

## Interculturality in Mexico: Trends, Language Games, and Power Relations

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to analyze the trends, language games, and power relations that predominate in certain academic production with respect to the significations of interculturality. I shall support my analysis with three tools of intellection from discourse theory and political analysis: nodal points, language games, and power relations. My argument is that interculturality has multiple significations that are redefined in different ways by institutions, societies, groups, and individuals. In Mexico, however, the policies of interculturality have considered solely the indigenous sector.*

**Keywords:** interculturality, significations, academic production, discourse theory and political analysis, tools of intellection, language games, power relations, Mexico.

### 1. Introduction

The Mexican Council of Educational Research (COMIE, in Spanish) has published a series of volumes that are of interest in describing the emergence and development of the notion of interculturality. The volume entitled *Education, Social Rights, and Equity* focuses on the study of education for diversity, ethnicity, sociolinguistics, sociocultural processes, intercultural education, and teacher training. The studies included in the publication are divided into two groups: the first questions the government's educational policies that sustain the importance of an intercultural and bilingual educational model for indigenous people, and the second centers on identifying protagonists in the history of education, educational projects, and models (Bertely, 2003). In contrast with the earlier publication, the COMIE volume on *Education and Multiculturalism* shows the emergence of interculturality as a field of knowledge in Mexico, by identifying research studies related to elements of transcontinental order, transnational migration, decolonization, intercultural education, citizenship, social exclusion, autonomy, communal education, and autonomous education. The studies in this publication are divided into two types: studies generated by official institutions that regulate the formal curriculum, and studies arising from local projects viewed as incomplete (Bertely, Dietz and Díaz, 2013). Such productions, however, continue to be strongly rooted in ethnicity, indigenous languages, resistance, migration, childhood, youth, teaching, indigenous knowledge, bilingual education, and cultural identity. Taking into account the development of national educational research on interculturality, along with its facets, objects, corpus of propositions, pretensions of truth, and interplay of rules, techniques, and instruments (Foucault, 1973), we shall find it useful at this point to pause and question the conditions that have given rise to the discourse of the intercultural focus.

### 2. Intellection Resources of Discourse Theory and Political Analysis

To recognize the trends, language games and power relations that predominate in certain academic production with respect to the significations of interculturality, I make use of discourse theory and political analysis, which Buenfil describes as a "complex conceptual configuration and a strategy of analysis articulated through the notion of discourse" (Buenfil, 1994, p. 5, my translation); in other words, a "set of practices that cannot be reduced to either their semantic or pragmatic components" (Torfing, 1991, p. 41, my translation). Discourse theory and political analysis offer tools of intellection "to investigate the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality" (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 4). I shall now explain the function of the tools of intellection that I have used to discuss the academic production. The first tool is the *nodal point*.

The nodal point is not unique and unrepeatable, but deals with signifiers that “partially establish significations; and in the partial nature of such establishing permit the disclosure of social elements, translating into the overflowing of discourse through the infinite field of discursiveness” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p. 193, my translation). In other words, nodal points are privileged signifiers that are articulated in a system of signification or a chain of significations in the discourse of interculturality. This tool allows academic production, resulting from educational research, to become integrated into a corpus of knowledge that affects the significations of interculturality. In the current study, I located three nodal points that are equivalent to the organizational criteria stated above; like magnets, they contain and join the significations of interculturality. The next tool, *language games*, is taken from Wittgenstein, who presented the relevance of using the significations of words with regard to the logical structure of language. Language games are “the whole consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven” (Wittgenstein, 1988, p. 6, my translation). All social configurations have a meaning and that meaning is significant since “there is no action without signification and no signification outside of the action” (Buenfil, 1993, p. 4, my translation). Thus social configurations have a discursive dimension (signifier and significant) in processes, objects, events, and manifestations of signification. The third tool of intellection, *power relations*, can be defined as “deeply rooted in the social nexus, not reconstituted above society like a supplementary structure whose disappearance we can imagine” (Foucault, 2001, p. 17, my translation). Based on this interpretation, I shall concentrate on analyzing the power relations that are interwoven through the antagonism of strategies in the analyzed contributions and which translate into trends of action and production.

### **3. Significations of Interculturality: An Analysis of Academic Production**

The corpus of knowledge shown below consists of twenty-four academic productions, published in Mexico, that are related to the significations of interculturality. Systematization allowed me to locate three nodal points: a) interculturality and civic values; b) interculturality and social relations among cultures; and e) interculturality and educational policy.

#### **3.1 Interculturality and Civic Values**

This nodal point includes contributions related to the civic aspirations of Mexican society. The exercise of interculturality is conceived as an opportunity to eliminate prejudices and discrimination against minority groups and to promote respect for human rights; it also favors equality in relations and dialogue among individuals (Juárez and Comboni, 2002). Civic values are linked to the ability to recognize differences, encouraging an attitude of respect for diverse cultures; such values attach importance to principles such as the acceptance of others, the awareness of being different, mutual respect, and the construction of a dialogical relation between the “Western” world and indigenous peoples (García, 2004), as well as interpersonal communication based on differences. Respect for rights and civic values (Jurado and Ramírez, 2009) permits living in a framework of equality, solidarity, respect, and dialogue (Montaño, 2008).

In these contributions, we notice that the significations of interculturality are diluted in a trend of “change and permanence”. On one hand, Mexican society is expected to appropriate civic values that allow it to interact as a fair, equal society, but at the same time, each sector of the population (mestizo or indigenous) fortifies its “own identity” to enrich cultural diversity. The result may be the widening of predominant social gaps in the Mexican population, due to the effects of globalization as well as social and economic differences. The language game that operates in this case is *Spanish-speaking*, which continues to be associated with the project of national unity that originated in the struggle for national independence and continued through the Mexican Revolution; the difference is that Spanish-speaking is now a function of learning the “intercultural language”, for indigenous people as well as for the population in general. The assumption is that once Spanish-speaking is attained, a positive Aristotelian result will improve relations among the nation’s citizens.

#### **3.2 Interculturality and Social Relations among Cultures**

This nodal point includes contributions in three groups. The first package of significations shows that interculturality is closely related to indigenous aspects; it is recognized as “a category antagonistic to multiculturalism since it contradicts the assumption of coexistence and its objective is to establish social relations among different ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups” (Vargas, 1994, p. 260, my translation).

In other words, interculturality represents the possibility of outlining new neocolonial relations between the State and indigenous peoples (Guzmán, Gutiérrez and Hernández, 2009) to construct a society that respects difference through cultural understanding (González, 2007). Another package of contributions recognizes that interculturality is focused on paying attention to the existing differences in Mexican society. The outstanding significations are the strengthening of human relations in a framework of equality, democracy, and social commitment, and the validation of others during the process of interaction (Fierro and Donoso, 2008): “a respectful dialogue among individuals who are different, without subordination, without pretensions of assimilation, integration, inclusion, and incorporation” (Juárez and Comboni, 2007, p. 5, my translation). The final package of productions is associated with “cultures” in generalized form. The significations suggest equivalency with “cultural pluralism” (Cervantes, 2006); in other words: interaction, intersections, contact, communication, and exchange (Keyser, 2007; Schmelkes, 2009; Cabrera, 2009; Vergara and Esparza, 2011) among different cultures that maintain their cultural identity based on a critical attitude toward what is one’s own and what is not (Beuchot, 2005). Other significations reveal that interculturality is constructed at a local level: from the culture’s symbolic and cognitive perspectives, which require promoting a changed mentality and a respectful knowledge of other cultures (Ortiz and Aguilar, 2009).

The contributions listed above interpret “culture” as a paradoxical notion that permits uprooting the indigenous and tracing a path possibly associated with Japanese, Russian, Mexican, Spanish, or youth culture, to mention only a few. In many cases, diversity is mentioned as a cause of enrichment, yet that same diversity leads to exclusion that homogenizes *comprehending and accepting, respecting and including*. Three trends predominate in the contributions of this nodal point: attention to the indigenous in vertical form, respect for differences in general, and respect for cultures that could be integrated in Mexico’s complexity. The language game that operates in this case is *internationalization*, which in spite of having its basis in the indigenous, starts epistemologically to glimpse other possibilities for action in diversity at the local, regional, national, international, intralinguistic, interreligious, or interpersonal level, more than through cultural contact with others whoever they may be, independent from the place of enunciation and from multiple forms of subjectivization.

### 3.3 Interculturality and Educational Policy

This nodal point integrates contributions related to educational policy and scholastic practice. The resulting significations recognize that interculturality represents a new type of education based on a political posture, critical of the hegemonic neoliberalism that despises the indigenous and all of its elements (UNEM and independent educators, 2009). Such education “implies a permanent process of relation, articulation, and negotiation among different parties, under conditions of respect, legitimacy, symmetry, and equality that assumes de-colonialism as a strategy” (Hernández, 2009, p. 4, my translation); education of this sort can occur both inside and outside of the classroom through knowledge, recognition, and appreciation of diversity (Navarro and Rodríguez, 2009). In a school setting, the significations of interculturality are associated with educational practice that favors the strengthening of relations in personal contact, the dispersion of conflict (Dietz, Mendoza and Téllez, 2008), and the value of the diversity of knowledge (Espinosa, 2009). An attitude of pedagogical innovation prepares individuals to view other cultures (Tovar, 2007) through pedagogical strategies that promote the reciprocal recognition of others and existing diversities (Malaga, 2011). Emphasis is on the hybrid and interactive (Mateos, 2007; Rehaag, 2010) through an empathetic process among carriers of different cultures.

Two trends predominate in this nodal point. The first is of a democratizing nature since Mexican citizens, supported by education, are expected to generate optimal practices of relations, communication, and social improvement. In this sense, interculturality is viewed as an aspirational transversal axis in the national educational project: an axis that permits the visibility and development of the subjectivity of those who interact in educational spaces for recognition and acceptance by both the self and others. The second trend is of a progressive nature since the government imagination expects the development of equality, respect, and dialogue through the school curriculum and its diversification. The predominant language game is *sustainable literacy* that allows, as during the post-Revolutionary period, school-age children to progress in their education with a common discourse and language: the naturalized intercultural reproducer of goodness and opportunities for all. In this manner, interculturality is viewed as the immediate possibility to democratize diversity, to maintain ongoing relations of dialogue among Mexican citizens, and to strengthen the idea of an *inclusive society*.

#### 4. Discussion

The academic production of interculturality in this article represents a constellation of significations that in spite of diversity continue to be limited, in the Foucauldian sense, to the abnormal sector for the mestizo majority. The dissemination of interculturality's significations and meanings acquires characteristics of domination, communication, borders, exclusion, inclusion, empowerment, integration, recognition, respect for human rights, and mechanisms of tolerance to include "others", but at no moment is associated with interculturality within "myself". With respect to the significations of interculturality, it is important to say that "if we accept the incomplete nature of all discursive training, and at the same time affirm the relational character of all identities" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p. 193, my translation), we can understand the proliferation of significations extracted from the review of academic production, polysemy, and the ambiguity of the signifier. In spite of the heavy contention of the indigenous/minority/unprotected sector, there is *no establishment* of a single signification; thus we have a battlefield where the significations of interculturality attempt to dominate, overcome, or prevail over others, or to become closer or articulated.

Based on the idea that discourse theory and political analysis "is not a theory but involves a non-renounceable theoretical component" (Buenfil, 2008, p. 30, my translation), this review of academic production adopts the perspective of discussing the teleology of intercultural discourse. As a signifier, interculturality is a social, contingent, historical construction with vanishing points that can be temporarily eliminated by the multiplicity of needs and diversities that situations as well as contexts demand. Depending on the speaker and the purpose, interculturality and therefore studies of intercultural discourse complement a field in the process of formation—a field that reveals its plasticity and mimetic ability to adapt to the nodal points of the present and future (Bhabha, 1994) as this literature review is strengthened. The trends and language games of these academic productions do not operate in isolated or vertical form. On the contrary, they permit overlapping significations at their vanishing points. In other words, at certain moments the documentary referents refer to civic objectives that have a close relationship with educational policy by establishing direct dialogue with the relations among cultures that such policy attempts to mesh, in a cyclical sense, into civic objects.

According to the results of the academic production, I discovered that it is possible to find power relations that are not entirely visible, for three reasons: because the "other" or "others" that are defined as indigenous, minorities, migrants, and so on are recognized, and that short circuits are generated and will be dealt with by political, curricular, or other types of action; because these types of action do not operate immediately on those "others" and the *operation* is diluted in an historical formative exercise that objectifies individuals; and because such power relations are articulated in a field of demands to local, regional, or international needs in which the attempt is made to include certain sectors of the population. In addition, power relations integrate reactions, results, and possible inventions that can refer to the creation of differentiated curricula or institutions responsible for preserving inter-culturalization; the result is optimal social practices represented by dialogue, the education of school-age children to overcome conflicts, the readjustment of the curriculum, or the generation of educational materials as a form of power over the group. In this sense, power relations identified at the different nodal points permit dispersing the fundamentalist panorama of interculturality and intercultural individuals. In contrast, it is of interest to recognize that new possibilities are created to objectify individuals as subjects, intercultural subjects, democratic subjects, tolerant subjects, or civic subjects with multiple possibilities in multiple territories.

#### 5. Conclusions

Insisting on the significations of interculturality implies abandoning "What are we talking about?" and returning to the Foucauldian question of "What are we trying to communicate from the place where I am speaking?" In such a sense, this article is relevant for knowing the configuration and articulation of the *command center* of the significations of interculturality, its trends, and language games in terms of civic values, relations among cultures, and the relation with educational policy in the form of nodal points. In conclusion my analysis of academic production represents a brief approach to the trends and language games of the significations of interculturality and at no time attempts to universalize this field in formation. On the contrary, my study is a pretext for locating lines of articulation and vanishing points that on occasions are mimetic and make almost imperceptible the tensions, precarious meanings, and productions of social reality.

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