The impact of American culture on other cultures: Language and cultural identity

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Abstract: - It is widely believed that there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity. Despite the belief in the *one language = one culture* equation, individuals assume several collective identities that are likely not only to change over time in dialogue with others, but are liable to be in conflict with one another. The widespread Internet, the American dream, the American way of life and the American culture have come to symbolize what is up-to-date and fashionable, becoming increasingly international and imitated around the world, to the detriment of local traditions and national identities, which seem to fade away in front of something not necessarily superior in point of value.

KeyWords: linguistic impact, cultural imperialism, consumerism, propagation media, cultural identity, conflicts

1 Introduction

By accent, vocabulary, and discourse patterns, speakers identify themselves and are identified as belonging to a certain discourse community. From this membership they draw personal strength&pride, as well as a sense of social importance and historical continuity. In isolated, homogeneous communities one may still define group membership according to common cultural practices and daily face-to-face interactions, but in modern, historically complex and open societies, it is much more difficult to define the boundaries of particular social groups and their members' linguistic and cultural identities.

Language, group profile based on race, or regional identity were, in turns, used as ethnically defining criteria, and they always failed and caused suffering, because they generated discrimination and unfair prejudices. There is no correlation between a given racial characteristic and the use of a given language or variety of language. Regional identity is equally contestable. Despite the multiethnic presence in France, Georges Marchais said: 'every man and woman of French nationality is French. France is not a multinational state: it is one nation, the product of a long history.' National identity is not a clear-cut either/or affair: either you are,or you are not a citizen.

An immigrant's sense of self, that was linked, in his country of origin, perhaps, to his social class, his political views, or his economic status, is, in the new country, overwhelmingly linked to his national citizenship or his religion, for this is the identity imposed on him by the others. His own sense of self and cultural identity change accordingly. Out of nostalgia for the *old country*, he may tend to entertain what has been called *long distance nationalism,* as the community he used to belong to becomes an *imagined community,* more emotionally present than the actual country he lives in.

2. American culture and its impact on the global framework

The American culture is a diverse, uncommon melting pot, inaugurated by the rapid European conquest of vast territories sparsely inhabited by various indigenous peoples. Therefore European cultural patterns predominated, mainly in language, arts and political institutions; however, peoples from Asia, Africa and North America also contributed to the new emerging civilization, influencing popular tastes in daily life. As a result, the American culture possesses an unusual mixture of patterns and forms forged from among its diverse populations, and its complexity has created a society that struggles to achieve tolerance and produces a uniquely casual personal style that identifies Americans everywhere.

2.1 Essential traits

In the 1830's the French political writer Alexis de Tocqueville provided a penetrating portrait of the American democracy and its cultural impact, still valid today: 'Americans are inclined to emphasize the ordinary and easily accessible traits, rather than the unique and complex ones.' Therefore, their culture is defined by its popular and democratically inclusive features (blockbuster films, TV comedies, sports & movie stars, magazines, fast food), and not

by its highly cultivated aspects (books, theatres, museums, art galleries). In modern USA, even fine arts stem from the fusion between refined & popular culture. This mixture spreads quickly, in the form of a cultural *invasion & conquest*, with both positive and negative consequences, spanning vast regions where exquisitely refined tradition used to rule.

2.2 Imported values

Among the forces that shaped American culture, imported traditions play an important role. While it is true that today's America sets the pace in modern style, it is also true that, for much of its early history, however, the USA was culturally provincial, and its art was considered second rate, especially in painting and literature, where European artists set the tone, defining quality and form. American artists often took their cues from European literary salons and art schools, as cultivated Americans traveled to Europe to complete their education. In the late 18th century, some American artists produced high quality art, such as the paintings of John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Charles Stuart and the silver work of Paul Revere. However, wealthy American art collectors in the 19th century still bought works by European masters, also acquiring decorative artifacts such as porcelain, silver and antique furniture. Then they ventured further in this field, seeking more exotic settings, especially items from China and Japan. By means of purchasing foreign works of art, wealthy Americans were able to obtain the status inherent in a long historical tradition, which the United States lacked. Americans such as Isabella Stewart Gardner and Henry Clay Finch gathered extensive personal collections, which overwhelmingly influenced non American arts. In literature, 19th century US writers believed that only refined manners and perceptions associated with the European upper classes could produce truly great literary themes. Such authors, notably Henry James and Edith Wharton, often set their novels at the crossroads of European and American cultural contact. Britain especially served as reference for quality, due to its role in American history and due to the links of language and political institutions. Throughout the 19th century, Americans read and imitated British poetry and novels, such as those written by Walter Scott and Charles Dickens.

2.3 Originality

The American culture developed an original and widely heard voice during the 19th century, showing a cultural identity strongly connected to nature and to a so-called divine mission, with liberating effects on how culture was perceived both in domestic context and abroad. Authors like Emerson and Thoreau portrayed deeply individualistic characters connected to natural and spiritual sources, rather than to the conventions of social life. Many of the 19th century's notable figures in literature (Melville, Dickinson and Twain) also influenced this tradition. Above all, Whitman's poetry spoke in a distinctly American tone about people's relation to one another and described freedom, diversity and equality with fervor. Yet, very little of this American culture actually moved beyond the United States and influenced art trends elsewhere. Folklore including craft traditions such as quilting or local folk music created by Appalachian farmers or African slaves remained largely local. This sense of the special importance of nature for American identity lead the inhabitants to become increasingly concerned with natural environment, overwhelmed by the late 19th century urban life and industrial products. It resulted in numerous calls to preservation by naturalists such as Muir who established the first national parks and the scenic areas of the American West.

2.4 Impact of immigration

Immigration and diversity shaped the unique American *melting pot*. By the early 20th century, as the US became a world power, its cultural identity became more complex. The country constantly grew more diverse as immigrants streamed in, settling mainly in the growing urban areas. Social diversity found significant expression in arts and culture. American writers of German, Irish, Jewish and Scandinavian ancestry identified an audience, even if the cultural elite resisted their works, considering them crude and unrefined. Many such artists focused on 20th century city life and on themes like poverty, efforts to assimilate into the United States, and family life in the new country: Theodore Dreiser, of German ancestry, Henry Roth, a Jewish writer, and Eugene O'Neill&James Farrell, of Irish background. European influence was very different from what it used to be: artists changed the core of American experience by incorporating their various immigrant origins into its cultural vision. During the 1920s and 1930s, African American poets&novelists enhanced this new trend. Langston Hughes, ZoraNealeHurston and Countee Cullen, among others, gathered in New York City's Harlem district and wrote about their unique experience, creating the *Harlem Renaissance movement*.

2.5 Visual arts

Visual arts of the early 20th century also began incorporating many new sights and colors of a

multiethnic America, visible in recent city settings. Painters associated in a group known as The Eight, such as Robert Henry and John Sloan, portrayed the picturesque sights of the city, while later painters and photographers focused on the squalid city views. Nature remained a significant dimension in national cultural self-expression, as proved by O'Keefe's paintings, but no longer at the heart of American culture and, by the end of the 1930s, few artists or writers considered it the basis of cultural identity.

2.6 Music

The tunes of many nations became American songs, and immigrant talents helped define national melodies, especially in the form of the Broadway musical.Composers like I. Berlin and G. Cohan used their talent to help define American patriotic songs & holiday traditions. In the 1920s other melodically original forms, the blues and jazz, began to dominate the rhythms of American popular music. Such tunes had African roots and were adapted to the American South, quickly spreading throughout the country. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie are the marks of a classic American sound. Composers like Gershwin and performers like Bix Beiderbecke also incorporated jazz rhythms into their music, while instrumentalists such as Benny Goodman adopted the jazz improvisational style to create a racially blended form: *swing music*.

2.7 Entertainment

The movies, the phonograph, and, a bit later, the radio made entertainment available daily, allowing Americans to experience elaborately produced dramas and all types of music. While mass media made all these things possible and accessible to more and more people, it also began to homogenize tastes, styles and points of view among different groups in the US. Class and ethnic distinctions in American culture began to fade when increasingly numerous stations broadcast movies and music to audiences throughout the country. Some critics argued against the growing uniformity of mass culture, especially as it lowered the general standard of aesthetic taste, since it sought to please larger numbers of spectators by appealing to simple rather than complex levels of education and understanding. However, culture became more democratic as modern technology and mass media allowed it to reach more people.

In the 20th century, mass entertainment extended the reach of American culture, reversing the influence, as Europe and the world were now transformed into consumers of US popular culture. Hence America became the dominant cultural source for entertainment and popular fashion, from the jeans and T-shirts teenagers wear to the music groups and rock stars they listen to and the films they watch. Audiences all over the world view American TV programs, years after their popularity has declined in the country of origin. TV, and later on, the Internet, became so widely spread at international levels, that they influenced economy, individual thinking and even global politics (what people bought, what they knew about current events, and how they reacted to political changes). American entertainment still is, probably, one of the strongest means by which American culture influences the world, despite the fact that certain countries, such as France, resist it, seeing it as a threat to their unique national culture.

2.8 Consumerism

Popular culture is in step with the growth of consumerism, the repeated acquisition of increasing varieties of goods&services. The American lifestyle is closely associated with clothing, houses, gadgets, as well as with spending leisure time. As advertising stimulates the desire for updated/improved products, individuals increasingly equate their well-being with owning certain things/purchasing the latest model. Mass media presents a privileged lifestyle that many hope to imitate, and Americans seek self-fulfillment and status through gaining material items. Indeed, products consumed/owned, rather than professional accomplishment/personal ideals, often constitute the success standard in American society. The media exemplify success with the most glamorous models of consumption: actors, sports or music celebrities. Dependence on products and constant consumption defines nowadays consumerist society everywhere. Mainly youngsters have set the pace for this ideal, fueling the consumer culture all over the world. Consumption has been extensively criticized as a dizzy cycle of induced desire. It seems to erode older values of personal taste and economy. Despite this, the mass production of goods has also allowed more people to live more comfortably and made it possible for anyone to attain a sense of style, blurring the most obvious forms of class distinction.

2.9 The informal style as trademark

The American style in the 20th century is recognizably more informal than in Europe, and more dependent on what people in the streets wear. European designs have a significant impact on American tastes, but fashion across the ocean more often comes from popular sources like schools, the street, television and movies.US designers often find inspiration in the imaginative clothes worn by young

people in cities or by workers in factories and fields, Blue jeans arre probably the most representative article of American clothing which has conquered the world. In the 1950s, actors Marlon Brando and James Dean made this type of trousers fashionable by wearing them in movies, thus becoming part of the image of teenage rebelliousness. This fashion statement exploded in the 1960s and 1970s as Levi's became a fundamental part of the youth culture focused on civil rights and antiwar protests. By the late 1970s, almost everyone in the United States wore blue jeans and youths around the globe sought them.As designers created more sophisticated styles, blue jeans began to express the American emphasis on informality and the importance of detail subtlety. By highlighting the right label & the right look, blue jeans, despite their worker origin, ironically embody the status consciousness of American fashion and the eagerness to guess the next trend. Along with its companions, cosmetics and accessories, the industry grew enormously in the second half of the 20th century, turning into major competition for French fashion, with its original look, based on the tradition of the old West (cowboy hats/boots/jeans) and on much used sportswear, frequent in suburban styles.

2.10 Festivals

Americans celebrate various festivals&holidays, because they come from around the globe and they practise many religions. They also celebrate specific facts, commemorating historical dates to encourage a common national memory. Holidays in America are often family or community events. As the US is a secular society founded on the separation of church and state, many of the most meaningful religiously based festivals and rituals, like Easter, Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan, are not national events, with one major exception: Christmas and the holiday season surrounding it. It is a huge commercial event in the American social calendar, deeply embedded in the popular imagination. Not until the 19th century did Christmas in the United States begin to take on aspects of the modern holiday celebration, with gifts, traditional foods, and elaborate decorations. It has grown in popularity and significance ever since, and Santa Claus defines the season for most children. Indeed, as some religious faiths do not have this particular tradition, the celebration interval has recently expanded to the holiday season, embracing Hanukkah,the Jewish festival of lights,and Kwanzaa, an African heritage celebration. Thus, the Christmas season is the closest thing to a true national festival in the US. It also is a pretext for intense shopping, spurred by advertising worldwide, and its frantic celebration has added numerous and important

elements to the social festivity patterns abroad: specific carols and typical decorations now have a wider circulation, many cards bear English greetings being considered fashionable, and the religious tradition is accompanied by a display of abundance. The expansion of the Christian event has even begun to encroach on the most indigenous of American festivals, Thanksgiving. Celebrated on the last Thursday in November, it has largely shed its original religious meaning as a feast of giving thanks to God, in order to become a celebration of the bounty of food and the warmth of family life in America. Children usually re-create the original event at school: Pilgrims sharing a feast with Native Americans. Both the historical and the religious origins of the event have largely given way to a secular celebration centered on a traditional meal, on family reunions and traveling, with people giving time and food to the needy and homeless. Another holiday that has lost its religious meaning becoming an industry worldwide is Halloween, the eve of All Saints' Day. It celebrates witches,ghosts,and goblins attracting mainly children. Other national holidays have become less significant over time and receded in importance as ways in which Americans define themselves and their history: Columbus Day was formerly celebrated on October the 12th, the day explorer Christopher Columbus first landed in the West Indies, but the date was changed to allow for an extended weekend. Originally it commemorated the 'discovery' of America in 1492, but as people became sensitive to their multicultural population, celebrating the conquest of Native Americans was controversial. Holidays honoring wars lost much of their significance, but celebrations reminding key contemporary issues enjoy high participation rates drawing much public attention, as in the case of Martin Luther King Jr., the African American civil rights leader assassinated in 1968. His birthday, a national holiday, symbolizes tolerance and inclusiveness in the American society and worldwide.

2.11 Democracy

The country is committed to democracy and equality in law and institutions, trying to export this model overseas, sometimes successfully, other times not, sometimes from generous reasons, other times merely disguising its financial and strategic goals. Such values flourished in the American environment after fighting prejudices and economic interests; the ideals originated in European societies which served as reference points, but they took firm roots in America more rapidly. The American dream, the American way of life and the American culture now

epitomize what is most up-to-date, becoming increasingly international and imported by countries around the world, to the detriment of local traditions and national identities, which fade away in front of something not necessarily superior in point of value.

3 Language and cultural identity

Language and cultural identity are progressively altered by globalization and by the increasing impact of the American culture and technological progress implemented worldwide. Informality, consumerism and widely accessible entertainment enhance the speed at which modifications take place. Certain such changes are for the better, others are for the worse, and humans now witness new types of endangered/potentially extinct *cultural species* such as traditions, idioms, dialects,and vanishing realities.

When speaking of cultural identity, we have to distinguish between the limited range of categories used by societies to classify their populations, and the identities that individuals ascribe to themselves under various circumstances and in the presence of various interlocutors. While the former are based on simplified and often quite stereotypical represent-ations, the latter may vary with social context. The ascription of cultural identity is particularly sensitive to the perception and acceptance of an individual by the others, but also to the perception the others have of themselves, and to the distribution of legitimate roles and rights both parties hold in the community.

Cultural identity is a question of both indenture to a language spoken or imposed by others, and personal, emotional investment in that language, through the apprenticeship that went into acquiring it. The dialectic of the individual and the group can acquire dramatic proportions when nationalistic language policies come into play.

3.1 Cultural stereotypes

The problem lies in equating the racial, ethnic, national identity imposed on an individual by the bureaucratic system, and that individual's self-ascription. Group identity is not a natural fact, but a cultural perception. Perception of someone's social identity is very much culturally determined. What is perceived about a person's culture is what the others apparently see, and it is determined by the stereo-typical models already built around the interlocutors. Group identity is a question of focus and diffusion of ethnic, racial, and national concepts or stereotypes.

European identities have traditionally been built around language & national citizenship and around the model *one nation = one language*, rather than around ethnicity or race, but even in Europe the

matter is not simple: people alternatively declare themselves of one nationality or another, depending on their position regarding the history of the region and the family biography. Many cultures survived even if their language virtually disappeared; others survived because they were part of an oral tradition kept up within an isolated community, or because their members learned the dominant language, a fact that, ironically, enabled them to keep their own.

3.1 Language crossing as act of identity

One strategy of cultural survival in immigration settings is to exploit, rather than stifle, the variety of meanings generated by the participation in several discourse communities at once. More and more people live, speak and interact in in-between spaces, across multiple languages or varieties of the same language. Such idiom crossings, frequent in inter-ethnic communication, include code switching, i.e. inserting elements from one language into another, be they isolated words, whole sentences, or prosodic features of speech. Language crossing also enables to show either solidarity or distance towards the discourse communities whose languages are used.By crossing languages,speakers perform cultural acts of identity. Language crossing may be used for more complex roles by speakers who wish to display multiple cultural memberships and play them off one against the other. They frequently insert figures of speech of one language into the prosody of another, or use phrases from one language as quotations into the other, to distance themselves from alternative identities, or to mock several cultural identities by stylizing, parodying, or stereotyping them all, if it suits their social purposes of the moment.Nation-states respond to separatist tendencies by refocusing national identity either around a national language or around the concept of multiculturalism. Besides being used as a way of excluding outsiders, the use of one, and only one, language is perceived as sign of political allegiance. People who, by choice or necessity, were bi- or multi-lingual, like migrants and cosmopolitans, are held in suspicion by those who declare one stable national identity.

3.2 Standard language

National identity is expressed by an artificially created standard language, derived from the dialects. When one language variety is selected as indicator for differences between insiders and outsiders, it can be protected from variations via official grammars, dictionaries and the national education system. In some countries that have a National Academy for the preservation of the national linguistic treasure

against external imports and internal degradation, standard language misuse is perceived not only as a linguistic mishap, but as an aesthetic and moral offence as well. The standard language is always a written form, preserved by a distinct print culture, serving a variety of political/economic/ideological interests. The desire to freeze time and keep the language pure preventing cultural contamination is constantly mined by the cooperative construction of culture in every dialogic encounter. The language acquires a symbolic value beyond its pragmatic use becoming a group's cultural emblem whenever a dialect is imposed on others by exercising national or colonial power, centralized pressure of a melting pot ideology, or when one language rules others via centralized deliberate planning or diffuse societal forces (English becoming an international language).

3.3 Linguistic and cultural imperialism

Linguistic rights are now viewed as basic human rights, and the case is made particularly strong with regard to the hegemonic spread of English around the world. When people feel economically and ideo-logically disempowered, the language may become an issue and a major symbol of cultural integrity. In a world of signs where meanings proliferate, it is difficult to distinguish the effect from the cause in linguistic imperialism, therefore linguistic pluralism is desirable, but the idea that people cooperate just because they speak the same language is an illusion. Linguistic rights, like anti-trust laws,must be upheld, not because of the strict relationship between culture and language, but because each language provides a uniquely individual means by which human beings apprehend the world and one another.

3.4 Cross-cultural/intercultural/multicultural

The terms cross-cultural/intercultural refer to 2 cultures or 2 languages meeting across the political boundaries of nation-states.They are expressed in the equivalence 1nation=1culture=1language, expecting a culture shock to take place when crossing borders. Cross-cultural approaches in teaching seek ways to understand others by learning their national idiom.

Intercultural may also refer to communication among people from different ethnic, social, gender identified cultures within the limits of the same national language. It is a dialogue between minority cultures and dominant cultures, being associated with issues of bilingualism and biculturalism.

The term multicultural is frequently used in two ways. In a societal sense, it indicates the coexistence of people from many different backgrounds and ethnicities. In an individual sense, it characterizes

people belonging to various discourse communities, who have the linguistic resources & social strategies to affiliate and identify with many different cultures and ways of using language. The cultural identity of multi-cultural individuals is not that of multiple native speakers, but, rather, it is made of multiple social roles or *subject positions* they selectively take, depending on the context they are in at the time.

3.4 Media and cultural identity

The invention of the printing press &the Internet radically changed the relation between language and culture in point of maintaining historical traditions, managing collective memory,and interpreting events with authority. Textual culture has become dominant in research activities. However, there have been two ways of looking at the written language: as a fixed and stable product-*the text*, or as interactive process between a text and its readers-*the discourse*. Via educational systems / media / political institutions, communities play an important role in establishing parameters for socially acceptable discourse events.

4 Conclusion

Even if there is no immuable correlation between language and cultural identity, language is the most sensitive indicator of the relationship between an individual and a given social group. Language is an integral part of the self – it permeates the very process of thinking and the way of viewing the world, constituting a means of showing political and cultural loyalty:the same use of a given language can index both servitude and emancipation, both powerlessness and empowerment. Paradoxically, the only way to preserve room for maneuver,vital to any human communication, is not by making sure that everyone speaks the same language, but by making sure that the linguistic semiotic capital of humankind remains as rich and as diversified as possible.

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