

**WHEN TRAVELERS AND LOCALS MEET: COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES IN TRAVEL NARRATIVES**

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses communication strategies between travelers and local people in some famous (and other not-so-popular) travel narratives. The main concern of this study is to examine how writers describe the contact between their narrators and the “other,” the “native” the “*Indian*” or simply “local” characters. Different travel narratives are recalled to exemplify an array of theoretical approaches about travel texts. The diachronic perspective proposed by Blanton (1997) is considered as backbone throughout this study. The section “The most famous of the encounters” revises some moments of contact in Columbus letters under the light of Greenblat’s work (1991). Pratt (1992) helps looking at the “contact zones,” and shows how Humboldt’s voice is predominant in his narrative, revealing asymmetrical power relations. The late 19th and early 20th century, described in “Depth and breadth,” correspond to the heyday of travel writing. Here is when works of Stevenson contribute to critical views on the relationships between foreigners and locals. The period that follows the Great Wars represents a loss of illusions while painting the genre with modern dimensions. The works of Kerouac and Theroux are briefly revised in the section of the article called “The effects of contact language”. The limits of the anthropological regard on travel writing are questioned by Clifford (1997), and is here exemplified through a short story in the section “A large can of worms”. In the end, “Creative solutions” for describing communication in encounters between different people are seen as responsible for the popularity of travel literature.

KEYWORDS: travel narratives, communication strategies, encounters.

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa estratégias de comunicação entre viajantes e pessoas locais em algumas narrativas de viagem famosas (e outras nem tão populares). O objetivo principal deste estudo é examinar como escritores descrevem o contato entre seus narradores e o “outro,” o “nativo,” o “índio,” ou simplesmente os demais personagens de seus relatos. Diversos exemplos de narrativas de viagem são contrastados com uma seleção de abordagens teóricas que têm como fio condutor a perspectiva diacrônica apresentada por Blanton (1997). Na seção “The most famous of the encounters” são revisados momentos de contato nos diários de Colombo sob a ótica de Greenblat (1991). O trabalho de Pratt (1992) esclarece o conceito de “zonas de contato” e mostra como a voz de Humboldt é predominante em sua narrativa, revelando relações de poder assimétricas. O final do século dezenove e início do século vinte, descritos na seção “Depth and Breadth” corresponde ao auge das narrativas de viagem. É a partir daí que o trabalho de Stevenson passa a contribuir para visões críticas acerca da relação entre estrangeiros e nativos. O período que segue às Grandes Guerras, por sua vez, representa a perda de ilusões e recebe as influências modernas. O trabalho de Kerouac e Theroux são brevemente revisados na seção “The effects of contact language”. As limitações do olhar antropológico revisado por Clifford (1997) são exemplificadas através de um conto em “A large can of worms”. Por fim, “Creative solutions,” ou “soluções criativas” são vistas como responsáveis pela popularidade da literatura de viagem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: narrativas de viagem, estratégias de comunicação, encontros .

ele: how are you Mogadishu?
 eu: yes, I go to Mogadishu.
 ele: how are you inglish italiani?
 eu: brazil.
 ele: how are you tourist?
 eu: yes.
 ele: how are you Somali?
 eu: no, I dont speak Somali.

(DO ROCK, 1997, p. 244)

The above dialogue is set in Somalia around the 1980s and it is a description of a first contact between “ele,” a Somali man, and “eu,” Zé do Rock, Brazilian character and author, as he describes himself in his travel memoir *Zé do Rock: o erói sem nenhum agá* (1997). The author-hero of this book travels around the world for 13 years and writes his story in the form of a grammar book, first published in German, then years later in Portuguese. Through this narrative, Zé do Rock aims at questioning the differences between written and spoken language, how languages get mixed up and are transformed in speaking. He proposes a simplification of German and Brazilian Portuguese and entertains his readers with a travel narrative full of jokes and wordplays. This personal story, said to be written in *Ultradeutsch* and in *Brasilês* respectively, brings to light fine examples of one of the greatest problems faced by travelers and locals anywhere they meet: how to initiate and establish contact when people speak different languages.

Communication successes and failures in first contacts between people who speak different languages are described in almost every travel narrative, no matter how close they tend to be to a fictional piece or a factual account. Linguistic contacts are particularly rich moments where narrators of travelogues describe the organic experience of trying to establish communication with another person. They illustrate the relations of power existing between characters when they meet, the conflicts and obstacles they face when trying to achieve their major objectives while keeping readers emotionally involved with the text. When narrating moments of contact, writers (and sometimes,

ghostwriters) have to deal with the necessary internal coherence demanded by storytelling by creating strategies that make the dialogues sound convincing while picturing nations, ethnic groups, enterprises or individual projects. In fact, the way these contacts are articulated and described can sometimes be crucial for a travel narrative to be successfully accepted by readers and critics as part of this literary genre, exceptionally popular since the times of the *Odyssey*.

For this short essay, excerpts of different travel narratives are going to be examined under a brief historic timeline guided by Casey Blanton's article *Travel Writing: The self and the world* (2002), the theoretical works of Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1992) and Mary Louise Pratt's book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, among others.

In order to review writers' strategies for describing moments of contact between travelers and locals, this study tries to answer some specific questions: do travelers or foreign characters make use of interpreters? Do they learn the foreigners' language? Do they speak an interlanguage, communicate through gestures or trade material goods in order to be understood? How do descriptions of understandings and misunderstandings contribute to the narrative, or to the familiarization of the reader with the different? As examples of moments of contacts in travel narratives, in the next sessions I examine a selection of passages from popular (and other not-so-famous) travel narratives by Christopher Columbus, Alexander von Humboldt, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack Kerouac, Paul Theroux, Emily Carr and the already introduced Zé do Rock.

THE MOST FAMOUS OF THE ENCOUNTERS

The attempt to characterize travel writing is seen by American writer and professor of English and Humanities Casey Blanton as a "Sisyphean task" (2002, p. xi). The number of travel books is vast, and the problem of defining what a travel narrative is can demand years of reading, considerations and positioning, while new books constantly question in form and content every stable

truth about the matter. For the purpose of this study, however, I stick to Blanton's understanding that "travel books are vehicles whose main purpose is to introduce us to the other (...)" (p. xi), dramatizing an engagement between the self and the world in trying to render the foreign into familiar (p. 1). The readers, "us," are then included in the analysis of these moments of contact, even if only as a synonym of spectators or consumers of travel narratives.

Christopher Columbus' *Diario* was already a "best seller" soon after it was first published in Spanish (one of the earliest at times of the invention of printing machines¹). It was the source of rapid translations right after its first publication, as soon as he returned to Europe in 1493. Neil L. Whitehead affirms that "the unanticipated discoveries of Columbus provided a frisson of mystery and need for explanation" (1992, p. 122) when, besides the attempts to map the world and its peoples, there was a great expectation for the encounter with "the marvelous, the novel, the extreme" (p. 122).

In *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1992) American literary critic Stephen Greenblatt, gives us some clues about the misunderstandings and disguised intentions that still today involves Columbus voyages². According to Greenblatt, imagination plays a key role in travel writing. What amazes him in Columbus' account is the change in perspective along the narrative from "knowing nothing" ("they did not understand me nor I them") to "imagining an absolute possession" where language is used as a tool for the ritual of appropriation ("the whole island was at my command")³ (p. 13). "The most palpable sign of this incompleteness for the early voyagers," states Greenblatt, "was an inability to understand or be understood," so that an element of the marvelous was perhaps always present in language differences (p. 24). For Greenblatt, "Europeans

¹ *The diffusion of Columbus Letter* - Retrieved March 28, 2016 from <http://www.oshermaps.org/special-map-exhibits/columbus-letter/iv-diffusion-columbuss-letterthroughurope-1493-1497>.

² Greenblatt reviews the role of writing and translating in the European projection of the New World. Through readings of Samuel Purchas pilgrims accounts (1577-1626) he recalls and questions the power of writing with which Europeans used to manipulate natives, and also the role of interpreters in negotiations such as it is said to have happened between Cortés and Montezuma - having the Aztec Emperor failed due to the lack competent translators, informants and go-betweens (p. 12). The act of giving gifts and trading between Europeans and natives was already a way of communication, or in fact "practice upon the other".

³ *The Diario of Christopher Columbus' First Voyage to America 1492-1493*, transcribed and trans. Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr. (Norman Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), pp. 243-5.

were particularly struck by encountering peoples who spoke languages as an observer puts it, ‘neither known nor understood of any.’” (p. 24). In *The Diario of Christopher Columbus’ First Voyage to America 1492-1493*, its author describes the arrival of the *Santa Maria* in a port Columbus named “Campana,” on November 27, 1492, and his encounter with the natives:

“Coming thus along the coast to the southeast of the last river mentioned, he found a greater settlement, the largest that he had found up until now; and he saw a great number of men come to the seashore shouting, all naked, with their javelins in their hands. He desired to speak with them, and hauled down the sails and anchored; and he sent the launches of the ship and of the caravel with orders that they should do no harm to the Indians, but not receive any either, and commanding that they give them some little things from the trade goods. The Indians made gestures threatening to resist them land, but seeing that the launches were approaching land more closely and that the Spaniards were not afraid of them, they withdrew from sea. Believing that if only two or three men got out of the launches the Indians would not be afraid, three Christians got out saying in their language not to be afraid, because they knew a bit of it through association with those they brought with them; but finally all took to flight and neither grown-ups nor little ones remained” (p. 179)

In this episode, different strategies of communication are performed: the symbolic and real approach of the ships; the internal command to not do or receive harm; the distribution of “some little things” (or *cosillas*, in the Spanish original); the use of gestures by the Indians to try to intimidate the so called Christians; the use of captives as interpreters. Truth is we know little about this and other encounters as, for instance, in the extract “they knew a bit of it through association with those (Indians) they brought with them”. But how can *Spaniards* assure that the different *Indians* speak the same language?

In the end, none of the communication strategies employed worked out well, as in towards the end of this excerpt the natives ran away. Nonetheless, what might strongly call readers’ attention is the expectation of the outcome of the encounter between European adventurers and natives from the New World. We are not sure about Columbus exact plan, who the writer really was, and we get puzzled by many questionable passages in the narrative such as the description of the mermaids they see (p. 321) and Columbus’ recurrent certainty about being understood by the natives. It is not by

chance that Gabriel Garcia Marques called the *Diarios* “the first book of magic realism”⁴. The text opens many gaps for readers and historical researchers to interpret, but the many hints given about Europeans greater mission is indicated by the repeated uses of the word *gold*.

ONE MAIN VOICE

Like Greenblat’s book, another important light was shed over the subject of cultural encounters through travel writing in 1992, this time by Mary Louise Pratt, researcher and professor of Spanish and Portuguese Literature and Language at The New York University. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* Pratt draws the concept of *contact zone*: “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (p. 4). She questions how writing cultures have described “the rest of the world” in their European project of mapping the planet through a process she calls *transculturation*, which is a term that refers to “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (p. 6). A key definition in the struggle to examine these moments of contact between different cultures closely is the *contact language*, which refers to “the impoverished languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently, usually in context of trade”. Pratt states that “such languages begin as pidgins and are called creoles when they come to have native speakers of their own. Such languages are commonly regarded as chaotic, barbarous, lacking structure (...)” (p. 6).

Pratt dedicates a chapter of *Imperial Eyes* to one of the most famous explorers and prolific travel writers of the early 19th century, Alexander von Humboldt, whose books influenced Charles Darwin some years later. Partly financed by the Spanish Crown, who wanted to reaffirm its power

⁴ COLOMBO, C. *Diários da Descoberta da America: As quatro viagens e o testamento*. Translated by Milton Persson. Porto Alegre: L&PM, 1998.

over the convulsed Spanish America of the time, Humboldt in his trip to Central and South America (1799 -1804) searched and described in a 30volume “encyclopedia” the botany, plant geography, zoology, astronomical and barometric measurements and political facts in a scientific tone, with luxurious illustrations and graphic innovations.

Contributions and resonances of Humboldt’s work were varied, but what is of interest here is the fact that the writer/speaker is the only voice in the narration (PRATT, 1992, p. 125), and that he and his partner Aimé Bonpland “never once stepped beyond the boundaries of the Spanish colonial infrastructure”. They did constantly establish communication with the locals, however, but it remains a question whether the knowledge in the narrative comes from the travelers’ sensibility or out of an interaction and the *travelee’s* point of view (p.135). Translators or interpreters in this famous scientific travel account are overshadowed, and though sometimes local people engage in conversations to explain certain aspects of the land, nature or personal happenings, dialogues do not appear as such in the narrative, and few are the linguistic obstacles described. The passage bellow exemplifies one of these encounters:

“A little before we reached Mamon, we stopped at a farm belonging to the family of Monteras. A negress more than a hundred years old was seated before a small hut built of earth and reeds. Her age was known because she was a creole slave. She seemed still to enjoy very good health. “I keep her in the sun” (la tengo al sol), said her grandson; “the heat keeps her alive.” (Chapter 1.15: Departure from Caracas. Mountains of San Pedro and of Los Teques. La Victoria)

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In this excerpt, one of a few that describes a conversation, the translation from Spanish to English is not problematized: readers are not sure whether the narrator understands Spanish or uses an interpreter. The supposedly original native voice quoted by Humboldt between parentheses may

⁵ HUMBOLDT, A. von. In: Valleys of Aragua. Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America, during the years 1799-1804, vol.1. Retrieved March 26, 2016 from <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6322/pg6322-images.html>

endorse the narrative as a scientific piece, which registers not only environmental findings, but also a bit of the natives' voice. It opens up an interlude in the narrative for listening to the other, which in turn, reinforces his dominant voice over the natives, as well as helps the narrative sound more realistic and thus coherent with its major ambition.

DEPTH AND BREADTH

The late 19th and early 20th century is described by Blanton as “the heyday of travel writing” because of both the depth and the breadth of travel books that appeared between 1850 and 1930” (1997, p. 19). Having passed the Romantic period, when travel writing was sentimental and a mean of self-discovery, it is by this time that more popular means of transportation allow travelers to go abroad motivated by the joy and the possibilities of education through travel, benefiting society with the traveler's background information through their narratives. Important names of this period include Mark Twain, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson.

In Stevenson's short story *The Beach of Falesá* (1892), set in an island of the Pacific, different perspectives of encounters between natives and Europeans, and among Europeans themselves are described. Although the narrative constantly presents irony, conflicts arise because of linguistic misunderstandings, which turn up to put in check and deconstruct the whites' commercial project. The main character, John Wiltshire, travels to the island hoping to be a successful trader. There he meets Case, another European trader, who seems friendly and arranges for him a fake marriage with a local woman, Uma, as these were traditional performances between them exclusively for trading reasons. Wiltshire does not speak Uma's language, so he needs Case's help as an interpreter:

“That's Uma', said Case, and he called her up and spoke to her in the native. I didn't know what he said; but when he was in the midst she looked up at

me quick and timid, like a child dodging a blow, then down again, and presently smiled”⁶.

As Case is the one who speaks “in the native” throughout the story, he wittingly provokes the slow decay of Wiltshire, who falls in love with his “fake” wife even without speaking her language. After this first moment when Uma just gives looks and smiles at him, they start communicating in what Pratt called a “contact” or “impoverished” language. Wiltshire is pouring out bottles of gin because he heard about a European who got drunk and mysteriously died because “he couldn’t get on with the natives, or the whites, or something” (in Case’s words). He relates his talk to Uma: “‘No good’ said I, for I was now a little better master of my tongue. ‘Man he drink, he no good.’” The effect of their talk is ironic and humorous, but most of all Stevenson puts power relations at stake.

In *The Beach of Falesá* a European man travels for settlement (which was the case of the author as well) falls in love with a native woman, and is deluded by another European trader and settler. Differently from Humboldt’s project, now there are new obstacles for the traveler such as trusting the words of a country fellow.

THE EFFECTS OF CONTACT LANGUAGE

In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, U of C historian James Clifford affirms that travels are like translations: built from imperfect equivalences” (1997, p. 11). Clifford is aware of the limitations of the encounters, and ultimately, the limitations of any attempt at thinking globally. “My expansive use of ‘travel’,” he states, “goes a certain distance and falls apart into non-equivalents, overlapping experiences marked by different translation terms: ‘diaspora’, ‘borderland’, ‘immigration,’ ‘migrancy’, ‘tourism,’ pilgrimage,’ ‘exile.’” (p. 11). Genres, for him, combine and hybridism does not easily fit into theoretical principles.

⁶ Retrieved March 26, 2016 from <http://www.online-literature.com/stevenson/island-nights/1/>

It is not useless to recall that the Great Wars represented a loss of illusions, with people (among them writers) leaving their homelands. They provoked the fragmentation of selves and nations and as a result, travel accounts became bitter and politically aggressive (Blanton, p. 22). However, they also gave room to the flourishing of different solutions for a genre that seemed to be worn out. Peter Hulme points out that the travel writing genre was “a career” after WWII, in its “crucial dimension of modernism” (HULME & YOUNGS, p. 89).

One of the new fertile grounds for travel narratives is the United States stretching from east to west and down to Mexico as depicted by Jack Kerouac. Sal Paradise, the American narrator and protagonist from New Jersey in the celebrated *On the road* (1957), is most of the time kept safe within the linguistic boundaries of the US shelter. But when he crosses the border and tries to find a girl for his friend Dean in Mexico, he faces this challenge in *Spanglish*. At this point of the narrative, a kid approaches him to try to sell a windshield-shade: “You like? Sixty peso. *Habla Espanhol? Sessenta peso*. My name Victor,” to which Sal jokingly answers “Nah (...) buy senorita” and the young man replies “(...) No good gurls when hot day” (KEROUAC, p.163). Both characters try to speak the language of the other, but still the narrator’s language prevails, a fact that demonstrates the dominance of the narrator over the native. This passage also shows that there was no need in the narrative for a good grammatical performance in either Spanish or English when trying to negotiate goods – which in this case is a woman. When there is a “need” to be understood or to communicate, English prevails.

To escape this type of “macaronic sentence” some twenty years after Kerouac, Paul Theroux in *The Old Patagonian Express* states in the beginning of his travel account that he will try to avoid “affecting Spanish words and will translate all conversations into English, not to incur into compositions like “ ‘Carramba!’ said the *campesino*, eating his *empanada* at the *estancia*...” (p. 40). Besides his decision not to write in Spanish or in an impoverished interlanguage, Theroux states that every conversation he had was in Spanish, as he learned the language so that he could better enjoy

and understand his experience differently from his previous journey to Asia that is narrated in *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1972).

These two brief postmodern excerpts show different strategies adopted by writers to face the linguistic challenges without the presence of an interpreter when describing the contact with the other, the local one. Theroux seems to be very sincere and practical in dealing with the problem, but by defining that he will protect his readers from linguistic blends, he reaffirms the power of English over Spanish and moreover, we lose a great part of the fun that is the absurd product of intended dialogues in mixed up languages. This fact, however, does not rub out the pleasure of reading *The Old Patagonian Express* and the witty moments of contact between author and natives. In Kerouac, on the other hand, the reader can enjoy the struggle and foolishness of the character's endeavor to communicate with a stranger through the register of a contact language.

“A LARGE CAN OF WORMS”

A certain lack of reliance on the work of translators is reinforced after Malinowski's generation, when “learning the language” or so far as possible “working in the local language” was prescribed (CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 22). Clifford asserts that

This opens a rather large can of worms. Can one speak of *the* language, singular, as if there were only one? What does it mean to learn or use a language? How well can one learn a language in a few years? What about “stranger talk,” specific kinds of discourse used with outsiders? What about many anthropologists' continuing reliance on translators and explicators for complex events, idioms and texts? (1997, p. 22).

Many questions are at stake here, but none of them indicate that learning the local language is a necessary a strategy to make a travel work popular, coherent or even reliable.

“Kitwancool” by Emily Carr (1943), “one of the best known and loved Canadian artists” (MORRIS & O'CONNOR, p.125), is another example of travel narrative that questions the use of language in

communication between natives and travelers. This short story shows that communication between the author/character and most of the *Indians* from this village on the west coast of Canada happens due to the fiery temper of the Ginger Pot, a dog “who bridged the gap between their language and mine with laughter” (p. 128). In Carr’s story, the narrator travels with the mission of painting the Kitwancool totem poles. In order to do so, she tries many different strategies: she uses one of the *Indians* as an interpreter, exchanges glances with an old lady that is responsible for keeping the poles while the interpreter translates the conversation. She also gives this woman a dollar for letting her dry her clothes next to a big fire, then promises to send her the pictures she is painting.

Through all of these efforts in communication (but apparently mainly due to her dog’s presence), the narrator is finally well received by the locals and afterwards can safely go home with her goods. In the end, to her (or to the readers’) surprise, a white policeman tells the narrator about all the trouble between the police and the natives, and states that he would never recommend a woman to go to Kitwancool. If applied to this example, the “large can of worms” suggested by Clifford in this narrative includes glances, tips, promises and a Griffon dog, besides an interpreter. All these communication strategies raise doubts about any possible neutrality or effectiveness of learning the native’s language when writing about moments of contact.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Creativity in solving the obstacles of describing the encounters of travelers and natives in travel writing seems to be a key element for the success of the trip, the achievement of a certain internal coherence and the future popularity of a story. It is not the choice of one or another communication strategy by the author that will qualify or characterize the text in theoretical models – it is rather the way each author constructs and narrates these moments that will help readers to fulfill their expectations or cause them surprises due to outcomes of communication. We do not necessarily need to be familiarized with the foreign, sometimes the mere amusement with the author’s struggle

with the linguistic, gestural, material, or animal communication described in the narrative is what makes it accepted and praised. As seen in the work of Stevenson, travel accounts also help question how familiar we are to our fellow citizens, or how factual a travel writer has to be when describing “the other”. From Columbus letter on, we have seen that communication in meetings between travelers and locals involves much more than the use of a common language. Travel narratives can reveal specific points of view, historic backgrounds, hidden or open agendas. But what makes the genre so celebrated, besides the craft of good storytelling, is the exciting, marvelous and sometimes extreme narration of the encounters between different people.

By the end of his book, when in China, Zé do Rock gives up the use of words: in trying to identify the food he is about to eat in a restaurant he just asks “muuuuu?” or “béééé?,” to which the waiter answers “uau uau uau”. And they understand each other.

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