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The role of literacy in the acculturation process of migrants

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SYNOPSIS

Many migrants who opt for Europe have had little or no formal education in their countries of origin. They are illiterate or functionally illiterate according to UNESCO terminology, that is either unable to read or write any language whatsoever, or have only a superficial command of written expression. That is true of nationals of “emerging” or economically challenged countries, but the problem also affects the developed countries albeit to a lesser extent. These migrants come from societies or from social or community groups with an oral tradition. Writing is not completely absent from their social and cultural environment, but they make little or no use of it. Their arrival in the supremely bureaucratized societies of Europe causes culture shock, in that writing is the medium for transactional relations (institutions, consumption, citizenship, etc.) but sometimes for personal relations too (SMS, e-mails...). Writing is more than a means of communication, it is a window on the world, a way of apprehending and comprehending reality. The textual tools in daily use (telephone directory, diary, plan) may present insuperable problems for poorly educated or uneducated people. Rather than helping migrants with little formal educational, these tools form graphic and abstract representations and reconstructions of the reality that they perceive and partake of through practical experience and oral expression.

Introduction

Before approaching the topic, some prior clarifications seem necessary. This study definitely concerns *migrants*, that is persons who have moved – emigrated or immigrated, depending on the viewpoint of the speaker – meaning that their children born in the host country are not migrants. To keep referring to them as such is tantamount to immuring individuals in preconceived categories that do not match the family, social or cultural realities in the migrants' lives. This also does much to obscure the reality and sustain the idea that immigration is not only a “problem” but remains so after several generations. Young people with immigrant parents or grandparents still meet with difficulties over their family background, but these difficulties usually stem from discrimination or racism, that is to say from the eye cast on them - all the more absurd and unjustified considering that these descendants of immigration are linguistically and culturally integrated. Their difficulties are actually the same as those of other people from the same social background. This is so in education: school failure is no more prevalent among immigrants' children than others, given equality of social background. Vallet and Caille¹ (1995) consider that the school achievement level of migrants' children, again given comparable social backgrounds, is even higher because the families have a bigger stake in their children's school career. Likewise, inequalities in access to *grandes écoles* or prestigious courses of study for example, do not specifically affect migrants' children but those of the masses generally, among whom students of migrant origin are as ridiculously few as working class students. This discriminatory effect is heightened by the fact that migrants' children are very often of working class or popular extraction on top of their migrant background.

As to young migrants enrolled in the school system of the host country after little schooling or none in their countries of origin, they enter an educational process that, depending on the age of entry, will totally or partially alter their relations with writing, reality and knowledge. They are of course migrants in the sense of being born aliens in a foreign country but, when they arrive in the host country at a very early age, their school careers strongly resemble those of migrants' children.

The migrants to be dealt with in this study are therefore people who have arrived in the host countries as adolescents or adults and have never attended school there, or for no more than a few months.

1. Schooling in the countries of origin

Some migrants come from countries whose educational institutions have neither experience nor resources that can compare with the host countries. The school systems established after decolonisation have not yet reached a sufficient level of effectiveness to meet the needs of the populations for literacy, vocational and skill training. Moreover, recurrent problems impede the advance of literacy: choice of a language of schooling not the native language of most pupils (French, English or Portuguese in sub-Saharan Africa, or standard Arabic in North Africa for example), absence or weakness of political will, inadequate material and financial resources, indifference of the populations who see no immediate interest in promoting literacy, cultural and/or religious obstacles preventing, in particular, mass education for women, etc.

¹ See Bibliography

Illiteracy rates in certain countries of origin of immigrants are thus very high² and no doubt conceal a still graver reality in that the official figures are not calculated on the basis of certified skills in reading and writing but on the school attendance level: persons who have completed their compulsory education are supposed to have been made literate. Yet the experience of the developed countries shows that even under good schooling conditions, a form of functional illiteracy persists. The survey conducted by the OECD (2000)³ is instructive in that regard, demonstrating that writing proficiency is by no means a skill acquired by all citizens, including those who have had a normal school education. Caution over official figures is therefore urged by analysis of the sometimes very difficult school attendance conditions for pupils in Africa, for example. Moreover, compulsory education, when carried under more or less normal conditions, often corresponds to the primary school level, ie. five or six years to learn to read and write. There too, knowing that about 15% of pupils who sit reading tests for sixth grade (lower secondary) entrance in France display major difficulties, it is easy to imagine what the same test would yield at the end of compulsory education in Africa. That is the reason why UNESCO speaks of functional illiteracy, placing this notion in opposition to absolute illiteracy: functional illiterates are persons who have been to school and acquired the rudiments of reading and writing but cannot apply these skills in the ordinary situations of everyday life. So, if the statistics are trusted, a migrant from a country in sub-Saharan African or the Arab zone has an average⁴ 40% likelihood of being absolutely illiterate and probably a still greater likelihood of functional illiteracy. But migrants do not represent a sample of their national population, and these figures are of course not directly transposable.

In fact the figures supplied by the National Institute for Economic Statistics and Research (INSEE) for France (Borrel, 2006) indicate that a very large proportion of the migrants present in France may fit this profile since over 40% of them have no qualification or one corresponding to the primary education certificate. Adding to them the migrants who have a diploma equivalent to an initial level of trade qualification (*CAP - certificat d'aptitude professionnel* or *BEP brevet d'études professionnelles*), we reach a figure of over 60%. Those with no qualification are of prime interest for our purposes: this absence of educational certification does not necessarily cause a problem of absolute or functional illiteracy but increases the probabilities of its occurrence. In any case, even though the proportion of uncertificated migrants has decreased since the 1980s and the proportion of persons with a university degree has increased, this is not a marginal question. Nor do these figures itemise national origins. Data on diploma holding per country of origin would no doubt indicate very strong disparities between, for instance, Africans and Europeans.

This situation stimulates heated political debate on whether or not to “choose” migrants according to their level of qualification. Traditionally, the developed countries of Western Europe have admitted labour immigration which helped in reconstruction after both world wars, powered industry during the long period of growth from the 1950s to the 1980s, and held the jobs no longer wanted by the better trained and better qualified Europeans. With selective immigration, European governments believe that they thereby aid the future integration of these new migrants since they gamble on educated, diploma-holding

² According to UNESCO, in sub-Saharan Africa 4 out of 10 adults are unable to read or write, ie 136 million people, and the Arab region registers the same results: 60.1% of literate persons (71.7 % for men, 47.8 % for women). [According to the study by WAGNER Daniel A]., *Literacy and Adult Education*, World Education Forum. Education for All. 2000 Assessment, co-ordinated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO (p. 29)]

³ OECD Surveys (2000, 2003 and 2006):
http://www.oecd.org/document/5/0,3343,en_32252351_32236191_39720645_1_1_1_1,00.html

⁴ Average, since a Moroccan has 6 chances in 10 of being illiterate and a Malian 8 out of 10, for example.

immigrants who belong to the middle class or intellectual bourgeoisie being less different, closer to the dominant standard social and thus more amenable to integration. Clearly, in this perspective migrants are no longer to be chosen for what they could contribute to the host country through their abilities, but also sorted by sociological criteria. To apply the theory of prototype semantics propounded by Kleiber (1999), the profile of the migrant in Europe might be drawn according to collective representations: originating from economically backward countries, poor, with little or no formal education, holding a low-skilled or unskilled job, or a housewife looking after a large family. Migrants from Northern Europe, academics, engineers or executives, do not conform to this stereotype and have become virtually inconspicuous in European societies. This is heightened by the fact that migrants belonging to the European Union enjoy rights which the others do not possess. So immigrants as such do not pose a “problem” of integration, but certain immigrants do, those least endowed with cultural and economic capital who find difficulties with social integration in the host society.

2. Orality and scripturality

The question of schooling in the countries of origin does not exhaust the subject, though: migrants with little or no formal education are of course faced with all manner of problems over employment, qualification, recognition and cultural adaptation, but also with the major difficulty of switching from the realm of speech to that of script with virtually no transition, and this crossover causes a fracture merely hinted at by the technical problems of mastering writing. These two concepts, orality and scripturality, are essential for understanding not only how poorly educated or uneducated persons relate to writing, but also how they relate to learning and to the world.

Orality is not reducible to oral expression as a medium, or to the oral tradition, still less to oral literature. It incorporates these aspects and transcends them because it has several dimensions: linguistic, communicational and cultural.

Orality really exists as the brainchild of scripturality. The early ethnologists who were interested in the societies which they at first called primitive discovered peoples who knew no writing or did not use it, and the ethnologists built their theories on the basis of their own representations as “literate” living in societies where writing had pride of place. They then spoke of societies with an oral tradition. But for the peoples concerned, this peculiarity is no such thing because they know only this reality. In the same way, in Europe the terms *illettré* (untaught) and *analphabète* (illiterate) appeared in France for example only in the 16th century, whereas French society was still very largely illiterate before then. It was at the very time when literacy really began to progress (Furet and Ozouf, 1977) that a name was given to those who would gradually become an exception then an oddity in modern society. Before that time, they were within the social norm and it was rather those outside the norm who were designated - the *lettrés*, a word that appeared as early as the 12th century in French and far earlier in Latin.

Orality has represented the cultural norm of mankind since man conceived and developed the first symbolic systems to render reality. Hundreds of thousands of years elapsed from the appearance of the first forms of language to the beginnings of writing. When man could write, there were five thousand more years to wait until the use of writing was mastered by the majority of mankind, and even today we know thanks to UNESCO that there are officially more than 800 million illiterates in the world, not to mention some tens of millions more who, as stated above, are only very incompletely acculturated to writing.

The groundbreaking work of Goody (1977, 1994) plainly showed how orality differed radically from scriptuality in terms of relationship with reality and knowledge. Command and use of writing presuppose very significant changes in individuals and social groups as to their representations of the world, and even cause alterations in their cognitive structures. Writing allows knowledge to be stored and preserved, disseminated and imparted; through it, information can be compared, discussed, organised and analysed. Writing is also a graphic arrangement: tables and lists, of which Goody spoke and whose role in the development of modern scientific thought he demonstrated, but also plans, calendars or forms, dealt with below. This is the universe of writing as Olson (2001) described it. The universe of writing is unlike the oral one chiefly in that it does not have a necessary link with reality. Writing allows knowledge to be taken out of context, releasing it from its framework of production and exchange. Orality, on the other hand, has a necessary link with reality and its social, historical, economic and cultural context in time and space (Adami, 2006).

Modern societies have stepped straight into the universe of writing. Orality survives in the nooks and crannies, but marginality is the price of its survival. The whole of society is structured by writing: administration, school, business, services, recreation, interpersonal relations too, if one considers for example the exponential growth in the number of e mails and text messages sent daily. Public and private space is saturated with script, and the Internet merely strengthens this dominant trend. All degrees of illiteracy in advanced societies are considered social ills today, not so much because they are gaining ground but because anything short of full proficiency in writing is a real social handicap in these hyper-textualised societies.

3. Migrants and “document shock”

G. Noiriel (2006) has demonstrated the decisive importance of the identity document’s appearance in the history of immigration, it being highly influential in the invention of the “foreigner”. The hard and fast dividing line between national and alien is marked, in France, by the issuance of the Nationality Code and the identity card. Indeed, the question of documents is a crucial one for immigrants, and current events afford an illustration of this. For some years there has been talk of a social category which only a textualised society is capable of inventing: “undocumented foreigners”⁵. They have become the emblematic representatives of immigrants. “Document shock”, to render Noiriel’s expression *choc des papiers*, is the encounter of these poorly educated immigrants from societies having an oral tradition with the cumbersome, complex bureaucracy of modern societies. Given that well-educated natives used to coping with official paperwork are sometimes baffled by it, one better appreciates the cumulative difficulties and conundrums that administrative formalities can represent for non-native immigrants with little or no formal education. Moreover this chore is often taken on by their children attending school in the host country. In fact the shock sustained by these immigrants is twofold: the difficulties they meet are of course linked with their weak or non-existent command of writing, but also with the way they conceive and practice social relations. They often come from rural or urban communities and social groups founded on neighbourhood and extensive acquaintanceship: the family, the village or district, the trade guild or business relations. These are very often direct interpersonal relations. In complex textualised societies, however, writing tends to be an imperative go-between in human relations. I do not set out to depict a dehumanised society here: direct interpersonal relations have not disappeared but tend to be channelled through writing. Migrants with little formal education are thus faced with a twofold semiotic and social hurdle when they enter the written universe of modern societies.

⁵ “les sans-papiers”

Entrance to this universe is the commencement of an acculturation process that will disrupt the migrants' entire social and symbolic reference system. Let us try to demonstrate more factually what this means for individuals confronted with these everyday difficulties.

4. Examples of three migrants reacting to graphic representation

This describes the cases of three migrants undergoing language training. They are adults and young adults, primary immigrants, that is having come to France less than two years ago at the time of these observations, with a sparse school record in their countries of origin. These case studies are based on empirical observations made as an adult education provider, monitoring people by the score and noting their problems, difficulties and reactions when confronted with the learning of French and above all with writing. For present purposes, these observations simply claim to apprehend materially what the discovery of the written universe by the poorly educated can represent.

They are Asmaa, Rachid and Jules. The first is a 20 year old Moroccan girl with 6 years of schooling; the second, also Moroccan, is a youth of 17 with 5 years of schooling; the third is Senegalese with 4 years of very irregular school attendance. Both Moroccans lived in Atlas Mountains villages: Rachid comes from north of Marrakech, from a Berber-speaking village; Asmaa originates from south of Fez, and she speaks a dialect of Arabic. Jules speaks Wolof and was resident in a district of Dakar where his parents immigrated from a village in the Casamance region. On arrival all three were able to communicate in French to varying degrees, Asmaa having the greatest fluency. Mutual comprehension in French with Rachid and Jules is possible but difficult. These three have been taught to read and write, in Arabic and French for Asmaa and Rachid, and in French only for Jules. However, this grasp of literacy is superficial and enables them to decipher a few French sentences indifferently without always understanding them. Like all the other learners monitored, they were learning oral and written French. The written expression on which we were working with them, however, was geared to everyday life and its requirements. So let us observe Rachid discovering the telephone directory, Jules bound for the administrative centre in Nancy, and Asmaa's problems with appointments.

Rachid and the telephone directory

After Rachid one day asked for the contact details of someone whom he had already met and wished to obtain information from by telephone, we took advantage of the fact to broach the use of the directory. Now, the telephone directory, that so commonplace and now outmoded item, is arranged according to highly specific conventions typical of the written universe, and these were to present Rachid with insuperable problems. The very heftiness of the document is off-putting to begin with, and that discouraged him from the outset; he quickly realised that if the information which he sought was really inside, something he was quite unconvinced of moreover, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. We then understood why he seemed so discouraged on seeing him open the directory at page one: he was proceeding to leaf through it page by page to find the name of the person he was looking for! So, on that occasion he discovered, otherwise than through its repetition by rote as he had learned, the reason behind alphabetical order, or rather one of its practical applications. We gave him a printed alphabet to save him repeating it in his head. Then he opened the directory at the page for the first locality and was about to run his finger down the column to find at last the person's name, so he did not know that the localities were also entered in alphabetical order. When he finally managed to get the right town, with our help, he had before him the endless list of names for a town of 35 000 inhabitants. Though assisted he never found the name he wanted. In his discouragement, he decided to go back where he had

met the person to speak to him directly about his problem. It was then that we understood why we had not found the name: it was actually a social worker, so we should have looked for the name of the department where he worked, not his own name. This possibility had never occurred to Rachid, he had met *a person* who had helped him, not an institution and still less an acronym.

The telephone directory is an irreplaceable tool for whoever is conversant with graphics and graphic layout but contrasts in every respect, by its strictly conventional and arbitrary character, with the reality perceived and experienced by a person who is not. Thus the telephone directory is not an aid to Rachid but a real headache.

Jules and his journey on official business

The administrative centre in Nancy brings together in the heart of town a number of public services in a group of imposing multistorey buildings. A person needs to know exactly what he has come there for in order to find the right official in the right office. Jules arrived one day bearing a note summoning him to the administrative centre about a routine administrative matter. When he understood that he could not evade the summons, he made a thousand and one good excuses not to attend. So to help him we gave him a street map and a leaflet with a diagram of the bus route which he should take to reach the administrative centre. He was back next day to tell us that he had got to the administrative centre but gone away without keeping the appointment! In fact, having arrived very late, he did not dare report for it. His story and the explanation of this fiasco are instructive. He had always used the bus without recourse to a text and a diagram because he always used the same routes to reach the same places. His bearings are visual, he knows he should alight when he sees such and such a building, street corner, etc. The diagrammatic bus route, sketched in a straight line, in no way reminiscent of what those very circuitous journeys through town are really like, its graphic conventions and colour scheme, its references and tiny footnotes, everything about it put him in error about the route first of all and then the stop. On finally reaching his destination, there were new written directions and new problems: the markings on the ground, the notices on the buildings or signboards, the acronyms, abbreviations, conventional signs such as arrows, the colours and the very punctuation marks, everything went to make up a formidable tangle of conventions and arrangements reaching far beyond the signs of written language. The tale of his trip round the administrative centre showed just how much every piece of written or graphic information could present a problem for him. Jules got lost in this semiotic maze and, being an hour and a half late, preferred not to have to face the official's possible ire.

Asmaa and her appointments

Our team was alerted several times by the welfare services that Asmaa, in language training with us, was not keeping the appointments made for her. Asmaa, however, stubbornly kept to a radically different version and accused the services of refusing to see her on each occasion. After some explanations, it turned out that Asmaa visited those services *when able*, not when required, for the plain and simple reason of her overlooking that an appointment always has a date and time. We took this opportunity for some diary work. The diary, a tool which ought to have made her life easier, enabled us to appreciate what an opposite effect it had in making Asmaa uncertain and disoriented. The linear time of the diary, the abstract time that no longer marks a "today" in relation to a "tomorrow" but displays a succession of identical pages, she could gain no perception of it all. Her life could not conform to this graphic abstraction, and she flatly refused to note her appointments in a diary, finally saying, "I can't put my life inside it" as she pushed the diary away.

Conclusion

The question of language proficiency is crucial to the process of migrant integration but does not solve everything. The cultural issues which include language have further determinants in the economic and political questions. The “problems” of migrants’ integration recur with each economic and political crisis in the host societies. However, migrants with little or no formal education are the prime targets on each occasion because they accumulate the economic and cultural difficulties. These difficulties, however, are not linked with geographical origin alone but also and perhaps chiefly with social background. When they arrive in advanced societies, they are caught up in a process of acculturation which is to alter radically their lifestyles hence their ways of comprehending and apprehending reality. Educational standard is decisive because its weakness causes a shock when certain migrants discover the host societies that live and function by extremely complex semiotic codes, directly or indirectly related to writing.

This cultural dividing line does not coincide with the commonly accepted divisions between “cultures” which are in fact usually defined according to national, ethnic or religious criteria. As to the relationship with writing and learning, the dividing line is essentially social. The question of interculturalism may therefore need to be restated and reappraised.

SOME PROPOSALS

1) I consider it important overall to stop thinking of cultural difference strictly in terms of ethnic, religious or national background, because these categories are very largely artificial and reductive. These labels help to entrench identities which are more meaningful to the people who apply them than to the people they are supposed to designate. The problems of adaptation and integration met by migrants often stem from misunderstandings and incomprehension about how the host societies function rather than the principles and values on which they are founded. Thus there are few realms of social existence free from administrative regulation in some form, itself completely dependent on writing. It is necessary to know and honour the leading political and cultural principles, but in practice the integration of migrants with reasonable celerity and success also depends on understanding of these day-to-day practices. The administrative complexity of host countries’ societies has become a cultural trait which mentors must be able to explain to migrants. It is no longer simply a matter of learning to fill in an administrative form, but of understanding why it is done and what will be the consequences of not doing it.

2) Transition from a predominantly oral to a predominantly textualised society is drastic for some migrants. It would be possible to envisage contact people, “cultural facilitators” as it were, helping the less educated migrants understand the mysteries of the host society. Each facilitator would have charge of several families and act as their counsellor and special *confidant*. They would speak the families’ language but would of course be thoroughly familiar with the host society. They are to be a direct, personal and oral contact with the families with the essential task of spelling out the implicit aspects of the host society’s workings.

3) The written documents intended for migrants are not much use to those with little or no formal education, *even when drafted in their mother tongue*. At all events, even if migrants have no inhibitive functional problem with reading, the documents drafted for them in their “mother” tongue are often drafted in a standard language which they do not understand because they speak a dialect. As far as possible, and the families’ home audiovisual equipment permitting, it is preferable for communication directed at them to be oral, in the

form of sound or video recordings for example, in the languages actually spoken by the migrants.

4) Many European states have provided language training facilities for first generation migrants. Some of these emphasise proficiency in the language of day-to-day life with the aim of assisting ordinary communication. One could contemplate, as a backup to this basic language training, introducing language training for access to a vocational qualification. This would involve language courses aimed at certain occupational sectors (construction, cleaning, etc.) which traditionally recruit unskilled migrants as things stand. This training would be conducted under voluntary arrangements as an offer made to migrants on arrival. This offer would be made primarily to migrants with little or no formal education. Indeed, integration through work is often the precondition for social and cultural integration. Now, given their standard of training, these migrants have trouble finding work and of course also experience difficulties in taking skill training courses with prerequisites which they do not possess, particularly command of writing. Language training with a vocational emphasis might allow a marriage of end and means: learning the host country's language, but also learning it by way of a linguistic variety which is advantageous in its greater practicality and, if mastered, foreshadows the possibility of effective integration through work. This proposal partly ties in with the work done under the Odysseus scheme⁶ for the Council of Europe (Grünhage-Monetti *et alii*, 2004).

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⁶ [Odysseus – Second language at the workplace http://www.ecml.at/conf/flyers/Conf03Folder_125.pdf](http://www.ecml.at/conf/flyers/Conf03Folder_125.pdf)