

## THE CENTRALITY OF LANGUAGE IN THE INTERCULTURAL INTEGRATION PROCESS

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**Abstract:** *Language can undoubtedly be considered a "cultural universal" in the sense that it is an element of the culture of each company known: its universality, and its nature is radically different from that of any other type of communication that exists between animals, to suggest anthropologists that the very use of language is one of the key features that differentiate humans from other living beings. The linguist and American anthropologist Edward Sapir gave this definition of the nature of language: "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires through a system of voluntarily produced symbols." The derivation of individual dignity from the dignity of a community, of a group and its culture, it would seem inevitably reflect, at least conceptually, the contribution to the individual, to be part of that community, identity and individuality itself. Although in correlation with its broad interpretation to the regions and with the statements of the art.2 Const., The "Republic" art. 9 was sometimes considered expressive of a pluralism of cultural identities "Elevating a fundamental principle of" the protection of linguistic minorities, provided by art. 6 Const., Does not seem to have administered the constitutionalization of a pluralistic nation, a nation of nations. Not only because, often accentuated, in the theories of linguistic and cultural pluralism, the rule of connecting the protection of linguistic minorities with freedom of expression, could recur mentioned the issue of reducing the protection to exclusive freedom of linguistic expression, but because, in the course of the preparatory work of the Constituent Assembly, was expunged the word "ethnic" that, in the original proposal submitted to the Commission of 75, had accompanied the "linguistic minorities", with a choice that, although it is not specifically motivated seemed to have been determined by the need to "limit the protection to minority linguistic and cultural aspect", excluding any reference to nationality, considered more closely reconnected adjective "ethnic".*

**Keywords:** *community, intercultural context, communication*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Instead of analysing the values of each culture in their specific context and accepting a pluralism of civilizations, each characterized by an organic unity completely integrated through the different forms of institution-building processes, directly linked to the ideological and emotional substrate, something that makes every culture a concrete embodiment of the ideal towards which every society strives, albeit achieved in accordance with concrete historical circumstances, for a very long time societies have been fraught with prejudices and stereotypes spawned from their own inner cultures which have paved the way to the affirmation of the superiority of only one particular system of thought, of a lifestyle or a religion over all the others.

The behavioural patterns conveyed by our culture from one generation to the next, makes us build referential schemes that encompass social norms, trends, beliefs, conceptions, values and

customs which form the basis of our decision-making that leads to action. Sometimes, all this prevents the individual, bearer of a microculture, from reaching out more widely and interacting with others because of the alleged superiority or inferiority of his/her own culture or only because of the lack of common points of reference, as often happens with immigrants who adopt self-marginalization strategies in order to staunchly defend their culture of origin or even strip themselves of every trait of their autochthonous culture, thus giving up their historical identity.

Applying the tenets of a hardcore ethnocentrism, those societies that are more directly affected by the phenomenon of immigration, have implemented in the past the strategy of compensatory pedagogy in order to eradicate the cultural models proper of the home societies of the families of youths and children, without even trying to understand the values those individuals bear, which allow them, as it is with anyone, to express their individuality to the fullest.

Other countries characterized by a more complex culture have, on the other hand, come to accept the possibility of a cultural pluralism without demanding full integration, allowing within the common boundaries of tolerance a different way to live values, as they acknowledge that even within the same population a trend towards cultural homogenisation, as strong as it can be, still leaves individuals enough margin for their own choices.

## 2. THE CENTRALITY OF LANGUAGE WITHIN HUMAN ACTIVITIES

The obligation to respect the fundamental rights of human beings, which today is taking hold within the national legal and political system, as well as in the framework of international relations, has become the linchpin of the humanocentric revolution also because it affects school and extracurricular education and human rights (see Spinelli, 1991; Bosna, 1993; Ifsol, 1994; Orefice, 1997; Sirna Terranova, 1997; Belpiede, 2002; Castiglioni, 2002; Demetrio & Favaro, 2002; Fadda, 2002; Andolfi, 2003; Moro, 2003 etc.). In this system, whose very core is represented by the individual and his inalienable rights, the mother language takes on a fundamental significance, alongside religion, artistic heritage and traditions.

Therefore we're going to talk about the cultural identity as the driving force behind that social interaction whose vehicle cannot but be the language, a "cultural universal" that represents an element of the culture of every known society. Its universality, and its nature profoundly different from whatever form of communication that exists among animals, has brought anthropologists to the conclusion that one of the fundamental characteristics that set humans apart from other living beings is precisely the use of language. The American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir (1921) has given the following definition on the nature of language:

Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.

First of all, this definition highlights the symbolic nature of language: it can be defined as a system of symbols through which experiential data is categorized and communicated within a certain society or social group. The bond between vocal symbols (and their graphic representation, i.e. the writing) and the "objects" they refer to is obviously arbitrary, in the way that there is no "necessary" or

"natural" relationship that binds the meanings with the verbal meanings that represent them. Ultimately, the verbal language is a "code", meaning it is a system made up of symbols, of the rules that combine and organize them and the rules of correspondence between these and the meanings. Another key element of the anthropological approach to language problems consists of the fact that the ability to communicate by means of a language is not instinctive, but is the result of a learning process. From a biological point of view human beings are born equipped with a series of organs, as mentioned by Sapir, which represent the "predisposition" factor of individuals to speak, although they become able to generate meaningful symbols only after a long cultural learning process. The centrality of language in the cultural transmission process, and its double significance of both "instrument" and "object" essential for the enculturation process, are clearly expressed by Linton (1945:32):

Language is an acquired and transferred form of behaviour and the individual has to learn it just like it does with all the other elements of the culture he is part of; however, it is one of the first elements to be learned and, once acquired, becomes in itself a key to unlock the entire cultural world.

The Italian anthropologist Carlo Tullio-Altan has brought into focus the important role that language plays in the anthropological studies, highlighting in particular some of the language functions in the context of cultural processes. According to Tullio-Altan (1983), language constitutes the fundamental system of symbols of human groups through which the system of values of a given society can be transmitted and organized in a coherent and uniform way. These basic characteristics of language entail other important functions:

a) It allows the communication of messages among individuals, language forms the nexus through which a human group is bound together, and is also the instrument that enables the organization of common activities as well as the transmission of culture from one generation to the next;

b) language plays a fundamental role in the formation of the personality of individuals.

A more specific sociolinguistic perspective offers, on the other hand, the broad empiric research of Basil Bernstein (1971) on the relation between symbolic systems and social structure. Although Bernstein envisages a dialectical relationship between social structure and language,

asserting that the linguistic forms can become relatively independent and modify the social structure by which they have been generated, even if they are originally linked to a given social order, he nonetheless focuses his attention on the societies and the social relations as generators of sociolinguistic codes. Bernstein's theory is based on the concept of "sociolinguistic code" viewed as a set of rules that govern the linguistic options of speakers when making a choice about lexical and syntactic alternatives with regard to the organization of the units of speech. In modern industrial societies, of which Bernstein speaks, exist two fundamental types of sociolinguistic codes: a "restricted code" characterized by a high degree of predictability of the linguistic options as its use is based on a set of knowledge and values which are deeply rooted in the social group, something that greatly reduces the need of the speaker to verbally explicate his intentions; the "elaborated code", which allows a much broader range of linguistic options, is characterized by a highly elaborated and complex verbal production able to express individuality and difference, leaving little to no room for what is implied or taken for granted. The use of one code or the other is not related to the ability of the individual speaker, but is the consequence of a different structure of social relations within which the child's primary socialization and the social distribution of knowledge linked to the concept of class society occurred.

### 3. LANGUAGE REFLECTED IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS

The right to a cultural identity reflected in the choice of the language is guaranteed by many international legal codes on human rights (see Gruppo di lavoro, 1991; Chiarelli, 2010; Vera Feloro, 2014). The almost six thousand existent languages form a coherent system of values which accurately reflect the cultural diversity of humanity preserved and promoted on a national and international level. The *Charter of the United Nations* (1945) affirms the faith in the fundamental human rights, the dignity and value of the human being, the equal rights for men and women and, consequently, the right to a cultural identity. The protection of the mother language is thus implicitly recognized. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), Article 2 (1) clearly sets out that human rights are guaranteed by the law, and so is the right to a cultural identity, indispensable if we

want to avoid revolt as people's last resort against tyranny and oppression. Article 2 (2) provides that human rights apply to every person, regardless, among others, of the language. There are objective moral norms according to which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is applicable regardless of the individual's origins, language, colour of skin, religion or any other element that defines his/her culture. If we come to recognize and accept the ideal possibility of a cultural pluralism, however independent from historical realizations, which makes us realize the changeability of man in time and space, then the acculturation process, acknowledging differences, must adopt appropriate strategies for overcoming them without deeming them as inferior, but viewing them as an objective value, a sort of amniotic fluid in which the life of the mind can easily thrive.

The International *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), Art. 29 (1) (b) (c), sets out that the child's education process must instil the respect for the parents, and in this new dimension of a common European culture and civilization, all this can and should take place in and through the school, a flexible and stimulating institution whose role is the transmission and the elaboration of culture through pragmatic strategies that lead to the conscious acquisition of that European culture in which we have been immersed for a very long time (e.g. music, painting, literature, technology etc.), often without being aware of it.

Education must also instil in the child the respect for the human rights and the fundamental freedoms, as well as for the principles laid down in the *Charter of the United Nations* (1945). School education is a subject of capital importance for UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It is essential for the use of the mother tongue to be encouraged by the school education systems from an early age.

Recent studies clearly show how the teaching of the mother language alongside the official national language help children to perform better at school and stimulates their cognitive development and their study skills. The protection of the mother language is expressively enshrined in the Constitution of the Italian Republic (2003) and its fundamental rights, namely those principles and guidelines by which the Italian legal, political and social order must abide. In fact art. 3 (1) states that "all citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law without distinction, among others, of language". Therefore language cannot be used

as a pretext for discriminations of any kind (see also Pizzorusso, 1975; Cerri, 1993; Zincone, 2000). Art. 6 of the same Constitution sets out that “The Republic protects linguistic minorities by means of appropriate measures”.

Although in view of the overbroad interpretation in line with Italy’s different regional realities and the wording of article 2 of the Constitution, the “Republic”, defined in article 9 as an expression of pluralism of cultural identities “elevated to fundamental principle of the Community law” (Lorusso, 2002), which entails the protection of linguistic minorities, provided for by art. 6 of the Constitution, seems to have failed to lay down the constitutionalisation process for a pluralistic nation, i.e. of a nation of nations. Not just because, as it is often the case, theorizations about cultural and linguistic pluralism, which have the tendency to put in the foreground the link between the protection of linguistic minorities and the freedom of speech and expression (Mastronardi, 2002), might raise the debated issue of a reduced protection in favour of the freedom of expression and choice of language, but also because, during the preparatory work of the Constituent assembly, the adjective “ethnic”, which in the original Commission proposal had always accompanied the “linguistic minorities”, was expunged. A choice that, although not expressively motivated, seems to have been determined by the need to “restrict the protection of minorities to its linguistic and cultural aspect”, thus excluding any reference to the national origin, which is more strictly connected to the adjective “ethnic” (Mossouliè *et al.*, 1997).

For UNESCO, language takes on a global importance, becoming an *Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Alongside a visible heritage exists, in fact, an invisible one, bound to the former and in a certain way, a prerequisite of it: it is the Intangible Cultural Heritage, made of uses, traditional cultural customs and, of course, a people’s language. The Convention for the protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage makes explicit reference to the languages as vehicles of this heritage. It contributes to the preservation of the linguistic diversity, a pressing issue considering how rapid the process of language death is, an average of two per month. This affects particularly the indigenous populations, to whom the defence of the mother language is crucial for the preservation of their cultural identity and heritage. The inclusion of language in those areas associated with the “intangible cultural heritage” is guaranteed by

article 2 of the Convention for the protection of the intangible cultural heritage.

Language difficulties represent the main obstacle for the immigrants’ integration process in the host country, as they are the major cause for incomprehension and misunderstandings between the autochthonous and the newly arrived. As a matter of fact, interpreting a new language, as we have come to understand, is not merely translating and transferring meanings from one language code to another; but rather consist of “interpreting a culture, i.e. understanding the values, rules, mindsets, different lifestyles peculiar to a people”.

The issues of linguistic diversity and bilingualism are not new to the Italian social and educational context, although they have taken centre stage in the last years due to the increase of the immigration phenomenon which tends more and more towards stabilization, as demonstrated by the increase in applications for family reunification. Bilingualism is the most common situation for immigrants and also the most desirable, as the acquisition of the language of the host country, also called “second language”, meets the basic need to communicate in order to ensure survival and avoid social self-exclusion and marginalization. However, the acquisition of an excellent command of the new language is contingent on social “contexts” and the work of “mediators” who should help the immigrants understand and introject the set of values and the basic rules of the society and culture of which the language is an expression.

The school is defined as “*the place of multiple mediations*” since education and the pedagogical action itself are a mediation, i.e. a translation, and interpretation and exchange between subjects placed in asymmetric position (educator and educatee); it is that physical “space” where to realize the language project that will favour the integration of foreign students and their families. The inclusion of immigrant children in childcare services and primary schools represents without a doubt one of the first “forced” contacts of immigrant families with the language and culture of the host country; in fact, parents are invited on several occasions to participate in the educational project of their children, contrary to what they were used to in their country of origin.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion of this brief analysis, we can state that the derivation of the individual dignity

from the dignity associated with a community, a group and its culture, seems to inevitably reflect the fact that, at least from a conceptual point of view, the identity and the individuality are conferred upon the individual by that same community.

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