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### Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding

# SOCIOCULTURAL REALIA IN UNIVERSITY WEBSITE VOCABULARY: ACADEMIC CHALLENGES IN STUDENT MOBILITY

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### *Abstract*

The paper tackles the issues of linguo-sociocultural realia used in the international academic discourse, on university webpages, in particular. To study sociolinguistic and linguocultural aspects of academic discourse is a pressing challenge as these parameters make it possible to get an idea of some socially and culturally determined peculiarities of studying abroad. The focus of the research is linguo-sociocultural competency which is fundamental for building up students' sociocultural and intercultural skills whilst getting ready for academic mobility programmes. Linguo-sociocultural competency is assumed to be a person's readiness to understand a different nation's culture, to realize values and concepts of alien sociocultural settings through a foreign language. The goal of the research is to define linguocultural significance of realia by studying the information students work with to successfully adjust to new academic and social conditions. The main method used for analyzing and describing linguo-sociocultural realia is commentating. The analysis revealed that the enucleated linguo-sociocultural realia are a part of the information space that helps international students effectively adapt to new academic conditions, social and cultural life at the university, on its campus, in a particular city or country they are going to study. We examined the realia that expose the way both university and state offices can support exchange students. It is concluded that studying linguo-sociocultural realia is vital for students to properly adapt to foreign culture and new social settings, to overcome mobility challenges they would face.

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**Keywords:** Academic mobility, sociocultural realia, university website.



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## 1. Introduction

The idea of transcultural dialogue suggests that human beings or communities of various ethnic, cultural and language roots deal on the basis of mutual respect and genuine understanding. The lack of dialogue forms a ground for stereotypes, establishes a tense atmosphere of mistrust and disbelief. This problem is an essential issue in the framework of new globalization trends.

The goal of building knowledge and evidence for sustainable and creative development in the global culture space is a pressing challenge for current humanitarian research, educational cooperation and transaction. One of the mechanisms is a professional dialogue and collaboration of universities within academic and research programmes, student and staff mobility procedures (Zipunnikova et al., 2018).

Some researchers focus on practical aspects of the joint programs and degrees which could help facilitate the university's development at the level of practical implementation, evaluation process, recognition of evaluation decisions, terminology (Delgado, 2019). Some scholars discuss key normative principles and methodological dimensions related to academic mobility and give empirical examples of the mobility metrics presented using a nationally representative data set (Quintana & Correnti, 2019).

The EU language education regulations (Conseil de l'Europe, 2020) reveal the idea of profession focused academic skills (both theoretical and empiric) being drastically important. However, awareness of public's or individual's daily routine (day planning, transport issues, communication and information tools) is also of great importance for foreign language activities.

Transcultural dialogue implies the knowledge of values and beliefs of some particular social groups and communities in other countries. So, it is emphasized that practicing fruitful transculturalism through proper social behaviour is interlaced with language skills. Any communicative situation implicates that language competencies combine quite all right with some common skills: background or prior knowledge, sociocultural competencies, professional experiences, etc.

Russia's integrating into the international academic space involves universities participating in the process of academic mobility, that means (among others) Russian students entering a great variety of foreign mobility programmes. Still it is observed worldwide that the increase in student mobility internationally is not paralleled in the level of support received from the university when undertaking international placements (Conroy & McCarthy, 2019).

The current situation demands getting hold with international academic discourse and its different national versions. Sociolinguistic and linguocultural aspects in the texts of some particular genres within academic discourse reveal most vividly national and cultural peculiarities of studying abroad. Furthermore, returnees as ambassadors, creating links between international student community and home student community before, during and after the education abroad experience could potentially help university mates to be more marketable at a global scale. International students have potentials to be future contacts for inducing the flow of international students evident by the social network or word-of-mouth referrals as one of the prominent pull factors. (Snodin, 2019, p. 1653)

One of the main functions of the discourse is declared to be institutionalization, i.e. fixing norms and rules regulating transactions in public life spheres. Academic discourse, which belongs to institutional ones, has been variously understood as it serves for all communication activities in the educational sphere, including higher education (Belousova, 2018).

The version of academic discourse which is formed by the content of university official websites is very specific in its language self-presentation. The information found on a university webpage reveals not only the mission and activities of the institution, but also demonstrates social and cultural contexts it is functioning in as the university is a potential dynamizing agent for sustainable development of the society it works for (Diaz et al., 2019).

Polunina (2011) assumes that in western countries being motivated to get an academic degree and striving to level up professional competencies are highly valuable features. Members of some particular social groups have their own, specific education strategies (Polunina, 2011). Thus, the French education system is based on encyclopedianism and egalitarianism (or equalitarianism), the British one is focused on humanism, which is mainly about transactions between a teacher and a student, German educators cultivate highest academic standards. Cultural and educational traditions help to keep the identity of a national academic discourse within the framework of the EU education system (Polunina, 2011).

It is indubitably apparent that language advisors accomplish their mission to support a rapidly growing international students community. Nevertheless, some researchers assume that language advisors lack opportunities for their vocational development when it concerns the international students expertise as there is a great variety of factors to provoke non-favourable managerial contexts for that, including financial and time shortage, academic and vocational re-classification (Tran et al., 2019). All the mentioned hardships can be transformed from barriers into perspectives when redirecting students to a foreign partner university website to search for sociocultural bumps they would stumble across and then discuss some new concepts with a language advisor or, which is even more fruitful, with international programme returnees.

Boguslavskaya (2018) underlines that linguo-sociocultural nucleus is a fundamental component for different spheres of communication and cooperation. Building up a concept of linguo-sociocultural literacy is proposed to be a chief aim for Russia's higher education system and its polycultural academic space (Boguslavskaya & Zhukova, 2018). University students, when they are sent to study abroad, are a kind of agents for the culture dialogue, they are ready to getting different sociocultural experience. Linguo-sociocultural aspect in research is believed to be the question of the day as there emerged the so-called "new literacy" trend (a cluster of digital, financial, medical, juridical, ecological, intercultural types of literacy) (Boguslavskaya, 2018).

Literacy means possessing knowledge and skills. Sociocultural skills are the tools you need to be ready for intercultural communication, to adapt your communicative behaviour to some drastically new conditions, to overcome communication failures, which are possible, by all means. Linguo-sociocultural competency implies not only skills for proper communicative behaviour, but also linguistic skills and sociocultural knowledge. Linguo-sociocultural competency is assumed to be a person's readiness to understand a different nation's culture, to realize values and realia of alien sociocultural settings through a foreign language. Thus, the main components of the competency are values and concepts, cognition, motivation, and transaction (Kostikova, 2011).

French and Canadian researchers have studied mobility adaptation challenges and they suggest that there can be hardships about various spheres of life – sociocultural, academic, administrative, financial, personal. Exchange students have to adapt to absolutely new cultural elements, to a new life style, to some

new cultural, social and institutional norms and standards, to the teaching techniques and assessment scales that differ from what they got used to dealing with and they have to do it in a very short time.

At Université Laval (Quebec) they made a survey which asked the following question: «What would you like to know when you go to Quebec?». Foreign students replied they wanted to know where to buy bus tickets, what are the work hours of a post office, where to buy food, what clothing stores are good for students. Before coming to Quebec students can access the online guidance that contains all the necessary information about Université Laval and its campus, about education process, registration and immigration, housing, transport, healthcare, financial issues, including a short glossary of Quebec idioms (L'Association des étudiantes et des étudiants de Laval inscrits aux études supérieures).

There are investigations that focus on the international students' marital status; seeking to understand a pattern that may differentiate the sociocultural acclimation or alienation processes, exploring their socializations within academic (e.g. classmates and professors) or nonacademic contexts (e.g. on or off-campus social/affinity groups), racial-ethnic sensitivity and perceived pressure and stereotypes among foreign students. (Pepanyan et al., 2019, p. 122)

Consulting university websites makes it possible for international students to get basic sociocultural information and thereby start forming linguo-sociocultural competency.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Levelling up linguo-sociocultural competency helps students successfully adjust to foreign cultures and new social settings, get over many of mobility challenges. Gorodetskaya (2007) is quite right when she proposes to define a relevant set of linguocultural components to make it a part of a curricula in order to escape culture conflicts in academic life. Thus, the key problem is to find out the significance of sociocultural realia as a tool for building up linguo-sociocultural competency.

Kirilenko (2015) studied the process of creating notions and concepts in sociolinguistics and emphasized the importance of defining social and functional forms of language, which was scrutinized by L.B. Nikolskiy. The researcher suggests that when applied communicatively within some particular spheres the functional “specialization” of language can arise informative specification. The essence of this specification is about fastening necessary language elements tightly to some particular communication sphere (Kirilenko, 2015). So, we can define both social significance and communicative loading of a language item in a specific information space.

Many researchers focus on the ways culture-bound information is expressed. They analyze various styles, discourse practices, lexical units (language items which contain nationally relevant culture component in their meaning, idioms, professional words, etc.), peculiarities of the grammatical structure of discourse (Boldyrev & Dubrovskaya, 2016); language items that lack translation equivalence, semes that are significant in their linguocultural aspect (Sternin, 2011); cultural and onomastic realia, precedent names, national and cultural symbols (Maklakova, 2011). Some scholars would study non-linguistic means of communication, aphorisms and idioms to enucleate nationally and culturally significant concepts (Grigoryan, 2010).

Moroslin (2010) studies how key words function on the Internet and makes a conclusion that these items keep information about the audience's interests, characterize the audience as it is, and, which is vital,

expose nation-focused aspects of the texts. Key words evince the linguistic worldview and are immanent for fundamental culture spheres (Glukhova, 2010).

The above-mentioned language units contain not only culture-bound components, but also socially marked information that is why to use the term “linguo-sociocultural” is quite reasonable. In some cases communication should be established with a relevant adaptation to the hosting culture. Some scholars discuss further implications for understanding intercultural communication; in particular, they argue that “a transcultural perspective provides a significant new dimension to research in which borders between languages, communities and cultures are transcended, transgressed and transformed” (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019, p. 471).

Researching the content of university websites makes it possible to study nation-focused sociocultural realia which are of great importance for successful cooperation with potential participants of communication process, i.e. future students and their parents, mobility partners. In fact, assessing websites is considered to be “a Multiple Criteria Decision Making problem (MCDM)”, and there is a massive number of criteria to investigate the information quality of a website (Rekik et al., 2018).

While assessing university webpages researchers take into consideration a set of quality factors, sub-factors and criteria such as accuracy, timelines, easy understanding, organization, consistent representation, easy navigation (Mavetera et al., 2017). Evaluating university websites effectiveness researchers mention at least one component that makes it inaccessible to some users: “the most prominent is neglecting to provide equivalent text alternative for content that has been presented in non-text formats, although doing so would be a relatively simple matter” (Kurt, 2017, p. 505).

Thus, the most significant components of university web-focused discourse are genres and types of texts, values, norms and standards, dominating strategies and concepts, scenarios of cooperation with addresses. The texts are ranged by the parameters corresponding to the nomination of the attached documents and language units describing sociocultural realia.

### **3. Research Questions**

The current contribution aims at the research on the ways university websites reflect HEI national and cultural ethnicity.

Recently there appeared quite many theories that have put forward the issues concerning the term “realia” and the criteria of realia classification. Realia may be classified into some categories: material culture terms, culture-bound concepts and language related phenomena (Kretov & Fenenko, 2013). When the term “realia” is used to describe culture-bound concepts it mainly refers to semantic fractions alien to other languages (Minchenkov & Minchenkov, 2016). This paper treats realia as a combination of socio and cultural components presenting both the situation and the language phenomenon.

It has been recognized that the criteria of referring a linguistic phenomenon to linguo-sociocultural realia may be quite diverse.

Sternin (2011) suggests that rational objective explanation is required to identify the linguocultural peculiarities of a linguistic unit, its meaning or semantic component. Cultural commentary of linguistic phenomena may specify their linguocultural importance. Thus, linguocultural importance of a linguistic unit may be determined by «the explanation of the phenomena of language through culture facts».

Some scholars believe that the criteria of referring linguistic phenomena to realia are quite subjective as some culture-specific units may attain different nuances in meanings or lose their specificity due to the context. Hence, it is necessary to identify culture-specific units in the text and then take into consideration the structure of knowledge: perceptive knowledge, background knowledge, and contextual knowledge (Minchenkov & Minchenkov, 2016). University websites usually provide reference links though sometimes it is necessary to turn to an external search to find some relevant information.

The study shows that various linguo-sociocultural realia found on university websites cannot be referred to as untranslatables, as they do not differ much from similar other units, or they mean similar concepts just bearing different names.

The choice of the realia under analysis is predetermined by the importance of students' social, cultural and academic adjustment. In terms of this study the collected data is classified according to possible communication failures mainly in sociocultural and educational spheres.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The basic objective of the research is to examine university websites and analyze linguo-sociocultural realia that are vital for successful social and academic adjustment of international students.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The research methods and techniques adopted in this project combine methodologies that can shed light on the use of culture-specific realia in the content of university websites.

Methodologically, the study draws on preliminary research of the concepts and theories of linguistic landscape; collecting, analyzing and synthesizing specific linguo-sociocultural data; commenting linguo-sociocultural realia.

Providing commentaries to realia leads to identifying and overcoming potential obstacles in cultural, social, academic, and psychological adjustment of international students.

#### **6. Findings**

The research aims at the analysis of the European university websites focusing on linguo-sociocultural information presented there. The research focused on the webpages and sections designed for international students.

The analysis of some European Universities' websites (Paris Sciences et Lettres (<https://www.psl.eu/>), École Polytechnique (<https://www.polytechnique.edu/>), the University of Sussex (<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/>), City, University of London (<https://www.city.ac.uk/>), Université de Nantes (<https://www.univ-nantes.fr/>) shows that realia used on the websites reflect linguo-sociocultural information through specially designed pages or information blocks depending on the degree programmes that are offered by universities.

This research highlights important findings based on the analysis of the Nantes University (Université de Nantes, 2020) website. There is a special page for international students *Etudiants internationaux: venir étudier à Nantes (International Students – Study in Nantes)* which has some sections:

*En programme d'échange (Incoming Exchange Students), Hors échange (Incoming Non-Exchange Students), and Apprendre le français (Learn French at Nantes University).*

Potential international students may follow the links that aim at providing information to facilitate a smooth transition from home to the host country: *Avant de partir (Before leaving your home country), Arrivée à Nantes (Arrival in Nantes), Loisirs et culture (Extracurricular and cultural activities).* International students are likely to face adjustment issues in several areas so this webpage contains current and pertinent information for international students like financing their studies and estimated budget, admission and enrolling at Nantes University and the like.

“*Guichet Unique - Accueil des Étudiants internationaux*” (*Guichet Unique – International students: Welcome and Information desk*) is the realia international students face first. The Guichet Unique is at *la Maison des Echanges internationaux et de la Francophonie (the House of International Exchanges and French-speaking communities)*. The Guichet Unique services provide necessary information about administrative procedures like registration at the university, residence permit, accommodation allowance, health, insurance, transport, student life, and more. Student tutors and international relations office staff welcome and offer help to international students.

Various institutions organise information points at the Guichet Unique: *l'Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration, OFII (French Office for Immigration and Integration), le Centre régional des oeuvres universitaires et scolaires, CROUS (Regional Center for Universities and Schools), le Service universitaire de médecine préventive et de protection de la santé de l'université, Sumpps (the University service of preventive medicine and health care)*. However, some institution names are abbreviated and need decoding. Information on public transport is presented by the abbreviations SNCF and TAN where the first stands for *la Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français (French National Railway Company)* and the latter for *Transports de l'agglomération nantaise (Nantes Public Transport)*. If a student pays rent, they can benefit from housing aid from the *CAF, Caisse d'Allocations Familiales (Family allowance)* or *APL, l'Aide Personnalisée au Logement (Housing assistance)* (Caisse d'allocations familiales..., 2020).

The Nantes University website provides information for international students with children and families. That category of students can get various types of childcare which depends on the age of kids. Students on exchange can choose a group childcare centre like *crèches or micro-crèches (day nurseries), haltes-garderies (daycare centers), and jardins d'enfants (kindergartens)* or individual childcare *assistante maternelle (childminder), garde à domicile (in-home childcare) or garde partagée (a shared nanny)*. There are also *centres de loisir (day camps)* for school-age children during school holidays. Factors affecting the choice of childcare may vary cross-culturally including age range, child care providers and some others. Accordingly the language units used to describe child care can represent examples of sociolinguistic realia.

In Nantes international students with children can get help from numerous childcare organisations which provide either bilingual or multilingual support (with enrolment via The Guichet Unique): *Fluffy*, a French-English bilingual childcare centre, *La Maison de Jordan (Jordan House)*, a French/English/Spanish childcare centre, *Hänsel et Gretel (Hansel and Gretel)*, a Franco-German childcare centre, and *Une Souris Verte (A Green Mouse)*, a French-English bilingual childcare centre on a houseboat. The names of these childcare centres refer to well-known fairy-tale characters like a *Fluffy Pony*, the character from a series of

animations Fluffle Puff Tales, and *Hänsel et Gretel*, the characters from a German fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm.

The cultural adjustment that international students undergo throughout their experience of living in a foreign land can be a crucial point. To avoid possible psychological distress the section with the information about the association *Autour du Monde – ESN Nantes (Around the world – ESN (Erasmus Student Network) Nantes)* offers intercultural activities to improve students' integration in Nantes and at Nantes University. The association helps international students get settled in on the campus and in the city. *Autour du Monde – ESN* offers activities throughout the whole stay, linking international students and local businesses interested in their profile and getting novices involved in community life through conversation groups (English/French, Spanish/French, German/French) which occur in bars in Nantes, during outings and visits in Nantes and the surrounding area, and Welcome parties. The mission of *Autour du Monde – ESN* is to help international students develop their cultural awareness following the basic idea of Students Helping Students.

The cultural component is presented in the section *Discover Nantes (Découvrir et venir à Nantes)* where exchange students may get the link to the Nantes Saint-Nazaire website (<https://www.nantes-saintnazaire.fr/en>) and choose cultural offerings that invigorate the neighbourhoods and feature a peculiar Nantes style. *La Folle Journée de Nantes (Nantes Crazy Day)* is a French annual classical music festival held in Nantes. It is the largest classical music event in France. The name of the festival refers to the Pierre Beaumarchais play “Le mariage de Figaro” (The Marriage of Figaro), or “*La Folle Journée*” (*The Follies of a Day*). The “*Voyage à Nantes*” (*A Journey to Nantes*) grants an exceptional experience combining tourism and culture, and it is highly praised by visitors and locals. The symbol of the Nantes style, *le Grand Éléphant (the Great Elephant)*, is the giant elephant made of wood and steel that walks along the central area. Passengers climb aboard the elephant to enjoy a tour around the site. *Les Machines de l'île (Machines of the Isle of Nantes)* is an artistic, touristic and cultural project, a collection of strange mechanisms that inhabit the Île de Nantes. These works of art make up *Le Voyage à Nantes* spark the imagination and get the feeling of the city.

The linguo-cultural component of these realia gives international students the opportunity to learn about Nantes society and culture outside of their placement, to switch perception angles, to see unity in diversity and, thus, to become less prejudiced against differences.

## 7. Conclusion

The number of international students attending colleges and universities in Europe has increased significantly. Most European universities provide support services for international students to boost the excellence of academic mobility experience. Sociocultural realia exchange students come across may be related to national and cultural peculiarities and differences in educational systems. The majority of university websites are designed to provide incoming students with socio-linguistic information to ease the transition to a different country. Reference links may provide extra information on national mentality and national behavior. Providing linguo-sociocultural commentaries to realia helps to deal with adaptation issues earlier and more successfully.



The realia analyzed in the study are linked to information and social support, successful cultural, social, and academic adjustment. The results of the research made it possible to conclude that identifying and analyzing linguo-sociocultural realia has a great potential for language didactics as it makes it possible to create a database to assist potential international students and develop their linguo-sociocultural competency. Sociocultural competency is a tool for levelling up intercultural communication and promoting successful cultural, academic, and social adjustment. Being aware of linguo-sociocultural realia may alleviate the stress associated with the experience of living and learning in a new culture and eventually lead to effective acculturation.

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