DISCOURSES OF ALTERITY. EXPLORING CULTURAL RELATIVISM IN ERASMUS STUDENTS' NARRATIVES

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Abstract
This article examines cultural perceptions based on a theoretical framework which includes anthropological concepts, especially that of cultural relativism (Franz Boas, Melville Herskovitz, and Ralph Linton), emphasizing that human behaviour and language require contextualization, rather than universal judgement. Utilizing a qualitative interpretative method, the study applies Linton's cultural reading grid to analyse Erasmus students' narratives. While the students identify objective Universals and Specialties, through cultural observation and social interaction, their subjective engagement with Alternatives and Individual Peculiarities transforms static norms into a personalized reality; in other words, it turns standard social rules into a unique experience.

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1. Introduction to Cultural Relativism

The study of *interculturality* - a field as fascinating and vast as it is complex and controversial - brings to the forefront an important concept called *cultural relativism*. Cultural relativism represents the basis of modern anthropology, marking a transition from rigid, ethnocentric views of earlier theories to a more flexible and ethnorelative perspective, which allows individuals to appreciate cultural differences without judgement. This principle disagrees with the concept of a single standard of civilization, and emphasizes that each culture has its own set of rules and values, thus being contextually valid and meaningful.

Cultural relativism is considered an essential theoretical principle in modern cultural anthropology. The concept promotes an attitude of understanding and tolerance towards others, which is essential for effective communication. By recognizing that our judgments are conditioned by our own *cultural patterns*, we learn to view differences as legitimate expressions of human diversity and not as deviations from the norm. This notion emphasizes that there is no single superior

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cultural model and that every culture must be interpreted within its own specific context.

Three thinkers from cultural anthropology, who construct a comprehensive vision of culture analysis - Franz Boas, Melville Herskovitz and Ralph Linton - underline that culture cannot be measured by universal standards, and that understanding human behaviour requires both contextualization and attention to the diversity of socio – cultural experience.

Boas provides the conceptual foundation of relativism and historical specificity, emphasizing the individuality of each culture; Herskovits explores the subjective and ethical dimensions of culturally grounded value systems, and Linton supplies a practical grid which accounts for variation within cultures. He rejects single universal standards of cultural progress and states that:

*... changes that appear to one as progress appear to another as retrogression. Attempts to further individualism, to restrict efficiency, to make tradition more binding would be considered as objectionable and energetically resisted by many. What is desirable depends upon valuations that are not universally accepted (*Boas, 1928, paragraphs 1998-1999)

In the following quote, Boas demonstrates how cultural values vary, therefore it is impossible to impose a uniform standard of cultural advancement on all civilizations, such as classifying all societies as primitive or advanced.

The social ideals of the Central African Negroes, of the Australians, Eskimo, and Chinese are so different from our own that the valuations given by them to human behaviour are not comparable. What is considered good by one is considered bad by another. (Boas, 1928, paragraphs 200-201).

Another anthropologist who made a major contribution to the development of cultural relativism, a central concept of twentieth-century anthropology, is Melville J. Herskovits. In *The Fundamentals of Cultural Anthropology* (1967), the author examined intercultural relations through anthropological lens, emphasizing that the principle of relativity is the basis of the relationship between individuals and their cultural environments. He argued that value judgments emerge from lived experience and are interpreted through culturally specific frameworks. These judgments are therefore not absolute, but are shaped by what Herskovits calls a *frame of reference*. He considers that every culture has its own *frame of reference*, resulting in a plurality of cultural codes rather than in a single universal standard. In his view, *cultural relativism* provides methodological and ethical means of overcoming ethnocentrism, which he defines as "*the belief that one's own way of life is superior to all others*" (Herskovits, 1967: 57).

Accordingly, Herskovits emphasizes that all value judgments are context-dependent. As he stated:

…cultural relativism is a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own. Instead of underscoring differences from absolute norms that, however objectively arrived at, are nonetheless the product of a given time or place, the relativistic point of view brings into relief the validity of every set of norms for the people whose lives are guided by them, and the values these represent.(Herskovits, 1948: 76).

From this perspective, behaviour cannot be properly interpreted without reference to the cultural conditions that shape it; therefore, it is inseparable from this cultural framework. In order to account for this internal variation, anthropological research, especially by Ralph Linton's perspective, has demonstrated that cultural diversity can be found not only between societies, but also within them.

Linton suggests a classification scheme that differentiates between levels of similar and distinct behaviour within a single culture (Linton, 1967: 218–219). The author summarizes this conception of *internal cultural variation* by describing culture as a range of behaviours or affective responses, all of which may be classified under four main heads: *Universals*, *Specialties*, *Alternatives*, and *Individual Peculiarities*.

- the *Universals* encompass beliefs, values, norms, and practices shared by all members of a given society, such as language, basic social relations, and standard forms of conduct;
- the *Specialties* refer to behaviours associated with specific subgroups, including those defined by gender, occupation, or social role;
- the *Alternatives* denote culturally determined but non-obligatory modes of behaviour that offer different means of achieving similar ends, such as variations in family organization or artistic expression;
- the *Individual Peculiarities* consist of distinctive personal traits, habits, or innovations that fall at the margins of cultural norms, but contribute to cultural dynamism and change.

If we observe the culture of any homogenous society, we will find that the content of this culture can be divided into three categories, this being derived from the extent to which the elements from each category are shared by the society's members (…). First, there are those ideas, habits and conditioned emotional responses which are common to all sane, adult members of the society. Well call these the Universals. (…). Second, we have those elements of culture which are shared by the members of certain socially recognised categories of individuals, but which are not shared by the total population. We will call these the Specialities. (…). Third there are in every culture a considerable number of traits which are

shared by certain individuals, but which are not common to all the members of the society or even to all the members of any one of the socially recognised categories. We will call these Alternatives. (...). Beyond the limits of culture there lies still a fourth category of habits, ideas or conditioned emotional responses; that of Individual Peculiarities. (Linton, 1936: 272-274).

To sum up, a review of the works of Ralph Linton, Melville Herskovits, and Franz Boas reveals a logical and complementary framework for comprehending cultural variation and the relativity of human behaviour. As the fundamental principle of cultural relativism states, Boas disapproved of ethnocentric cultural hierarchies and showed that cultures must be interpreted in light of their distinct histories and contexts.

Boas's student, Melville Herskovits, further developed the idea that value judgments are influenced by culture and maintained that norms and values are only understandable within their own cultural context, since each person sees experiences through the lens of their own *frame of reference*. According to Herskovits, *cultural relativism* is both a methodological principle and an ethical requirement. It advocates analysing behaviours in light of the internal logic of the community in which they take place, rather than imposing one's cultural values on others.

Ralph Linton's work complements the above-mentioned perspectives by emphasizing internal diversity within cultures. His classification of cultural characteristics into *Universals*, *Specialties*, *Alternatives*, and *Individual Peculiarities* shows that behaviour is a dynamic process, a continuum of activities, neither uniform nor rigid, even within a single community. Therefore, rather than giving an action a moral worth or a judgment, the anthropologist's job is to determine where it falls on that continuum of practices. Linton's framework also removes ethnocentric biases, allowing researchers to analyse a culture / a society as a heterogeneous dynamic system. In this way, anthropologists can explain behaviours and practices without using external judgments (such as "it's good/bad/normal/abnormal/natural" etc) and can argue that a society has a distinct identity (through its shared norms) while also acknowledging that no two members of that society are identical (through individual variation).

As we could notice in the above-mentioned research, there is an interdependence between the theoretical views presented. Bridges always exist between language and culture, that is why, Malinowsky's central concept from anthropological linguistics, that of "context", complements our theoretical overview.

Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the pioneers of the above-mentioned field, considers that "utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation" (Malinowski 1923: 307). This idea has been regarded as "one of the necessary pillars of any

theory of pragmatics" (Verschueren 1999: 75). In the following quotes Malinowski explains the basic idea which characterizes the field of anthropological linguistics – that of the importance of context in the creation of meaning – in this sense, language is not just a collection of abstract words, but a social tool that only makes sense when you understand the environment in which it is used:

…it needs no special stressing that in a primitive language the meaning of any single word is to a very high degree dependent on its context. The words wood, paddle, place had to be retranslated in the free interpretation in order to show what is their real meaning, conveyed to a native by the context in which they appear (...). Thus, starting from the wider idea of context, we arrive once more at the results of the foregoing section, namely that the study of any language, spoken by a people who live under conditions different from our own and possess a different culture, must be carried out in conjunction with the study of their culture arid of their environment. (Malinowski, 1935: 284).

Furthermore, the author exemplifies how the situation's context is a crucial element in interpreting the meaning of a statement; words are always relevant only in the specific circumstances in which they occur, rather than as isolated objects. He believes that every statement has a practical purpose; it serves as an intermediary between speaker's state of mind and the external environment. Thus, in order to truly understand any speech, one must consider the context of the situation (such as the speaker's intended meaning, and the social dynamics at that moment) and not just the dictionary definitions of the words.

A statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered. For each verbal statement by a human being has the aim and function of expressing some thought or feeling actual at that moment and in that situation, and necessary for some reason or other to be made known to another person or persons-in order either to serve purposes of common action, or to establish ties of purely social communion, or else to deliver the speaker of violent feelings or passions. (Malinowski, 1935: 307)

Later on, in 1997, Folley defines the field and explains how language functions within a society. Language isn't just a way to describe the world; it is a tool used for establishing and upholding cultural customs and social institutions. This suggests that language is not considered a passive medium for description, but it is viewed as a creative power that actively creates reality. Scholars might discover deeper meanings in the subtleties of everyday speech, by considering language as an extension of cultural norms. For example, silence is rarely a nothingness; it is a potent communication tool that can have various meanings across cultures such as: respect, time for listening, thinking time, disapproval, the presence of a social taboo, embarrassment, boredom etc.

Anthropological linguistics is that sub-field of linguistics which is concerned with the place of language in its wider social and cultural context, its role in forging and sustaining cultural practices and social structures. … Anthropological linguistics views language through the prism of the core anthropological concept, culture, and, as such, seeks to uncover the meaning behind the use, misuse or non-use of language, its different forms, registers and styles. It is an interpretive discipline peeling away at language to find cultural understandings (Foley, 1997: 3).

In the next excerpt, Duranti (1997/2004) also moves away from the idea that language is just a formal system of signs, and views it as cultural practice, as a form of action that people use to navigate their daily lives. Instead of seeing language as just a set of grammar rules, it is viewed as a cultural tool that helps create and maintain the social acts that people perform.

…the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice... it relies on and expands existing methods in other disciplines, linguistics and anthropology in particular, with the general goal of providing an understanding of the multifarious aspects of language as a set of cultural practices, that is, as a system of communication that allows for interpsychological (between individuals) and intrapsychological (in the same individual) representations of the social order and helps people use such representations for constitutive social acts.... linguistic anthropologists work at producing ethnographically grounded accounts of linguistic structures as used by real people in real time and real space. This means that linguistic anthropologists see the subjects of their study, that is, speakers, first and above all as social actors, that is, members of particular, interestingly complex, communities, each organized in a variety of social institutions and through a network of intersecting but not necessarily overlapping sets of expectations, beliefs, and moral values about the world. (Duranti, 1997/2004: 2-3).

The text emphasizes that speech is an inherently context-dependent phenomenon, asserting that the meaning of any utterance is linked to the general conditions and the specific socio-cultural environment where it exists; in other words, we use speech to build social relationships and establish our place within a community. In this way, communication cannot be interpreted just linguistically; the context in which the words are spoken is what determines their true meaning.

By taking into account the authors' definitions of linguistic anthropology, we could notice that language is a living entity that is inextricably linked to the culture and surroundings of its speakers, rather than simply a collection of vocabulary items and grammar rules.

2. Research methodology

2.1 Introduction and method

According to the evidence we could gather, there are no well-established studies that directly apply Ralph Linton's four cultural categories to Erasmus students or, in general to mobility. Most of the existing literature on international student experiences relies on more contemporary and dynamic frameworks, such as acculturation theory (Berry, J., W, 1997/2005/2019), the U-curve of adjustment (Lysgaard, S., 1955), or theories of intercultural identity and competence (King, P. M., & Baxter Magolda, M. B., 2005; Kim, Y. Y., 2001).

These approaches are generally preferred because they focus on the processes of adaptability, identity transformation during intercultural experiences, which is central to the Erasmus experience. One of the main reasons Linton's framework may not be commonly used in this field is that, due to the fact that his classification of culture into *universal* elements, *specialties*, *alternatives*, and *individual* peculiarities was developed within early anthropological traditions and it is mainly descriptive, aiming to categorize cultural content, especially within one single culture. In contrast, Erasmus mobility research is primarily concerned with the dynamic aspects of this experience in terms of adaptability to cultures or the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of living abroad perceived as agents which contribute to identity transformation over time.

However, we believe that Linton's model can still be used or reinterpreted, as a valuable theoretical lens, even if it is not explicitly applied in the studies we researched. In this sense, our research interprets Erasmus students' experiences through Linton's categories, by identifying the *universals/ specialities/ alternatives/ peculiarities* of the host culture that students discover. These are reflected in students' observations, subcultures, adaptability strategies or simply associated with students' personal traits. Linton's framework can complement more widely used theories by offering a structured way to think about different layers of culture.

In conclusion, while there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the direct application of Linton's cultural categories to Erasmus students, this gap can also be seen as an opportunity for further studies. Using Linton's grid can provide a theoretically rich perspective, especially in possible research that aims to bridge classical anthropology with contemporary mobility studies.

Our study focuses on respondents' (Erasmus students) perceptions of the host cultures, through comparison with a focus on the central concept of "context dependency". The study analyses how students identify, experience and interpret

the cultural elements from the visited countries, which reflects that *cultural relativism* is present in all Linton's described layers. Thus, the findings make the transition towards more modern mobility studies, which explain the identity negotiation process in mobility programmes.

The research is based on a qualitative interpretation of semi-formal academic texts (written projects) regarding the Erasmus experience, collected during the Romanian language courses of foreign non - EU students from a technical university in Bucharest. The study reflects 23 foreign students' views regarding the following issues, formulated as guidelines for their projects, in which they have to write a comparison between the intercultural experience gained during their Master Studies (in France and Romania) from educational and socio-cultural point of views. Their programme involves one semester of technical studies in France (the city of Nantes) at Master level and one semester of technical studies in Romania (the city of Bucharest). Within the framework of this Master Programme, the students are take part in a short-term French/Romanian language and culture course. This one-year academic programme is very enriching, according to the students' opinions and offers them the possibility to be part of a cultural immersion as well. The students' final assignment for the Romanian language and culture subject, is to write a testimonial about their Erasmus experience from both a cultural and educational point of view. The data were collected over a period of a year. Below we can find the project requirements, which helped us categorise students' perceptions.

Project Guidelines and Requirements

1. Introduction
The introductory section must highlight the significance of the Erasmus+ mobility programmes in the context of international education. Furthermore, it should clearly articulate the main objective of the paper.

2. Main Body
The core analysis of the project should have four distinct topics:

- **Socio-Cultural Elements:** An examination of local visible cultural signs, including linguistic nuances, architectural styles, public infrastructure, and general safety.
- **Social Integration:** An analysis of perceived social behaviours across various social contexts and an evaluation of the student's ease of adaptation to the host culture.
- **The Academic Environment:** A review of internal institutional regulations, the effectiveness of communication with both peers and the faculty staff, the specific academic activities in which the student participated.

- **Student Life:** A description of leisure activities conducted outside the university campus.

3. Conclusion
The final section of the project must provide a balanced synthesis of the overall experience. It should offer a comparative reflection on the socio-cultural and educational dimensions encountered in both countries.

In our research, we interpreted their projects from a cultural and socio-linguistic perspective, by applying comparison techniques and Linton's cultural reading grid. The anthropological research of Ralph Linton (1936/1967) proposes a segmentation of cultural content into four fundamental categories: *Universals*, *Specialties* (specifics), *Alternatives*, and *Individual Peculiarities*. Applying this grid to the Erasmus testimonials of our research reveals the mechanisms of cultural relativism. As we could notice in students' written discourses on their cultural observations, this perspective suggests that no cultural experience possesses absolute validity; rather, it is functionally integrated into its specific context.

The analysis of students' projects reveals both common views and fundamentally different opinions about education and cultural adaptability in France and Romania, which reflects the cultural relativism principle. The findings are grouped in two categories:

– a socio-linguistic and cultural analysis of general, more objective positive and negative aspects of the Erasmus cultural and educational experience, which reflect the *Universals* and *Specialties* from Linton' grid;
– a socio-linguistic and cultural analysis of subjective cultural selection of different modes of action and reaction to the cultural and educational context, which reflect the *Alternatives* and *Individual Peculiarities* from the same grid.

2.2 Findings

2.2.1 Charming and challenging aspects of the Erasmus experience – Universalities and Specialities

In students' analysed texts, on the one hand, *the Universalities*, defined in Linton's terms as practices shared by all members of a given society, are reflected in the more general cultural observations, such as: the French social rigor or the Romanian communal spirit. On the other hand, *the Specialities,* defined in Linton's categories as behaviours associated with specific subgroups (the academic environment, in our case) are reflected in the observations about the Romanian flexible academic schedule and the vibrant student life, noticed in contrast with the

stricter academic environment in France or the lack of entertainment opportunities for students.

Cultural observations in the students' narratives

Students' experiences in Bucharest and Nantes reveal some similarities and contrasts regarding Linton's *Universalities,* in terms of cultural observations about the cost of living, social environment (safety and cleanness), the sense of community, public transportation and English communication skills.

In Romania, one of the most frequently cited advantages is the low cost of living. Students describe it as "relatively low, making housing, food and services more affordable," allowing them to "live comfortably on a moderate income." On the other hand, they notice that in France, the cost of living is consistently higher, particularly in major cities, and is described as significantly more expensive than Romania.

Regarding safety and cleanness, the highlighted cultural *Universalities* are: Bucharest is perceived as "particularly safe, with low crime rates," allowing students to "go out even at late nights", the city being also praised for its cleanliness. In contrast, safety and cleanliness concerns are noted in the city of Nantes: one student was advised "not to go out alone at night", and reports of rats near rivers and trash cans are mentioned as a negative aspect.

Students' written discourses reveal information about a strong sense of community in Romania, and they describe Romanians as "very helpful," "more talkative than French people," and "more social than the French". The country is also noted for its "warm hospitality and inclusive ethos".

Public transportation is considered efficient in Bucharest, with the "availability and connectivity" of trams and buses seen as "so much better than in Nantes." In Nantes, public transportation is functional during the day but limited at night; after 10:30 p.m., even on weekends, the frequency of trams and buses is low, restricting mobility.

In the analysed texts, the students' report that in Romania, communication is facilitated by the prevalence of English skills among young people, particularly in academic and urban settings. In contrast, in France the language barrier is significant, as students emphasize that French proficiency is "essential to interact with the people," and it was "extremely rare to find people who speak English".

Therefore, the *universal elements* contained in the linguistic structures used in the researched narratives, show various universal/general values, such as the identification of official languages (French/Romanian), the influence of

Christianity (Orthodox vs. Catholic) in the visited cities, and general norms of public safety, cleanness, public transportation etc.

When the respondents encounter the new environment, they immediately begin to create a first impression based on the visible part of the iceberg—the external cultural elements that are easily observed. These *universal* visible elements are reflected in the terms describing broad, unchangeable structures observed by all students, regardless of their cultural origin. For example, the vocabulary used by the students show general cultural observations related to religion, language, noticeable national traits, architecture, public transportation, etc, which, in fact, concern the visible part of a culture and easy noticeable by a foreigner (the tip of the iceberg). This analysing process is rarely neutral; instead, the visible culture is presented in dichotomous terms: on the one hand, there are similar elements, that are aligned with the student's home culture, providing a sense of comfort or familiarity) and different elements, that deviate from the home culture, which often trigger a sense of otherness or curiosity.

In this sense, we can mention the following examples:

- Keyradin and Yoseif from Ethiopia and talks about: *Orthodox churches* and *traditions* (just like in their country);
- Esteban from Colombia remarks the *official language,* which he finds rather easy to understand;
- Salma and Ahmed from Egypt notices universal human values: *warm hospitality*, *social solidarity*;
- Samuel from Ecuador notices aesthetic universals: *nice architecture*, some *Gothic churches*;
- Anagha from India identifies universals of safety and public order: *safety*, *low crime rates*;
- Hieu from Vietnam mention that the Romanian *language* has sound he cannot pronounce;
- Like from Nigeria considers the 8th of March *tradition* very similar to those in his home country;
- Abdulah from Bangladesh is fascinated by the *parks*.
- Two French students (Cedric and Loris) have chosen Romania because they were attracted by the unspoilt *natural landscapes*, where they can go hiking.

Linton's *Specialities* are reflected in the perceptions of behaviours and activities belonging to social/professional groups. In this respect, our research focuses on students' observations on the academic environment, which are divided into the following categories: the educational system at Master level, student life, integration and cultural adaptability.

Regarding the Romanian system, at Master level, the students describe it as more flexible, allowing for a part-time activity, thus offering "greater flexibility in

scheduling, deadlines, and assignments". They notice that delayed punctuality is "tolerated" and the activities involve "a lot of project work" and student autonomy. The academic system in France is described as rigid and demanding. Students report that it was a "full-time commitment" with mandatory attendance, long days, and early start times. Punctuality is strictly enforced, with arriving late often considered "unacceptable." Bucharest offers a vibrant student life, students characterizing it as a "lively city" with a more visible student presence compared to Nantes.

Regarding integration and cultural adaptability to the academic environment, some students report difficulty integrating with their Romanian peers ("not easy to integrate with Romanian students") due to the structure of the classes, some of them, late in the evening or online. They also report a smaller number of foreigners and immigrants as compared to France, which "feels alienating for a foreigner."
The specific elements which appear in the texts (the *Specialities*), belong to clearly defined groups, meaning the academic environment. In this respect, students' vocabulary becomes more specialised and academic, reflecting the subgroup to which the Erasmus students belong to.

- Salma, Keyradin, Anagha and Ahmed: utilize a formal register to describe the academic environment: *academic excellence*, *world-class faculty*, *prestigious institutions*, *interdisciplinary collaboration*.
- Samuel, Mohammad, Mike, Hieu and Esteban: focus on the specifics of campus life and foreign bureaucracy: *immigration office*, *student discounts*, *faculty study program*, *coordinator*.

To sum up, these observations demonstrate that in the students' cultural and academic experience, Romania offers affordability, social warmth, and flexibility, with students emphasizing its "relatively low" cost of living, "very helpful" locals, affordable and comfortable public transportation even at night, relatively clean and safe city, "greater flexibility" in academic schedules, more student autonomy, "lively" student life, and easiness in communication in English. In contrast, France presents a more structured academic environment, higher living costs, and linguistic and logistical challenges, stricter punctuality, limited nighttime public transport, and a greater reliance on French proficiency.

Taking into account the cultural relativism principle, these observations and interpretations, with a certain expected degree of objectivity and subjectivity, we would like to highlight the fact that the cultural aspects which are described in the narratives, could be and were interpreted as advantages and disadvantage for each individual. Thus, some of the students mention that the greater reliance on French proficiency, for example, which was noticed in France, is both advantageous and disadvantageous, since it constraints students to learn French at a better level and, at the same time, reveals communication challenges.

Thus, the Erasmus students' discourses reflect how their unique experiences with their charms and challenges contribute to a rich tapestry of memories and insights, equipping students with diverse skill sets and a broader perspective on the world.

2.2.2 Subjective cultural selection of different modes of action and reaction – Alternatives and Peculiarities

Cultural relativism is most evident in the category of *Alternatives*. Students do not passively adopt the new culture; they consciously select between different modes of action and reaction, according to their inherited cultural norms, values and individual traits and experience. Although Linton places *Individual Peculiarities* at the periphery, they are essential for the learning process. They consist of unique affective reactions, perceptions or personal interpretations of various mundane facts or experiences - such as one student's delight with the snow in Romania. These subjective experiences are proof of cultural relativism: what is a mundane fact for a local, becomes a *Peculiarity* charged with meaning for an external observer.

Linton's *Alternatives*, present in the students' narratives, propose different, socially acceptable ways for the foreign students of expressing the same reality, such as: culinary preferences and leisure options. The language used by the students reflects the capacity to compare, select, and express preferences, rather than merely state observations about cultural aspects (local cuisine, leisure activities, and communication styles).

The students' discourse was analysed in context and special attention was given to the way in which their vocabulary choices reveal some selective affective filters, such as: the sensory satisfaction, the surprise/magical element, the desire for social connectivity.

The discourses regarding the local cuisine reveal a clear distinction between the "sophisticated" maritime cuisine of France and the "hearty" comfort food of Romania. For the French cuisine the students use adjectives like "succulent", "delicate," "delectable", and "world-famous", whereas the Romanian cuisine is depicted as: "flavorful", "savory", "creamy," "crispy, and "comfort food".

The narratives about leisure travel, provided by the students utilize a vocabulary that elevates leisure activities into the realm of the fantasy. There is a distinct shift from the mundane to the "mysterious," where French destinations are characterized by a "futuristic feel" or the sensation of "stepping into a fairytale" focused on "picturesque landscapes", "strolls in the park," and "maritime heritage" while the Romanian "mysterious," "captivating," "extraordinary" leisure and travel experience heavily focused on "mountain" landscapes, "hiking", and "medieval

castles". These linguistic choices reveal a desire for "captivating" travel experiences with this Erasmus group of students.

Communication styles are also analysed in both countries and they reveal the following contrasts: Romania is depicted as having a more "warm, communicative culture" with "talkative" people who enjoy long chats; France is contrasted as a more "formal society," suggesting a more structured and perhaps less openly informal way of interacting. This category highlights how different individuals prioritize and value social interaction as a key part of their cultural experience. For example, Samuel's preference is defined by social interaction. By choosing phrases such as "talkative Romanians" and "chat for minutes", he highlights a preference for the warm, communicative culture of Romania over the more formal society of France but which is defined as gourmet and fancy; the following vocabulary choices stand as proof: "formal," "institutional structure," "dining etiquette," "art of eating."

The *Individual Peculiarities* show how students adapt their personal habits to, or against, the prevailing urban environment. According to Ralph Linton's framework, the *Individual Peculiarities* found in these texts represent the unique habits and marginal innovations that differentiate one person's experience from the cultural norm, as the saying goes: "*Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder*".

In terms of leisure activities, *Peculiarities* regarding how an individual perceives and describes the environment can lead to new cultural interpretations. For example, Salma mentions "spending a few hours at night playing board games with friends at Fabrik de Jeux", a club, probably. In a culture often associated with cafe-sitting or clubbing, this preference for a "board game" niche represents a specific social innovation. Ziham, the Asian student, seeks out specific, marginal local knowledge, such as the "secret" in the Romanian city of Rimetea, where "the sun sometimes rises twice" due to the mountains. His decision to book a "driving tour" to see specific "rare bats" in caves shows a leisure preference that falls outside typical tourist choices. Anagha from India notes her habit to "go out even at late nights" in Bucharest, in contrast with the same activity in France, which is not recommended by her peers. Samuel focuses specifically on the "round" shape of church tops in Romania compared to the "gothic" style in France. This specific focus on the "shape of the people represented in the religious paintings" is an individual way of processing religious art that contributes to a unique cultural interpretation.

Based on the analysed narratives and Ralph Linton's framework, these *Individual Peculiarities* reveal how students act as "active agents" rather than "passive observers" during their Erasmus journey. Their specific habits and deviations from cultural norms highlight the internal processing of a new culture.

The *Peculiarities* also reveal that a student's individual imprint, often dictates their level of cultural adaptability; for instance, Samuel displays a confident, analytical sense of self by openly stating that while he enjoys the local gastronomy, "Sarmale is not a thing" for him. This illustrates that integration does not require the total abandonment of personal preferences. Similarly, Salma shows a proactive and structured approach to social barriers; when academic structures made it difficult to mix with the locals, she took the individual initiative to volunteer in student associations in order to facilitate her own integration.

Collectively, these examples show that the Erasmus journey is less about following a set path and more about the *Individual Peculiarities* that allow a student to carve out a unique space within a new society.

3. Conclusion

The Erasmus experience serves as a great opportunity to become engaged in all the four levels of Linton's culture reading grid, and this happens because students engage as active participants in the host culture. The examination of the Erasmus students' narratives, analyzed through Ralph Linton's cultural categories, reveals that integration is not a simple, linear path of assimilation; instead, it follows a more selective route.

The research emphasizes how cultural *universals* serve as the foundational framework through which students perceive the new cultural environment. Aspects like language, religion, safety, architecture, and public services create a common cultural framework, enabling international students to form some similar representations of the two host countries. These *universals* align with the most obvious elements of culture, to which we can refer as the surface level of a culture, which are readily identifiable. Furthermore, the study reveals that cultural relativism is prominently present within the realm of *alternatives,* where students assess and select among diverse culturally acceptable behaviors or preferences. Students' narratives expose a comparative reasoning where experiences are filtered through emotional lenses such as sensory enjoyment, aesthetic value, or social engagement. For example, the distinction between Romanian "comfort food" and French "refined cuisine," or the difference between a "warm, communicative culture "and "formal social norms," shows how cultural meaning arises through relational comparisons. These linguistic expressions indicate that mobility fosters reflexive cultural awareness in students, enabling them to view cultural differences as choices rather than hierarchies.

The respondents also engage with the cultural settings through deeply personal experiences – unforeseen encounters, unique interests, or emotional responses – that convert typical situations into significant memories. Whether it involves *a*

fascination with snow, interest in specific *leisure pursuits*, or personal reactions to *local cuisine*, these idiosyncrasies demonstrate how individuals actively reinterpret the host culture through their unique perspectives. In this way, Erasmus participants do not merely passively witness cultural knowledge; they get involved and act as active creators of their own cultural stories. For example, terms like "ordinary" or "fantasy" found in the descriptions of their leisure activities, or the dismissal of local food traditions (like the "sarmale" example), infers that personal choices and emotional responses play a very significant role in shaping student's lasting cultural impression of the host culture.

Although this research shows valuable perspectives on cultural relativism, in the way that Erasmus students interpret cultural elements during mobility experiences, it is constrained by its focus on a limited number of students, which may not capture students' diversity and reflects experiences that are tied to certain academic and city environments, specifically in Bucharest and Nantes, neglecting local differences within both countries. Consequently, the results are not applicable to all Erasmus mobility types, scenarios or to general cultural interactions within Romania and France.

The final conclusion of our research is that intercultural experience is a subjective engagement with alterity, which can be analyzed through Linton's categories to understand how students perceive mobility experience. Moreover, one of the most important findings of this research shows that, although Linton places the *Peculiarities* category at the outskirts of his cultural framework, the findings of our research conclude that they are at least as important as the rest for understanding the relative aspect of the intercultural learning journey, as they are the personal imprint that interprets social-cultural norms from the host culture according to one's own views, and this contributes to personal growth.

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