

LANGUAGES AND CULTURAL DIALOGUES

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Keywords: culture, civilization, difference, hegemony, frontier, language, dialogue, translation

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Summary

This chapter is concerned about languages and cultural dialogues and is organized in five sections as follows: 1. *Introduction*. Cultures and languages: no immediate relationship. 2. *Cultures*. Definitions of culture according to contemporary anthropology. material and non-material culture. - Culture and civilization: a terminological distinction. The differentiation of cultures from a historical and a geographical point of view. - Popular culture (folklore): peasants, women, and children.

- Cultural models and the concept of frontier (Ruth Benedict, Jurij Lotman). - Ethnocentrism. Equality and cultural relativism (Tzvetan Todorov). - Conflicts of cultures. 3. *Languages*. The myth of the tower of Babel. - The discussion on the origin of languages. From the perfect universal language of Eden to the *confusio linguarum* (Dante Alighieri).- From a monogenetic to a polygenetic hypothesis on the origin of languages (Guillaume Postel, Spinoza, Leibniz, Vico, Locke, Renan). - The return of the monogenetic hypothesis according to recent biological and archaeological research (Colin Renfrew). - Theoretical definition of language (Cassirer, Terracini). - Sociolinguistics (Humboldt, Whorf). 4 *Dialogue* A philosophy of dialogue: from Plato to Martin Buber. - Dialogue in narrative form: Mikhail Bakhtin. - Dialogue among cultures and languages. The myth of the gift of tongues bestowed on Jesus' apostles. - The importance of translation in the history of cultures and languages. Finally Section 5 makes some concluding remarks.

1. Introduction

In spite of widespread and strong opinions to the contrary, there is no immediate and compulsory relationship between a given culture and a given language, although there are, of course, many forms of relations between culture and languages. We have no archaeological evidence, for instance, that cultures reconstructed from prehistoric artifacts necessarily corresponded to ethnic groups speaking the same language. A region, a tribe, a people can change their language while their material culture remains more or less unaltered. In Africa, in the Indian sub-continent, in the islands of the Pacific, in the Americas when they were discovered in the Renaissance, a multitude of languages coexisted with different cultures: sometimes they overlapped, sometimes they kept their specificity, and sometimes they intermingled.

Even in countries where a process of political unification took place, not always cultures, religions, and languages coexisted harmoniously: we could mention India, Lebanon, Iraq, or the ex-Yugoslavia, the country of the Slavic population of the South, where coexisted peoples of different ethnicity, religion and language, two of which, the Serbs and the Croatians, now form two different nations, who adhere to two different religions (Greco-orthodox and Catholic) but have in common a language: the Serbo-croatian. In other countries things worked differently: in Switzerland, for instance, we have the coexistence of a number of quite different ethnic groups, two main religions, four main languages. On the whole we can say that language is a very important means of communication among cultures. It is a formidable tool for expressing forms of tension and conflict among cultures, and also forms of reciprocal influences or reciprocal differentiation.

2. Cultures

2.1. Definitions of Culture

According to the anthropologists (especially the cultural anthropologists) the term culture refers to the entire array of intellectual or manual activities that men living in society carry on, whatever the shape and content, the orientation and the complexity of their way of living, their level of awareness, and their distance from the views and behaviors that in our society are more or less officially considered true, just, or good,

considered, in one word “cultural”. Accepting this definition, we should consider as forms of culture also those customs and observances that we might be tempted to consider expression of «ignorance» (such as for instance superstitious practices): they belong to culture in the sense that they are ways of conceiving and living the world, whether we like them or not (and often we dislike them). For anthropologists that uphold this notion, culture includes both non-material elements like the world-view of a particular population and material elements like the products of their manual activity. This is a debated point and some scholars prefer to think that, when we deal with complex societies, we should distinguish between their *material culture* (their ways of cultivating the land, building houses, clothing, eating, organizing the family life, etc.) and their way of conceiving the world and their exercise of knowledge and imagination. Their non-material culture, in this case, should include religion, traditions, ideas of life and death, conceptions of the world (ideologies), etc. A school of French historians led by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who in 1929 founded the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, prefer to speak, for this aspect of culture, of *mentalité*.

2.2. Culture and Civilization

Another terminological distinction is between *culture* and *civilization*. The distinction seems to be clear in German, where the terms *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* have historically acquired distinctive meanings: *Kultur* is the original heritage of a people, the array of traditions, costumes, characters that are passed down from a generation to the next, *Zivilisation*, which as a term was imported into German from French during the Enlightenment, is the process of becoming civil, intellectually and spiritually more refined, often through the imitation of other peoples that might be considered more advanced. A heated debate on the different merits of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* took place in Germany at the time of the First world war, with the two brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann taking their stance on opposite sides: Thomas being at the time in favor of the traditional, conservative, popular values of German *Kultur*, Heinrich being in favor of a more democratic, liberal, international conception, represented by the term *Zivilisation*. The distinction is less clear in the other European languages and also in contemporary German, especially so after the development of the disciplines of anthropology, material culture, popular culture, etc. It is of some significance that the classical book by Jakob Burckhardt *Die Cultur [sic] der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) was translated into Italian as *La civiltà del Rinascimento*, into French as *La Civilisation de la Renaissance*, into English as *The Civilisation of the Period of the Renaissance*, but into Spanish as *La cultura del Renacimiento*. In French today the term *Civilisation* seems to be in larger use for example: *Byzance et les Slaves: études de civilisation*, *L'avènement de la civilisation industrielle*, or even *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, but also *L'Afrique noir: histoire et culture*.

In German we find more often *Kultur* where in French we would expect *Civilisation*; for instance: *Die Kultur des Islams* or *Deutsche Kunst und Kultur*, while *Zivilisation* seems to have a more restricted and specific meaning (for instance *Traumzeit: Über die Grenzen zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation*). In the other European languages there is still a certain amount of confusion, although the tendency seems that of conferring an anthropological meaning to culture and a more spiritual and intellectual meaning to

civilization (including *mentalité*, sensibility, history of religious beliefs, history of ideas, etc.).

2.3. The Differentiation of Cultures

From a historical, and also a geographical, point of view we can speak of different cultures, that have developed in time and are diversified on the basis of the various forms of organization of the human settlements, their relation to nature, their form of life, their traditions and imagination. Within a society we can also distinguish between different cultures that are expressions of the different social strata or groups. But how does it happen that cultures differentiate? There are various mechanisms at work: 1) the material difficulties of communication which, until recent times, have caused the isolation of the peripheral zones from the central ones: these last ones have usually shown a stronger capacity of innovation and expansion, thus accentuating the disparity among the various zones and the relative backwardness of the peripheral ones; 2) the cultural discrimination exercised, in economic or military terms, by the most powerful social groups over the less powerful ones: we speak in these cases, respectively, of hegemonic and of subaltern ones. For long historical periods some social groups have been excluded both from the production and the consumption of cultural products: it has been the case, for example, of those strata of the population (women, peasants, poor people) who were left out of the education process of reading and writing: or it has been the case, during the Medieval and early Modern period, of the sumptuary laws, that banned the use of certain garments for certain strata of the population; 3) the resistance of certain peripheral and subaltern social groups to the «civilizing» impositions of the hegemonic ones. One of the areas of culture in which this resistance was stronger in the history of the Medieval and also the Modern period was that of religion, as it is demonstrated by the many decrees passed by the Church Councils or Synods condemning pagan or semi-pagan practices, remnants of beliefs and superstitions. But similar phenomena have been visible in the areas of popular customs, political practices, and language, with resistance, in this last case, to the imposition of the language of colonizers, and sometimes absorption of the language of the colonized on the part of the colonizers.

2.4. Popular Culture (Folklore): Peasants, Women, and Children

A concept that is not always clear is that of *popular culture* or *folklore*, especially due to the aura of originality and creativity bestowed on folkloric products of culture (songs, legends, fairy tales, proverbs, etc.) during the Romantic period. Modern scholarship recognizes that many products (not only texts, but also views of the world, models of behavior, forms of the imagination) of the so-called *popular culture* have been traditionally transmitted by social strata that we call “the people” (“*das Volk*”). Which does not necessarily mean that those social groups were the authors or producers of those cultural products: sometimes they were, but on the whole to say that certain popular strata of a population are the conveyers of certain cultural products simply means that they have been the ones who relished, sometimes exclusively, those products and utilized and transmitted them, regardless of the fact that they had been produced by the dominant strata or the subaltern strata of society, This was particularly true of the peasants (who for a long time made up more than 90 % of the population in great part of

the countries), or the women, or children up to the age of adolescence. They normally did not possess their own language and had to resort, in order to express themselves and their needs, aspirations, views of the world, to the language and products of higher and cultivated strata of the population. Many of these specific cultures had their own ways of resisting to the dominant culture. The peasants, for instance, gave birth many times, from the Middle ages to Modern times, to episodes of open rebellion, usually concluded in tragic defeats followed by cruel forms of repression. They had only the possibility to deform, reverse, and “carnivalize” (the term has been introduced by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin) the language of the cultivated classes, giving vent, when allowed to do so in special occasions (like the Carnival), and using the mode of comedy, to their desire of free expression and their criticism of the system of powers that kept them under their yoke. Women rarely resorted to open rebellion from the patriarchal type of society in which they were kept under the domination of their fathers and husbands. They had at their disposal more refined and intimate modes for expressing their unhappy situation: although compelled to use the language of the dominant gender they often succeeded in creating their own texts and in building their own private cultural spaces (in the house, in the conversation with other women, sometimes even in a convent). Children also had a specific culture, sometimes called child-lore, made of rhymes, stories, games, rites, and kept it among themselves and protected it from the adults (although in most cases those texts and games had an older origin and were reductions and adaptations from texts and games of adult culture). Usually when they entered into adulthood, they forgot that cultural heritage, which continued to be passed on from generation of children to generation of children, without the intervention of adults.

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Biographical Sketch

Remo Ceserani was born in Soresina (Cremona, Italy) on November 22, 1933. He graduated in Italian literature and literary criticism at the University of Milan (Italy) in 1957 and did post-graduate work at Yale University (U.S.A.) in the Department of Comparative literature under the direction of René Wellek in 1958-59. He received his "Habilitation" (libera docenza) in the History of Literary Criticism in 1970 (Scuola normale superiore di Pisa). His main fields of study are Comparative literature, Theory of literature, History of literary criticism.

He was the recipient of a Fulbright and Smith-Mundt scholarship in 1957-58 and later received a Fulbright travel grant in 1983-84, a Grant from the Goethe Institut of Munich in 1988, and various other Grants for teaching or researching in Germany and Denmark. He was Assistant professor of Italian literature at the University of California in Berkeley (1959-61), Assistant professor of the History of literary criticism at the University of Milan (1962-65) and the Scuola normale superiore di Pisa (1966-70), associate professor of Italian literature at the University of Pisa (1970-84), professor of Comparative literature at the University of Genoa (1985-89), Professor of Theory of literature at the University of Pisa (1990-96), Professor of Comparative literature at the University of Bologna from 1996 up to his retirement in 2006. He has been Lauro De Bosis Visiting lecturer at Harvard (1992-93), Chair of Italian Culture at the University of California in Berkeley (1997), and Visiting professor in many institutions in the United States, Australia, Germany, and Denmark.

He is the author, together with Lidia De Federicis, of a large ten-volume manual for the study of Literature *Il Materiale e l'immaginario* (1979-95) and of a more recent *Guida allo studio della letteratura* (1999, 2003) has been translated into Spanish. He has published essays and books on Romantic love, Postmodernism, the Fantastic, the theme of railways and trains in the European literatures, the theme of the stranger, the relationship between photography and literature, and the problems of writing literary history. He is one of the main editors of the three-volumes: *Dizionario dei temi letterari* (DTL), 2006-2007.