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MULTICULTURALISM IN CYBERSPACE

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Language is an essential part of identity, and in many ways it is considered to be the fundamental constituent of identity. *Language and culture* are inextricably linked. Every social group with distinct linguistic and social characteristics seeks to preserve its cultural identity. Contemporary political theorists have labeled this phenomenon of the coexistence of different cultures in the same geographical space as multiculturalism. Based on the descriptive, analytical, comparative and verbal-culturological methods, this article discusses the presence of various cultural and ethnic groups within a society. Multiculturalism in cyberspace mainly denotes the harmony and interaction of diverse cultures within online communities and platforms. The vanishing of cultures naturally has a negative impact on diversity. It is critical to create an environment where different cultural groups can sustain and flourish, thus making the overall gamma of linguistic colors richer and more colorful.

Keywords: *language and culture, multiculturalism, online communication, social media communication, online multicultural education.*

Introduction

Cyberlanguage, often defined as internet or online language, is a communicative tool used in virtual reality. Cultural diversity is manifested by two main theories: *the melting pot* and *the salad bowl*, which are simplified versions of reality. *The melting pot* theory of cultural diversity states that when different cultures meet, they melt together, thus creating a completely distinct, new culture. According to *the salad bowl* theory, nothing new is created, but , cultures remain separate in a salad bowl and preserve their individuality while living side by side (“A Melting Pot of Cultures”, 2023). We are living at a time

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when information and communication technologies are turning into a powerful culture defining industry. The advent of *Internet* has changed the flow of information and the way people communicate. Electronic information systems have become an integral part of our daily life. Cyberspace broke down the barriers of communication that were limited by geographic boundaries. It encourages globalisation and creation of rather universal cultural values. *Digital technology* has radically transformed many aspects of our lives. Cyberspace can serve as a melting pot of cultures, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to interact, collaborate, and learn from one another, thereby promoting multiculturalism and fostering global understanding. It should be noted that what works in one culture will not necessarily work in another culture. We need to be sensitive to cultural differences and demonstrate our ability to adapt to the explicit and implicit rules while dealing with other cultures (“Has Technology”, 2023). Globalisation, on the other hand, inevitably leads to standardisation and to common patterns in all domains of life and the economy. When a language is lost, humanity becomes one language poorer. It is the richness of information flow, in which language is a critical component, that has led to advancement in technologies and sciences. A loss of a language leads to the loss of a group’s history, stories, medical knowledge, and many other things. Culture is also threatened by things like climate change, wars, religious discrimination, and development. Lack of cultural diversity may lead to problems like discrimination. In diverse societies, where interaction between different ethnic and cultural groups is more prevalent, usually the social fabric is more accepting of an influx of new immigrants or new ideas. Everyone, including but not limited to politicians, business leaders, and teachers, all play an important role in acknowledging and respecting cultural similarities and differences, and the following attitudes are of paramount importance:

- recognize and respect other cultures’ celebrations, traditions, beliefs, etc.;
- work to preserve disappearing languages;
- consume media (books, movies, music, etc) from other cultures;
- stand against cultural discrimination;
- beware of how societies often force assimilation;
- encourage learning about other cultures;
- let people from other cultures speak for themselves.

The positive view of a cultural melting pot says that there is an equal blend of each culture's strengths. However, in reality certain cultures are forced to assimilate to the dominant culture and let go of their unique traditions. This is often enforced through governments and the employed policies, as well as fear and shame-based discrimination. H. Rheingold was the first to create the description and the definition of a *virtual community or online community* (Rheingold, 2000). The definition of the virtual community is given by the author as depending on the context of time, distance and communication. As a consequence, a *virtual community* is an online community of people who have common interests, concerns, viewpoints and who communicate with each other, whether or not they personally know one another. They get together in a special digital place, where they may communicate, share one another's experiences and ideas to advance their goals and create deep relationships with one another ("What is a virtual community?", 2023; "Virtual Communities", 2023). The continuing growth of the Internet technology leads to changes in the dynamics of the virtual communities. Internet communities are becoming vital platforms for exchanging information. *Internet discourse* provides means by which online interaction takes place, and it is widely used in online engagement. As a result, a new space for language usage has appeared in the lives of the majority of us with the use of email, the internet, mobile technology, and internet-based forms of communication. One of the *peculiarities of online discourse* is an opportunity for cultural interaction. The Internet gives people new opportunities to express themselves in manners highlighting their national and cultural identities. Digital technologies have developed quickly, and they are now present in a variety of cultural contexts ("Cultural Diversity", 2023).

Thurlow has a detailed definition of *Computer Mediated Communication* (CMC). According to the author, CMC refers to language and communication through many channels and highlights five key elements: multilingualism, language change, conversation/discourse, stylistic diffusion, and metalanguage and folk linguistics (Thurlow, et al., 2004). D. Crystal, on the other hand, places Computer Mediated Communication within the viewpoint of linguistics by characterizing it as a variant of language: language as used on the Internet (Crystal, 2001).

Computer Mediated Communication is made up of three basic components: the *Internet*, which provides technological support, *communication*, which is a human activity, and *discourse*, which is the

manifestation of communication as a human activity. It is hard to separate these three components since the limits of the online network have shaped the growth of technical assistance which, in turn, has shaped electronic discourse.

The fact that the Internet is an electronic, international, and interactive media has an impact on the language that may be found there. Accordingly, language usage in digital communities has to be viewed and acknowledged as a distinct area of language use. Digital language usage has emerged as a crucial component of communication. It offers truly new features of language use as well as a variety of new formal and informal communication channels (Crystal, 2001). Both spoken and written discourses undoubtedly have an influence on the online discourse. Although the characteristics of written and spoken speech are combined in the characteristics of the Internet language, it also has its own characteristics that are mediated by *computer communication*. As a result, the Internet language is a new form of discourse and communication. It differs from spoken and written communication, although it combines the elements of both.

Multiculturalism is a concept that deserves special attention and consideration by people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds inside one dominant culture. The term "multicultural communication" is used to describe the interaction of people from different social groups who live or work together. A multicultural group can be identified by their ability to cooperate. Language is one of the elements that shapes culture. Admittedly, putting language and culture on an equal level would be incorrect. Language is merely a factor in culture and does not just represent culture as a whole.

Cyberlanguage as a substyle of online discourse

Online discourse is one of the opportunities provided for the manifestation of *multicultural communication*. There is an increasing amount of human-to-human computer-mediated communication. Online interaction involves accelerating communication by enabling the exchange of texts, pictures, speech, sound, and video in addition to structured data. New virtual spaces for human-human contact and human-machine communication have both been made possible by computer technology. These modern virtual spaces and communication are generally known as *Cyberspace* ("The Culture of Cyberspace", 2023).

Online education is one of the most obvious examples of a discourse or communication in which we encounter *multiculturalism in cyberspace*. Creating equal educational opportunities for students of all genders, various racial, ethnic, social, and cultural groups to succeed academically is the main objective of the developing discipline of *multicultural education*. The framework of multicultural education is essential for our awareness of difference between various cultures. It values cultural diversity and recognizes the need to prepare students for an interdependent world. It plays an important role in establishing the required attitudes and values for a democratic society and is a process that affects all aspects of a school's organization and policy (“Deepening Understanding of”, 2023). The term *Virtual Exchange* refers to a practice that according to research, entails continuing, technology-enabled, humans-to-humans educational activities or programmes in which, with the assistance of educators or facilitators, constructive communication and interaction occur between individuals or groups of people who are physically separated and who are from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication and exchange have a profound effect, and virtual exchange combines it with the extensive use of technology.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has become a common form of learning in higher education. An important advantage of this type of learning is the opportunity for students to gain intercultural experience without leaving their current place of residence and university. Student participation in online exchange is also appealing because it requires less financial and organizational effort compared to traditional student exchange programs (Guth, 2014). One of the primary goals of COIL is to increase the students' ability to communicate effectively in intercultural interactions. COIL aims to allow people to have a meaningful intercultural experience as part of their education. It also encourages digital competence (the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively online), foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context. Thus, COIL projects involve inclusive, intercultural collaboration and dialogue that bridges differences and distances and inspires action with a long term positive impact on relationships (Ayunts, et al., 2022).

The fourth year students of the Department of English for Cross-cultural Communication in the framework of their practice encountered with *online multicultural education* participating in *Collaborative Online International*

Learning (COIL), which is a successful online experience recently taken place in a PCI (Collaborative International Project), among 25 students from Yerevan State University, in Armenia, and 37 Brazilian students from 8 different Fatecs, assisted by Brazilian and Armenian professors. Armenian students acted like tutors to the Brazilian ones and, together, they found possible solutions for the challenge presented in the form of a WebQuest. The tasks used in this COIL project were meant to stimulate intercultural interaction between students and allow them to gain knowledge about another culture. Students completed collaborative team projects; they selected a global problem and developed solutions for the problem while considering the cultural specifics of Brazil. The students developed a project implementing Project Based Learning (PBL) and studied the impact of the WebQuest on intercultural interaction during the collaborative project and awareness of general cultural differences as well as those related to a specific global problem (Ayunts, 2023). PBL (Problem Based Learning) is the basis for the conduction of the work with WebQuests. The COIL links the classrooms of two or more higher educational institutions, each situated in a different country or cultural context, and offers certified courses. *The COIL* approach encourages more than just international student collaboration in an online classroom. Instead, *COIL* develops equitable team-taught learning settings, promoting experiential and interactive student learning, where instructors from two cultures collaborate to produce a common curriculum. The courses provide students with additional opportunities to expand their cross-cultural awareness while giving different contexts for the concepts and texts they examine (“What is COIL?”, 2023). At the end of the project, a total of 40 students from Brazil and Armenia were surveyed using an anonymous SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Students answered 6 questions about (1) the different aspects of COIL; (2) effectiveness of PBL; (3) effectiveness of collaboration within the group; (4) success of the WebQuest project; (5) future participation in a similar project; and (6) recommendations for friends to participate in a similar project. It became obvious that 58% of students highlighted the cultural aspect of COIL to be the most important one for them and 35% mentioned the language aspect. As for the project effectiveness, 65% of the participants evaluated the project as highly effective and 68% evaluated the collaboration within the group as very effective. Concerning the WebQuest project, 55% of the participants rated it as very successful. 95% expressed willingness to take part in a future project, while 97% mentioned that they

would recommend their fellow students to take part in a similar project. COIL projects promote all the 4 aspects of internationalization, namely: cultural competences, the English language level, digital skills and practicing professional content through English as Lingua Franca. The major findings imply that the method of the mentoring chain had a very substantial influence on the learning outcomes, resulting in students who are highly motivated, active, passionate, and skillful in solving learning problems. It can be added that the project provided a good learning environment for both content and the English language improvement through collaborative learning (Ayunts, 2023). It should be noted that the project was a success, as a result of which the students boosted their English language skills, improved their cultural competence, collaborative skills. They also developed their critical thinking in providing solutions to different problems. Hence, when conducting a multicultural educational online collaboration program, it is worth taking into account *Erin Meyer's "Eight-scale Tool for Mapping Cultural Differences"*.

The first one is *the Communication scale*. E. Meyer develops the communication scale based on how cultural differences in communication can affect values, personality types, and sense of humour. There are low-context and high-context cultures on the communication scale. Low-context cultures provide precise, clear communication methods with little possibilities for misunderstanding. High-context cultures have complex and delicate communication patterns that need intensive line-reading. Because of their lengthy histories, these nations have had more time to develop peculiarities and complexities (Meyer, 2014).

From the experience of the Armenian and Brazilian students who participated in the COIL project, it can be assumed that they conducted high-context communication. Although the majority of the students and professors that study or work at COIL are Brazilians, they have interacted with both *Chinese and Brazilian* students, and it is definitely clear that the issue of diversity and multiculturalism arises here. Many cultural distinctions between Armenian, Chinese and Brazilian cultures may frequently lead to misunderstandings. Hence it is reasonable to consider the long and distinct histories of these nations. Frequently, such questions as "*What do you mean by this?*", "*Could you explain what you mean?*" or other inquiries of this type were asked, and they all led them to the conclusion that the communication is high-context.

It is well known that no nation can be entirely high-context or low-context. One country can have a higher context when compared to some country with lower context. But, as compared to a country with higher context, this country becomes a low-context one. While interacting with a multicultural team, it is crucial to be able to strike a balance, because there are different levels of perception (“The Culture Map”, 2023).

The second scale of the Culture Map is *Evaluating Scale* which serves as an indicator for how feedback is given and received. *Direct feedback cultures* highlight points with direct language and exact descriptions. In direct cultures, words like *completely*, *absolutely*, etc. are utilized to provide feedback. The delivery of criticism in front of a group is not avoided in direct feedback techniques. On the other hand, *indirect feedback cultures* are more subdued, employ kinder language, and conceal unfavourable criticism with flattering phrases. Indirect feedback cultures typically utilize phrases like *perhaps*, *somehow*, and *such as*, and criticism is offered in secret (Meyer, 2014). The Armenian students were engaged in indirect internet interactions as part of the COIL project, and feedback is frequently provided and received. Armenians and Brazilians share a feature on this scale where they both have indirect feedback systems, particularly when contrasted to Chinese culture. In this connection, it can be noted that one culture can be regarded to be more or less direct than the other. The next scale of Meyer’s Culture Map is the *Persuading Scale* which reveals people’s ability for using reasoning to effectively understand and start a project. The categories on the persuasion scale are principles-first reasoning and applications-first reasoning (Meyer, 2014). The COIL project has introduced the students to a variety of cultures, including Armenians, Brazilians and Chinese. These cultures tend to use applications-first reasoning, asking *how* as the first question when given a task. Yet, multicultural environment may presuppose the inclusion in online communication of the representatives of both principles-first reasoning and applications-first reasoning cultures. So, it is important to alternate between explaining the *why* to the *principles first* group and teaching the applications first group how to perform the work.

The fourth scale is the *Leading Scale* which is mainly the impact of culture on the workplace. The distinctions of the leading scale are an egalitarian culture and a hierarchical culture (Meyer, 2014). Flat organizational structures characterize egalitarian leading systems. The working relationship is egalitarian

if there is little distance between employees or between students and professors. For instance, egalitarian societies do not worry or shy away when supervisors and students or employees recognize each other by first names. The Brazilian culture has egalitarian leading system as the relationship between a professor and a student is less formal. In hierarchical arrangements the spaces and the distance between the levels are obvious. Such cultural approaches have a definite hierarchical framework for communication and decision-making. Armenian and Chinese cultures have more hierarchial structure as usually there is an evident distance between the supervisors and students. Thus, collaborative work environments where employees or students feel like they are eligible in decision-making, are necessary when dealing with individuals from egalitarian cultures. The COIL project offers environments that are more typical of egalitarian society, despite having representatives from both types of groups. All decisions are made in consultation with the students, who are frequently asked by the Brazilian professor if they are satisfied with a specific topic for the lesson. Although *the leading scale* provides an understanding of how decision-making functions in various cultures, the next cultural scale, *the decision-making scale*, which provides an overview of decision-making broadly and altogether. The deciding scale is usually *top-down or consensual*. In cultures with consensus determining systems, everyone participates in the decision-making process. The parties involved come to an agreement before the ultimate decision is made (Meyer, 2014). Top-down scale has a hierarchical structure, with the leadership at the highest level often making the majority of the choices. Although choices are made more quickly at this level, modifications are slower to accomplish since they should be made frequently. Although it consists of professors and students from many cultures who make decisions both by top-down scale and by consensus, the COIL atmosphere encourages more consensual decision-making because all issues are typically discussed by all participants, and everyone's ideas are taken into account. The next scale is the *Trusting Scale* which may be classified into two types: emotional trust and intellectual trust. Emotional trust results from emotions, whilst the intellectual one refers to the trust that is developed via long-term relationships and establishing reliability. Close ties, including those with friends and family, are frequently cited as the source of such trust. The Culture Map by E. Meyer demonstrates that *the task-based and relationship-based* components of the trusting scale are both high (Meyer, 2014).

High task-based scale, where the trust element is developed by commercial or work-based relationships and incomes which are usually successful, are easily created and destroyed. In high relationship-based scale trust is built on shared human relationships and experiences. Armenians, Brazilians and Chinese students had the online multicultural communication in the framework of their practice in COIL and shared this scale because they had all built their trust through enduring human relationships and experiences. Although the representatives of the three countries were always pleased to speak with one another and discuss their cultural and linguistic differences, they still needed to endure relationships to develop trust. *The Scale of Disagreement* is also included in the Culture Map. Arguments are normal and unavoidable in social structure. Yet, disagreements occur differently in many cultures. This scale evaluates the capacity to disagree openly and the propensity to see the disagreement as either constructive or destructive for relationships. Disagreements may result in confrontations or attempts to avoid them depending on the culture (Meyer, 2014). As soon as the students and the professors got in touch with *Chinese, Armenian and Brazilian* participants in the COIL project, it became obvious that none of the three nations was willing to express their disagreements loudly which resulted in a situation where everyone and everything was harmonious and peaceful though there might obviously be some disagreements in each member of the group.

Let us analyse another situation and imagine that multicultural communication takes place among cultures that are quite different from each other. For instance, if French and Russian students who are more open to talk about issues joined the learning process, some difficulties would definitely occur, especially if the group members did not have cultural knowledge and awareness. Understanding other peoples' cultures will help us to interact with them without difficulties or judgments. This promotes cross-cultural interactions and reduces disputes, misunderstandings between people of different cultures.

The last scale is the *Scheduling Scale*. The way that time and schedules are seen varies from culture to culture and might be linear or flexible, depending on the scheduling scale. Prioritizing one task before moving on to the next, linear approaches like to fulfil deadlines. Additionally, such cultures consider it disrespectful to change focus from one work to the next without completing the first one. On the other hand, multitasking is valued in flexible societies. Many

topics can be discussed at once and flexibility is a quality that is valued more highly (Meyer, 2014). The COIL project among students has shown that Brazilian culture is more flexible than Chinese or Armenian cultures, and they prefer multitasking. Due to this, it is sometimes possible to misunderstand what the primary task was. In contrast, the educational system in Armenia focuses more on a single task that is fulfilled by specific deadlines. And therefore, there are cultures that find multitasking fairly productive, and there are cultures that prefer to focus only on one activity and complete it in due deadlines. Although the students have used a specific *virtual* domain, the same principles can be used in face-to-face interactions as well. Online communication offers numerous advantages such as global reach, flexibility, convenience, accessibility, collaboration tools, etc. While online communication offers many advantages, it is essential to consider its limitations and disadvantages such as security concerns, privacy issues and the risk of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Consequently, the users should be aware of these factors and use online communication tools effectively. However, there are cases especially in asynchronous online communication, when even people of the same culture may not understand each other and clarifying the problem in this case takes longer than it would be in face-to-face communication. One of the most evident examples of this can be the communication in Social Media. There are people like social media managers or advertisers who use this domain both as a workspace and a place for leisure activities. Social media managers create communities on social media for businesses, interact with these communities, for instance, by generating lots of comments, and persuade them to take some form of action, like reading a blog post, signing up or buying a product. Managers and advertisers of social media platforms are essential in raising a company's brand recognition. The cultural awareness plays a crucial role as it is not clear how many types of cultures will get acquainted with the post. This is especially crucial for those who want to associate with *multicultural communities*. Users should be able to learn about topics through advertising that are important for them, and match the readers and their cultures.

To solve this issue, the majority of top organizations in online advertising industry provide multicultural advertising solutions. Facebook and Instagram, for instance, allow marketers to contact users whose likes and other online activities show whether they are interested in a product or not. These online

platforms work by algorithms, which, when applied effectively by the advertiser, send the users the product that is appropriate for them at the moment. Yet, it is not inevitable or even very usual that people from many cultures will gather around a shared object or service on the Internet domain and create communication with likes, dislike, comments or chats.

Conclusion

Cyberlanguage has become an inseparable part of online communication. Multiculturalism in cyberspace refers to the multiple and invasive nature of online platforms and communities that allow people from various cultural backgrounds to express and share their national identities. It motivates the identification and acknowledgment of different cultures, languages, customs and traditions advancing the universal exchange of thoughts and information. The topics like online harassment, cultural sensitivity and digital fairness and respect should be conveyed to guarantee a healthy and positive multicultural online environment. It should be noted that there is a direct correlation between the Internet usage, people or information and digital technology. Digital technologies have revolutionized every part of our life. They have become an inseparable aspect of modern life, enabling people to share information, cooperate and boost ties across distances.

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Մարիաննա Օհանյան

Լեզուն և մշակույթը անքակտելիորեն կապված են: Յուրաքանչյուր հասարակություն կամ սոցիալական խումբ ապրում և հնարավորինս պահպանում են իրենց մշակույթը, աշխարհիկ մշակութային արժեքները, ուստի, մշակութային և լեզվական բազմազանությունը իրականություն է դառնում: Համացանցային խոսույթի միջոցով տեղի է ունենում հաղորդակցում, փոխգործակցություն, որն էլ լայնորեն օգտագործվում է առցանց տիրույթում: Կիբերտարածությունը մշակույթների խառնարան է: Այն հնարավորություն է տալիս տարբեր ծագում ունեցող մարդկանց շփվելու, համագործակցելու և սովորելու

միմյանցից՝ դրանով իսկ խթանելով բազմամշակութայնությունը և գլոբալ ըմբռնումը: Կիբերտարածության մեջ բազմամշակութայնությունը հիմնականում դրսևորվում է որպես առցանց համայնքներում և հարթակներում տեղի ունեցող տարբեր մշակույթների ներդաշնակ փոխազդեցություն: Երբ մշակույթներն անհետանում են, բնականաբար տուժում է նաև աշխարհի մշակութային բազմազանությունը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ լեզու և մշակույթ, բազմամշակութայնություն, առցանց հաղորդակցում, առցանց լրատվական հաղորդակցում, առցանց բազմամշակութային կրթություն: