signed on the 1st of December 2009. The former EU Commissioner responsible for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism, Ján Figel (2005), explains the main reasons for this choice:

[...] languages are not mere means of communication. They contribute to a better knowledge of other European cultures and have a real potential for a deeper understanding between European citizens. Multilingualism policy aims at ensuring multiculturalism, tolerance and European citizenship. Widespread general competence in foreign languages also plays its part in keeping xenophobia and intolerance at bay. We have to understand each other if we want to reap the full benefits of the cultural, social and economic richness of our continent.

The EU has, in fact, strongly supported several programs and actions to promote multilingualism. In order to extend the knowledge of foreign languages, some solutions were proposed:

- The early learning of a first foreign language
- Content Language Integrated Learning

⁸ Usually, we distinguish “multilingualism” (a term that is massively used within the EU Commission) and “plurilingualism” (mostly used by the Council of Europe). Even if both are often used randomly, I use multilingualism to “societies where more than one language is spoken, be it officially or not, while plurilingualism refers to the fact that individuals speak more than one language.” (Van de Craen and Perez-Vidal, 2003: 1)

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- The development of a “personal adoptive language” (cf. Maalouf 2008)

- Intercomprehension

These four approaches do not exclude each other, but my choice today is to focus on the importance and effectiveness of Intercomprehension on the development of plurilingual competencies.

The concept of Intercomprehension (IC) has been under discussion for more than 20 years now. Since the beginning of the 90’s, several European teams have been studying it and its implementation in the process of language learning. Definitions may vary according to the many theoretical schools, or to the direct pragmatic aims of specific applied research (cf. Capucho, 2011a).

In 2004, the academic group that met for the project Eu & I defined IC as “[t]he process of developing the ability to co-construct meaning in the context of the encounter of different languages and to make pragmatic use of this in a concrete communicative situation” (Capucho, 2004) or, in other words, *the process of co-constructing meaning in intercultural/interlinguistic contexts* (Capucho, 2011b). The development of such a process will lead to the ability to understand, to a certain extent, one and/or several languages, by using existing communicative (discourse) competences (plurilingual skills from personal life experiences). This may be enabled by the fact that languages belong to specific families (the Romance languages, the Germanic languages, the Slavic languages), which share a great number of linguistic features (lexical, morphological and syntactic); however the possibility of IC between languages belonging to different families has also been demonstrated (cf. Ollivier, 2007, Capucho, 2011a), and some recent projects have specifically focused on this possibility. The knowledge of English may, as well, become a bridge for the development of IC in Romance families (cf. Robert, 2011).

Intercomprehension is, therefore, a new form of communication in which each individual uses his or her own language BUT understands that of the others. The innovative

aspect of IC consists mainly in this idea of being able to understand a language in spite of not having learnt it before. Therefore, it allows plurilingual interactions to play an important role in intercultural communication, avoiding the systematic use a *lingua franca*. In fact, IC is a natural process, which has been accepted by all those who travel around the world and by those who live in border regions (cf. Capucho, 2008). It was thought impossible, until very recently, to implement IC in the context of formal school learning. However, the efficiency of IC has been proved in the context of at least 183 different training events that have been surveyed so far (<http://www.formations-redinter.eu/>) and in the context of more than 25 projects (<http://www.redinter.eu/web/proyectos>). It is a flexible approach that may be adapted to personal and institutional needs: some of the latest projects (PREFIC, CINCO, INTERMAR) have been specifically designed in order to address professional needs on the tertiary sector or on naval and maritime contexts.

Over the past few years, training in IC has had various objectives, according to the specific skills that were at stake in the context of the projects. The first projects conceived the IC processes in written reception activities; later, IC also comprised situations of oral reception. The use of new technologies brought the possibility to use IC in written interactions, in chats and forums. Finally, nowadays, the projects linked to professional training place IC in any oral or written situation of interaction, either in face-to-face encounters or at distance. This latter conception of IC aims at developing learning in

- Written reception – which is, in fact, the easiest skill to acquire in many languages, more specifically amongst languages of the same family. Learning activities focus on the development of linguistic awareness (similarities between forms and structures, correspondences between linguistic forms, even when they differ), text awareness (the structure of a text corresponds to sets of rules

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that are the same in any language; text formats, as well as “text images” are translinguistic), pragmatic awareness (any text is marked by a certain intentionality and addresses a specific kind of reader) and strategic transfer of knowledge and competences;

- Oral reception, very often supported by video documents that contextualise the message and allow the support of nonverbal features for the construction of meaning – in fact, in daily life, most of the oral documents in a foreign language that one deals with are audio-visual (not many people listen to the radio in a foreign language, but we often see films or watch the television when travelling abroad);

- Written and oral interaction, creating a context for interactional cooperation (including collaboration and conflicts), where the negotiation of meaning is central. Thus, the activities focus not only on written and oral reception but also, in “interproduction”, i.e. strategies to be used by a speaker to make himself/herself understood (when using his/her native language) by a foreigner (who does not speak that language) and reduce interactional conflicts.

Intercomprehension is certainly one of the most productive approaches to language learning nowadays. By respecting language diversity, by NOT imposing any exterior language for communication, IC creates intercultural awareness and is, in its very essence, an open door to cooperation between speakers of different languages. In plurilingual interactions, the commitment of both speakers to the success of communication is vital and involves attention, tolerance, and respect, which are the main factors of intercultural communication. Accepting the IC approach to language learning will thus open the way to the co-construction of newly redefined communities.

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