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OPPOSITIONAL MOTIVATION: INSIGHTS INTO A NEW PSYCHOLOGICAL PREDISPOSITION IN FACING THE OTHER IN ARAB SOCIETIES

Since the writings of the social and clinical psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner 1979), researchers in education have come to consider the importance of environment in determining the success or failure of learning. His work emphasised the effects of the environmental systems of the individual, i.e. his *ecology*, on his development. In education, the learner's readiness to learn languages and be open to discover their cultures is also quite related to his ecology inasmuch as the latter develops in him positive or negative attitudes towards these languages and cultures, attitudes which influence greatly his involvement in the learning process. The concept of attitude, which is generally defined as "an acquired, latent, psychological predisposition to react in a certain manner towards an object" (Lüdi and Py 1986: 97), is central to understanding the situation of foreign language learning in Arab countries in the sense that it explains the learning behaviour of the foreign language student, especially in his relationship to the culture or cultures he is exposed to in the classroom.

In foreign language and culture learning at university level, attitudes towards the target language and culture play a major role in the student's readiness and subsequent achievement of the objectives of the curriculum of the degree he intends to obtain. Emphasis is put here on university level as the objectives of a university education go beyond the mere fact of accumulating knowledge in a specific field for a future job after graduation. University education is part and parcel of the great social enterprise of producing citizens capable of taking in charge the country's management, including its relationships with the rest of the world. As such, success and failure of a university education is to be assessed not only in terms of how much knowledge the graduate has or has not accumulated, but also how much *savoir-être* he has been able or not to integrate to live up to the hopes and expectations his society has invested in him.

Attitude is all the more important inasmuch as it is associated with deep-rooted emotional responses, as a psychological process very much relevant to the

cognitive process of learning, in which contacts with the foreign language and culture are based on feelings, stereotypes, and prejudices about the people who speak that language or hold that culture. A conflicting or amicable relation to a people influences a student's interest in their language and culture, i.e. his attitude to approach them.¹

It has been observed that considerable numbers of foreign language students in Arab universities do show negative attitudes towards the cultures of the native peoples of this language. These attitudes seem often surprising to teachers and somehow not taken into account by syllabus designers and language teaching methods. This is partly due to the fact that these attitudes have coped quite well with the learning of the language, instead of being a definite deterrent or a psychological inhibitor, though they are sometimes so. Foreign language learning often takes place in a non-supportive, and at times even hostile, environment of resentment, suspicion and rejection of the culture of the target language. This hostile ecology brings many Arab foreign language students to miss a great part of the objectives of the foreign language curriculum as they view the foreign culture as a *subtractive* (Gardner 1979) threat that could take the place of their own culture, while the foreign culture is meant to be *additive* to their own, i.e. approached in a positive give-and-take relationship that can be profitable to them in terms of widening their scope, vista and comprehension of the world.

It is in this sense that attitudes towards foreign languages and cultures among Arab students stand as prerequisites to the real effectuation of the university curricular objectives. This is all the more true as these attitudes determine the student's motivation to engage body and soul into achieving these objectives. Defined as "a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act" (Williams and Burden 2001: 120), motivation, as a crucial affective variable in the learning process, which comprises psychological factors that "energize behaviour and give it direction" (Hilgard, Atkinson and Atkinson 1979: 281), determines the student's interest in the subject studied and the amount of time and effort he is ready and willing to invest in it.

Yet, because there is a clear distinction between language and culture as far as attitude is concerned in the sense that a negative attitude towards a culture does not necessarily induce a negative attitude towards the language that conveys it, motivation to learn the language may vary from the motivation to really know the people who speak it, i.e. the motivation to discover in an unbiased manner their culture or cultures. Although attitude towards the language may well coincide with attitude towards the culture, in which case it would induce or not the motivation to learn both, attitudes towards language and culture may well not operate on the same wavelength, and produce a situation whereby the student develops a motivation to learn the language, and at the same time remains completely impermeable to and turns away from its culture.

Contrary to Schumann's (1986) theory of the 'acculturation model', which states that rejection of a group's culture is likely to lead to inhibiting the learning of the group's language, many students in Arab universities manage to be quite good users of, for instance, English in spite of their negative attitudes towards the English or the Americans. This is mainly due to the type of motivation they activate in

their approach to this language. Probably, a positive attitude towards the culture is likely to correlate with higher achievement in the language, a situation in which it is the *integrative motivation* that directs the learning process. Integrative motivation is then one of the main positive results of the personality variable referred to as empathy.

Since the works of Gardner (1985) and until recently, integrative motivation held a privileged position in foreign language learning as it stood as the best booster for the language learning process. Yet, Gardner himself, and many researchers before him, such as Lukmani (1972) or Ellis (1994), have come to mitigate this statement and reconsider this theory, more applicable to second language learning, and admit that other types of motivation could induce successful learning, especially in the case of foreign languages.

In the case of Arab university students, other types of motivation play an important role to overcome the culture inhibition and achieve successful learning of the foreign language. Despite the fact that the other, not less important, objectives of university education are not achieved, these types of motivation bring the students to spend the necessary time and effort to attain a decent, if not a good, mastery of the language. These types can be grouped under the general name of *instrumental motivation*, in which practical factors, external to the individual, come to induce the desire to learn. Among these factors, Williams and Burden (2001: 116) mention “passing exams, financial rewards, furthering a career or gaining a promotion”. This type of motivation was labelled by Atkinson (1964) as *achievement motivation* in the sense that the student’s desire to learn is induced and sustained by his need to achieve a success in a given subject. Achievement motivation is then necessary for students who struggle against the fear of failure.²

Williams and Burden (2001) prefer to define motivation in terms of a combination of either internal or external influences. Internal influences range from a mere interest in an activity to a wish to succeed. External influences refer to the impact of other people in determining the desire to learn. Deci and Ryan (1985) express the same idea using the concepts of *intrinsic* and *extrinsic motivation*. With intrinsic motivation, according to the authors, the reward is the learning experience itself, instead of an external reward like success.

In the case of some Arab students that learn a foreign language despite their negative attitudes towards its culture, it is a quite special and different type of motivation that prompts learning. It is a motivation that combines internal and external factors. This combination operates in a specific way in the sense that internal factors are the result of the external ones, and gives birth to a new type of motivation which I will be referring to as *oppositional motivation*. It is a psychological state of defiance and challenge, in which the student learns the language of a people whose culture he despises and considers as the antithesis of his own. It is a motivation of confrontation in which language becomes an arm that can lead to defeating the Other. Otherness is viewed, in the eyes of such students, not as an opportunity for enrichment, but rather as adversity, enmity and conflict.

On the basis of a social view of motivation, as opposed to the cognitive perspective which affirms the individual choice in making decisions, it is suggested here that the learning of foreign languages among some Arab university students

is sometimes successful despite negative attitudes towards their cultures, because it is underlain by an *oppositional motivation*. This motivation is based on the internal factor of self-satisfaction induced by the external factor of their religious-dominated culture that makes up the social context of their upbringing and education. Students are motivated to learn the language by their response to a religious prescription, an Islamic one, which establishes foreign language learning as a moral duty. Their learning is viewed by them as an act of piety as they put into practice the words which the prophet of Islam, Mohammed, is supposed to have said: "He who learns a people's language is safe from their harm".

Their *oppositional motivation* includes an instrumental one as they learn the language as an act of self-defence. It also comprises an extrinsic one as they are influenced by their religious-cultural environment. It integrates an intrinsic motivation as well in the sense that it relies on a belief and a moral conformity to this belief. It is not meant here that all students are motivated in this way, nor is it assumed that *oppositional motivation* is the only motivation that brings a category of Arab students to learn foreign languages. *Oppositional motivation* is rather what allows these students to overcome the cultural obstacle and engage in the language learning process despite their negative attitudes towards the foreign culture.

It appears here that the student's views of the foreign language and the foreign culture play a substantial role in determining his attitudes towards both of them and his motivation to approach them. These views are nothing but his *representation* of the Other and the relationship he is supposed to have with him, i.e. his conception of otherness. The notion of otherness, or the relation to the Other, underlies attitude, and consequently the whole intercultural process experience, whether within or outside class. The view of the Other is thus a representation on the basis of which opinions are formed and attitudes are adopted.

The main concern here is social representations, i.e. the group's imagination of one's position in the world and its relationships with the other groups which are believed to possess different cultures. As opposed to individual representations, which are the individual's imagination of his own position as a member of his community or society and personal perceptions and projections, social representations are collective conceptions that are shared by a cultural group. They are social as they involve social rapports, and they are collective in the sense that they become the group's mode of knowing the world, i.e. "processes of mediation between concept and perception" (Moscovici 1976: 302) that result from the very interrelations and contacts between members of the same group and across different groups.

They are approximations (Moore 2001: 10) that compartmentalise reality according to the pertinence of a particular element. For instance, some Algerians' representation of a particular group, such as the Americans, may have a negative representation, while another one, such as the Swedish, may have a positive one, despite the fact they are generally viewed as belonging to the same general category referred to as the 'West'. In this sense, representations retain only elements that may justify prejudiced or favourable behaviour. As a "form of practical knowledge" (Nuchèze and Colletta 2002: 172), they are inescapably part of the individual's database that helps him decide on the most appropriate and suitable actions in

various situations. They are, to use Maisonneuve's words, "spaces of opinions" (quoted in Nuchèze and Colletta 2002: 16) which determine not only general behaviour, but also learning behaviour.³ In certain instances, representations acquire a greater importance as far as opinion and behaviour are concerned as they are the only sources of knowledge, as is the case with some students' views of the 'West'. In this situation, negative attitudes can only be explained by the kind of representations they hold, representations which become the central "mental schemata" (Zarate 2004: 29), not only in the relation to the Other, but also in defining one's identity, be it individual or ethnic.

Moreover, representations, not only across communities but also within the same community, are not peacefully juxtaposed. They are often in competition, depending on the types of discourse they emerge from and the people who produce this discourse. Ideology, and most particularly Islamist ideology in Arab countries, does a lot in producing a particular type of discourse which fashions and sustains some representations of the Other (the 'West') in a logic of conflict and opposition to other types of discourses and representations that are available in Arab societies. Those who are likely to hold power and exercise domination, socially and politically, are those who are capable of imposing, by force or consent, their discourse and their representations. As Zarate (2004: 31) put it: "Representations do not coexist in a mere relation of juxtaposition, but in a competing space where the stakes are those of a symbolic struggle for a social, and sometimes political, recognition".

In education, social representations affect the individual learning behaviour. Here, they intervene in this pedagogical context and play a substantial role in directing learners' attitudes towards the subjects studied. In language learning, two types of representations interfere: language representations and social representations. There is a clear-cut distinction between these two types as one can be negative while the second is positive. The representation of the English language is positive among many Arab students, while some of the cultures underlying this language, such as American culture, may have a negative representation among the same students.

Distinction between language representations and social representations is probably not natural, since "there is no language," as expressed by Poirier (1989: 83), "without a message, there is no message without the intention to signify, and there is no signification without a reference system".⁴ This distinction is often the result of a deliberate action, much like a nuclear fission, undertaken by ideologies that purpose to split language from culture. This split, in most Arab-Islamic countries, is operated by some currents of thought for the sake of preserving younger generations from any supposedly 'negative' influence that foreign cultures may induce.

What is peculiar about social representations, as compared to language representations, as far as foreign language learning is concerned, is the fact that when they are negative about a particular culture, they do not hinder language learning, since language learning is sustained by positive language representations and boosted by *oppositional motivation*. In the case of Arab students, the negative representations of American culture, though they induce negative attitudes towards this culture and thus prevent them from fully experiencing it and taking advantage of its benefits, yet, they do not deter English language learning.

Teaching culture, and more specifically foreign culture, is also taking into consideration the social and cultural representations found in the foreign culture, as they underlie what J. L. Martinand called *social practices of reference* (see Raisky and Caillot 1996: 22-23) that direct, not only social choices, but also didactic ones. These practices, based on the economic and social situation of society, are what society has fixed as the representative and most appropriate forms of behaviour that all its members ought to adopt. In a cross-cultural situation, it is the confrontation between the social practices of reference of the social and cultural representations of the native culture and the target one that is the dynamics of the cross-cultural experience. It is the balance in this confrontation that determines the success or failure of this experience.

Beyond the indisputable utility of representations in any culture, they still stand as psychological inhibitions outside and inside the classroom by inducing students to cope with one of the most common principle among human beings, the principle of 'the least effort'. It is easier and far more comfortable to face the familiar than confront the unfamiliar, to find ready-made answers than strive for explanations, to be certain than doubt. What political and religious ideologies in Arab countries have laid, as far as students of foreign languages and cultures are concerned, is a substratum of stereotyped and representation-based pictures of the Other that jeopardises their very objective of engaging in a university education, by inducing in them negative attitudes that impede the realisation of this objective, i.e. their quest to find their way out of the ethnocentric cocoon. Succeeding in learning the foreign language through *oppositional motivation* bears witness to the existence of a dramatic situation whereby there is little opportunity offered to many Arab students to learn through passion rather than hatred.

1 Works on the strong relationship between attitude and learning were produced as early as the 1950's with Adorno through his *Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno 1950), which explored the relations between prejudice, personality and learning. Other consistent works also continued this type of investigation with people like Anglejan and Tucker (1973), or later Gardner and Lambert (1972), Gardner (1979), Gardner and Smythe (1981).

2 With the works of the Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb, distinction between instrumental and integrative motivations seems unsatisfactory. Hebb (1966) spoke of *optimal arousal*, a motivation which induces learning without having to meet other needs than novelty, curiosity and pleasure. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) uses the concept of *flow* to describe this psychological state in which learning becomes an optimal experience of effortless movement of energy.

3 W. Doise (Doise 1979: 184), working on the linguistic behaviours of categories of the Swiss population speaking different regional dialects, has observed that the nature of the relationships between these groups, whether in a situation of competition or cooperation, affects to a great extent, not only their readiness to learn each other's language, but also each group's tendency to accentuate its regional accent so as to distinguish themselves from the others.

4 J.-C. Abric defines social representations as a system of interpretation of reality: "Social representations," he writes, "are the product and process of a mental activity by which an individual reconstitutes and attributes a specific signification to the reality he faces" (quoted in Nuchèze and Colletta 2002: 171). These representations, according to Moscovici (1976: 39), are expressed and observed through "a speech, a gesture, an encounter, in a daily environment"

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SUMMARYOPPOSITIONAL MOTIVATION: INSIGHTS INTO A
NEW PSYCHOLOGICAL PREDISPOSITION IN FACING
THE OTHER IN ARAB SOCIETIES

Foreign language and culture teaching and learning in Arab countries has acquired, as a pedagogical process, specificities which makes it today one of the main urgent concerns of research in educational sciences in this part of the world. Within a social context which is extremely permeated with cultural and ideological influences, many students tend to import social representations of the Other into the classroom, something which determines their readiness and learning strategies in their approach to foreign languages and cultures. This has induced among many Arab students of foreign languages and cultures a new type of motivation referred to in this paper as *oppositional motivation*.

Oppositional motivation allows these students to distinguish between the foreign culture, towards which they have developed negative attitudes and representations, and its language they are psychologically disposed to learn, and thus overcome a psychological inhibition which would otherwise prevent them from learning the target language.

KEYWORDS: attitude, motivation, oppositional motivation, Other, otherness, representation, ecology, foreign language, foreign culture.