Article proposal
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Identity, culture and intimacy – Stereotypes in Everyday Life

Name: Fred Dervin
Status: Prof. Dr.
Affiliation: University of Helsinki, Finland
E-mail: freder@utu.fi

Short biodata: Dr Fred Dervin is Professor of Multicultural Education at the University of Helsinki (Finland). His research interests include the sociology of multiculturalism; academic mobility and migration; language learning and teaching; the use of lingua francas and their impact on the identification of intercultural couples; anthropology and intercultural education; research methods for working on identity. He has organized many international events and published extensively on these topics (cf. http://users.utu.fi/freder/).

Title: Do intercultural couples “see culture everywhere”? Case studies from couples who share a lingua franca in Finland and Hong Kong

Abstract: Even if the concepts of identity and culture have been questioned by scholars for quite a while now, especially in relation to their “solid” understanding (Bauman 2001; Baumann 2001), they remain central in everyday discourses on interculturalism and the phenomenon of “seeing culture everywhere” as analysed by Briedenbach & Nyíri (2009) still very much present.

In this article, my focus is on 5 intercultural couples in Finland and Hong Kong. Many studies have been published on this type of population and they often tend to adopt a “culture-alibi” and/or differentialist approach (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003; Piller 2002; Dervin 2010). The specificity of the couples here is that they share a lingua franca to communicate, i.e. a language of which none of the partners are ‘native speakers’. My approach is constructivist and is interested in how the couples use stereotypes and differentialist discourses on cultures and other identity markers to talk about ‘intercultural couplehood’. Does the fact that the partners share a lingua franca with a ‘different’ other-through which none of them can claim that they are ‘representatives of the culture’ attached to the language-alter the discourses of “seeing culture everywhere” that are reported in most studies on ‘intercultural couplehood’? As lingua francas are hybrid and unstable par excellence, are there signs that the couples are aware of the fact that cultural differences are productions rather than fixed products? I shall show how stereotypes in such intimate relations are produced, negotiated and also questioned by the partners during research interviews, and in relation to what.

Keywords: intercultural couplehood, Finland, Hong Kong, culturalism, lingua franca
Do intercultural couples “see culture everywhere”? Case studies from couples who share a lingua franca in Finland and Hong Kong

Fred Dervin, University of Helsinki, Finland

Introduction

It has now become a truism to say that physical and virtual mobility and migration have accelerated in the 21st Century (Pieterse 2004). One of the most notable consequences lies in the increase in the chances of people having a partner from abroad (Karis & Killian 2009; Heikkilä & Yeoh 2011). At first sight, what will be referred to as intercultural couplehood in this article is not a new phenomenon. History has witnessed many instances of such couples: Moses and Zipporah, Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius, Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, Pocahontas and John Rolfe, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, etc. Ragnhild Johnsrud Zorgati’s latest book Pluralism in the Middle Ages: Hybrid Identities, Conversion, and Mixed Marriages in Medieval Iberia (2011) demonstrates distinctly how much intercultural couplehood has accompanied world history. But it is also important to bear in mind that intercultural – and “ interracial” – couplehood has not always been perceived positively, especially in modern times. As such, Nazi Germany banned interracial marriage, South Africa also banned it during the apartheid era and intercultural and interracial marriages were illegal in most areas of the United States until 1967. Even today intercultural couplehood can still very much be a taboo (Dervin 2011).

According to applied linguist Ingrid Piller, who has worked extensively on intercultural couples, what makes intercultural couplehood special today is the fact “discourses of love, romance, gender and sexuality, have become enmeshed with cultural discourses. Culture is made relevant in the emotional lives of many people and has come to inflect love and desire” (2011: 113). As such ‘doing’ intercultural couplehood tends to be depicted positively and put into scene in global media, with e.g. a large production of films about intercultural relationships (Ae Fond Kiss, Chocolate, The Lover, My beautiful Launderette, Mississippi Masala, etc.). Therefore one can easily assume that the doxa or common sense on intercultural couplehood is very much a postmodern phenomenon, which, as we shall see, tends to depend on the old, tired and problematic concept of culture in research worlds and beyond.

Actually there are many other labels in the literature used to talk about intercultural couples, which might reflect specific emphases. The Francophone literature uses “mixed couples/marriages”, “domino couples” (Kuoh-Moukoury 2000), “binational unions”, “exogamy”, etc. In English, an even larger variety has been identified: “multicultural/mixed marriages”, “intermarriage”, “ interracial couples”, “ interlingual families”, “cross-border couples”… By using “intercultural”, I place my work within a potential danger zone as the notion of the ‘intercultural’ is polysemic and sometimes used as an empty signifier to refer to the ‘Other’ (Abdallah-Pretceille 1986, 2003; Barbot & Dervin 2011; Dervin 2011). In this article, I am more interested in the inter-of the intercultural rather than the -cultural. Most studies on intercultural couplehood have relied heavily on national cultures to explain the “challenges” that intercultural couples encounter. Waldman and Rubalcava’s 2005 study illustrates well this flaw when they write that “The mutual provision of affect attunement becomes more
problematic and difficult in intercultural marriages because culture plays such a
significant role in the construction of emotion” (ibid.: 236). My understanding of
culture is not as narrow and encompasses many other elements such as language,
generation, gender, professional occupation, social status, etc. Also I see
‘intercultural’ interaction as a co-constructivist and negotiating phenomenon, during
which people have to put themselves into scene and potentially manipulate the other
by e.g. putting a generic national culture on the table (Abdallah-Pretceille 1986). This
is where the notion of stereotypes becomes central as it is through them that many
intercultural couples negotiate their identity, intimacy, relationships and every day
lives (Piller 2011; Dervin 2011).

1. Intercultural couplehood without culture?

Researchers note increasingly that we know very little about intercultural couples
because there is not one single category of such couples but many and varied types of
intercultural couples with difference experiences (Karlis & Killian 2009: xix). Yet this
is ambiguous in most recent studies, where, on the one hand, one can identify
criticisms of the overused and abused concept of culture for being too generic, solid
and static (e.g. Bystydzienski 2011; Cools 2011), but on the other, national culture
remains one of the most salient explanatory factors of the “challenges” that
intercultural couplehood triggers. Let us note at this stage that the dei ex machina of
challenges and difficulties are often used to work on intercultural couples, as if there
were a natural link between them. It is also noteworthy that very few researchers have
actually questioned the dichotomy of “intra-” and “inter-” cultural couples as it
appears to them superficial today (Falicov 1995; Piller 2002; Varro 2003; Cools
2011). As such any couple faces having to negotiate their everyday lives, their
identity as a couple and create their own habits, manners, behaviours, traditions, etc.
Another issue is that of labels: do intercultural couples see themselves as
intercultural? What about the people around them (close family, friends,
aquaintances, etc.)? Do researchers – but also politicians and decision-makers –
 impose these labels on them? Abdallah-Pretceille (2006: 480) reminds us that “No
fact is intercultural at the outset, nor is the quality of intercultural an attribute of an
object, it is only intercultural analysis that can give it this character”. In her 2001
novel Mole, The Cappucino Years, Sue Townsend reveals how such unstable labels as
intercultural or in her case mixed marriages can be. The main character, Adrian
Mole, tells us about a phone call he received from an English TV producer:

A researcher from Kilroy rang this morning to ask me if I would appear
on the show tomorrow morning to talk about “mixed marriages”. I
pointed out to her that my African wife was divorcing me. “Due to racial
intolerance ?” she asked, sounding excited. “No”, I replied. “Due to her
intolerance of my personal habits”. She said they were doing a show in
November called, “My partner’s habits are driving me mad”. Would I be

As can be seen, upon hearing that the problematic situation of Mole’s couple does not
derive from “racial intolerance” (which could also read as cultural intolerance, cf.
Balibar’s 1991 argument that we are increasingly experiencing racism without race),
the normality of intimate relations emerges.
Yet there remains in research what I call a “romanticization” of intercultural couplehood: the couples differ from other couples and should be considered as such (cf. e.g. Cools, 2011). I propose to examine several cases of intercultural couplehood without culture in this article, i.e. intercultural couplehood beyond static and solid representations of national cultures and identities.

In order to do so, I am looking at how intercultural couples from Finland and Hong Kong put their couples into scene, through references to their “culture” and another important identity marker: language. We will also be looking at who contributes to these constructions. In their book, Seeing Culture Everywhere, Briedenbach & Nyíri (2009) explain that “Today’s world is a world shaped by a consciousness of culture that penetrates everyday life as well as matters of state in an unprecedented way. Culture – or rather, cultural difference – is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions”. Culture is thus everywhere, it explains and justifies everything, especially when we talk about the ‘intercultural’ and the ‘Other’. In their study on Mexico-American couples, which tends to rely a lot on the concept of culture in its limited understanding, Molina, Estrada & Burnett (2004: 140) still note the omnipresence of what they call “cultural camouflage” in intercultural couples’ discourses. Cultural camouflage corresponds to what Abdallah-Pretceille (1986) calls Culture-Alibi, i.e. a stereotype which justifies a habit, a way of thinking, traditions, etc. Molina et al. (ibid.) give the following example: “Hey Honey, sorry I am late, but I am Latino”.

In this article, I argue that this should be analysed as a construction, as a strategy hiding a specific objective (a potential excuse here) and not as a “Truth” (Latinos are late so you have to accept it). It also means that the context of interaction should be taken into account: who is present? Where are the interlocutors? What language(s) are they speaking? What is the role of the researcher? Etc. (cf. Brubaker 2004; Howarth 2002: 17; Gillespie & Cornish 2009). A “Truth” about a culture is always constructed with and for an Other and thus requires to be examined as such. For the anthropologist Alban Bensa (2010: 36-37, my translation), we should “free ourselves from the absurd idea that actors are full and complete participants in their own world without examining their confusion, their questioning, their relative distance from what they live. Anthropology should not drown the will of others in that naive belief that confuses form and substance, metaphor and concept, what signifies and what is signified”. This translates in Piller (2000) as “it might be much more useful to ask how cultural and national identity is ‘done,’ i.e. how it is constructed in ongoing interactions”. I believe that working on stereotypes in intimate intercultural relationships should rely on this principle. A stereotype is a representation, which emerges in interaction and is thus unstable (Bar-Tal 1997).

2. About the study

This study is based on interviews with 5 intercultural couples in Finland and Hong Kong, which will serve as case studies. The choice of these two contexts is based on my own professional and personal contacts. I am not interested here in comparing these contexts, as this would not make sense. Discourses on intercultural couplehood, and especially how this notion is constructed through the use of stereotypes, are my main emphasis. Unlike previous studies, this article examines intercultural couples that share a lingua franca (English) and do not speak the other partner’s language(s).
(or very little) (on the concept of lingua franca, cf. Dakhlia 2010 or Dervin (ed.) 2010). This is an important aspect of the study as sharing a lingua franca in intimate relations can have an impact on “politics of identity”, i.e. the fluctuation of identity markers which are co-constructed and negotiated in interaction. Also, the use of lingua francas modifies the “power game” and hierarchy in intercultural communication: none of the speakers can claim the superiority of the so-called native speaker neither can they serve as specialists of the “culture(s)” attached to the language they share. This makes this context of study quite appealing for the study of stereotypes and representations.

The data is derived from separate interviews with 3 couples in Hong Kong and one focus group with 2 couples in Finland. The couples were found through Snowball sampling (Frey et al. 2000). For the Hong Kong interviews (Alain, Jean and Sophie), I had access to one partner of two couples and both partners for the remaining couple. The foreign partner was French in the three cases. As to the couples in Finland (H(usband)1-H2, W(ife)1-W2), the male partners were from Africa in both cases. The partners all shared English as a lingua franca in Hong Kong and Finland. The interviews in Hong Kong took place in French while the focus group in Finland was in English.

3. Discourses on “culture”

Let us start with the concept of culture: Do the couples see culture everywhere? If so how is it constructed?

The Hong Kong couples were asked the direct question: “Are cultures presented as problematic in the studied couples?”. It can be argued that by confronting them with this question, the couples were influenced in their answers. Yet it is interesting to note that they answered negatively to it in a more or less coherent or precise manner.

For Sophie, the question represents a “fake problem”:

non franchement c’est un faux problème à partir du moment où on parle y a pas de problème même si y en a un qui va dire ça c’est blanc et l’autre ça c’est gris non y a toujours un moment où il faut faire des compromis et il faut être patient parce qu’on parle pas tous les deux anglais parfaitement et il faut accepter et ses limites et les limites de l’autre

no frankly it is a fake problem because, as long as we talk to each other, there is no problem. Even if one of us says this is white and the other this is grey no there is always a time when we have to make compromises and we have to be patient because we don’t speak English perfectly and we have to accept our own limits and the others’

In Alain’s reply, there is a slight contradiction:

certaines manières de… ben oui… on a des niveaux différents, aussi bien sûr notre manière de voir les choses d’analyser une situation ben par exemple on regarde la télé il se passe un truc on va pas l’analyser de la même façon puis ce qui est intéressant c’est qu’on en discute ben ça je trouve ça extrêmement
enrichissant et puis sur le quotidien oui sur des habitudes quotidiennes ouais certainement aussi
certain manners of... well... we have different levels, but also the way we see things, the way we analyse a situation, for example we are watching telly and something happens we won’t analyse it the same way then what makes it interesting is that we talk about it I find this to be extremely enriching and then about daily life well yeah daily habits yes certainly there too

Alain does not use the word culture but talks about “manners” at the beginning of his turn and then about “daily habits”. Later on in the interview, I asked him if his couple manipulates each other by means of their cultural belongings from time to time. He answered:

oui chez moi on fait pas comme ça, non étonnamment non c’est jamais arrivé c’est jamais arrivé mais j’ai du mal moi-même à cerner quels sont qu’est-ce qui fait que je suis français ? quelles sont les valeurs qui devraient être présentes chez un Français ? euh j’ai du mal à le définir je ne renie pas du tout mon origine française mais pour moi ça répond pas à des critères extrêmement précis et j’ai de la chance on n’a jamais eu ce genre de discussion je dis j’ai de la chance parce que c’est un peu stérile parce que c’est pas comme ça qu’on va faire vivre un couple

yes in my country we don’t do that, actually it has never happened it has never happened but I find it difficult myself to understand what is it that makes me French? What are my values that should be present in a Frenchman? I have difficulties in defining I do not renounce my French origins at all but for me it doesn’t answer to extremely precise criteria and I am lucky as we have never had this type of discussion I say I am lucky because it is a bit sterile because it is not the way a couple will survive...

His answer shows an ‘open’ and non-reifying understanding of intercultural relations and of the concept of culture. He seems to be aware not only of ‘cultural camouflage’ and the attached stereotypes (cf. the direct quote in my country we don’t do that) but also the potential dangers of this phenomenon (it is not the way a couple will survive).

For the third Hong Kong couple, this open way of conceptualising intercultural intimacy is clear from the beginning. In what follows, Jean seems to be constructing what could be considered as a coherent and realistic discourse on intercultural couplehood beyond culture, which he names “the loophole” (échappatoire in French):

I : d’être de deux pays différents ça pose des problèmes ?
J : non je pense que dans une vie de couple y a tellement de facteurs en jeu que les réduire à des problèmes de langues et de cultures c’est un peu rapide quoi c’est une façon facile de régler des problèmes peut-être que inconsciemment j’ai du utiliser au moins ça c’a du me traverser l’esprit mais c’était plutôt l’échappatoire plutôt que d’essayer de comprendra un peu que c’est un peu réducteur quoi mais c’est vrai que malgré ça on peut pas vraiment éviter ces stéréotypes qui sont derrière, qui durent un peu quand on a pas envie de trouver une solution
I: Is the fact that you come from two different countries problematic?
J: no I think that in the life of a couple there are so many factors at play that reducing them to languages and cultures is a bit too quick it is an easy way to settle problems maybe subconsciously I have done this maybe it crossed my mind but it was more like a loophole rather than trying to understand a little bit that it is a bit limiting but it is true that regardless of this you can’t avoid these stereotypes which hide behind, which can last for a while when you don’t want to find a solution.

Jean then gives an example of how these generic, a-contextual, imagined and imaginary elements are used in a humorous manner in his couple:

souvent c’est plutôt une façon un peu ironique pour se moquer de l’un et de l’autre : ah t’es français ah t’es hongkongaise…

it is often a rather ironical way to laugh at each other: ah you are French ah you are from Hong Kong…

Now let us have a look at the Finnish data. Unlike the Hong Kong couples, discourses on culture are not tackled directly, by either the interviewer or the interviewee. Actually, the concept was not identified a single time in the transcription of the focus group. However there was a lot of the discussion centred around the concept of *identity*. In what follows, the couples start exchanging on the fact that the Finnish partners are actually members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (around 6% of the 5-million Finnish population). Wife 2 reacts to her husband labelling wrongly her as a Swede:

H2: Not like I don’t much like lay the emphasis on the fact that she is Finnish or Swedish I think it is ok that she is Swedish
W2: I am not Swedish that is the worst thing you can say I am a Swedish-speaking Finn
H2: yes she is Swedish-speaking Finn but I don’t put too much emphasis on that background I believe that it is only individual attitudes I look at it that way

As in the Hong Kong data, the husband shows an open-minded approach to labelling people: her wife might be Swedish-speaking, i.e. not like the majority in Finland, and yet it does not seem to matter to him. The ‘misunderstanding’ or even stereotype (which is often recycled to denigrate Finland-Swedes in Finland) over the wife being Swedish or Finland-Swedish leads the whole group to discuss the potential differences between Finnish speakers and Finland-Swedes. While husband 2 appeared to move beyond dichotomies in the excerpt supra, both husbands begin detailing general characteristics (Finns are shier, less elegant than Finland-Swedes), in reaction to which, annoyed, one of the wives stresses that “every person is different there are a lot of Finnish speaking people that are different from other Finnish speaking people you can’t say that everybody is the same”. In doing so, she puts into question the stereotypes shared by her husband – and at the same time the other husband’s.

To summarize the findings in this first analytical section, it is quite surprising to note that very little “seeing culture everywhere” is done in the data – as this has always
been the emphasis in most studies on intercultural couplehood (Piller 2011). What is also novel is the fact that some of the couples are aware of the fact that culture can serve as a strategy to manipulate the other. Yet there are few hints, here and there, of solidification of the partners’ groups through the use of stereotypes.

4. Perceptions of the intercultural couples

4.1. Questioning common sense about intercultural couplehood

On several occasions, the couples criticize implicitly or explicitly certain ready-made ideas about intercultural couplehood. We look at the questions of language use and the dichotomy of “intra-” and “inter-” cultural couples in what follows.

In the interviews, the topic of lingua franca use was obviously omnipresent as this was the main emphasis of the study. At the beginning of his interview, Alain reacts to the question “how does it feel to use English as a Lingua Franca with your partner?”.

Alain uses the word *problem* when he introduces the topic of lingua franca use. I asked him then why he had used the word, suggesting that this was interesting and/or potentially limiting. His reaction shows that he reflects on the use of the word but that in fact he had used it automatically, without thinking. In other words, the word is used but it does not actually mean *problem*. Would there be a hidden stereotype here? The idea shared largely by researchers that intercultural couplehood is before all problematic?

In the next excerpt, Jean talks about the use of a common language in his couple:
J: (...) all the people who have a certain relationship share a personal language there are always references to certain situations that the two people can understand, it is quite general

According to Jean, any type of intimate relationship, any couple, creates a “personal language”. Does this mean that he questions the dichotomy of intra vs. intercultural couples? Most probably if we refer back to what he had to say about culture in the previous section. For the doxa, these two types of couples are viewed as very different types of relationships (Cools, 2011).

4.2. Othering the couples in terms of languages rather than culture

Intercultural couplehood, or exogamy, symbolises intimate relationships, which can intrigue and interrogate (Piller 2000). In what follows, I am interested in how the others perceive the couples (friends, family, acquaintances), and how they talk about them. Being lingua franca users, it does not come as a surprise that the others share stereotypes about their language use.

4.2.1. Can they learn each other’s language?

In her interview, Sophie, evokes some “individuals” throughout. These people keep telling her that she will never be able to learn Cantonese correctly (one of Hong Kong’s official languages). She rejects this idea several times in the interview and asserts that one of the reasons why she is willing to learn it properly is to put an end to this misconception. According to her, the Hong Kong context leads to such discourses:

À Hong Kong en fait le problème c’est que quand on parle cantonais y a deux choses en fait y a une espèce d’écran dans la tête des Cantonais qui fait qu’ils se disent ah non étranger impossible de parler cantonais même chose au Japon c’est pareil et y a aussi une autre chose qui fait qu’il y a aussi un autre problème les Hongkongais pensent que si on parle cantonais ils pensent que nous on pense qu’ils n’ont pas assez d’éducation pour qu’ils nous répondent en anglais

In Hong Kong in fact the problem is that when you speak Cantonese there are two things in fact there is some sort of shade in Cantonese people’s heads which makes them say ah no a foreigner impossible to speak Cantonese it was the same in Japan and there’s also another thing which is problematic Hong Kong people think that if you speak Cantonese they think that we think that they are not educated enough so they answer in English

Jean also mentions something similar in his interview:

(…) ce que je regrette un peu c’est que dans l’environnement hongkongais il est assez difficile par exemple pour moi d’apprendre le cantonais parce que les gens ont tendance à utiliser l’anglais pour les étrangers
what I regret a little is that in this Hong Kong environment it is quite difficult for example for me to learn Cantonese because people tend to use English with foreigners

Contrary to the other partners, Alain does not seem to be “annoyed” by this problem. When I asked him how Cantonese people react when he speaks Cantonese, he replies:

ouais eux non il peut y avoir une légère surprise au départ mais peut-être le fait aussi que je m’exprimerai en cantonais à ce moment-là avec cette Hongkongaise avec laquelle je partage ma vie ça réduit un peu la surprise

well no there can be a bit of a surprise at the beginning but maybe the fact that I express myself in Cantonese at that very moment with a Cantonese lady with whom I share my life reduces a bit their surprise

What has been identified in this section is the omnipresent representation that when one is in a specific place one must learn/speak the local language(s). It is easy to see how problematic this representation is for couples who share a lingua franca and do not speak the local languages. It is interesting to note that none of the research participants in Finland mentioned the fact that the “locals” did not expect them to learn Finnish and/or Swedish.

4.2.2. Varied reactions to the couples’ linguistic situation from families and friends

Now let’s move onto friends and family. In the Hong Kong data, Sophie says that these people do not actually comment on their situation. It is quite different for Jean who confesses that, having lived in Hong Kong for 15 years, he has been disappointed in his level of Cantonese, especially as he sometimes loses face and gets embarrassed when he has to tell his friends and family in France that he does not speak the language. He goes as far as saying that he feels “ashamed” about it:

quand on me demande si je parle cantonais je dis non (…) bon je dis je survis je me débrouille je me démerde et personnellement j’ai un peu honte de donner cette réponse parce que après tant d’années ici et quand on voit des étudiants qui n’ont pas accès a un environnement francophone et qui après quelques mois quelques années arrivent a se débrouiller a communiquer

when people ask me if I speak Cantonese I say no (…) well I say I can survive I can work it out and personally I feel a bit ashamed to give this answer because after so many years here and when I see students who do not have access to a French-speaking environment and who after a few months a few years are able to manage to communicate

It is not thus the Others who “blame” him for not speaking Cantonese but himself.

Alain’s family has lived abroad and speaks English very well, which facilitates their encounters with his girlfriend. Alain used to live in another country for a long time and has had several foreign partners: “it is not a situation which puzzles them (his
parents) I think they are quite used to this”. On the other hand, his partner’s parents do not speak English but this does not seem to represent a problem:

pour sa famille ses parents parlent pas anglais du tout donc j’ai une communication… je les ai rencontrés plusieurs fois au restaurant assez souvent j’ai une communication qui est assez limitée aussi mais c’est aussi du fait que c’est des gens assez réservés qui communiquent pas beaucoup mais c’est assez accepté d’après ce qu’elle m’a dit c’est pas un problème

her parents do not speak English at all so our communication is… I have met them several times at a restaurant often our level of communication is quite limited but it is also related to the fact that they are quite reserved people who do not communicate a lot but it is quite accepted from what she told me it is not a problem

The couples in Finland share very similar experiences than the Hong Kong couples in relation to friends and families. Let me emphasize here again the very specific case of these couples as the Finnish partners are Swedish-speakers and thus represent a minority in Finland. Even though they both claim to speak Finnish, they say they feel more confident in Swedish. The male partners try to learn Finnish to be able to find a job in Finland so they have no real motivation to concentrate on Swedish. One husband (from Tunisia, H1) told me during the focus group that he had tried to speak Finnish with his partner’s parents but to no avail, as the parents’ Finnish was inadequate. His wife could not speak French or Arabic and could not thus communicate with the Tunisian family. The other couple uses English with the parents in both Finland and Cameroon.

In this excerpt, the wife from the Tunisian-Finnish couple explains why she has not learnt French, which she could use with her husband instead of English:

I thought in the beginning that maybe French would be easier to learn than Arabic when he insisted that I also learn something that he speaks French would of course be easier for a Swedish-speaking person coz it’s some similarities but no I am bad at learning languages so and then when it is not his real language anyway so I thought it would be like a little bit stupid to learn French because your language is Arabic anyway but if I knew French at least I could communicate a bit with your relatives now I can’t communicate with them at all

It is quite interesting to see in her answer that she is herself a victim of a limited, monolingual and Eurocentric conception of language to defend her own position – a stereotype about language? As she puts it, French is not her husband’s “real language” (your language is Arabic anyway…). She also evaluates her potential learning of French as “stupid”. This might indicate her ignorance and misunderstanding of the Tunisian context but also, again, her limited understanding of language use.

In the follow-up to this discussion, W2 asks a certain number of questions to understand the Tunisian context better:
W2: so you communicate in English with his family?
W1: sign language yeah basically
W2: coz they don’t speak English?
H1: no, nobody actually speaks English but they know they speak a bit French it depends on how much school
W2: and then what makes me lazy is because your mother speaks English

After having listened to the first wife’s answers, the other Wife draws the following conclusion about her own situation: she speaks English with her husband’s mother, which makes her “lazy”, i.e. she doesn’t need to learn another language. Here again one could find the voice of the doxa, for whom speaking the other’s first language is a main objective in intercultural communication – but what does it mean in the case of hyper-plurilingual countries such as Cameroon where people might have several “mother tongues”?

In what follows, the first couple talks about a certain pressure from the Tunisian family to learn Arabic:

H1: They always ask me if she knows some Arabic but she always says hi and bye
W1: they really want me to speak more
H1: of course they want
W1: and every time they ask so have you learnt any Arabic? No and I should be more... I could actually use body language with them a bit more but I am a bit like shy Finnish (…)

Even though the first wife was quite open-minded about not “solidifying” Finnish and Finland-Swedish people (cf. supra), here she does not hesitate to refer to a stereotype about Finns (I am a bit shy Finnish), often used an auto- or hetero-representation, to explain herself and her lack of competences in Arabic (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003; Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009).

The couples’ friends and acquaintances also contribute to othering the couples. In the following excerpt, I asked them directly if people saw their relationship as problematic. This is what the two couples negotiate:

W1: many actually comment to me many Finnish-speaking always think that it is crazy that we always speak English they think we should speak Finnish instead and Swedish my family at the beginning they said yeah definitely we should speak Finnish because then you learn Finnish better but at work you need it and stuff like that but now I think they understand that it is not easy to change languages
H2: we have so many friends who understand English, of course I speak English with my friends and she also speaks English with my friends
W2: I would say like when we hang around with Finnish-speaking people it is like they so much want to like speak English because it is not so many opportunities for them to practice their English so it is actually a problem because if they would just stick to Finnish then maybe they would learn some Finnish
Different attitudes and reactions are presented here, based on what others have said. While the first couple seems to be facing incomprehension (they think it is crazy) and is urged to speak Finnish or Swedish together, the second couple is surrounded by people who seem to have a positive attitude towards the use of English and who even profit from the couple to practise their English. W2 considers that it is problematic because it reduces the opportunities for her husband to learn Finnish – though the latter does not seem to be disturbed by the situation in the rest of the focus group.

The presence of a young child in couple 1 multiplies discourses and comments on the multiplicity of languages imposed on them by the use of English as a Lingua Franca. In the following excerpt, the wife inserts negative voices of the others (cf. the repetition of many). These voices comment on the future well-being of their little boy (confusion), which she contradicts by mentioning her own observations and the boy’s actual competences.

W1: many have now that we have a child commented that we have too many languages that we speak too many languages at home and that our child will be like confused that many have actually commented on every time I say what we speak at home people are like oh that’s really a lot of languages that will be confusing for the little boy but he has actually picked up languages like really good and he from even watching TV he knows Finnish words and Arabic and Swedish and some English words actually that’s the language he knows least just some few words (…)

Conclusion

In this article, I wanted to approach intercultural couplehood from a different angle, i.e. beyond culture, to work upon the concept of stereotypes. What emerges from the data is that, indeed, when the couples talk about their relationships and about how other people perceive them, culture is not everywhere. In fact, language use - English as a lingua franca but also the partners’ first and second languages - are often at the centre of stereotyping.

As asserted several times in the article, this represents a major adjustment from ‘canonical’ research on intercultural couplehood, which has tended to analyse intimate intercultural relationships through the prism of national cultures and solid differences. Many partners expressed a clear understanding of the instrumental function of culture but also of stereotyping in such relationships (Abdallah-Pretceille 1986). It was quite interesting that in the Finnish data the concept of culture was not pronounced a single time, by either the interviewer or the interviewees. Would this be an indication that, depending on the researcher’s emphasis (language or culture or communication, etc.), results differ? As such the couples had been made aware of my research objectives (the influence of lingua franca use on intercultural couples).

But this may not always be automatic. For instance Carine Cools in her study entitled “Relational Dialectics in Intercultural Couples’ Relationships” (2011) often asks her research participants if the fact that they come from different cultures impacts on their relationships. Most couples reply by mentioning language – not culture. This is an important result for researchers as it might imply that by wanting to see culture everywhere, we actually manipulate data collection and our results. As much as
research participants ‘do’ intercultural couplehood and identity in research contexts, we researchers contribute to the ‘doing’ and must acknowledge that we do.

Maybe we should keep in mind these words from the Duchess in Alice in Wonderland:

Be what you would seem to be - or, if you’d like it put more simply - Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.

The case of intimacy that we have described in this article is a fine illustration of the ‘normal identity game’ that is taking place whenever individuals meet… even researchers…

References

Abdallah-Pretceille, Martine, 2006. « Interculturalism as a paradigm for thinking about diversity », Intercultural Education, 17 (5), pp. 475-483


