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Dymplexity: new theories, new contexts and new labels for mobile students

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Dymplexity: new theories, new contexts and new labels for mobile students.

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Abstract

In their article 'A guide to interculturality for international and exchange students: an example of *Hostipitality*', Fred Dervin and Heidi Layne discuss two locally-produced documents designed to help international and exchange students acclimatise to life in Finland. Drawing on Derrida, Bauman, Bakhtin and other theoretical approaches to cultures, to interculturality and to discourse analysis, they find that the documents seek to impose on visiting students the norms of an essentialised Finnishness. In this response, I adopt a simpler theoretical position to reflect on theoretical neologisms, and to challenge what is fundamentally a binary statement of the issue, and one which potentially misrepresents the documents by drawing on concepts which are no longer apt, and by ignoring some key factors of the context of their production and use. I suggest that dymplexity might be a more appropriate term than hostipidality for considering intercultural aspects of student mobility.

Introduction

In their article 'A guide to interculturality for international and exchange students: an example of *Hostipitality*', Fred Dervin and Heidi Layne discuss two documents designed to help international and exchange students acclimatise to life in Finland. They situate the discussion within the context of different concepts of identity, hospitality and interculturality. They analyse the power relations existing between the host country and the incoming student, and decode hospitality as typically including the setting of rules for the guest. In this commentary article, I do not take issue with their central findings. Instead, I critique aspects of their theoretical positioning, terminology and target, and I try to look at other ways in which their study might be positioned, and other contextual issues which might complement and enrich their findings.

Dervin and Layne explicitly accept that the word 'intercultural' is highly polysemic and problematic (p.4), and that the notion of hospitality is a complex one, which 'cannot be conceived without hostility and vice versa' (p.4), since it is typically the host who sets norms for the behaviour of those who are being hosted. In the title and throughout the article, they adopt Derrida's witty coinage 'hostipitality', but in so doing I fear that they may be under-playing the complexity of the relationship between incoming students and the country and institution in which they find themselves.

International students, exchange students, and commercialised hospitality

Theories of reading and writing such as Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA (e.g. Fairclough 2001, van Dijk 1993) assert that any written or printed document cannot be considered in isolation from its circumstances of production, dissemination and

consumption, and its intended readership. In discussions focusing on detailed discourse analysis, especially when the authors approvingly cite Andreotti's (2011) rejection of what is ahistorical or uncritical (p.5), we are entitled to scrutinise every word. We may start by looking at the way in which the authors themselves define the target readers: specifically, they conflate 'international and exchange students' (title and p. 4) as if there were no distinction; but in the domain of academic mobility, especially from the perspective of the UK and other countries where student tuition fees apply, these are two very distinct designations.

Readers will be well aware that higher education has become a global marketplace, where rankings count towards attracting international students and academic staff, and the proportion of international staff and students counts towards rankings. Mobile students are typically grouped under either degree (whole-programme) mobility, or credit (within-programme) mobility. Globally, student mobility doubled in the past decade, thus growing faster than the worldwide expansion of tertiary education (77% increase in the same period). However, since fewer than one in forty of the world's students is currently mobile (OECD 2012), there remains huge potential for continued growth, and all aspects of the phenomenon are worthy of study. Europe welcomed 41% of the 4.1 million mobile students recorded in 2010 (OECD 2012).

For UK higher education (and similar terms are employed in other countries where non-resident and/or non-national students pay a differentiated fee), 'International students' are those from beyond the European Union, and who can therefore be charged higher fees. Indeed, British universities have often been criticised for interpreting 'internationalisation' in their mission statements in the narrow sense of attracting large numbers of such students. Official statistics published by the Universities' Central Admissions Service (UCAS) and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) always distinguish between UK, Other EU and Non EU students, reflecting the different (and always higher) fees paid by the third classification, a lucrative community which justifies separate targeted marketing. The UK is the second largest recipient of international students in the world, and the money they bring represents an 'export' value of £5.6 billion a year (British Council 2010), so it is no surprise that there is a highly respected professional body, UKCISA (http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/), which has been devoted to the interests of international students for over forty years. Every receiving country has at least one similar national organisation whose role is to attract and/or support incoming students: it might have been more appropriate to analyse a corpus of documents emanating from such bodies rather than a single, opportunistically accessed, unofficial production whose treatment could also be criticised as being rather selective.

Is it useful or legitimate to bring heavy-weight theoretical approaches to bear upon a well-intentioned but relatively unsophisticated local initiative? It might be considered churlish to criticise one attempt, however imperfect, to offer practical help in order to address the real incidents of culture clash which, as is well documented, and has long been thoroughly researched (e.g. http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/documents/MAXSAResearchReport.pdf, http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/interculture/), characterise study abroad. A single paper document in isolation is hardly representative of the global and largely web-based genre of professional advice to mobile students. Although Dervin and Layne do not mention the fact, a presentation of the 2012 edition of THEM FINNS is in fact

available online at . It might be compared with the highly professional resources available at http://www.studyinfinland.fi/.

I have argued elsewhere that 'intercultural competence is perhaps the most important benefit to be derived from contact with other cultures. Exactly what it represents has been the subject of several book-length studies, but it may be summarised as an awareness of the relativity of all cultures - including one's own' (Coleman 2007: p.40). What strikes me at once in the online slides for THEM FINNS, apart from the humour, is not an issue of power relations but the explicit recognition of the relativity of cultures, a recognition which is a key feature of most definitions of intercultural competence. The second thing I notice is that the intention is to avoid misunderstandings, and not to impose normative behaviours. Thirdly, perhaps, there are features of the expression which might be ungenerously characterised as amateurish mis-spellings and awkward turns of phrase, but which I prefer to read as a form of ELF (English as a lingua franca), which the authors and the target readers share.

In the case of incoming international students, is it even appropriate to talk of 'hospitality' when the transaction is a commercial one? Hotels also talk of 'hosting' and 'guests', but the financial component takes us a very long way from Derrida's idealised, decontextualised, philosophical discussions of whether genuinely altruistic hospitality (or giving, or forgiving) are possible.

The welcome reserved for exchange students in the UK and elsewhere may be very different from that of international students. Not only do they pay no fees if they come under the European Union's Erasmus programme, but they incur expense for the host institution because they expect to be taught. Like Ireland and many Scandinavian countries which offer English-medium teaching, the UK and its universities are 'net beneficiaries' in terms of exchange students. Although outgoing UK student numbers have been rising each year since 2006, and are now higher than ever, the ratio of outgoers to incomers remains low. In 2010/11, the latest year for which Erasmus figures are available, the UK hosted 17,504 students but sent out less than half that number (8,577). The position is similar in Finland (3,927 outgoers, 6,302 incomers). Finland has traditionally charged no fees to any category of student. But in 2009 the New Universities Act allowed fees to be charged on a trial basis to non-EEA (European Economic Area) students studying English-language Masters courses: might this be the thin end of the wedge?

In economic terms, then, international students are an asset, while exchange students are a liability. Nor do the distinctions end there. Despite both groups' sharing - especially as far as documents aimed to support cultural integration are concerned - a need to enhance their language skills and to acculturate, international students are typically degree-mobile and coming for at least three years, often with a family, and not infrequently with the intention of working after graduation in the host country. Exchange students, by contrast, are credit-mobile, and as likely to seek assimilation into an international peer group as into the local culture(s). My characterisation of study-abroad social networks as concentric circles (Coleman, in press) builds on many research studies which have found credit-mobile students socialising with co-nationals and other outsiders rather than seeking to integrate with their hosts (see for

example Isabelli-García 2006, and a review in Dewey et al. in press). The real-life engagement with co-nationals, with other outsiders and ultimately – sometimes – with locals is, I would argue, a more authentic representation than an artificial host-other duality, even if all three of the groups are imagined rather than identifiable communities.

Anyone who is not convinced that the aims, values, behaviours and therefore induction needs of degree-mobile international students are very different from those of credit-mobile exchange students is invited to google Erasmus Orgasmus ('About 44,500 results' on 2013-02-01). One definition (accessed 2013-02-01 and selected pretty much at random) claims that

> When Erasmus began it was little-known, and promised nothing more than mobility and educational enrichment. Today it has become the infamous international social party network that allows European students to live a lavish lifestyle abroad under the pretext of studying.

(A-)Historical contexts for theory and practice

The two versions of the booklet analysed by Dervin and Layne were 'published on paper' (p.6). Those who have administered study abroad exchanges or managed professional development programmes in this domain (as I have done, notably with the Residence Abroad Project which received £300,000 of UK Government funding in 1997-2001) know that even those students who would be helped by a document are unlikely to recognise the benefit to be derived, and are in fact unlikely to read it. Even a decade ago, many UK universities had learnt by experience that preparation for student mobility must not only be compulsory and integrated, but also assessed if it is to be taken seriously by students (Coleman and Parker 2001). Virtually all universities despatching students to a foreign country relied then – as they do now – on students who are currently abroad, on returners, and on online forums: students listen to other students more attentively than to academic or administrative staff. Even then, but very much more so today, students, and especially mobile students, rely not on dead trees processed into 'paper', but on internet-accessible resources.

To take one very recent example, the University Council of Modern Languages (which I chair) and the British Academy needed to prepare a lobbying document (ironically a 'position *paper'*, though also available online) to support continued central UK funding for outgoing academic mobility (British Academy 2012). We chose to draw upon the impact of website thirdyearabroad.com to gather evidence of the employability benefits of international experience. The website gathered more than 600 graduate stories of their year abroad in only three weeks in late 2011, and in under a year the selected stories (http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/graduates) have scored more than half a million hits.

Theories and identities of time past

Writing of the contexts of academic mobility, I have argued elsewhere (Coleman and Chafer 2010: p.165) that, thanks to new communication technologies and easier travel, 'abroad is less abroad than it once was'. I would also suggest that, with uninterrupted global connectedness and instant access to information, 'strangers' (the word punctuates Dervin and Layne's article) are less strange than in the past.

More broadly, I wonder to what extent it is legitimate to apply the theories of a past generation to today's world, where up-to-date practical information is permanently accessible online. Derrida lived in a world built largely on paper: today's world is more mobile and more connected. Derrida died in 2004, the year Facebook was founded. I do not believe that he ever Skyped (2003), and I have not found him in LinkedIn (2003). He certainly never knew YouTube (2005), Google maps (2005), Twitter (2006), Android smartphones (2008), the Apple app store (2008) or the myriad other devices and apps which mobile students automatically turn to first. Of course humanity has not changed fundamentally in a couple of decades, but we should perhaps be cautious about applying pre-internet concepts and theories to an internet age, and to putative readers drawn from the generation of digital natives.

Traditional, pre-internet notions of identity must also be revised. A UK Government report (Government Office for Science 2013) reiterates the now widely accepted notion that people can have many different overlapping and fluid identities which we perform according to contexts and in interaction. The report pinpoints three important ways in which internet technologies are driving changes in who we are: the blurring of private and public identities, increasing social plurality, and above all hyper-connectivity. If, previously, you were what you said, today you are what you tweet.

Like other identities, geographical identity is performed and context-dependent. Identity labels (Finnish, British, host, guest) are superficial and transitory, just one aspect of the accommodation to one's interlocutors which is widely attested in applied linguistics research (see e.g. Ellis 2008: 124-5). In academic circles, national labels are in metaphorical inverted commas, in a mute acknowledgment that we define ourselves and each other not by origin or residential location, but rather by more individual traits and by negotiation. Who is 'we' and who are 'the strangers' in the growing number of multilingual and multicultural encounters where neither participant is at home? We, the interculturally competent, perhaps?

Stereotypical and binary categories

To cope with the many complexities of contemporary life and society, let alone what the educational philosopher Barnett has called supercomplexity (Barnett 2000) and Vertovec (2007) super-diversity, the human intellect needs to synthesise, to simplify and to generalise. We know that stereotypes are often inaccurate, that they are in conflict with individuality and personal identities, that they are often derogatory, that they set up simplistic oppositions between 'us' and 'them' – but we use them and rely on them nonetheless. When we encounter a disabled athlete, an academic in a hijab, a Beijing taxi driver or a New York shop assistant, we open with tacit provisional categorisations and characterisations which shape both the form and the content of our initial interactional utterances. We hope that these are flexible enough, and well enough informed by our world knowledge, tolerant and relativistic attitudes, and understanding of intercultural competence to adapt to her/his needs and expectations and avoid ethnocentricity (linguists tend to have less rigid ego boundaries than many other professions).

I have shown (Coleman 1998) that mobile students have firm auto- and heterostereotypes before they undertake study abroad, and that, for many, the

stereotypes are not nuanced but reinforced by studying in a different European country. Activities which deconstruct stereotypes by forcing future study-abroad participants to acknowledge and deconstruct their own, is a fairly standard part of pre-departure preparation.

Humans also find, while knowing full well that a two-dimensional phenomenon is a physical impossibility in the real world, that binary oppositions offer straightforward categories. The language we all use accentuates the tendency, perhaps especially among applied linguistic researchers, who conventionally work with clearly contrasted experimental and control groups. We refer to 'diglossia' comprising H (high) and L (low) but not middling varieties; Focus on Form or Focus on FormS, but not a hybrid pedagogy; knowledge which is declarative or procedural but not half-digested. Dervin and Layne explicitly criticise such over-simplification, which they find in modernist 'dichotomies' (p.3), yet they approvingly quote Bauman's (2003) oppositions of normal/abnormal, expectable/unexpected, ordinary/bizarre, domesticated/wild, familiar/strange, us/strangers; and Shérer's (2005) identification within hospitality of 'ambiguity' (p.4, from Latin *ambi* = both); and they repeatedly opt for binary terms to define their central argument, which lies in hospitality vs. hostility, the 'contradictory' position of 'hosting/hostage' (p.4) as captured in Derrida's ugly neologism hostipitality. They criticise 'the *us versus them* dichotomy' of the booklet (p.13) yet couch their discussion of 'relations between the 'locals' and the 'guests' (p.1), envisaged 'from both sides, the guest and the host' (p.4) in binary terms. Even when criticising a putative approach as 'superior' (p.3) they opt for a binary comparative adjective. They talk of 'vice versa' (p.4). And while insisting that 'intercultural', like all language, is polysemic (pp. 5, 8), they inevitably perpetuate a term whose prefix, although the original Latin might be translated into English as either 'between' (*inter spem et metum*) or 'among' (*inter alia*), now attaches predominantly to the meeting ('interface') of just two entities viewed as discrete from each other.

Discrete and contrasting entities, even fictional ones, particularly when they are in binary opposition, used with clever but superficial word-plays such as host/hostage, and attached to famous-brand philosophical theories, capture attention and no doubt suit a polemic if not an academic context, but I wonder whether they properly capture the necessary complexity of contextualised encounters.

In English, terms beginning with 'inter-' and 'multi-', such as multistorey office block or interfaith dialogue tend to apply to two or more distinct units. This is why terms such as 'interlanguage' are nowadays widely spurned by linguists who conceive of languages not as discrete codes acquired in sequence (L1 , L2, L3…) but as overlapping and incomplete systems characterised by complexity and dynamic instability: what a neologist might call dymplexity. For example, my English, French and German are pretty distinct one from the other, but anyone who has engaged with my Italo-hispano-luso-catalan would have great difficulty in allocating to it an L-number. It comprises elements of several European languages, and is created anew whenever I find myself in conversation in a country on the northern coast of the Mediterranean. I am uncomfortable to be described as 'multilingual', because the word evokes concepts in which a language is reified as a discrete and normative entity, rather than being constructed within any individual interaction from the range of codes available within the linguistic repertoire of each speaker.

Since I am unable to locate a suitable existing synonym for 'multilingual', may I turn, Derrida-like, to a neologism? The image I want to convey is not a neat Venn diagram of overlapping circles, but rather a wet and runny water-colour painting, where the tones or codes which make up my linguistic repertoire are of different sizes and shapes, with some of them incomplete or fragmentary, and where they can merge into one another in unpredictable and always original ways in the context of a particular interaction.

My first notion, blodgilingual, is ruled out by different meanings in British and American English. How about mergilingual or splodgicultural? I cannot see them catching on. A preferable alternative might be flexilingual, coined in 2012 by Nick Byrne of the London School of Economics (http://languagerichblog.eu/2012/06/28/todays-launch-england/).

Bilateralism to complexity

To return to Dervin and Layne's use of host and stranger; the single Latin noun *hospes*, which gave rise to many English terms including hospital, hospitality, host, hostel, hotel and hostage, translates both as 'guest' and as 'host', and, like the French word *hôte* which embraces both the *personne qui reçoit* and the *personne reçue*, thus perhaps better embodies the mutual obligations and complexity of roles when receiving a visitor than the hard opposition of us and the Other. As an applied linguist, I feel it is perfectly possible to critique ill-advised formulations without lapsing into a similar bilateralism. If, at a conference abroad, I buy a coffee for a local postgraduate, neither of us is wholly host or guest. As Dervin and Layne suggest (p.6, after Shi-xu 2001), we negotiate and co-construct the linguistic and behavioural norms of our interaction. I share the authors' post-modernist conviction that it is wrong to use 'intercultural' to refer to 'knowledge and skills in a particular language and culture' (p.5), that essentialised notions of 'culture' à la Hofstede are naïve, and that contexts, like culture, identity, agency, beliefs and motivation are fluid, dynamic, situated, and constantly reconstructed through interaction. For that reason, I prefer to visualise phenomena through the lens of complex dynamic systems (Larsen-Freeman 2011; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008). Since the two key factors of all human behaviour are instability and constant change (dynamic) and near-irreducible complexity, I adopt the label dymplexity.

A coda on hostipitality and other neologisms

My fundamental conclusion is that analysis of a text must rely on a full evaluation of the context of production and reception, rather than on sophisticated theories and witty coinages. It perhaps advances neither theory nor practice very far to take one local document, select the single theme of interculture, apply a pre-internet theory of hospitality to what is today a primarily commercial relationship, and to couch in binary terms an issue where every noun should be qualified as fluid and situationally context-dependent.

As in the rest of Europe, Finland's mediaeval 'hospitals' were not just for sick people; they welcomed and lodged pilgrims too. The meaning of nouns changes with time, and it is not only because of travel and the internet that we cannot take the word

'hospitality' as having a single meaning, regardless of context. But that does not mean that we necessarily coin new ones instead.

However justified it may be within certain theoretical discussions to coin new words in order to concretise a new concept or a new perspective on an important issue, their use in wider contexts is akin to acronymics, the self-protective power game which consisted of using little-known and often undefined terms which were known to the in-group but which subtly excluded those who were not in the know. Thanks to Wikipedia, any reader can now rapidly grasp the sense of ZPD, CoP, SLA, CMC and even hostipitality – which was not the case in Derrida's day. With few exceptions – such as the use of 'language' as a verb to embody the rejection of the notion of languages as reified codes or systems for a more dynamic and constructivist understanding of linguistic repertoires which are enacted through interaction – such inventions add little to academic discourse. I therefore withdraw unconditionally the neologism dymplexity.

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