

LIFE AREAS AS VEHICLES OF DIALOGUE AND INTERCULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract. *Promoting intercultural dialogue has been a priority for most European institutions and recent developments have underlined its importance, bringing a new emphasis on this issue. This paper would like to provide a brief evaluation of recent initiatives in the area of intercultural dialogue, taking into account different fields with direct link to diversity and intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue does not exclusively deal with social and political issues. It also considers the importance of dialogue in the relationship between most of life areas: religion, museums, art, music, sports, literature, languages and many others.*

The current article is dedicated to the role of intercultural dialogue by covering some issues related to the importance of direct interaction between representatives of different languages and cultures. Respecting and promoting linguistic diversity lays the ground for all citizens to take an active part in social, economic and cultural life and to shape skills and abilities in intercultural communication. In a wider sense, the aim of intercultural dialogue is to learn and to want to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging.

Keywords: *intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, multiculturalism, social integration*

Some concepts of dialogue and intercultural dialogue

Dialogue is considered as a rational conversation between two or more persons. The word is derived from the Greek *dialogos*, which in turn comes from *dialegethai* (to converse). *Dialegethai* comes from *dia* (through, across) and *legein* (to speak). Today the meaning of this concept is perceived, according to J. Tarnowski, as a method, process and social attitude. The method describes patterns of inter-human communication conducted for the sake of mutual understanding, rapprochement and finally, cooperation.

The word *dialogue* as given in the dictionary of Catholic social science describes the term as conversation aimed at mutual confrontation and understanding of views, and as cooperation in the search for true protection of general human values and work for justice and peace.

Dialogue distinguishes itself from debate because it involves a form of listening that is beyond position or profession. Dialogue is described as a process of exchanging information where participants leave the dialogue with a deeper knowledge level and wider frame of reference than when they approached it. It involves the creation of an expandable context.

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Dialogue is successful to the extent that all parties to it are permanently stretched beyond their opening views. Furthermore, dialogue distinguishes itself from debate because negotiation is a discussion in which the participants try to strike a deal or reach an agreement of some kind. In other words, negotiation is the art of give and take. In contrast with the art of negotiation and debate, a dialogue may request from its participants to see each other not as an abstract being, but as a particular individual and the process as one of accepting the other.

It is also relevant to consider the concept of *culture* in order to understand one of the two elements of the word, *intercultural*. By definition, culture is always embodied in a specific community, in the way its members feel, think and act. That is, in the way they understand themselves and the world, realize their happiness, express their moral, religious and political values, and establish particular relations as individuals and groups in every sphere of practical living (Ariva, p. 4).

Once we have defined the constitutive elements of the concept, we may proceed towards the definition of *intercultural dialogue*. Intercultural is perceived as a path to conviviality and multiculturalism in which cultures influence each other without destroying themselves or entering into clashes or conflicts. One of the major challenges of the future is to devise dialogues between cultures able to balance unity and solidarity with tolerance and diversity. Intercultural dialogue becomes a necessity not only for overcoming conflicts but also for rethinking and responding to global challenges faced by humanity.

The Council of Europe offered a definition for the *Intercultural dialogue*, as an "open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception".

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave the following significance to intercultural dialogue: "Without this dialogue taking place every day among all nations – within and between civilizations, cultures and groups – no peace can be lasting and no prosperity can be secure". Outlining the value of dialogue between civilizations launched by the United Nations, he stressed that "it helps us draw on the deeper, ancient roots of cultures and civilizations to find what unites us across all boundaries, and [...] perhaps most important [...] helps us discern the role of culture and civilization in contemporary conflicts, and so to distinguish propaganda and false history from the real cause of war".

Dialogue between cultures, the oldest and most fundamental mode of democratic conversation, is an antidote to rejection and violence. Its objective is to enable us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging.

Aims of Intercultural Dialogue

Earlier assumptions considered dialogue between cultures similar to the dialogue between persons. Others believed that the real purpose of intercultural dialogue was to reduce international violence (war, terrorism), while there were others who thought that the ultimate goal of intercultural dialogue is fostering global economic development.

At this point we may also introduce the concept of the intercultural person, since he or she represents one who has achieved an advanced level in the process of becoming intercultural and whose cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics are not limited, and are open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of any one culture.

Thus, a person becomes international, universal or multicultural.

As phrased by UNESCO, the complication is that one person in an interaction cannot be interculturally competent alone, because interaction is a process co-constructed

jointly by all participants. If together participants manage well, then together they are interculturally competent. If not, then it is simply inaccurate to say one of them was competent and the other incompetent. This notion of co-construction, of jointly making our interactions with others, rests at the heart of any intercultural encounter. Each encounter is about making something, creating something, jointly with at least one other person, and so the process of interaction must serve as focus. In any case, intercultural dialogue is the first step to taking advantage of different cultural traditions and histories to expand the list of possible solutions to common problems. Intercultural dialogue is thus an essential tool in the effort to resolve intercultural conflicts peacefully, and a precondition for cultivating a culture of peace¹.

In a wide sense, the aim of intercultural dialogue is to learn and to want to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging. Intercultural dialogue can also be a tool for the prevention and resolution of conflicts by enhancing the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The following objectives should be taken into consideration in order to have a respectful exchange of views between individuals:

- to identify similarities and differences between different cultural traditions and perceptions;
- to share visions of the world, to understand and learn from those that do not see the world with the same perspective we do;
- to bridge the divide between those who perceive diversity as a threat and those who view it as an enrichment;
- to share best practices particularly in the areas of intercultural dialogue, the democratic management of social diversity and the promotion of social cohesion;
- to develop jointly new projects.

But the real aim of intercultural dialogue is considered to be the reduction of international violence: terrorism and war. However, intercultural dialogue implies an understanding that leads to praxis. Therefore dialogue cannot be accomplished merely by holding conferences, but should be built into the very structure of the cultures of the world. Dialogue, in this sense, is a rational conversation between two parties in an atmosphere of freedom, respect, equality, trust, and commitment to truth.

Life areas as direct link to the intercultural dialogue

Intercultural dialogue does not exclusively deal with social and political issues. It also considers the importance of dialogue in the relationship between all fields or areas of activity: religion, museums, art, music, sports, literature, languages and many others.

Since 2008 the Council of Europe organizes on an annual basis the *Exchanges on the religions dimension of intercultural dialogue*, with the participation of representatives of religious communities, non-religious convictions, NGO's and other civil society actors, as well as representatives of member States' governments. The Exchange provides a platform for dialogue between public authorities, religious communities and organizations representing non-religious beliefs, and broader civil society on topics of particular importance to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. In 2007, in the context of its Chairmanship, San Marino set up the first European conference on "The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue". In May 2008, the White Paper on intercultural dialogue "*Living together as equals in dignity*", highlighted the contribution of both

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/interculturaldialogue/core-concepts>

religious and secular groups to European cultural heritage; and it is today widely recognized as the reference document on managing diversity in a democratic way².

Religious people and communities of many different faith traditions have a long history of aid for those in need, including those fleeing war, poverty or persecution. Religious orders and monasteries of various traditions offered places of safety and aid to the poor, and from the 19th century onwards religiously based charities of many different faith backgrounds have become involved in humanitarian assistance of various kinds (Goodall, 2015:1).

Pope John Paul II asserted that the church and the scientific community will inevitably interact; their options do not include isolation. Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish. According to his attitude, we need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be (this was according to Pope John Paul II, Letter to Director of the Vatican Observatory, 1.6.1988, in Papal Addresses 9, p. 300).

Festivals, films, museums, exhibitions or drama are among the most powerful ways at people's disposal for them to express their worldviews, emotions and opinions. Art is the most used instrument (and through the most varied forms), for remembrance and celebration of important events, for preserving collective identities, for honoring people. Through art, individuals and groups also actively exert citizenship and propagate opinions: they claim rights, denounce atrocities, influence public opinion and encourage action of their peers. Art is used to educate youngsters, to animate groups, to stimulate solidarity and collective links and to foster community wellbeing, or solely to touch the inner world of spirituality and worship, celebrating cultural diversity (Gonçalves, Majhanovich, 2016:7).

Can music play a role in intercultural dialogue? Experience shows that shared musical experiences can generate strong emotions and an increasing number of cross-cultural musical projects would seem to indicate that people are seeking this shared experience across cultures in order to reach out to each other and achieve a better understanding. The French romantic poet and novelist Victor Hugo wrote: "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent." The German romantic metaphysics of art declared music a 'language above language'. This line of thought was continued in the second half of the 19th century by Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche, who considered music as an expression of the 'essence of things'. Nietzsche said that "Without music, life would be an error." Music was elevated by writers to a 'language of a spirit world', and the symphony was used as a prototype for absolute music.

Performers, composers and audiences did not only discover the enhanced creativity generated by the intercultural musical encounter, they also came to experience the transcendental power of this hermeneutical dialogue which effortlessly crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries. This can be well illustrated by the example of jazz. During the first half of the 20th century, throughout the Western world, jazz was perceived as the 'music of the black' and regarded as the symbol of primitivism, animalism, evil and a menace to Christianity and civilization. Later on, jazz bands members picked musicians from different ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, consciously deciding to ignore linguistic barriers and rather base their collaboration on musical excellence and intuitive

²https://search.coe.int/directorate_of_communications/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680761567

understanding. This way jazz has become everyone's music (McKimm-Vorderwinkler, 2010:5).

Already accepted as a tool for social integration, sport is also seen as a means of promoting intercultural understanding in an increasingly diverse Europe. Regarding the contribution of sport to intercultural dialogue, a declaration annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty, 1997, "emphasizes the social significance of sport, in particular its role in forging identity and bringing people together". In addition, politicians and sports stakeholders agree that sport can act as a tool for social integration. Several Euro barometer surveys show that almost three in four EU citizens view sport as a means of promoting integration, while two thirds perceive sports as a means of fighting discrimination³.

In 2003, the European Commission ordered a study to examine "the contribution of sport, as an instrument of non-formal education, to the multicultural dialogue between young people" as well as "the part it plays in promoting the integration of recent migratory flows". The study provides policy recommendations on increasing the use of sport to promote intercultural dialogue as well as on issues related to refugees and asylum seekers and the use of EU structural funds . It gives examples of good practice for sporting organizations serving culturally diverse communities.

UEFA president and former French football star Michel Platini has made a passionate plea for preserving the exclusivity of football and sport across EU regulations, arguing the game is a vital cog in the process of social and cultural integration across the continent (Kukhler, 2008).

Platini stated that "European sport has always been a powerful catalyst for social and cultural integration. Millions of children from all parts of the world have become and continue to become European by kicking a ball around a muddy pitch in our towns or countryside before going to school [...] Grassroots sport is an extraordinary catalyst for ethnic intermixing and integration. Football in particular is a welcoming, protecting and integrating sport"⁴.

Generally, the literary context surprises between different cultures the act of communication through the exchange of ideas and the identification in the other of some patterns of writing, collaboration that ends with the construction of writer identity.

It has been said that literary works can benefit and advance intercultural understanding. For instance, Mazi-Leskovar, a professor from Ljubljana asserts that "literature should alert readers to all those who are in one way or another different from the readers themselves. Literature thus encourages inter and intercultural awareness". Multicultural literature remains one of the sources through which issues related to intercultural communicative competence can be successfully addressed. Works of literature enable the reader to observe the world from several perspectives and cherish the diversity of individual perception and the power of literature lies in its unique ability to deeply involve the reader both at a cognitive, as well as emotional level (Steppat, 2017:4).

Abdo Abboud, professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Damascus, agrees that literature is a mirror of the social and cultural relationships within a people, a society and a culture. When works of literature are translated from a foreign language, the recipients in the new language are enabled to achieve insight into the social and cultural conditions of that people or nation. And because dialogue between cultures requires channels, literature is also a highly important tool in that dialogue. If one wishes

³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/sports/linksdossier/sport-and-intercultural-dialogue/>

⁴ *Sport and Intercultural Dialogue*, on <https://www.euractiv.com/section/sports/linksdossier/sport-and-intercultural-dialogue/>, 25 Feb. 2010

to get to know a culture, two options are available: either one learns the language, or one reads the literature in translation. Language teaching is subject to limitations, simply because there are so many languages, that it's impossible to learn them all. So translation will continue to be the most important channel of communication between cultures.

Languages, the main vehicle in the intercultural dialogue

In all European countries multiculturalism and diversity has become an every day reality. To ensure a harmonious interaction between people and groups with different cultural and religious identities, respect for cultural diversity, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation are becoming basic social skills needed by every European citizen. Intercultural learning, intercultural dialogue, intercultural competence must be understood as one of the preconditions for individuals to cope with the new challenges of having to build societies that must be based on respecting people in their diversity. Intercultural learning is an experience which involves all senses and levels of learning, knowledge, emotions, behavior in an intensive way. Language is one of the most visible elements of culture and in that sense a central aspect in intercultural communication.

Language-learning bridges cultures and promotes intercultural dialogue and respect. It is an important tool for fostering dialogue and fighting racism and discrimination because it opens our horizons to the richness of cultures and ideas brought by migrants from all continents to the European area.

The priority of languages as identity signs becomes evident when dealing with issues relating to language loss and the emergence of new linguistic practices. From the perspective of intercultural relations, safeguarding linguistic diversity goes hand-in-hand with promoting multilingualism and must be matched by efforts to ensure that languages serve as a bridge between cultures, as a means to promoting the successful diversity of the world's cultures⁵.

Learning languages, understanding other languages, builds bridges between people, between communities and cultures. Of course, speaking someone's languages doesn't mean we solve all our problems. But it is a window, a way of appreciating that another point of view, another perspective, exists. And that's an essential starting point to understanding each other better.

Linguists believe that a large percentage of the world's languages are likely to disappear in the course of the 21st century. While the precise number of languages spoken in the world today is disputed, inventories in evaluating languages statistics such as the *Ethnologue and Linguasphere* put the total between 6,000 and 8,000.

Endangered languages and their extinction

About 2,500 languages are in danger of becoming extinct according to UNESCO, and some of them are spoken by only 30 people. By the turn of the century, it is estimated that at least 50 per cent of the world's current spoken languages will be extinct.

There is an increased social consciousness around the importance of language diversity in the development and maintenance of knowledge, cultural heritage and human dignity, under the related causes of linguistic human rights and the protection of endangered languages (Paolillo, 2006).

An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future. Many languages are failing out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely

⁵*Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, UNESCO World Report, UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2009, p. 67

used in the region or nation, such as English in the U.S. or Spanish in Mexico. Unless current trends are reversed, these endangered languages will become extinct within the next century. Many other languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers; these languages will become extinct when their last speaker dies. In fact, dozens of languages today have only one native speaker still living, and that person's death will mean the extinction of the language: It will no longer be spoken, or known, by anyone (Woodbury, Anthony C., 1992).

The distribution of languages and language families around the world tells an important story about the successive waves of human expansion throughout the habitable areas of the globe.

The most dramatic examples of language extinctions in recent history occurred in the Americas and Australia. At the time of Columbus, an unknown number of distinct languages, easily in the thousands, were spoken in the Americas. Today, as a result of wars, disease and incorporation into the populations of European colonists, only a few hundred remain, and many of those remaining, especially in North America, are near extinction or in danger of being replaced by a European Language (Adelaar 1991:70).

The causes of language death and extinction are numerous and may reflect deliberate human action, involving violence and coercion, or accidental circumstances, through contact with neighbors, absorption into other linguistic groups or natural causes. Generally, language loss is preceded by some sort of multilingualism, whether societal, through coexistence of different language varieties in the same geographic area, or individual, through individuals knowing more than one language (Wurm, 1992:263). Although most languages go extinct because their speakers are absorbed by a dominant language or cultural group, many languages are simply oppressed out of existence, usually by a colonial power or their descendants. So, sometimes the answer to question *Why are languages extinct?* is simply: "Because the government said so".

Language statistics are collected in a number of ways, depending on the purpose, resources available for their collection and the nature of the entities collecting the statistics. Large compilations of language statistics are therefore heterogeneous, in comprising a body of statements gathered through different means. Unfortunately, a major consequence of this is that the statistics so gathered are often not readily comparable to one another, and it can be very difficult to know what sort of information one really has.

At present, the field of linguistics is only a small part of the occupation of linguists. While many linguistics graduate programs require a component of training in linguistic fieldwork, this requirement is not universal, nor is it focused entirely on under-described languages. Linguistic field surveys are also rare, being complex to organize and relatively expensive for their participants' time and resources. Consequently, much of the information that exists about smaller language groups is likely to be out of date.

Because so many languages are in danger of disappearing, linguists, the very few ones interested in this concern, are trying to learn as much about them as possible, so that even if the language disappears, all knowledge of the language won't disappear at the same time. Researchers make videotapes, audiotapes and written records of language use in both formal and informal settings, along with translations.

In addition, they analyze the vocabulary and rules of the language and write dictionaries and grammars. Linguists also work with communities around the world that want to preserve their languages, offering both technical and practical help with language teaching, maintenance and revival. This help is based in part on the dictionaries and grammars that they write. But linguists can help in other ways, too, using their experience in teaching and studying a wide variety of languages. They can use what they've learned

about other endangered languages to help a community preserve its own language, and they can take advantage of the latest technology for recording and studying languages (Woodbury, Anthony C., 1992).

Preserving these languages is important, and UNESCO explains why: "Languages are humankind's principle tools for interacting and for expressing ideas, emotions, knowledge, memories and values. Languages are also primary vehicles of cultural expressions and intangible cultural heritage, essential to the identity of individuals and groups. Safeguarding endangered language is thus a crucial task in maintaining cultural diversity worldwide".

From the perspective of cultural diversity, linguistic diversity reflects the creative adaptation of groups to their changing physical and social environments. In this sense, languages are not just a means of communication, but represent the very fabric of cultural expressions. We may say they are the carriers of identity, values and worldviews. The respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is a cornerstone of the European Union. But we must constantly renew the efforts to relate these values to citizens' lives. Languages can make that link. Learning languages can make Europeans more aware that a better Europe lies at our doorsteps, a Europe that can deal with the complex reality of multiethnic societies and the coexistence of different cultural identities and beliefs.

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