DISSOCIATION AND “COMPLEX” INTERCULTURALITY.

Abstract

Introduction: The background to this paper is to be found in the current debate on scientific approaches to intercultural communication. Aim of the study: Basing my argument on the liquid paradigm of the British sociologist Z. Bauman (2000), I propose that the concepts of dissociation and solidification can help to analyse the complexity and construction of self and the “other”. Materials and methods: The paper offers an epistemology of intercultural communication by suggesting ways of introducing tools taken from various fields (pragmatics, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis) to examine acts of dissociation and solidification. Results: various linguistic elements in real-life speech taken from intercultural encounters and interaction show evidence of dissociation and solidification. Conclusions: my paper advocates moving away from “easy and safe interculturality”, especially in language learning and teaching.

Keywords: discourse analysis, interculturality, dissociation, liquid identities, didactics.

INTRODUCTION

In a recommendation dating from 2005, the European Union Commission presented a list of key competences for lifelong learning (Education 2010)\(^1\). Some of these competences include Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, civic competence, which are defined as:

(...) competences (that) cover all forms of behavior that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to resolve conflict where necessary (...).

In many definitions of Intercultural Competence (cf. e.g. Byram 1997, Dervin 2006, Dervin & Dirba 2006, Deardoff forth.), researchers have suggested that, in order to “equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and

working life”, items such as knowledge of oneself or awareness of one’s own identity should be explored. In our contemporary worlds, nothing is fixed but liquid (Bauman 2000) – especially selves and identities. The resulting plurality leads individuals to adapt to varied interlocutors and contexts, i.e. to wear different masks and to solidify by narrating themselves. Hence the idea that everybody is multi-/intercultural\(^2\), and that they have to face their own complexity on a constant basis by negotiating who they are and by using strategies to adapt to various contexts of intra- and intercultural encounters.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

My contribution has two aims. Firstly, it looks at and analyses cases of dissociation and solidification, which are indications of the plurality of selves. Secondly, an attempt is made at contributing to the debate on the inclusion of interculturality in language learning and teaching. My reflections and analyses are based on psychology, discourse analysis and pragmatics.

Dissociation and the other(s) within

“When the accident happened, I didn’t feel like myself”
“There is this other person inside of me who doesn’t want to do it”
“I said to myself: no, you can’t do that!”

These excerpts are not taken from narratives of schizophrenic patients but from everyday life speech of very “normal” people. In fact, most of us have probably uttered these words on several occasions, and in varied contexts. The quotations derive from a phenomenon that psychologists describe as dissociation or “a state of fragmented consciousness involving amnesia, a sense of unreality, and feelings of being disconnected from oneself or one’s environment” (Steinberg & Schnall 2003: IX). “Dissociation is a healthy adaptive defense used most universally by people in response to overwhelming stress or life-threatening danger” (ibid.: 5). In other words, in the above quotations, the speakers talk about themselves as if they were strangers to themselves: the first one goes through an accident and does not realize that she is experiencing it; the second speaker explains that there is another Self in him; while

\(^2\) These two terms are usually mixed up – even in research worlds. In this paper, I will only use the adjective intercultural. For a definition of these concepts, cf. Dervin, ibid.
the third speaker is simulating a conversation that she has been having with herself. *First conclusion:* these instances show that, in some cases, people behave in certain ways or say things that they cannot predict/control. *Second conclusion:* the ways people behave or things they say in such and such context are not always exactly identical but are unstable and “un-programmed”. Dissociation is what I call complex interculturality, i.e. the other is also the other(s) within.

**Dissociative acts**

Steinberg & Schnall (ibid.) list the following categories of dissociative acts. I will illustrate each category with examples.

*Depersonalization*

This type of dissociation happens when we talk about ourselves as if *Self* was another person, an *Other*. In other words, one watches oneself from a distance. In the following example, an English exchange student in Finland dissociates when she talks about something that she used to do with her foreign flat-mates:

“When I was in Finland, my friends and I used to get on buses without paying the fares since nobody ever checked... I would never do that myself”.

There is clearly a change of person between the first series of *I* and the last *I* in the quotation, even though the person who utters these words is the “same”.

*Internal dialogues*

Internal dialogues happen in each and every one of us when we have to make a decision or role-play, such as playing back what a conversation has been like or will be like. Internal dialogues are obviously not recordable but they can be expressed directly by people in written or oral forms (cf. testaments, confessions, memoirs, etc.). There is, of course, no guarantee of the actual contents of internal dialogues when they are uttered or written (people do not always tell the truth about the sort of reticence or questioning that they have had with themselves). Many times a day, we may be heard saying: “I said to myself...”. This is an example of externalized internal/virtual dialogue, which tells listeners that we have been talking to ourselves.
Derealization
This phenomenon is usually caused by stress, fatigue, extreme surprise or amazement. For instance, one cannot believe, realize or understand what is happening to oneself. For example, before you travel to a country that you have always wanted to visit and once you have reached the country, you may have a strange feeling that you are not actually there. Another simple example would be when one listens to music on one’s IPod on the streets and does not even realize that e.g. one is walking to the city centre to do some shopping.

Identity alteration
This is the most common and normal dissociative act since it happens every minute of our lives. Every time we change partners in a discussion, places, etc., we adapt and change representations on who we are and who the person in front of us is and therefore we alter our discourse and identifiers (or identity signs such as tone of the voice, language registers, things we talk about, clothes, etc.). Sherry Turkle sums up identity alteration under the question “who am we?” which, as paradoxical as it may seem, symbolizes the reality of societal life. Turkle has worked on identity on the internet (cf. Turkle 2005) and showed how people tend to dissociate on Internet Relay Channels or forum by lying about who they are (ex: a man plays the role of a woman, an old lady can pretend to be young, etc.). Steinberg and Schnall (ibid.) also clarify that identity alteration happens through:

- referring to yourself by different names/ nicknames (ex: I am either Fred or Tony to some people), talking about yourself using “we”, “you” or “one” (ex: “one is never happy when this happens... well I wasn’t happy about it”);
- acting like a different person, imitating, speaking in different accents, pretending to be happy or satisfied;
- being told by others that you are different (ex: after a stay abroad, your friends tell you that you would never have done something the way you do it now before) or telling others (ex: I feel different now).

Finally, pragmatics has showed evidence that plurality is omnipresent in our speech (cf. M. Bahktine 1984 and his theory of polyphony). What we call represented speech (sometimes referred to as reported speech – though it can never be reported because the context in which the speech has taken place cannot be fully “reported”
but only *represented*) is the archetype of identity alteration in each and every one of us. E.g. by including Paul’s speech in the following, I take on his mask for the duration of it: “I met Paul the other day and do you know what he told me? He said *great to see you*! *I was just thinking of you*...”. Adding represented speech to one’s discourse is not an innocent act but a discursive strategy that can help speakers to manipulate others (cf. e.g. de Fina 2003, Dervin forthcoming).

**Solidification: bad – but normal - dissociation**

While identity alteration occurs voluntarily or not, solidification is always conscious and potentially manipulative. This category is inspired by the sociologist Z. Bauman’s paradigm of liquid identities. Solidification is in fact the flipside of the *liquid* coin: one “solidifies” when one retains one *single identity* in one’s discourse. In intercultural communication, this happens quite often and leads to auto-/hetero-stereotyping: e.g. one explains one’s behaviour by explaining that one is from such and such country. Stereotyping is normal and cannot really be controlled or “deleted” from encounters because it helps to meet people and to deal with the complexity of our liquid world. This kind of dissociation usually takes place in discourse (e.g.: “We *Spanish people* like to eat food late” where millions of people are suddenly reduced to a same model) or in attitudes (e.g. a French student who was an exchange student in Turku told me that he was so fed up with having to listen to people telling him that, because he was French, he was going to be late, that he decided to be late to please them – and confirm the stereotype³). Finally, solidification cannot but be based on imagination.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS OF THE RESEARCH**

The following three extracts are taken from various corpora of intercultural encounters and will be used to demonstrate how dissociation and solidification can be analysed. The “tools” can be used, obviously, with any language. Pragmatics, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, discursive psychology, among others, can offer many tools for such activities (cf. Benwell & Stokoe 2006 for an introduction). I will show how the following speakers use pronouns (e.g. *we* vs. *they*), adverbs and plural nouns (used as metonymies) to dissociate and solidify below.

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³ Cf. Dervin 2007 for an analysis of solidification in the context of student mobility.
RESULTS

In the first document, a German student who was a trainee in Denmark for a few months explains how she was trying not to be too German during her time abroad. Her discourse is paradoxical because, on the one hand, she gives examples of how she tried not to appear too German (by being generous and relaxed), while on the other hand, by using the phrase “whatever that means” after the statement “I want to be less German”, she gives the impression and confirms that her examples are based on her imagination (and sense of drama, cf. the virtual dialogue in italics that she invents):

“A: Yes well as we talked before well Germans... whatever people think Germans are... so when I started my internship I said myself well ok I want to be less German
B: (Laughter)
A: whatever that means... so I started with a good motivation and you know I like invited colleagues to coffee and not like typically German counting the coins and... you owe me 20 cents... you owe me whatever... so I invited colleagues for coffee. And I tried to be relaxed when people didn’t deliver an assignment on time so I tried to be a little bit more relaxed and I showed my colleagues Germans have humour etc.”

Strategies used for solidifying found in the trainee’s discourse include the use of adverbs such as typically in “typically German” and the plural noun Germans to categorize her people.

In the following example, a Finnish student (A) interviews an American exchange student (B) on Finnish television. Solidification is co-constructed here by the two students:

“A: If you heard that us Finnish people are shy and quiet I have heard that Americans are loud and can’t stop talking.
B: Yeah that’s so true with us”.

The Finnish student offers a solid image of herself through dissociation (“us Finnish people are shy and quiet”) then she solidifies the American student (“Americans are...”). The American student agrees to the claim about her countrymen and solidifies herself too (“that’s so true with us”). The use of the pronoun “us” is usually a sign of solidification.

4 This dialogue is a transcription of an extract from the podcast “Absolutely Intercultural”, www.absolutely-intercultural.com
Finally, an extract from a podcast produced by Yang-May Ooi, a Malaysian who lives in the UK, will show how solidification helps her to define what she refers to as “a split personality” in her show:

“I was hanging out with the Malaysians (...) singing campfire songs and just having a good time laughing very loudly and my English friends were in the main tent where the food was being cooked and they were just sitting there quietly and having a little chat and they told me afterwards when someone asked where is Yang-Mai? and one of them said oh she is outside being Malaysian and I have always remembered that because being Malaysian to me meant being out there you know having a good time having a laugh making a lot of noise // which when I am in my English persona perhaps I don’t make that much noise perhaps I am quieter perhaps I would be sitting with my English friends having a chat.”

Her interpretation of who she is (i.e. a noisy and laughing Malaysian and a quiet English woman) is based on the stereotypical idea that people who have links to two countries, two “cultures” have two personalities. In fact, it is interesting to see how unfounded and uncertain her discourse on her “English persona” sounds because she uses the adverb perhaps before every statement that she makes: “perhaps I don’t make that much noise perhaps I am quieter perhaps I would be sitting with my English friends having a chat”. Even though this dissociative act is worthy of note here (she clearly expresses duplicity in her), it is easy to see how it actually leads to the solidification of Malays (who are noisy) and Brits (who are quiet).

The three extracts analysed here have shown how working on solidification by using authentic documents can be fruitful for spotting manipulations and “bad” – but normal! – dissociative acts.

CONCLUSIONS
The didactics of interculturality in language learning and teaching requires pondering over the methods used in class, both for ethical and intellectual reasons. The culturalist approach (i.e. students are given information about the people of such and such country) is “easy and safe”; in other words, teachers can provide students with a list of information (recipes) that they can use when they encounter natives of the language they learn. It is safe because it does not involve the students in the sense that the natives are “talked about” and “described” but nothing is said about the students as individuals and/or about their countrymen - or if this happens, it is usually for solid

5 http://www.fusionview.co.uk/
comparative purposes (ex: Germans do this vs. Finns do that). To me, the culturalist approach is not ethical for it makes students believe that the recipes it offers will help them to meet very complex and dissociative Others. Besides, it is not based on any intellectual rationale since it concentrates mostly on differences and usually ignores similarities between people. As Abdallah-Pretceille (2003) puts it, it is so much easier to notice differences than recognize similarities.

Once we have accepted that dissociation and solidification are normal phenomena, it seems interesting to raise awareness about dissociative states in language learning and teaching. If aware of such ordinary phenomena, my hypothesis is that e.g. students of foreign languages will accept more easily that a foreigner is also liquid and complex, and that s/he can also dissociate. Besides, I believe that awareness of this can urge students to refrain from seeing the other as a mere representative of a culture (cf. the widespread accepted wisdom that cultures meet – not individuals...). The intercultural approach through the observation and analysis of dissociation is far from being “easy and safe”. The approach offers to concentrate on the complexity and internal plurality of each individual. This means that no recipe, no information about cultural aspects of these individuals can help to encounter them. It also implies that, instead of concentrating on any imaginary other by giving make-believe indications on how this other lives, thinks, sees, etc., the approach makes clear to language students that every single person is before all complex, liquid, different from her/his country fellows, and unfixed. The approach also lends a hand to them to find counter-examples of this and analyse them through the study of varied solidifying elements.

Remains to be seen what students do with the savoir-faire that this approach provides them with. It is clear that they have to be taught to use this outside class and learn to avoid manipulating others by presenting a unified, imaginary self in intercultural communication – which means, before all, an awareness of self-solidification. That is why, students should reflect on why, how, when, with whom they can dissociate and e.g. solidify. Finally, they should also find a range of strategies that they can use when others self-solidify and/or solidify them and in/directly manipulate them (e.g. “you’re not Finnish, so you wouldn’t understand. We Finns do it this way”). These strategies include: topic avoidance/abandonment, questioning, asking for reformulation, resorting to a mediator, etc. The tools described
in this article cannot but help them to do that and, subsequently, to develop intercultural competence.

REFERENCES


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