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European Cinema and Intercomprehension: Metaphors and Instances of Mutual Intelligibility

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Abstract. The European Union is multilingual in its daily reality as well as in its legislation. The use of only one language as a communicative means among different peoples in Europe would greatly impact upon Europe’s capacity to federate diverse cultures and languages, not to mention the economic and cultural benefits enjoyed by the country whose language would become an inter-European language. With Intercomprehension (IC), the European citizens could overcome the risk of diminishing communicative exchanges: it promotes a direct, multilingual dialog tailoring the mindset and language specificity of each and every interlocutor. As such, IC bears the sign of a concrete action in favor of the cultural and language diversity. Two French movies – Euro-Mix (“L’auberge espagnole”) and its sequel Russian Dolls (“Les poupées russes”) – have been precisely selected as proof of this communication skill that avoids using a third language between two people speaking related languages.

Key words: Intercomprehension, multilingualism, language diversity, movies

1. Introduction

Ever since the dawn of language, IC has been a daily reality and a communication strategy put in practice by millions of people. Nevertheless, its potential still remains largely untapped. Indeed, its overall implementation brings about challenges that are not only language-related but also affect pedagogy and politics.

That is why the purpose of our paper has been to approach the social, cultural and linguistic scope of this particular concept that is IC, especially in the European context. In fact, the respect of language diversity constitutes one of the basic rights guaranteed by the E. U. charter, as stated in Article 22, “*The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity*”. [1]

Or, as the Italian novelist Umberto Eco pointed out, “*a Europe of polyglots is not a Europe of people who speak many languages fluently, but, in the best case scenario, of people who can communicate, each speaking his/her own language and understanding that of the other, but who, while not being able to speak it fluently, by understanding it, even with difficulty, would understand the “spirit”, the cultural universe that every one expresses when speaking the language of his/her ancestors and of his/her own tradition.*” [2]

In the same line of thought, IC among closely-related languages has been a time-honored communicative practice whose existence can be traced down all through the history of humanity. In

this respect, Swiss linguist V. Conti points out that IC among neighboring languages can be defined as speakers' capacity to understand each other on the basis of similarities between their native language and their interlocutor's. Also its stakes are very high: they do not stop not only at language level but also encompass teaching methodologies and politics. [3]

2. Analysis

So, IC is a communicative method which illustrates a new approach to the language teaching policy: it annihilates the use of a third language between two people speaking related languages. As previously shown, this is extremely important.

Thus, the most elementary propaganda on globalization, "the new person", the Erasmus academic scholarships and several clear-cut examples of IC are encapsulated within the trilogy of French film director Cédric Klapisch: *Euro-Mix* (translation from L'auberge espagnole; literally: the Spanish inn), *Russian Dolls* (Les poupées russes in original), and *Chinese Puzzle* (*Casse-tête chinois* in French).

The film story line is simple but promising: 25 - year - old French student Xavier embarks on an Erasmus exchange program in Barcelona, Spain where he has to share an apartment with other international students. As of now he finds himself immersed in a cultural and language melting pot that he has to make the most of and successfully cope with.

As such, Xavier takes us through his unique experience, both culturally and linguistically. His character becomes the symbol of a Europe that is tolerant, open to new languages and cultures, and at the same time contributor to this heteroclit language and cultural diversity. His ending lines in the movie actually best epitomize this: *"I am French, Spanish, English, Danish... I am not one, but several. I am like Europe, I am all that. I'm a real mess."*

The movie is thus punctuated by a whole series of **metaphors** that buttress this vision of a European society under construction where each and every individual respects other people's values and simultaneously preserves their true language and cultural identity through integrated management of acknowledged differences. In fact, the **apartment** itself and the idea of sharing it, as well as its strategic common points such as the **fridge**, the **phone**, the **kitchen** and the **living room** are as many reflections of a European space in progress which people are supposed to learn how to master for the better by the day.

Students' discussion about identity outside their college is very telling in this respect. [4] One student argues that it is not about only one identity and that there is no valid identity since there are so many different identities that are perfectly compatible. In his opinion – to which we subscribe – it all comes down to respect. The same student goes on with a personal example and points out that he has at least two identities: Catalan and Gambian; however, he does not think at all that mixing them is conflicting.

A Spanish student refers to Xavier and his French identity which he keeps as he will always be associated with Astérix and cheeses as part of his Frenchness. On the other hand, the student ascertains the fact that he himself will give his "pan tumaca" (bread and tomatoes), Dali but Spain is more than "Olé" and "flamenco", it's all this and even more. So, each individual brings in his/her personal national touch while trying to perfectly fit into the whole international group.



Snapshots of The Spanish Apartment movie

The polyphonic side of this comedy is best captured during the blackout episode where each tenant names the fuse that needed to be changed in their own language and they understand each other seamlessly. This functions as the best case of IC at work.

Or, as Jeanine Medelice so nicely describes it, when rain stops, the French will see a bow in the sky (arc-en-ciel), while the English perceives it as a rainbow, the Italian as the dolphin's bow (arcobaleno) and the Occitan as a silk bow (arc de seda). This contrastive perspective undoubtedly showcases several differences; however, the common traits that unite these words – and languages by extension – are even greater. [5, our translation]



Snapshot of The Spanish Apartment movie

This scene reinforces us in the idea that, just like in the manner of Molière's bourgeois Gentleman who made prose without knowing it, there are people who make use of this method without even realizing it.

And it also reinforces some advanced ideas on this concept. First, IC certainly works better within the language families, but it is also quite possible and operational beyond these languages. Second, in the case of unrelated languages, the fewer points of linguistic contact, the more IC must be based on extra linguistic dimensions such as textual and/or situational ones. Last but not least, it is important to resort to making associations with the language knowledge already stored in one's memory as no language is a new territory.

In addition, five years after the release of *The Spanish Apartment*, *Russian Dolls* – its sequel – also conjures up identity and language diversity issues on a more romantic note since William, the Englishman, invites the whole gang to his wedding in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The love story between Natasha and William is yet another example of intercomprehension, that is as Dr. F. Capucho points out: “the development of the capacity to co-build a meaning when different languages get in contact and pragmatically use it in a specific communicative situation. In other words, intercomprehension is also the capacity to understand a language (without necessarily having studied it before) in a given context by using the developed discursive competence.” [6]

Most of the time, Natasha and William communicate in their native languages (Russian and English respectively) and succeed in understanding each other. Here is a movie scene that speaks volumes in this respect: Natasha uses the Russian word for sun - *солнце* – to ask William to put up the lights for her to dance on the stage (на сцене). He makes associations between the way these words sound in Russian and English and thus complies with her demand.



3. Conclusions

The afore-mentioned movies are as many metaphors of IC and intentionality of communication which are also characteristic features of today's polyglot Europe.

In French, the expression "auberge espagnole" has in fact lost somehow its primary meaning "an inn which was typical of Spain where people could bring in whatever they wanted to eat", and has already become synonymous of "a place, a human creation where guests bring along and throw in whatever they would like to find, and where they find only what they have contributed"; in short, it is an expression that has been around more as of the release of this movie.

In the same manner, the Russian Dolls movie takes its name after the brightly colored wooden figurines, similar in shape, interlocking with each other and reminds us of the nature of this concept that is Intercomprehension. It also makes it possible to determine speakers' awareness, as well as their availability and need to activate such skills.

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