

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

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The modern world of the 21st century is through all the media an open space that serves for highly varied means of communication. Through different means of mediated communication we don't communicate only within the scope of our language and our own local culture, but our interaction spreads far beyond the borders of these. Bilingualism and biculturalism, or even multilingualism and multiculturalism, are phenomena shaping and altering the form and representations of the communication nowadays. “*Different cultures have different modes of interaction*“ [Wierzbicka 2003] and these modes of interaction represent a tendency to clash into one another in a practical multicultural communication. An important aspect is whether the participants of the communication are members of the same social, cultural and ethnic group and if not, how these groups differ from one another.

The questions and observations concerning cultural differences are mostly applied to natural speech and its representation in everyday communication. When considering literature and literary art as one of the means of mediated communication, the author and the readers of the work of art are communicators within a closed and predestined communicative means (considering the two-fold nature of communication, the author as the main communicator and the reader as the receiver and reviewer of the author's ideas and contributions into the communication). The given topical area, the American holocaust novel is highlighted by the very nature of the intercultural background. If we presume that this topic is employed mostly by authors having ethnic Jewish background, this aspect is twice valued. The easiest and most ideal situation for cultural analysis and deconstruction of a literary text is the precondition that the author and the reader come from the same cultural background sharing the same mother tongue and living approximately in the same era. However, this ideal situation can be taken for granted by no means. Particularly at the topic of American holocaust novel, this ideal condition is most often not likely practiced (only within the American Jewish minority).

The author's and the receiver's backgrounds

The aspect of the author is just one facet of the issue. In the essence of literature and within its values, the reader is just as important as the writer of the text. Therefore, the cultural background of the receiver and consumer of the particular work of art is just as significant. For example, when an American holocaust novel written by a Jewish author is analyzed by a central European reader, three cultural aspects need to be scrutinized: the cultural aspects of the writer as an ethnic Jew, the cultural aspects of the writer as an American citizen and the cultural aspects of the reader as a central European resident. These three aspects can easily be divided into two categories

requiring separate cultural studies and analysis. On one hand there is the category of the producer and on the other hand there is the category of the receiver of the text.

To analyze the categories described in the previous paragraph, two descriptions could apply for them. The category of the receiver would be much diversified from the point of view of analysis, because his/her cultural background is always unique. In our case, it is a central European reader. However, the receiver can have any cultural background. On the other hand, the question of the producer is much more specific in our case. Here we can state three different starting points for three paths of cultural analysis:

Yiddish author with other mother tongue than English, e. g. Jerzy Kosinski – an American author with Polish mother tongue. Nevertheless, maybe the best example for this category of authors is Ellie Wiesel with Yiddish as mother tongue, but speaking also Romanian, Hungarian and German on mother tongue level, later also speaking Hebrew and writing in Yiddish, French and English. Considering the multilingual and multicultural background of this author, the analysis of his texts is extensively peculiar from the point of view of questions concerning intercultural communication.

An American author with English as mother tongue, being or not being able to speak Yiddish, but having Jewish cultural background. Cynthia Ozick or Jonathan Safran Foer could be named as examples, both of them were born in American Jewish families.

Completely American author with English as their mother tongue, not being able to speak Yiddish and not even sharing a Jewish cultural background. The most famous author from this category would be William Styron. When analyzing his texts, the American cultural background might be considered as the most important one.

The importance of the above mentioned categories can be proven by a short analysis of Bernard Malamud's text from the short story *The Magic Barrel*. This author is a Jewish – American author writing in English. English was his mother tongue, he could speak Yiddish as well, but on a considerably lower level [Lasher, Malamud, 1991:48]. Therefore all his literary works were originally written in English. And still, the Jewish cultural background is strikingly perceivable from his writing, as Wierzbicka states in her short analysis:

The story is written in English, and it includes no unusual or non-standard words, but the ways of speaking and of interacting reflected here are those characteristic of Yiddish, not of (mainstream) American English. Note in particular the use of *No* and *Of course* the irony, the wry humor, the bluntness and the gruffness. [Wierzbicka 2003: 4]

Directness versus indirectness

Wierzbicka characterizes the Yiddish ways of communication by extensive directness [Wierzbicka 2003:88]. Throughout a range of directness versus indirectness,

different languages can be compared to one another. An interesting example is the triad of English, Yiddish and Japanese. Yiddish is very direct when compared to English. As the analysis of Malamud's extract shows, it is characterized by wry humor and even gruffness. This directness does not necessarily apply negative connotations of language, rudeness or insensitivity. It is rather the question of egalitarianism as an ideology and this directness fights any possible discrimination. In practice, while Yiddish is typical of direct rejection, if the context requires it, in the form of harsh *No*, English chooses moderate and polite forms of rejection. In English, usually an explanation would follow the rejection. Yiddish does not require any explanation, unless asked for. A complete opposite to both these practices is Japanese. In Japanese, a person wouldn't say *no* just because it's impolite. A Japanese speaker would avoid any negative forms at all and would try to sneak out from the situation by other means. Now when imagining a Japanese speaker talking to a Yiddish person, a range of misunderstanding might rise only from the question of directness versus indirectness because of the differences in the culture of communication of both nations [Wierzbicka 2003:88 – 93]. To put it general, there are different ethnographies of speaking [Wierzbicka 2003:85] and the study of these ethnographies gives us the initial key to understand the communication between two cultures.

The notion of directness is just an aspect of generalized concept of communication in Yiddish. If we took this directness as an initial characteristics and we would examine it in the context of real and typical Yiddish modes of interaction, we would arrive to such extreme manifestations as wishes and curses. Especially curses are very typical of Yiddish culture. For an English or central European communicator, catching typical Yiddish curses being pronounced to a close relative of the communicator might be a very outlandish situation. A non-Yiddish communicator might remain speechless and stunned by hearing a Yiddish woman cursing on her own baby by words for example: "*May the worms eat you. May the earth open up and swallow you alive.*" [Wierzbicka 2003:123]. Within the Yiddish culture such highly emotional expressions are common and nobody would wonder upon catching them. These formulas are purely of therapeutic function, as Matisoff states [Matisoff in Wierzbicka 2003:123]. These curses, as easily present in common speech, might be as easily present in the Yiddish literature as well. Therefore when a non-Yiddish reader encounters such expression, these expressions might be given a completely different meaning and importance than they originally had. In practice, they acquire the importance which would be given to such curses in the original language of the readers, their mother tongue. But in Yiddish these curses are of completely other importance. This might cause intercultural confusion and it might also alter the results of interpretation of the particular literary work of art. This is one of the practical fallacies of the intercultural perception.

The roots of the described directness might be sought not in the linguistic sources, but in the cultural ones more likely. Yiddish is a language that has common roots even with English, because it is sourced in old Germanic, exactly western Germanic [Krupa 1996:99]. In this way it has less in common with Hebrew, than it may

have originally seemed. Yiddish contains only some elements from Hebrew on the dialectical level and uses the Hebrew alphabet for its system of writing [Benor 2002]. Yiddish is more or less the language of Ashkenazi Jews, i.e. mainly the Jews living in Europe, mostly Germany [Schoenberg 2011]. On the other hand, Hebrew – the original language of the Jews, not those of living in diaspora, is a Semitic language [Krupa 1996:266 - 268]. In Hebrew we can find the phenomenon which is called the *dugri talk*. It is a “*ritual act of confrontation*” and *direct and straightforward expressing of non-complimentary thoughts or opinions*” [Wierzbicka 2003:186]. In practice, this *dugri* talk seems to be the cultural background for the typical Jewish directness. The *dugri* talk is practiced by the speakers of Hebrew and for the speakers of Yiddish similar directness is typical. This implies that these two languages, Hebrew and Yiddish, though having different roots, they are tools for the same attributes of the group of people with the same ethnic and cultural roots.

However, the directness of Yiddish and the *dugri* talk of Hebrew does not necessarily imply the same phenomenon, at least not into the same extent. The proof for this can be the fact that the Jews from Diaspora are viewed as *luftmensch* from the point of view of the “original” Hebrew Jews. The concept of *luftmensch* implies “*rejection of Decadent European ways of speaking that involve twisting the forms of speech for the purpose of showing respect.*” [Wierzbicka 2003:186]. While Yiddish is too direct compared to English, for Hebrew it starts to be artificial (into some extent). It is using “*twisting of forms*” in order to be polite, which is not typical for Hebrew.

All in all, the range of directness and indirectness can also vary within one group of people of the same ethnic origin, based on different aspects. Therefore, the value of directness within the works of arts of American Jewish novelists can vary in various extents. The cultural background of these writers is very important when considering the directness of their literary products. As we know different dialects, analogically it could be proposed, that these dialects are only reflections of cultural differences within the scope of the same culture. Jews speaking Hebrew, Jews speaking Yiddish and Jews speaking only English as their mother tongue are different variations of the same cultural background. Therefore, the elements of their communication differ into some extent as well. Comparison of authors within these groups and the question how they differ from each other should be subject to deeper analysis.

Conclusion

The issues discussed within this paper have shown that the aspect of cultures and multiculturalism, as well as the aspect of linguistics and multilingualism cannot be omitted from the study of the given area. Without these contexts, important details would leak from the correct approaches. Therefore the view of the aspects presented in this essay has brought significant notes to be applied in further studies.

Literature

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Summary

The paper deals with the aspect of multicultural communication within the topic of literary interpretation. There are a few basic questions which are studied in the paper: the question of crosscultural communication concerning the author's and the readers' backgrounds and directness and indirectness of Yiddish and American communication. All these areas are considered within the basic topic of the research, the American Holocaust novel. The topics discussed suggest ways for approaches for text interpretation. The phenomenon of multicultural communication is very important because the whole study of the American Holocaust novel is basically a study within more cultures (American culture, Jewish culture and the culture of the reader). The paper serves as a general overview of the given issues and suggestions for their practical application to the study of American Holocaust novel.