

CULTURAL VALUE AND REPRESENTATION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

The debate on and amongst cultures often takes the form of comparison with its by-consequences such as mockery or debasing words. Everything depends on the individual, that is, the persons who mouths the words to characterize or to tell about a given culture. The lines to follow intend to raise awareness on the fact that it is nonsensical to establish a sort of comparison between cultures; for every culture is worthy on its own. Moreover, anytime a culture is assessed along with the norms of another culture, this will surely lead to an act of depreciation. Therefore, culture is simply worth describing rather than prescribing. Such a perspective can help reconsider the idea of 'ideal culture' to undertake a better harmonious intercultural communication.

Key Words: culture- value-representation-cultural norm-depreciation- ideal culture-intercultural communication.

Résumé : Le débat sur et entre les cultures prend souvent la forme d'une comparaison avec ses conséquences secondaires telles que la moquerie ou les mots avilissants. Tout dépend de l'individu, c'est-à-dire des personnes qui prononcent les mots pour caractériser ou raconter une culture donnée. Les lignes à suivre visent à sensibiliser sur le fait qu'il est insensé d'établir une sorte de comparaison entre les cultures ; car chaque culture en vaut la peine. De plus, à chaque fois qu'une culture est évaluée avec les normes d'une autre culture, cela conduira sûrement à un acte de dépréciation. Par conséquent, la culture vaut simplement la peine d'être décrite plutôt que de prescrire. Une telle perspective peut nous aider à revoir l'idée de « culture idéale » pour mieux entreprendre la perspective d'une communication interculturelle plus harmonieuse.

Mots clés: culture-valeur-représentation-norme culturelle-dépréciation-culture idéale-communication interculturelle.

Introduction

Cultures are sometimes denominated along with the continent they belong to. In this perspective, individuals often speak in terms of 'American culture, European culture, African culture, Asian culture...etc', to name only these. It is as if, each continent has a specific culture which is findable all places of the concerned continent. Moreover, despite the world exchanges are much more characterized and evaluated on the basis of the commercial exchanges, most of the times, relations between continents are appreciated on the basis of culture. But this cannot be else as continents do not meet; only people meet, and as such, there is somehow a cultural exchange which takes place. In the current analysis, allusion will often be made to two major cultures such as western and African cultures. Though not representatives of major cultures, reference to western and African cultures can validly account for cultural specificities.

Cultural specificities call on cultural differences, and therefore raise the issue of types of relations that may exist between them. Considering the two types, African and French cultures can help depict what actually prevails between the world's cultures. In fact, the relations between these two cultures have often been characterized by what can be referred to as the cultural clash. But, beyond the issues of identity, a cultural clash is before all a clash for interests. As Abdelaâli Laoukili (2005, p.81) well puts it, cultural and identity issues strongly go along with political and economic tensions. He states that when interactions between groups are characterized by the feeling of economic and cultural domination of one over the other(s), if that feeling of domination is contested by the latter, the issue of identity will be exacerbated¹.

The study of the relations between cultures is often known as intercultural studies. But most of the intercultural studies which very often oppose dominant and dominated cultures will always address the issue either on the critical side of domination and discrimination, or on the critical size

¹ Dans un contexte caractérisé, d'une part, par une domination du modèle économique et culturel « néolibéral » culminant dans la mondialisation des échanges ou leur « marchandisation » et, d'autre part, par des formes multiples et parfois violentes de contestation de cette domination, on ne peut que constater l'exacerbation des questions touchant à l'identité des groupes et individus. Ces individus ou groupes s'identifiant ou étant identifiés soit dans le groupe des « dominants », soit dans celui des « dominés » (Abdelaâli Laoukili, 2005, p.79)

of regressive reference to outdated traditions of a given dominated group². Scarcely, analyses are oriented towards a double criticism of the mechanisms which are present in the opposed cultural systems, as well as their interaction in the context marked by globalization. It is along with this relative new perspective that the topic of the current analysis reads as: *cultural value and representation: a sociolinguistic perspective*.

The present analysis will be conducted leaning on two main theories. On the one hand, we have the speech act theory with an orientation towards the analytic perspectives of Carbaugh (1990), and on the other hand, we have the theory of representation and identity. The objective is to raise awareness on the fact that each culture is valuable on its own, and that, there is no need assessing a different culture on the basis of one's own cultural norm. Such a perspective could help us reconsider the rampant idea of 'ideal culture' and get a clear perspective on the possibility of a soft intercultural communication.

Analyzing attitudes, mainly when it concerns the ways people behave towards their own language or culture in comparison to the way they behave towards the cultural and linguistic assets of another community, necessitate we use the perspectives of macro sociolinguistics. In fact, sociolinguistics studies the correlation between language and society, and it can be seen as a meeting ground between pure linguistics and social sciences such as sociology or anthropology.

Moreover, sociolinguistics it is made of two main trends. One of the trends is micro sociolinguistics which investigates how some structures influence the ways people speak and how social varieties correlate with some sociolinguistic attributes. As for macro sociolinguistics, it is concerned with what a human society does with its languages, what its attitudes are towards its language and towards that of other societies.

Through the agency of language use, the current study aims at analyzing the ways different cultural settings are regarded, assessed and ranked. In other terms, the study will be concerned with what individuals from different cultural background appreciate their cultures, but also the cultures of others. And this is only possible on the basis of language use. Therefore, it is somehow an aspect of analysis of speech act oriented towards the appreciation of cultural values.

Studies of speech acts constitute a subset of what Carbaugh (1990) calls cross-cultural communication studies, to distinguish them from intercultural communication studies. Cross cultural communication studies focus on a particular feature of communication within and across cultures (e.g., choice of address forms, turn-taking conventions...etc). Intercultural communication studies, by contrast, are concerned with a number of features of two cultural systems as they are used in a particular intercultural encounter.

Along with the theory of representation, Jay Gregory S. (1997, p.29) defines cultural representation as: "a complex set of cultural practices in which practice indicates activity that is at once conceptual and physical. Representation refers both to systems of knowledge made out of signs and to material or economic arrangements for the (re)production of knowledge".

The debate on the value and representation of cultures brings out the issue around the difficult recognition of the line of value that dominated cultures conceal in the eyes of the dominant cultures, and therefore, the belittling through stereotypes from which members of dominated cultures particularly suffer. However, how does the term value become so crucial in intercultural relations? Will it be indicated to speak of the term value leaving apart the concept of

² idem

representation? is it not the fight for positionality that feeds the outstanding taste for cultural opposition, and by the same token, the taste for cultural conflicts? These are the different questions to analyze in the trend of the current analysis.

I- Defining values and Representation

Value is a transversal concept which is visible in all the domains of life, particularly in scientific domains, be them objective sciences, or social sciences. We can even say with Saussure that value constitutes the organizing principle of any system.

The 3rd edition of the Concise Oxford Thesaurus Dictionary (2007, p.903) defines value, in its second and third entries, respectively, as ‘worth’ (usefulness, helpfulness, importance...); and ‘principles’ (ethics moral code, morals, standards, code of behavior). It comes out that value refers to what something ‘costs’; that is, what that thing represents in our personal or subjective understanding. Therefore, analyzing value necessarily transits by utterance modalities, but which are here, specifically subjective or appreciative modalities. According Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980) appreciative modalities otherwise called affective adjectives express, at the same time, property of the element at stake, as well an emotional reaction of the speaker. Appreciative modalities cover at the same time axiological and non-axiological evaluative terms which are most often expressed by means of adjectives. As for non-axiological evaluative adjectives (axiological entails what concerns value), they are those which imply a quantitative or qualitative evaluation of the element, without referring to the value of the element, as well as an affective commitment of the speaker.

The term value is perceived as the capacity of an individual or a community to achieve progress or development. In fact, a general perception of the term value consists in perceiving a state or work toward positivity. With regards to human societies, the term value is appreciated on the basis of the living standard of individuals, technology, science and knowledge. For instance, Norbert Elias referring to the era of the renaissance, talks about the walk toward civilization³. However, relative to the value of a social group, various entities can be referred to. Amongst other things we may have democracy, education, religion. To these social values, should be added the respect of human right.

A more recent conception of the social value, with an orientation to societal development, comprises tolerance and by the same token, the acceptance of difference. In fact, tolerance is perceived as one of the central values which takes its source from the *Renaissances* ideology. It (tolerance) represents the core of the intellectual development as it has enabled the conception of another world beyond the one imposed by the Christian religion (Goody, 2004, p.6-7). This first binary conception of the world has brought about the notion of laicity. Outside the world of religion, tolerance has allowed to differentiating what is religious from what is not. Even within the world of religion the same term tolerance has helped construct the dividing and relative line of acceptance between the Christian world and the world of Islam.

The acknowledgement of difference between entities has been beneficial for science, as it somehow allows the perception of the existence and relative acceptance of various possibilities. As illustration; Goody (2004, p.7) talks about the controversy between Huxley and bishop Wilberforce on the Darwinism in the 19th C. what is specific in the handling of the term ‘social value’ is that it targets the future of the history of mankind, and more specifically, the future of specific cultures. In

³ In Jack Goody, 2004 p.6

fact, acknowledging differences among individuals is to acknowledge the necessary condition of what should be known as *humanism*. *Humanism* refers in my analysis to the consideration of all individuals, and by the same token, the consideration of all societies, in their specificities.

In recent days, *humanism* is often looked on as implying the recently conceived notion of globalization. In a former work, I have indicated that, more and more the world today is conceived as a global entity within which it has become almost impossible for any country to survive independently from others. Based on this deep humanitarian security principle, the first gist of globalization would be to gather people from different cultural backgrounds in a space whereby the problem of one becomes the problem of others, a space where individuals or groups of individuals would share equal rights and duties, thanks to the solidarity they are supposed to share (Sekongo, 2019, p.433). But globalization appears as a space within which every single culture is called to check its own value, in the sense of assessing it, not without assessing the value of others in terms of what it or they bring(s) to this planetary village (Sekongo, 2019, p.431).

Unfortunately, globalization is often confused with '*westernization*'; that is the valorization of western cultures, considered as references. The consideration of western cultures as models is relative to the writing tradition of their cultures, a tradition which had played an important role in the techno-scientific development of these cultures. This consideration becomes crucial when reference is made to democracy, and mainly when democracy is considered as a universal value of which, the western society is the original guarantor. It is certainly in this perspective that, adopting the post-structuralist idiom, Geertz (1982) views culture as "an assemblage of texts", forgetting the fact that, as Franson Manjali (1998) well puts it, 'culture is often spoken of as belonging to a transcendental realm of ideas and programs of action, detached from its contexts of experiential creation. Franson Manjali (1998) will even go further to state that:

This is not entirely surprising since the cognitive parameters of culture are easily available for discursive purposes, while its experiential bases lie buried under thick crusts of apparently ideal constructions such as myths, folktales, etc. which squeeze out the rawness of experience in favor of the popularly evaluated and historically accumulated narrative forms.

However, it is worth mentioning that the western culture is only a particular type of culture, with its specific values. Moreover, the conception of *humanism*, varies along with the specificity of the culture (Goody, p9). Specific allusion to a society will call on an analysis of the dynamics of the referred culture. Along with value, 'culture constitutes a treasure of signification and a matrix of meaning, which imposes to the individual to invest himself as organizer of the relation between he and himself, as well as the relation between he and other members of the society' (Diet, 2010, p41). In fact, the reference to a specific cultural value inscribes within the dynamics of referential bounds which take their origin from the singular history of individuals and their cultural practices as well as their belonging groups. Indeed, a given culture takes its value along with the group, the continent, the country and the race it belongs to.

Moreover, depending on who is speaking, assessing the value of a culture, an individual may give in accurate words what this culture actually is, or, he may portray in negative words or even hide the actual value of the referred culture.

As we can see talking about the value of an element is to representing the psychic image of what that element calls into our mind. However, what to define the concept of representation?

Representation sounds like the reproduction of a reality. It is conceived as an imitation of the real which accompanies what we see or feel. For Laplantine (1999, p.86) representation calls for the transcendence of the object. For, it stresses the postulates of the reference as center. From a purely linguistic standpoint, representation implies the material character of language, as language will serve to represent ideas in the process of communication. In fact, amongst the six functions of language, two of them respond to the idea of representation. There are the referential function and the expressive function.

In the referential function, linguistic signs are used to refer directly, that is, they are concerned with the literal meaning. As for the expressive or affective function, it is used to represent our feelings and attitude, as speakers. The expressive function of language is concerned with the subjective meaning. As we can see, language signs are used to represent the reality of object or ideas, though the reality of these signs of language is doubtful.

The concept of representation has been of interest for social sciences and it has highly been used to account for the difference between social classes. Representation of social classes is rendered by means of the well-known concept of social representation along which the notion of social classes takes all its importance. Along with this classification, there would be the famous notion of social stratification. Social stratification divides society into classes. It is a well-known notion which would be of interest for social sciences, mainly sociolinguistics, a linguistic field which is at the junction of linguistics and social sciences. For sociolinguistics, the study of social classes is so much important in the sense that it helps analyze the phenomenon of linguistic variation along with social classes. For anthropology, the concept of representation will help distinguish between various cultures, in the view of stressing what, in their functional systems, is specific to these cultures.

Studies on representational systems have always opened up to the question of cultural specificities. In fact, 'representation' entails what can be referred to as a description or physical depiction of an entity. It supposes a strong adequation between the sign and what it is supposed to represent. But the problem with the notion of representation, mainly along with the way it is used, is that representation which is normally objective, strongly depends on the subjectivity of individuals. As such, representation has become an unfaithful photocopy of the entity which it is supposed to faithfully represent. It is most often a description which always implies an implicit will, a description along with the way we want a person or something to be understood. We can quote with Sacks quoting Einstein who states that:

*Les entités psychiques (values) qu'il me semble que j'utilise comme éléments de pensée dans les problèmes que j'essaie de résoudre m'apparaissent sous la forme de certains signes et sous la forme d'images plus ou moins claires qui peuvent être reproduites et combinées par l'effet de la volonté"*⁴ Ameisen (2013, p.223)

It comes out that to represents is to depict along with a personal appreciation, that is the value we assign to an entity be it an object, an individual, a thought, a speech community, a society

⁴ The psychic entities (values) that I seem to use as elements of thought in the problem I am trying to solve appear to me in the form of some signs and in the form of more or less clear images that can be reproduced and combined by the effect of will. (My translation)

or a culture.....etc. For instance, John Locke (1561) described black people as “beast who have no houses, they are also people without head having mouths and their eyes in their breast”⁵. Along with this quotation, it transpires that the representation of an entity depends on the value we assign to it.

The Brentano school of descriptive psychology analyses value in terms of psychic phenomena (judgments, affects) derived by simple association. However, for this school, before explaining, that is, describing what is going on in the consciousness (in the sense of why do we have such or such idea, and how do other ideas associate to build a judgment or an affect?) we first of all classify psychic phenomena according to their nature and then describe their internal composition from their simple elements, that is, their representation (Gallerand 2013, p.35). Therefore, it seems that there exists in human a “*sense of value*”, the same way they are endowed with the senses of touch, sight, taste, without forgetting the sense of balance which allow to seeing two things sharing or not the same value (Ameisen, 2013, p.235).

II- Relationship between value and representation

Along with the definitions of value and representation, we notice a strict relationship between the two concepts. In fact, value and representation mutually imply. We cannot refer to value without bypassing representation; all the same, we cannot speak about representation without referring to value. This relationship between the two concepts takes form in the language structuring process; that is, language performance. In fact, the Aristotelian “*sprachtheorie*” indicates that the main function of language is to express or to exteriorize what is lived internally in the consciousness; that are, acts (representations, judgments) psychic states (emotions, feelings). In other terms, the finality of language is to allow the expression of psychic phenomena such as representations, judgments, feelings and decisions (Gallerand 2013, p.36).

As we can see, language allows us to see through the eyes of another person (Ameisen, 2013, p.225). To cope with the topic, it can be stated that language allows to somehow have an insight on the value of what an entity represents for someone else. But learning from the eyes of another person, or even appreciating an element by oneself may lead to a plurality of appreciation of the same reality. In fact, the plurality of individuals entails a diversity of sensitivity. One of the consequences of the manifestation of the plurality of sensitivities along the notions of representation and value is the advent of cultural clashes.

III- Culture and the manifestation of representation

Culture is a set of beliefs customs, habits, ways and values shared by a group of individuals. But the term culture in itself is ambiguous, for, it covers at the same time what should be considered as the ‘inside’ of the concerned culture; that is what is considered as part of the culture. And by the same token, for the inside to be more salient, the ‘outside’ should exist. In fact, an account of a specific cultures implicitly implies the existence of other cultural settings different from the one at stake.

Relative to the existence of various cultures, there exist cultural frontiers. Cultural frontiers can be defined as “cultural borders which are historically constructed and socially organized within

⁵ CHIMAMANDA Ngozi Adichie, 2009, “The danger of the single story” conference TED de 2009. Entre différences culturelles, sous-représentation littéraire des noirs et stigmatisation des africains

rules and regulations that enable particular identities, individual capacities and social forms” (Awkward 1995, p.9). Therefore, culture is a space within which a group of individuals expresses its identity. In fact, acts of self-referentiality to locate origin, posit affinity or even recognize connections (Awkward 1995, p.15) are acts of identities which a group will always try to preserve. But in the politics of positionality, most cultural powerful groups will always depict dominated groups in dismissive misnaming resulting in invisibility and exclusion. In this fight for positionality one of the strategies to better subdue others is known as stereotyping. In her presentation on the danger of the single story during the TED conference 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) deals with Stereotypes. According to her,

The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes, it's not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story becomes the only story. It's impossible to engage with a place or a person without engaging with all the stories of that place or that person. The consequence of that single story is this: it robs peoples' dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar⁶.

From this quotation it comes out that the expression of one's culture goes along with the necessary expression of self-position. By the same token, in the quest for a better position, individuals will indulge in debasing acts such as discrimination, exclusion or rejection *vis-à-vis* other cultures. But what is paradoxical in the fight for cultural positions is that, no culture is strong enough to escape the debasing characterization on behalf of members from other cultures. In other terms, the same way an alleged civilized culture will negatively portray a so-called less advanced community, the same way individuals from this developing community will find terms to characterize the barbarism of the supposed advanced culture.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, along with what have been said concerning the specificity of each and every culture, it must be understood that culture is a 'social reality which must be adequately grasped, described and represented (Zigmunt Bauman, 2000, p. ix). This idea by Bauman is sound in as much as it favors the simple description of culture, rather than its prescription. In fact, just like language which is its conditional vehicle, culture is natural; and the same way we cannot expect a language to function like a different other language, the same way we should not expect to see a culture to necessarily function according to the norms of another culture.

Besides, culture is not just like a simple system, but it is a system of systems. It is not only a system made of language (which is a system of interconnected elements), but it is also a system made of the society (which is a system organized in hierarchy and attributes). Moreover, all these systems which compose the metasystem of culture function along with the setting; that is, the environment which plays, though not always explicit, an important role in their functioning. In that perspective, every culture begets a kind of civilization and is worthy in its own. The development of some cultures over some others is just a matter of the instrumentalization its composing elements. That is, what have been done of its composing elements. To paraphrase Jakobson (1963 :84) according to whom languages differ not in terms of what it can do, but rather in terms of

^{6 6} CHIMAMANDA Ngozi Adichie, 2009, "The danger of the single story" conference TED de 2009. Entre différences culturelles, sous-représentation littéraire des noirs et stigmatisation des africains

what they must do, I can simply say that a culture is worthy not in terms of what it can do, but by what it must do.

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