

The Role of Stereotypes in a New Europe

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I. Internationalization in Europe

Due to the expansion of mobility world-wide in the physical and geographical sense representatives of practically all professions and affiliations are affected by intercultural experience and international influence.

Recent technological achievements have further facilitated our access to world-wide information without even our needing to move; the development of the electronic media has produced a hitherto unimaginably rich choice of international information and intercultural exposure.

All these processes are often labelled using concepts like "internationalization" and "globalization". One of the most obvious by-products of this process is the internationalization of the English language which in a couple of decades has enjoyed a sky-rocketing career, so much so that it has risen to the status of the lingua franca of our time. However, some native speakers look on its role with a certain scepticism: "More than 300 million people in the world speak English and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to", writes Bill Bryson in his book *Mothertongue*.

Nevertheless, speaking and using English as a common linguistic tool of communication does not, and should not, imply loss of cultural identity.

Unification tendencies in Europe have coincided with globalization processes world-wide, and perhaps on account of this time-overlap, have often been interpreted as an outcome of them. Despite of successful integration processes in the fields of the economy, finance, and legal harmonization, Europe seems to be resisting cultural integration. On the contrary, partly as a reaction to unification on the legislative level, peoples of Europe appear to manifest their cultural identities on the national level more extensively than before.

Fifteen European countries have joined to form the European Union (EU). Despite differences of culture, customs and experience, they share the desire to live

in peace, play a role on the world political stage, improve their living and working conditions and strive for greater justice in the world.

One of Europe's assets is the richness of its cultures, traditions, and languages. It is very important that we recognize this and appreciate all countries. EU's respect for cultural and linguistic diversity is also seen in its language policy. The 11 official languages of the Union are: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish.

All 11 languages have equal rights, but some are more equal than others. English and French are the languages that predominate in the institutions. German, Italian and Spanish come on the second place which means that Danish, Dutch, Greek, Portuguese, Swedish and Finnish belong to the third category in this ranking order. Regional and minority languages, not being official languages, are located on the fourth place according to this ranking system.

Multilingualism in Europe is both an expression of its cultural wealth but at the same time a barrier to communication.

The language problem in the EU is not only a matter of concern of the European institutions, but also a serious obstacle to the citizens of Europe. (c.f. TYTGAT)

In 1991 the decision was taken to set up a new Commission in Europe to protect the culture and education of Europe's language minorities.

II. The Historical heritage

Cultural and linguistic pluralism in Europe is a part of the historical heritage. Let us consider the so-called Völkerstafel, from the 18th century, on which each nation represented is given a brief "stereotype-like" characterization. Each representative is in a form of national dress and each is labelled with only three descriptive words or phrases.

This "Völkerstafel" was made in Austria. "Völkerstafel" means 'people-tablet' and it is designed to introduce different peoples of Europe. We have not only the pictures, not only the costumes of the nations but we would also have a very brief description for these people. What are they like? If to look at the text we see that we have here Spanish people and French and Italians and Germans and English - there is a long long row of them. If to translate it then we realize that there are different parameters along which all these nations are characterised. For instance, just to take the example of the Spaniards, as far as their "character" is concerned it is said that they are wonderful; for the French it is said that they are talkative and merciful; Italians are jealous, Germans are quite good, for the English that they are kind and friendly and so it goes along the different parameters like "temperament", "mental capacity" "intellect", "weakness", "morals", "illness", "martial skills", etc. It's very interesting to know that already in the 18th century traders, businessmen were using such tablets just to orientate themselves what other nations are like.

Stereotypes are almost as old as mankind. Already Greek historians describing other nations, their neighbours and enemies would comment on their national characteristics. Herodotos for instance (B.C. 484-425) describing the Greek-Persian war (B.C. 492-449) would characterize the Persians as "excellent war-man" and "being fond of children". Although they were also quoted as "liars" and people who make "debts". As can be seen from these ancient comments, stereotypes are not always negative; they can also "praise" - although in common usage it has a definitely negative connotation, hence it is often equaled with "prejudice".

III. What is the present situation?

One may wonder if Europe has undergone profound changes - if any - with respect to stereotyping?

A widely circulated chart shows how Europeans see each other at the present time. What is the unified Europe going to be like?

Heaven if

- the lovers - are Italian
- the cooks - are French
- the technicians - are German
- the policemen - are English
- and if everything is organised by the Swiss

Hell if

- the cooks - are English
- the policemen - are German
- the lovers - are Swiss
- the technicians - are French
- and if everything is organised by the Italians

Young Europeans from EU countries were recently asked to write down the first five things that sprang to mind when they thought about a particular country.

What are five things that spring to mind when you think about:

Belgium:	Brussels	Chocolates	Tintin	Beer	Capital of Europe
Denmark:	Vikings	Copenhagen	Hans Christian Andersen	Lego	Football
Germany:	Beer	Berlin	Goethe	Motorways	Serious
Greece:	Islands	Parthenon	Onassis	Moussaka	Socrates
Spain:	Barcelona	Paella	Bullfighting	Art	Juan Carlos
France:	Wine	Paris	Ge'rrard Depardieu	Food	Fashion
Ireland:	Green	Pubs	Celtic design	James Joyce	U2
Italy:	Rome	Pasta	Shoes	Art	Pavarotti
Luxembourg:	Castles	Banks	Court of Justice	Small Echternach	dancing procession
The Netherlands:	Van Gogh	Tulips	Amsterdam	Drugs	Flat
Austria:	Vienna	Klimt	Skiing	Sissi	Mozart
Portugal:	Port wine	Lisbon	Explorers	The Cock	Algarve
Finland:	Lapland	Santa Claus	Forests	Saunas	Telecommunications
Sweden:	Blondes	Cold	Ingmar Bergman	Nobel prize	Pippi Longstocking

United Kingdom: Shakespeare London BBC Beatles The Royals

In the UNESCO there is serious thinking of elaborating some new laws that would forbid using stereotypes in guide books (c. f. Die Zeit). One may wonder however what will remain if all stereotypes are left out from guide-books?

IV. The Eastern-European Dimension

Western Europe has been experiencing its problems handling multiculturalism within the integration process, but the 1990s have brought new challenges in learning about the new, emerging cultures of Eastern Europe -cultures that also contribute to the European scene.

The political changes in Eastern Europe over the past few years have added to the strengthening of the awareness of multicultural consciousness. Since the Eastern bloc started to disintegrate, national cultures have become more visible. Today, Eastern Europe contains a large number of partly differentiated cultures in more than twenty-five independent states comprising a steadily evolving new cultural microcosm (Hofstede, 1992). From behind the "Iron Curtain", much to the surprise of Western Europe, a culturally rich and diverse world has suddenly appeared on the scene.

The terms "East" and "West" are of course relative. In a religious-cultural sense, the West is the world of Western Christianity, which experienced in turn, a Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and modernization brought by the industrial and scientific revolutions. The East was the world of Orthodox Christianity and the Ottoman Turks.

In the political sense however, the borderline is more to the west, drawn between Austria and Hungary, or between Czechia and Germany or between Poland and Germany.

The problems of Central and Eastern European are proverbially unintelligible in the West, because various races live there in an old mosaic pattern, often disregarding territorial conventions. No nation of Eastern Europe can claim to be racially pure. Each is a mixture of indigenous peoples and the invaders who periodically migrated across the region.

Despite of the fact that geographically and ideologically the countries of Eastern Europe belonged to a single bloc for more than forty years, this does not mean that they became unified culturally. The cultural differences between them -owing to differences in core values such as religious history and social structure -set them apart from each other just as much as cultural differences set the countries of western Europe apart from each other. Empirical research proves, for example, that even clusters like the Baltic states cannot be treated on the basis of a common denominator. Intercultural research data have demonstrated that Latvia is

nearest culturally to Sweden, Lithuania to Poland, while Estonia is nearest in cultural terms to Finland.

If all this is true, then marketing work for instance must be different in each Baltic country!

The experience of living within a culturally diverse setting is not new to many communities, especially in the eastern part of Europe, where one could and still often can find even small villages with inhabitants drawn from two or three different nationalities.

It is important to realize that institutional unification does not automatically mean cultural unification. In this respect, it is interesting to note that there is, for instance, more similarity between Slovenia and Austria than between Austria and England. Slovenia may be physically in the East of Europe, but culturally feels itself to be in the West. The common institutional status of Austria and England (both EU members) on the other hand does not affect their differences in terms of culture.

It is important to distinguish between the three semantic levels of belongingness: on the basis of ethnic identity, on the basis of cultural identity, on the basis of legal identity.

In the German language this notion is covered by two words: Zugehörigkeit = attachment (emotional, mental), and Angehörigkeit = legal status.

V. What should be done?

1. Countries of East-Europe have to make themselves seen!
2. They have to make themselves understood! But: to know the rules is not the same thing as playing the game! That is why
3. They have to learn how to operate in an international setting.

Responsibilities and tasks of education are greater then ever with respect to the proper conveying of "intercultural literacy".

1. We have to raise the intercultural competence of students, trainees and managers. Differences and similarities, together with common and particular characteristics of different cultures, should be demonstrated and made clear.
2. Underlying factors in the core values of culture like religion, history and social structure should be explained in order to raise understanding of the reasons for behaviour.
3. In a sense, as explained earlier, Europe is used to the idea of cultural pluralism. What has to be re-learned, however, is a much more extensive and intensive level of operation and transactions in a multicultural setting. This affects the business world most of all.

Since all our thought, imagination and behaviour are shaped by our culture, we must learn to understand each other. If cultural diversity is "behind us, around us and before us" as Claude Levi-Strauss put it, we must learn how to manage it in such a way that it leads not to the clash of cultures but to their fruitful coexistence and to intercultural co-operation.

European societies are multicultural and multi-ethnic, and their diversity, as reflected by the range of different cultures and traditions, is a positive and enriching factor.

The diversity and richness of the national cultures make up the common European heritage. European culture is not merely the mechanical sum of those cultures nor some sort of common denominator, but a living interaction of its national elements.

The questions of pluralism, multiculturalism, multilingualism and education must be grounded in the context of the basic values of equality, difference, respect and dignity.

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