THE FUNCTIONS OF CLICHÉS IN THE ASSIMILATION OF BASIC VOCABULARY

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Abstract If we leave aside the contrastive method, often used in the process of teaching foreign languages, lingua franca (or the contact language) is replaced in the act of teaching Romanian language as a foreign language (henceforth called RLS – Româna ca limbă străină) by a recognizable mixture of clichés, seen as a class of socio-cultural and linguistic codes. The existence of endless resources of signification hidden in every cliché gives us the opportunity to reflect on the role played by clichés in acquiring new vocabulary at a basic level of RLS. Under what circumstances can they be used? What are the advantages/disadvantages? How beneficial would be the use of clichés as a mediator in teaching RLS?

Keywords Cliché/stereotype, Romanian as a foreign language (RLS), sociolinguistic approach, L2 teaching methods, acquisition of basic lexical elements, A1 level.

1. What is a stereotype?

In a study from 1994, *Stéréotype et lecture. Essai sur la réception littéraire*, Jean-Louis Dufays defines stereotypes/clichés/common places (seen as synonyms) as "the first tools used in the construction of meaning"[1]. Clichés allow at a textual level the display of meaning accessible solely to members of a certain cultural community: "Before using the codes for more or less unusual functions, any lecturer is committed to recognizing the codes or the code fragments that are part of the cultural community to which he belongs"[2]. We highlight from the previous statement the idea of recognition, directly related to the repetitive, predictable and readable character of each commonplace. In addition, we emphasize the importance of the socio-cultural framework in the existence and identification of these codes, seen as an indistinct conglomerate of clichés, lacking the origin or the goal.

[1] Jean-Louis Dufays, Stéréotype et lecture. Essai sur la réception littéraire (Mardaga: Liège, 1994), 12.
[2] Ibid., 35.

The members of any cultural community have two reading options, according to Dufays: (1) one that is referential, favoring the relation of the text with the objects of the real world, and (2) another that follows the internal, intertextual connections in a direction that is poetic and aesthetic[3]. If the first attitude is characterized by the affective and emphatic engagement of the reader in the stereotypical representations, the second involves distancing and prudence towards these representations.

Although Dufays always describes clichés with regards to literature, his theory can be easily extended to other fields. We are refering here to cognitive (socio)linguistics, where the stereotype is mainly seen as (1) "a minimal set of socially determined data"[4], (2) a "general representation of the social phenomena"[5] or (3) as a widespread model within a culture, characterized by automatically generated value judgments, without prior reflective thinking[6].

2. The cliché as a didactic object

The implicit question that arises at this point is whether cultural models can be transformed into means of assimilation in the case of L2 (a person's second language). Whether we appeal to universally accepted clichés, or we focus on a particular audio-visual media culture created through TV channels and the Internet, we will attribute to the references outlined during the act of teaching a language at the basic level (specifically, the A1 level) the function of a substitute for the target language's culture.

Following the principle according to which a successful didactic act is one that utilizes the student's prior knowledge[7], language assimilation (L2) is not limited to the acquisition of linguistic expertise, but takes into consideration the student's attachment to the everyday life of the target language's culture, by focusing on extra-linguistic understanding. Regarded as a social practice[8], L2 or "languaculture"[9], according to the cognitive method, in addition to being a window towards new socio-cultural codes, acquires the active function of transfiguring the mental schemata.

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[3] Ibid., 12.

[4] Gitte Kristiansen, Rene´ Dirven, *Cognitive Sociolinguistics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 29.

[5] Kuzniak, Marek, Agnieszka Libura, Michał Szawerna, *From Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Cognitive Ethnolinguistics. Patterns of Imagery in Language*, Vol. 3, Berlin, Peter Lang Edition, 2012, p. 39.

[6] Ibid., 39.

[7] Elena Platon, *The role played by audio-video materials in the development of oral communication skills in RLS* (*Rolul materialelor audio-video în dezvoltarea competențelor de comunicare orală în RLS)*, in "40 years of Romanian as a foreign language at UBB" ("40 de ani de limba română ca limbă străină la UBB. 1974-2014" (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de știință, 2014), 17.

[8] Karen E. Johnson, *Second Language Teacher Education. A Sociocultural Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 46.

[9] Lantolf, James P., *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning* (Oxford: Oxford, 1994), 50.

It is worth mentioning that both the "communication forms employed by society"[10], circumscribed to socio-cultural codes, as well as the modification of mental structures are goals impossible to reach at A1 and A2. Therefore, at the bottom levels, we invest the stereotype with the role of a mediator, first, between the mother-culture and the universal culture, and then, faced with an independent user of the target language at B1, the stereotype will ensure the dialogue between the two previously mentioned cultures, employing that which will become the adopting culture of the independent user. In other words, as a substitute for the target culture at the basic levels of L2, the cliché succeeds, through the acquisition of new lexical elements, to pave the way for the student's encounter with authentic language-, culture- and civilization-related situations, which is not often achieved with the commonly used texts/inputs that are tailored to the respective language level.

3. The practice of the cliché

The exercises illustrated below carry commonplace images that can be used at A1 level to introduce basic lexical elements. Unlike the "self-stereotypes"[11] that appear, for example, in a text[12] from unit 5 of the *Romanian Language Text Book A1-A2 (Manualul de limba română ca limbă străină A1-A2)*, where, on the occasion of learning food-related vocabulary, that the student encounters for the first time, one also introduces information on gastronomic habits pertaining to the Romanian space (for instance: (1) "Romanians do not drink large amounts of wine or beer because they prefer «țuica»[13]" or (2) "Romanians use many spices in their cooking[14]"), the examples we will be discussing here are known as "hetero-stereotypes[15]"; they are, in other words, clichés related to an alterity formed, in most cases, through a media culture, seen as a transmitter between the mother-culture and the target culture of the student involved in the learning act.

The first type of exercise we suggest is an associative one, based on image-text matching. Students are given five images to which correspond the following sentences: (1) *A girl lives in a salad bowl* (*O fată locuiește într-un bol cu salată*); (2) *Sherlock drinks a cup of coffee (Sherlock bea o ceașcă de cafea);* (3) *On the table is a plate of stuffed cabbage rolls (Pe masă este o farfurie cu sarmale); (4) Aladdin has a teapot with tea (Aladdin are un ceainic cu ceai*) and (5) *The boy has a basket of bread (Băiatul are un coș cu pâine)*. Although it is an exercise that can be used in teaching at the very beginning of Romanian language

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[10] Carmen Compte, *Un document télévisuel pour parfaire l'apprentissage des langues?,* in "L'enseignement des deux langues partenaires, Actes du Congrès de Tours", vol II, 1998, 1, 5.

[11] John Corbett, *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching* (Glasgow: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2003), 9.

[12] Elena Platon, Ioana Sonea, Dina Vîlcu, *Romanian Language Text Book A1-A2* (*Manual de limba română ca limbă străină A1-A2)* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, 2012), 85.

[13] Ibid., 85.

[14] Ibid., 85.

[15] John Corbett, 9.

apprehension, it should be taken into account that students already know some elementary verbs in the present indicative (*to be/a fi, to have/a avea, to drink/a bea, to live/a locui*), have assimilated through previous exercises some food vocabulary such as *bread/pâine, tea/ceai, stuffed cabbage rolls/sarmale, coffee/cafea, salad/salată*; thus, this exercise acquires a double function: (1) recapitulation of previously absorbed knowledge, plus (2) introduction of terms related to a framework of containers (basket/coș, teapot/ceainic, plate/farfurie, bowl/bol, cup/ceașcă). However, it is worth noting that the use of images involving Sherlock and Aladdin, characters deep-rooted in the collective memory through media culture, also possesses a playful function. Aladdin no longer has a magic lamp, but a cup of tea, while Sherlock, in spite of his British origins, drinks coffee and not tea. Due to the previous exercise, we achieve the following goals: (1) recapitulation of previously assimilated knowledge; (2) introduction of new words not in an isolated manner, but through a potentially iconic context (it is possible that outside the classroom, students will continue to associate the cup of coffee with Sherlock's image) and (3) making the link between L2 and real-life images and/or media culture that the student is probably unconsciously familiar with.

The second example works on the same principle, firstly revision, then introduction of new lexical elements, but the difference from the previous one is that it involves oral production, is based on a positive set of cultural prejudices and organizes the group of students in pairs. The recapitulated lexical elements are the names of countries, nationalities, numbers, and the newly taught ones are professions. Thus, we have, on the one hand, cards with people from certain countries, and, on the other hand, notes with their identification data. Each student will take turns in being the one who describes and of the one who guesses. Age cannot be guessed without knowing the country of origin, and the country of origin and nationality cannot be inferred in the absence of a specific traditional wear. Although there is no connection between the image and the profession, on the basis of certain common international words (such as *policeman/polițist*, *doctor/doctor*, *professor/profesor*, *student/student*, etc.) and clichés with national specificity (such as folk costumes), the students get in touch and become familiar with an elementary vocabulary of the Romanian language.

4. Conclusion

If we only consider the "hetero-stereotypes" mentioned above, mostly linked to *pop culture*, then we will argue that at elementary levels[16], the cliché has the following functions: (1) works as a substitute for the target culture, which is almost inaccessible to the beginner student in the absence of linguistic skills; (2) introduces new lexical elements through a potentially iconic context (see in this respect the image of Sherlock that might be taken outside the classroom and associated with the coffee cup in real life); (3) links L2 to everyday images and/or media culture that the student is unconsciously already familiar with. Since this familiarization also

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[16]The main scope of my argument was the A1 level, but the theory can be supported with examples up to A2+.

involves a form of identification, it is possible, as Dufays points out, for the student to become emotionally invested in the act of learning.

On the other hand, when it comes to lexical clichés, the functions change. We exemplify by a text about the Voroneţ Monastery[17], from the *Romanian Language Text Book A1-A2* (*Manual de limba română ca limbă străină A1-A2*), placed towards the end of the A1 level. The purpose of the reading exercise is twofold: (1) the student's familiarization with the heritage of the target language culture and (2) the introduction of new lexical elements (mainly, adjectives) through international vocabulary. For example, in an exercise such as "Find in the above text synonyms for the following words:"[18], the verb *a semăna/to resemble* is accessed by students through the synonymous parallelism it sets with *similar/similar*, *minunat/wonderful* through *splendid*, and *numeros/numerous* through *mult/many*. Besides *similar* (*similaire* in French, *similar* in English), s*plendid* (*splendide* in French, *splendid* in English) and *numeros* (*numerous* in English), the 261 word text (among which around 50 are linking words) about the Voroneţ monastery contains 57 words that have the same form and content in at least one of the two international languages, English and French.

We take into account here two categories of vocabulary: there is, on the one hand, (1) a common lexicon, specific to both Romanian and French and/or English, including words such as *turist/tourist*, *important/important, unic/unique, exact/exact, vacanță/vacances, în general/in general, interior/intérieur, intens/intense* etc., and, on the other hand, (2) though less numerous than the first category, there exists an international lexicon, with a lower frequency in Romanian, which consists of words such as: *remarcabil* (as in "construcții remarcabile"[19]/*remarkable buildings*) or *splendid* (as in "peisaj montan splendid"[20]/*splendid mountain scenery*). Despite the fact that the two adjectives (*remarkable* and *splendid*) are less commonly used in Romanian than in French or English, they manage to make a student that speaks at least one of the two international languages, aware of the order of words in the Romanian language. Either through equivalence with French, where, like in Romanian, the adjective is usually placed after the noun (as in the example: "bâtiments remarquables"), or through opposition with English, where the adjective comes before the noun ("remarkable buildings"), through these international words, which in the examples above can be placed in the category of the cliché used as a didactic object, the student at an elementary level of Romanian language comes into contact with the target language through universal lexical mediators. They function here as a substitute, as in the examples in the *Practice of the Cliché* section, but they also have the function of "micro-language"[21].

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[17] Elena Platon, Ioana Sonea, Dina Vîlcu, 132.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Elena Platon, *Two avatars of language: interlanguage and micro-language* (*Două avataruri ale limbii: interlimba și microlimba)*, in "The Proceedings of the International Conference Globalization, Intercultural

Defined by Elena Platon, in *Two avatars of language: interlanguage and micro-language (Două avataruri ale limbii: interlimba și microlimba)*, as "a grammatically correct, but much poorer language"[22], I believe that "micro-language" (*microlimba*) allows both the teacher's valorization of "a part of the Natural Language System (LN) learned by the student up to a certain point"[23], as stated by the author in the article above, as well as the exploitation of the previously mentioned international vocabulary that does not function as a language of communication, but rather as a lexicon for contact between the mother tongue and the target language.

If, in the case of stereotypes related to media culture, the only possible risk is that the student does not understand the socio-cultural reference, when it comes to the lexical cliché, although there is a high chance of it being accessible to most students in a group, it runs the risk of building in the students' mind an associative mechanism by which they select and remember from the second language (Romanian, in this case) only that which is similar enough to the international languages they have come into contact with before studying Romanian.

In spite of these disadvantages, we consider that, if handled with caution, stereotypes facilitate and galvanize both the contact between the mother language/culture and the target language/culture, as well as the dialogue between student and teacher by establishing a common ground.

Dialogue and National Identity, Globalization and National Identity. Studies on the Strategies of Intercultural Dialogue", Tîrgu-Mureș, Arhipelag XXI, 2016, 634-647.
[22] Ibid., 635.
[23] Ibid.