Perceptions and Representations in an Intercultural Setting: The Image of Doctors in The Imaginary Invalid by Molière

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Abstract:

In the field of teaching/learning French as a foreign language, classical works remain inexhaustible, and great authors such as Molière are indispensable references. In this article, we highlight the notion of representation through the lens of Molière, a playwright, addressing doctors in "The Imaginary Invalid." We present the emergence of representations by emphasizing their various meanings and functions in an intercultural approach to French.

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To study the notion of evidence as an essential concept in any intercultural approach, we have chosen to contrast the positive representations of doctors among our students with the highly derogatory image that Molière gives of 17th-century doctors.

***Keywords**:* Perception; representation; Molière; doctor; notion of self-evidence; French.

Introduction

The As a trainer in intercultural communication in French as a foreign language, we have undertaken action research focused on the acquisition of intercultural competencies among our learners (students in the French Bachelor's program). From a didactic perspective, the acquisition of intercultural competence is based on the development of understanding (of the other and, by extension, oneself), reflection, decentering, and relativization. In this regard, the language teacher should consider that "the entire process of socializing an individual within their community leads them to ignore that 'what goes without saying' is, in fact, an arbitrary construction of the world, a coherent but non-universal whole" (Zarate, 1986:24).

In other words, an individual's representations are generally considered by them as self-evident, making it difficult for them to

believe that they are not so evident to someone else. Hence the need for decentering work that allows the individual to open up to other worldviews. To encourage learners to decenter and question the notion of self-evidence, we chose to conduct a contrastive analysis between their positive representations of doctors and the highly derogatory image given by Molière in his work "The Imaginary Invalid."

In our research, we employed a qualitative and comprehensive methodological approach to explore the acquisition of intercultural competencies among students. We conducted a free word association test to uncover the content of students' representations of doctors. This technique allowed us to gather spontaneous responses, revealing the underlying perceptions and representations of the learners. We then contrasted these positive representations with the derogatory image of doctors presented in Molière's play "The Imaginary Invalid." This contrast aimed to encourage students to reflect on the notion of self-evidence and to develop their ability to decenter and understand different perspectives. Our survey involved first-year French Bachelor's students from the University of El Tarf, who are primarily oriented towards teaching. This methodological approach highlights the importance of decentering and openness to other sociocultural markers in the process of learning a foreign language.

Given that French education at Algerian universities emphasizes literature, especially classical authors, we set out to accomplish two

main objectives.: to study Molière's work and to confront students with divergent sociocultural representations to help them understand the difference in self-evident truths.

1. The notion of Representations

The concept of representation refers to a transdisciplinary object of study, whether it is anchored theoretically or experimentally, to understand its fundamental underpinnings within the domains in which it is studied. The etymological origin of the term "representation" is derived from the Latin "repraesentatio" ("action of putting before the eyes"). For many researchers, "representations" are synonymous with the notion of "image." In a broader perspective, the image refers to several other terms such as: symbol, projection, perception, stereotype, and prejudice.

Representation constitutes a transversal concept in different scientific disciplines and covers multiple meanings. Researchers in the humanities and social sciences have attempted to define this notion. In this article, we refer to the works of Jodelet (2005) and Abric (2016) on collective social representations and individual representations.

The notion of representation refers to a principal concept in social sciences, particularly in social psychology, as it constitutes a

pivotal element between the subject and their group, as well as between the group and its environment. In his study of religions and myths, Durkheim (1991) considers that the first systems of representations that humans created of the world and themselves are of religious origin. He proposes the distinction between collective representations and individual representations.

Works in social psychology have conceptualized and refined the definition of the notion of representation, which until then encompassed all collective representative constructions (common sense, values, ideology, practices, religion, science, and myth). The theory of social representations was then formulated by the psychosociologist Serge Moscovici, who theorized the notion of social representation and studied its construction and transmission modalities. For Moscovici, cited by Castellotti & Moore (2002:08), this notion is both mental and social.

Mental and social representations refer to explanatory models of the world that each individual develops from birth to understand, adapt to, act upon, and communicate with others. These shared representations, consisting of knowledge, practical know-how, beliefs, and imagination, are significant in everyone's life. This conceptualization of social representation by social psychology provides a common tool for the social and human sciences.

Research in educational sciences is inspired by cognitive psychology, whose researchers hypothesize about the functioning of the human mind, propose models, and consider that one cannot overlook mediating processes, among which is a process corresponding to the very phenomenon of consciousness: that of representation.

In a learning situation, learners arrive with a more or less dense and complex "set" of representations constituted by the relationship between information emitted by their own bodily, psychological, and cognitive space, and that provided by their familial, sociocultural, ideological, economic, and political environment. The degree of precision and accuracy of these representations' content in relation to reality depends not only on the weight of beliefs and knowledge about oneself and others, particularly from their family, school, peers, and media, but also on the diverse and changing characteristics of their previous emotions, perceptions, and representations.

From these observations, it becomes evident that for a language teacher, considering the representations of learners in the same class can be crucial. Eliciting these representations could help the teacher understand which conceptions are reactivated to respond to the work required and to what extent it would be possible to act on them. The

language class offers a space for modifying representations : "The educational context appears as a privileged field to see how social representations are constructed, evolve, and transform within social groups and to enlighten us on the role of these constructions in the relationships of these groups to the object of their representations" (Jodelet, 1994:364).

2. Perceptions in intercultural studies

Perception is a fundamental concept in intercultural studies, as it shapes how individuals interpret and interact with the world around them. According to Green, Fairchild, Knudsen, and Lease-Gubrud (2018), perception is the process by which individuals create "mental images" of the world, influencing their communication choices and interactions. This process involves three stages: selection, organization, and interpretation. This definition highlights the importance of perception in understanding and navigating intercultural environments.

While representations refer to the mental images and symbols that individual and groups create to understand and communicate their experiences, perception influences how individuals interpret cultural cues, communicate, and interact with others from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding perception mecanism helps to avoid

common perceptual problems and fosters respect for diverse views, ultimately enhancing intercultural communication and relationships.

In intercultural studies, representations often shape how cultural groups are viewed and understood, influencing stereotypes, symbols, and collective images. Perceptions, on the other hand, are the individual experiences and interpretations that people have when they encounter different cultures.

For example, representations of a cultural group might include stereotypes or symbolic images that are widely recognized and shared within a society. These representations can influence how individuals perceive members of that cultural group, affecting their interactions and attitudes. Conversely, individual perceptions can challenge or reinforce these representations, as personal experiences and interpretations may differ from the collective images.

In an intercultural environment, understanding the interplay between perception and representation is crucial. It helps to recognize how cultural stereotypes and symbols can shape individual attitudes and behaviors, and how personal experiences can contribute to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of different cultures.

3. The Subjective Dimension of Representations in Language Classes

From the above, we can deduce that sociocultural representations have a major impact on the relationship between the learner and the foreign language being taught. Learners tend to have preconceived, often erroneous, representations of other cultures. These consist of judging a language-culture based on their own values, considering it inferior or at least too different, which often generates ethnocentrism and rejection of the other's culture. Representations arise from contact with the other, cultural images from history, and transmitted through social discourse and media. Others may arise from conflicting relations between two countries.

This is the case with representations of former colonized countries towards the language and population of the colonizing country. In this regard, Bivona (2014:01) states: "Every colonized person is a mirror reflecting the description and construction of Otherness; every adventure of domination constantly ties and connects the history of acculturation, whose modalities, more or less brutal, depend on the variable conditions of its own images or those of the colonized." In summary, learners' representations of foreign languages and cultures hold a valorizing or devaluing power over this learning.

As learners' representations can motivate them to learn the foreign language and open up to another culture, they can also demotivate them, often leading to linguistic blockage and rejection of the other's culture. In this research, we will attempt to bring out students' representations to understand how they influence the process of learning French as a foreign language (FLE). Some studies (cf. Perrefort 1997; Muller 1998) highlight the strong interrelation between the image a learner constructs of a country and the representations they form about learning the language of that country. In his didactic work, Dabène (1997) considers that the representations social actors form of a language, its norms and characteristics, and its status compared to other languages, largely influence the processes and strategies they will develop in learning and using the target language. The idea of the significant influence of representations on language learning is echoed by Castellotti & Moore (2002:09): "For acquisition linguistics, representations constitute a structuring element of the language appropriation process. Representations of the mother tongue, the language to be learned, and their differences are linked to certain learning strategies among learners who construct a representation of the interlinguistic distance separating their language system from that of the language to be learned." In what follows, we will explain the various representations of doctors in a theatrical work, particularly in the 17th century, to show how students perceive these

representations and consider how to reinvest them in a French as a Foreign Language course.

4. Representations of Doctors in Molière's "The Imaginary Invalid"

At the beginning of the 17th century, medicine still relied on theories conceived during ancient Greek times, such as those of Galen, a physician inspired by Hippocrates and Aristotle. Physicians asserted that maintaining health depended on the equilibrium of four bodily fluids: blood, lymph, yellow bile, and black bile.They believed that the imbalance of these entities was harmful to health. Almost all treatments were based on the following medical acts: enemas, bloodletting, and purges. The most prestigious personalities indulged in these practices with full confidence, for example, King Louis XIV, who underwent purgation more than two thousand times in fifty years. Molière did not fail to note this with much irony and mockery.

At that time, medicine was far from being an exact science, based on archaic practices, as we have explained above. Patients exhausted by their illness struggled to survive the barbaric practices of the time. The relationship between doctor and patient was very different from today. Indeed, during his medical university course, the future practitioner examined his patient without being able to touch him: his anatomical knowledge was very fragmentary as it only

contained the external profile of the body. Dissection was banned by the Catholic Church: doctors who had to meticulously analyze anatomy had to procure corpses by taking enormous risks.

It would take the anatomical work of Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), physician to Philip II of Spain following Charles V, to provide more efficient knowledge of human morphology. Vesalius is currently considered one of the greatest revolutionaries in medicine who evolved Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) conception, particularly the work on the scientific conception of the body carried out through the dissection of deceased patients. Under the Ancien Régime, medical training was exhausting without being truly efficient: the course, at a high cost, was long and spanned at least seven years, yet it was the theoretical aspect that was valued contrary to the practical aspect. The future doctor accumulated anatomical, pathological, and physiological medical knowledge but remained powerless in the face of concrete therapeutic interventions.

Until the 18th century, doctors did not yet detach from the theory of the four fundamental humors, considering the human body as a reflection of the universe, consisting of four entities (water, earth, air, fire). Doctors used few curative treatments: diet, bloodletting,

purges with clyster, emetics, infusions, various potions, and thermal cures.

However, the world witnessed a real decisive awareness among doctors in the 18th century. Indeed, medical practices underwent a real mutation, notably with anatomo-clinical medicine, which allowed locating afflictions through the examination of patients and corpses. The development of investigative means (taking temperature, auscultation, and still exceptional use of the microscope...) highlighted symptoms that could be confronted with lesions discovered through autopsy. Thus, the science of diagnosis was born: medical discourse thus freed itself from theory and tradition.

Doctors have been represented throughout history in a caricatural form or a learned form. In the 17th century, Molière gave a detestable image and acerbically criticized their practices, which he considered barbaric and useless. This refers to outdated medical practices. This author had an exacerbated relationship with doctors, probably related to his own experience. Indeed, Molière, exhausted by his work at the head of his troupe and in the service of the king, was afflicted with tuberculosis that the doctors of the time were unable to cure. Molière, aged fifty-one, had a malaise on the stage of his Palais-Royal theater while playing his fourth presentation of the role of "Malade." He died at home the same evening, spitting blood.

In several of his works, and particularly in "The Imaginary Invalid," Molière portrays doctors as pedantic characters, full of themselves, who believe they hold an absolute truth that the layperson cannot understand. These arrogant characters are denigrated by satirical theater and accused of imposture: In "The Imaginary Invalid," the character "Argan" is a hypochondriac who believes he is afflicted with all the ailments of the human body. His doctor "Diafoirus" encourages him in his delusions and ramblings of imminent decay. How would our learners react to this derogatory image of doctors ? We aimed to challenge the learners with this question, considering that doctors are regarded as highly respected elite in their socio-cultural environment.

5. Intercultural Approach: From Representations to Questioning the Notion of "Self-Evidence"

Shifting students from their perspectives of interpretation is a requirement for the development of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2008; Byram, 1997; Crane & Sosulski, 2020; Drewelow, 2023; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The intercultural approach in a foreign language class can be carried out through work on raising awareness of otherness and decentering. .The latter is defined as "the ability to

put oneself in another's place, to see the world as they see it, without renouncing one's own perspective (...) egocentric decentering aims to move away from the belief that one's own point of view is the only possible, the most correct one" (Cuq, 2003:66). In this article, we present part of our survey conducted with students from the French Department of the University of El Tarf.

These learners will likely study texts during their LMD training where sociocultural markers play an undeniable role in understanding and processing information. It seems very important to us to work with these students on the process of decentering and opening up to other ways of life and other sociocultural markers. Our methodological approach is comprehensive qualitative and, aiming to get learners to reflect on what seems self-evident in life, what seems indisputable and logical.

5.1. Surveyed Audience

Our audience consists of students enrolled in the first year of the French Bachelor's program (N=27). They are between 17 and 20 years old. These students are enrolled in an academic Bachelor's program but are mostly oriented towards teaching. This makes it necessary to study the great classics of the French language on which teaching in Algeria is based, from primary to secondary school. We can therefore say that this passage through representations constituted a necessary

first step before starting the decentering phase. The latter consisted of exploiting a passage from Molière's work "The Imaginary Invalid."

5.2. Data Collection and Emergence of Representations

To collect our data, we conducted a free word association test to bring out the content of representations. We sought elements likely to constitute the field of representation and to identify those that are central to the group of students studied. We chose, for its simplicity of administration and the richness of the data obtained, a formulation halfway between free evocation (or word association) and definition. This free association technique calls for a spontaneous response to the question asked, thus "giving voice" to the unconscious. We simply asked the students to complete sentence starters. We gave the following instruction: What does the word doctor make you think of? What does the profession of doctor represent to you? The responses obtained converged towards laudatory representations of doctors and their profession. The recurring responses are "noble profession, intellectuals, saviors of humanity, warriors, sacrifice, elite, healing, courageous, generous, volunteers, Doctors Without Borders."

5.3. Relativizing Self-Evident Truths: Towards Decentering Work

To encourage learners to reflect on the notion of self-evidence, we chose to exploit a short passage from Molière's play "The Imaginary Invalid." The chosen excerpt from Act 3, Scene 10, available online, describes the playwright's disdain for doctors and brings out a derogatory image of their profession. Our objective in this stage of the survey was to make learners aware of other completely divergent self-evident truths. Indeed, to decenter, one must understand that what seems self-evident to us may not be so for other people and/or other cultures. By studying the proposed excerpt, students are confronted with a completely different image of doctors. Their curiosity as learners then leads them to seek to understand Molière's disdain. As a result of our survey, this led to a whole process of understanding the context in which Molière lived, the medical practices of the 17th century. This confrontation of representations allows us to highlight the importance of decentering in any process of learning a foreign language with an intercultural aim.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the language teacher plays the role of an intercultural mediator by bringing out learners' representations and encouraging them to decenter. It goes without saying that literature is a privileged place for intercultural communication because it allows, through its universality, the study of multiple realities and sociocultural markers. Molière's representations

of doctors confirm, through mockery, the bad reputations of the deceitful doctors of the time. By using multiple ironies, Molière makes his audience laugh while painting a critical picture of doctors he considers archaic. He revisits the same theme in "The Doctor in Spite of Himself" and "Monsieur de Pourceaugnac." The playwright pushes the critique to the point of ridiculing the characters of doctors. In a generic sense, medicine seems to hold a certain power over relieving the patient but not over curing them.

This derogatory representation was confronted with the laudatory representations of the students in order to analyze the notion of self-evidence. This analysis work can be a major challenge in raising awareness of the notions of otherness, diversity, and acceptance of the Other. These concepts form the basis of the discourse on intercultural communication in FLE classes.

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