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Against ‘failing *francophonie*’, a reflection on *francophonies*

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Abstract: Based on the observation of the heterogeneity of the category ‘newcomer allophone students’, the article purports to reflect on the links to be forged between languages and experiences, histories and relationships with languages. The aim is to propose a conceptual alternative allowing a different definition of *francophonies* (in this case, school *francophonies*), by taking into account the plural and relational dimensions of *francophonies*, as well as the diversity of their members. Thus redefined, and excluding the idea of linguistic mastery, school *francophonies* could mobilise the fundamental opacity of the language of the school (academic discourse) as a lever enabling students to adopt a distanced posture with regard to languages and learning at school.

keywords: French as a language of schooling – newcomer allophone students – plurilingual dynamics - relational *francophonies* – relational didactics

According to recent research (Armagnague & Tersigni, 2019), the French school system tends to use the allophony² of newly arrived students as a categorisation criterion that leads to their grouping in pedagogical units for newcomer allophone students (UPE2A³). Armagnague and Tersigni indicate that this criterion— considered as the only common point between those students – is mobilised because it is the only one that can be translated into terms of schooling, given its linguistic dimension. The fact of being a non-speaker of French would function, within the French school system, as a ‘hetero-definition criterion in the sense of Fredrik Barth (1995), thus producing an othering boundary through a linguistic marker⁴.’ (Armagnague & Tersigni, 2019, p. 8). Indeed, during their investigation, the authors did not meet any student (newly arrived or not) who used this denomination, and only the so-called ‘ordinary’ students used the term UPE2A to refer to the newcomers. Armagnague and Tersigni (2019) also note that leveraging this criterion leads to the constitution of a heterogeneous category, which ‘is made up of *diverse backgrounds and school experiences* of students grouped together in the same pedagogical device by virtue of one common denominator, that of a *failing francophonie*⁵’. (ibid., p. 83, my emphasis).

Based on this observation, which highlights the diversity of the students’ backgrounds and experiences, and the idea of categorising the students according to their level of proficiency in

¹ term often used to refer to an individual's proficiency in the French language, definition which will be discussed in this article

² term used to emphasize the fact that those students – although not French speakers- are speakers of other languages

³ UPE2A : Unité Pédagogique pour Elèves Allophones Arrivant

⁴ « critère d’hétéro-définition au sens de Fredrik Barth (1995), produisant ainsi une frontière (boundary) d’altérisation par un marqueur linguistique. » (Armagnague et Tersigni 2019, p. 83).

⁵ « compose avec *divers parcours et expériences* scolaires d’élèves contraints de se regrouper dans le même dispositif au titre d’un même point commun, celui d’une *francophonie défaillante*. » (ibid., p. 83, je souligne).

French, posed here as failing, I propose considering the articulation of the students' francophonies and allophonies, from the perspective of relational didactics (Castellotti, 2017).

The newcomer students' relationship to the language of the school will be studied with an aim to considering their *francophony* from another angle than that of failure. Focusing on failure 'in French', which the term allophony was already trying to avoid, could lead to a double impasse. The first pitfall consists in excluding, in a way, the pupils from a community of French speakers. The second pitfall is failing to consider the primary opacity (Gajo, 2006) of the language of instruction as likely to constitute a lever that would help these pupils adopt a distanced, a 'meta' posture with regard to the language of schooling, and to the learning that must be imparted through it.

The diversity of these students' backgrounds, histories, experiences, languages, and also their projects, when compared to the problem of learning French as a second language and the question of schooling, should make it possible to envisage the matter of 'the consequences of inequalities on language mastery and learning' differently. To do so, I will rely on the contributions of sociolinguistics and language didactics, which are my primary disciplines, and on a particular current within these, derived from phenomenological and hermeneutic epistemology (henceforth PH), which posits language as consubstantial to thought, itself linked to the sensitive dimensions of understanding. Languages, or rather the 'L: languages, language, discourse' (Robillard, 2008) are thus considered both as a shared social and inherited object, which we contribute to transform, and as a singular phenomenon, inscribed in the experience of every individual.

Languages, language, discourse: understanding, being, appearing - A set of epistemological references placing the experience of each person at the centre of the reflection

As Armagnague and Tersigni (2019) show, it is the linguistic criterion, and in particular the idea of a lack of proficiency in the language of schooling, that is used to designate, group, and later accompanies the schooling of the students we are interested in. The focus on this criterion, the sole common denominator of these students, ignores the diversity of their experiences. However, it seems possible to envisage the didactics of French as a second language and language of schooling differently, by founding it on other bases, by leveraging the diversity of these students and the singularity of their 'being-in-languages'. To do this, it should be defined from the outset how the concept of language is to be understood in the phenomenological-hermeneutic sense used here. Specifically, I will highlight three aspects to help understand what 'being-in-languages' can mean.

Incorporation, socialisation, singularity

The first point that helps to shift the study of cultural diversity from a diversity of codes to that of a diversity of experiences is based on the idea that language cannot be reduced—and the languages in which this capacity is manifested—to a set of conventional signs that would allow us to 'communicate our thoughts'. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach posits that thought cannot occur outside of language. Thought did not precede language but, rather, language allowed thought to develop. Language, however, operates through the body and translates into meaning phenomena which is antecedently and corporeally perceived. From then on, the experience of the world can be translated linguistically by each individual using the languages at his disposal. This brings us to the second point of our reflection.

The languages at our disposal place us in one (or more) linguistic and cultural communities (real or imaginary). Socialized within these communities, we thus inherit various senses of belonging, which will evolve depending on individual histories, various encounters, individual and collective aspirations. Within these various networks, languages and ways of speaking allow us to develop a sense of belonging, of distinction, and contributes to hetero- and self-identifications, sometimes without any direct link to effective mastery of the languages or varieties of languages concerned.

Finally, while languages are social phenomena, they are also singular, because they are linked to our perceptions and experiences (bodily, emotionally and imaginarily). In this sense, Humboldt notes that:

‘Each age, each class of society, each famous author, that is, if we look at the finest nuances, each individual who has a slightly cultivated mind forms in the bosom of the same nation a language of its own, attaches differently modified ideas to the same words, and insensibly draws the common language into what is most essential, into the most intimate nuances of thought and feeling. ’ (Humboldt, *Essays on the Languages of the New Continent* §11 (1812), in Humboldt, 2000, pp. 56-57)⁶.

These elements concur with the phenomenology of perception: through our own body we can access the world, of which we make sense through the languages we inherit (which are at the same time instituted and instituting, formed and forming) and which we contribute to modify, because we understand them, via our historical (living) body, not only socially but also singularly.

By way of consequence, this singularity allows for the establishment of a relation to the other (whose singularity is also expressed in language). Thus, according to Humboldt, languages are

‘above all the place of formation, meeting and exchange of subjectivities. But this subjectivity is never a pre-linguistic given; on the contrary, it is formed through language, which simultaneously allows for the establishment of the relationship to the self and the relationship to others, in a recognition that is indissociably sensitive and sensible⁷. ’ (Thouard, in Humboldt, 2000, p. 14).

Nourished by a perceptive, antecedent experience, and therefore linked to singular histories; as well as reflections of the (self-designated or hetero-designated) belonging of individuals to communities—and hence linked to a collective history—languages are historical (not stable), whether we consider them at the social or at the individual level, since one can never be dissociated from the other. If they necessarily rely on a form of consensus ‘on the surface’, languages are indissociable from an individual's history, experience, singularity, innermost being, and each individual ‘attaches differently modified ideas to the same words’, or, to put it

⁶ " Chaque âge, chaque classe de la société, chaque auteur célèbre, enfin si on regarde aux nuances les plus fines, chaque individu qui a l'esprit un peu cultivé, se forme dans le sein de la même nation une langue à part, attache des idées autrement modifiées aux mêmes mots, et attire insensiblement le langage commun dans ce qu'il y a de plus essentiel, dans les nuances les plus intimes de la pensée et du sentiment. " (Humboldt, 2000, pp. 56-57)

⁷ Les langues sont “ avant tout le lieu de formation, de rencontre et d'échange des subjectivités. Mais cette subjectivité *n'est jamais une donnée prélinguistique*, elle se forme au contraire à travers la langue, qui permet simultanément *l'instauration du rapport à soi et du rapport aux autres*, dans une reconnaissance indissociablement *sensible et sensée*. ” (Thouard, dans Humboldt, 2000, p. 14, je souligne.)

differently and according to the Gadamerian formula, to understand is always to understand differently⁸.

This quick overview of the contributions of a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to language and languages, sheds light on the emerging tension between diversity and inequality within the French educational institution built on a unicist linguistic ideology (Beacco, 2001; Bertucci & Corblin, 2004; Lorilleux & Castellotti, 2018), and aims to propose a reflection for a didactics of appropriation.

Diversity or inequality in the relationship to the language of the school?

Following this idea of an underlying heterogeneity beneath the apparent transparency of languages, it would probably be more relevant to speak of linguistic and cultural diversity rather than inequalities. This is, in any case, the postulate I will adopt here, without denying the unequal effects of this diversity within a reproductive institution—to use Bourdieu's terms—based on a certain type of relationship to language and to the world. That is, a written relationship to language, which organises success around a particular type of relationship to knowledge: an epistemic relationship to knowledge (Charlot, 1997; Lahire, 2008; Bautier & Rayou, 2009; Lorilleux, 2019).

Therefore, it is not a question of denying the unequal effects of this diversity within the school institution, which is often blind to its own cultural orientation. It is rather a question of considering what could be done through the prism of other categories of thought: diversity rather than inequality; but taking history into account as well, placing speakers in a relationship that is always specific to the language of the school (in addition to the relationship to the school, to knowledge, etc.) The conceptual shift thus progressively occurs from the focus on the idea of 'mastery of the language'—which encourages positing the possible 'failure' of the pupils—to the focus on the pupils' relations to the instituted language of the school. These relationships, as already mentioned, are linked to their histories (personal and collective), and to their projects (also personal and collective). They are also a possible way of defining *francophonies*, as we shall see in the following paragraph. Considered from the perspective of relationship and experience, *francophonies* escape the question of failure.

The aim here is to suggest another way of looking at francophonies, with a view to questioning the articulation of the students' languages with the school language, through the prism of reception.

Francophonies vs. failing francophonie

Armagnague and Tersigni (2019) show how, based on the criterion of the supposed 'failure' of their *francophonie* (i.e., the lack of mastery of French, the language of schooling), a social category is constructed, that contributes to the segmentation of the school universe, to the relegation of newly arrived students and to their being grouped together based on this sole 'school-translatable' criterion (ibid., p. 82). In this case, '*francophonie*' is understood as mastery of the French language. This is not, however, the only way in which the term can be defined. Feussi, (2018) places his reflection on *francophonies* (in the plural, therefore), in a PH perspective, according to which, as we have seen, languages are not considered as secondary

⁸ “ Ce processus de la compréhension, du fait de son caractère historique (au double sens social et singulier), implique que le sens n'est jamais réitéré à l'identique : « dès que l'on comprend, on comprend autrement » (Gadamer, [1960] 1996, p.318). ” Huver et Lorilleux, 2018.

tools for communicating thought, but as experiences. Feussi wonders: should we restrict ourselves to the linguistic dimension, concerning ‘those who speak French’, in order to define *francophonie*? Or should we focus solely on the geographical dimension, concerning the ‘territories where French is an inherited or a second/official language’ (ibid, p. 78)? Should we still consider the ‘sense of belonging’ that reflects greater understanding and shows ‘respect for differences’ (Deniau, 1995, p. 18) (Feussi, 2018, p. 78)? Beyond these definitional questions, should we not, above all, consider the projects at stake and the fundamental issues of the construction of this ‘francophonie’ category? Indeed,

‘[t]o take these dimensions into account is to develop a plural approach to francophonies that does not neglect, without explanation, experiences that would nevertheless help to understand a francophone situation as such⁹.’ (Feussi, 2018, p. 80)

Accordingly, it is necessary to state the project that presides over these reflections and its underlying issues. Specifically, this would consist in turning around the assertion according to which ‘knowledge of the system of language [is] the *sine qua non* condition of understanding’, (Boutet reformulated by Feussi 2018, p. 60); on which the expression ‘failing *francophonie*’ is based. The aim here is to lessen ‘the risk [...] of the co-construction of inequalities’ (cf. Delarue-Breton & Bautier, 2021, p. 3). Feussi encourages us to conceive of the *francophonies* through the prism of experience, of the relationship that every interpreter has with them. Henceforth, students categorized through the prism of their allophony may be fully considered as francophones: not in the sense of linguistic mastery, but in the sense of the experience and the relationship they have with francophone entities, at school and outside.

How to understand students’ francophonies in this relational perspective? What does it mean to consider languages as experiences? How could these reflections translate didactically?

Taking a relational and experiential perspective on students’ *francophonies* implies (at least) two considerations. First, in view of what we mentioned previously regarding language, it is clear that if we focus on reception, on the way students understand what they are being taught; on the way they appropriate—language-wise, but not exclusively—the knowledge transmitted (or more exactly constructed) at school, then diversity, even singularity, is the rule. What the pupil learns—what he understands—is what he inserts, from what is taught to him, in a network of his own of movable meanings. Thus, institutionalised knowledges are embodied, they are incorporated to the imaginary, to personal experiences, with a distinctive colouring for every individual (Lorilleux, 2014 ; Lorilleux & Tending, 2018). Knowledge of the linguistic system is no longer the *sine qua non* of understanding. The latter being also founded on experience (history and perception), this leads Feussi (2018, p. 61) to write that ‘access to meaning happens at first through “mute” experience and sensitivity [,] even though, thereafter, it can be brought to the discernment’¹⁰. *Understanding* thus comes through a sensitive experience, to which we give form in languages—note the plural—regardless of the degree of mastery in our different languages.

⁹ " [p]rendre en compte ces dimensions consiste à développer une approche plurielle des francophonies qui ne néglige pas, sans explicitation, des expériences qui aideraient pourtant à comprendre une situation francophone comme telle⁹. " (Feussi, 2018, p. 80).

¹⁰ “ l’accès au sens se fait d’abord par l’expérience « muette » et la sensibilité[,] même si, par la suite, il peut être porté au jugement ” (Feussi, 2018, p. 61).

This should not obscure the common part, the shared part of acquired knowledges (moreover, it is this common part which is always highlighted and valued), but let us not forget that there also exists a singular dimension in understanding: a metabolization of knowledge, specific to each person, and which occurs through languages. A metabolization which also transforms the person who appropriates languages. Therefore, a form of unavoidable opacity persists throughout the process of transmission-appropriation.

The relational-experiential perspective adopted also means seriously considering the fact that being in French in France, for allophone students, implies that they participate in a new community that cannot erase what has constituted them up to that point, at the risk of fracturing the continuity of these students' lives, which is sometimes already challenged by geographical mobility. Taking into account these historical continuities and geographical mobilities in the students' experience is an important point, as Castellotti writes:

‘[...] the histories of languages and the spaces in which they unfold and enter into a relationship are not taken into account in their variability. *Yet, issues of interlinguistic and intercultural contacts and conflicts and their evolution throughout history play a very important role in the teachings of these languages as well as in the symbolic factors valorising or inhibiting their appropriation*’¹¹.(Castellotti, 2017, p. 178, my emphasis, own translation)

Emphasising that ‘the appropriation of a language is not limited to the functional uses one makes of it, but is potentially a matter of existential transformation’¹² brings to light an important issue. Once again, this refers to Humboldt's previously mentioned quote, according to which

- on the one hand, languages are ‘above all the place of formation, meeting and exchange of subjectivities’;

- and on the other hand, subjectivities are formed ‘through language, which simultaneously allows the establishment of the relationship to oneself and the relationship to others, in a recognition that is indissociably sensitive and sensible.’ (Thouard, in Humboldt, 2000, p. 14)

Yet, when we speak of relationship (of rapport), we mean distance and, precisely, successful students are those who enter in a distanced rapport with language and knowledge (Charlot, 1997; Lahire, 2008; Bautier & Rayou, 2009). The visible opacity of the language of the school for allophone pupils could be used to help them experience this distance. The opacity of the school discourse could be a lever that would help students adopt a reflexive posture, because in order to break through it, they must make an effort to step back from their own language. This reflexive posture could help students become aware of a form of distance, potentially favourable to the development of a meta-relationship with language and school (language) knowledge.

Concluding with the virtues of opacity?

¹¹ “ [...] les histoires des langues et les espaces dans lesquels elles se déploient et entrent en relation ne sont pas non plus pris en compte dans leur variabilité. *Or, les questions de contacts et de conflits interlinguistiques et interculturels et leurs évolutions au cours de l'histoire jouent un rôle très important dans les enseignements de ces langues ainsi que dans les facteurs symboliques valorisant ou inhibant leur appropriation* ” (Castellotti, 2017, p. 178, je souligne)

¹²“ l'appropriation d'une langue ne se limite pas aux usages fonctionnels que l'on en fait, mais qu'elle relève potentiellement d'une transformation existentielle ” <https://migrants-fle-quilt.fr/version-francaise/qui-sommes-nous>

Allophone pupils are categorised—as described in particular by Armagnague and Tersigni (2019)—through the prism of a *francophonie* thought to be deficient, which would constitute a fundamental obstacle to learning. And, categorising students thus would tend to assign them to this deficiency. This has an impact on identity, certainly, but also potentially on cognition. However, an imperfect level of proficiency in the ‘language’ of the school can also be a lever towards a more advanced understanding, provided that the opportunities supplied by the fundamental opacity of discourse are seized (Gajo 2003, 2006). Gajo insists on the fact that this opacity is not an anomaly specific to plurilingual practices (2003), but, rather, that it is the rule and merely highlighted by plurilingual situations. This leads him to wonder if it wouldn't be time to look at monolingual situations from a plurilingual perspective (2003, p. 61).

In concrete terms, there are several tools to make this possible (the list outlined here does not claim to be exhaustive): reflexive approaches to learning (Molinié, 2006), ‘journals of astonishment’ (Develotte, 2006), comparative approaches to languages (Auger, 2005), valuation of extracurricular uses (Penloup, 2007). Those tools are meant to help students articulate their multiple senses of belongings (Early & Cummins 2011; Lorilleux 2015), and for teachers to change their views of students who, from deficient Francophones, could then become fully plurilingual students who are also part of the school Francophonie, offering the school community the complexity of their comprehension.

The monolingual and linguistic-centred conception of language at school leads to thinking of diversity in terms of inequalities that are difficult to overcome. Which is why the idea here is not to describe what exists, but to suggest a starting premise diametrically opposite to the monolingual and linguistic-centred conception of ‘language’ at school.

By shifting the focus from a ‘failing’ *francophonie* to a relational *francophonie* which would take the history of the students into account, the starting assumption would no longer be that, without ‘mastering French’ it is not possible to understand the teachings. Rather, the starting assumption would be that even without understanding French, something of the lessons is understood, and that we must rely on this ‘something’ to access a better mastery of the established school norm. These perspectives should help us to think monolingualism at school with the tools of plurilingualism. (Gajo, 2003).

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