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**Reflexivity and Self-Presentation in Multicultural Encounters:  
Making Sense of Self and Other**

**Alex Frame<sup>1</sup>**

Reflexivity is a process underlying all interpersonal communication, and one which appears particularly important in multicultural encounters, due to its possible influence on the way individuals seek to play on different cultural identities, during such encounters, both consciously and unconsciously. On a first level of analysis, reflexivity will thus be considered, in this chapter, as a fundamental communication process. On a second level, reflexivity will be approached as a competence to be gained in a bid for communicative “transparency” or “efficiency”, thus echoing normative discourse around the concept, often found in social science research (eg. Tsai 2012), and particularly in literature dealing with second language acquisition (eg. Turner 2010) and intercultural competence training (eg. Spencer-Oatey 2009, p.171-242; chapter 3 of this volume). When discussing reflexivity on this second level, I will thus be using the term in a sense close to what the editors of this volume define as “awareness” (as applied to second language acquisition and intercultural communication competence). On a third level, I will evoke the reflexivity inherent in the research process itself, both on the part of the researcher and the researched (*cf.* chapter 4 of this volume for an excellent discussion of this), underlining the inherent subjectivity of any such undertaking. Understanding reflexivity as a basic communication process, I will argue, can help us apply it in practical terms on the second and third levels, by showing its limits and by

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<sup>1</sup> I am Associate Professor in English and Communication Science at the University of Burgundy in Dijon, where I have been teaching intercultural communication for the last eight years, from undergraduate to postgraduate level. My research in intercultural communication centres on the dialogical sense-making processes used by individuals to apprehend and comprehend multicultural encounters.

taking into account its specific importance in what we as academics describe as multicultural encounters, but also in the ways we go about studying them.

In order to illustrate the processes at work, the chapter will cite examples and experiences from a field study I carried out as part of my PhD (Frame 2008), looking at interpersonal interactions within the European student association AEGEE (European Student Forum). AEGEE is a pan-European student body, founded in 1980, which aims to promote European integration and cultural exchange. Its 13 000-strong network is made up of students and young adults, in some 200 “locals” situated in university cities in 40 countries on and around the European continent<sup>2</sup>. In accordance with the dominant beliefs of its founding members about the political conditions necessary for the European ideal to succeed (Biancheri 1996), the association has no national level. Rather, local antennae are coordinated directly by the executive committee (“*comité directeur*”) based in Brussels, and delegates regularly travel to meetings around the extended European continent, in order to take part in network-wide projects, attend bi-annual congresses, etc. My interest for AEGEE was linked to this non-national philosophy, since I was seeking, from a symbolic interactionist standpoint, to observe the degree to which members referred to different identities (both national and non-national) in order to try to make sense of one another’s discourse and behaviour in interpersonal communication. One of my hypotheses when studying AEGEE was that national identities were important in this communication process, despite the ideological standpoint of the association’s founders and leaders, and the lack of a national level in its structure. My study was based largely on participant observation at congresses and

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.aegee.org/>.

“European events” as well as on interviews with informants of different nationalities. I will quote it to discuss how reflexivity and multimodality shape the way we represent, categorise and communicate with others in multilingual or multicultural contexts. As with any context involving interactions between people carrying different group identities, whether based on gender, age, sexual preference, ethnic classifications, nationality or other differentiating criteria, questions of power are never far below the surface (*cf.* chapter 5 in this volume). In this respect, AEGEE is no exception, despite its espoused ideals of equality, solidarity, and European integration. Critical theory has taught us to reject universalising discourse and value systems, and has underlined the hegemonic power of linguistic and social norms, yet such norms and value-oriented representations are part and parcel of the way we go about experiencing the world and our interactions with one another. By focusing on reflexivity as a communication process, I will try to explain and illustrate just why this is the case, before trying to link these considerations, at the end of the chapter, to intercultural communication theories such as Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois, Cindy et al. 2005; Giles & Ogay 2007) or Uncertainty and Anxiety Management Theory (Gudykunst & Kim 1992; Gudykunst 1998). Finally, I will evoke ways in which I think these theories can be used to help students of intercultural communication to (a) gain a better understanding of the importance of reflexivity in the communication process and (b) increase their own critical distance and adopt a more reflexive stance in their communication practices.

### 1. Reflexivity in interpersonal communication.

As a process, reflexivity underlies all human social interactions, and can have an impact upon them. Much can be gained, in terms of understanding, by taking into account this process: not only in ethnographic research protocols, in the language classroom and in

intercultural competence training/education, but in many other social activities, such as job interviews, online interactions or chess matches. Applied to social interactions, reflexivity refers to the capacity people have to reflect on what they are saying or doing, analyse the possible consequences of this, and attempt to adjust their behaviour as a result. In his collected papers, published posthumously under the title, *Mind, Self and Society from the Perspective of a Social Behaviorist* (1934), George Herbert Mead indirectly explores this process, through the associated notions of “self-consciousness” and “role-taking”. For Mead, communication is what makes the mind and thinking possible, since humans learn to see the world in terms of symbols, by interiorising gestures, through communication<sup>3</sup>. The faculty of reflexivity is thus a social product of human communication, as well as a key process underlying it. “Role-taking”, for Mead, is what people do when they sub-consciously project themselves into another person’s social role or position within an interaction, in order to assess their own actions or words ‘through the eyes’ of that person. It is an ongoing process, allowing each of us to anticipate and adapt our behaviours – our “symbolic acts” in Mead’s terminology – depending on the way we expect other people to react to them.

Arguably, role-taking in itself is a *reflexive* process, since, for Mead, normally socialised adults are thus continuously (yet not necessarily consciously) ‘putting themselves in other people’s shoes’, anticipating – with differing degrees of success – what they consider to be likely reactions to their words and deeds and endeavouring to adapt the way they communicate accordingly. From a symbolic interactionist

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<sup>3</sup> Mead compares humans to animals which cannot think, yet can communicate. “Mind arises through communication by a conversation of gestures in a social process or context of experience – not communication through mind.” (Mead 1934, p.50)

standpoint, the fact that all interpersonal communication involves, to some extent, this process of consciously or unconsciously anticipating the reactions of others justifies the idea that the notion of reflexivity can be useful in conceptualising human communication in general. However, since much role-taking takes place subconsciously, such a broad definition of reflexivity, however helpful it may be to understand basic communication processes, is quite distant from the notion of reflexive awareness in intercultural encounters, whereby individuals consciously focus on differences they attribute to themselves and others. In this chapter, I will thus be using the notion of reflexivity, applied to interactions, to mean a more conscious or “mindful” (*infra*) form of role-taking, in which individuals (stop and) think *consciously* about the possible impact of what they are doing and saying, depending on their representations of others, and adjust their communicative behaviour accordingly<sup>4</sup>. This is not to suggest, however, that all reflexivity is conscious, nor indeed that it is possible to establish empirically a clear distinction between conscious and unconscious forms of “role-taking” in interactions. Indeed, the very process of soliciting representations and impressions from informants, by encouraging them to adopt a *post-hoc* reflexive stance, can itself lead them to reconstruct many of the representations and thought processes they report, even when they are trying to do so in good faith and ‘objectively’.

Taking this narrower definition of reflexivity, we may be justified in asking how large a role (conscious) reflexivity / reflexive awareness plays in interpersonal communication.

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<sup>4</sup> In this sense, but also with the same proviso, the notion of reflexivity appears close to Mead’s notion of “self-consciousness”, which he defines as: “[t]he taking or feeling of the attitude of the other toward yourself.” (1934, p.171). However, self-consciousness is the instantaneous result of the ongoing dialectic relationship between I and Me, which forms the process of the Self, for Mead, whereas reflexivity, as used here, is a more far-reaching process, and not exclusively centred on the Self.

Writing about intercultural communication, Scollon and Scollon highlight the importance of social structure and pre-existing identities in the way individuals behave socially:

The idea of habitus is used to capture the idea of social practice. That is to say, our theoretical position is that *we do not* largely act out of conscious purpose and planning. We act as we do, not because we want to accomplish X, Y, or Z, but because we are the sort of person who normally does that sort of thing.

(Scollon & Scollon 2001, p.169)

There seems to be little scope for reflexivity in such a vision of *normal* communication, where actors are seen to simply act out their social roles, at least in certain situations. Yet this does not exclude a certain degree of more-or-less conscious coordination, as interactional sociolinguist John Gumperz points out, underlining the way in which definitions of situations, identities and meanings are negotiated intersubjectively:

A successful interaction begins with each speaker talking in a certain mode, using certain contextualisation cues. Participants, then, by the verbal style in which they respond and the listenership cues they produce, implicitly signal their agreement or disagreement; thus they ‘tune into’ the other’s way of speaking. Once this has been done, and once a

conversational rhythm has been established, both participants can reasonably assume that they have successfully negotiated a frame of interpretation, i.e. they have agreed on what activity is being enacted and how it is to be conducted”.

(Gumperz 1982, p.167).

Interpersonal communication thus appears to involve both some degree of intersubjective negotiation and co-construction, but also semi-automated phases, in which people sub-consciously reproduce or refer to mental schemas and shared *repertoires* (Wenger 1999, p.82) of cultural and situationally-grounded knowledge and representations, once certain basic choices have been made and mutually established. Until this “frame of interpretation” evolves or is called into question, and depending on a whole host of contextual factors, including power relations, internal and external constraints, the nature of the situation and the relationship between the individuals concerned, etc. participants in the interaction may (but will not necessarily) content themselves to ‘act out their roles’, without worrying consciously about how to make a good impression, how best to get their point accepted, and so on. This is not to say that their behaviour is dictated by social structure, simply that role identities, interaction rituals, internalised situational constraints and the like are commonly used to guide behaviour and comfort the impression of mutual predictability in the encounter, to reduce participants’ needs for conscious effort, both in understanding what is going on and thinking about what to do or say next.

However, at times, participants can become conscious of this process and self-conscious<sup>5</sup>, thinking reflexively about their communicative behaviour. This may notably be associated more particularly with three types of situation or behaviour:

- managing face and accountability
- managing misunderstandings
- intended agency / ‘strategic’ behaviour

Erving Goffman’s work on “face” and “facework” (1992; 1973) highlights the importance of reflexivity in situations where communication ‘breaks down’, and where perceived threats to one another’s face lead people to focus consciously on the significance of what is being said and done, in terms of identities and the intersubjective relationship<sup>6</sup>. Strategies dealing with “face threatening acts”, by trying to justify or account for communication behaviour represent clear examples of reflexivity being used in everyday interactions, typically to subsequently analyse behaviour deemed unsuitable or problematic. Participants seek to present narratives to explain or justify what they did or said, making them “accountable”<sup>7</sup> in terms of their identities, interactional norms, the preceding conversation, and so on.

Reflexivity thus tends to surface in reaction to something happening which has been judged to be *abnormal* by one or all the parties involved. This may concern the

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<sup>5</sup> Mead makes the distinction when evoking human and animal communication: “The conversation of gestures is not significant below the human level, because it is not conscious, that is, not *self-conscious* (though it is conscious in the sense of involving feelings or sensations).”(Mead 1934, p.81)

<sup>6</sup> Stemming from Goffman and the symbolic interactionists, Identity Theory (*infra*), and notably Peter Burke’s model of Identity Control (Burke 1991, p.838) provides a theoretical framework allowing us to better understand the processes involved here.

<sup>7</sup> This notion of accountability comes originally from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and supposes that individuals are able to give account for their actions.

relationship between the participants, but it may equally be linked to misunderstandings that crop up, and which participants seek to resolve by going back over what was said and done and how they understood this. From an intercultural perspective, Jan Blommaert (1991, p.24) analyses a misunderstanding between himself and a Tanzanian colleague, surrounding the meaning of “having a coffee”. For Blommaert, in the context of a semi-professional meeting between university colleagues in Belgium, this meant drinking a cup of coffee, whereas for his colleague, it meant chewing coffee beans, which was the tradition when welcoming a guest in Tanzania. Blommaert recalls that several exchanges were necessary to identify and resolve this lexical misunderstanding.

Yet reflexivity also comes into play in interpersonal communication when individuals actively seek to influence the course or the outcome of an encounter, by consciously behaving in a certain way. Questions of structure and agency have been the source of many debates in sociology and elsewhere. It was suggested earlier that individuals very often tend to use social structure to guide their behaviour and show themselves to be predictable to one another during much of their communication. However, reflexivity is the faculty which allows them to attempt to adjust their behaviour consciously, in order to try and have an impact on the other people involved in the interaction, for example to obtain agreement, to seek compliance, to work on improving a relationship, to reject an idea, etc. This is not to suggest that individuals are able either to fully control their own behaviour (let alone that of others), or to master the sheer complexity of all the factors affecting behaviour during an interaction. Crucially, however, it suggests that they at least *try*. As Peter Burke points out:

In light of [the nature of interactions], it seems to make little sense to speak of “rational action” or “planned behavior”. Instead we need to talk about the goal states that our behavior accomplishes in spite of disturbances, disruptions, interruptions, accidents, and the contrivances of others. [...] A variety of means is always available to accomplish some goal, and if one doesn’t work, we try another.

(Burke 2004, p.6)

In a similar way, George McCall and Jerry Simmons talk about long term “agendas” which give a general orientation to actions (McCall & Simmons 1966, p.241-8): goals which participants seek to obtain by trying to exploit perceived available “opportunity structures”, themselves linked to the situation at hand, or what can also be defined as the “figurative context” (Frame 2013, p.173-246). Intentionality and agency are thus limited here to conscious *attempts* by individuals, at a given moment, to influence an interaction in a certain way, based on their understanding and representations of the situation, the other people involved, and of the underlying context.

One of the ways in which reflexivity may be brought to bear on an encounter is when participants seek consciously to give a certain image of themselves (self-presentation strategies). Once again, the basic (reflexive) process is that which is at work in interpersonal communication in general, as people use role-taking to produce behaviours which they expect to appear acceptable (or not) for others, in light of their

salient identities within the context. However, this process may become more conscious when individuals actively try to highlight some identities, rather than others. This may be the case, for example, when members or minority groups feel the need to position themselves in relation to the dominant majority identity (*infra*), and is more generally motivated by considerations of face. Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke 2000; Burke et al. 2003) seeks to describe how people try to validate their different *social* (group) identities, *role* identities or *person* identities, in order to manage self-esteem and interpersonal predictability. By widening the scope of this theory and applying it to multiple identities (Burke 2003; Frame & Boutaud 2010), we are also able to account for “strategic” performances of certain behaviours on the part of individuals in the way they seek to manage identities<sup>8</sup>.

During interactions, different identities are chosen and made salient for a variety of reasons. Very often, these include the situation (role identities), questions of predictability and desires for inclusion or exclusion. People may also have identities ‘forced’ upon them, either because they become salient in a given situation or because others insist on evoking them. As a Brit living in France, moreover as a scholar of interpersonal communication, I have become keenly aware of this process. On occasion, I consciously play on my national identity, for example when seeking to appear legitimate in talking about the UK, or when encountering a fellow expatriate. At other

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that reflexivity and multiple identities are being used differently here to the way they are used in Giddens’ (1991) “reflexive project of the self” (see Adams, 2003 for a critique of this approach). Whereas the latter imagines individuals in post-traditional societies constructing their Self by consciously choosing to pursue certain identities, from one situation to another, this chapter places the emphasis on individual interactions and the way salient identities affect the relationship between participants.

times, I tend to avoid drawing attention to this particular facet of my identity, for instance during an anonymous discussion in the supermarket. In some circumstances, the identity becomes almost unavoidable, for example in front of a France vs England rugby match. I may also choose to draw attention to my foreign identity if I'm aware of having made a syntactical error or of showing my ignorance about some element of French pop culture, to avoid passing for an *inculte*<sup>9</sup>.

It is important to note that although we may reason in terms of identities, these are very often symbolised and conveyed by identity *traits*, which themselves are open to negotiation and interpretation. Identity traits can be defined as particular characteristics or attributes, discursive positions, speech styles, gestures, postures, expressions, clothing styles, etc. associated with particular identities. Thus, if I want to underline my Englishness (identity), I may play on my accent (identity trait), for example by choosing an English pronunciation of English names or places when speaking French. Or I may attribute myself a particular characteristic which I explicitly associate with this national identity, often in the form of a joke such as punctuality, reserve, strange humour, lack of culinary finesse, familiarity with dull weather, etc.

Identity traits need to be approached multimodally, focusing on what is said, but also how it is said, with what tone, posture, expression, etc. Indeed, an identity trait explicitly evoked, when this is the case, may in fact be designed to suggest another, complementary trait which (we hope) will be associated with the same identity. For instance, I may make a joke about the English always being prepared for rain when offering an acquaintance my umbrella, while (vainly) hoping to appear gallant and

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<sup>9</sup> Goffman describes such strategies for “passing” or dealing with stigmatising identities in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963).

organised! Of course, none of this is specific to national identities. The way we choose to dress is often designed to underline such and such an attribute of a particular (desired) social identity to which we may either belong or aspire to belong (age, sex, profession, ethnic group). In terms of intergroup stigmatisation, as a civil servant in France, I often avoid disclosing my professional identity to people I don't know, for fear of being represented in the light of negative media stereotypes, notably by people working in the private sector.

I carried out my PhD fieldwork, studying interactions within the European student association AEGEE, based on the symbolic interactionist theoretical framework described above. Inspired by Identity Theory's vision of multiple social, role and person identities, and seeing the association as a collection of individuals with various shared and differentiating identities, I set about observing and trying to detect the ways in which members appeared to (consciously or unconsciously) employ various "identities" and "identity traits" in their interactions with one another. During the participant observation, I endeavoured to remain sensitive to the multimodal aspects of communication, including accents (real or faked), gestures, facial expressions, etc., as well as the power relations which seemed to be expressed through facework. I then discussed with informants certain examples of behaviour I had observed, trying to link them to the context in which they were performed, in order to confront my interpretations with their own perspectives.

During this fieldwork, I often observed members referring explicitly to national identities, as they sought to understand one another's behaviour based on (foreign) national cultures. They would joke about or discuss seriously national identity traits attributed to one another or, more often, to absent third parties, which were presented as

helping to understand or justify given behaviours or discourses or discourse styles. At other times, differentiating national identities seemed to fade into the background, replaced by salient common identities (student, associative, pro-European...), which could be used as alternative sources of predictability, and which underlined a sense of collective belonging. In situations in which the formal setting was clearly defined (e.g. plenary congress sessions), and/or in which the activity at hand gave each participant a set role as an association member (e.g. workshops), people appeared globally less likely to mobilise national identities, unless the person spoke with a strong accent, had a particularly nationally-marked appearance, or did or said something which could plausibly be attributed to national culture, for instance.

Power relations were also apparent in the way members would play on certain identity traits, seemingly in order to give themselves legitimacy or to try to cultivate a particular image, often on an insider versus outsider basis. A person who had taken on responsibilities in the association might refer to them in passing, or members of a certain group might (consciously?) use jargon in a way which symbolically underlined their shared membership of one of the association's internal thematic working groups, for example, thus setting them apart from other people present.

As I report in my PhD thesis, (Frame 2008, p.513-5), I observed what I analysed to be an instance of this type of power-related figurative behaviour when taking part in an editorial team working on a news bulletin, during an AEGEE congress in Istanbul. The editorial team was made up of around 10 people of different nationalities, who had volunteered to produce a daily newsletter, entitled M(Eye) Agora, relating the events

and providing opinion and reactions on what took place during the four-day congress.

This anecdote concentrates on four figures:

- Gunther<sup>10</sup>, German-born editor-in-chief of the newsletter, an experienced “oldie” in the association, who worked as a professional magazine editor in Germany. He had been in charge of the recent 20-year anniversary publication of the association’s annual review.
- Jean, a contributor to the newsletter, also an “oldie”, of French nationality living in Germany and working as a business consultant.
- Barbora, a contributor to the newsletter, having recently joined the association, a communication student of Hungarian nationality, hoping to become a journalist.
- myself, a contributor to the newsletter, having joined the association 2 years previously explicitly for the purpose of my PhD in communication, and a British-born university lecturer in English, living and working in France. I was also a member of the “Culture Working Group” and a workshop leader at the congress in question.

I had agreed to work on this newsletter after being approached by Jean, whom I had met at two previous congresses. Gunther and he were friends and well-known members of the network. Within the group, they worked closely together, often conversing in German, despite the fact that English was very much the lingua franca of the association, the language of the publication, and they both spoke it fluently. At the first meeting, Gunther issued instructions to the group, distributing tasks and warning contributors of the importance of respecting deadlines and working efficiently. He identified me (the only native English speaker in the group) as a resource person who could re-read and correct articles, along with himself, should the other contributors desire this. Jean spontaneously acted as a coordinator between the contributors, since he already knew many of them. He reported back to Gunther, who concentrated more on the editing, layout and integration of the different texts.

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<sup>10</sup> The names used here are fictitious.

Barbora was the only other member of the 10-person group to speak German. She admitted feeling very nervous about writing articles which were going to be read by hundreds of people (there were over 800 attendees at the congress). She said she hoped that she would be able to contribute to other publications for the association, as this was good work experience for her as a prospective journalist. Compared to the generally relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the association, she said that she found the editorial team “very German” in their approach, explaining that by this she meant organised and serious, and added that this way of working did not bother her unduly. I myself felt slightly out of place in an environment where I could not understand the language spoken by the two ‘leaders’. I was happy to have been asked to join the group, and wanted to be included in the decision-making, yet felt that the use of German was partly a way to exclude me from this. Different languages were frequently spoken within the association, but AEGEE etiquette usually required people to look for a language common to all those present in a conversation, and to use English if no other *lingua franca* was found (Frame 2009).

My misgivings were strengthened by an encounter with Gunther, when I presented him my first article, slightly after the deadline he had imposed. Although I had respected the word limit, he immediately shortened it by almost half, deleting or rewriting several sections, while voicing his (moderately favourable) opinion on its style and contents. I vainly referred to my experience of writing articles in an academic context (identity trait), in a conscious bid to defend my legitimacy (and pride!). He explained to me that he was used to this kind of writing in the context of the association (reference to his status of ‘oldie’), that it took real professional experience (reference to his own professional identity), and that it was not at all like writing for an academic publication.

In this situation, Gunther seemed to be playing on several social and role identities, more or less consciously, in order to impact on the situation and the relationships with myself and other members of the group. The main identities and identity traits used by Gunther, according to my analysis of the situation, are shown in the table below:

<i>identity</i>	<i>type of identity</i>	<i>identity traits performed</i>	<i>behavioural manifestations</i>
AEGEE 'oldie'	social	hierarchical relationships + seriousness + professionalism +	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little consultation</li> <li>• use of German</li> <li>• constraints imposed</li> <li>• 'finished' texts treated as materials to be reworked</li> </ul>
professional editor	social		
editor of publication	role		
German nationality	social		

**Table 1 : identities, identity traits and behavioural manifestations associated with Gunther**

The combination of identities I attributed to Gunther were associated with certain identity traits which appeared salient in the context, themselves reflected in the behavioural practices performed. For example, the fact that he imposed strict guidelines (behavioural manifestation) was compatible with all of the identity traits listed here and could be justified by his role of editor (role identity), and possibly also by his experience in this domain and in the association (social identities).

This discussion raises three important points. Firstly, it illustrates the importance and the limits of adopting a reflexive stance as a researcher attempting to carry out participant observation as a method. As described in chapter five and elsewhere in this volume, studies which employ this methodological can of worms are inevitably marked by our subjectivity as researchers, our limits and sensibilities, even when we try to cross-check our analyses with several informants. These limits are possibly all the more powerful in a context we describe as "intercultural", though not simply because of the supposed "cultural distance" from the subjects we are studying, since academics

working in this field generally expect to encounter cultural differences. However, many studies in “intercultural communication” tend to focus solely on national cultures and identities, whereas often other identities can reveal themselves to be just as important to the subjects being observed (Frame & Boutaud 2010).

Secondly, even if, from a symbolic interactionist point of view, we consider that Gunther’s behaviour as reported here involves role-taking and strategies of self-presentation (Goffman 1973), this discussion does not enable us to establish with any degree of confidence to what extent this behaviour is *consciously* reflexive. It seems likely that even the people concerned, whatever their reflexive capacity may be, would be very hard-pressed to provide a categorical answer to this. For instance, we might argue that Gunther’s decision to speak German is the result of role-taking (a reflexive procedure), in that we can assume that Gunther has thought (on some level) about the identities of the people present, and chosen his language according to their capacity to understand it. However, the conscious motivation for this, as well as its intended ‘meaning’ is much less clear. Has Gunther thought consciously about the situation and planned his choice of language? Might he be wanting to make a point about the “expert” in English not being able to speak another major European language? Maybe he has always had a habit of speaking German with Jean, and does so because the conversation does not concern me? Or indeed, maybe his choice is motivated by a combination of these factors, and others.

Thirdly, even if we were to accept that my (extravagantly oversimplified) interpretation of the situation as presented here were relatively close to other participants’ own interpretations of the encounter, it appears impossible to isolate identities and identity traits from one another and from the context in which they are performed or enacted. If

we accept the hypothesis that Gunther is acting in a way which seeks to underline hierarchical distance between himself and the other members of the group, should this be attributed to his role identity of editor, his position of 'oldie', his professional status, or something else entirely? Indeed, some participants might attribute it to his individual character (a "person identity" in the terminology of Identity Theory), and others to his national identity or his age, etc. depending on their idiosyncratic representations and stereotypes. If the situation were to change, would Gunther exhibit the same behaviour? Going one step further, it appears plausible that his actions are not governed by one particular identity, but indeed by the combination of identities activated in the context. Hence this supposed trait of underlining hierarchy may be privileged precisely since it appears compatible (or at least not contradictory) with several of his salient identities in this particular context. The study I carried out into AEGEE culture underlines the idea that many cultural traits attributed to the association appear inherently contradictory. For example, although hierarchy, seriousness and professionalism do appear to be espoused values in some contexts, conviviality, irony, fun, solidarity and equality can be observed as central traits attributed to association culture in other circumstances (Frame 2008, p.527 *et seq.*). From a postmodern, poststructuralist point of view, such a fragmented conception of an incoherent, constantly evolving organisational culture, where the traits and values espoused depend heavily on the figurative context and the sets of identities activated simultaneously, is close to Joanne Martin's "fragmentation perspective" of cultures in organisations (Martin 1992). Furthermore, the idea that identity traits 'feed off' one another dialogically, in their sometimes ambivalent, sometimes coherent relationship to an individual's various activated identities, can encourage us to reject approaches which limit themselves to considering one particular

identity at a time, in favour of analyses of individuals' self-presentation strategies and interactions based on the concept of *intersectionality* (Choo & Ferree 2010; Walby et al. 2012). However, even here it would be important to underline the powerful influence of the figurative context on the way multiple identities and identity traits are performed simultaneously by subjects in different situations (Frame & Boutaud 2010).

## 2. Multimodality and Reflexivity in Multicultural Contexts

Having asserted the fundamental importance of reflexivity in interpersonal communication, both through conscious reflection on communication behaviour, and sub-conscious role-taking, I will now move on to discuss the particular ways in which this specifically affects situations involving individuals who represent different national, cultural or linguistic groups. To do this, I will consider the way certain theories of intercultural communication refer, implicitly or explicitly, to intra-subjective reflexive processes. As an academic studying instances of what I define as "intercultural communication", these theories contribute to structuring my vision of what I am analysing and of the importance of reflexivity therein, and this subjective vision is necessarily inherent in both my research activity and in the discussion which follows.

During encounters with people of different nationalities, interpreting what is going on and trying to respect considerations of face and politeness (Spencer-Oatey 2000) very often implies a conscious effort to try to interiorise, or at least to grasp in some form,

what one sees as their point of view. Not surprisingly, reflexivity is frequently listed among those skills which favour a high level of intercultural competence (eg. Spencer-Oatey 2009, p.171-242; chapter three in this volume), and indeed many intercultural training programmes explicitly seek to encourage the capacity of their students to take a step back and analyse not only their own behaviours and those of their partner(s), but also the ethnocentricity of their stances.

In their work on Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM), William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim (Gudykunst & Kim 1992; Gudykunst 1998) insist on the importance of *mindfulness* in interactions. Mindfulness is characterised as a state of reduced uncertainty and anxiety, which allows individuals to remain attentive to what is going on, in order to be alert to the possibility of misunderstandings. From our point of view, the state of mindfulness appears particularly propitious to (conscious) reflexive processes, since these may be hindered either by too little uncertainty and attentiveness, or by too much anxiety, which further reduces our (already limited) subjective capacity to reason in a detached way. In this sense, we can read the central propositions of AUM as a theory based on the subject's capacity for reflexivity, *ceteris paribus*. AUM's insistence on "communicating with strangers", where "strangers" covers both new acquaintances and foreigners, in turn underlines a link between acculturation and reflexivity. When an individual seeks to become accepted within a new group, not only does he/she not necessarily know what to expect ("predictive uncertainty") or how to interpret what is going on ("behavioural uncertainty"), he/she often attempts to fit in, to 'do the right thing', or at least not to 'stand out', and doing this very often entails a relatively high level of reflexivity. This is the case for people trying to understand, copy

and master foreign codes and communication rituals, but also new recruits to a company or organisation, children in a new school, etc. This level of conscious reflexivity can be expected to gradually drop over time (though not necessarily in a purely linear fashion) as socialisation occurs within the group and semi-automated reflexes develop, together with a specific *repertoire* of past actions and experiences which the individual associates with (constantly evolving) group culture, and upon which behaviour and interpretations can be based.

However, differences between primary (absolute) and secondary (relative) socialisation processes, between enculturation in children and acculturation in adults, can also have an impact on our capacity to mobilise culturally-based identity traits for identity and facework purposes. Since ethnocentricity can be seen as a limit to reflexivity, then deeply ingrained, unconscious primary socialisation behaviours, beliefs and values would appear harder to call into question than cultural traits assimilated later in life, i.e. those which are learnt when an individual begins to frequent a new social group, and which are perceived as different to previously taken-for-granted norms. Because the individual thus tends to have less conscious purchase on his/her primary socialisation culture (Berger & Luckmann 1991, p.129), their *habitus* in Bourdieu's terms, reflexive behaviour becomes more of a challenge when the individual changes national contexts or encounters a group which does not share the dominant national doxa, *despite* the fact that he/she may be more *conscious* of the need for reflexivity in such situations. One of the reasons for this (along with affect, symbolic and ethical factors, among others) is the complexity of multimodal communication. Whereas verbal communication is generally perceived as the dominant mode and traditional education programmes focus primarily

on language acquisition (namely lexical, syntactical and phonological codes), speakers are also attentive to other para-verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. Prosody, intonation, extra-verbal utterances ('tutting', blowing raspberries, clearing one's throat, etc.), along with bodily codes, such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, proxemics and bodily contact, and also peripheral codes, such as dress codes, are all taken into account when interpreting one another's behaviour, along with the sociolinguistic knowledge and behavioural codes (protocols and rituals associated with specific situations and social categories and groups), which prescribe what is considered appropriate when. These elements all go to make up what interactional sociolinguists such as Dell Hymes (1984) or John Gumperz (1982) call "communication competence", not to be confused with "intercultural communication competence".<sup>11</sup> Thus, even when people are aware of the existence of cultural differences, and reflexively adapt language and other codes of which they are more or less conscious, there are very likely to be other codes of which they remain unaware. Misunderstandings may arise on the basis of these unsuspected codes, although the people surprised or offended by their transgression may themselves be no more consciously aware of the reason why a particular behaviour should be unexpected or deemed inappropriate. At times, divergences in codes may result in seeming contradictions or double binds, where what is said explicitly is reinterpreted depending on what is done, or vice versa. This may result in misunderstandings or value judgements, often linked to stereotypes, but in

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<sup>11</sup> Gumperz defines "communication competence" as "*the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation*" (1982, p.209). Communication competence applies to multimodal communication in general, whereas intercultural communication competence concentrates on the affective, behavioural and cognitive qualities which specifically help someone deal with individuals from unknown national environments. The first is culture-specific, whereas the second focuses on trans-cultural interpersonal communication skills adapted to contexts marked by cultural differences.

other cases, incoherencies may well simply be seen as idiosyncrasies, attributed to the other person's character or foreign identity.<sup>12</sup>

This discussion inevitably raises questions of power once again, since it underlines the way in which the negotiation of a linguistic and cultural frame of reference can advantage or disadvantage the different parties, both symbolically and semiotically, in terms of their communication competence.<sup>13</sup> Fredrik Barth (1969) evokes the importance of such choices, notably linked to underlying intergroup relations, and Carmel Camilleri (1990) describes the different "identity strategies" which can be adopted, more or less consciously, by members of immigrant minorities, in reaction to hegemonic identities and cultural practices of dominant groups. Through reflexively adopted postures or self-presentation strategies, explains Camilleri, members of minority national groups in society can thus seek to underline their national origins, in a bid to gain recognition for that identity or justify different behaviours, or, on the other hand, to distance themselves from their 'migrant' identity, by conforming actively to norms of the majority 'host' culture and declaring a preference for this group. Such preference can be reflected not only in explicit declarations, but also conveyed through adopted mannerisms, speech style, dress style, etc. Furthermore, Camilleri also points out that individuals very often change strategies depending on the social context and perceived symbolic (self-esteem) or material gains, ranging from one extreme to the other, with a whole variety of intermediate positions.

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<sup>12</sup> The classic solution as far as intercultural communication competence is concerned, is to stress the need for tolerance, empathy, and a "decentred" approach to the Other.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that "native speakers" will systematically gain from imposing their language, since their effectiveness, to some degree, depends on their capacity to establish conditions for mutual understanding, whilst both parties can play on ambiguity, feigned misunderstanding, and so on.

Finally, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) also deals with questions of convergence and divergence between different (multimodal) communication styles, linked to considerations of intergroup and interpersonal relations (Gallois, Cindy et al. 2005; Giles & Ogay 2007). Once again, strategies can be more or less conscious, ranging from intentional mimesis or distancing snubs to unconscious reproductions of postures or gestures, or unwitting accentuation of differences in communication style. The theory describes different degrees and logics of accommodation (Gallois, Cindy et al. 2005, p.141), sometimes associated with a lack of reflexivity, which can have repercussions on the relationship between the different parties to an encounter. These include:

- *over-accommodation*, whereby one party over-adapts to the other's perceived lack of communication competence, for example by adopting *foreigner talk* (Smith et al. 1991) when addressing a foreigner who speaks their language well-enough to feel belittled by this 'good intention'.
- *under-accommodation*, consisting in a failure to adapt one's communication style to that of the other person, which can sometimes be interpreted as showing a lack of interest or consideration towards them. Whereas over-accommodating consists in overcompensating for (imagined) cultural differences and can be interpreted as patronising, under-accommodation may give the impression that a person cannot be bothered to make an effort to communicate clearly and to help a foreigner understand what they are saying.
- *counter-accommodation*, when an individual heightens the differentiation between their speech style and that of the other party, which can be interpreted

as a put-down, especially between members of groups which occupy different places in the social hierarchy (in the case of class differences or minority/majority relations, for example). For example, in the situation quoted above, I interpreted Gunther's choice of language as an instance of counter-accommodation, designed to exclude me from conversations.

Such theories, often applied to intercultural communication, can help us to conceptualise and discuss the importance of reflexivity, from an operational point of view, notably for education and training purposes. By analysing real-life situations with students, based on their own experiences, as foreign nationals or minority group members, especially where they have felt disregarded (under-accommodation), have had the impression of being 'talked down to' (over-accommodation) or rejected (counter-accommodation), it is possible to encourage them to think about not only their own experience, but also how they might have been perceived by other parties, as well as the behaviours they themselves might adopt in situations in which the roles were reversed. This can lead into a discussion of reflexivity and mindfulness as ideals which can be aimed at in such situations, and of the factors which may encourage and inhibit them.

### Conclusion

Interpersonal communication is a semi-automated, multimodal activity, in which participants consciously and unconsciously negotiate a shared frame of reference, in relation with existing and evolving cultural norms. Within this frame, they seek to give a certain image of themselves, based on multiple identities and a repertoire of shared

knowledge and representations, while sometimes trying to influence others and the outcome of the encounter. The process of negotiation is all the more delicate, and often more conscious, in encounters involving individuals of different nationalities and cultural groups, since participants may be more aware of differences in knowledge, representations, and also in communication codes.

Understanding the role of reflexivity in the communication process can help us to better apprehend its importance from the perspective of intercultural education or second language acquisition, both in the first and second degree. Thus students should be encouraged to “be reflexive”, meaning to think about the way they are communicating, to push back the limits of their ethnocentricity, to be mindful and aware of differences in representations and communication styles. Yet besides simply being an aim or necessary precaution, developing an understanding of reflexivity can prepare students to approach an intercultural encounter as a socially-situated activity, helping them to anticipate the reflexivity of the different parties involved, not only the differences in communication style, but the way each participant may try to adapt his/her communication style, based on his/her representations of the other parties. In the same way that an ethnographer needs to develop an understanding of the impact of his/her presence and interactions with the subjects under study, students of intercultural communication should be aware of the impressions they give to the people they meet, and how these impressions may have an impact on their behaviour, for example when both parties reciprocally *over-accommodate* to one another, or when, as Earley and Ang describe (2003, p.101-2), a newly-arrived manager on an overseas posting at first

receives very deferential treatment, from his/her local subordinates, who then gradually, over the next few months, increasingly treat him/her much more as they would any local manager. Finally, an understanding of critical theory and the associated implications of language choices and communication styles can alert students of intercultural communication, but also managers and negotiators, to both symbolic (identity) and semiotic (meaning-construction) aspects of implicit or explicit power struggles during various types of encounter, as well as the suffering and resentment which they may provoke.

To go beyond the comparative approaches to intercultural communication, centred on national differences, there is an urgent need to focus on the inherently reflexive and multimodal communication processes underlying the interactions themselves. The concept of *mindfulness* (AUM) and different types of *accommodation* (CAT), associated with insights into intergroup power relations, affect, multiple identities and individual presentation strategies can help complexify our vision of intercultural encounters and that of our students. Indeed, existing theories of intercultural communication provide models and concepts with which we can approach questions of reflexivity and multimodality, seeking to come to grips with the reality of multicultural interactions in today's "accelerating, complex and transnational spaces". Incorporating these theoretical elements into teaching and learning about interculturality can thus benefit future practitioners and all those who work with them.

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