INTERCULTURAL ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS

Xenia Liashuk

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Trnava University in Trnava, Priemyselná 4, P.O. BOX 9, 918 43 Trnava, Slovakia

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss the scope and character of intercultural elements as found in selected tests that are designed to validate learners' proficiency in the English and German languages. Despite the fact that the factual knowledge of culture-specific realia does not feature as a testing target, the textual material used in language tests does preserve the cultural marks of the target culture, ranging from explicit in-text mentioning to implicit references. Possible implications on students' performance as well as on the preparatory activities are also discussed.

Key words: *culture, language proficiency test, intercultural awareness, linguistic worldview, cognitive pattern*

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Culture, language and text

For the purpose of the present study, we adhere to the broader definition of culture. Thus, culture is seen as going beyond the realm of man-made artefacts, which is contrasted with the natural world, and encompasses, according to Sapir (1921), "the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives." Culture seen as a way of life of a given community is then inherently connected with a language as a means of the realization of human life in a given community. The process of living, both in existential and social terms, is connected with the application of a certain language, either internally, in 'speaking-to-oneself' manner, or externally, in social communication.

The relation between language and culture in outlined by Lévi-Strauss (1961, p. 68) as a trichotomic unity, consisting of the following layers:

1) language as a result of culture – "a reflection of the total culture of the population",

2) language as a part of culture – alongside with tools, institutions, customs, beliefs and other entities,

3) language as a condition of culture – "in a diachronic way, because it is mostly through the language that we learn about our own culture", but also "because the material out of which language is built is of the same type as the material out of which the whole culture is built: logical relations, oppositions, correlations, and the like."

The third layer outlined by Lévi-Strauss is consonant in its phrasing with the concept of the linguistic worldview ('*Weltansicht*'), introduced by Wilhelm von Humboldt, which is used to refer to a certain perception of the world fixed in the language using its means and spread among the speakers of a certain nation through communication, and thus shared by them. Proceeding from the premise that life virtually happens through language and that a language inherently contains a certain perception of the world, we come to the following question – Does a test designed to measure language proficiency bears traces of the culture related to that target language? Furthermore, the question of whether the knowledge of a certain languages is a prerequisite of acquiring a knowledge of a corresponding culture (Levi-Strauss 1961) can be extended and elaborated to ask, how much knowledge of culture do we acquire from learning a language, and consequently – how much of this cultural knowledge is involved, either explicitly or implicitly, in a successful performance at a language proficiency exam.

The trichotomy outlined above can be used as an orientation framework for detecting specific spots where cultural elements are located and will be searched for within the present study. Language as a

result of culture can be expected to be adapted to the purpose of describing that culture, in the range of denotative and connotative meanings, thus it should contain lexical means for naming the relevant cultural entities. Language as a part of culture can be seen as a cultural artefact itself, for example, from the points of view of the aesthetic force of its means. And finally, language as a condition of culture can be viewed a logical construct reflecting cognitive patterns and habits of the given culture.

Text represents the form in which a language is materialised to perform a certain communicative intention. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2001, p. 10), text is defined as "any sequence or discourse (spoken and/or written) related to a specific domain and which in the course of carrying out a task becomes the occasion of a language activity, whether as a support or as a goal, as product or process." In the case of language proficiency tests, this definitions applies to the textual input, either in a written or a spoken form, as encountered in the tasks that test receptive skills (reading and listening comprehension) or involving reception as an incentive or a starting point for language production. The application of communicative perspective on the text in the context of language proficiency tests results in the emergence of two distinct paradigms that presuppose different involvement of a test taker: (1) text as a documentary representation and/or description of a communicative situation, with a test taker being external to it, and (2) text as an element of a new communicative situation involving the test-taker as the recipient. The new communicative situation is prompted by the task of the test items, which spells out the role a test taker is supposed to take. Proceeding from this, we can speak of two ways of the involvement of culture: (1) culture as documented in the text and (2) culture as the frame insuring the adequate processing of the text and meant to trigger an adequate behavioural or cognitive response. In both cases we speak of texts as coherent verbalised entities bearing traces of culture in which they were created as well as traces of the culture-related cognitive frameworks imposing on the receiver certain prerequisites and directives for their correct processing. Hence, in the search for cultural traces in language proficiency tests, we focus not only on textual parts but on corresponding test items as spots where the influence of culture on cognitive patterns and mind set is manifested.

Under the term 'text' we can also understand smaller units (statements, paragraphs) of which the textual basis for separate parts of a language proficiency test is composed. The prerequisite for treating such fragments as texts of their own kind is to be found in the definition suggested by Valgina (2003) according to which the main features of a text are coherence and integrity. In the framework of a proficiency test, it is expedient to view a specific fragment to which a given test item relates as a 'text' and treat the rest of the original textual input as a context which might or might not contribute to the processing of the given fragment according to the requirements of the corresponding test item. Vereschagin and Kostomarov (1990) distinguish between pragmatic (a more precise English equivalent might be – 'practical') and projective texts (messages). Pragmatic messages are aimed at conveying what is defined as "practical", "essential" information, whereby the decoding role of the recipient is to decode the meanings of denotative units contained in the utterance (ibid., p. 112). In a projective communicative message, the sender's intention goes beyond the boundaries of such cumulative meaning, with the implicit intentional meaning being coined "subtext" (ibid., p. 128). Two more units are essential for correct processing of a given projective message – "context" as the aggregate of other utterances that convey a single point (ibid., p. 129) and background knowledge as a component of the meaning of the given text which is, however, not verbalized therein. The latter is also referred to as 'the preliminary knowledge' (Valgina 2003).

In relation to textual types used for the aims of language proficiency testing, an assumption can be made that such test would attempt to avoid the need to explicitly employ test takers' preliminary knowledge of factual background of the target culture. However, taking into consideration Gannon's observation that in many cases "the culture's members are only dimply aware" of the "deeply held but unconscious norms, values, and beliefs" that make up culture (Gannon 2015), it can also be assumed that these norms, values and beliefs would leak into the joined text of a language proficiency test namely due to their partly subconscious nature.

1.2. Cultural and intercultural aspects

The authentic text which serves as a basis for test items comes from the target national culture, and the test items as a specific type of accompanying text can be assumed to be designed by representatives of the given national culture. Therefore, the resulting proficiency test is expected to contain cultural traces of the given culture. At the same time, a language proficiency test is processed by a representative of a different culture(s). Being a member of another cultural space influences the performance of a test taker both from the receptive and the productive point of view, both implicitly and explicitly. The need for test takers to establish a dialogue between their culture of origin and the target culture, specifically in terms of mitigating the cognitive influence of the former one and assuming not only the linguistic but also the cognitive patterns of the latter one constitutes the intercultural aspect of language proficiency tests. In a language proficiency test, the parameter of the target culture is a fixed one, while the culture of origin is included is an undefined variable and is conditioned by the cultural background of individual test takers. Receptive tasks will incline more to the target culture, while the culture of origin might unconsciously help or impede their processing. Productive tasks will give the space for more extensive and purposeful application of one's home culture, but we might expect influence from the target culture as to which particular aspects of the culture of origin should be presented and how.

By singling out the national aspect of culture we do not mean to simplify the entire matter to this single aspect nor to deny the impact of other components of an individual's identity. The focus on cultures as national cultures is in line with the Hofstede's view of 'nations' as political units that are not equated to societies, to which the concept of a common culture should be applied in the first place. Despite the lack of a high degree of internal homogeneity, the scholar sees nations as "the source of a considerable amount of common mental programming of their citizens" and points at one dominant national language as one of the forces towards their further integration (Hofstede 1991, p. 11-12). Within the present study, the decision to focus on national cultures in relation to language proficiency tests is motivated by the fact that those tests serve as a prerequisite for a work/study permit in stipulated nation states or are described as a proof of a test taker's ability to communicate successfully with a member of a target national culture.

In CEFR (2001, p. 103), intercultural awareness is viewed more broadly than the understanding of the relation between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' in their similarities and distinctive differences. It is also supposed to include the awareness of other aspects, such as regional and social diversity, but also the awareness of "a wider range of cultures", which helps to place the two meeting cultures into a wider context. Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 10) see the ultimate aim of intercultural communication in the ability to ensure a shared understanding between people, taking into consideration their multiple identities and individuality. In the language testing paradigm, the involvement of third cultures into the contents of a test is restricted by the domineering focus on linguistic skills as the object of testing. Test takers get a chance to demonstrate their intercultural awareness most vividly in the speaking part, where in one of the task two test takers (who can happened to come from two different cultures of origin) are required to discuss a given topic or an issue of interest that presupposes certain degree of cultural specifics.

1.3. Language proficiency tests under analysis

The research material for the detection and analysis of intercultural elements was represented by samples of the following language proficiency tests, available for public use on their respective websites:

1) Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)[1] developed by the U.S.-based Educational Testing Service, in both the internet-based and the paper-based format,

2) Cambridge English: First (FCE)[2] developed by the U.K.-based Cambridge English Language Assessment,

[1] https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/test_questions and https://www.ets.org/toefl/pbt/prepare/sample_questions
[2] http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/first/preparation/

3) Goethe-Zertifikat – the Goethe Certificate (ZD)[3] developed by the Germany-based Goethe Institute, and

4) Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch – Austrian German Diploma (ÖSD)[4] developed as a joint collaboration of the Austria-based ÖSD organisation, the Germany-based Goethe Institute and the Switzerland-based University of Freiburg.

The proficiency tests were chosen in such a way as to make up two major bulks of samples – the English language sample (1 and 2) and the German language sample (3 and 4), as well as to provide an opportunity for comparing and contrasting specific national cultures according to the cultural affiliation of institutions that develop the tests. The two-language approach was chosen for the sake of creating a contrast that would put into the highlight those features that might have remained unnoticed as non-peculiar within the realm of one and the same language.

Among the four tests, TOEFL stands out due to its orientation towards the academic environment, which is reflected in its topical composition. The general test description states that it is designed to evaluate the test taker's mastery of language skills in their combination "to perform academic tasks." The test, however, bears cultural markers of the American academic environment. Apart from academically-oriented TOEFL, the rest of the tests are directed towards broader context of national cultures. The English language test descriptions include a note about the applicability of their results in other English speaking cultures, like Australia. The Goethe Certificate supports the claim about applicability of its result in the three German speaking culture by stating that it focuses on the above-regional standard German language ('*die überregionale deutsche Standardsprache*'), which is a variant of German that is the result of a joint collaboration of the language institutes of the three nations, containing the elements that are located most closely to the intersection of the variation of German spoken in the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria and the German speaking part of Switzerland.

The analysed German language tests incline towards greater mutual affinity, which might be explained by their adherence to CEFR as the supreme document governing the language policy of the European Union, but also by a greater degree of collaboration between the individual institutions that develop the respective tests. Thus, both ZD and ÖSD provide a common test sample at B1 level, and the ÖSD-B2 also applies for the three nations. However, ZD-B2 sample is provided in a single-state version. This might be viewed as indirect evidence of linguistic and cultural peculiarities that come hand in hand with a higher level of language proficiency tested for the given cultural environment.

Both English language tests make an attempt to adapt to the CEFR requirements. In particular, each test is accompanied with a B1 to C1 scale which translates the original score obtain by a test taker in points to the respective CEFR level. The mutual acceptability of results can be qualified as limited, as, for example, the TOEFL results are accepted only for issuing a certain type of student visas, which might be the result of its limited correspondence to the British cultural environment.

As the main objective of a test is to assess proficiency, we will not find test items dealing with the background knowledge of reality. However, it is likely that the background knowledge (either contained in the given text or assumed to have been mastered by a test taker) features in the test item or with a certain degree of impact influences its successful accomplishment.

2. FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CULTURES IN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS

The representation of factual knowledge about a target culture in a language is primarily related to the sphere of lexics. As stated above, language as a result of culture encompasses adequate denotative means to describe the relevant culture, which are further linked to certain connotations shared by the majority of speakers from the given culture. In this analytical line, we focused on lexical means employed for

[3] https://www.goethe.de/de/spr/kup/prf/prf/gzb1/ueb.html and
https://www.goethe.de/de/spr/kup/prf/prf/gzb2/ueb.html
[4] http://www.osd.at/default.aspx?SIid=50&LAid=1&ARid=351 and
http://www.osd.at/default.aspx?SIid=32&LAid=1&ARid=107

referring to peculiar objects, facts, events that are typical of the given culture. In CEFR (2001, p. 102), such referents (entities from the target cultural space) belong to the realm of "declarative knowledge", more specifically one of its two components referred to as "knowledge of the world". The notion is specified as "factual knowledge concerning the country or countries in which the language is spoken, such as its major geographical, environmental, demographic, economic and political features." It is important to note that the acquisition of the knowledge of the world is not conditioned by the acquisition of a target language, but can also precede it or be carried out on the basis of another language. In other words, it is hard to determine which share (if any) of factual knowledge of a culture a test taker has acquired in the process of mastering the target language.

2.1. Proper names

Proper names make up a group of culture-specific elements that probably are the easiest to detect since they refer to entities which are unique in their singularity. Each of the four tests under analysis contained proper names related to the cultural space of the corresponding nation. Additionally, the tests also included proper names from the neighbouring cultures. This feature can be explained logically as far as the tests originally designed for a cluster of neighbouring countries, ZD-B1 and ÖSD in particular. The inclusion of neighbour cultural references (most often geographical names) can be linked to an assumption that arguably any nation comes in contact with its geographical neighbours, either on institutional or personal level, therefore it is likely to reflect in its texts the reality of its neighbours if it is relevant. Proceeding from the premise of topicality and relevance, it is possible to explain why all the tests occasionally mention references to more distant nations as well.

The contrastive difference between the English and the German language sample lies in the intensity of reference to specific entities from the target cultural reality. In English language tests, the reference is less frequent and tends to be avoided where possible. In German language tests, the opposite tendency is traceable – the communicative message of a text is delivered in settings containing as many factual details as possible, even though these specific references might have marginal importance for understanding the text and/or completing the corresponding test items.

A specific case worth considering in this respect is the issue of geographical location. The analysed German language test tend to locate the topical situation in specific cultural as precisely as possible, most often by mentioning the region, district, city, town or even institution where the described events take place. English language tests, on the contrary, try to avoid specific referencing. The first strategy might be seen as an attempt to evoke the necessary mental images and connotation in a test taker's mind to prevent it from creating a different mental representation, the second – as an attempt to do the opposite, i.e. to prevent the mind from wandering too deep into the mental representation and keep it concentrated on important information. Specific geographical references are of marginal importance for successful completing of test item in the first case, and would have a similar marginal impact if they were present in the second case. Providing lavish supporting details in the form of proper names can also be the manifestation of the low context character of German culture, which prompts it to incline towards explicitation of every piece of information, even those considered minor.

As far as the inclusion of proper names in test items, the FCE test showed negative tendency, which is explainable on the basis of their initial diminished concentration. The German language sample, on the contrary, provided positive examples, but with the following specifics: (1) the tested proper name is assumed to be widely-known, (2) the tested skill is that of detecting the proper name in the text; test takers are not required to employ their knowledge of the corresponding denotatum nor any additional connotations.

The TOEFL test manifests another manner of processing cultural elements in the form of proper names – they are included into the texts as elements of proposition bearing certain informative value. The test taker is not required to have any deeper knowledge of them as such, but should be strategically able to comprehend them in order to demonstrate the understanding of another informative point. Here, another feature of American culture transpires, and namely it has been actively spreading all around the world, by means of politics, economic affairs but also cinema and television, so many cultural elements

(including proper names) that originated with the American nation have become internationally known and occasionally even internalized by other cultures. For example, a text in the reading section of TOEFL mentions NASA without specifying what kind of organisation it is; the abbreviation subsequently appears as an option within a multiple-choice test item.

Another feature is that TOEFL, in contrast to other tests under analysis, is more closely linked to the narrower context of college that to the broader context of American culture. Therefore, the test taker is expected to show performance similar to that of the college students from the target environment. For example, in the listening comprehension part, test takers have to listen to a lecture in the literary class about the novel *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, which is considered the first detective novel in the English langauge. The information about the novel, its plot, protagonists (Seargeant Cuff and Superintendent Seegrave) and features is presented in comparison with other works of the detective genre, providing reference to *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allen Poe, Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Lestrade, and Nero Wolfe. The lecture is delivered in the manner that presupposes that its intended target recipients are already familiar with the literary works and characters referred to as a model for comparison. The corresponding test items also contain reference to the names of literary works and characters mentioned in the text. Factual knowledge bears an inherent difficulty for processing as it is hard to keep in memory as newly acquired pieces of information. A test taker who is not familiar with the names mentioned in the text will have to process the text as new information, which could arguably take more time and mental effort.

2.2. Realia

Vlachov and Florin (1980, p. 47) define realia as words or phrases denoting objects that are characteristic of one nation, in particular of its way of life, culture, social and historical development, and are alien to other nations. Adequate comprehension of realia then requires preliminary knowledge of their respective referents from the cultural space. All of the analysed tests are designed in such a way as to insure that the possible lack of that preliminary background knowledge about a culture-specific entity does not interfere with successful completion of the test item. It is possible to trace three main strategies applied with this aim in view. These strategies are:

1) exclusion of realia from the textual scope to which a given test item relates,

2) partial explanation of realia in the broader context, either by stating its distinctive features or providing a generic reference, and

3) inclusion of a footnote commentary with the definition or explanation of a given lexeme (detected only in the German language sample).

The choice of a strategy might be conditioned by the degree of proximity of a given realia to the universally understandable or shared cultural code, as well as of the frequency with which a test taker is assumed to have been exposed to the reference to such realia during the formal process of language acquisition.

For example, one of the texts from the reading part of FCE starts with a description of living on the island of Hale, whereby *causeway* is mentioned and consequently explained as a *narrow road built across the mouth of the river which separates us from the rest of the country.* Even though this word can be assumed to belong to the scope of realia that are frequently mentioned in course of formal language studies and the corresponding test item relates to a different textual fragment, the explanation is not left out, possibly to insure that the given lexeme does not interfere with the general understanding due to its culture-specific nature.

A ZD-B2 test provides an example where a test taker is supposed to possess the preliminary knowledge of the notion of *Wohngemeinschaft,* which is mentioned in the text as a reference point and is not accompanied by any additional explanation. The text describes life at a research station in Antarctica and provides a comparison of the conditions there with *Wohngemeinschaft*, which, according to the Duden dictionary, stands for a group of people that live in a house or a flat as a community (keep a

common household). In a corresponding multiple-choice test item, a test taker has to find the distinctive feature of the station community, which is the fact that its members pursue common goals:

Im Gegensatz zu einer normalen Wohngemeinschaft haben die Bewohner einander nicht selbst ausgesucht. Dass trotzdem ein harmonisches Klima herrscht, liegt daran, dass alle Besatzungsmitglieder eine ähnliche Interessenslage und eine gemeinschaftliche Aufgabe haben.[5]

Factual information about a regular *Wohngemeinschaft* that can be extracted from the text is that its members search each other out. The rest has to be derived from test-takers' background knowledge. It is likely that a test taker who is not aware of the meaning of this notion would have second though about the distractor that mentions that members have the same hobby, since the text speaks about similar sphere of interest and does not provide information about that aspect in a regular *Wohngemeinschaft.*

2.3. Non-literal means of expression

In this perspective, we focused on lexical means with inherent cultural specifics in their semantics. In the samples under analysis, such means were represented by idiomatic expressions and allusions. The common feature bringing them closer to the knowledge of the factual kind is that it is not possible to draw a direct line of correspondence between the meaning of their composite words and the intended denotatum. Due to the indirect character of sematic relations, such speech items have to be memorized in their integrity, in a manner similar to remembering proper names. Moreover, in these units we can see the manifestation of language as a part of culture, since they carry a share of expressive and aesthetic value of their own.

Of the two non-literal means of expression, idioms can be assumed to be more difficult to process because (1) their meaning does not equal the cumulative meaning of their lexical composite elements, although it can be deductible in a diachronic perspective, and (2) specific lexical items involved or the idiomatic situations described might trigger other connotation in speakers from a different cultural environment, or even remain unintelligible if not mastered as an item of knowledge.

FCE sample contain an example where a test taker has to match a given test item to one of the paragraphs that contains the same information. One of the test items provides the description of a person as someone who *sometimes seems much more mature than he really is*. The reference point in the paragraph contains an idiom *an old head on young shoulders*. On the background of the lack of factual knowledge of the given idiom, the intercultural interference in this case might occur – the adjective *old* is interpreted as s*enile* instead of *wise*, thus leading to the perception of the original statement as a negative rather than a positive one.

Allusion is a figure of speech in the form of a covert or indirect reference to an entity from the external context. It is most often used as a means of conveying expressive attitude or making a statement more diverse, and thus creating an aesthetical or intellectual appeal to the listener/reader. So is the case in the German language sample: *das starke Geschlecht – the stronger (sterner) sex* as a reference to men, *vierbeinige Freunde – four-legged friends* as a reference to pets, or *graue Schnauzen – grey muzzles* as a reference to old pets. The meaning of such metaphorical nominative phrases is deductible from the context which explicitly mentioned their referents. However, their adequate processing is conditioned by a test taker's ability to recognize such phrases as allusive and to distinguish them from phrases conveying literal meaning. If a test taker is not accustomed to allusive manner of speaking or is unaware of specific allusive phrases typical for the given target language, this feature of speech will most likely work as an impediment for task completion.

Allusive language turned out to be less typical for the English language sample as a rhetorical device increasing the expressiveness of speech. An allusion detected in TOEFL belongs to the informative contents of the text and is meant to be processed as a factual point. One of the multiple-choice test items

[5] English translation: "*In contrast to a regular shared housing, the members [of the research station crew] have not searched for each other. A harmonious atmosphere is created due to the fact that all crew members have a similar interest scope and a common task."*

requires the test taker to answer the question, "*What does the word 'Apple' in the phrase 'The Big Apple" refer to?"* It corresponds to the text in the form of a dialogue between a foreigner and a New Yorker, in which the latter shares some factual information about the city. Even though the right answer is retrievable from the text alone and does not test the background knowledge, the prior awareness of the meaning of the given allusion might facilitate the process and save the time.

3. SOCIOCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS

Second constituent element of declarative knowledge, outlined in CEFR (2001, p. 102), is sociocultural knowledge, which includes knowledge of everyday living, living conditions, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes, body language, social conventions, ritual behaviour. In other words, this aspects presupposes not only the awareness of the existence of culture specific entities with a certain name (signifier) but also the awareness of how these entities work together in the given context and where they fit in their interrelation.

In relation to sociocultural knowledge, it is expedient to apply the notion of cognitive and interaction frames, introduced by Fillmore (1976, p. 23), in terms of which "the language-user interprets his environment, formulates his own messages, understands the messages of others, and accumulates or creates an internal model of his world." Thus, the orientation of TOEFL towards academic environment motivates the foundation of a significant number of its component on the frame of college life. Specific constituent elements of this frame that are derivable from one test sample include such lexemes as *student association, campus, tutoring program, study group, doctoral students* and other. A test taker is supposed to perform a variety of tasks on the background of this frame. This is not related to any culture-related problems as such, provided that a test taker is aware of the contents of a frame and the implied relation between its constituent elements. By performing a task, test takers then merely trigger the frame from the given culture that already exists in their mind. Difficulties might arise if such a frame in a test taker's mind lack certain components, which consequently have to be created on the spot, possibly from the information contained in the accompanying text. If the text contains no relevant information, the missing components are likely to be substituted by elements from a test taker's habitual cultural environment. This might ultimately lead to the distortion of the target frame, especially if a test taker is not aware of differences between such a substitute equivalent and the missing target element.

The need to actively operate a cognitive frame seems to be even more challenging in productive tasks. For example, in the writing section of ZD/ÖSD-B1 for teenagers, test takers must describe a sports day (*Sporttag*) that took place at their school and comment on what they liked most about it and why. The task presupposes that test takers are aware of what a sports day is and have possibly experienced it. If this is not the case, they will have to invent a description that would fit the stated frame, and this might turn out to be more time-consuming than the effort of writing down the description that already exists in their mind.

Another variation of frame-based tasks are found in the speaking part of both German language tests as well as in FCE. A test taker is supposed to speak about a given topic/answer a given question on the basis of pictures. For example, in FCE, a test taker has to comment on what people enjoy about spending time in the given gardens. One of the two picture provided shows the view of people on a lawn in front of Chatsworth House. Taking into consideration the fact that the name of the place is not provided and that the exterior of the building reminds of a museum or a palace, a test taker who has a different cognitive frame of a public garden might find it difficult to decode the picture and to comment on it. In ZD-B2, a test taker has to choose between three pictures to speak about the modern eating culture. In one of the pictures we can see a group of elderly men, some of them in traditional clothes, sitting at a round table in what looks like a vast terrace, eating and drinking beer. The viewer's background knowledge should suggest that the picture represents a *Biergarten* (a loan translation into English – beer garden). The visual components of the picture alone can be hard to relate to the notion of *modern*, and with certain difficulties to the notion of *eating culture.* A model of the minimum background which is arguably required to speak efficiently about the given picture can be demonstrated on the English version of the corresponding Wikipedia entry:

"A beer garden […] is an outdoor area in which beer and local food are served, typically at shared tables. Common entertainments include music, song, and games, enjoyed in an atmosphere of *Gemütlichkeit*."[6]

The additional knowledge required in relation to this entry is the explanation of *Gemütlichkeit*, which "describes a space or state of warmth, friendliness, and good cheer. Other qualities include coziness, peace of mind, belonging, well being, and social acceptance."[7]

The awareness of this background knowledge provides test takers with the factual basis on which they can built their oral statement and allows them to focus more on the fluency and coherence of their speech.

In relation to the above-mentioned example, the importance of the awareness of concepts should also be stressed. According to Stepanov (2004), a concept represents a cluster of culture in a person's mind, which consists of ideas, knowledge, associations, feelings and emotions that accompany the given word. Comparison between the productive parts of the two language samples reveals that German language tests tend to be more inclined towards the normative, value-laden aspect of concepts, while English language samples gravitate more to the factual component. Thus, in the speaking part of ZD-B2, a test taker has to comment on the issue of *Gastfreundschaft* (hospitableness) and the obligations of guests within in. The written part of ÖSD-B2 deals with the concept of status-related politeness – test takers are expected to express their opinion on whether or not students should be allowed to address their teachers in an informal way. The issue is related to the structural peculiarity of the German language which distinguishes between formal (*siezen*) and informal (*duzen*) address, linked to a distinct communicative and cultural norm.

The English language sample provides more information-oriented incentives for productive tasks based on concepts. In TOEFL, test takers have to express their view on the concept of spending time with friends and choose between staying in and going out. In FCE, test takers have to evaluate the ideas how to attract more tourists to an unspecified town, which is related to the concept of a tourist destination. Such tasks in both language samples provide an opportunity for test takers to demonstrate their cultural background and compare it with the target culture and/or interlocutor's culture, which virtually represents the explicit act of intercultural communication. Nevertheless, this intercultural communication happens within the framework set by the target culture, as the topics and questions are predominantly designed in such a way as to put into the spotlight those issues, values and norms that are of importance to the target culture.

4. PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN LANGUAGE PROFICIECY TESTS

Both English and German language samples contain tasks that are based on the correct evaluation of the illocutionary force of a given utterance by a test taker. We refer to the illocutionary force on the basis of the distinction, proposed by Austin and elaborated by Searle (1968, p. 406), between the locutionary act as a speech act produced to convey a certain propositional content (meaning) and illocutionary act as a speech act produced with a certain force. This force is what turns a neutral utterance into a promise, a threat, a warning, and so on. The detection of the illocutionary force of an utterance is then conditioned by the communicative situation in which it is produced and moreover, by the ability (or the inclination) of the recipient to decode incoming communicative messages as carrying something more than just the literal meaning.

In the following FCE extract, the test taker has to listen to a message on a telephone answering machine, which says:

"Oh hi it's me, John. Sorry to miss you – you must've already left for work. Look, I wondered if you wanted to come away for the weekend. There'll be about 10 of us including someone called Sam Brent who says he was at college with you – and he remembers that you were brilliant at rock and roll! They've decided it'll be on October 9, Friday night till Sunday. Anyway, I'll put the details in the post. I know

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beer_garden
[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gem%C3%BCtlichkeit

you're busy at the moment, so don't feel you have to come, but just let me know one way or the other when you can. Talk to you soon. Bye."

The test taker then has to answer the question, "*Why is the speaker calling*?" by choosing one of the three options provided. The right answer, *to issue an invitation*, is related to the propositional contents of the utterance which includes the speech act of invitation (*I wondered if you wanted to come away for the weekend)* and provides additional information about the event. For successful completion of the task, the test taker has to be aware of the norms of inviting in the target culture, which are typically mastered simultaneously with language acquisition as one of the communicative patterns. However, the source of intercultural interference can be located in one of the distractors, *to persuade someone to do something*. Even though the text does not contain verbal means with explicit persuasive force, the manner in which the information is provided (enthusiastic tone, eagerness to submit details even before receiving the positive answer) as well as the specific arguments mentioned (a chance to meet an acquaintance from the past) might prompt certain test takers to perceive the utterance as persuasive, especially if the communicative pattern of such "hidden" persuasion is typical for their source culture.

In relation to the above-mentioned example, we have come across indirect evidence of the inherent culture-related specifics of measuring the communicative force of utterances. Thus, an English language teacher who provides tips for passing the FCE exam on his website[8] points to the phrase *don't feel you have to come* as the main reason why the message should not be interpreted as an insistent request despite the fact that it might seems to be like that.

The above mentioned example is related what Oksaar coined "cultureme" and defined as a manner of behaviour in specific recurrent situations, conditioned by culture and varying according to cultural, verbal, non-verbal and extraverbal factors. A test taker hast to be familiar with the norms and customs implied by the verbal cultureme of issuing an invitation in the target culture, and to be aware of possible difference between it and the counterpart cultureme in their culture of origin.

Items testing the interpretation of culturemes are also frequent in the listening section of TOEFL, e.g. cultureme of ending a conversation, of providing and accepting apologies, and other. In contrast to that, German language test items that involve the reproduction of communication between native speakers tend to focus on the informative components of the conversation rather than on the comprehension and/or interpretation of the pragmatic component. In other words, German language test item tend to focus on what is said rather than on why it is said or with what purpose. Examples from the German samples also include cases where messages can potentially be viewed as bearing the implicit illocutionary force. However, such force is predesigned to be neutralized by the meaning retrievable directly from the informative component of the utterance and its verbalisation.

Extract from the text of a blog-entry where a girl describes her visit to the Zoo (ZD/ÖSD-B1):

Insgesamt waren wir am Vor- und Nachmittag über sechs Stunden im Zoo und sind davon sicherlich etwa vier Stunden herumgelaufen. Am Schluss haben mir die Beine total wehgetan, und ich war extrem froh, als wir auf dem Heimweg waren. Trotzdem war es ein genialer Tag![9]

After reading the entry, a test taker has to decide whether it is true or false that the girl would like to have stayed at the Zoo longer. Although from the context of the entry, where the girl described her stay and how happy she was to be there, the recipient might infer that she wouldn't mind to stay longer, the answer to the test item is False. The informative arguments in favour of this conclusion are supposed to be her own testimony that she was glad to go home, the length of her visit (6 hours) and the fact that she was physically exhausted (her legs hurt). In order to reach the conclusion that the girl might have wanted to stay longer, a test taker has to leap over those facts, which would involve taking a step away from the more explicit propositional context. Moreover, in this example we can trace the implied logical division between the girl's attitude towards the visit (she liked it very much) and the need to go home (she

[8] http://www.fceexamtips.com/listening-1-and-2/

[9] English translation: "*In the morning and afternoon, we stayed altogether over six hours at the Zoo, and certainly spent about four hours running around. In the end, my legs totally hurt, and I was extremely happy when we were on our way home. Nevertheless, it was an amazing day*!"

welcomed it as well). This analytical division of attitude might fail to be customary to cultures with a more holistic way of perceiving reality, where liking something very much is inherently linked to reluctance to abandon it.

Stronger emphasis on the propositional contents is also manifested in the design of certain tasks that are peculiar to the German sample and are absent from the English one. The German texts tend to put more emphasis on what is being told, not with what aim. Focus on the attitude with a strict polarity, as in the above-mentioned example, is also found in a specific type of task where a test taker has to understand a speaker's stance on a given disputable issue and interpret it as either positive or negative, with no possibility of neutral or reconciliatory.

Another task peculiar to the German language sample is based on listener's ability to perceive and understand recommendations or commands. For example, in the listening part of ZD/ÖSD-B1, test takers have to listen to the instructions a guide gives to the participants of a tour through the city museum in Munich:

Um 16 Uhr treffen wir uns dann alle wieder hier im Eingangsbereich, direkt gegenüber dem Café. Ihre Taschen können Sie an der Garderobe dort drüben abgeben.[10]

One of the test items asks about the location of the meeting point in the afternoon. The options include: (a) at the entrance, (b) at the cloakroom, and (c) in the café. The choice of options reflects the precise and careful attitude that Germans are believed to hold towards space and its distribution. Even though one might expect that the cloakroom is situated somewhere in the entrance area and for some cultures that see space as a continuum of overlapping sectors where you can simultaneously be at the cloakroom and somewhere near the entrance, the mental pattern included into the instruction and the test item obviously dictates that 'here' is not 'there'.

5. ANALYTICAL SKILLS IN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS

In both clusters of sample tests there are tasks that require distinguishing important information (main point) from that of minor importance.

In FCE, frequent are test items that ask about something most loved or appealing, which is most often detected on the basis of linguistic markers (*really*, *most of all* and other). For example, in the listening section test takers hear an interview with Rachel, who works in a commercial art gallery, which contains the following extract:

The really rewarding thing for me is that you never know how the day is going to go. Some days it'll be really quiet, other days it's really busy, and you don't know what you are going to have to cope with. And there is the added bonus of working with really nice people. And of course, I have the pleasure of spending my days surrounded by beautiful works of art. So I can't complain.

One of the test items asks, *What does Rachel find most enjoyable about her work?* The right answer, *the fact that it's unpredictable,* relates to the part of the proposition mentioned first, which contains the expressive verbal marker *the really rewarding thing*. The distractor *being close to works of art* also has a reference, but it is located at the end of the passage. Within the top-to-bottom approach towards argumentation, the last argument in a row is then perceived as the weakest one, even though the broader preceding context contains reference to it that might make an impression of its high importance for the speaker. The other distractor, *meeting interesting people*, should then be discarded for the same reasons, but also because in the passage it is introduced as *an added bonus.*

A notable feature of the German language sample is its focus on the verbalisation of a speaker's attitude, for which there exists a separate task in the reading section. At B1 level, the task is designed in the form of readers' comments on the given issue; a test taker has to decide whether each person is for or against the issue discussed. Here is an example of such a comment from ZD/ÖSD-B1 for adults:

[10] English translation: "*At 4 pm, we will all meet again in the entrance area, directly opposite the café. You can leave your bags in the cloakroom over there.*"

Ich spiele sogenannte Killerspiele wie CaDu seit bald drei Jahren regelmässig. Ich habe eine kleine Tochter, eine Frau und einen Job und spiele für den Ausgleich. Nur weil es mal dazu kommt, dass einer auf dieser Welt das Spiel als Realität sieht und durchdreht, müssen dann all die anderen ein Verbot hinnehmen? Es wäre besser, die Altersbeschränkung auf 18 Jahre festzulegen und sie auch strikt einzuhalten.[11]

The test taker has to decide whether the author is for or against a ban on video games that contain too much violence. The extract exemplifies strategies of indirect argumentation that are also frequent in other texts within this type of task, and namely, (1) reference to personal experience, either positive or negative, (2) verbalisation of a stance in the form of a rhetorical question that presupposes either a yes-or-no answer, and (3) providing alternative solution to the problem, occasionally without mentioning explicitly that the suggested measures are meant to serve as a direct opposite to the measures proposed in the original question.

The prerequisite for strict determination between positive and negative attitude is manifested even more clearly in tasks for B2 level. The test taker has to determine whether the author assesses the points outlined in test items as positive or negative/sceptical. In case of some items it seems hard to determine their attitudinal polarity on the basis of the text alone, and the test taker will have to reach for the background knowledge about the current state of affairs in the country, the generally held opinions but also values and beliefs.

For example, a text in which the choice between family and career is discussed contains the following statement:

Im Zeitalter der Empfängnisverhütung liegt es in der Freiheit jedes Einzelnen, sich für oder gegen Kinder zu entscheiden. Staatliche Anreize, mehr Kinder zu zeugen, helfen wenig, um die Geburtenrate zu erhöhen.[12]

The test taker has to evaluate the attitude of the author to the possibility of contraception as a decisive factor for keeping the birth rate low. The right answer is Positive. The extract does not contain explicit expressive markers of positive attitude, therefore the key to evaluating the attitude is to be searched in the shared values and views on the topic described there. Contraception is seen as positive because it gives an individual both freedom of choice and higher control over the results of one's behaviour (which are valued high in German culture), even though fewer children are born, which could be evaluated as negative in the perspective of the well-being of a society.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRESENCE OF INTERCULTURAL ELEMENTS IN LANGUAGE TESTS

Due to the dialectical unity of language and culture, language proficiency tests contain certain traces of the target culture, both on the explicit factual and on the implicit cognitive level. The preliminary knowledge of such cultural peculiarities can be argued to facilitate the performance of language-oriented tasks which happens against their background. The lack of cultural knowledge, however, does not prevent test takers from passing the test, but can create additional strain on the time, as the missing cultural knowledge will have to be retrieved from the available textual input or an attempt will have to be made to substitute it with the cultural knowledge at one's disposal.

A test taker's culture of origin might impede the processing of target-culture input and stimuli unless a test taker has contrasted it with the target culture and has come to realise the points of their similarity and difference. In order to pass a language proficiency test, test takers have to develop a mental set

[11] English translation: "*I have been playing so-called shooting games regularly for almost three years. I have a small daughter, a wife and a job and play for to outbalance this. Just because sometimes someone starts to take the game for the reality and cracks up, does it mean that a ban must be imposed on all the others? It would be better to set the age limit at 18 years and to ensure that it is strictly observed.*"
[12] English translation: "*In the age of contraception, every person has the freedom to decide for or against having children. Government incentives to have more children do not contribute much to increasing the birth rates.*"

similar to that of a member of the target culture and to possess the ability to step over the usual ways of their culture of origin in order to assume the target mental set for this single occasion, without resigning their culture altogether.

Language proficiency test are also useful from the didactic perspective because, given their limited size, they are most likely to refer to issues, areas, concepts and realia that are of particular importance for the given target culture. Prospective test takers will only benefit from performing an intercultural analysis of available test samples aimed at detecting and reflecting upon intercultural elements contained therein.

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