

LANGUAGE EDUCATION: CULTURAL MEDIATION THROUGH CREATING AN IMAGE OF THE FOREIGN COUNTRY

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Abstract

An important part of language education is the development of students' intercultural competence, as attested also by relevant international methodical documents, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Such a competence includes the use of the sociolinguistic dimension of communication and suggests the presentation of imagological discursive types of text in the language acquisition process. As a result of the recent national Slovak school curriculum reform in the area of language education, possibly two foreign languages have been established in state schools as early as at the first stage of primary education. At the same time, according to respective national methodical documents, foreign language teaching should emphasize the context of intercultural mediation from the lowest language levels onwards. Therefore, we decided to examine selected Italian language textbooks for foreigners, published by Italian editors and widely used in the Slovak primary and high schools at language levels A1-B1, with the aim to identify the methods and discourse used to create an image of Italy, its culture, and its identity. Using the literary methods, we determined the types of texts presented and described the use of cultural stereotypes and cultural confrontations in relation to stereotyped national identity to create an image of a given country. We proceed from the assumption that the basic and valid strategy of imagological creation is to integrate into the language some precise conceptual ideas that are characterized by key words. Therefore, we pay particular attention to the vocabulary and themes of the selected types of text. The result of our research is a set of key themes and words that are used in Italian language textbooks for foreigners as a basis for creating an image of Italian culture.

Keywords: *Cultural discourse, imagology, linguistic vehicle, foreign language.*

1. Introduction. Objectives and methodological assumptions

In recent years, numerous studies have highlighted how textbooks continue to convey gender, ethnic and cultural stereotypes, as well as political and moral views that influence the formation of students' identities, confirming the hypothesis that nations tend to reinforce their own view of foreign cultures through such representations. This is a phenomenon of scientific circularity, as highlighted by Dumez (2025). In language teaching, Blanchet and Chardenet (2011) emphasise that language teaching is always situated, permeated by identity, political and social issues.

In the context of Slovak school system, the second language, included Italian, is proposed to be enhanced in the nowadays conditions. According to CEFR (companion volume, p. 30) an effective practical communication in the second language is anchored in the pluricultural competence, stressing its semantic aspects: "Both the CEFR descriptive scheme and the action-oriented approach put the co-construction of meaning (through interaction) at the centre of the learning and teaching process". The co-construction of meaning leads directly to the use of such interpretations of the given text to satisfy both learner's refined knowledge and expectations or cultural projections on the other culture. By comparing various socio-cultural elements, the learning process leads to discover to what is general and what is specific in the given cultural feature, but also what is so important that provides an identity element of the communicating culture. In the process of meaning de-coding and re-coding, most of all the receptive skills and reading skills, as well as general culture background of the reader / pupil / student are of stressed importance. These can be facilitated by teacher's intervention oriented on the diversification of the entire educational process (Stranovská & Haringa & Ficzer, 2025). Thus, a choice of images presented to the pupil, either in the textual or in any other form, is a strong vehicle to communicate a country's or national identity as wished to be seen and perceived by the learner. Beyond their explicit pedagogical objectives, such representations

also contribute to what can be defined as educational implicit, namely the set of norms, values and identity models conveyed indirectly through teaching materials. This implicit dimension, often perceived as neutral or self-evident, plays a central role in shaping learners' perceptions of the foreign culture without being explicitly formulated as curricular content.

In this aspect, in our opinion, the importance of text is stressed. Indeed, among “mediation activities” indexed in the CEFR there are listed also “expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature)” which means, in other words, an interpretation and contextualization of the given portion of literary text. Also in the case of “analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature)” we are talking about the textual competence in active and passive form, as well as about the learner's sensibility in reading and interpreting a verbal or textual message. In this ambience, abundance of translations of world-famous contemporary Italian authors and texts to Slovak, may create a good background for creating an image of Italy as a cultural and literary reference point. In accordance to Maria Corti (1976), “Literature, by its very nature, reflects a socio-cultural context, and therefore every particular literary text can be understood as an expression or response to the cultural environment and historical context of its origin and subsequent functioning, also understood in terms of the literatures and cultures that receive it in the form of translation”. Nowadays, texts in schoolbooks are supported and reinforced by multimedial texts and contents (such as videos, interactive texts and exercises, update services in the National politics and culture and many other resources) offered by various platforms pertinent to the single publisher houses or textbook lines.

A recent document released by the Slovak Ministry of education, research and sports, which introduces a curricular school reform, defines the contents and performance standards in accordance to the selection of the input text. We can read in Educational standards in Language and Communication, subfield Foreign Languages (Vzdelávacie štandardy. Vzdelávacia oblasť Jazyk a komunikácia. Podoblasť Cudzie jazyky, p. 11): “Various types of texts in paper, audiovisual and digital form are used in the development of communicative language skills. The choice of texts must be appropriate to the level of communication, age and interests of the pupils: extracts from fairy tales and illustrated stories, short descriptions, songs, poems, nursery rhymes, cartoons, posters, notices, leaflets, etc.”. In addition, the input text should be in accordance to topics and thematics proposed in CEFR (such as “family”, “housing”, “human body”, “fashion”, “travelling”, “education”, “leisure time”, “gastronomy”, “comparing cultures”, “shopping” and many others, just to list those who coincide with the image of Italy as a reference point in gastronomy, tourism, fashion, art and culture).

Remarks Dörnyei (2007, p. 27): “Thus, quantitative researchers follow a ‘meaning in the general’ strategy, whereas qualitative researchers concentrate on an in-depth understanding of the ‘meaning in the particular’”. Therefore we offer an analysis of the single contents in the selected manuals as representative examples of the tendencies and strategies of communication of cultural contents and creating an image of the foreign country, respecting the affirmation of Cohen et al. (2007, p. 476): “Content analysis, then, describes the manifest characteristics of communication [...] infers the antecedents of the communication (the reasons for, and purposes behind, the communication, and the context of communication) [...] and infers the consequences of the communication (its effects).”

2. Discussion

Our aim was to examine selected Italian language textbooks for foreigners, published by Italian editors and widely used in Slovak primary and high schools at language levels A1, for teaching a second foreign language at adolescent age, with the aim to identify the methods and discourse used to create an image of Italy, its culture, and its identity centered for such a learner's profile. We have described some cultural stereotypes and cultural confrontations in relation to stereotyped national identity to create an image of Italy, centering mostly on verbal texts, eventually accompanied by pictures. We have proceeded from the assumption that the basic and valid strategy of imagological creation is to integrate into the language some precise conceptual ideas that are characterized by key words. Therefore, we have paid particular attention to the vocabulary and themes of the selected types of text. The result of our research is a set of distinctive key themes and words that are used in Italian language textbooks for foreigners as a basis for creating an image of Italian culture. These circularly repeating and gradually widened key themes and cultural images are also implicated by the textbook methodical structural sections dedicated to lexical and intercultural competences aimed to be achieved. We did not pay as much attention to general cultural features common to mostly all national cultures (such as numbers, colors, time measurement and many others).

Table 1. Key themes and words used to create an image of Italy in the examined manuals.

Topic	Image	Keywords	Message	Notes
Learning Italian	Pictures of Italy		Italian language as a culture vehicle	
	Italian gestures		the importance of paralinguistic competence	in the communication often the most important part of the message is not expressed by words
	Social hierarchy and contacts	<i>ciao, buongiorno, arrivederci, arrivederLa</i>	greetings and their formal context	
	Famous Italian cities and places	<i>quartiere, città d'arte</i>	Italy as a reference point of European and world-wide tourism	rich visual material (for ex. video-tasting section <i>In viaggio con Sara</i> in «Nuovo Espresso Plus»)
Gastronomy	Italian coffe	<i>caffè</i>	drinks and food as cultural and social vehicles	social rituals connected with various types of coffee
	Italian meal World-wide famous Italian receipes	<i>pranzo, colazione, cena, bar, ristorante, osteria</i>	social meaning of a common dinner	Food as a social mediator; Confronting national customs in restaurants
	Typical Italian products	<i>prodotti tipici, D.O.C., D.O.P., sapori</i>		
Festivities, occasions	Calendario delle feste nazionali	<i>regalo, la Notte Bianca, Festa della donna, San Valentino, sagra, festa, piazza, auguri, compleanno, brindisi</i>	Italians as joyful, warm-hearted, and willing; typical gifts for selected occasions (often related to love)	gifts as social interaction symbols; Italians are shown in various pleasant social interactions
Family	Traditional and contemporary Italian family	<i>famiglia, amici, sposi, matrimonio, vicini, amore</i>	Italians as sociable and family-loving	interesting: in stamped manuals images of traditional family happiness, but in complementary on line materials also other social tendencies
Travelling	Moving in the city and outside	<i>strada, vicolo, via, viale, albergo, cartelli stradali, mezzi di trasporto</i>	human voyages; organization and discipline in city life	
Leisure time, Sports	Mountains Seaside Sport campus	<i>vacanza, sport, correre, nuotare, andare in montagna, andare al mare</i>	pictures of businessmen in typical Italian blue shirt and pictures of young people doing sports or being at home	sports and free time as social occasions; organised and active free time as promotional campaign to buy free-time products
Housing	Typical Italian urban and countryside architecture	<i>casa, appartamento, villa</i>	housing as an economical and social issue related to the topic of “family”	

To stress a comparative aspect of intercultural communication, the manuals contain specific sections in which the images of Italy are proposed and systemized (for ex. *Culture a confronto* in «Chiario»; *Caffè culturale* in «Nuovo espresso plus»). In first it works mostly with pictures, then words and concepts. The pertinent video portions present always young people, friends or couples, with typical Italian acting, gesturing and clothing, in representative Italian ambience (the short stories are located mostly in idyllic ambiances of Florence or Rome).

At higher language levels, the cultural concepts in the examined manuals are presented widely by portions of literary text which are either canonical in the traditional sense of this word or which are proposed to reform it into a new literary, thus cultural canon. In the postmodern era, the literary canon has been repositioned as a factor that identifies a certain community: “The literary canon contains the identity values that shape the community and every individual who belongs to it” (Domenichelli, ed.). From an educational point of view, the literary canon can also be defined as “the dominant object of knowledge in literary education” (Magalová, 2013). In the textbooks chosen, we can see that, alongside classical and canonical

authors, cultural mediation is carried out mainly by representatives of commercially successful forms and genres (such as detective novels, novellas, biographies, etc.), bearers of a moral heritage or values closely linked to key moments in the development of Italian society. Thus, analysing the textbooks of the «Via del Corso» series by Edilingua and «Magari» by Alma Edizioni, at levels A1 - B2 respectively, we come across, for example, the works of Leonardo Sciascia on the theme of the *mafia*, linguistically interesting treatments by Andrea Camilleri, or the cinematic treatment of canonical texts of early Italian literature. Canonical writers (e.g. Manzoni, Eco, Dante, Ariosto) are often presented without textual excerpts in a cultural section dedicated to general knowledge (Marin & Diadori, 2019). We may also come across passages by Alessandro Baricco, interviews or brief notes on Antonio Tabucchi, Massimo Carlotto or Giorgio Faletti (De Giuli & Guastalla & Naddeo, 2013). As for thematics, (young) love and interpersonal relationships in general, e.g. authors as Federico Moccia are mediated. At the highest levels of linguistic competence (C1-C2), publishers offer lesser-known and perhaps more engaging authors, because they are very contemporary, such as Mauro Corona, Erri De Luca, Stefano Benni or Valeria Parrella, while also re-proposing canonical authors such as Antonio Tabucchi, Leonardo Sciascia or Italo Calvino (De Giuli & Guastalla & Naddeo, 2013).

3. Conclusions

In a contemporary context marked by controversy over the identity content of teaching materials, this article offers an interpretation that could be useful for understanding the dynamics of identity communication through education. Far from being neutral tools, school textbooks are devices for transmitting values, representations and social norms, often implicit, that reflect dominant worldviews of the emittent. The observations made here above raise ethical questions regarding the responsibility of textbook designers and publishers, whose lexical, visual and thematic choices contribute not only to linguistic learning but also to the construction of cultural hierarchies and normative representations of the foreign country. Nevertheless, the strategy of imagological creation regards both the sender's intention and the recipient's refined imagination, his sensibility and interpretation skills. It is therefore specific for every relationship between two (or more) cultures that are communicating. In our case, we have focused strictly to Italian imagological proposal as reflected by elementary language level textbooks distributed in Slovakia. Whether through language education and intercultural mediation or through travel and other forms of imagological discourse, the image of the Other plays a crucial role in the creation of personal and national identities (Píšová, 2025).

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