

Negotiation and intransigency in forum discussions on interethnic topic

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Abstract. *There are several issues emphasized when studying a forum on arguments for and against the return of emigrants from Canada to Romania: the emigrants realize that in order to get affirmative feedback from the people in the host-country, they need to adjust their identity so that it reunites their own ethnic features with the ethnic features in the new country; it is also to be taken into consideration the fact that for the Romanians in Canada, this hybrid identity might also contain Romanian elements which are compatible with the Canadian elements, the result being the identity of a Romanian - Canadian.*

The objective of this paper is to establish the way in which some participants in the online Romanian forum debates see the existence of some cultural differences between them and the Canadians. We have mainly referred to the debate forum of the news website "hotnews.ro" whose topic between 2008 and 2010 was "I want to leave Canada for Romania. What would you advise me?"

As far as the social negotiation is concerned (on the one hand, it deals with the interethnic negotiation between the Romanians and the Canadians, and on the other hand, it deals with the negotiation between the participants in the discussion on the online forum we analyzed), the five message fragments we have selected from the online discussion regarding the Romanian and Canadian inhabitants can be associated both with competitive and collaborative (who make compromises) negotiators.

Real and online interethnic communities

The virtual communities, which emerge when surfing the internet, highlight a new meaning of the term 'community' – in this space, the interactions happen differently compared to the face to face communication, where the main feature is the physical proximity (Raufman and Ben-Cnaan, 2009, p. 44). The virtual communities enable their members to have a feeling of identity and membership, and even create interpersonal relationships of permanent support between persons living in different parts of the globe. The forum is an unsynchronized means of communication in which the written comments appear so that the reader is connected to a great amount of information. The advantages of unsynchronized communication go beyond the ability to read and write messages at the same time. The information in the network and using the hypertext technology allow the foundation of a database made up of the texts in the interconnected computers (Raufman and Ben-Cnaan, 2009, p. 45). If these references to the status as a member of an ethnic minority had been more frequent, it would have been useful to know to what extent Fitzgerald's view on the integration/non-integration of members from the first generation of emigrants would apply to Romanians. Thomas K. Fitzgerald (1992) refers to the fact that the emigrants preserve their previous identity (corresponding to the country of origin) for a long period of time, as a consequence of economical and psychological uncertainty which the new comers find in a country.

Mark Valenta (2009), a researcher who has studied several communities of emigrants from Norway, thinks that the friend networks of most emigrants are divided on ethnic criteria. The reasons causing this ethnic division of emigrants' social life are connected to the maintenance of some hybrid identities. Valenta calls the participants to the research he conducted "equilibrists", because they try to keep their balance between the minority culture they belong to and the majority culture in the new country, juggling with both sets of codes in everyday life. Together with their fellows, the emigrants state that they either have not changed at all since they left their country of origin, or that they have adapted to the standards of the new country regarding only the unimportant, superficial matters. The participants to the forum "I want to leave Canada for Romania" state the same things, many of them pointing out that they do not lack almost any of the things which continue their Romanian identity (for instance they can buy grilled minced meat rolls or cabbage rolls from Romanian restaurants in the big Canadian cities and/or they can meet with Romanian friends in their spare time). The users who have stated their opinion regarding the possible return of a Romanian who has emigrated to Canada several years back, have mostly emphasized issues such as: the living standard in Canada and Romania, the changes which happened in Romania in the last years and especially the fact that Romania has become an European Union member, the health insurance systems in the two countries and so on.

Apart from the possible emphasis of ethnicity as a reason for or against settling in a certain part of the world, we have also taken interest into the way in which Romanian – Canadian users of Hotnews forum see themselves as representatives of a minority in Canada. We have found few interventions from users in this case, too.

If the virtual community is considered to be a space where personal and collective problems are discussed openly, it applies even more with the members of the forums created by Romanians. The participants to Romanian forums are defined by a continuous confrontation regarding both grammar issues and political, economical or lifestyle points of view. From a demographic point of view (according to the identities declared by the participants in online discussions), it seems that highly educated young men prevail on forums of all kinds.

The start point of this paper is the hypothesis according to which the participants in the forum on the website Hotnews (no matter whether they agree with emigrating to Canada) think there is great cultural distance between Romanians and Canadians.

From a methodological point of view, the analysis of online forum discussions is based on communicational approach. The main contribution of communicational analysis is that it allows perceiving the social realities as historical and everyday constructions of individual and collective actors ((Mucchielli & Guivarch, p. 116). The fundamental principle of constructivism in the field of communication postulates that the meaning of a communication is not an a priori fact but a collective construction of the actors in that particular situation, and the construction is based on their own communication (Mucchielli & Guivarch, p. 147).

Modern epistemology developed as an attempt in trying to find new ways of using the representations in the research activity. According to postmodern epistemology, the representations (whether they are used by those focused on quantity or those focused on quality) are influenced by the researcher (Green, Camilli, Elmore, p. 576). Postmodern methodology is based on the principles of auto-reflection and deconstruction (Green, Camilli, Elmore, p. 579).

The data collection is made up of fragments from the interventions of Hotnews website users (the topic “I want to come back to Romania”). These fragments have been chosen because they refer directly or rather indirectly to the relationships between the Romanian emigrants and the host-population (the Canadians). This type of standpoints are an insignificant fragment as far as quantity is concerned, compared to the dozens of topic commentators’ discussions on the advantages/disadvantages of living in Romania, and respectively in Canada. This relative lack of interest towards the issue of inter-ethnic relationships can be perceived either from the point of view of a similarity between Romanians and Canadians (the start point might be the European origin of most of the population in the north of the United States), or from the point of view of the indifference of Romanian emigrants and of those who did not emigrate regarding the ethnic aspects, which prevail in forum discussions, and other elements such as the economical, administrative and also climatic differences

between the two countries (Romania and Canada). Even though the fragments in that particular forum are not representative for the entire discussion on Romanian – Canadian topics, the results after analyzing these fragments will be useful as the foundation for future research of identity construction // reconstruction from a communicational approach.

The texts chosen to be analyzed will have to answer the following “questions”:

- a. How the actors’ speech, who communicate (implicitly or explicitly) about identity, is structured;
- b. How the meaning of the dialogue is negotiated;
- c. To what extent a certain cultural distance is perceived between Romanians and Canadians.

Main concepts

According to Thuderoz, we witness a new paradigm of social and collective action which is based less on inherited identities and imitative practices (as it used to be) and more on negotiated identities and differentiated practices: “This new image of the social bond contrasts with the former Taylor’s bond; it is maintained by inventions, imagination, creativity, it enters flows and networks in innovative combinations. The social identities are built here in a reasonable exchange; each is defined through the other’s eyes, who is equal but different. The individuals and the differentiated instances participate in the discussion through a communicational plea.” (Thuderoz, pp. 10-11).

The psychologists have sorted the negotiators into five fundamental types of personality, based on the way people would deal with inter-personal conflicts: “The five types of people are, in decreasing order of aggression: the competitors, the problem solvers, those who make compromises, those who make concessions (the conciliators) and those who dodge” (Shell, p. 11).

Mavrikakis (2000) thinks that Canada’s multicultural policy is formal and the minorities culture seems to be more interesting if the past is considered to be obsolete, rather than if all the cultures in Canada are to be emancipated. However, it is likely that the emigrants from the former British and French colonies have a better status than the other new comers: the Canadian multiculturalism is a neo-colonizing dream which allows those who have been colonized by British and French empires to have a slice of the nord-American capitalist cake (Mavrikakis, 2000).

The cultural distance emerges as a consequence of the tendency to establish new boundaries between the individual and otherness. Erik Erikson uses the term distancing in order to describe this phenomenon (apud Ladmiral & Lipiansky, p. 137): the distancing is defined as an urge to consolidate his/her own features emphasizing the differences from the “strangers”.

Cultural distance // closeness on the forum

“I want to leave Canada for Romania”

The cultural differences between Romania and Canada are pointed out in several messages posted on the forum in the first months after the launch of the topic “I want to leave Canada for Romania”:

Canada is currently trying a social experiment which is much more developed than the communist experiment.

The population of European origin that has created the Canadian society is gradually replaced by the government with a collection of ethnical groups from China, India, Africa and the Islamic world, which are called “visible minorities – VM”.

In the big Canadian cities (Toronto, Vancouver etc.), the population of European origin is already a minority.

The official religion in Canada is called multiculturalism and, theoretically, it states the equality of all cultures. Actually, the so-called principle of “Affirmative action” allows the government to promote VM in different fields including getting a job and more.

In the public school systems, the young children are being indoctrinated with the spirit of multiculturalism, therefore replacing the feeling of guilt for being affiliated to European culture (which is blamed for all the bad things, including the destruction of the planet). The media and the universities are the enthusiastic supporter of this ideology.

The forum users criticize vehemently the features of multiculturalism, creating the impression that the facts they communicate are extremely relevant in order to understand the interethnic/interracial relationships in Canada. The statements seem to be extracted from other texts, but there are no clues of some ideas being continued, or the points of view of those who have posted their attitudes before the users above. Right from the start, the users take a defensive attitude towards the danger of this “social experiment, more developed than the communist experiment”. As for the social negotiation, they seem to accept no compromises; they do not give any hints that the multiculturalism supporters might be understood to some extent or that there might be some compromises to improve the interracial relationships at some point in the future. Concerning the cultural distance towards the Canadians who do not belong to visible minorities, there are no great differences foreshadowed between the former and the Romanians.

The following commentators have communicational qualities, trying in their interventions to continue topics which have been discussed previously, by bringing reasons and examples from everyday life:

This Internet Romanianism is annoying but it causes no harm. However, if I come to Romania with my pants ripped in the ... or in the knees (as I could have tripped at an uneven sidewalk) and I enter a bank to find information about a credit or the city hall or any other place where Romanians living a good life in Romania are working, do you have any idea of the answers I get? And Romanian’s honesty... they don’t tell you what they find to blame or

to criticize: the Romanian's honesty is the gossip! Have you seen that guy? He has stayed for 15 years in Canada or France or any other country... but he's no good, he's a poor devil... and I'm telling you that I'm not such a poor devil, but before the crisis came it seemed that all Romanians had more money than I did.

Do you think that if you get dressed as a beggar and enter a Canadian bank you'll have any luck? I doubt it. A few pages back they made a big fuss on how cheap the (labeled) clothes are here.

Another aspect of the lack of hypocrisy of the Romanian is that the neighbors stop greeting you or they barely snarl a hello if you had a party and you disturbed their nocturnal peace or if you parked your car on the spot where they painted the number on their registration plate. You get to find out what X or Y said from others who want to cause trouble, and then you understand their behavior, but none of them will let you know politely that you've gone too far or you've violated the property rights they have granted themselves...

*Lack of hypocrisy=honesty/sincerity... it sounds well anyhow but you should read a book once in a while because you are mixing up the words and I start doubting that you have really passed your baccalaureate. So you want the Romanians to be hypocrites? Anyway, what you're saying is a feature of the Canadian society, cultural stuff coming from the English. They have a thing saying that rather than telling someone something nasty, you should say nothing at all. So, a parent will leave his 17 year old and 170 kg daughter wear her pants that you can see her *** hole*

BTW... both in Canada and Romania, if you live in a big block of flats, not one of them will greet you, if you live in a house and you talk to your neighbors and maybe they know you, they'll greet you. They're both the same for me. Also, in Canada, you find out you've made someone angry when your car is picked up or you receive a letter from STRATA/the city hall. And you should see how he'll smile when seeing you...

The users on the forum above analyze and compare the Romanians and the Canadians, using expressive language and conciliatory tone in the dialogue with the other people writing on the forum. Similarly to many other cases of forum communication, there are references to the grammar correctness of the previous commentators. The negotiating style is collaborative, using the social negotiation style based on information delivery whenever they analyze the similarities // differences between the Romanians and the Canadians, when they address the forum members and, at the same time, the forum readers, using the contextualization and the expressiveness.

In the following fragments we have extracted from the forum, it is obvious how the Canadian reality is related to the emigrant's age: it seems almost useless to mention that in the second forum text, the Romanians and the Canadians behave similarly in similar situations:

After a certain age (the person is retired), many people cannot adapt to such a different environment such as Canada, as easily as in their youth, and the priorities aren't the same as when you're 30. Emigration isn't usually one of them.

For younger people, Canada can seem boring and I can understand why. If, for example, you're used with the very dynamic and always hectic pace of life in Bucharest (and you enjoy it), the Canadian towns will seem too quiet for you. The Canadian society is rather steady, which makes everyday life predictable.

Another participant in the discussion uses plastic language referring to a widely known saying "the grapes are sour". Even though in this case there is an argument with another user, the dialogue remains polite using the contextualization, the same as in the emigrant's text (emigration is recommended when you are young rather than when you are old; the pace is hectic in Bucharest, but if the emigrant comes from an area with a slower pace of life, he might not find the Canadian towns boring).

The tone of the dialogue is trenchant but there are no invectives used, in comparison with many of the online comments where the "courage" does not have to be taken on, and most of the interventions are anonymous. We are given the impression that everyone might have something to win if they knew who should live in Canada and who shouldn't.

As far as the closeness // distance between the Romanian and the Canadian social environments is concerned, it is inferred that there is a rather big social distance between the two countries.

One of the participants to the forum conversation sees the Canadian realities from a big Canadian city, Vancouver:

I'm now in Vancouver, BC, Canada. The way I see Canada, taking into consideration that I have a two year old child, is: here, children don't make friends in parks, but in indoor playgrounds, which are quite expensive; they don't have friends, they have play date pals; parents don't have friends either, they have "members of the same group" of playing (if they have children), and members from the community, if they don't; the food is expensive and it tastes like plastic; the organic or bio food, or whatever you may call it, costs almost twice in comparison with the non-organic food. For example: the non-organic yogurt has lactic cultures, guar gum and other chemicals; the organic food has lactic cultures and the same chemicals. The parks here are much more miserable and aren't taken care of as the parks at home (in Bucharest, my house is in the 3rd district where the parks are awesome).

This participant to forum discussion is first of all preoccupied by the issues affecting her child (the park maintenance, the relationships between children in the public environment). She uses few expressions from the country she emigrated in ("play date"), which can be explained because she has not emigrated for too long to Canada. The English or French expressions (depending on the Canadian area where they emigrated) are much more frequent at other participants to the discussion "I want to come back to Romania", but these persons have left Romania several years back. The user's above attitude is not conciliatory towards the places and people in Canada. She emphasized only the negative aspects in Canada, in comparison with the positive aspects in Romania, which are either explicit (the wonderful parks in

the 3rd district in Bucharest) or implicit (the Romanian children make friends more easily in parks without any previous formal agreements between the parents). If we compare this message with those analyzed previously, it is obvious that we face a well-defined pessimistic vision regarding the cultural distance between the Romanians and the Canadians. The last text we have selected from the forum discussion on the advantages of staying in Romania // the advantages of emigrating to Canada, criticizes harshly (compared to the texts analyzed in this research) the Canadians.

The dirtiest arrondissement in Montreal is actually Villeray-St.Michel-Parc Extension (an official document of Ville de Montreal certifies my statement). (...) Another feature which I found shocking in the country rated by UNO to have the best quality of life is: the denouncement occurrence (which you mentioned in your commentary). ALL the people living in this country are fanatic and compulsive informers. Unbelievable, yet true; it seems that this second job is a hobby, which is a proof of their true nature. This is just another way of repressing their frustrations. And stupidity, illiteracy and hypocrisy are a common thing. I think that a sociological – anthropological – psychological study on the local population regarding the denouncement would reveal surprising elements.

From the point of view of the dialogue with the other participants in the forum, we notice that this user supports the opinion of another forum member, referring to the “denouncement occurrence”, which, according to the two persons, is frequently met among the Canadians. The “pax vobiscum” user also refers to some other Canadians’ flaws besides disclaiming the so-called Canadians’ denouncement. The tone is trenchant, the participant does not contextualize and he goes straight to putting a label on Canadians.

The way he labels the so-called Canadians’ flaws, makes this user belong to conflictual style of social negotiation. The social/cultural distance between Romanians and Canadians seems to be the most important in this last fragment we analyzed.

Conclusions

The postmodern methodology has been criticized due to its features such as the lack of strictness, the low scientific validity, the researcher’s subjectivity (especially when using auto-reflexivity) and so on. Even if we do not try to emphasize some palliating circumstances for this particular study, we might still pinpoint the advantages of this approach: inter-subjectivity, diversity of points of view (accepting the alternatives) and, last but not least, accepting the boundaries of one’s own approach. In this context, we underline the possibility that a restricted circle might appreciate the expressive richness of the persons whose “literary” creations we have selected, similarly to most of the academic papers. From this point of view, we should also take into consideration the sampling method of these texts. The texts to be analyzed are not representative for all the persons who comment on

the forum above, however, they might be considered to be expressive and rather complementary texts (as a consequence of the wish to present various and original points of view). The concern of finding “interesting” texts was merged with the intention to render these forum opinions in a rather large space. This method of a thorough disclosure of commentators’ individual (original) points of view has been applied in counterbalance with the data volume of the communicational analysis. The reason for this lack of balance lies in the methodology we chose (postmodern communicational analysis), which allows finding ways of valorizing the analyzed texts and having at the same time the certainty that both the analyzed fragments and the results of the analysis are after all expressions of uncompetitive subjectivity of the real world.

Finally, we will review the common features and the differences between the forum commentators. As far as the dialogue with the other participants is concerned, we noticed that three of the five forum members continue certain topics, either agreeing or disagreeing with the previous commentators. Contextualization, expressivity, exemplification, using aphorisms have all the same rank as the critical labeling, which varies from the ascertaining tone to using invectives. We should also mention the need to share personal experiences with those interested in a certain subject, which is also found in other members of online forums.

If we refer to social negotiation (on the one hand, we have the inter-ethnic negotiation – between Romanians and Canadians, and on the other hand we have the negotiation between the participants to the discussions on the online forum we analyzed), we observe that the five message fragments in the online dialogue about Romania and Canada may be assigned to competitive negotiators (the first and the fifth commentary on the forum) and to negotiators who make compromises (the second and the third texts we analyzed). The fourth message on the forum is more difficult to classify in Shell’s (2005, p.11) negotiators’ chart: “the competitors, the problem solvers, those who make compromises, those who make concessions (the conciliators) and those who dodge”. As for a particular participant in the forum discussion, we notice her indifferent attitude towards the situation of parks and inter-personal relationships in Canada: “that’s just the way things are” – it seems that this participant to forum discussions is placed in distributive negotiation category (Shell, 2005, p. 243).

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