



EMANUELA PECE

***INTERCULTURALISM IN ITALY.  
IS IT MERELY A LANGUAGE AND  
COMMUNICATION PROBLEM?***

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# **Interculturalism in Italy: Is it merely a Language and Communication Problem?**

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## **Abstract**

It is unthinkable today not to promote or encourage intercultural communication, it being the only alternative to conflict: a dialogic interaction designed to promote all the instances in the game and to achieve equilibrium points that are recognized by the parties involved. It is necessary to activate transformation processes in the subjects' cognitive system, so that they experience occurrences as a synthesis and reinterpretation of several cultures. Indeed, the presence of different cultures leads to the construction of new cultural identities, either multi- or trans-ethnic ones, and multiculturalism is a multidimensional process of interaction between people with different cultural identities, who, through the meeting of cultures, live a deep and complex conflict/reception experience, as a valuable opportunity for their personal growth, from the standpoint of changing everything that creates an obstacle to the construction of a new civil society.

## **Keywords:**

*Communication, Culture, Integration, Interculturalism, Language.*



## 1. From cultural differences to cultural integration

Italy, landing country for the thousands of migrants who flock to the Mediterranean, experience major difficulties in measuring their integration once they decide to stay. This is particularly true because the numerous variables involved in the integration process (political, economic, social and cultural ones) are difficult to monitor, also according to official statistics or administrative sources (Cesareo & Blangiardo, 2009). This is because official sources mainly refer to just part of the “migrated population”, namely the legal or naturalized one. However, it is well-known that part of the immigrant population is illegal (ISMU Foundation, 2015), meaning they lack the residency permit, while at the same time they also actively participate in the integration process. The research called “Integrometro” (integration meter), sponsored by the ISMU Foundation and carried out before the migrant emergency in Italy reached today’s levels, has precisely tried to measure, through the construction of integration indices, the immigrants’ degree of integration, keeping into account – where possible – also the illegal part of the immigrant population. In particular, the cultural integration index has considered as core factors “the knowledge of the Italian language and its level and the access to information” (Cesareo & Blangiardo, 2009, p. 25). However, as we will clarify in the present contribution, these factors are important but not sufficient to measure the actual degree of integration of immigrants with respect to the cultural dimension.

Global society is characterized by the “formal” destruction of geographic boundaries (like the Schengen Agreement in Europe, today questioned because of Islamic terrorist attacks), that allows, also in potential, the relocation of populations or parts of them – whether voluntary and peaceful or not<sup>1</sup>. This gives rise to situations where different cultures are “forced” to meet and live together, permeating the social and cultural processes of the host society. This is not only because, in different settings, it is possible to come into contact with people from other countries, but more generally on the grounds that, when engaged in a relational act with them, we should take into ac-

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<sup>1</sup> Think about the hundreds of migrants, victims of unscrupulous smugglers, who are left adrift in the Mediterranean sea (UNHCR, 2015). The latter, from the cradle of civilization has become an “open-air graveyard”.

count the different roles and cultural levels. Communication thus becomes intercultural communication (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Castiglioni, 2005) understood as the negotiation of meaning between two or more people from different cultures.

Today it is unthinkable not to promote or encourage intercultural communication, as it is the only alternative to conflict. Indeed, communication is a dialogic interaction designed to promote all the instances in the game and to achieve equilibrium points that are recognized by the parties involved (Baraldi, 2003; Gili, 2009; Monceri & Gili, 2009; Giaccardi, 2005). It is necessary to activate processes of transformation of the subjects' cognitive system, so that they experience occurrences as a synthesis and reinterpretation of several cultures (Demetrio & Favaro, 1992). Indeed, the presence of different cultures leads to the construction of new cultural identities, either multi- or trans-ethnic ones. Multiculturalism, for its part, is a multi-dimensional process of interaction between people with different cultural identities, who, through the meeting of cultures, live a deep and complex conflict/reception experience as a valuable opportunity for their personal growth. The starting point of this process is to change everything that creates an obstacle to the construction of a new civil society. It is however undeniable that most reflections on migration flows and integration focus precisely on cultural and identity issues. The demanding challenge faced by societies and social systems, and that they will have to face more and more, is their configuration as either closed (no-welcoming) or open (welcoming) systems to "other cultures": what Baumann (1999) called "the multicultural riddle". As some scholars have argued (Mangone & Masullo, 2010. Cappelli & Mangone, 2012), this suggests that multiculturalism is a new way to understand cultural dynamics. Indeed, multiculturalism does not mean a culture multiplied by the number of "other cultures" in a given territory, but rather a new way to deal with the simultaneous presence of cultural diversity in daily life (Hannerz, 1996) introduced by the persons/actors from other territories. A different position is taken by Donati (2008), arguing that the main limit of multiculturalism (from an epistemological, moral and political point of view) is the lack of relationality between the cultures to be institutionalized. Multiculturalism, instead of promoting trust and cooperation relations between different cultures, supporting mutual exchange, ap-



pears to make these relations unresponsive and indifferent, eventually destroying sociality and isolating people.

Donati talks here of what he calls the “fluctuating multicultural society”, typical of highly mobile and stratified contexts based upon the principle of social differentiation; here migrations are characterized by features of massive instability and conflict among different cultures (Donati, 2016).

Now, the question we must answer – or at least try and sketch an answer to – given this cultural diversity, is whether a true intercultural society is feasible and achievable. In order to answer, it is necessary to have a definition as most clear and comprehensive as possible of what is meant by cultural integration. Obviously, defining cultural integration requires giving equal attention to two terms (integration and culture), combining which we may outline a possible definition of cultural integration. Cultural integration is thus “*a multidimensional process temporally and spatially contextualized, and aimed at civil cohabitation of populations or groups of them, based on the respect for cultural diversity*” (Cappelli & Mangone, 2012, p. 202). This definition makes clear that the phenomenon we are facing has no beginning nor end: cultural integration is an ongoing process. As such, it must necessarily consider, on the one hand, the sense of belonging and, on the other, the equal dignity and value of all cultures. The former, particularly, has shifted from local (particularistic) to transnational (universalistic) without being able to combine the requirements of solidarity with the social and cultural identity of the host community and the migrants themselves.

In light of these considerations, the question is no longer whether cultural integration is feasible and achievable, because this process can no longer be “residual” in a society more and more characterized by the simultaneous presence of different cultures. Rather, the question is what are the elements of the “system society” that can contribute – or not – to the process of cultural integration and its adaptation to social changes.

## **2. Language, socialization and re-socialization**

Communication is an inexhaustible resource for the acquisition and construction of meanings. In turn, this allows us to build an interpretative space for reality that is co-experienced with the Other: “there are no meanings beyond or outside of those related to shared

knowledge and consolidated in a particular social group and, of course, outside of those 'traceable' in the text or in the words used by those who are communicating. Even new meanings that can be 'discovered' must 'fit' into the culture (as a set of knowledge) of those who live in a specific social context" (Livolsi, 2004, p. 54). The symbolic mediation system (language and symbols) used by people to exchange meanings is a constitutive element of the background social environment, as it is rooted within specific cultures. The growth of knowledge derives from a system of symbols and meanings shared by a specific culturally determined community that inevitably thinks about itself and the surrounding world through these symbols and meanings.

In light of these reflections we can already provide a first answer to the question posed above: communication (orality, writing and physical expression), precisely because it is configured in the terms described above, is the element that can help activating the process of cultural integration. Indeed, communication is the medium through which people understand their surroundings in order to build a representation of the world. In turn, people use this representation of the world to build their identity through both self- and hetero-recognition, and to plan their life path so that it is open to the presence of others.

Language is an important tool through which all other cultural forms come to light and are transmitted (Crespi, 2005). However, at the same time, the relational dimension also holds central importance. A fundamental characteristic associated with language is *intersubjectivity*, which reiterates the importance of the reciprocal relation between people, allowing for the very construction of individual subjects and their coordination in communities and social units. This dimension refers to one of the functions of language identified by Jakobson (1966): the *effort* function explains the importance of establishing a communication relation with the other, a contact which gives an immediate and non-reflexive mutual recognition of the speakers' presence. The importance of the other in a communicative exchange thus seems to set the initial conditions for the start of a process of cultural integration. In this sense, by learning the language, foreigners can *objectify* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) the external reality, understand its meaning and make sure to acquire and internalize certain aspects of reality belonging to a given social con-

text. However, language does not hide problematic aspects. First, there is the question of the language-learning techniques employed by foreigners. Many difficulties can quite clearly be linked to structural factors (for example, the code type of a particular language), or to the subjects themselves: a child will not have the same language-learning problems of an adult. Second, beyond the more or less obvious difficulties of learning the sounds and signs pertaining to a language, there is the problem related to the acquisition and sharing of other aspects which fall within a communication process. Language can represent a real *medium*, through which we can learn and categorize experiences of reality and create a bridge between two different cultural universes (Smelser, 1994). However, it is equally true that a set of elements related to the *meta-communicative* dimension can affect the success (or failure) of an exchange between speakers. The meta-communicative elements are the gestures, the tone of voice, the context, the postural attitude and facial expressions; all of which influence communication and, in the various cultures, are mostly *internalized* and “taken for granted”. It is quite clear that people belonging to cultures with a number of shared rules will have a greater chance of success in a process of communication.

Culture is internalized by individuals, but at the same time it is *internal* to the very relation and it is such as to give it a specific shape (Donati, 2006). It is therefore possible that culture, by shaping the elements existing within a communicative relation, may help in creating ambiguous situations, interpreted as a *communication defect* (miscommunication) or *hostile intent* (Hymes, 1974). The importance of the relation between the individuals involved in an intercultural communication process opens the possibility of managing and redefining the communication process itself, since both parties are caught in a web of meanings they have inherited and acquired. At the same time, however, both parties also have the ability to redefine and reshape these very same meanings, holding both intentionality and reflective skills. They are therefore also the *origin* and the *actors* of the communicative relations in which they are involved (Gili & Colombo, 2012). Dialogue between two cultures is central to the concept of “third culture”, originally developed by Casmir (1978, 1997; Casmir & Asuncion-Lande, 1989), which states that people from different cultures can improve their relations via a “third culture” understood as the *conjoining of their separate cultures* toward a *more*

*inclusive culture*. The latter is not merely the result of a merging of two or more separate elements, but rather *the product of a harmonization of composite pieces into a coherent hole* (Casmir & Asuncion-Lande, 1989, p. 294). While dialogue is required in order to develop this “third culture”, the latter cannot be achieved without empathy and a deep understanding of others. Therefore, Starosta and Olorunisola (1998) argue that people should be aware of their differences and, at the same time, should be able to stay their judgements in order to build a third culture understood as the product of convergence, integration and mutual assimilation. In their opinion, once this “third culture” is achieved, the situation is ripe for promoting interaction, precisely because it is mutually accepted, supportive and cooperative.

Furthermore, the transmitted linguistic codes and symbols do nothing but activate for foreigners (as for locals) *de-socialization* and *re-socialization* processes. Life-long socialization processes brings the subject to “be a part” of a given social reality in a responsible and reflexive way. They aim at building social bonds, bonds of belonging, of identity, within which norms, rules and socially shared values are experienced, but which are also continuously processed at the individual and group level. The individual must also learn multiple roles and adapt to new situations that imply a questioning of those very bonds (de-socialization of value orientations and learned behaviours). Only at a later date she re-elaborates these elements (re-socialization), taking into account the different system of expectations (Besozzi, 2006). These two mechanisms define the immigrants' process of socialization in a new cultural system and they presume, on the subject's part, the ability to implement strategies to adapt to the new social and cultural system. However, the same holds true also for natives whenever they have undergo a dialogic process with the Other (immigrants). Within this process, two sets of elements are being questioned. First, those regulating a relation, especially a communicative one, that is established between the participants. Second, the aspects defining and delineating the identity of each subject. With regard to self-presentation and perception of the Other (in this case, the foreigner) we must remember a fundamental aspect, what Goffman (1959) defines the *social self*. According to this view, there is a *personal* identity that remains an intangible concept, and a *social* identity, considered as the product of social interaction. This

means that people attach a given role/social status to Others depending on the context in which the relation takes place and the expectations they place in that *character/role*. In this sense, then, there is an intangible identity that is specific to the foreigner/immigrant and another that, on the contrary, is constantly redefined depending on the various interactions between participants. For this reason, regardless of any form of communication (either verbal and non-verbal) a first and important element which can guide a communicative exchange in a given direction, is the concept of *body*. Indeed, it is the “business card” people have whenever they establish any relation; it may also be an effective “tool” through which to perceive what is “external” (and alien) by initiating a process of signification that could take either positive or negative valence.

The body can be a starting point from which people can build a particular representation of others, for example, when observing clothing, gestures, postural attitude, the physical elements identifying a particular ethnic group. If we think about the media, it is easy to envisage the various representations of individuals or groups belonging to ethnic groups with particular somatic traits, with attires such as to raise public debates (not least, the prohibition of burkinis on French beaches), associated with crimes, terrorist attacks, or the dramatic tragedies due to illegal landings on the Mediterranean coast. The interpretive frame proposed to the general public is reflected in a media image that can elicit positive (or negative) feelings and opening-closing attitudes towards the Other. Media help in bringing together – but also in distancing – different cultural universes. Therefore, if it is true that our perception of the Other is different than in the past, and that the continuous flow of news and images allows us to perceive the Other in our everyday life, it is equally true that in many cases the media spread images that can generate stereotypes or hostile behaviour against particular groups or ethnicities.

Concerning intercultural communication, we can therefore say that from a linguistic point of view there may be difficulties in learning the code, the use of a language, the rules and internal elements to the communicative relation itself. Furthermore, the media are the main means of dissemination of knowledge and of some representative models of a given social reality (and of particular persons). However, to date, there is no model exhaustively representing a full

integration between the concept of communication and that of culture.

In other words, intercultural communication – and thus the integration between *a culture* and *a communication process* – from a linguistic point of view could easily be “manageable” in micro-situations, i.e., in those cases where the communicative interactions begin and end in a definite *hic et nunc*, such as face-to-face relations. However, in mass communication, intercultural communication seems to happen on a *representative* rather than linguistic level; that is, the ways in which mass media offer images and representations of people (or groups) from other cultures, when they act as instruments of knowledge for a given reality, able to connect (and, therefore, to create a communication between) two or more cultures, and, finally, when they become a “space” in which subjects from different social, value and cultural contexts dialogue. Examples of this kind can be manifold. First, when television programs show countries, events, or traditions of distant parts of the world that nevertheless appear as “known” and “close”, or when we see a televised debate addressing a topic of public interest, for example, the issue of landings on the coasts of Sicily and Lampedusa, hosting representative of local authorities and privileged foreign witnesses, and finally when, for example, newspapers publish news, photos and images that tell life stories (or tragedy) related to foreigners.

### **3. Interculturalism and communication**

If it is true that in order to promote cultural integration it is necessary to encourage intercultural communication, it is also true that one must start from a basic assumption, namely: intercultural communication is based on the *principle of diversity* whose speakers come from *different cultures*. For this reason, we must avoid looking for similarities, and instead acknowledge (and thus accept) that there is a *difference* between people and mutual expectations. This means that individuals from different cultures have different ways of experiencing and organizing reality, so that taking oneself as the benchmark on which to predict the way others will respond to messages has little chance of success (Bennett, 2013).

But *diversity* is often associated with *otherness*, which in turn becomes synonymous with *distance*; for this reason foreigners may appear “simultaneously near and far” (Simmel, 1908). Society is forced to redefine itself (Tabboni, 1986) and to re-determine its actions not only with respect to those who will surely allow its survival, but also to anyone questioning it, such as immigrants. Bauman (2001) defines the *distance* between what we need to know and what we know, or think we know, about the likely or actual attitudes that others will assume; it can be a “push” to readjust a certain type of behaviour that drives people towards the Other and not as a limitation to mutual knowledge. The recognition and acceptance of *another culture* also regulate the process of communicative interaction. Indeed, there are some dimensions that contribute in defining the characteristics of intercultural communication (Bennett, 2013), including: *cross-cultural sensitivity*, allowing to recognize and respect cultural differences; *intercultural competence*, relating to the ability to implement cross-cultural sensitivity, and, finally, *cultural learning*, encompassing all those (general) cultural competencies that are transferable and allow to relate in *cross-cultural* situations (i.e. with co-presence of one or more different cultures). These three elements, which are part of a wider discourse addressed by Bennett, allow for a general view (at least from a theoretical point of view) on intercultural communication, highlighting some important issues related to our argument on the relationship between language and culture. As mentioned earlier, language learning is an important starting point that can set in motion a process of cultural and social integration. However, there are other fundamental aspects which can ensure a communication “success”. These elements take into account the individual aspects (typical of *cross cultural psychology*) as well as aspects of intercultural communication, focusing on the influence of the *normative schemes of a group* (Bennet, 2013). Indeed, it is important to emphasize not only the difficulties relating to the understanding and use of a language, occurring *ipso facto* whenever the speakers use two different codes, but that the cultural *frame* identifies the differences in using the language within as many specific social contexts. The context (in both its *micro-* and *macro-*level) can be a very important aspect of the level of knowledge and mastery of a language. For example, it is of paramount importance to know how to behave during negotiations,

or the rituals of greeting, farewell and congratulations in a given socio-cultural context.

In line with this argument, there are some conditions that can facilitate (or hinder) intercultural communication (Gili, 2009): *a*) the “structural” and contextual conditions and prerequisites; *b*) subjective conditions and factors; and, finally, *c*) the specific interactive situations.

A person joining, either voluntarily or out of necessity, a new socio-cultural system has to face both subjective and structural difficulties in order to be included. Clearly, the structural ones depend in part (or in full) on the subject herself and therefore, as such, they need more attention in order to be overcome.

In the case of intercultural communication, structural and contextual conditions that can affect it either positively or negatively are represented by knowing the linguistic code, sharing or not the common values and meanings (culture) and abiding by the rules that govern the communicative relation. Language is among the first aspects to be considered, since lack of knowledge of the code causes subjects to be unable to communicate their “reasons” and “needs”. Furthermore, it hinders the circulation of the knowledge of each other’s cultures (and of those cultural *differences*). This, in turn, would obstruct, first, a lessening of the “mistrust” towards the foreigner, secondly, the destruction of stereotypes and, finally, a full social integration. Learning a language during the phase we defined as *re-socialization* is also influenced by a difference in the contexts. This is even more true as, in contemporary society, everyday life is no longer based only on interactions with the individual – thus primarily through the language – but it brings with it socio-cultural aspects that define the contexts (*frame space*). In line with this perspective, intercultural communication can be facilitated, or hampered, by two structural conditions: as Mangone and Masullo (2010) point out, we can distinguish, on the one hand, *formal* contexts (school and work) where the use of the Italian language is compulsory and is in fact used (of course within the limits of its knowledge) while also respecting the *interaction order* (Goffman, 1967) and, on the other hand, *informal* contexts (family and leisure) where several linguistic codes are adopted – not least the dialects of the host society that, in some situations, may not help in learning the language. In *informal* settings it may be that the foreigner/immigrant



chooses to speak his mother tongue as it happens, for example, within the family, or in groups of “peers” (as during leisure time). However, there are also cases in which we witness a *deliberate* limitation of the linguistic code in order to exclude the Other from the communication (as when the Other is perceived as a threat or a danger). These are some examples of how the degree of separation between two cultures may increase, and may also result in cases where a lack of linguistic (and cultural) integration is associated with the absence of social integration. The latter case takes the form of small communities in which foreigners/immigrants tend to shut themselves, excluding themselves from the urban context and loosening (or restricting) trust networks with the host society.

#### 4. Conclusions

Cultural integration, as widely discussed so far, seems to be based on various dimensions: a cultural one, a linguistic one, a social one, etc., all of which ask participants to interact with each other, to relate to the territory and the institutions and to acknowledge an *alterity* able of accepting the *Other*, but at the same time to protect its cultural universe of belonging. This reciprocity in acknowledging and accepting the existence of *someone other than* (different from) *us* allows for the separation of the two identities, the *personal* and the *social* one, both expression of the two cultural worlds: the one of origin and that of the host society. Therefore, the two identities fall into what Goffman (1969) calls “public” and “private” sphere. Each subject must indeed be able to keep the two environments separate: each actor (to use Goffman’s terminology) must be able to demarcate the public space where he is staging its representation (the *proscenium*) from the private one (the *backstage*). This “separation” allows for the *impersonation* of a specific *social* role, satisfying people’s expectations on *that role* in that given situation, and according to specific rules. As a consequence, the same dynamic can occur also in an intercultural context: *cultural pluralism*, for example, seems to respond to this management of “space” by acknowledging the existence of different cultures within the same social reality, while postulating a strict separation between public and private spheres: the public sphere is governed by generally accepted shared rules, while the private one is the place where differences are freely expression.

This condition leads to some considerations. The first points to the

immigrants' will (or lack of) to blend into the host society, and this largely depends on their life project (either to stay or to return to their country of origin). The second, closely related to the first one, refers to the different processes of integration that can take place in the host territory.

For this reason, it is possible to speak of *selective acculturation* (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Ambrosini, 2008) even though the clear distinction between “public sphere” and “private sphere” rather suggests a *silent acculturation* (Damien, 2001; Besozzi *et al.*, 2009). That is, an acculturation without the construction and affirmation of one's own identity, but with strong residues of a “different culture” (the original one) confined to the private sphere and destined to shrink over the generations. The latter form does not imply the loss of one's cultural identity, but rather assumes a lessening of cultural ambivalence and of the “conflictual” occurrences between two or more cultures. It is also true that, for example, immigrant families have the ability to merge the “old” with the “new”, thus creating new styles of family life. Moreover, contact with/separation from the hosting also depends on forms of assimilation with the native culture (Foner & Kasinitz, 2007).

Ultimately, we emphasize the need to promote a perspective pointing to the recognition and appreciation of those *cultures perceived as others*, so as to allow and facilitate an interaction process which, as we have seen, includes different levels: linguistic, behavioural, legal, etc. All these elements are universally valid and taken for granted by each culture, but the step towards the *Other* presupposes reciprocity (both for those who welcome, but also for those who come), and at the same time a tendency to consider everything that can be *different* as an “engine” driving towards knowledge and not as an obstacle or a limit.

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