Developing strategic competence in liquid times.
Fred Dervin, Department of French Studies, University of Turku, Finland
freder@utu.fi

My contribution looks at encounters between inhabitants of cross-border countries – sometimes a case of daily intercultural communication. In these encounters, breakdowns in communication often happen, due to linguistic but also psychological boundaries (e.g. stereotypes). Strategic competence, which is at the centre of this paper, helps us to balance these obstacles. In what follows, first, I contextualize intercultural encounters in an era labeled as *liquid* by the British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Secondly, I define strategic competence both from linguistic and intercultural points of view. And finally, I reflect on developing strategic competence in encounters between representatives of different cross-border countries.

1. **Liquid times and intercultural encounters**

The key-terms of *culture* and *identity* always pop up when one talks about intercultural communication – being on a day-to-day basis or "scientifically". In intercultural encounters, most people understand *culture* as "shared habits, beliefs and values of a national group" (Kotter, 1996: 188). To many observers (Dervin in Dervin & Suomela-Salmi 2006, Abdallah-Pretceille in Kelly et al. 2001), this brings about a rather imaginary, homogeneous, limited and *solid* picture of national groups, which lays down boundaries between interlocutors. Anderson, in the early 80s, called national cultures "imagined cultures" because

> All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined… imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in their minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson, 1991: 4).

On top of that, and in agreement with Bauman's image of *liquidity* to describe the zeitgeist of our times (*ibid.*), *culture* and *identity* are often described as multidimensional and unfixed. Bauman explains his liquid image in these words:

> One attribute that liquids possess and solids don't, an attribute that makes liquids an apt metaphor for our times, is the fluids' intrinsic inability to hold their shape for long on their own. The "flow", the defining characteristic of all liquids, means a continuous and irreversible change of mutual position of parts that due to the faintness of inter-molecular bonds can be triggered by even the weakest of stresses[1].

In liquid times, we all "navigate" between different and countless cultures (among others: sexual, generational, professional, educational, media cultures), and witness an excess of identities. As such, one could say that everyone's culture turns into

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[1] Zygmunt Bauman, Milena Yakimova. *A postmodern grid of the worldmap?* Interview with Zygmunt Bauman. Available at: http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-11-08-bauman-en.html (visited 25.5.2006).

culturality - an incessant creation of culture – and everyone's identity into *identification* (Hall & du Gay, 1996). As we live in a world where we constantly meet people physically or virtually (acquaintances, friends, strangers, etc.), we need to "identify" (i.e. show resemblance or differentiate) and create culture every time encounters occur. In this "complex pastiche of relationships, choices and acts enacted in a variety of parallel and overlapping contexts" (Barney, 2004 : 151), positive and negative stereotypes on others and one's selves are multiplied because it is not possible to grasp the complexity of all the people we meet (Morin, 2001). This reaction is the other side of the coin of liquid times. Influenced by the media, the education we have received (e.g. history and foreign language learning lessons), what we have heard from family and friends, foreigners themselves, we tend to reduce others to merely stereotypes – or "shared group beliefs" (McGarty et al. in Yzerbyt, 2002: 1). Cross-border encounters make no exception to the rule and sometimes, even though people live close to each other, stereotypes are strong.

Having now described the macro-context of our contemporary worlds, the following section presents a definition of strategic competence, which can help us to deal with the ambient liquidity. Strategic competence is usually defined in terms of linguistic strategies (*micro-strategies* in what follows). What I want to do here is extend this concept to other savoir-faires (or *macro-strategies*), such as liquefying others and selves and paying attention to contexts of interaction.

2. Strategic competence and verbal / non-verbal interaction in cross-border regions

2.1 Defining strategic competence

Little (s.a.) tells us that interests in strategic competence started when one attempted to define communicative competence (Canale 1983, Canale and Swain 1980) and check how it is applied in second language performance (Faerch and Kasper 1983). The canonic definition of strategic competence, as far as language (verbal as well as non-verbal signs) is concerned, is the way in which a speaker, when faced with a communicative problem, improvises her or his way to a solution. In what follows, we present *micro-strategies* that can be used in interaction.

Let us imagine that you are visiting a cross-border country to which you have never been before. You speak the local language a little and you are trying to buy a train ticket at a station but you do not remember the word for *ticket*. The ticket seller does not seem to speak any other language than her/his mother tongue. Which verbal and non-verbal strategies can you use to express what you are trying to say?

On the one hand, you can avoid this problem by adopting **a reduction strategy** (Mariani, 1994): in other words, in order to keep the act of communication going, you can adjust your ends to your means by different actions. In relation to the situation above, you may e.g.:
- Point to a drawing or a picture of a ticket;
- Mime, draw a square or rectangle with your hands or with a pen;
- Mention the name of the place you wish to travel to;
- Check your pockets or wallets quickly if you have an old ticket to show;
- Ask someone around you if they speak any other languages that you know;

- Quickly call a friend, whom you know speaks the local language, on your mobile and have her/him talk to the cashier.

This sort of situation is usually very stressful – especially if there is a long queue behind you. In some cases, you may decide to abandon the message and use a machine to buy your ticket. In most cases though, people manage to get their message through and obtain what they want.

On the other hand, you may decide to keep your goal but develop another "riskier" plan, and adopt an **achievement strategy** (Mariani, ibid.). Since languages are changeable and liquid, who says you always have to use the correct and proper word or pronunciation if what you are saying is understandable? In this case, you may:

- Foreignize words (*anglicisms* or using English words may help since English is the foreign language most people know);
- Resort to a word for word translation (ex: in some languages tickets are *paper receipts*);
- Make a sentence to explain what you want (ex: I need a piece of paper that can help me to travel).

Reduction and achievement strategies are very easy to use in such "basic" contexts. In fact, we use these strategies on a daily basis with our friends, colleagues, family, etc. (just listen to the people around you).

2.2 Reflecting on linguistic interactions

Encounters in cross-border regions can take many forms: they can occur in one's mother language(s), in a foreign language or in a *lingua franca*. Our interlocutors can be native speakers or non-native speakers (the case of *lingua franca*). Besides, encounters can even take place in *non-verbality* ("sign language", in case none of the interlocutors share any language). They can take place in one's own country, in a foreign country, or in a third cross-border country (where both interlocutors are strangers). All these aspects can have an impact on the acts of communication that take place. In what follows, the strategies that are described are *macro*, i.e. they allow us to deal with what surrounds and is involved in interaction and are based on observations.

Because of all the different contexts of encounters listed above, interacting with someone *cross-borderly*, can be a demanding, complex and more or less unstable situation. The more complex the topic is, the worse it gets. That is why, analysing the context of communication can help us to alleviate some of the stress and potential misunderstanding that can take place during interaction. Scholars in linguistic interaction studies have provided a framework for analyzing interaction/communication which departs from the (too) simple classical model of Jakobson (1963). In Jakobson's model of communication, a sender emits messages (codes) to a receiver who decodes them (in intercultural encounters, these actors are usually representatives of two different countries). The reality is quite different. Interaction studies tell us that we should be aware of the following elements when we communicate (Traverso, 2005: 18-19, Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999: 62), among others:

- Our relationship to the person we are talking to: personal (a friend), institutional (a colleague), functional (customer/sales assistant) or a mixture of these (a colleague can be a friend);
- Our roles in the communicative act: proximity/distance (intimates/total strangers) and power relations (equality or hierarchy);
- The number of individuals involved in the act of communication (the more individuals, the less "involved" we may have to be or the less risks we may have to take);
- Each participant's characteristics: age, sex, socio-professional status, mother tongue, intercultural capitals, etc. (if they are guessable or known to you);
- The duration and place of the encounter (public/private spaces);
- The objective(s) of the encounter (business, leisure, transaction, etc.);
- The psychology, mood, health of the individuals (if we are extremely tired, we may not wish to be very sociable).

Taking into consideration all / part of these elements before, during and even after the act of communication can help to deal with the liquidity of the situations and of our interlocutors (and of ourselves). Let us not forget also that there are a lot of "others" involved in what people say (*doxa*, "ready-said", words and phrases borrowed from other people, constructed-reported speech, etc.), that we are also part of what is being said and done (breakdowns may also depend on us), and that people do change opinions, ways of expressing their ideas depending on where they are, who they are talking to, their moods, their health, etc. If we are aware of some of these elements before and during interaction, using micro-strategies (presented in 2.1) might be easier.

3. Intercultural strategic competence

Going back to our episode at the train station mentioned above, now let us imagine that the ticket seller comes across as very rude or impatient to you. S/he tells you something but you cannot understand her/him and you feel that s/he is not being supportive or nice. You may start thinking: s/he does not like foreigners, s/he is annoyed because you do not speak her/his language properly, s/he is from such or such country that is why s/he is acting this way, etc. All the explanations that will cross your mind during or after the act of communication are based on impressions, solidity, and most probably your "imagination" (Cf. section 1). They may have an impact on what you do or say in this situation. Most probably what you will be thinking will be related to *us vs. them* (ex: Austrians vs. Hungarians) because of frustration.

There is no "grammar of civilizations" (Braudel, 1993) that can help you solve this sort of problem. Intercultural strategic competence is not really based on what you say but more on what you think and how you react to difficult intercultural situations. To me, it is impossible to separate linguistic and intercultural elements: they are interrelated and equally important. Intercultural strategic competence can be developed through the following aims:

-Being aware that national cultures and identities can be a *Deus ex-Machina* in intercultural encounters. In other words, whenever you hear somebody - or even

yourself - utter a "we Slovakian/Austrian/Hungarian people are…", you know that what comes after this utterance is based on "imagination" and solidity. In other words, you realise when someone is solidifying her/his discourse and trying to manipulate you, i.e. "[h]ow (…) individuals use culture – theirs and that of their interlocutors – or, more precisely, how do they use fragments of these cultures in order to communicate?" (Abdallah-Pretceille in Kelly et al. 2001: 137). Strategies to deal with this include: Discussing the matter with the person, avoiding the topic with her/him or leaving…

- When surrounded by your peers or others, you avoid explaining misunderstandings and differences by using national characteristics (ex.: "I did it this way because I am Hungarian"). That is why discussing, clarifying, confirmation checking are important to make sure that you really understand what is being said or happening[2].

-You really believe that every single individual you meet is multicultural (sex, age, religion, status in society, etc.) and liquid, and that s/he adapts to different contexts and interlocutors and wears "social masks" accordingly. Besides, you know that people are human beings and that they are in good/bad moods, have personal problems, feelings (they may not like you for other reasons than your nationality), preferences, and that nationality has nothing to do with the ways they treat you.

-Avoid ethnocentric[3] comments such as "in my country, we do it this way. It's much better" because, again, you would be lying – not everybody in your country does things the same way. Ethnocentric comments ("banal nationalism" Billig 1995) are very common, we do not always even notice when we use them – they can hurt.

-Finally, non-verbality (ex: facial expressions, gaze, gestures, postures, tones of voice, body positioning in space, etc. Cf. Poyados 2002) does not really have a "grammar". Some interculturalists (Dahlen, 1997) give workshops and train people to adapt to foreign non-verbality. But in my opinion, you should not try to learn (or even worse copy) a people's non-verbality, because it doesn't really exist and you may find yourself in a very embarrassing or ridiculous situation if you do. Non-verbality changes according to contexts of communication and familiarity with the people around us, etc. If you take the French for example, who are known for kissing people to say hello, even they do not know the rules (two, three or four kisses?). So meeting somebody from a neighbouring country does not mean that you have to be like her/him or become like her/him, because it is impossible.

Going back to our train station for one last time, having reflecting on these ideas, you will most probably succeed in obtaining your ticket by considering the ticket seller to be an *enigma*, controlling your emotions and refraining from thinking about national characteristics.

Conclusions

Liquid times are extremely complex times. Whenever we meet someone, being cross-borderly and even intraculturally, we face an enigma, i.e. someone who is liquid in her/his identities and ways of being. As we have seen in this paper, strategic competence can help us to face liquid individuals and liquid situations. Developing

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[2] Of course, one could always use one's culture as a weapon, a strategy in interaction, but is this ethically acceptable?

[3] Ethnocentrism is the Belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group. The term was coined by William Graham Sumner.

micro- and macro- strategies is a very long and hard process, whose path is filled with *faux-pas* and mistakes. The more we meet people from cross-border countries, the more we should be able to communicate correctly with them. Yet, we need to remember that we are human beings and that we have emotions and feelings that hinder our "perfection". What we need to work on is our abilities to reflect on situations and on what we say (or not say) and tell (or not tell) other people, and what we do.

As a conclusion, I would say that being honest with oneself (I can / cannot do it, I can / cannot lie about who I am; I can / cannot continue speaking to a person because s/he is disrespectful; I can/ cannot use a "polished" image of my country) and with others (I don't understand what a person is saying, I should tell her/him; I don't like her/his attitude, I should let her/him know). Strategic competence is not about forgiving somebody for being e.g. impolite to you or xenophobic, but it is about making acts of communication, e.g. in cross-border encounters, as respectful and smooth as possible. Abdallah-Pretceille (ibid.) tells us that the term intercultural communication is a tautology (all acts of communication are liquid and therefore intercultural) and when we communicate intra-culturally, we tend not to ask ourselves as many questions as when we are faced with somebody from a different country. It all seems natural with a person from your own country, even though s/he is as enigmatic as any foreigner. The key to cross-border communication probably lies in liquefying people from other countries, and dealing with them as we do with any person from our own environment.

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