

# Mutual adjustment

One of the most important skills in intercultural dialogue is to adjust one's language code to the interlocutor's language skills and knowledge. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller present in their book *Acts of identity* (1985) some useful concepts for describing the acts of identity in intercultural dialogue.

They see an individual's language resource as a "repertoire of socially-marked systems" (ibid: 116). This repertoire makes the speaker capable of adjusting his language to different situations. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller describe this adjustment as a kind of "projection" where the speaker projects his "images of the world" to the surroundings. This projection is seen as an invitation to other individuals to share this image and expresses a hope of getting a response of solidarity from the interlocutor. In a situation where the speaker gets a positive response to his projection, the speaker will try to make his language more focused. On the other hand, his language might tend to be more diffuse in a situation where he gets a more negative response.

Le Page and Tabouret-Keller have pointed out that speech communities, and therefore language varieties, vary from the relatively focused to the relatively diffuse. The focused speech communities are often communities where members identify themselves with each other, and the diffuse speech communities are characterized by more divergence.

I think we can use these ideas to characterize the differences in a dialogue between teachers and majority parents and a dialogue with minority parents. The situation with the majority parents will often create a relatively focused use of language whereas it will be more diffuse in situations with the minority parents. Kofoed (2004) points out that a problem for the minority parents in parental support is the meetings where both majority and minority parents participate. An explanation to this problem could be that the meetings are set in a relatively focused speech community where the teachers and the majority parents

share the same cultural "habitus", but the minority parents do not understand the focused language code and are therefore kept out of the fellowship. The teachers have to accept that the speech community is more diffuse when minority parents participate and they have to adjust their language code. This, however, requires that the teachers are attentive listeners and are capable of noticing the response from the minority parents, and this is only possible in a dialogue. A problem is therefore how the teachers can adjust their language and how they can involve the minority parents in the fellowship at meetings and in school subjects in general. The Norwegian scholar Olga Dysthe (1996, 1997) presents a relevant concept for this work, namely the teachers' engagement. Dysthe sees engagement as a precondition for a dialogue with the parents, and I see engagement as a precondition for both negotiation and adjustment.

Dysthe points out three dimensions of engagement:

1. Teachers actually believe that parents can contribute to the co-operation in school, and they show this to the parents
2. Students and parents have to see a connection between the curriculum and their own lives and experiences.
3. Students and parents need to have a certain control over the aim and the methods of the teaching.

Olga Dysthe (1997:233 (my translation) The work of Dysthe is based on an idea of creating a more "multivoiced classroom" and is based on the Russian theory of "dialogism" (e.g. Bakhtin) and Vygotsky's social constructivism.

Dysthe's teaching method to create a more multivoiced classroom is based on

three activities: Authentic questions, Uptake and High-level evaluation. "Authentic questions" signify open-ended questions with no pre-specified answers. Authentic questions are a signal to the parents to show them that the teachers actually think they can contribute to the dialogue. "Uptake" means that the teacher incorporates the parents' answer into his next question. "High level evaluation" is a follow-up on these, as the teacher shows that she highly values the students' (parents') answer by building on it in the ensuing conversation." (Dystry 1996, p. 391). Although this method is made for classroom teaching, I am quite certain that it easily can be applied to the dialogue between teachers and parents in general and especially with minority parents. On one hand it forces the teachers to be engaged in the parents' "images of the world", and it forces the teachers to create mutual adjustment. On the other hand, it also forces the parents to do the same.