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Hermeneutics and comparative education. Language as material and powerful tool for assigning meanings, understanding and transforming information

Abstract: Language and the processes of understanding meaning of the concepts we use are of particular interest to scholars of comparative pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy and other fields dealing with intercultural communication processes. It is also evident that the methodology of comparative pedagogy must include considering the process of understanding. For it is not possible to describe the solutions used in education without understanding the processes that had led to a certain state of affairs. The article discusses the issue of understanding the meanings of concepts as a necessary methodological procedure of comparative pedagogy. It provides examples of theoretical perspectives on the importance of language as a tool we use to communicate, store and transform information. The article also shows the link between culture and the vocabulary and pragmatics of language as well as the extra-linguistic possibilities of understanding meanings.

Keywords: comparative pedagogy, pedagogical hermeneutics, methodology of comparative pedagogy, understanding scientific concepts.

Comparative international studies are not and have never been a mere description of external factors that influence the shape, structure and functioning of various elements of social life, even though this is how comparative pedagogical studies are usually perceived, especially in the Polish tradition. Comparison is part of every scientist's mindset regardless of their discipline.

Also, it is easy to see the pressures in science that result in comparisons through which individual communities position themselves in relation to others: social well-being, demographic indicators, social phenomena, economic and military development, rule of law and education standards, democracy index, etc. In all these and other countless categories, dedicated institutions, but also ordinary citizens, are constantly comparing their societies with others, wondering what to emulate and what to avoid.

Besides comparison, an important factor in the development of societies is their interdependence and dependence on other societies. It seems clear, therefore, that any theory of social change (and building them is the purpose of comparative research) must consider the interactive dimension of the social world. Unfortunately, comparative pedagogy has not fully mastered this task. Like other social disciplines and sub-disciplines, it has experienced a theoretical pluralism, extending the theoretical consensus established in the 1980s based on the principles of liberalism, realism and Marxism to include new paradigms: critical theory, constructivism, feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, environmentalism and others. Some scholars involved in international studies in a broad sense stressed the importance of structural realism for the methodological foundations of this research area. For instance, Kenneth N. Waltz believed that constructivism is not a theory at all and, in fact, it is difficult to say what constructivism specifically explains (Waltz, 2004, p. 5). Waltz describes it as an optimistic view of the world that claims that people and states, rather than pursuing their own interests, can and do act for the benefit of others. This is just an example of the ongoing disputes.

The existence of multiple disciplines continues to suggest that different features of the external require different ways of exploring it. It also leads us to believe that the world of science has been permanently divided and the boundaries marking the divisions are reflected in the ways in which we see and describe them. "The disciplines and fields of research that have been constructed," Galganek writes, "seem to demonstrate so obviously the existence of a strict agreement between what we say and what we think we see, that many researchers have begun to treat this illusion or what they themselves have invented as a justification for their research" (Galganek, 2019, p. 13). As Hans-Georg Gadamer argued, it is important to be methodical, but truth in humanities is not provided by a method. The essence of truth is not determined by the primacy of method, but by the process of cognition from the perspective of a historically conditioned human being (Gadamer, 1990, p. 493). A hallmark of the humanities, as Bogusław Milerski writes, is "(...)

both a distance towards *a priori* principles and a particular attitude towards method - scientific exploration requires method, but being methodical does not guarantee that one would understand the reality of the *humanum*. Indeed, humanistic and hermeneutic learning must be open to events that elude the method, in which a reality authenticated in truth is revealed in the medium of language.” (Milerski, 2011, p. 29).

The thesis that is revealed from the above is that language is an important issue concerning the distinctiveness and thus identity of scientific disciplines. How has pedagogy, including comparative pedagogy, handled the linguistic turn of the 20th century? This linguistic turn in philosophy and social theory was introduced to the discipline of pedagogy by philosophers such as John S. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Scholars of international relations, reflecting on the function of language, have brought into comparative pedagogy such concepts as: “binary oppositions”, “discursive practices”, “communicative action”, “speech acts”, etc. Language was beginning to be seen as the primary tool for representing the world. It was believed that the more accurately we represented the world and what was taking place in it, the better we could capture the changes that comparative pedagogy, in its utilitarian function, was intended to bring to social systems, including above all to the education system.

Language is the primary tool by which we communicate as well as store and transform information. It is also the most important tool for transmitting cultural heritage from generation to generation. Without language, culture as we know it could not exist. Culture is strongly linked to the vocabulary and pragmatics of a language, however, the words we use are merely a part of the communication process. Our behaviour, gestures, facial expressions, tone and other characteristics of voice, touch and visual attention are also extremely important parts of the communication process. Words and non-verbal communication, as well as non-behavioural elements (the structure of the environment in which we function, our clothing, use of space and time, conversational style) are carriers of meaning in the process of interpersonal and, more broadly, intercultural communication. Words thus represent only a small part of the variety of events and behaviours that make up communication. It is therefore not surprising that language is of particular interest to comparative pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy and other research fields concerned with intercultural communication processes.

Apart from linguistic competence and communicative competence, intercultural competence is increasingly referred to as one of the main goals

of language teaching. This is because it has been realised that reducing knowledge of a foreign language to formal structures alone does not guarantee successful communication at the interface of two (or more) cultures. William Howell (Howell, 1982, pp. 29-33) identified four levels of intercultural competence: (a) unconscious incompetence - when we misinterpret another's behaviour and are not aware of it; (b) conscious incompetence - when we know that we are misinterpreting another's behaviour but do nothing about it; (c) conscious competence - when we are constantly thinking about our communication and trying to achieve greater effectiveness and precision of speech; (d) unconscious competence - when we have developed our communication skills to such a high degree that we no longer need to think about what we say and how we say it.

In pedagogy it is often emphasised that the desirable outcome of intercultural education is level-four proficiency and fluency. And yet, someone who functions at this level can easily forget the need for self-awareness, for reflection and for gaining knowledge, for learning to read the Other not according to one's own pattern, but according to the intentions and needs of the interlocutor. Knowledge, reflexivity and the ability to interact can therefore be seen as the three prerequisites of effective intercultural communication. Stella Ting-Toomey and Atsuko Kurogi (Ting-Toomey, Kurogi, 1998) recognise that the effectiveness of intercultural communication is determined by equality of both parties, unbiased mutual listening, not blaming anyone and appreciating the feelings and needs of others. Konrad Lorenz in *Behind the Mirror: A Search for a Natural History of Human Knowledge* (Lorenz, 1977) argues that language as an external system of signs extends and functionally changes the structure of cognitive representations. The discussion on the cognitive function of language has offered two answers to the above issue, namely that language greatly expands the cognitive capacities of human beings, being a specific tool of cognition and a way of organising information and, the opposite view, that language is only a tool of communication and expression of already conceptually organised pre-linguistic cognition.

Science is what we can discover using the scientific method: the truth or at least an approximation of the truth. In logic and mathematics there is an unspoken rule that as few words as possible should be used to represent the world. Hence, it should come as no surprise that analytic philosophy and philosophy of science have their origins in a positivist understanding of reality. In the twentieth century, especially in the 1930s-1960s, as Jan Woleński writes, the philosophy of science was dominated by a formal orientation (reconstructionism) derived from logical empiricism. It recommended that

scientific output (theories, laws, hypotheses, statements about experimental results, explanations, predictions, as well as linguistic means of encoding scientific statements) be examined using formal and logical methods (Wolenski, 2014). It assumed the existence of a strict criterion that would allow to distinguish science from non-science. And so, according to the proponents of the formal methodological orientation, science always manifests itself in the same way, regardless of the historical period, and the main object of scientific research is scientific output not scientific activity, in other words, it is the context of justification and not the context of discovery that is important.

According to the reconstructionists, it is possible to create a principle that would define science (in the sense of empirical science, formal sciences such as logic and mathematics were not included) and at the same time contrast it with non-science, i.e. pseudo-science. The early logical empiricists put forward the criterion of verifiability (a statement is scientific if it is empirically verifiable), others, like Karl Popper, advocated for falsifiability (a statement is scientific if it is empirically falsifiable), others still, like Rudolf Carnap, proposed expressibility through definability and/or reducibility in empirical language (a statement is scientific if it can be expressed in empirical language, with the particular aim of defining theoretical constructs in such a way that they make empirical sense).

The methodology of reconstructionism was a-pragmatic, oriented towards output (products) rather than activity, and was supposed to be modelled on metamathematics. Pragmatic methodology (i.e. the study of scientific activities) was not relevant to understanding the nature of science. Reconstructionism argued that, in most cases, activities are accessible through their products, so it is the latter that are more important. We should note however that a variety of pathways can lead to scientific discovery, including irrational ones. Thus, it is the reasoning (justification) that is important in science, as it can be subject to logical standardisation. Consequently, the context of justification is always subject to logical analysis, whereas the context of discovery only in certain cases.

Recent decades have seen a characteristic shift in emphasis regarding the role of science, including that of its custodians, i.e. researchers. Science must be accessible, easy to understand and, above all, in many ways useful. As John A. Bargh writes in his book *Social psychology and unconscious: The automaticity of higher mental processes* (Bargh, 2002), evidence is piling up that we do not control our judgements and behaviour as much as we think we do. We tend not to realise that unconscious or automatic forms of mental and behavioural processes occur without our intention or consent,

even though they affect us in important ways on a daily basis. Automatic processing affects our likes and dislikes of almost everything, as well as our perceptions of other people. So if a lot of our choices are made unconsciously or controlled by our prior experiences unintentionally, are we able to make objective judgements in any area of science? Are the choices we make really our autonomous choices? Are the processes by which we identify research goals really dictated only by our cognitive curiosity and absolutely free? Or are they perhaps determined by our individual perceptions, as well as by our prior often unconscious life scripts? Perhaps when we make various choices, whether it is in our personal or academic lives, we automatically generate preferences or aversions towards objects and events? After all, no stimuli in the human environment are completely neutral.

Depending on the currently prevailing culture, the principle of optimum research generally determines the degree of relevance of such scientific activity factors characteristic of the social sciences, but also linguistics and humanities, as form, significance, referential meaning, structure and context. Although these categories seemingly belong to linguistics and can be found in numerous publications in this field, they are also relevant to the social sciences, including the subject-matter of this book, i.e. scientific comparison. By treating language as a system of signs, serving as part of a wider cognitive system to organise, process, accumulate and transfer information, we can recognise that the meaning attributed to an expression in a particular speech act is the product of a number of information processes and functions performed by cognitive representations. Indeed, we should distinguish between the universal meaning an expression has as part of the linguistic system, the meaning conferred by the language user, the result of the acquisition of a particular language, and the meaning of a particular utterance caught up in a specific context. The difference will become clear when we refer to the information processes determining the different stages of constituting a language system.

Language is, first and foremost, a socially created sign system, that is, a permanent structure of representation, linked to conceptual and sensory cognition. At the level of social language, through the processes of exchanging information, individual cognitive representation systems (conceptual and sensory) of individual members of a linguistic community are integrated into the socially produced system of linguistic representation. The integration of the conceptual structure of an individual with the social structure of a language takes place in the process of language acquisition. Once acquired by an individual, language not only serves to link mental

representations to a system of external signs, thus enabling the expression and communication of knowledge, but also actively influences the organisation and interpretation of information acquired in the individual's momentary experience. The language used in science is a representation of the knowledge and experience as well as competence of the researcher acquired during the process of language acquisition (structures and lexis). It does affect the transmission of content and fundamentally determines the intersubjective communicability.

It is quite different in the phenomenological theory, which in essence boils down to orienting everyday life towards the perspective of its participant. The phenomenological theory focuses on the interpretation of subjective experience and personal understanding. The phenomenological tradition is all about interpretation, so it does not assume any intersubjective verifiability. Individual perspectives become particularly important, for nothing is more relevant to communication than one's own direct experience. The trouble with interpersonal communication, however, is that no two people have the same life experiences, and since we are unable to experience the experiences of others, we tend to miss them when we talk to them. So can two people move past superficial impressions and make real contact on a deeper level? Carl Rogers described three conditions for change in an individual's relationship with others. These are confidence in their congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Rogers, 2002, p. 43).

Martin Buber reached similar conclusions and claimed that authenticity in human relationships can be achieved through dialogue, i.e. a process in which the parties engage with the intention of understanding another person's situation. "I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken," Buber said (Buber, 1954, p. 43). But at the same time, he added: "The extended lines of relations meet in the eternal Thou" (Buber, 1954, p. 43). Thus, if the I-Thou relationship consists of two parallel lines, then the point of intersection is in infinity. Buber's "pre-words" I-Thou and I-It are an attempt to explain the ways in which humans are in the world and interact with other humans. I-It denotes the possession of an object, taking the form of everyday experience, and always meaning: I possess (I perceive, I think, I feel) something. Whereas I-Thou marks a relationship. Each finite Thou, according to the dialectic of relation, can transform itself, if necessary, into an It, and each It can reveal a Thou. Encounter with Thou always brings about a kind of transformation of I, it is, as it were, between I and Thou. The phenomenological approach makes it possible to understand that the authenticity

of the relationship with another person is contained in the imperative to treat them as subjects. If I see another person as It, I preclude any understanding (dialogue) between us. Critical theory, the scientific achievement of the so-called Frankfurt School, whose representatives were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, was originally created to critically analyse the views of Karl Marx, but it also presented views on the essence of civilisational change, denouncing emerging inequalities and the crooked mirrors of the meanings in the language of politics. In its assessment of social change, the Frankfurt School was infused with pessimism. Its representatives wrote about civic indifference and called for emancipation, transformation and more conscious participation in the life of society. For them, language analysis became a symbol of social oppression. They called for the use of words representing the positions of marginalised groups. Marcuse claimed: “The avenues of entrance are closed to the meaning of words and ideas other than the established one—established by the publicity of the powers that be, and verified in their practices” (Marcuse, 1976, p. 310–311)”. Adorno recognized the role of media: “[...]as communities were increasingly subjected to the power of mass communication, the preformation of minds increased to such an extent that there was hardly any room left for people themselves to become aware of this state of affairs” (Adorno, 1986, p. 45).

The influence of the Frankfurt School on scientific thinking about the critical function of language is still evident today. Its representatives wrote much less about what they actually supported. Their texts, filled with appeals for liberation, transformation and more social awareness, generally do not reveal the way to achieve these goals. But, even though they did not address the subject directly, their reflections found and continue to have a place in pedagogical reflections on the nature of intercultural communication. The moral responsibility and social solidarity advocated by the proponents of critical theory are in fact reflected in the practice of intercultural dialogue, i.e. in thoughtful social action and attempts to challenge some illusions societies have, e.g. the illusion of already being inclusive used by some in the world of politics, the economy or education to hide their particular interests under the guise of the common good.

Thus, intercultural communication becomes a tool to effectively deal with social illusion. Finally, we should also mention the socio-cultural tradition derived from the premise that people who talk to each other create and reproduce a culture. Most of us assume that words reflect reality. But is this really the case? Or perhaps it is the other way around and it is words that shape our vision of reality.

Sapir and Whorf, for example, argued that it is the structure of a culture's language that determines people's thoughts and actions, and therefore it is not the vocabulary of the language that reflects cultural differences, but it is the language we use, its possibilities and limitations that shape our perception (Whorf, 1982, p. 285). When we teach children to speak, not only do we indicate what exists by giving that thing a name, but we also awaken in them the desire to search for that which is not directly visible and experienced, which has no referent. William Gudykunst pointed out the importance of the cultural code for understanding the meanings of spoken or read words (Gudykunst, 1988, pp.125-127). We can agree with his thesis that culture plays an extremely important role in decoding signals in communication, whereby the cultural rules of such decoding are closely linked to the emotions and value judgements that make up our self-understanding.

Many manifestations of the world's existence go unnoticed by some people precisely because they cannot say anything about them. Therefore, it is the process of communication that creates reality or transforms it. Two people having a conversation co-create their own social worlds. The inability to name a state, an element of reality or a phenomenon or the different names used to refer to them can create communicative collisions. Language that remains in the collision zone of people not understanding each other fails to create a space of mediation. It does not favour a sensible and understanding encounter. And often the cruelty of spoken words, the bitterness of indifference, the ruthlessness of resentment are emphasised in speech as acutely as in silence. From a perception of reality that is closed in one's own ego, it is no longer possible to move to a communal "we". People as monads, forming quasi-dialogue relationships, do not see each other and are unwilling or unable to listen.

In a book entitled "Practical Criticism. A Study of Literary Judgment" Ivor A. Richards was one of the first to present a systematic description of the ways in which words function. They are, according to him, arbitrary symbols that mean nothing in themselves. Words take on the colours of the environment (context) in which they occur. Richards warned against the trap of "singular meaning" (cf. Richards, 1930), i.e. the belief that it is possible to precisely define the meaning of the words we use. In his view, meanings are not found in words, but in ourselves. We can only properly understand a word when we give it meaning (or grasp it). Otherwise, it remains to us an empty sound. Ambiguity and thus also misunderstandings in communication are, according to Richards, an inevitability of language. For words,

even spoken in the same language, can mean completely different things to different people.

In summary, comparative pedagogy is a multi-faceted, contextualised analysis not only of education systems, as this sub-discipline was traditionally perceived, but also of paradigms, philosophical and political discourses in education and its history as well as of socio-cultural phenomena. It expounds the segments of reality that are of interest to the researcher, analyses discourses and questions of meaning. Comparative analyses make it possible to describe not only “What is?” but also “Why it is the way it is?”, to understand the entanglements of education in social, cultural, economic and political dependencies embedded in the logic of past events. Given the above, we should consider hermeneutics as the art of understanding reality to be an indispensable part of the methodological foundations of comparative pedagogy. Hermeneutics provides us with ample evidence of how language is an essential medium of meaning. This unique nature of understanding compared to other categories of cognition is closely related to the linguistic context, but also to the extra-linguistic context, in the sense that the understanding of reality does not result solely from the structure and condition of the human mind, but from their belonging to the world of culture and their ability to find their way in this world in a way that is not only rational but above all understanding (interpretative and meaning-giving).

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