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Rosanna Tammaro, Marika Calenda, Iolanda S. Iannotta & Concetta Ferrantino

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### **1. Authors' information**

Department of Human, Philosophical and Education Sciences - University of Salerno, Italy

### **2. Authors' contact**

Rosanna Tammaro: [rtammaro@unisa.it](mailto:rtammaro@unisa.it)

Marika Calenda: [macalenda@unisa.it](mailto:macalenda@unisa.it)

Iolanda S. Iannotta: [iiannotta@unisa.it](mailto:iiannotta@unisa.it)

Concetta Ferrantino: [cferrantino@unisa.it](mailto:cferrantino@unisa.it)

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# *Communication for Cultural Integration: The Case of a Secondary Reception Centre*

ROSANNA TAMMARO, MARIKA CALENDIA,  
IOLANDA S. IANNOTTA & CONCETTA FERRANTINO  
University of Salerno, Italy

## **Abstract**

The language, human species-specific activity, permits to know, organize and describe the reality around us. Even though the verbal communication represents the preferred channel of expression, everyday experiences can be shared in many ways; facial expressions, gestures, but in general, our actions are reflection of the culture that shaped us. In this paper, after a brief reflection about the essential relationship that exists between language and culture, the authors report some considerations about the typical communication dynamics registered in a Secondary Reception Centre, situated in the province of Avellino. The analysis of the field observation shows that a designed and oriented educational communication is appropriate to understand the distinctive characteristics of each guests' history. Consequently, a reflection on the individual and collective communication practices, could allow overcoming the mere reception and predicting a real introduction into the social *substratum* of the Host Country.

**Keywords:** culture, communication, integration, community, Secondary Reception Centre.

## *Introduction*

The current complexity that governs some regions of our world greatly increased migratory flows; the International Organisation for Migrations (OIM) says that around one million people has reached the Europe in 2015. This paper do not address the motivation at the heart of the problematic reality. Each of us have the responsibility to deal whit the condition that undeniably affects the most ingrained habits of our communities. The aim of this article is to offer some thought consideration; for this purpose, we have started from the descriptive observation carried out in the Secondary Reception Centre of Sant'Andrea di Conza, Avellino, in the South of Italy. Living in a community, even if restricted and protected, is a new op-

portunity for emigrants: people have the possibility, through the language to tell their stories, to know and to share their experiences. In addition, communication, if properly designed and targeted towards a specific goal, can facilitate the conscious entrance into a community and enable all actors to share a new life condition.

### 1. *The language "defines" culture*

One of the human species-specific characteristics is to find an explanation for the phenomena observed and/or directly lived, giving a name to objects, events or situations. The specific components of each *habitat*, such as territorial or climatic conditions, resources availability etc., permit the establishment of a cultural paradigm. In fact, specific requirements, opportunities, or vice versa, detriments have resulted decisive for adaptive strategies emergence in the human beings, in order to represent and live in a specific context. Nowadays, the possibility of living, in the way of *dwelling* (Heidegger, 1976) is no longer exclusively linked to a territory hospitality; in fact, is connected also to the ability to generate and maintain a meaningful dialogue between the various performers of the world's scene. It is important to clear that the action of "communicate" does not mean transmitting information from one person to another, but precisely to put "something in common". To ensure that this can happen, it is necessary that the mutual intention between those who speak has been established: this condition permits the sharing both of meanings and of the rules that manage the communication exchange. Participants that are involved in a communicative act, carefully engage each other and adhere to a real signaling system, made up of rules that allow messages to be formulated and understood in a way as close as possible to the accuracy. The concept of *rule*, understood in the linguistic sense, concretely represent the average of everyone expressions (*parole*), among the possibilities that exist in the abstract, in a given system (*langue*). For this reason, the "rule" is considered not what each person evaluates or believes correct, in relation to his meanings system, but rule is what "necessarily people have to follow if they want to be members of a linguistic community" (Cosseriu, 1971, p.76); therefore, the rules are closely dependent on peculiarities of a considered community. Another

very important aspect that concerns the communication is to be primarily a cognitive activity. Every time we want to communicate something to someone, we are implicitly referring to our thinking: ideas, beliefs, dreams. According to what has been said, the human being has to be considered as a *communicating* being, as well as a “thinking, emotional and social being” (Anolli, 2002). The communication actions, however, have not to be understood as a mere means or instrument, but rather the realization of a cooperative activity between individuals, whose meanings are made available and possible by each of the actors involved in this as ordinary as problematic process. The communication is mainly a *social* activity, because the necessary condition is that it takes place between dyads or groups. Only based on these canons, in fact, it is possible to generate, transmit and retain meaning and ensure the development of a linguistic system, as well as a cultural paradigm. In fact, the mere emission of a sound through the vocal apparatus cannot be considered language. Precisely, language is an unpredictable and complex activity: “none name is of nature. It has a name rather, when a sound of the voice becomes symbol, since something is also revealed by articulated sounds - for example by the beasts - none of which constitutes a name” (Aristoteles, *Organon*, 16a). It is important to note that, during a conversation, the ways for sharing messages can be many. It is possible to use the words of our language, but in this case, it is appropriate that our listeners share our same linguistic code. Nevertheless, the human being can use a series of nonverbal and/or paraverbal behaviours, which are also characteristic and accessible semiotic artifices. Often ignored, the non-verbal language is said to include interpersonal distance, hand gestures, facial expressions and posture, but is very common during our daily interpersonal relationships. It is problematic to unambiguously define when a nonverbal behaviour is intentional and when, on the contrary, is absolutely spontaneous and unmotivated; this does not mean that the expressed behaviour do not exactly constitutes a part of the conversation in which people are engaged. It is also true that, compared to what happens for the verbal behaviour, the nonverbal communication is characterized by a strong element of meaning arbitrariness, making its classification much more complicated. Despite the verbal represents one of the most powerful semiotic artifices

(Eco, 1975), some of the nonverbal behaviours are able to give untranslatable meanings<sup>1</sup>. So, far from being a mere completion of the verbal language, nonverbal behaviour is a completely autonomous channel for sharing meanings.

During a communicative act, each levels - verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal - are closely related and they all together contribute to state the speaker's culture. Despite the term *culture* is often present in most people "everyday" vocabulary, for human beings think about culture as an abstract concept is very difficult, since all of us are immersed, without realizing (Anolli, 2004), in our culture, as fish are in the water. Culture is *invisible* but defines our thinking modality and, consequently, the way we express our "being".

## 2. Culture: an intentional activity to share meanings

It is not easy to provide a comprehensive definition of the culture concept. For this reason, we choose to refer to the etymology. The Italian word "culture" comes from the Latin *colere*, which in its literal translation means "to cultivate the land". It is then evident that this meaning was in a metaphorical sense extended as, "cultivation of the spirit and individual educational process" (Giaccardi, 2005), according to the classical (or humanistic) understanding of the culture concept. The personal educational process finds its origin in the cultural processes: culture is the *scenario* for actors involved in the everyday life *mis-en-scene* and gives them different roles. In fact, each human being is simultaneously *addressee*, *protagonist* and *observer* (Anolli, 2011). All we are *addressees* as the cultural environment that surrounds us, inexorably, shapes us: everything we do is produced because of what our culture prescribes. But, also we are *protagonists* because every day we do things, we express ourselves with words, with gestures and with actions, we become creators of new and renovated cultural practices. Through the daily behaviours, finally, we comment, express opinions on what surrounds us: this makes us *observers* of the culture in which we are

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<sup>1</sup>We refer in this case to every nonverbal and paraverbal behaviours that, in view of their specific character, have no specific codified words useful for expressing their relevant.

dipped. In every moment of our lives, or at least since we can operate *symbolizations* (Piaget, 1968) our “multiple roles” allow us to understand, interpret and fully live our culture in a conscious and oriented manner. Globalization and the almost total fall of the nation states defines the importance of the cultural character, and the concept of difference (which directly follows by this) is tangible and problematic. Although it could be desirable to tend to the equality in the rights recognition, this does not mean to cancel what characterizes each individual, or the uniqueness of one’s own existence. This involves the so-called *culture paradox*: on the one hand, the culture regulates differences and, on the other hand, it generates or in some cases exacerbates the diversity, unfortunately giving origin to cultural-historical situations of a difficult solution (Spreafico, 2004). Communication in the formal education context assumes a decisive importance and it is desirable to be considered beyond the learning of technical and disciplinary concepts. From it depends “learning” in the true sense of the word, as knowledge of the world, of the itself and the others.

The concept of communication and that of education are significantly related, especially if education is no longer understood as “instruction” or “knowledge transmission”, but as continuous recursive learning experience, in a dialogic comparison between one-self and the *other-than-self* (Ricoeur, 1993), between teacher and student, paying attention for individual differences and for the historical and social complexity.

The growing cultural diversity in today’s society imposes to recognize each other in their own social community. Even if a community can be defined as a group of people who regularly share the same social structure, customs, traditions, knowledge and values (Rogoff, 2004), it is well known that every community can give the chance for human being to discover the *other* (Benhabib, 2002), as well as for social-constructivists to mutually cooperate in the knowledge construction. In general, learning have to be built over dialogical-reflective bases, over the interaction and collaboration processes, over the possibility of a shared communication and about the opportunity to come to light common arguments, meanings and definitions. John Dewey, however, argues, “there is a link, rather than verbal, between the words common, community, and communication. Humans live in the community, by virtue of the things we have in common. And communication is the modality whereby we are in possession of the common things”

(Dewey, 1916, p.46). Relationships between individuals who live in a same community are varied and multifaceted; consequently, it is impossible to exclude conflicts or disputes often caused by wrong or unsuccessful form of communication. The educational communication, in its dialogic, formative, didactic components can promote *relational processes*. Communication is "formative" inasmuch it shapes through education the human being that lives in a society composed by identical/different humans, within which the person recognise itself. That being said underline the strong relationship that exists between the communication and education. The *educational communication* is a special type of communication, which is oriented to establish a meaningful relationship (with parents, teachers or peers) that would be able to promote the *other's* growth and the empowerment of his potentialities.

### 3. *Communicative, educational and integration process: the Secondary Reception Centre.*

As we aforementioned in the introduction of this contribution, the migration crisis that affects the European Continent determines a conspicuous mobilisation of resources act containing the *Desperate Journey* and offering, as much as possible, assistance to refugees. One of the most appropriate methodologies for migrants support in the Europe are the structures of the *Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees* (SPRAR) designed to host vulnerable classes. In general, SPRAR has made up by the network of local authorities accessing, in the limits of available resources, to the *National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services*. The SPRAR interventions are not exclusively aimed at the immediate assistance to foreigners arrived in the European territory, but the project wants to facilitate the refugees' social and economic integration, through the acquisition of a renovated autonomy. Therefore, it works towards the concept of the beneficiary's *empowerment*, defined as "an individual and organized process through which human beings can rebuild their ability to choose and design and recover the perception of their value, of their potentiality and opportunities" (SPRAR, p. 4). Specifically, these *educating communities* allow planning actions oriented to given ends, as for example for the construction of shared mean-



ings, considering it an ethics and specific educational task (Acone, 1995). In this paper, the authors have chosen to analyse the experience of a Secondary Reception Centre in the province of Avellino, in the municipality of Sant'Andrea di Conza. One of these authors has worked as educator in the centre, during the period from March 2015 to May 2016. She was able to directly observe and participate in the activities planned by the SPRAR project, focusing her attention on the communication dynamics and on the practices of sharing experiences. The centre, in the observed period, hosted young men between 14 to 18 years. In relation to our descriptive observation that was finalised to the characterization of the communicative phenomena, we focused on the relational aspects and on how the educational strategies can promote the intercultural communication. As the experience of the *desperate journey* represents a common element for all migrants, who unload on the European coasts, each human being has his own "history" that deserves attention and acknowledgement. To preserve these fundamental conditions, the educational path planned by the SPRAR is usually divided into four phases: the *reception*, the *personalization*, the *empowerment* and the *autonomy*. These standard procedures can nevertheless provide an adaptation, functional to the individual needs. The educational path, built by the educators, following a precise and calibrated analysis of each of the guests' characteristics, has directed the actions of the personalization phase to the educational communication: the aim is to establish a significant relationship between teacher and student, in order to *re-create* a reference relationships network in the context of life. One of the first elements that has been deduced from the descriptive observation<sup>2</sup> is the great difficulty in expressing. The younger refugees do not share the same language; for this reason, the observation was focused on non-verbal and paralinguistic components that can provide a variety of useful information to define their relational and educational experience within the centre. The space of this contribution do not permit to specify every educational strategies or practices registered during the period of observation. In synthesis, the SPRAR of

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<sup>2</sup>Research, briefly reported in this contribution, was carried out through the *participant observation* methodology. The essential features of this instrument, typical of qualitative research in education, have made possible the analysis of all those typical nonverbal behaviours. The researcher, who worked directly in the SPRAR centre, has used the technical of "logbook". For further understanding, please refer to Notti, 2012.

Sant'Andrea di Conza provided workshop activities that involved the entire community of beneficiaries. In these: the Italian language literacy teaching, the digital literacy teaching, the art class (painting and ceramics), the course of music (guitar, drums, etc.), the dressmaking and the recycling workshop or the didactic garden. The only lab course to be mandatory was that of Italian language literacy teaching. Motivation is easily adducible: guests have very different cultural backgrounds and, often they do not even have in common the same native language. The cultural and/or linguistic distance among young guests was shortened thanks to these educational strategies and this has also allowed educators to access to recondite content, useful for follow through the guests in their path of self-empowerment. During the period spent in the SPRAR Centre, it was possible to observe some constants in the group of younger refugees, in spite of the incontrovertible individuality of each human being. The migratory experience creates a remarkable cognitive, emotional, relational and spatial disorientation and, consequently, a strong destabilization that requires specific adaptive strategies to tolerate the new done reality. This process changes the each one's identity and it call into question roles and the value-driven nature. The migratory trauma can compromise the integration quality and the results of individual path. Generally, for refugees the individual experience of migration is initially lived as an adventure fostered by many expectations. Then the expectation and enthusiasm for what is new leaves room at the disappointment, caused by the objective difficulties; in these the exhausting search for employment, unknowing other language, lack of support from family are only some of the examples of what they might be deal with. Living in a foreign country determines for each individual a constant tension in adapting to the new environments, a sort of *cultural shock*, that often results in the loss of self-esteem and in the weakening of the person's physical abilities. All significant changes that affect the young refugee attack the personality, because a modification of the geographical space, of the sense of self, of the social and economic level, and, last but not the least of the linguistic space, which includes nonverbal communication systems and cultural dimension of language. The field observation has permitted to understand another obstacle for the integration process: this is the gap that exist between competence acquired in the context/culture of origin compared to those that are typical of the Host Countries. Indeed, just as in

Western Culture linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities are privileged (Gardner,1987), the case study done in the SPRAR Centre of Sant' Andrea di Conza reveals a very significant propensity for manual or technical-practical skills, certainly more functional in the origin countries. It has been found the presence of anxious and depressive behaviours (this condition has been confirmed by the psychologists that served in the Centre): refugees felt the separation anxiety, lived as loss of contact by the family, friends and the ethnicity group. Even the necessity to "abandon" the mother tongue to interact with other people causes *eustress*<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the greatest feeling of alienation affects the field of language, for the realization of the loss of expressive and communicative effectiveness of the language that until now had familiarly led and cataloged every level of life's experience. In conclusion, if communication, at first, has represented a very consistent factor of weaknesses, in a successive moment of the educational path in SPRAR center has been considered the unique way to live the new context of life. The results of the observation demonstrate that when they manage cultural aspects, related to the language and the cultural tradition of the Host Country, they are primed in sharing experience, emotions and feelings transmit themselves as if they were at home.

### *Conclusions*

Migration is a complex phenomenon that includes several components, factors and histories. For this reason, it is impossible dare any solution that would be not transferable to other contexts, other places and other histories. However, the direct experience of one of the authors of this contribu-

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<sup>3</sup>The *eustress*, known as "positive stress", is caused by one or more stimulus, even of different nature, that train psychophysical capacity to adapt. According to Selye, each individual has a different level of resistance to the phenomenon that surround him, that not always and necessarily are negative or harmful. The phenomena, that generate stress, can be recognized in the angst, in the physical effort, as well as in success. In fact, "from the point of view of its ability to cause stress, it does not matter that the stressor, or the situation we face, whether pleasant or unpleasant: only count the intensity of the need for adaptation or re-adaptation" (Selye, 1974). In the case of our study, this condition we believe would be connected with the compulsory abandon of the mother tongue.

tion attests that if the communicative dynamics are not limited "to the need," but they become means of telling one's self and one's own experience, the integration process is motivated. In fact, sharing habits and affective states favoured the rethinking and respect for cultural diversity. Abdelmalek Sayad (2002), to acknowledge that integration is a complex, disharmonious and conflictual process, believes that the study of the migrations has to consider the refugees origin. Conceiving that the person starts to exist when migrant arrives in the Host Country, inevitably means to understand only a partial and ethnocentric view of the phenomenon: this overlooks the weight that emigrant's history has in the process of adaptation in the host society. These authors conclude, based on the observation done in the SPRAR Centre, that investing in planned educational programs could be the way to promote intercultural integration. Moreover, through communicative dynamics it would be possible to develop the *intercultural competence* (of all the actors involved in meaningful relationships) to improve mainly the chance to understand the reality, and therefore the experience of *difference*: "the construction of reality as increasingly capable of accommodating cultural difference, that is at the base of evolutionary development" (Bennett, 1993, p. 24).

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