

Criticism of the Dominant Academic Standards of "Scientific Communication" in the Didactics of Languages-Cultures

Christian Puren
Professor emeritus,
University Jean Monnet (Saint-Étienne, France)

Abstract

Two fundamental criticisms can be made of the dominant academic standards of "scientific communication" in the Didactics of Languages-Cultures: 1) While Didactics of Languages-Cultures belongs to the action paradigm, since its main aim is to improve the teaching-learning processes, these standards belong to the communication paradigm; yet these two paradigms are opposed to each other, as can be seen in Didactics of Languages-Cultures precisely in the differences between the social action-oriented approach and the communicative approach, with the repetitive vs. inchoative, durative vs. punctual and imperfective vs. perfective respectively. 2) Whereas Didactics of Languages-Cultures seeks primarily to develop models (in the sense of products of the modeling operation) as indispensable interfaces between theory and practice, because they alone are both practical enough to generate modes of intervention in the classroom, but sufficiently abstract to be adaptable to very varied and variable teaching-learning environments, the current scientific paradigm admits only theoretical communication, or practical communication, or communication that strives, with variable degrees of relevance, to put theory and practice in direct relation in one direction or the other.

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Introduction

In my paper, I will develop a critical analysis of the academic standards in force in journals of languages-cultures in a very general way, and in terms of structural trends.

I am aware that some journals have relaxed their standards to accommodate articles that are more or less distant from what seems to me to be the dominant orthodoxy. This is precisely the case, even before I became editor or deputy editor for a few years, of two French didactic journals of languages and cultures, *Les Langues modernes* and *Études de linguistique appliquée*. I have in mind the other journals I know, which are mainly French and Spanish language journals. I leave it to my listeners to see what, in what I am going to expose, applies or not to the journals they frequent.

Not surprisingly, since research articles are supposed to be texts of "scientific communication", their publication standards are directly dependent on the conception that the editors of these journals have of science, on the one hand, and of communication, on the other. I will deal successively with these two points, in a way that is necessarily a bit allusive given the size of a single article.

1. The "scientific" paradigm in Didactics of Languages-Cultures

The standards Didactics of Languages-Cultures journals are very much influenced by the norms of publication in the so-called "exact" sciences, whereas our discipline belongs to the humanities¹. In a discipline such as ours, which therefore belongs to the human sciences, the standards should not strive to eliminate, but should, on the contrary, take into account, its fundamental epistemological characteristic, which is the complexity of its field (see Puren 2019). The sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin, who is one of my epistemological references, recognizes the usefulness and even the necessity of simplification in the research laboratories of exact sciences, but he refuses it in the human sciences. And he criticizes researchers who, in order to "do science", reduce complexity. I have summarized these ideas of Edgar Morin (1986, 1990) in the following diagram:

The scientific paradigm	The paradigm of simplification	The paradigm of complexity
"Scientific reductionism"	Reduction	Systemic approach
The researcher manipulates a reduced model of reality.	confuses a reduced reality for scientific analysis with reality itself.	tries to take into account as much data as possible, knowing that reality itself escapes us.
Specialization	Disjunction	Union of distinction and disjunction
distinguishes between different fields, levels, problems... to analyze each one separately.	autonomizes the different disciplines, domains, levels, problems...	tries to unite the distinction (necessary to the perception) and the conjunction (which restores the interrelations, the articulations, the multidimensionalities).
Rationality	Rationalization	"Open rationality"
uses as an instrument of knowledge and control	seeks to build a perfect and totalizing coherence around a unique principle (Copernican paradigm).	is conscious of the limits of logic, of the perverse effects of theoretical closure, of the inexistence of a unique principle of coherence (Hubblean paradigm).
tries to eliminate imprecision, uncertainty and contradiction.	considers legitimate only precise and certain knowledge.	works with imprecision, uncertainty and contradiction.
seeks the truth.	is certain to hold the truth.	turns around the problem of the truth by passing from perspective to perspective, from partial truth to partial truth.
strives to be 'objective'.	is persuaded to be 'objective'.	knows that the subject is always present in the observation of the object, and we look for intersubjective procedures of objectivation.

¹ I addressed this topic in a contribution to a collective work published in 2019.

The Didactics of Languages-Cultures belongs to the paradigm of complexity, because its project –the improvement of the process carried out between a teacher and a group of students–concerns an object which is itself complex since it is a language-culture. However, it seems to me that many of the norms of publication in the Didactics of Languages-Cultures can be linked to the paradigm that Morin criticizes, that of “rationalization” in the sense of a closed and reductive rationality.

The complex nature of the discipline "Didactics of Languages-Cultures" has two major consequences.

1.1. First consequence of the complex nature of the disciplinary field

The first consequence is the following: the global didactic environment, with the concrete conditions of teaching-learning, including the personality of the teacher as well as the local teaching-learning cultures, are factors that intervene in an absolutely decisive way on the modes of action of teaching and learning. Edgard Morin speaks in this respect of the "ecology of action": He writes in his 1990 book that “Once launched into the world, the action escapes the actor's intentions and can even go in the opposite direction”, so that the action does not depend only on the environment for its conception, but also for its effects.

The numerous one-off and local experiments that give rise to many articles in journals and lectures are carried out - understandably, because the experimenters aim for success - under conditions that they want to be optimal. The two consequences are that the results of these experiments depend very closely on these conditions, and that these conditions are very different from the ordinary teaching-learning conditions. So among the few "scientific" laws (in quotation marks) that I think I have discovered in my career are the following²:

1) *The more successful an experiment is, the less generalizable it is.*

The theories that are often sought to be applied in experimental research work as simplification and rationalization mechanisms, so another law of our discipline is:

2) *The more theoretical it is, the less applicable it is.*

This is the reason why, in France, the name "Applied Linguistics" was abandoned at the beginning of the 1970s, which was at the time just as much an "Applied Psychology", along with the behaviourism that was dominant in the USA at the time. Applied Linguistics and Applied Psychology are forms of theoretical reductionism, but there is also a practical reductionism that is just as negative, the famous "best practices". They are indeed very much linked, as concrete practices, to the concrete environment in which they have been realized. So we can state this 3rd law of our discipline:

3) *The more concrete it is, the less transferable it is.*

² For those of you who might be interested, I point out, on my personal website, the paper entitled « Les sept lois "scientifiques" de la Didactique des Langues-Cultures » ("The seven 'scientific' laws of Didactics of Languages-Cultures"), Puren 078.

These laws are only surprising for those who think in Didactics of Languages-Cultures within the framework of the rationalizing epistemology of simplification. I do not feel that these three laws are taken into account in the usual standards of publication in many journals in our discipline.

1.2. Second consequence of the complexity of the disciplinary field

The second major consequence of taking complexity into account in our discipline is announced in one of the descriptors of the complexity paradigm according to Morin, that I presented earlier: “One knows that the subject is always present in the observation of the object, and we look for intersubjective procedures of objectivation.”

Edgard Morin has written on this subject, in his *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (1990), lines that should be meditated upon, I think, by all those in charge of didactic reviews of language-culture:

I am an unconcealed author. By this I mean that I differ from those who hide behind the apparent objectivity of their ideas, as if the anonymous truth spoke through their pen.

To be an author is to assume one's ideas for better or for worse. I am an author who, moreover, is self-designated. I want to say that this exhibition also involves humility. I give my subjective dimension, I put it on the carpet, giving to the reader the possibility to detect and to control my subjectivity. (p. 153)

This quote from Edgar Morin seems to me to echo what Roger Nunn presented at this conference in his paper, "In Search of the Author's Voice. Learning from our Younger Students". He defends the idea that the inhibition of their subjectivity by students in their writing has negative consequences even from a formal point of view. He writes in his abstract:

Traditional & impersonal academic practices restrict the choices & stifle students' agency, voice and subjecthood by trapping students into grammatical and generic prescriptivism.

But I think that the inhibition by authors of their subjectivity also has a negative impact for the content, in particular on the degree of originality of research: formal standards tend to provoke standardization of content.

2. The paradigm of communication in Didactics of Languages-Cultures

I now move on to the second part of my speech, “The paradigm of communication in Didactics of Languages-Cultures”. I will address successively the question of the paradigm of communication (2.1), then that of the conception of communication and the tourist journey (2.2)

2.1 The paradigm of communication in Didactics of Languages-Cultures

It seems to me that there are similarities between the characteristics of rationalization in Morin's simplification paradigm and Paul Grice's "conversational maxims" as generally summarized by some linguists and didacticians:

“Rationalization” in E. Morin's simplification paradigm	The Paul Grice’s “conversational maxims”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -One seeks to build a perfect and totalizing coherence around a unique principle (Copernican paradigm). - One considers legitimate only precise and certain knowledge. -One is certain to hold the truth. -One is persuaded to be objective. 	<p>In exchanges between interlocutors, the interventions of each should be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -as informative as possible; -as clear as possible; - relevant (i.e. coherent with the topic being discussed); -truthful (one asserts only what one considers to be true).

The same rationalist –or, more precisely, “rationalizing”– conception of communication can be found in the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In a colloquium of German-speaking educationalists in Tübingen (Germany) in 2002, entirely devoted to the critique of the 2001 CFERL (CoE 2001), one of the participants notes the similarities between the conception of communication in the communicative approach and Habermas's conversational action, in order to criticize precisely its reductionist aspect:

“One of the key terms of the Framework is obviously “communication”. One of the key terms of the Framework is obviously “communication”. This concept, as used in the CEFR, has not escaped criticism from commentators. According to Hans Barkowski, it is a concept of ideal communication (in the sense of Habermas): the facts communicated are always real, there is a consensus between those who participate in the communication and who consider themselves equal partners. According to this same researcher, this type of communication is rather that of the socio-cultural elite.”

(According to FRIEDERIKE DELOUIS Anne. 2008)

Here we find again the criticism of a reductive conception of communication.

2.1 The conception of communication and the tourist journey

The communicative orientation in language teaching in Europe was imposed with the first major publication of the Council of Europe, namely the “Threshold level”s (English *Threshold level*, 1972, French *Un Niveau seuil*, 1976, for example). The political project of the time was to develop communication between Europeans in the context of travel from one country to another, the global reference situation taken to define the teaching-learning contents in terms of notions and speech acts being the tourist trip. For example, here is a passage from a preface by J.L.M TRIM (CoE 1975), one of the authors of the English version of this document which really launched the communicative approach in Europe:

*Nevertheless, by far the largest single group of learners, everywhere, consists of people who want to prepare themselves, in a general way, to be able to communicate socially on straightforward everyday matters with people from other countries who come their way, and to be able to get around and lead a reasonably normal social life **when they visit another country**. This is not simply a matter of buying bread and milk and toothpaste and getting*

repairs carried out to a car. People want to be able to make contact with each other as people, to exchange information and opinions, talk about experiences, likes and dislikes, to explore our similarities and differences, the unity in diversity of our complicated and crowded continent. (my emphasis)

This global situation of reference, which obviously provokes a very reductive conception of communication, has remained the same in the second major text of the Council of Europe, the CEFR of 2001, as can be seen from the analysis of the descriptors of the most important and influential part of this document, namely the scales of competence. For example, here are the descriptors for the first three levels, A1 to B1 (Table 1. *Common Reference Levels: global scale, p. 24, my emphasis*) :

B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate Basic need.
A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

At level B1, the global reference situation of the communicative approach is cited, i.e. travelling to a foreign country. We can also see that the communicative contents at levels A1 and A2 are those that are generally dealt with during initial encounters with foreigners in the context of tourist trips, and not professional trips. And even less when one lives permanently with foreigners, at home or in their homes.

We find in communication as it is conceived in the communicative approach the different "genes" (or fundamental characteristics linked to its original conception) of the tourist trip. These are:

- the *inchoative* gene: it is the beginning of a meeting between two interlocutors who did not know each other before ;
- the *punctual* gene: their meeting will last a short time ;
- the *perfective* gene: the conversation closes on itself, because the interlocutors are going to leave each other definitively.

In most of the communicative dialogues in language textbooks, the same people meet to talk about the same thing at the same time and in the same place: these dialogues, in fact, resemble those of classical Greek tragedy more than those we hold every day with the people we meet, whether in the personal, public, educational or professional domains.

The methodology of reference in language didactic journals has been this communicative approach for several decades, and the thesis I defend here is that these standards are strongly influenced by this conception of communication. To put it schematically here, by:

- the *inchoative* gene: the articles must correspond to original, new research;
- the *punctual* gene: the articles must correspond to precise research study, carried out within a determined framework during a limited time on a delimited field, the reference model, which is that of the exact sciences, being the experimentation;
- the *perfective* gene: the articles must be based on completed research, which allows the author to "conclude" his or her remarks.

These requirements appear not only legitimate, but "obvious", only if one situates oneself in the paradigmatic framework that generated them, which is the paradigm of communication.

However, there is another paradigm, that of social action, which is announced and outlined in the CEFRL of 2001, in particular in the following lines:

The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. (CoE 2001, p. 9

This new paradigm is demanded by the consideration of a new social situation of reference, that of multilingual and multicultural Europe where it is no longer a question of communicating, nor even of being able to live, but also of acting, in one's own society, in a language-culture different from one's mother tongue. This new global reference situation has generated, particularly in France over the last twenty years, a new didactic orientation, the "Social Action-Oriented Approach".

However, the genes of social action are opposed one by one to those of communicative action, which is language interaction. To be effective, social action, whether as a citizen or as a worker, requires continuity, repetitiveness and duration. On this point, I refer to the intervention, in this colloquium, of my colleague and friend Ahmet Acar, as well as to his numerous works on the question (*e.g.* 2022a,b,c).

To be in harmony with this new didactic orientation as well as with the reality of the researcher's work, which is also, in a discipline of social intervention such as the Didactics of Languages-Cultures, a work that is situated in continuity, in duration and repetitiveness, the publications in Didactics of Languages-Cultures must therefore open up to the norms that are opposed to the norms in force (I will give an example of a publication for each new gene):

–*The continuous gene*: e.g., an article will extend the research theme that has already given rise to several previous publications by the same researcher: this will necessarily give rise to a large number of self-references on his part.

–*The repetitive gene*: e.g., the researcher will take up one of his previous publications in its entirety to analyze it, to show how he has evolved, or even how he has made mistakes: this will inevitably give rise to a large number of self-citations on his part.

–*The durative gene*: e.g., the researcher does not focus primarily, after the presentation of the objectives, the problematic and the device, on the results of his research, but he describes it as it unfolded over time, its process, with its doubts, its hesitations, its mistakes.

This process orientation of research writing is indispensable for the writing of initial research at the university, that of student-researchers in their Master thesis and doctoral thesis: the primary objective of this initial research, in fact, is training in research through research, and it is necessary, for this, to be able to write a research paper.

A chapter of my online course "Writing the research in Didactics of Languages-Cultures" (Puren 2021), which is addressed to student-researchers, deals precisely with this issue. In this text, I make in French a distinction between "l'écriture **de** recherche" ("writing up the research"), that of the academic presentation of results, and "l'écriture **de la** recherche" ("*writing the research*"), that which drives the research itself and through which it is constructed.

More than the quality of the results of their research, students must show that they are capable of using writing for what it is first and foremost in research, namely the main tool of research: it is writing that allows one to progress in one's research. It is, therefore, a serious mistake, in my opinion, to impose on students, in a Master's thesis and even in a doctoral thesis, only the academic norms of publishing research results.

Conclusion

I will leave the conclusion to Edgar Morin, to whom I am deeply indebted:

The heart of the complexity, it is the impossibility and to homogenize and to reduce, it is the questions of the unitas multiplex. [...]

We can say that what is complex is, on the one hand, a matter of the empirical world, of uncertainty, of the incapacity to be certain of everything, to formulate a law, to conceive an absolute order. It raises on the other hand of something of logic, that is to say of the incapacity to avoid contradictions. (1990, p. 43 and pp. 91-92)

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