Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World

INTERCULTURAL GLOSSARY

Responsibility

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Why an intercultural dialogue ?

Everyone knows. Each language is rooted in the history of a people. Each language expresses a perception of the visible and invisible world, the human being, society and the relations between all that exists. These visions are nurtured by human experiences, old and new ones. And so, they are always evolving. Each language "is" and expounds a culture, it brings to the fore people's cultural bedrock.

The words constituting a language have a history too : their forms and their meanings have also developed in the course of time and are voicing culture as well.

However, studying the historical development of words and the concepts they contain does not suffice to understand their contemporary meaning. Because words acquire their full meaning only through their relations with other words. They are part of a *constellation of*

associations connected with their form as well as their meaning, in fact with both simultaneously. [1]

Thus the open space between words is filled with meaning left unsaid, understandable only to those who know their cultural ground waters.

If on the one hand a word refers to an acoustic image (the "signifier"), it refers on the other hand to a mental image ("the signified"). A word does not refer to the thing itself, but to the idea the mind has formed of it, the concept. Thus, messages carried by words can be understood only if sender and receiver associate a sequence of sounds with similar mental images. In other words, those who speak to each other must share a same *code* which determines the meaning. This code is not established in an individual manner, but rather in a collective way. [2]

No wonder then that communication through language may create problems, even within a human group speaking the same tongue. And this, of course, will be more often the case when people immersed in different cultures try to communicate in a "common" language. At least for one of the two this will be a foreign tongue, that is to say "from outside", from elsewhere, from another nation, in short : not from home. And so the cultural *under*-standings which words carry with them tend to be rapidly transformed in cultural *mis*-understandings.

And yet. We are living in a period of increasing international communication, which by its very nature is intercultural. Moreover, it has become less and less restricted to governmental and business elites. The advent of civil society at global level, a society claiming its right to participate in vital decisions concerning the future of the planet and humankind, becomes increasingly manifest. And citizens of our planet do *not only* want to *communicate*. Above all, they want to *act together*.

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[1] This idea was developed in particular by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Payot, Paris, 1972
[2] See : Julia KRISTEVA, Le langage, cet inconnu, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1981
Vincent NYCKEES, La Sémantique, Editions Belin, Paris,1998

The objectives of these common actions are expressed by words. However, the citizens of the world, all children of the same Mother Earth, unfortunately do not have the same mother tongue. Consequently, the objectives of the common action are "named" initially with the help of one of the dominant international languages. And too often, in the rush to act together, it is taken for granted that everyone ascribes the same meaning to "common" words.

Everyone knows : traps are hidden in communication between people from different cultures. But which ones ? Exactly ? Does everyone know them ?

One thing is sure : the experience of international life has at least shown that it may be more prudent to take up the challenge of intercultural learning than to ignore it. The effort of trying to make explicit the diversity which enriches us in order to discover the unity that brings us together, is worth its while. Intercultural dialogue is indispensable for acting together.

How to make cultural differences between meanings explicit ?

Starting from the idea that constellations of associations relate to the meaning as well as the form of words, we propose to establish the semantic fields [3] of certain key words -- supposed to represent common objectives in international movements--   in an important number of different languages.

Comparing these semantic fields will reveal specific features of the various cultural contexts. Making explicit what the implications of these features for social practices are, may highlight possible disparities between ways in which commonly agreed objectives, expressed by the key words concerned, are put into practice.

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[3] Pierre GUIRAUD defines these fields as *morpho-semantic fields* : "the complex of relations of forms and meanings constituted by a constellation of words" (P. GUIRAUD, *la Sémantique,* Que saisje ?, 1969)

Let's take the example of the initiative of *the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World* to frame a *Charter of Human Responsibilities* (attached). This charter is meant to be endorsed by citizens from all over the world, and later by international institutions.

The notion of "responsibility" stands at the heart of this charter. Therefore, it is of prime importance to make sure that this notion, being the main objective, is not in itself subject to cultural misunderstandings. One may take it that the idea of responsibility constitutes a universal value, if only because each newborn child appeals to a sense of responsibility of the parents. And yet, this presupposition does not automatically lead to a universal consensus on how this idea should be put into practice.

If the human being is supposed to be responsible, then : for *what* ? and to *whom* ? and on what is the *legitimacy* of the exercise of responsibility based ? *To what extent* does responsibility depend on the free choice of the individual ? *To what extent* is responsibility assigned (by the community ? by God ?). [4]

The answers to these questions will necessarily reveal in which ways people are expected to execute their responsibilities and account for them.

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[4] Cp. Monette VACQUIN, *La responsabilité*, Preface p. 13, Les Editions autrement, Paris, 2002

Questions on the semantic field of the word "responsibility"

In order to explore the semantic field of the word "responsibility" in different languages, we need to define the formal relations and the major semantic associations connected with that word.

To this end, the following questions are submitted to the participants in the intercultural dialogue on the *Charter of Human Responsibilities*.

Once the results of this empirical enquiry into the semantic fields of the word "responsibility" are established in the various languages concerned, they will be compared, refined, interpreted and discussed.

1. Formal relations

1.1. Is there a word for "responsibility" in your language ? Or perhaps more than one ? if so, which one(s) ?

1.2. To which *roots* is/are the equivalent(s) of the word(s) for "responsibility" linked in your language ? Can you translate these in English ?

   (For instance in English the word "responsibility" has its roots in the Latin verb "respondere" : "re-" = in return + "spondere" = to promise, to guarantee (cp. "spouse"). Originally it was a term used in religious language and meant "to fulfill a solemnly taken engagement" . Later "respondere" acquired the meaning of "to say something in return", "to answer" and also "to be answerable" (= accountable for one's acts).

   In Arab languages words have often a variety of roots).

1.3. Which other words in your language are morphologically linked to the equivalent of the word "responsibility" ?

   (For instance in English : the adjective "responsible", the noun "the responsible(s)", the adverb "responsibly")

2. **Semantic associations**

2.1. Set expressions including the word "responsibility"

2.1.1. With which *verbs* do(es) the equivalent(s) for the word "responsibility" in your language form a set expression ? Can you translate their meaning into English ?

(For instance in English : one can *take, assume, determine, decline, reject* responsibility/ies)

2.1.2. which *adjectives* are normally associated with the equivalent(s) for the word "responsibility" in your language ? Can you translate their meaning into English ?

(For instance in English : *ministerial, civil, moral, contractual, criminal, diminished, personal, collective)*

2.2. Concepts associated with the notion of "responsibility" in the cultural context

2.2.1. Which *related* concepts does the notion of "responsibility" evoke in your cultural context ? Can you explain their meaning in English ?

(For instance in English : *accountability, duty, obligation, freedom, self-limitation, justice, punishment, respect…)*

2.2.2. Which notions are the *opposite* of the idea of responsibility in your language ? Can you explain their meaning in English ?

(For instance in English : *irresponsibility, indifference….)*

3. **Exploring the dimensions of individual responsibility (of adults)** *in social practices*

3.1. Individuals are responsible for what/for whom ?

(Please try to indicate areas of responsibility considered of major importance in your own cultural environment)

3.2. With respect to these areas of responsibility (3.1.) , please mention :
   - to whom one is accountable
           ((*oneself ? others ?* (who are the others ?), God ? nature ? the cosmos ?… ?))
   - on what the legitimacy of the exercise of responsibility is based.
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