

Last glances of true "imperial eyes", cooperative principle and intellectual styles in the mexican foreign language classroom

Marlene Rall*

Palabras clave

- diálogo intercultural,
- estilos intelectuales,
- poder,
- competencia comunicativa intercultural.

RESUMEN

Se abordan ciertos casos de encuentros interculturales y la manera cómo los evalúan los estudiantes mexicanos.

Dos formas básicas de interacción social intervienen en nuestros casos: a) por un lado, la gente suele tratar al otro con signos marcados de deferencia y ceremonia, y espera del otro un trato respetuoso; b) podemos observar sociedades donde unos y otros se preocupan ante todo por conservar sus propias caras y suelen tener una comunicación más directa. En los encuentros entre los del tipo -a- y los del tipo -b-, pueden producirse choques que dan lugar a sentimientos encontrados, si los del tipo -b- demuestran prepotencia y los del tipo -a- sufren de una "mentalidad colonial" heredada de las condiciones históricas y socio-económicas de su país. Esta situación genera muchos temas de conversación en el salón de clase y permite orientar la competencia comunicativa desde la perspectiva de lo intercultural.

As long as foreign language teaching was mainly concerned with explaining and practicing grammatical topics like declension, nega-

* Letras Modernas, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Unam, Ciudad Universitaria, 04510, México D.F.

tion, interrogation, pronominalization and so on, teaching used to be a rather easy task and in any case a less challenging one than nowadays.

Since concepts like Communicative Competence and even more intercultural Dialogue has come up, classroom interaction has begun to develop into a really intriguing study object.

In former papers (Rall 1987, 1993, 1996, a,b,c), I looked for pragmatic differences in intercultural dialogues and tried to show, supported by the Gricean Cooperative Principle, universals of politeness (Brown/Levinson 1983) and, above all, differences of Intellectual Styles (Galtug 1985) how certain shocks or misunderstandings can be explained by specific pragmatic inferences or implicatures.

We normally start from the principle that the interlocutors talk in accordance with the conversational maxims. There are, nevertheless, differences in intellectual styles, that may create misunderstandings and hurt feelings, thus impeding a successful intercultural communication. Without going into details, two basic forms of social interplay are involved in the cases I want to analyze:

- A) On the one hand, some people usually treat each other with marked signs of deference and ceremony, expecting reciprocal image care of face on the part of their interlocutor.
- B) On the other hand, we can observe societies, where the speakers are mainly concerned with their own face and are used to a rather straight forward communication.

In this paper, my main concern is that in encounters of A-and B-types there occur collisions, giving way to bad feelings, especially if the B-type demonstrates self-sufficiency and the A-type suffers from remnants of "colonial mentality", due to the historical and socio-economic conditions of his or her country.

As Zink Bolognini (1996) points out, students who come to the first lesson always bring knowledge with them about the culture, society and history of the country whose language they are going to learn, and this knowledge is ideologically marked. She analyzes conversations between Brazilian and German students as well as between Brazilian students and their teacher of German, and she detects underlying concepts like *Herrenrasse* (race of supermen, superior race), a concept fatally linked to the disasters of the Third Reich, but already present in Brazil in the 19th century since the very first argumentation to bring German immigrants into the country. I quote her conclusions (translating from the German paper presented in 1994 at the ALEG Conference): "In an interaction between subjects of both countries, the Brazilian plays the role of the inferior, because he grows up in this

role, because the discourses he hears in his life assign this role to him. In the so-called Third World this sensation of inferiority is quite frequent, and we will have to deal with it" (Zink Bolognini 1996:492). In the case of German, the connection with National Socialism is but too obvious. Anyway, the propensity to underestimate one's own identity and overrate the other's shows up equally in French and English classrooms. That is why I am inclined to link it with the so-called "colonial mentality", in other words with deep-rooted feelings of inferiority stemming from the centuries of the conquest by and dependency on a European crown. I can't and won't generalize the presence of this kind of ideological attitudes to all of our students. But nobody can deny that after two hundred years of independency, nations like Mexico, Brazil and other Latin American countries have to struggle with identity problems brought up and maintained inside or outside of their boundaries.

In order to get information about those underlying concepts in classroom discourse and in intercultural dialogue in general, I presented some case studies to students of different ages and careers and invited them to discuss the relevancy of each of them. The first one goes as follows:

- a) A Mexican professor of sociology stated: We treat the foreigners as kings. And then they behave like kings.

The discussion of this example brought up so many interesting aspects, that Y can only summarize the most important ones for my focus. Several students claim this behaviour as typical Mexican hospitality and as appropriate for any stranger, with no regard to his origin. But they admit that there are many Mexicans who tend to treat a stranger coming from a First World country much better than other foreigners and sometimes even than their own people. And they show a mixture of acceptance and reluctance to arrogant behaviour on the part of the visitors.

The following case provoked a quite unanimous reaction:

- b) A visiting professor from Spain used to check comprehension by asking: Do you understand? (*¿Comprendéis?*) A Mexican professor asks for the same purpose: Is it clear what I am trying to explain? (*¿Me explico?*)

The Iberian question is definitely ranked as impolite and inadequate: One doesn't like to be constantly taken for a fool. But there emerges another point: In Mexico, many students and professors are inclined to give more credit to a professor coming from Europe or the

United States than to those from their own country. Imported theories have more weight: quotations and methodological foundations refer mostly to authors from abroad or North America and very often neglect the findings of Mexican research.

Anyway, the pretended superiority of a foreigner gives way to bad feelings and disagreement, but seldom of overt disapproval, e.g. the following case:

- c) A German student, invited to a session of a conversation club, began to lecture about how Mexico should solve urban problems. The group kept silence until he left: then their anger burst out about the presumptuous tourist from the First World.

A royally treated person who pays deference with conceit earns more anger than he or she may realize. In the western world, silence is understood mostly as giving up, as acknowledging willy-nilly that the other debater is right, has the better reasons and therefore wins. As I have been told, however, in the Indian realm silence means neither approval nor contradiction. They just stay apart; they don't feel concerned. The students of the UNAM are in between. Many of them keep silence, some accepting, others rejecting the arguments and feeling offended. And they are divided as well in the judgement of the silence: either they understand silence as politeness, or they interpret it as the easy settling of cowards. Others say they would and should talk back, so that the foreigner will realize he has been rude. These latter are determined to fight against false power.

The following case, observed in a lower middle class high school, caused astonishment among the discussing students:

- d) A German professor was invited to give a lecture about punctuality and conception of time; the Mexican listeners, students and their teachers, reacted as if they had been blamed and argued that their unreliability is a weapon against conquest and exploitation.

The commentaries took up the hint of the colonial past: everybody remembered from his own or others' behaviour the "glances of the imperial eyes" from the angle of the defeated, "la visión de los vencidos" who go on making concessions to the foreigners. And they began to link all the cases with this viewpoint. They acknowledged the fact that in many encounters of Mexicans with Europeans or North Americans there is a lack of equilibrium in self-esteem and care of the others' face. Of course not all, but several students found out that in a power play they often accept the role of the inferior that is not really

suitable. Some realize that their politeness is taken for submissiveness. Others emphatically reject arrogated superiority and allege the necessity to defend their own human values.

It is promising to introduce such topics of conversation into the classroom in order to increase the pragmatic awareness of the students, make them alert about possible prejudices and allow them to gain a better intercultural oriented communicative competence.

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