

# Passing from Babel to Pentecost<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Meeting in Babel: it's the meeting taking place today with people for whom the spoken language is not about sharing, but a presumed barrier to communication, where a pain is found which doesn't have the right to be thought about nor communicated. Where a Pentecost must be launched: a meeting where, as in the famous tale of the Acts of the Apostles, everybody can understand each other beyond different languages. The present article expands on a work published in the text *Lavorare con il gruppo specializzato. Teoria e clinica*, edited by M. Curi Novelli. The article addresses the issue of the therapy with a group of political refugees, focusing especially on language. The experience of being "emigrants" - having left their homeland - and "immigrants" - having arrived in a new land - arouses a question: in what language can all this be narrated? And what happens when a new linguistic code enters a pre-existing associative network?

Cultural mediators are important co-actors of our profession which, in the third millenium, has to face a large part of the population which doesn't recognize our a role and doesn't understand the aim of our work. They are afraid of us and we are the first to be afraid of them, but also interested.

**Key words:** political refugees, Identità, cultural mediators, Headspace, Language, Homesickness, Thing presentation, Word presentation

*Indeed, it is in silence  
that the secrets about this darkness  
are learnt,  
of which it isn't enough  
to say that it glistens...  
within the darkest obscurity,  
and that... it fills with splendor... the minds  
who know how to close their eyes.  
Dionysius the Areopagite*

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<sup>1</sup> This work is an elaboration of the article "Incontrarsi a Babele" by F. Amione and A. Cusin (see bibliography). Several sections, especially in the part dealing with language, have been extrapolated from that text, therefore they have been written with my colleague and friend F. Amione.

In the Bible (Gen. 11), the world is said to have had only one language and a common speech... Men wanted to settle on the Shinar plain and build for themselves a city and a tower whose tip could reach to the heavens, so that they may become famous, make a name for themselves and not get scattered on the whole earth.

But seeing the city and the tower, the Lord said "They are one people and have one language; this is the beginning of their work and what they mean to do will not be impossible for them. Let us go down and confuse their language, so that they will no longer understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city.

That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth.

Babel, the place where languages get confused, a place of lack of communicability par excellence, which destroys projects that are too ambitious; but also BAB - EL, God's Door, the place from which the omniscient knowledge is reached, therefore the place of invertible upheaval, turmoil, dissolution, opening up to ever new constructions.

God cannot be known by and contained within the human mind because the latter doesn't have the ability to do that, it isn't adequate for such enormity. The will to know, the hubris, the arrogance of wanting to "touch" God is punished in this place – Babel – which reminds us that Knowledge, the divine, cannot be reached through human means, but that our powerlessness must be tolerated. The very same powerlessness that can always support us while meeting the unknown, the foreign, which is actually represented outside us by the stranger and, inside us, by the unconscious, the foreign par excellence.

A-spatial and a-temporal.

The meeting in Babel recalls the meeting taking place today with people who are similar to us, but with whom the spoken language is not about sharing, but a presumed barrier to communication, where a pain is found which doesn't have the right to be thought about nor communicated; non-knowable, non-reachable. Where a Pentecost must be launched. Starting a meeting where, as in the famous tale of the Acts of the Apostles (2. 1-13), everybody can understand each other beyond the different languages. The whole known world was in Jerusalem on the day the Spirit came down ("Parthians, Medes and Elamites...") and each one heard the apostles speaking in his own language. What does this mean? They asked themselves "utterly amazed"... from a lay point of view, what is this spirit which unites, which allows for a dialogue despite the differences?

Meeting different cultures implies not only a simple change of language or the use of a language known to the majority of people (such as English today); words cannot be simply re-named in a new language, they must be transformative, not abstract, "emotionally charged, not cleaved from the underlying emotion or from the

environmental context, sufficiently approximate/rough, elastic, immediate, condensed: breath-words, caress - words, lullaby- words, kiss - words, water – words, warmth- words, etc. Not words of logic and of rational thought..." (Lamartora, 2006, 11).

Therefore a Pentecost is necessary because we can no longer look emotionless and unmoved at complex suffering having social, political, ideological roots, about which we feel powerless and useless, but over which Psychoanalysis, with its attention to the internal dimension, can say something; it can interact with other knowledge, offering its privileged summit for observation.

“The events of the world we live in mark us with all their weight and oscillations, from optimism to the darkest pessimism. There is a feeling of inevitability which we can hardly escape: present and future history has a course that goes beyond our personal destinies and our powerless little attempts to deviate it.

On the other hand, we know that it is up to us to live that little piece of life we own as fully as possible ... However, I think a common temptation is that of not thinking about it so much, of seeking shelter in a kind of indetermination, hoping to overcome difficulties or discontent and to keep, if not improve, the good things of today” (Lugones, 2005, 59).

Many who assist people in difficulty (in the public sector, within private associations and organizations) are often overwhelmed by the urgency, the emergency of suffering that pushes, collapses and clouds up headspace. Sometimes they can only descretely identify a call for help, in order to manage some cases that are particularly delicate, to restrain experiences of indifferntiation, death and persecution that unfortunately do not disappear when the victims go away from their country of origin, but are amplified in their minds and even infect the very assistants.

Generally, in life, new things cannot be acquired without losing other things. This is even truer and more dramatic for migrants, who are often overwhelmed by the temptation to act, with the complicity of unfair laws or, even worse, due to the total absence of laws on the matter. Action becomes their last option, because thinking is inhibited by internal suffering due to sudden and often violent break-ups, and speaking is hindered because they find it hard to express themselves, to explain, to talk, because they are forced to use languages that are new – unknown – not only in their sounds but also as products of a foreign culture. Let us remember that, although article 10 of the Italian Constitution foresees a very expanded right of asylum and, therefore, grants welcoming and protection to refugees in our country, Italy has never translated the constitutional duty into an organic law (that is a specific law that encompasses the whole subject). Laws regarding asylum are still very fragmented, poor and not systematic. Several aspects related to the rights of asylum-seekers and

refugees are poorly or not defined<sup>2</sup>, especially regarding those in need of humanitarian help. The effects of this situation are very serious.

After losing everything (ties, dignity, a role, one's country), refugees cannot lose the "nothing" they own, that they feel they are and that the others, the residents, confirm they are by de-humanizing them, by turning them into a thing:

"She doesn't belong to the Castle, she's not from here, she is not anything. Yet, she too is something, unfortunately, she is a foreigner, one who is always unwanted, always in the way, one who causes a lot of trouble" (Kafka, 1926).

I want to quote this accusation, as the Grinbergs (1982) did, because it perfectly underlines the sense of non-existence that forces one to act in order to exist, to take, to hold on to something extremely concrete, which ends up removing any symbolic ability from the thought process, when it is reduced to the bi-dimensionality of mere action.

At a time when the largest variety of people are migrate to European countries, an important issue is that of describing oneself in a foreign language instead of one's own, which is the ultimate vehicle of experience and emotion.

Homesickness, the longing to go back, seems to interpose and prevent a new language from being learnt; it seems to hinder the acquisition of those words of the Italian language that are needed to communicate, especially in those people who were forced to leave their country due to persecution, war, violence, as is the case with asylum-seekers.

In the article "Meeting in Babel"<sup>3</sup>, my colleague Amione and I describe in detail the characteristics of a group of political refugees I had chosen to work with to help them pass from a situation of complete dependence on the institution they were living in, to the independence acquired through official recognition of their refugee status.

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of refugee is found in the Geneva Convention of 1951. In Art. 1, a refugee is defined as "A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". This, apparently broad, definition excludes from the recognition of refugee's status all those who flee not from personal persecution (likely or already in place), linked to one of the above-mentioned reasons, but who try to escape violent conditions stemming from situations of war, guerrilla, internal conflict, generalized violence or wide-spread violations of fundamental human rights. This second category is evidently much wider than that which includes refugees strictly speaking. Though they are not being persecuted, they are non the less persons in danger and in need for international protection. Within the international right, their protection is weak and uncertain because there is no specific Convention that gives clear definition and establishes a minimum level of rights to be recognized. Since there are no recognized terms for these situations falling outside the Geneva Convention, different terms are used in different countries, or even within the same country depending on the historical period: "humanitarian refugees", "de facto refugees", "extra - Convention refugees", "displaced persons", etc. The protection of humanitarian refugees" is entrusted to single national legislations and, recently, in the European Union, to a Directive establishing a single definition for all countries of the Union and a common minimum level of recognized rights (inferior rights, less "stable" and often more uncertain than those granted to recognized refugees).

We wish to thank G. Schiavone from the Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà for the useful information above.

<sup>3</sup> About to be published in the collection of papers edited by Mirella Curi Novelli *Gruppi monotematici e gruppi specializzati*", Franco Angeli.

This group caused considerable problems which are described in the afore-mentioned article; here I would like to concentrate on language aspects, that is, on the constructive inability to have a language to communicate.<sup>4</sup>

While explaining the task or aim of our meetings to the group, I wished to convey the concept of a inner well-being activated by the solidarity among members and through the verbalization of their own discomfort, but I was forced to use such a simple language that I had the feeling I was speaking to incompetent children rather than to adults.

I wish to underline this because I have noticed that it often happens with migrants: in a short conversation with them we always use the Italian informal pronoun *tu*, which is closer to the international “you”, but it is also a symptom of the fact that we place ourselves in a superior position, not always unconsciously, and we place the other in an inferior position, in an infantile condition of need and dependence.

A news report after the earthquake in the Abruzzo region, for instance, interviewed an Italian man, using the formal pronoun *Lei* and, immediately afterwards, interviewed a foreigner of the same age using the informal pronoun *tu*!

Considering the migrant as a needy child – in my view, implied by the use of *tu*, - has several important repercussions: what migrants say is considered not so important, their bargaining power is reduced, they perceive devaluation and lack of interest in them. Therefore, the whole relationship with them is out of balance and, inevitably, their situation of dependence on our “benevolence” is strengthened; this casts migrants into a passive state from which it is difficult to unhinge.

These are the words that, perhaps naively, I had chosen to start the group work, highlighting its task:

“I have called you (“invited” is an unknown word) to this group because when we talk together (the present tense is very concrete and therefore easier to understand; moreover, I chose to use “we” because it is more immediate in conveying the measure of the relationship) we feel better afterwards, we are “happier”... “

The word “happy”, easy and well-known, is the only one that seemed to convey the concept of mental well-being, but it can be misunderstood; in fact, some in group answered that, to be happy, they just needed to listen to very loud music, alone, or that “no person can make happy, only God can help, and you can’t help, you can’t do anything for us!”

It must be underlined that peoples of Arab origin are very reserved with regards to affection and that feelings can be expressed only at funerals and weddings, so thinking of a place where to express one’s feelings and then discuss about them is unusual.

When learning a new language, one has to allow “a new linguistic code into one’s own already organized associative resources, a series of word-representations (and

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<sup>4</sup> This part of our work is complex and rich in potential food for thought. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient space to develop it all, so we recommend the interesting work by Amati Mehler, Argentieri e Canestri, *La Babele dell’inconscio*.

new thing-representations) that must come to terms with already existing systems” (Amati Mehler, 1990).

So, what word-representation does “being happy” refer to in the conscious system, and what thing- representation does it refer to in the unconscious system, for Afghans, Iraqis, Turks, Cameroonians? What is “happiness” to them?

In this regard we are helped by the remarks of a patient whose mother tongue was Slovenian; speaking about trust, about relying on the relationship with one’s analyst, he said that in the Slovenian language, “to rely on” is *zaupanje*. But this word also contains *upanje*, which means “hope”, therefore in Slovenian trust is closely linked to hope. This is not the case in Italian, where this link is a further intellectual operation (he who trusts in, also hopes in...). In Italian, “trust” and “hope” are etymologically different words and this inevitably influences word- and thing- representations.

To what extent is the word “happiness” linked to religious matters for a foreigner who is Islamic? To what extent is the deity hiding an idealization of the lost maternal figure/maternal language? When choosing to use this term, to what extent am I, as a therapist, risking to liken myself to the deity, but, at the same time, also to an idealized maternal figure that was lost?

Stengel states that, in the subject, “Words having the same meaning can arouse different images in the mother tongue of infancy and in the language acquired afterwards... Such images will inevitably be modified in the process that follows the acquisition of a new language and in the context of new experiences... the libido relation with an object that is named by a foreign word is different from our relation with the same object denoted by a mother tongue word. In any case, very interestingly the transitory change in the libido relation with the object coincides with a change in the imaginative processes, and it is reasonable to suspect that all this is not pure coincidence” (cited by Amati Mehler, 2003).

Therefore I believe there is room for some thoughts on non-verbal language. Narration and the use of one’s mother tongue to convey experience and emotions may have to face the difficulty of learning the words of a new language (in this case, Italian) to communicate.

The non-verbal is not always to be considered as acted: the non-verbal of this group often translated what the schemes of the shared language, Italian, did not allow to convey.

“Reformulating ancient psychic resources in a new language inside oneself is not just a banal “translation or “commutation”, but an increase of meaning “ (Amati Mehler, 2003).

“Learning a new language, while having one’s mother tongue, means letting in the meaning given to concepts by the culture that expresses itself in the new language. The concepts acquire meaning when put in the cultural context itself”.

The disorientation experienced by those people who are forced by violence to leave their culture to save their lives (because they cannot stay in their country) opens up a dilemma about loyalty towards their homeland / culture / ethnic group.

We know from Greenson that “since learning a new language ‘implies the intake of new objects’, if there is a resistance to letting go of old objects, this might hinder the acquisition process “ (Amati Mehler, 1990).

It is interesting to observe the “vigilant and critical function that the Superego has in the acquisition of a new language with regards to pronunciation and the correspondence between objects and their name. This is especially evident in subjects with a severe Superego (permanently alert, as in patients suffering from obsessive neurosis), which can sensibly slow down the acquisition, due to continuous doubts regarding the correct words to use. Children are [therefore] favoured in this task” (Amati Mehler, 1990).

Language translates into the narration of the experience of the self, so “when the single word changes, our libido relation will vary, as well as the emotional investment of the word designating one thing in one language or in the other. A new name or a new word are not only intellectual acquisitions, but also elements which – getting into an associative network – modify the whole context of our relations with things” (Amati Mehler, 1990).

The experience of being “emigrants” - having left their homeland - and “immigrants” - having arrived in a new land - arouses a question: in what language can all this be narrated?

In the psychoanalytic theorization, we can ask ourselves if the thing-representations, which belong to the unconscious, can become word-representations using new words, in a new language, or if the level of anxiety wrapped around some representations prevents them from being linked to words, restricting their possibility to be thought to an unknowable and therefore non-communicable level. A sort of segregation within the unconscious whose aim is to keep the “secret”.

In this sense, the choice between learning a new language or remaining loyal to one’s mother tongue sets the emotional experience of being foreigners in a foreign country in a different perspective. Migrating forces persons into a two-fold movement: going out of one’s original framework and getting into the context of the welcoming country. “Is it possible to ‘forget’ in a language and ‘remember’ in another?” (Amati Mehler, 1990).

And what happens when a new linguistic code enters a pre-existing associative network? How does all this relate to one’s identity?

*Mohammed (24 years old) says “I have been away from home for four years, I cannot talk to my relatives, I only know that my mother and my sister are dead”.*

*Despite his young age, Mohammed looks at least thirty-five, he is illiterate and often feels inferior in the group, he is afraid of the comparison with Ubu, who is more cultured (Ubu holds a degree in agriculture in his country). But Mohammed is very*

*emotional, he wants to talk. He doesn't seem to know Italian. At the beginning he uses the cultural mediator's intervention a lot. He talks very much and tells about himself, but he doesn't seem able to do it in Italian. However, by the end of our meetings, he would have significantly improved his knowledge of the Italian language. And, some months later, meeting me informally in the apartment, he addressed me in Italian telling the last developments in a clearly comprehensible manner.*

The emotions and intimacy of the group and of the therapeutic relationship seem to have acted as a picklock to open unexplored areas; from there, thing-representations can emerge and new word-representations, though simple, can finally be matched to them, thus going from concreteness to symbolization.

It is interesting to remember that sometimes a language is easier in situations that spontaneously induce regressive movements such as the love or the therapeutic relation" (Amati Mehler, 1990).

The migrants participating in the group highlighted their difficulty in learning the Italian language. We think this might be linked to the deeper meaning of learning another language and to what is lost or added in translation.

Emigrating also means immigrating, that is continuously rebuilding the homeostasis between psyche and culture, between the internal reality and the external cultural space, while safeguarding that I-skin (Anzieu 1985) which contains the rhythms and expectations on which the individual psychic functioning is based.

Migration is a chasm in the networks of meaning and relations that give sense to life, and with which we identify, to the point that we cannot be distinguished from them anymore.

Migration and its related problems do not occur in isolated bodies and souls, but in a universe of sense made of social relations and of cultural comparisons:

Culture is a system which, by circumscribing a social space, helps to circumscribe a psychic space: language is a system of spacial circumscription as it immediately organizes the universe into two groups for the individual: the inside and the outside, those who hear and those who are deaf (Nathan 1996).

The world of origin can be internalized if there exists a new world (that of the welcoming country) which supports the chasm and the deep transformations of the internal framework, and allows it to be re-composed; this is so that the self can be nourished and the exchange between in and outside can be fostered. Therefore a container is necessary to receive and filter the external elements, allowing them to become integrated with previous experiences:

In other words, with their wealth of experience and specific characteristics, immigrants represent “the new idea/content, to which the “container/receiving group” responds, with different tendencies, ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to absolute refusal. (Grinberg, 1982)

A dynamic interaction is possible between the immigrant individual (representing the new idea) and the environment (the host country). Such interaction can take the shape of a catastrophic change. As therapist of the group, what I try to do is giving the image not only of a container which welcomes at a mental or symbolic level, but also of a container which transforms and filters, allowing non-verbal elements to be exchanged between me and the group, thus laying the bases for an intense relationship within the time constraints.

A fundamental problem certainly is the role of language and the relation between language and mental processes, which have always been at the heart of the psychological investigation. For example, what is the relation existing between linguistic and non-linguistic factors in the processes of comprehension, codification and retrieval of information from the memory? In the case of collective memory, the role of non-linguistic factors is very significant, also because they are an expression of the subject’s rooting into a network of meaningful and specific symbols (such as fairy tales and myths); therefore, migrants feel that their belonging to their ancestors’ memory wavers when their culture does not find space for expression and socialization and opportunities to be heard, or when they cannot “act” their own culture and memory, evoking the group they belong to at an intimate (both public and private) level.

This inevitably causes “mental suffering” to those emigrants who are foreigners in the welcoming country and become foreigners also in their country of origin.

This happens in Abdul’s tale, which is not only a personal narration (in which case I would certainly have found welcoming words, using the empathetic ability to “comprehend”, i.e. *take together*<sup>5</sup>) but also a tale based on the collective experience of violence of one ethnic group dominating another one. Being brought about by a people and not by an individual, this violence is unimaginable, because it refers to an infinite number of imagined stories.

*At the second to last group meeting, we are talking about Ismael who went shopping and about the dinner they are about to cook; suddenly Abdul mentions the language he used to speak in Iraq, the Kurdish, and then he plunges himself and the whole group into the story of tragic events he lived as a child. In a few words and in few minutes, a scene of horrors opens up in front of us, a scene of unpunished violence that freezes us all.*

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<sup>5</sup> Reference is made to the etymological meaning of the Italian word *comprendere*, which means “to understand” but originally meant “to take together”; the emphasis here is on the sharing.

*From a relaxed conversation over banal subjects, I find myself sharing Abdul's tales and I realize I am reacting in a cold, completely emotionless way. With indifference. "I was a child and I remember the story of the jaguar that was fed children. But it was true, not a fairy tale!" Abdul smiles saying this and I wonder to what extent it corresponds to a fantastic elaboration of an adult tale... "But then I saw forty-two people slaughtered with a knife, I was there... They cut everyone's throat in front of me... I was three and I know that the dictator often shot young (Kurd) children so that they couldn't grow up and oppose him". Abdul's look doesn't change, he smiles as if to say "It's over!... and I' am alive". In the previous meeting, the same Abdul didn't want us to use the word "to kill" – which lightly entered our discussion about Ismael's problems with a woman – "because it's an ugly word, I don't like it!"*

Abdul's words appear simple and bare but they refer to images similar to internet links, from which one can access endless meanings. In that situation, I chose not to elaborate on them with questions that might have been not only intrusive, but also inappropriate to the task of preserving an emotion with its characteristics: coldness and indifference. These communications are considered much more important than any other piece of news aiming at clarifying the truth of the narration. The word "jaguar" is not frequently used, yet it is well-known to Abdul and is understood by his mates. One might wonder why they would know this word and ignore other words that are more vital to their integration in our culture. Why has Abdul learnt the Italian word for "jaguar" so early? To what extent is the "jaguar which is fed children" a character similar to the Wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood tale? There is, however, a considerable difference between a jaguar *which is fed children* and a Wolf which *eats*. Compared to the jaguar, it is men – meaning adults (parents) – who are mean, while in the Little Red Riding Hood tale, the Wolf represents the repository of the mean, greedy, devouring aspects of the child.

Can perhaps the jaguar symbolize the mother/mother country (who eats instead of nourishes her children), From which Abdul had to flee when he was still a child (he was seventeen when he escaped alone to Europe), not to be devoured by a tyrannical regime?

And then, from an emotional point of view, what is he saying in the transference? And what in the group transference? Can they trust each other... and me? Who is the dictator who kills forty-two people? Is it a metaphor, a representation, or reality?

It seems that, in a social context characterized by violence, man's fears are exploited, as well as ambiguity, thus confusing and mixing one's own violent aspects, passing them off as childish fears, and confusing the violent reality in the transference. I also have the impression that violence is made less incisive and almost justified when, after the narration, one tries to give interpretations that reduce it to a mere relationship between therapist and patient.

In her works on the subjects – one of which is included in the bibliography for reference – Amati Sas inflexibly identifies such mystifying and alienating attempts to reduce a violent socio-political situation to mere transference.

But here I have no space to discuss this important issue in depth, so I refer to Amati Sas' works on the subject.

However, we know that the child's mind cannot memorize as the adult's can, because adults are able to create thoughts.

...some memories, referring to early, pre-verbal times of life, cannot hope to emerge if they are not channelled by substituting operations – the so-called screen memories – or by later experience rehashing. Other memories, moved in space or time, will show up disguised as false appearances. But, within the analysis, precisely such “false appearances” and distortions will indicate to us the evolution in its interaction with defences and later rehashing, and how and why the recollection of an event has taken on another form. Other representations, on the other hand, are able to more fluidly interact with new internal or external experiences, and they will get into a continuous game of past and present psychic paths, which allow for transformations, reconstructions and transcriptions of past meanings (Amati Mehler, 1990).

Memory, as Freud said, is fundamentally reconstructive and dynamic; emotions and desires play a fundamental role in determining what is remembered and how.

Every new word that enters our mind must get into a pre-existing network of associations – and in a new language, even more so. With the acquisition of a second language, not only the lexis and syntaxes are enriched, but also a small internal revolution takes place; as a consequence, the first language also is modified in the newly created, broader “system” of relations and connections. Perhaps it is this deep process of change (and we, as psychoanalysts, know how painful change is) that sometimes makes it hard to win the oppositions to learning new languages (Amati Mehler, 1990).

But, as the authors underline: in a letter to Fliess, Freud writes “... a translation failure is what we call *repression*” (Amati Mehler, 1990). So there can be several versions of the same memory, but also several different linguistic versions, so much so that the authors say “one lives *in memory*, not with memory”.

The problem is understanding what effect the acquisition of a new language has on repressions, especially when such learning takes place in a different country to which one was forced to flee.

Translating images or events into language influences the way we think about them and the possibility to recall them. Talking helps to remember, to reiterate the memory, but sometimes also to forget. Had there been more group meetings for the refugees, had the group structured itself as a therapeutic group, it would have been

possible to create an event reiteration, so as to allow the traumatic events described by Abdul to be differently organized in the future. But, unfortunately, the agreement with the structure that was housing them was to organize ten meetings to help them to work through to the moment when they would leave the structure, where they had been living for more than a year waiting for their refugee status to be recognized.

So language seems to have a specific role in how collective memories are passed on. But there also seems to be a relation between collective memory and ethnic identity because, conscious as an ethnic group might be about its own identity, it is based on groups that are temporally contingent, that can be created, modified or may even disappear, therefore their collective survival completely depends on the groups' historic memory. I wondered to what extent the single participants to the group needed to be considered both as individuals and as repositories of an endangered community, be it ethnic political, or otherwise.

At a certain point, Ismael begins remembering dreams and tells us that he has dreamt he was going around in his country and seeing his houses again. Mohammed says that, when he is in trouble, he is able to dream of talking with his mother or sister and when he wakes up he feels reassured and more self-confident.

There is also a relation between speech, which creates, and the mind, which conserves: our future will be intelligible depending on how we negotiate the interpretations of our past. The emphasis on speech as the environment where mental procedures are generated stems from the assumption that the task of giving sense to the world and to everything that takes place in it cannot be managed individually, but requires both coordination of aims and negotiation of what is at stake. The constructive potential of speech is evident in the fact that the experience of the world in which a society identifies itself can be valid only if (and while) *it finds ways to be expressed*. Speech must be seen not only as the activation of a linguistic code in a certain situation, but also as the practice of co-construction of meanings, "the shared speech". As stated by J. Puget (1994), the psychic reality is a specific process of construction/reconstruction/new construction of a new reality which is exterior and susceptible to being "meant". When this process is the result of the exchange between two or more people, it becomes a representation/bond based on reciprocal identifications, sense attributions, opposition and recognition of differences. Within the group components, the future is not rooted yet; they have documents, a formal recognition, but not the tools to make their future intelligible. I am asked to make it intelligible, but through the only thinkable request: that of being helped and supported in finding a job.

If the negotiation of interpretations of the past is not given the time it needs, how can the future become intelligible? We believe the difficulty of growing independent from the welfare system lies more in this impasse than in the objective difficulty of finding a job: as always, the meaning precedes the action.

And here I deliberately avoid discussing "acts", including all the jobs lost or given up.

Thinking about the role of metaphoric language, which is so important in the elaboration and sedimentation of collective memory, one wonders how people manage the apparent inability to use metaphors, when they are forced to use the bare and schematic language I have described. Metaphors stem from the culture of the place of origin and refer to the variations that the language had in time; they also borrow concepts and symbols from poetry and literature, which are nothing but the mirror image of the way men have come into contact with the known nature in that region of the world ... What metaphors can the therapist share with the places and stories that refugees come from? Vygotsky very vigorously and coherently underlines the role of culture and language in the individual mind activity, putting forward a model in which mental processes are developed in a framework of cooperation between individuals.

During the group work, in the limited time of just ten meetings, a space seems to emerge where it is possible to “con-struct” (build together)<sup>6</sup> metaphors that are meaningful for the group and, at the same time, representative of the group itself [Vygotsky calls this inter-individual cooperation and we call it group mind].

In a deluded attempt to solve the problems of mutual understanding, we often necessarily choose to rely on the cultural mediators’ help.

In this situation, where all migrants spoke Persian and knew only a few words in Italian, I also chose to turn to a mediator I have known for years and whom I trust to work seriously.

I’d like to briefly mention this here, but our work together was described in more details in the article “Brevi spunti di riflessione sugli aspetti di una possibile collaborazione tra mediatori culturali e psicologi” (Some food for thought on aspects of a possible cooperation between cultural mediators and psychologists), which we wrote together (Cusin, Motamedvaziri, 2006) for a text published by a cooperative of cultural mediators from Trieste (cfr. bibliography) .

As psychoanalysts, but in particular as psychologists, we are usually working as mediators and facilitators of the communication in interpersonal relations; for example, let us think to those psychologists who work in the field of family mediation or who lead groups. Those colleagues who, like me, were trained in psychoanalysis know very well that our task is to help others to become aware of the unconscious, a stranger who lives inside all of us. At the beginning I called it the ultimate foreigner. We avoid listening to it, we don’t recognize any right or role of it except that of disturbing our daily life. Sometimes it turns against us and puts us in trouble; we are afraid of its strength and we avoid getting in touch with it because we find it primitive, dirty and ugly. So different from us, who are apparently safely hidden within our false certainties. We might say that sometimes our role as

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<sup>6</sup> Reference is made to the etymological meaning of the Italian word costruire, “to build”, in order to underline the aspect of sharing within the construction, the idea of building together.

professionals is that of cultural mediators with the unconscious. That is why the profession of the cultural mediator seems so similar.

Personally I find that my mixed origin, as for the great majority of people in Trieste, leads me to see a great opportunity for development in all this.

Cultural mediators are the spokesmen of culture, languages, stories that are different; I believe they are important collaborators with our profession which, in the third millennium, has to approach a large part of the population who doesn't know who we are, doesn't recognize our role and doesn't understand the aim of our work. They are afraid of us and we are afraid of them but also interested in them. We know very well that fear goes hand in hand with desire.

We can easily close ourselves in our offices meeting those who recognize our knowledge, but it is more difficult to interact with a colourful and mixed context of cultures where the psychologist does not exist, and the psychoanalyst even less.

In many cultures, the role of the psychologist is played by family and by the community, through actions aiming at welcoming and giving meaning, thanks to traditions and rules shared by all. However, these rules are breached when one leaves one's country and ends up in a sort of different dimension, where the usual points of reference are missing.

In time, answers should be found to a number of questions that I put forward here. I will not give any answers myself because it would fall outside the scope of this work. Yet the reader might want to think about them:

In different cultures, how is the psychotherapeutic role played? What happens when pain emerges, without a name and coming from no organ? What do they do?

At present, how can cultural mediators collaborate in dealing with cases that belong to psychologists or psychoanalysts in the western culture? How can we work together? Let us think of the great number of immigrants who request psychological support but don't know the language and choose different ways to attract attention (Cusin, 2007).

What are the boundaries, the differences, the specificities of the two professions? How can we avoid stepping into the other's role, and being given tasks we don't have the competences to face? How can we avoid professional overlaps?

How can we avoid the risk that society and institutions end up entrusting to our professions the solution of problems that actually require action at a higher (political, legislative, institutional) level?

Finally, how can we make our competences work for each other? How can we integrate them to create synergies and positive spin-offs on our patients (Cusin, 2002)?

When I proposed to create a group therapy for political refugees, I realized I would need help. Actually, my ignorance of the Persian language was just a marginal problem. I felt the need not to be alone in the group, to be supported by someone who

would help me understand a mentality unknown to me, who would not let me feel too “alone” and exposed to a particularly involving emotional relationship.

I think the fact that I was aware of my need for help to face this “simultaneously feared and desired meeting” made the whole experience successful. For a long time we have been asking ourselves if the relationship with the psychotherapist, be it for support or therapeutic intervention, could include the cultural mediators’ presence. To what extent would their intervention influence the setting, which is that particular set of simple but strict rules that grant the patients’ both the freedom to express themselves - because they feel protected by privacy - and a clear relationship with the professional? To what extent might the mediator’s intervention be seen as a disruptive intrusion in the relationship, within the context of a treatment or support given by a psychotherapist?

A therapist who has had analytical training is prepared to notice these sometimes very disguised signals of a feeling of intrusion that the patient or the group feel in the relationship: for example, the recollection of dreams or events that can be linked to the transference between therapist and patient. Working on feelings linked to intrusion is one of the therapy’s tasks. But how can mediators fit into this? Though belonging to the same culture, they have their own mind and, therefore, their own personal experiences; these are not always and sometimes cannot be worked through, but cannot be simply ignored.

We should ask ourselves whether their presence would be interpreted as an external attempt to control the relationship, as an illicit interference; if they would be seen by patients as spokesmen of the culture of a country by which they were persecuted, tortured, marginalized, forced to flee. As it is easily understandable, all this refers to the experience of reciprocal trust which doesn’t necessarily depend on the objective reality. In our case, this might have worsened the persecutory tendency of the group.

We should ask ourselves if mediators can bear to be mistaken with all this, if they can tolerate hostile behaviours, apparently without cause, but in the end unconsciously linked to these matters. We should wonder whether mediators can accept that a patient or a group tells things from their point of view, which might be totally against the mediators’ own memories. These become more and more faded in their minds, especially if they have been away from their country for a long time; they become distorted, not true to the reality of events. Every event is linked to lived experience and the recollection of events is inevitably warped depending on the internal reality of the subjects, which allows or doesn’t allow some data to be recognized and saved.

In order to have a productive collaboration between psychologists and cultural mediators, it is crucial that, in their innermost being, both are aware of respectful ways of restraining their personal curiosity, choosing to listen rather than to intervene, interpret, explain, give shape. This managed to happen between us; the mediator’s contribution started a sort of Pentecost, first and foremost between her and myself, a place where different languages were able to intertwine in an apparent confusion. In time, this went from Babel to Pentecost, reaching a degree of

understanding that goes beyond the concreteness of the spoken language and points at the language of the shared and uniting spirit which lives inside the unconscious of all humankind.

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