

## **Reciprocal images of Turkish and Portuguese university students: for an intercultural mediation between Portugal and Turkey**

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes to present an ongoing research project aiming at diagnosing the reciprocal language and cultural images of Portuguese learners of Turkish and Turkish learners of Portuguese as foreign languages in the Higher Education context. As a case-study format project following an eminently qualitative approach, it includes the application, analysis and interpretation of the results of three distinct and sequential data-collection instruments: two questionnaires/surveys, a collective interview, and an on-line platform that will serve as a space for the interaction of the students of both countries. Conclusions are to be taken on how the images/social representations the two groups of students construct of each other pertain on their knowledge and attitudes towards each other, and, ultimately, on their intercultural competence. Based on these conclusions, “cultural awareness” and intercultural competence development guidelines, at the level of foreign language learning – teaching, are to be devised and provided to be applied in Portuguese and Turkish higher education institutions.

In this article we intend to account for the first questionnaire/survey, a more quantitatively devised data collection instrument, which has been already applied to the students involved in the study.

**Key Words:** Images / Social Representations, Intercultural Communication, Foreign Language Teaching

### **Introduction**

Given the importance of intercultural dialogue in an increasingly globalized world, this research Project – “Reciprocal images of Turkish and Portuguese university students: for an intercultural mediation between Portugal and Turkey”– intends to contribute to the rapprochement of two countries that appear to be distant in what concerns the linguistic, cultural, social, and religious factors that structure them, although they share a similar peripheral geographical position in the European continent, a recent past of some economical frailty, and an imperial history: Portugal and Turkey.

In the present geopolitical conjuncture, in which Turkey is a candidate for European Union (EU) membership, the EU must be regarded as constituting, in its plurality, a unitary entity when confronted with a non-member state, with a majorly Muslim population, and most of its territory geographically located in the Asian continent.

This project, centered on the reciprocal images of Portuguese and Turkish students who are learning, respectively, Turkish and Portuguese, as a foreign language, in the higher education context, aims at answering the need for a cultural mediation between the two countries, and at contributing to a tightening of the relations between them.

As higher education institutions are a privileged space for the creation and maintenance of contact and cooperation between their public, namely through foreign languages teaching /learning programs and internationalization strategies, they more and more assume the responsibility of fostering ways of developing their public's competences to cope with the raising complexity inherent to contemporary societies. As this complexity reflects itself on the identity and communication processes, the images/ social representations<sup>37</sup> of the language and culture that each group builds of the other will be analyzed as to set forth a diagnosis of the shared reciprocal images.

This diagnosis will be taken as a basis for the identification of factors of rapprochement and distancing between the two groups and the conception of cultural mediation strategies within the framework of an intercultural approach that, at a formative level and in the context of Higher Education in both countries, should concur to the promotion of intercultural dialogue as a means of strengthening mutual understanding between the people from either culture.

## **1. Theoretical framework**

### **1.1. Educational challenges of a new century – the intercultural requirement**

Delors (1996) and Morin (1999) claimed that education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ought to be envisaged as a continual process of individual and collective development, in what respects competences and knowledge. They also highlighted its role in the tightening of interpersonal, communal, and international relationships, before the challenges mankind would have to face, realizing that human beings are as deeply involved in each other's existence as they are in each other's rejection.

Bohm (1980) and Morin (2008) connected the factors hindering human beings from working together for a common goal with a fragmented and disconnected view of reality, and urged for its reconstruction: it is the way thought is organized that will enable human-beings to find their place and act in the world as individuals, and as members of mankind.

In this sense, Abdallah-Preteille (1999), adopting an intercultural perspective, proposes a conceptual and methodological paradigm of diversity. He highlights the processes that define individuals and groups in relation to the Other, regards the questioning of identity facing alterity as an essential value, and adopts a way of thinking that simultaneously tells apart and reconstructs universality. Proposing a rethinking of cultural knowledge in a heterogeneous context, and privileging an analysis of complexity over one of structures and states, implying interpreting and analyzing interactions on a hermeneutical basis that opposes "doing culture" to "being culture" (cf. Abdallah-Preteille, 2006).

This conception has a deep bearing on Intercultural Education (IE), which aims at promoting intercultural competence and dialogue for the development of multicultural democratic societies, by raising the individual's consciousness of cultural differences; on the construction of a common basis of dialogue rooted on the knowledge of other cultures and one's own; on the psychological processes of acculturation and intercultural contact; and on intercultural communication.

We thus recognize, with Birzea (2003), that interculturality is fundamentally characterized by reciprocal relations and by the capacity of entities to take on shared responsibilities, and create common identities by developing common projects. It should, therefore, be instituted as a universal element of education at all levels (Bleszynska, 2008).

### **1.2. Intercultural Education in Higher Education**

In the field of educational policies, the Council of Europe (CoE) has fostered strategies that make the European space one of privileged Intercultural Dialogue (ID), the role of the higher education institutions being seen as of paramount importance in its re-enforcement. ID is defined as a process of open exchange of ideas between individuals and groups of different ethnical, cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions, upon a basis of mutual respect, aiming at improving understanding of diverse practices and world views, strengthening cooperation, enabling adaptation of individuals, and promoting tolerance and acceptance of the other (cf. CoE, 2008).

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<sup>37</sup> As, in this text, the concept of images is used in close association with the concept of social representations we will choose to maintain the use of only the term "images" as it is the one mostly used in the field of Language Didactics.

For the CoE, one of the priority purposes of contemporary educational systems is to supply learners with language and intercultural competences that enable them to efficiently act as citizen members of an increasingly larger and more complex community, to acquire knowledge, and develop attitudes of openness to alterity (cf. Beacco, Byram, Coste & Fleming, 2009: s/p), i.e. to develop a view of language and culture learning based on plurilingual and intercultural educational principles. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges Foreign Language Teaching faces today is that of supplying learners with language and intercultural competences that allow them to efficiently interact in a progressively broader community.

### **1.3. Images of languages and cultures in Foreign Language Education**

To face this challenge with the necessary tools it is of paramount importance for Language Education to act upon the images of the language that students are learning, of the people who speak it, and of their culture. To achieve this aim, Language Didactics (LD) proposes a concept of images as systems of interpretation of reality anchored in historical, social-identitary, cognitive and discursive processes, specific to each subject or group, and partaking in their process of grasping and constructing reality, influencing the ways in which the subject or group interact with it (Andrade, Araújo e Sá & Moreira, 2007).

The notion of images in LD adopts the characteristics of an “immigrant”, “nomad” and “carrefour” concept (cf. Vasseur, 2001; Muller & De Pietro, 2001), which simultaneously avert its conceptual crystallization and contribute for it to be approached by multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The reciprocal images of the individuals are understood to be crucial in cross-cultural communication (cf. Doise & Palmonari, 1986), and the LD reference framework for the images of languages and cultures constitutes an effective contribution to educational strategies and practices that aim at developing intercultural communication as an interaction of different world visions.

Consequently, LD, as a scientific discipline aiming at playing an active role within the framework of complex cultural social-political contexts (cf. Alarcão, Andrade, Araújo e Sá, Melo-Pfeiffer & Santos, 2009), puts forward a conception of images rooted on the principle that its comprehension gives access to individual or group world views, permitting to explain how subjects build reality, and proposes to effectively intervene in the teaching /learning context (cf. Mariko, 2005; Andrade, Araújo e Sá & Moreira, 2007 ).

In this sense we intend to follow two approaches to the study of images in the context of Language Didactics: as diagnosis, testimony, or evidence of social reality; as constitutive of social reality, which implies working on images through images, so as to contribute to their (re/des)construction (cf. Mariko, 2005).

## **2. Proposal of a research baseline hypothesis: images of language and culture are related by mutual implication to Intercultural Competence**

This project is developed in the confluence of these two trends of imagological studies in LD. The ways social images relate to the dimensions focused on by the multidimensional models of intercultural competence (e.g. Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007) are analysed so as to contribute to the development of the Portuguese and Turkish students' IC, and promote ID between the two countries.

We, thus, depart from the relation of mutual implication between the dimensions contemplated in the multidimensional models of IC, and the images of language and culture individuals build of each other. This relation is implicit in the baseline definitions of both concepts:

- Images: socially constructed, shared knowledge, with practical bearings that contribute to the construction of a common reality for a determined social group; systems of representation of reality responsible for the orientation and organization of social behaviour (Jodelet, 1997), accounting for the ways of interaction with the Other (Doise & Palmonari, 1986, Abric, 1994), and for the subject's understanding of the social dynamics he takes part in (Vala, 1993).
- IC: adequate, effective management of the interaction between individuals with different affective, cognitive, behavioral orientations that are a result of different group or cultural affiliations, as this interaction becomes an intercultural process (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009).

We thus intend to contribute to an optimization of diversity on the basis of "reciprocal valuing" constituted by heterogeneity – realizing how differences can enrich us, considering how fundamentally identical we are". (Abdallah-Preteille & Porcher, 1996: 20). It is in this sense of mutual enrichment that heartens this study, and prevails throughout it.

### **3. Research project “Reciprocal images of Turkish and Portuguese university students: for an intercultural mediation between Portugal and Turkey” description**

#### **3.1. Main objectives**

Three main research objectives structure this project:

- 1) To diagnose the reciprocal images of Portuguese and Turkish higher education students, respectively learning Turkish and Portuguese language; account for the factors involved in the construction of such images; identify and analyse the relations between these images.
- 2) To devise a theoretical tool based on a referential framework for the development of the students' Intercultural Competence, and of ID in the Portuguese and Turkish higher education context.
- 3) To contribute to Intercultural Education and Foreign Language Teaching with the proposal of strategic guidelines focused on language education practices aiming at developing the students' Intercultural Competence, and promoting ID between Portugal and Turkey.

#### **3.2. Main stages**

As an eminently imagological comparative study, this project will focus on the reciprocal images of students of a Turkish university, and of two Portuguese universities, respectively, learning Portuguese and Turkish as a foreign language in their Higher Education language learning context.

Two distinct, but complementary, sequential stages are contemplated:

- a) The first stage is intended to identify, describe and categorize the reciprocal images of the two groups in question. A comparative analysis of these images will be developed, aiming at the understanding of how they interrelate in terms of similarity or difference regarding their nature and function, and of the factors involved in their construction. The interference of the images on both groups' ability to communicate and relate to each other will also be scrutinized.  
Based on the results, a theoretical referential framework will be constructed highlighting the interconnection between the conclusions of the analysis and categorization of the images, and the multidimensional model of Intercultural Competence.
- b) The second phase is focused on the development of strategic guidelines of intervention at the foreign language (Portuguese and Turkish as foreign languages) education level. Based on the objectives inherent to IE, and on the interconnection of images and Intercultural Competence, it is intended to improve the students' Intercultural Competence, their awareness of the intrinsic value of the each other's language and culture, and their ability to reflect upon their own culture when faced with the other's, as crucial to the development of positive attitudes regarding diversity.

#### **3.3. Methodological design**

Considering that the field of Education research is that of an unrepeatable, mutable reality, with an undetermined number of conditioning factors, assumptions, and purposes (cf. Amado & Boavida, 2008: 226), a constructivist approach was adopted, of an ontological and epistemological nature, based on the conception of knowledge as co-constructed in a collaborative process, focusing on the research process itself, and not disregarding the intervention and influence of the researcher himself. (cf. Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

It takes the form of a "multiple cases" variant of a case study project, as it includes more than only one case (cf. Yin, 2009). A contemporary phenomenon is focused on, in a real life context, by means of a comprehensive research strategy, aiming at approaching its understanding through a systematic, detailed, intensive, deepened, and interactive examination (cf. Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). The results obtained are not intended to be generalized, as they aim, on the contrary, at achieving a deeper level of understanding of the issues in study.

Two imagological complementary approaches are adopted: a thematized approach, which takes images as elements liable to explain competences inherent to an individual or group, and which aims at

understanding the individual's world organization system; and a non-thematized or constructivist approach, which focuses on the dynamical nature of images, and aims at devising educational activities that should favour the (re)construction of those very images (cf. Vasseur, 2001; Müller & de Pietro, 2001).

Data collection and analysis are, thus, carried out according to quantitative-qualitative *continuum* model (Niglas, 2004), and the following data collection tools were adopted:

- 1) inquire by questionnaire – Two distinct questionnaires are applied: (1) **“Images”** will focus on the reciprocal images of the inquired; (2) **“Intercultural”** will take the form of a self-report by the inquired on aspects connected with intercultural communication; it is intended to gather information on how the inquired describe and assess themselves in what concerns their own intercultural capacities, rather than to assess their intercultural competence levels.
- 2) *focus group* technique – inherent to a qualitative research, it propitiates an approach to different individuals' diverse views on a predefined theme. Based on inductive research strategies, results are largely descriptive, seen as a way of complementing or deepening the information gathered through other methods, and contributing to hypothesizing in subsequent data collecting and analysis phases and / or future research (cf. Stewart; Shamdasani & Rook, 2007);
- 3) on-line interaction platform – interaction between the two publics in study is recorded in the form of an on-line platform specially designed for the purpose, in which groups are intended to interact in order to fulfill a task within the context of a collaborative work to be integrated in the teaching programs of Portuguese and Turkish language courses attended by the classes of the students participating in this project.

#### 4. Description of the “Images” questionnaire

This questionnaire is applied to the Higher Education Portuguese and Turkish students attending, respectively, Turkish and Portuguese as FL language courses in both countries. Four different classes were selected: two classes of a Portuguese Language course of a Turkish University and two classes of a Turkish language course of two different Portuguese Universities. The students are attending the second semester of either the first or second year of the respective language courses.

The construction of this questionnaire, its application and the planning of the subsequent processes of analysis of its results were guided by the following main research questions:

1. What is the biographical, academic and professional profile of the students involved?
2. What images of the native and foreign languages (Portuguese and Turkish), and of their speakers and culture are shared by the participants?
3. What are the main factors which are likely to interfere in the construction of the reciprocal images of the participants?
4. At what level can the images of the two groups of participants be inter-related?
5. What are the implications of these images on the processes of approaching/distancing of the students regarding their counterpart’s language, people and culture?

The questionnaire was structured as to obtain an answer to these questions, focusing mainly on the collection of data related to the reciprocal images of the two groups, and divided in five distinct sections, presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: “Images” questionnaire sections and respective data collection objectives.**

<u>Sections</u>	<u>Objectives</u>
<b>1. Personal Data</b>	<b>Describe the subjects in what concerns:</b> Sex, age, nationality. Professional experience. Academic experience (level of education, study cycle, institution, department, and name of the course being taken, participation and/or desire to participate in mobility programs).
<b>2. Linguistic Biography</b>	<b>Describe the subjects' linguistic biography:</b> Mother language(s); parents' mother language(s). Significant experience abroad; reasons for experience; acquisition of the language(s) of the host country. FLs learnt; learning context; competence (self-assessment); motivations for learning

	FLs used (contexts and motives).
<b>3. Images of the Turkish and Portuguese Languages</b>	<b>Describe the self- / hetero – images of the subjects regarding Turkish and Portuguese languages:</b> Motivations for learning Portuguese/Turkish as FL. Level of difficulty in learning Portuguese/Turkish Images of the Turkish Language. Images of the Portuguese Language. Images of the status of the Turkish/Portuguese language in different contexts, and of its future development.
<b>4. Images of the Turkish and Portuguese people and cultures</b>	<b>Describe the images regarding the Turkish and Portuguese people and cultures:</b> Visits to Turkey/Portugal; contexts of the visit; interest in visiting the country. Contacts/relationships with Turkish/Portuguese natives or descendants; nature of contact/relationship. Images of the Turkish people (self- / hetero-images) Images of the Portuguese people (self- / hetero-images) Images regarding the general representation of Turkish people shared by the Portuguese people. Images regarding the general representation of Portuguese people shared by the Turkish people. Factors concurring to the rapprochement between Portuguese and Turkish people. Factors concurring to the distancing between Portuguese and Turkish people. Degree of comfort to establish social and affective relations with Turkish/Portuguese people. Political and social images of Turkey and Portugal. Degree of identification with the Turkish/Portuguese people. Images of the influence of religion on different social and political spheres in Portugal and Turkey. Images of the status of Turkey and Portugal at the intellectual, cultural, economical, and industrial level in different contexts, and of the future development of the two countries.
<b>5. Opinions and attitudes regarding the EU</b>	<b>Describe the opinions and attitudes of the participants regarding the UE:</b> Positioning regarding the membership of Portugal/Turkey in the EU. Political and social aspects of the EU. European identity. Degree of confidence regarding the future of the EU. Level of a sense of belonging to a progressively larger geographical or cultural context. Association of certain political, social, economical, and religious values to the EU, Turkey, Portugal, or none of them. Degree of support, or opposition, to the integration of Turkey in the EU. Challenges that Turkey faces as a candidate State to the integration in the EU.

Concerning the questions typology, a range of Open-ended and Closed-ended formats were selected: Open-ended; word-associations; multiple-choice (open- and closed-ended); categorical (open- and closed-ended); Likert-scale.

This instrument had already been subjected to a validation and pre-testing process, having also been adapted to a digital format to be available on-line. Both the divulgation and filling of the “Images” questionnaire is processed through the internet.

#### **4.1 Expected outcomes and future valence of the use of the “Images” questionnaire**

The treatment of the collected data is expected to:

- present a characterization of the students' profile;
- understand their motivation to learn Portuguese and Turkish as foreign language;
- know the nature and level of communicational and relational experiences with their counterpart;
- present a characterization of the images that both groups construct regarding their own language and culture and their counterpart's;

- understand the level of influence of the participants' opinions and attitudes regarding the EU on their reciprocal images (Portugal being a member-State of this institution, and Turkey being a long-time candidate to the integration in the EU)

These results will propitiate the reaching of conclusions on the participants' self- and hetero-images that should provide a basis for a comparative analysis intended to highlight the main similarities and differences of the nature, characteristics, and background of the reciprocal images of the two groups of students, and elicit some further conclusions on the factors that might come to play a role in intercultural communication between Portuguese and Turkish people.

A set of conclusions on the images that either group constructs and shares regarding the other will have an intrinsic value for the academic research in Language Didactics and IE, as well as for other disciplines in the area of the social studies.

It will also provide a basis for the planning and construction of the data collection instruments and techniques to be applied in the development of this research project: the collective interviews (based on the technique of *focus-group*) and the on-line interaction platform.

The data collection instruments based on an eminently qualitative methodology will help deepen the knowledge and understanding of the participants' reciprocal images, and of the interconnection between these images and the participants' ability to be involved in effective intercultural communication with each other.

## **Conclusion**

The ultimate aim of this research project is to promote an effective ID between Turkish and Portuguese people through the proposal of strategic guidelines focused on education practices in foreign language education (Portuguese and Turkish), in a Higher Education context, intended to further develop the students' IC and raise their awareness of their counterpart's language and culture.

The tightening of the connections between the two countries is seen as extremely beneficial not only in a conjectural intercultural communication framework to be promoted and developed in the Higher Education context, at an intellectual, economical, political, and cultural level.

In face of the complexity and variety of the factors involved in the construction and use of the images of languages and cultures, as well as in the different dimensions that are part of IC, we chose to follow a holistic paradigmatic approach, in the planning, structuring, and developing stages of the present project. This approach was based mainly on the epistemological and scientific frameworks presented by Bohm (2008) and Morin (2008), which are based, respectively, on the conceptions of "Wholeness" and "Complexity". These approaches are considered fundamental when studying the factors involved in the study of images and intercultural communication, primarily because both approaches present a conception of the self as a simultaneously individual and collective reality and give emphasis to the complexity and interconnectedness of this same reality.

The contemporary challenges facing all human beings and nations stress the urgency for a further epistemological development in science, which has to be based on the development of a "new way of thinking" (Bohm, 2008; Morin, 2008). In this sense, and viewing the world as a "complex wholeness", this project answers the need for a transdisciplinary perspective that propitiates the problematization of the questions under study in a wider and more complex way, allowing for the dissolution of barriers intrinsic to the disciplinary stratification of sciences, in particular of the Social and Human Sciences (cf. Geertz, 1989). In clear opposition to the latter's fragmentary view of reality we chose to make use of theoretical frameworks from different disciplinary scientific areas, as well as to adopt and implement different methodologically based data collection instruments and processes of analysis of their products. We believe that only by interconnecting different views and methodologies will it be possible to answer the questions that orientate this project, following, at the same time, the principle that scientific explanations do not consist in the reduction of complexity to simplicity, but rather in replacing a less intelligible complexity by a more intelligible one (cf. Levi-Strauss, 1996).

We therefore chose to adopt a holistic approach to face the questions we raised, assuming that only a holistic approach will make it possible to achieve a simultaneously broader and deeper understanding not only of the ties that unify individuals as human beings, but also of the factors involved in bringing them apart.

It is through the profound understanding of the complexities involved that strategies based on the notion of ID may be designed and carried out to promote tolerance and openness to diversity.

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As a final conclusion and a way of portraying the holistic paradigm prevailing throughout this project we transcribe Daniel Faria's words from his poem "Labirinto I":

*"Never again shall I divide  
The birds – their singing and their wings-  
To find the precise weight  
Of their rising body."*

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