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INTERCULTURAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT :
Melting Pot Dream or Tower of Babel Nightmare ?

by

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Summary of the meeting

Intercultural project management now forms part and parcel of any major company's daily routine. An empirical analysis of several international project teams suggests that intercultural projects come somewhere between the dream of the cultural melting pot and the nightmare of the Tower of Babel. The melting pot threatens to result in impoverished exchanges, notably due to language problems.As well, cultural diversity always brings some potential of violence. The charisma and skill of project leaders play a key role and could even turn Babel into a blessing.

PRESENTATION BY SYLVIE CHEVRIER

In 1994 Philippe d'Iribarne, Jean-Louis Beffa and Erhard Friedberg discussed at length whether or not we can talk about national management models. The École de Paris debate shed light on two main irreconcilable approaches: the culturalist approach, which sees a strong link between culture and management styles, and the universalist approach, which attributes only a minor role to nationality.

THE UNIVERSALIST APPROACH :
BUSINESS IS INTERNATIONAL

According to international business managers, there are a number of problems involved with transnational project management : logistical and legal problems, difficulties linked to the bureaucratic maze of administration of expatriate staff, financial problems such as transaction risk management, and so on. These are technical problems that can be solved when experts familiar with international misadventures set up clear procedures to deal with them.

In this respect, an intercultural context appears to have little impact on business, merely limiting the influence of national traditions on management styles and individual behaviour at work. There is proof of this in the wide variety of corporate cultures we can see in a single country.[1]

The approach acknowledges that there may be cultural differences between partners, but that it is easy to standardise practices if a unifying project culture lays down clear rules. In addition, a climate of tolerance towards different cultural behaviours can be promoted by making team members more sensitive to local ways of doing business. In other words, shared routines can help overcome cultural differences, as can co-workers' open-mindedness, goodwill and pragmatism. Finally, the business world has long dealt with the language barrier by adopting English as its international language.

Such ways of doing international business implicitly rely on a universalist approach to management acknowledging that the business world is governed by similar interests on both sides of the border, i.e. "the best product at the lowest price". Certain methods are particularly good at serving these interests and other companies soon catch onto them. The preface to the French edition of "In Search of Excellence" (Le prix de l'excellence) reads :

"There are however a certain number of companies that seem to be models of excellence. As part of a research programme for MacKinsey, T. Peters and R. Waterman made an in-depth study of a sample of these model companies in order to uncover the secrets of their unrivalled success. Although the sample was American, the findings can be applied to other companies because they are based on human behaviour and transcend cultural particularities."[2]

This proof of excellence encourages team members to abandon their vernacular practices in favour of proven standard methods. National management styles and organizational structures are said to converge, as are lifestyles and patterns of consumer spending.

For example, European managers are said to be gradually heading towards the German model of success[3]. This convergence would naturally make it easier for companies to adapt to cultural differences that may soon be little more than folklore.

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[1] Friedberg, E., "Did you say national models ?", Can we talk about national management models ? debates with P. d'Iribarne, J-L. Beffa and E. Friedberg, The Ecole de Paris' speakers, 1994.

[2] Peters, T., Waterman, R., Le prix de l'excellence, Paris, InterEditions, 1983, p.10.

[3] Beffa, J-L. "Du bon usage des spécificités", in Peut-on parler de modèles nationaux de gestion ? op. cit. Bloom, H., L'Art du management Européen, Les Editions d'Organisation, Paris 1994.

Indeed, some companies have been making the most of these favourable conditions. The directors of numerous major companies (IBM, St-Gobain, Shell, Philips) with wide experience in international business pride themselves on their sound expertise in intercultural management.

THE CULTURALIST APPROACH :
CULTURES WORLDS APART

In stark contrast to the universalist approach, the culturalist school maintains that international projects, like all other intercultural situations, lead not only to technical problems but above all to problems of a symbolic nature. Focusing on economic problems while neglecting all other considerations is over simplistic and inevitably leads to failure. Team members are attached to their cultural traditions, which means they give things special meaning, as opposed to merely following superficial measures introduced to improve efficiency. New practices can only be implemented if they fit with each actor's representation.

The culturalist approach generally focuses less on the interaction between members from different cultures than on decoding the subtle links between culture and practices and comparing cultural systems. However, by focusing on the particularities of the different national management styles that underpin different rationals[4], the approach ponts to the incompatibility of different systems and the difficulty of getting members from different cultures to work together. It would be idealistic to hope to standardise practices with one culture strong enough to override national cultures. Challenging national styles of behaviour means violating unspoken cultural rules, disturbing social balances and threatening carefully constructed socio-cultural identities; this can only lead to frustration and anger.

Given this, intercultural project management is a delicate operation that requires constant cultural translation to avoid poor understanding, conflict and failure. Cultural translation refers to what specific practices mean in a certain culture and finds the equivalent in others. For example, the notions of commitment and responsibility may be expressed by written contracts, word of honour or long-standing business relationships, depending on the culture. There have been numerous fiascos concerning expatriation, transfers of technology and management styles and even international co-operative agreements, and these seem to attest to the extreme difficulty managers have making intercultural projects a success.

Reconciling the irreconcilable ?

It's tempting to look for explanations when faced with these seemingly irreconcilable approaches. We could, for example, see the manager's point of view filtering through the universalist approach, or the ethno-sociologist's point of view influencing the culturalist approach. A person's relationship with the object is said to determine their standpoint. But can it really be that the practitioners are given the opportunity to sit in on brilliant international management successes while the theoreticians only get to observe post-mortem bitter intercultural failures ? Is it possible to account for the wide gap between manager and consultant by the desire to safeguard the image of the international company on the one hand and build up goodwill on the other ? The conclusions from different sides seem too disparate to accept this explanation. It's no longer possible to dismiss one of the approaches and sweep aside the supporting evidence.

We conducted our own studies concerning European project management in the electronic engineering and telecommunications computing sectors. These suggested a subtle approach that acknowledges the complex combination of factors that divide or unite project teams.

Our research was carried out from March to November 1993 with three teams of people involving regular interaction between at least three different nationalities. We followed the way the teams worked by observing meetings and conducting a series of interviews with participants.

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[4] d'Iribarne, P. La logique de l'Honneur, Seuil, Paris, 1989.

OBSTACLES TO INTERCULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Cultural practices

Intercultural co-operation inevitably exposes a number of subtle differences in practices and behaviours as regards general aspects of culture : relationship to time, space, other people and to work in general. For example, participants on European projects follow different rules for speaking in meetings, punctuality, respecting deadlines and the degree of familiarity between different levels of hierarchy and they admit that this can be annoying for others, for example Scandinavians who only speak up when they disagree, and Latins who readily show their approval.

However, these differences do not appear to bring joint projects to a standstill since the participants make an effort to adapt and show tolerance and they often overcome their differences. In addition, intercultural adjustments go hand in hand with the interpersonal adjustments that any team (even monocultural) has to make for a shared project to succeed. This said, other difficulties, like the working language, tend to be under-estimated.

The working language

English has been the language of international business for decades now, which means that it is used in international projects almost as a matter of course.

The main purpose of exchanges is to communicate information that can help the project progress. This mainly involves aspects of project management (fixing meeting dates, setting agendas, negotiating deadlines) or technicalities (progress reports, problem solving, discussions on technical choices to be made).

In general, information exchanges connected to project management require a simple vocabulary and a rudimentary knowledge of the language. People do not usually have any problem using a foreign language for minimal factual communication, since they know enough English to survive in these situations.

Technical communication in a second language proves to be more difficult. The greatest difficulties come less from a lack of specialised vocabulary than from the fact that many find it impossible to put forward fine arguments in any language other than their own. There are frequent misunderstandings due to ambiguous or careless expressions, and more importantly, the general level of interaction is affected. People may lack the exact words they need to express their thoughts exactly as they wish, which means that they either give up trying to express themselves and discuss particular details, or they grossly oversimplify and the discussion goes off at a tangent. When disagreeing, people find it more difficult to argue in a logical and convincing manner in English than in their own language and the obligation to speak in English discourages them from talking to the group. Rudimentary English fulfils its basic function but it does make the work more laborious. At times we saw that any disagreements that came up in meetings in English were fiercely battled out later in the mother-tongue.

The fact that people often fall short of an ideal bilingualism prevents some project workers from expressing themselves as they would like to, and forces them to restrain their arguments. Language allows us to express our thoughts and conceive abstract ideas, since naming objects allows us to stand back and discuss them intelligently. When people lack the means to express themselves, the content of their exchanges suffers. Foreign language exchanges do not explore the full range of thoughts people may have in the mother tongue, and project team members are left frustrated that they are not using their full potential for arguing, going into detail and being creative.

While the main use of communication, the transmission of information, is crucial in work situations, it must not overshadow the other functions of language, in particular its role in

interpersonal relations. Communication is first and foremost a human activity, used to define our position in relation to others and to claim an identity.

In an international context, speaking a language in an approximate manner affects not only the content of exchanges but also the quality of interpersonal relations. For example, an insufficient command of a language can lead people to use inappropriate words that are stronger than intended and this can tarnish their relationships. There is the danger that criticism given in a poorly-mastered foreign language can hurt the recipients more than when it is expressed more tactfully in the mother tongue. Even when the exchanges are relaxed, the level of concentration necessary for speaking in English takes away some of the conviviality that comes with spontaneous exchanges in someone's mother tongue.

Project teams can therefore experience limited informal exchange, and relationships are often built between people with common mother tongues. The patchwork of language conditions the spontaneous formation of informal groups and the quality of new relations. The mother tongue is the language of comfort and respite, and hence the language of coffee breaks, meals and private conversations.

The language barrier creates an obstacle for international projects in two ways: firstly somewhat undermining the information exchange and secondly hampering the development of informal intercultural relationships that can help create an easy-going working atmosphere.

FACILITATING INTERCULTURAL WORK

Different norms can coexist within international project teams, but a minimum of shared norms must be defined if targets are to be reached. This means that some of the partners have to make concessions. The participants are generally willing to adapt, even if they may accept the need to adjust and show tolerance with an air of resignation. It is not easy for the partners to be flexible, but this forms an integral part of the unspoken psychological contract that binds workers in an intercultural environment.

However, the groups we studied were helped to adapt by a common denominator that overrides cultural barriers: their professional culture.

The culture of engineers

Occupational activity can be the source of deep-seated identity, providing status andsocial recognition, and also shaping certain thoughts and action. In fact, a job involves a certain way of approaching technicalities and things in general. Familiarity with a certain human and physical environment gives an experienced worker a particular sensitivity to the dimensions of the environment, along with the ability to pick up nuances that a novice would miss. Ideas also need to be expressed in a precise way, often with a new language called for by the special characteristics of the technical work, the originality of the communication situations and the special nature of the experience that needs to be described. Finally, the work itself promotes new behavioural norms.

Each occupation is immersed in its own specific culture made up of a complex mix of expertise, knowledge, specialised terms, values and representations. This exclusive expertise and knowledge provides an identity and also overcomes cultural barriers, since technical cultures are to some extent transnational.

In this way, we observed that the culture of engineers and more precisely the culture of computing in the telecommunications sector and the culture of electrical engineering played a federating role by uniting the members around core knowledge, expertise and shared representations.

The engineer's role is essentially to master techniques or to apply specialised knowledge and expertise. He or she derives pleasure from mastering a technique and applying it so that an installation or unit works. They have the satisfaction of seeing the results of a job well done. But

technique is only of interest when it cannot be taken for granted, when the engineer has something new to learn and the expert can still gain in expertise: technique is associated with learning, innovation, a continual search for new solutions and procedure, and this is made possible by the exchanges between engineers.

Finally, technical activity usually involves team work with strict schedules (contracts, launches, starts, trials, etc.) that help bring the professional community together. A common task-based culture makes group projects easier while conversely, group projects reinforce the culture. The task promotes cultural integration whilst joint work practices reinforce common ground and the task culture.

Professional cultures therefore make intercultural work easier by acting as catalysts for intercultural communication. They fulfil several requirements for exchanges, namely :
- a content: exchanges with other professionals are seen as valuable ;
- a means of expression: technical issues are expressed in a vocabulary of technical terms that everyone can understand ;
- and an environment that promotes the development of interpersonal relations based on a mutual recognition of skills, and is more effective than hierarchical structures for open, specialised communication.

However, we should not overestimate the unifying power of a task culture. Firstly, individual interests and methods vary considerably among the different types of experts working on projects, and the divergence causes fierce technical arguments. This is why it would be more appropriate to talk about a culture in a sector of activity than simply a task culture.

Above all, if the technical aspect of a professional culture brings engineers of all origins closer together, the social aspect of work continues to divide them. An occupation is based on technical activity but it is also a source of social identity. However, the social status of an engineer differs between countries, as the following examples illustrate.

In Germany, engineers generally follow technical courses and see their knowledge as complementing the expertise of blue-collar workers and technicians. German engineers see themselves as workers, and proof of this is in their frequent affiliation to major unions such as the DGB rather than to the union specifically for engineers (ULA).

In the United States, the rise of engineers has come as part of the general movement towards *"professionalisation"*, or the formation of highly-qualified professional groups within corporations. Guaranteeing the competence of members selected by their qualifications, corporations establish ethical rules or codes of conduct and are concerned with the general role a *profession* should play in society. Thus an engineer, like a nurse or an architect, identifies more with a peer group than with the company he or she works for. There is also a tendency to challenge the classic model of hierarchical authority. The engineer's social identity is based on this categorical allegiance to a professional community that is recognised for its competence; it is the result of a sort of horizontal division of work between *professions.*

In France, an engineer's title testifies to his or her technical skills and above all grants the person a status close to that of a manager. Regardless of his or her precise activity and place in the hierarchy, the engineer enjoys the prestige that is granted by the educational system he or she has gone through. The competitive entrance examinations for the "Grandes Ecoles" (France's leading business schools) and the "Grands Corps" (prestigious institutions for training future top civil servants) aim not only to select applicants capable of following top-level scientific courses, but also and more fundamentally, to promote a small elite who will then go on to become the country's top civil servants or the heads of blue-chip companies. In this way, while many of the engineers are passionately interested in science and technique, others see themselves more as generalists and identify with the ruling class.

These three examples show clearly how there is no such thing as the "intercultural engineer" because engineers build their social identity differently in each country. Only the technical

element and the work itself unite them. Despite its limitations, professional culture can be a starting point for defining the common ground that an intercultural project team needs and for creating a team spirit.

Structure : a key factor in intercultural dynamism

Team structure plays a key role in the integration or break-up of intercultural teams.

In any intercultural team, the members have a different rationale for action and are obliged to establish a working arrangement that allows exchange and group work to take place. Yet there is nothing to determine the confrontation between members of several cultural systems. One of the systems may gain the upper hand, the whole team may adopt a special new norm, or certain differences may coexist. It is considerably easier to negotiate common rules for action when the structure favours adaptability. By 'structure' we mean two things: the hierarchical relationships of power, prestige and control of resources, and the range of interests that fit the aims of individuals and the team's sub-groups.

Our comparative study has shown that intercultural dynamism is closely linked to the structural context. For example, national groups may correspond to sub-groups that have diverging interests because the structure imposes different goals on them (for example, short-term results for one sub-group and long-term results for another) ; under these circumstances communication and the general atmosphere become more tense, mutual representations are tainted by negative stereotypes and caricatures, critical ethnocentric attitudes appear and intercultural adjustments are non-existent or go only one way. In the end, the sub-groups divide, interpersonal relations are marred by open or hidden conflict and the quality of work suffers as a result. The following quotations illustrate some instances of conflict :

"When the French arrive, you have to listen to everything they've got to say. They want to tell us what they've done, how they've controlled such or such a situation. You get the feeling they think they're the best. They want to show off to the Swiss."

"The Swiss think they're the best at everything. They're really full of themselves. They never admit it when other people do well: it's never as good as what they're doing."

"The Germans aren't very flexible or independent. They cling to the hierarchy and what they've done before. They need sound values."

"In France, bosses are like Napoleon. I can't make any decisions any more. Everything comes from the top. They won't let us have our say any more."

By contrast, the intercultural dynamics are not a problem when boundaries between interests do not match the boundaries between cultures, or when hierarchical levels do not correspond to cultural groups. The acceptance of perceived cultural difference goes together with more tempered judgements of the partners involved, subtle mutual representations and more relaxed communication. Cultural adjustments within teams lead to the creation of new norms that serve as a mediator between different cultural styles. The atmosphere between the different cultural communities allows individuals to get to know each other and establish relations person-to-person rather than between groups.

Finally, cultural differences can cause hitches, for example when there are two opposing views on working methods. In general, though, Europe's cultural diversity is not a source of irreconcilable differences. However, when cultural diversity is added to antagonism of another sort, it tends to aggravate the problem. Cultural diversity is rarely at the heart of a conflict but can sometimes fan the flames of conflict, providing another means of confrontation and criticism. On the other hand, intercultural problems are easily overcome when cultural groups have comparable structures and do not perceive any threat to their identity or existence.

Managing intercultural projects : walking the tight rope.

In conclusion, the results of our research have led us to take the middle road between the universalist approach and the culturalist approach.

The outcome of an intercultural project cannot be determined in advance and its success depends less on the nationalities present than on the way in which the project is organized and implemented. The success of an intercultural project depends firstly on the interests shared by the members and the quality of their interpersonal relations; it is also important to maintain the delicate balance while building common references by building on universal factors and respecting cultural features. The role of the project leader is to overcome intercultural obstacles by establishing a project structure that is open to adjustment, thus making the most of facilitating factors like the shared professional culture or team spirit that can be created around the desired objective. To do this, the project leader has to call on his or own experience, but each project also requires its own local solutions and specially-negotiated rules.

Caught between opposing demands, the project leader has to take cultural sensitivities into account and create a climate that will encourage the partners to make the necessary adjustments. Each person within a given culture is capable of giving different responses to the same situation, a phenomenon that J. Demorgon calls "oscillation"[5]. This creates "room to manoeuvre" to adapt to those cultural differences that do not conflict with their own system of basic values. A reassuring or threatening context is what will encourage participants to show open-mindedness or cultural rigidity and it's the role of project leader to create the right atmosphere so that participants will get involved.

DEBATE

Some examples

Participant : *I've got some good examples of what you're saying from what I've seen at IBM, which has a very strong transnational culture:*

- There are immense language problems. To give an example, a new policy stipulated that management shouldn't be transparent any more. For the Americans and many others, this meant that the boss should present all decisions as though they were his, regardless of whether they were actually his or imposed upon him : he was to assume them and if (he did) not, he became transparent and was therefore a bad manager. Noone had any problem accepting the new policy except the Germans who considered the transparent manager to be ideal, because he represented the company so well that you could see the whole company written on his face ! Everyone agreed on the main idea : the source of the problem went deeper than words: it was more a question of interpretation !

- It is often said that Americans learn to express themselves better right from an early age. Whereas in France you can often

meet bright people who don't express themselves well. To an American, this might indicate that the person doesn't really know what he's talking about. Doubt is then thrown on the content of the discussion, regardless of whether the difficulty comes from a lack of oral competence in the mother tongue or whether it's the consequence of an inadequate command of the second language.

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[5] Demorgon, J., "Vivre et penser les cultures dans la mondalisation en cours", Intercultures, n° 20, January 1993, p.25.

- The Americans know how to forget hierarchical relations in certain circumstances, and sometimes it's impossible to tell that a work group involves both the boss and his or her subordinates from two rungs down. It's another thing altogether for the Germans: a subordinate will never talk before his boss or contradict him. The Japanese are masters at sharing opinions that they defend fiercely at first, but then once a decision is taken everyone rallies round it as one.

Participant : *Interpreting the word transparency brings other examples to mind : when we say in the South Mediterranean that it's human to make mistakes, it means that you have to take things as they are, whereas elsewhere in the world people say that you shouldn't take things lying down. For us, the word self-interest is banal because it evokes the driving force behind human action, whereas elsewhere it's a dangerous subject. You can see how much misunderstanding is possible and the risk is greater when you don't have a good command of the second language. The language barrier tends to bring things down to a lower level: for example, the World Bank uses less than 500 words: how can you describe the world in so few words ?*

The project leader

Participant : *In your opinion, what basic qualities should a project leader have ?*

Sylvie Chevrier : A project leader has a lot of responsibility and not much power. The people he works with depend on other structures or even other cultures. Like the Indian chief who dedicates himself to the members of his tribe so that they listen to his wisdom and follow him (if they want to) he can only lay down his authority to achieve the project objective when he also makes an effort, in a spirit of friendship and shared interests.

Participant : *Your study of the culturalist and universalist approaches to project management could lead to an analysis of the choice of project leaders, since the main difficulty in a project does not involve technical matters but the team's social make-up. This is where the personality of the project leader is crucial. The nationality of the international project leader is not neutral and can cause friction! That's why you see some quite unsuitable project leaders, chosen according to criteria that are likely to make the fewest waves, for example the simple fact of occupying a functional post in the field. The difficulty is such that a project is sometimes supposed to work without an officially-designated leader !*
   We could go even further and ask ourselves about the validity of the project itself. There are projects that are badly targeted, useless, unclear, or lacking in any real goal. We could therefore ask what exactly a project is; whatever the big boss's approach or personality, what can be achieved without a proper project ?

Culture and management

Participant : *Could you clarify what exactly you mean by the word* culture *in your talk ?*

S. C. : A well-known inventory of 152 different definitions of culture gives an idea of the large number of approaches to the subject. I myself see culture as a system in which a context (a history, a constitution, etc.) interacts with a practice and a meaning. This is a constructivist approach: practices take on a meaning in a context.

Participant : *We could also think about company management. We notice that certain countries manage to assimilate styles of management that are developed in a very different cultural systems. This permeability gives the impression that universalism is possible: what do you think ?*

S. C. : If we abandoned all ideas of universalism and believed that different cultures are incommensurable, there'd be no scope for interaction, which would be a bit extreme. Yet we've

seen that the culturalist approach is relatively uninterested in interaction and has hardly looked into transformation or assimilation. The approach looks at several cultural systems in terms of context, practices and meaning, and then rebuilds a single coherent logic, suggesting that some systems seem incompatible. But we shouldn't underestimate people's ability to adapt to a new environment: if there is genuine cultural conditioning, we shouldn't systematically reject the common ground that allows people to pull together.

Enhancement through differences

Participant : *Nations give us an extraordinary insight into the differences between people : in France the power comes from the top, and any differences are conjured away; in Switzerland the power is with the people and there are many languages. While it isn't possible to organize these different systems into a hierarchy, people can't just act as they will with anyone. We're torn between two increasing trends: the move towards universal communication and the desire to respect singularities. The first should not overpower the second, but the differences should be sources of mutual benefit.*

S. C. : In Switzerland local democracy is taken to extremes and certain foreigners have trouble adapting to it : this is an example of a situation which can be a solution for some and a problem for others. The opposing trends of convergence and diversity date from the eighteenth century. They're like the tides in that neither one of the trends ever dominates the other. Identity must be built with the two tides and benefit from the differences.

Alliances

Participant : *In a big American gathering, there is a natural tendency for small groups of Germans, French and Italians to stick together as Europeans. Might there be some sort of flexible cultural membership that is dependent* on context ?

S. C. : Yes, I think that the link between alliances and context is another a key factor. We see this clearly with different nations when they need to take a united stand in a war: as soon as the conflict is over, the disagreements start to show again.

The Tower of Babel myth

Participant : *Your presentation is based on an observation of intercultural teams of engineers. From this we shouldn't deduce that professional culture predominates project culture, the current tendency being to develop project culture. As for the Tower of Babel, there's no certainty that it was a curse : one philosopher has even written that it was a blessing[6]. The engineer accomplishes something concrete, tangible and therefore true, but this truth is not universal since it cannot be shared by everyone. Shouldn't we enjoy the cultural and linguistic differences that lead us - under the enlightened guidance of an Indian chief - to another truth: the rejection of a pretentious and dogmatic tower that as a universal model can only lead to confusion ?*

Participant : *The Tower of Babel myth is a description of totalitarianism. The universalists propose a myth of appropriation, many of them believing that it's a shame the Tower was never finished and that it is their job to carry on the work. On the other hand, the culturalists may interpret it as a myth of misappropriation, where multilingualism is not a punishment: the fact that people are no longer able to speak the same language means that they are socialised to live and prosper in their diversity.*

S. C. : It's true that the teams in the study weren't really multidisciplinary, and I tend to agree with the first remark. As for the Tower of Babel myth, we can say that it's a nightmare : the

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[6] François Marty "La bénédiction de Babel" Editions du Cerf, 1990.

construction can never be completed simply because people cannot understand each other. If we go deeper, we should of course be delighted with the safeguard of diversity but we could also perhaps learn some humility: when a project becomes too ambitious, isn't it bound to fail ?

Languages

Participant : *In my research on intercultural team work I observe a natural tendency for people to establish power relationships. For example, the person who has a poor command of the language will soon feel dominated by the others. I feel that if things are to run smoothly in a project team, it's essential to dilute the strength of power relationships or even eliminate them altogether. Radical work is needed for each person to recognise the other members' cultures, strong and weak points included, and to understand the different attitudes, expectations and behaviour.*

S. C. : This is an important issue: how, starting from our own culture, can we rebuild others' cultural interpretations in an intercultural relationship? Would this sort of study need a research team that is intercultural itself or a person who is perfectly immersed in the relevant cultures (if this person exists) ?

Participant : *Isn't education the solution to the problems we've been discussing today ? Shouldn't we train people to be bilingual and teach cultures in schools, which would make it easier for them to accept the differences later on ?*

S. C. : We see fewer difficulties in countries where lessons are taught in several languages and in small countries where multilingualism is a necessity. The number of people who speak several languages is inversely proportional to the size of the home country. We've got a long way to go in France ! Some institutions make their students move around, like the EAP, which requires them to spend one year in Paris, one in Oxford and one in Berlin.

Participant : *At the École des mines de Paris, every student has to have had at least two months' work experience in a country where he or she doesn't know how to speak the language, and civil engineers have to do a year's work experience abroad in a post normally held by a local. Having said this, there are side-effects : they and their peers learn the World Bank's 500 words and this definitely represents a threat of Tower of Babel monolingualism !*

Participant : *Be careful ! There are also some risks involved in speaking a second language very well: sometimes people can make terrible blunders using inappropriate expressions without realising it and others don't excuse them because they think they did it on purpose ! Perhaps the best thing would be for everyone to know how to speak several languages and then people could express themselves in their mother tongue.*

Participant: *The birth of the United States was a grand intercultural project. At the beginning people got together to unify the nation but bit by bit the immigrants started to cling to their differences and form groups. New York has China Town, the Irish and Italian quarters, and so on, and many Americans think that there's no longer any mix of cultures but simply barriers between them. Perhaps it's better to keep the differences, like the ingredients mixed together in a melting pot where an appropriate sauce does justice to each of the ingredients without destroying any of them. In the United States, this sauce is the shared language. I don't think people can speak their own languages on a project, since the nuances are too important and also the number of languages can soon create an insurmountable obstacle !*

S. C. : I'm not sure that the patchwork-style immigration in the United States is a success, nor that the right sauce has been found. Having said this, finding the right sauce is a good challenge for a project leader !

Participant : *The approaches have been presented in such a way that they appear to oversimplify the issue:*
- the cultural approach because, for example, there isn't just one valid logic in France : several coexist and, what's more, no-one is a prisoner of their logic;
- the universalist approach, because we tend to think that anything goes with processes and routines and that there are no longer any intercultural problems.
We notice that everything is being put down to language, which means more than simply speaking a tongue; it's also an indication of people's dynamism, in terms of fixed ways or flexibility, security or fear, withdrawal or openness: in general these are gaps that remain and need to be analysed. We need to know how to tune in to all this, even without language (since no-one really masters it!) And education can't really solve the problem, since we need to express our feelings - agreement and disagreement - and the mother tongue still seems the best way to do this.

Already existing problems

Participant : *The evolution of mentalities still lags behind the evolution of society, but I've understood from the debate that language reveals problems that already exist. In effect, multilingualism comes after the nightmare.*

Participant : *As C. Riveline says, "What's universal is management and war", and it's a question of identity in the end. Can't we reaffirm our identities other than through adversity? Doesn't this explain the rise in violence we see when people assert their differences? Can we avoid the economic war that is perpetuated not for economic reasons but for these mysterious, already-existing, incommensurable reasons that are the root of so many problems ?*