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Intercultural Communication

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SUMMARY

This BA thesis, in the first place, deals with culture and intercultural communication. My work consists of three major parts. In the first part, I firstly define the term culture and cultural typology by Geert Hofstede. I also compare Croatia and Australia on Hofstede's model. Furthermore, intercultural communication and its forms are explained, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication. The second part of my thesis deals with major issues in intercultural communication, such as language barriers, stereotypes and prejudices, racism, discrimination and ethnocentrism. Next important theme discussed in the second part is intercultural communication competence. Also, I provide some suggestions for improvement of those skills. Moreover, culture shock is a common problem people encounter when traveling or moving abroad, so it is explained in short. Finally, in the third part I focus on interethnic communication in the United States. Firstly, I explain what ethnicity is because that is crucial for understanding of this chapter. The next theme is differences in language use in the USA because, although the primary language that is used for every legislation, regulation and pronouncement is English, there is no official language in the United States. Since there are many ethnic groups in the USA, there are a lot of differences that lead to prejudices and stereotypes, so I list a couple of examples of accent hallucination.

Keywords: culture, intercultural communication, intercultural communication issues, ICC competence, culture shock, ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

We live in the world where people contact with each other in the areas of education, business, science, entertainment and tourism. The result of those contacts is interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds who speak different languages. Being aware of our own culture and learning about other cultures leads towards understanding and acceptance because lack of understanding of other cultures can lead to embarrassing situations. The aim of this BA thesis is to show the importance of intercultural communication and of gaining intercultural communicative competences. Also, I want to draw attention to the issues in intercultural communication, such as racism, ethnocentrism, language barriers and discrimination. In the first part I briefly describe the term culture, Hofstede's cultural typology and forms of intercultural communication. In the second part the focus is on issues in intercultural communication, as well as it is on improving our intercultural communicative competences. The last part of my BA paper deals with the ethnicity in the USA, different language uses and accent hallucination.

1 CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Given the fact that we witness ever-increasing world population and that cultural migration between nations is frequent, the knowledge of intercultural communication is crucial. This chapter defines the term *culture*, explains the Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural typology and cultural diversity. Furthermore, it defines the term *intercultural communication* and its forms.

1.1. What is Culture

Culture is everything and everywhere around us. On the surface, it could mean customs and behavior. But if we look more deeply, culture could be what the behavior and customs mean to the people who follow them. Indeed, there are many definitions of this term and it can be understood in many ways. Fred E. Jandt defines culture as a total sum of "ways of living including behavioral norms, linguistic expressions, communication styles, thinking patterns, and beliefs and values of a group large enough to be self-sustaining, which are transmitted over the course of generation" (Jandt 2001, 499).

Linell Davis (Kathrin Luckmann de Lopez 2013) suggests some metaphors about culture. He compares it to an iceberg, saying that some parts of culture, such as history, customs and literature, are visible, but the biggest part of it is invisible (feelings and attitudes). He sees the person's body as a hardware and culture as software, which means that we become humans when we are programmed with the software of the culture. Moreover, Davis thinks that culture is the grammar of our behavior because we learn our cultural grammar unconsciously and apply it automatically in order to behave appropriately in any society.

Similarly, Fons Trompenaars thinks that culture has many layers and compares it to an onion. On the outside layer we can find everything visible and the way we behave and talk, and the next layer consist of norms and values shared by the members of the same culture (Trompenaars 2009).

Samovar and Porter (2004, 27-39) list five approaches to defining culture:

1. Culture is learned

2. Culture is shared

3. Culture is transmitted from generation to generation

4. Culture is based on symbols

5. Culture is dynamic

6. Culture is an integrated system.

In short, culture is the way of life shared by people in the same community. People learn the culture throughout their life. There are millions of cultures worldwide, so there is a big possibility that misunderstandings in communication between them will occur. That is why it is important to learn about the cultures, which are also a basis for the intercultural communication.

1.1.1 Cultural Typology by Hofstede

Cultural Dimensions, the theory developed by a Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede (2010), is a significant cultural theory because he created the most comprehensive study of nation cultures so far. He defined six dimensions of culture – power distance index, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, pragmatic versus normative and indulgence versus restraint. Power distance index is a dimension that expresses how the society handles inequalities among people, which means that people in societies that have a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order, whereas in societies with low power distance, people strive to be equal. When it comes to individualism, it can be defined as a social framework in which individuals take care of only themselves and their immediate families. In contrast, collectivism is present in societies in which individuals can expect their relatives to look after them in exchange for loyalty. The United States, Australia and Great Britain all tend toward individualism. Furthermore, the masculinity and femininity indexes are connected with the distribution of the roles according to gender. Hofstede explains that the society with a high masculinity index has a preference for success, achievement, heroism and tends to be competitive. On the other hand, the femininity side of this dimension represents a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for other people and is more consensus-oriented. For example, Ireland, the Philippines, Greece, Venezuela and Italy are among the countries with a high masculinity index. The uncertainty avoidance index shows how much people feel uncertain in unpredictable and ambiguous situations. The societies with a high index try to control and minimize those situations with rules and laws, while the nations with a lower index try to avoid

rules as much as possible and are more flexible. According to Hofstede, pragmatic versus normative dimension relates to the fact that not everything that happens around us can be explained. So, in societies with a normative orientation (also called short orientation), people want to explain as much as possible and they respect traditions and social conventions. On the contrary, those with a pragmatic orientation (also called long orientation) do not have the need to explain everything, do not expect the results immediately and are more adaptable. The last dimension is indulgence versus restraint. Hofstede says that cultures can be indulgent, which means that they have a weak control of their desires and impulses, or restrained, which means that they have a strong control.

1.1.2 Croatia and Australia compared on Hofstede's model

Geert Hofstede's official website offers a possibility to compare two countries on Hofstede's model. For this thesis I compared Croatia and Australia.
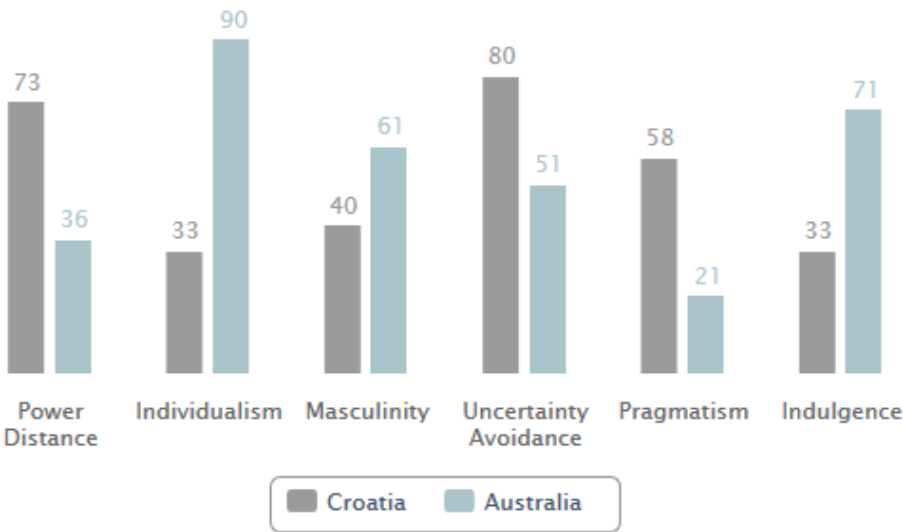
Figure 1, Croatia in comparison with Australia,
http://geert-hofstede.com/croatia.html

http://geert-hofstede.com/australia.html

Figure 1 shows that Croatia, unlike Australia, scores high on power distance dimension, which means that society accepts hierarchical order. Furthermore, it can be seen from the score of 33 that Croatia is a collectivistic society, whereas Australia, with a score of 90 on this dimension, is a highly individualistic society. When it comes to masculinity, Croatia is considered a feminine society and Australia masculine society, which means that Australians are more competitive than

Croatians. This diagram shows how differently Croatia and Australia deal with the fact that the future can never be known. Croatia scores 80 on the dimension uncertainty avoidance and that means that it has a very high preference for avoiding uncertainty, people are precise, punctual and are more open towards changes. On the other hand, with a score of 51, Australians mostly do not behave like that. In pragmatic societies people save for the future and easily adapt traditions to changed conditions, and Croatia is one of them. In contrast, Australia has normative culture where people focus on achieving quick results and do not save for the future in the way pragmatic cultures do. Finally, Croatia has a low score on the last dimension, which makes it a restrained country with a tendency for pessimism. However, Australians, as members of an indulgent country, are optimistic, spend more money as they wish and enjoy life as much as they can (n.d.).

1.2 Intercultural Communication

Some fields that deal with intercultural communication are sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. The term can be defined in various ways. In general, it refers to any communication between members of any cultural communities. Jandt, for example, defines it as "face-to-face interactions among people of diverse cultures" (Jandt 2001, 45). Likewise, Samovar and Porter say that "intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" (Samovar, Porter 1997, 12). Intercultural communication develops as a result of traveling, international business, migration, etc. Barnet and Lee (2003) present the structure of intercultural communication. They refer to it as exchanging cultural information between two groups with distinctive cultures.
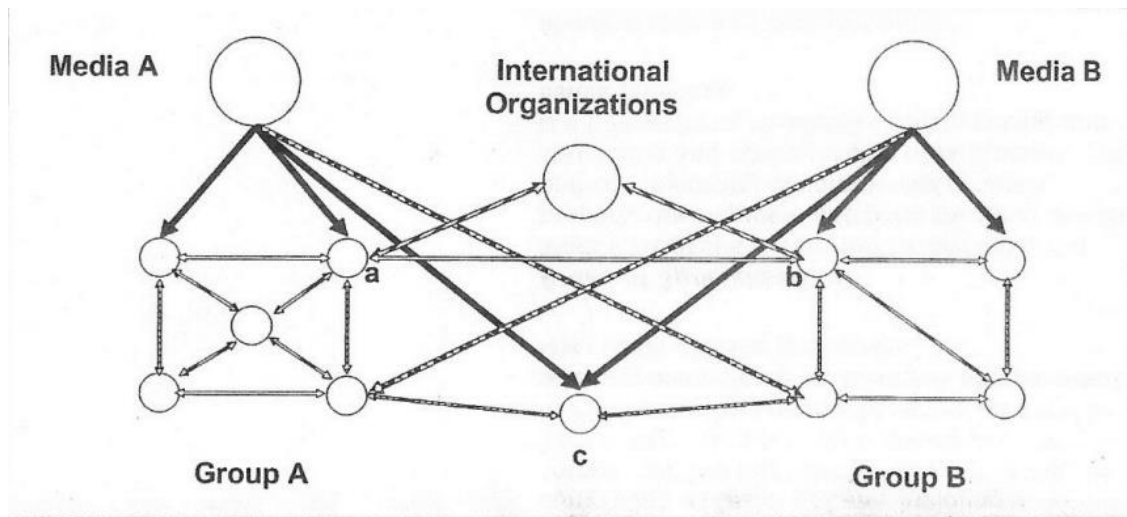
Figure 2, Structure of Intercultural Communication (Barnet, Lee, 2003, 262)

As Figure 2 shows, there are two groups, 'A' and 'B', which have different cultural characteristics. There is intense communication within the groups, unlike between the two groups. There are people from the two groups who temporarily leave their own group because of education or business. Those people are named 'a' and 'b' and they represent their own culture and exchange cultural information. The 'c' person represents those who can speak both languages, so it does not belong to neither of groups, but still understands both cultures.

1.2.1 Forms of Intercultural Communication

There are four forms of intercultural communication. In the first place, there is international communication, which occurs not between individuals, but rather between nations and governments. It is formal and ritualized. Second, interracial communication takes place between people who belong to different races. When it comes to interethnic communication, it is important to mention that ethnic groups form their communities within the country or culture and share a common origin and heritage. As a result of that, "when two people speaking a different language try to communicate, the problem is clear and there is seldom any sense of hostility involved even if communication fails. This can be very different when people of different ethnic backgrounds, using the *same language* try to communicate" (Fought 2006, 174). I also deal with this topic in the third chapter of my thesis. The last form of intercultural communication is intracultural communication, which is a communication between members of the same culture and it occurs every day among families, friends or co-workers.

1.2.2 Verbal Communication

Language, as Merriam-Webster Dictionary suggests, is the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other, and it is the main tool of verbal communication. Language and culture influence and reflect each other. It is easier to communicate verbally to represent one's experiences within the same culture because people share the language and have many similar experiences. Verbal communication across cultures is more difficult because people's experiences, values, beliefs, traditions, customs and the language are different.

1.2.3 Non-verbal Communication

"Nonverbal communication involves all nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that is generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that has potential message value for the source or receiver (Samovar, Porter 2004, 246). Nonverbal communication includes body language, eye contact, facial expressions and posture. Also, different environments produce different nonverbal messages. For example, we behave differently at the club than we do in the bank. It is important to mention that there is no universal and international language of gestures because each culture developed its own system of gestures. Therefore, it is almost impossible to understand intuitively the gestures from other culture. For example, as Dane Archer suggests, *thumbs up* gesture does not have the same meaning everywhere. In American/English culture this gesture means "good luck to you". But it is an obscene gesture that means "screw you", and an American traveling in Iran would outrage people there if the American performed this gesture. When in another culture or society, we should never imitate a gesture that someone presents to us without knowing it, because we could be deeply offending that person and inviting conflict (n.d.)

2 ISSUES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

This chapter deals with the problems that occur in intercultural communication. Firstly, I discuss the reasons why cultural misunderstandings appear. Secondly, the most common barriers that occur between people coming from different cultural backgrounds are presented. Finally, I talk about culture shock, intercultural communicative competence and how to improve it in order to alleviate misunderstandings.

2.1 Obstacles in Intercultural Communication

People from different cultural backgrounds act in different ways. The differences such as language or race are visible on the surface, but there is a wide number of cultural segments, such as mentality, value system and habits, that come to the surface only during the deeper interaction between two or more different cultures. Intercultural communication can result in making new friends, broadening your horizons and learning about new things, but it can lead to conflicts and negative consequences because of various obstructions. Obstacles and misunderstandings in intercultural communication occur because of different barriers such as languages, different cultural backgrounds and mentalities, discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices, racism and ethnocentrism.

2.1.1 Language Barriers

Language is the basic and the most important means of communication. It is the first thing we notice and hear when encountering different cultures. Language barrier is the most frequent problem in intercultural communication because there are thousands of languages in the world. If the participants of the conversation speak different languages, it is necessary to find the appropriate language in order to realize adequate communication. However, even if the participants of the intercultural communication master the appropriate language, the successful communication is not guaranteed if they do not know the customs and values of the respective culture because language and culture are connected and reflect each other. In such cases, it is English language that serves as a lingua franca. Lingua franca, according to a Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is any of various languages used as common or commercial tongues among peoples of diverse speech".

2.1.2 Stereotypes and Prejudices

When it comes to stereotypes, it is commonly known that people tend to categorize and classify, so it is often a case that they assume that all the members of a group have the same characteristics. It is not fair to believe that all people with a particular characteristic are the same. As an illustration, blonde women are stereotyped and considered unintelligent because of their hair color. Stereotypes are exaggerated and based on beliefs, so in order to avoid misinterpretations about someone's behavior, people should try not to judge others before knowing them personally. Furthermore, prejudices are connected with negative attitudes based on stereotypes. While stereotypes include both positive and negative feelings and attitudes, prejudice is usually strictly negative judgment of others. That means that highly prejudiced people most likely will not change their attitude towards others, not even when they get to know them personally. The right attitude towards other cultures includes the ability to move beyond and forget about the stereotypes and prejudices. To realize successful cultural encounters, people should concentrate on individuals and avoid generalization based on their previous experiences.

2.1.3 Racism

Although we live in the twenty-first century, racism is still present, not only in the United States, but also in the societies around the world. Racist acts are current issues on every level of our societies and it seems that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that all children will be judged not only by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character will remain just a dream (Samovar, Porter 2004, 177). Many groups of people such as Asians, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Arabs experience racism and it is hard to talk about the consequences and effects that racism leaves on them. But, it is widely known that racism is damaging and destructive for both sides. Racism occurs because of the feeling of superiority and racist individuals often mistreat people of more than one race. Samovar and Porter (2004) propose four steps to avoid racism. First, they suggest trying to be honest with yourself and confront your racist beliefs. Second, it is important to object to racist jokes and insults whenever you hear them because that will send a message to others. Third, they urge us to respect freedom because from the United States Declaration, it follows that you must work to see that all individuals are free from political and social restrictions to preserve liberty. The final step is to examine the historical roots of racism in order to be able to understand (178). These two authors quote Maya Angelou, the African American author, who writes that the plague of racism is insidious and that

it enters into our minds as smoothly and quietly and invisibly as floating airborne microbes enter into our bodies to find lifelong purchase in our bloodstreams (Samovar, Porter 2004, 179).

2.1.4 Discrimination

Stereotypes, prejudices and racism are pervasive and become part of our life and our seeing the world. Those problems can be expressed in many ways, more or less transparent. Discrimination is the most transparent way of expressing negative attitudes based on race, religion, sexual orientation and ancestry. It is sad, but true that discrimination has been present for thousands of years throughout the world. Samovar and Porter (2004) list a few examples from the past including that African American were being forced to ride in the back of the buses, Japanese Americans being isolated in camps during the Second World War, Jews being forced to wear a yellow star of David, American Indians having their land confiscated, and South African society divided along racial lines. Today we see discrimination in the form of physical violence or offensive words. Also, targeted people are often disregarded. (177).

2.1.5 Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a big problem in intercultural communication because ethnocentric people consider themselves and their own culture superior to that of others and judge others' by the standards of their own culture. People with ethnocentric minds think that their way of life is the only right and others are wrong. For example, people from one culture might view people who eat raw horsemeat as being abnormal and barbarous. At the same time, people who eat raw horsemeat might see people in other cultures as cruel because they assign the elderly to convalescent homes (Samovar, Porter 2004, 179). Jandt also proposes an example of ethnocentrism in his work. The US citizens address themselves as *Americans.* At the same time, that expression refers to all people who live in North and South Americas (Jandt 2010, 83-5). According to Samovar and Porter (2004), ethnocentrism has three levels: positive, negative and extremely negative. The first level, positive, is the belief that your culture is preferred over all others, at least for you, and there is nothing wrong with that belief because you draw much of your personality from your own culture. When it comes to negative level, your culture is the center of everything and all other cultures should be measured by its standards. The extremely negative form is the belief that your culture is not only the best one, but also the most powerful

one and that all other cultures should adopt your values and norms (180). Ethnocentrism is, like culture, usually learned unconsciously. To prove that ethnocentrism is universal and that most people are ethnocentric, Samovar and Porter (2004) say that schools that teach only history, geography and literature of their own country and exclude those of others encourage ethnocentrism. In the same way, the Chinese quietly teach ethnocentrism by referring to their country using ideograms that mean "Central Kingdom" (180). It is not easy to avoid ethnocentrism, but we are urged to avoid dogmatism by asking ourselves a couple of rhetorical questions. For example, is one belief more correct than the others when we consider the fact that Catholics have one God, Buddhists have none, and Hindus have many gods? Moreover, people should be open to new views and learn about other cultures because "the lack of knowledge is the major cause of ethnocentrism" (Samovar, Porter 2004, 181).

2.2. Intercultural Communication Competences

Gaining intercultural communication skills is important if we want to successfully live and work in the global society. People might engage in intercultural communication when traveling, but there is also a probability that someone becomes employed in international company. The only way to be successful in that kind of working environment is that a person is able to appropriately interact in foreign languages with people from other cultures. Knowledge about other cultures and their cultural patterns is a good way for making friends with your co-workers and finding support, as well as giving one. Samovar and Porter (2004) say that "a competent intercultural communicator is one who has the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with members of another linguistic-cultural background on their terms" (384). They also list five components of intercultural competence. The first one is motivation to communicate because it is the most important factor for starting a communication. The signs that show that a person is motivated are showing interest, making effort to talk and understand, extending help, showing a possession of international perspective and going beyond your boundaries. The second component, knowledge, means that people understand and are aware of norms and rules connected with the culture of people who they are communicating with. The third component is skills. A good communicator is able to listen, observe and analyze. Furthermore, the participants of intercultural communication should be sensitive to each other and not act strange or unusual when they encounter different customs. The last component, character, is very important because

if you are not perceived as a good character by your communication partner, the encounter might not be successful (385-6).

2.2.1 How to improve ICC

Intercultural communication skills do not come naturally, but should be learned and practiced. Samovar and Porter (2004, 387-395) introduce suggestions for improvement of the skills. The first step is to be aware of our own culture because we see others through it. Our cultural backgrounds, families, values and beliefs shape our lives and that also influences our understanding of other cultures. People need to be aware of their own belief system and identify personal stereotypes, prejudices and opinions because those attitudes affect the communication. Also, knowing your communication style could help you in discovering how other people perceive you. The second step is to be emphatic. In other words, we should try to imagine how we would feel if we were in other person's position. However, it is not easy to be empathic if there are some characteristics that can disturb it, such as different cultural backgrounds, constant self-focus and stereotypes. Although it is not possible to be completely empathic, we can pay attention and learn to accept differences. The third important suggestion for improving one's competences is practicing effective listening, which includes appropriate non-verbal communication (nodding, eye contact) and encouraging feedback by smiling, silence or verbally. Moreover, developing communication flexibility helps adapting to other cultures and people. Since many unpredictable situations might occur, it is useful to practice patience, be adaptive and expect unexpected.

2.2.2 Culture Shock

Intercultural communication competences could be useful when someone journeys into new culture because anxiety and other emotional disturbances are the first feelings one may experience. Culture shock is, along with those mentioned feelings, an experience that consists of many other psychological and physical discomforts that people encounter when they are either being tourists or planning to become permanent residents in a foreign country. Samovar and Porter (2004, 397-8) list some of the possible reactions people may feel when adjusting to a new culture: antagonism toward the new environment, a sense of disorientation, feelings of rejection, homesickness, upset stomach and headaches, withdrawal and many others, but not all the people

respond to culture shock in the same way nor everybody needs the same amount of time to adjust. Still, most of them go through four stages of culture shock. The stages are seen as a U-shaped curve. It all starts with the excitement phase when a person feels euphoric and excited about the new culture and opportunities in a foreign country. When a person faces the first problems, the second, disenchantment, phase begins. In this phase people might feel disappointed because of the language, school or housing problems. In the third phase, called beginning resolution phase, the person gains some knowledge about the culture, starts copying the patterns, so everything seems less difficult and stressful. Eventually, in effective functioning phase, the person understands all the elements of the new culture, such as values, norms, customs and beliefs, and feels comfortable. In conclusion, learning about the host culture in advance, participating in all cultural activities and making personal contact with people from the host culture can certainly help to alleviate culture shock (Samovar, Porter 2004, 398-9).

3 INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN THE USA

Interethnic communication, as one of the forms of intercultural communication, is the topic of the third part of my thesis. This chapter deals with language and ethnicity in the USA. It concentrates on ethnic groups, differences in language use and language attitudes and prejudices.

3.1. What is ethnicity?

In her work *Language and Ethnicity*, Carmen Fought suggests that "ethnicity is something that is highlighted most clearly where in-group/out-group boundaries are part of the context" (13). For example, when people who live in the same country and speak the same language, but have different ethnic backgrounds and try to communicate, the communication might fail. In other words, every ethnic group has their own characteristics and it is always a good thing to be aware of patterns in other ethnic groups. Outward signs for ethnic group members can be race, language use (including names), dress code (e.g. Amish), religious customs, food or music. By understanding where our conversational partner is coming from, we have a better chance of achieving whatever goals we have for interaction. According to U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 survey showed America's diversity. The examination confirmed that the non-Hispanic white population is still numerically and proportionally the largest major race and ethnic group in the United States, followed by Hispanic and Asian populations.

3.2 Differences in language use

There is no official national language in the United States. However, the primary language that is used for legislation, regulations and all official pronouncements is English. Although, at the moment, 27 out of 50 states have established English as the official language, the US is still multinational and multilingual country and many other languages are spoken on daily basis. For example, Hawaii has establishes both English and Hawaiian as official languages. In the 19th century English was predominant and there were a series of laws which discriminated against Mexican-American and other languages and cultures. As an example, "in 1878 California became the first English-Only state" (Milroy 1987, 195).

The bitter divisions created by slavery and the Civil War in the US shaped a language ideology focused on racial discrimination. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also

known as Ebonics and spoken by many African Americans in both rural and urban areas, is probably the most stigmatised linguistic code of all in the United States. The roots of that attitude date back to the period when the slaves were considered inferior (Fought, 196-204). Still, it is difficult to specify what standard American English is. In a sense, the standard is what is left behind when the non-standard varieties spoken by African Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Asians and Mexican Americans are set aside (Milroy 1987, 174).

Furthermore, what is perceived as somewhat abrupt in one group may seem unnecessarily polite to another. As an illustration, ending a conversation can be a complex ceremony. Formulas such as *See you later* and *Take care* for Athabaskans in the USA and Canada violate a norm of not talking about the future. These contact points are a good place to begin looking at interethnic communication in order to avoid many possible miscommunications when individuals from different ethnic groups meet in public places. Moreover, Athabaskans talk less than other Americans and have longer interval of pausing between sentences, as well as they avoid direct questions. They do not like to talk about the future and see talking about their accomplishments as bragging. As a consequence, they are likely to have problems when applying for the job when the interviewer expects the candidate to talk about past accomplishments and future goals (Fought 2006, 175-6).

3.3 Stereotypes and accent hallucination

Stereotypes are based on differences between ethnic groups. Those differences are common, so there is always a possibility that in any interethnic encounter there will be at least some norms that differ slightly and may lead to miscommunication. As it has already been said, not all dialects of the language are equally valued. People who speak non-standard variety are often subjected to discrimination. But at the same time, the language has a big role in identity, so finding a group of people within the ethnic community with whom a person can identify, and who are using the standard variety at least some of the time is necessary (Fought 2006, 187).

The perception of stigmatized accents can lead to prejudice. In her book, Fought offers a number of examples, including the experiment by Williams (1983). In his study, a group of European-American student teachers were asked to watch a videotape of a child who could be seen speaking from the side. There were three different versions of the video, one with a European-American child, one with an African-American child, and one with a Mexican-

American child. Regardless of which video they saw, the accompanying audio file they heard was of the same standard English-speaking child. The African-American and Mexican-American children were rated as notably more 'non-standard' in their speech than the European-American child. In other words, it is possible that expectations about language and ethnicity override the actual linguistic nature of an individual's speech in the minds of hearers (Fought 2006, 187-9).

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