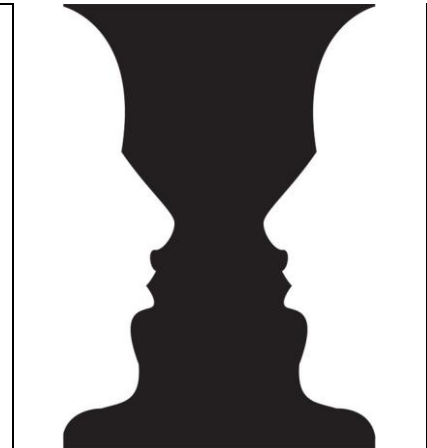

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The repression of *us-* and *we-*hoods in European exchange students' narratives about their experiences in Finland

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Abstract

This paper is based on a postmodern approach to identity, i.e. identity is seen as unfixed, transient and contextually created. Through the narratives of French Erasmus exchange students on their daily lives in Finland, I demonstrate how they express, enact and co-construct multiple and unstable identifications with the various groups they interact with (us-/we-/they-hoods). Due to their specific status in the host country (they are 'passing' foreigners), Erasmus exchange students experience what can be described as "être-ensemble". But what are the impacts of such a context on the ways the students talk about themselves and others (Finns, people from their own country and other Erasmus students)? The Erasmus programme is often portrayed by students themselves but also policy makers and researchers as a time of strong communal and intercultural experiences. Is this a postmodern myth? Based on interviews with Erasmus students from the Turku campus (south-western Finland), the analysis of pronoun uses and represented discourses in French will help to provide some answers to the complex question of identification.

Keywords

Identification, discourse analysis, Erasmus, Finland, togetherness

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Identity is not a universal of nature or culture but a question of performativity.
(Chris Barker & Dariusz Galsinski, 87)

One cannot be a self on one's own.
(Charles Taylor, 36)

Context of the study: Erasmus students in Finland

This chapter deals with international exchange students (i.e. Erasmus students) in the Nordic country of Finland. Erasmus students are European students who spend three, six or nine months studying in another country. Their sociality is usually quite special during their stays abroad as they form short-lived *tribes* that are constantly *in nascendi* in the host countries. This article is interested in the consequences that this has on their identification and on the perennial *us vs. them* dichotomy that allows identity to emerge.

Host societies usually have positive views of Erasmus students (Papatsiba, 2003: p. XIII), even though their presence is limited in the public agora. In Finland, according to my fieldwork, Erasmus students are well treated, as accommodation is provided by their host institutions and they are actively “orientated” at the beginning of the year. Courses are even organized especially for them in English, since they rarely master Finnish or Swedish upon arrival (the same can also be said with regard to their mastery of the languages at the end of their stay, cf. Taajamo, 2005: p. 112; Dervin, 2006, 2008). This factor has an influence, of course, on their integration and adaptation, placing the students in *heterotopias* or segregated spaces: meeting local students is nearly impossible (Taajamo, 2003) because of the creation of what could be labeled as “cocoon, bubbles, tribes...” composed solely of other foreign students and people from their own country (Dervin, 2008; Papatsiba, 2003: 142) from their first days on campus. Most studies on Erasmus students have demonstrated that this usually leads the students to “strong” *identification* with Erasmus tribes (in-groups, *us-/we-hood*) and stereotypical visions of the locals, the OTHERS (*them-hood*) (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003, Papatsiba, 2003, Taajamo, 2003).

Contrary to the above, my chapter will try to show how the students’ identification with these tribes is rather unstable, we might even say contextual and relational. I base my observations on a corpus of interviews with French Erasmus students in Finland and work from a postmodern comprehension of identity, which views identities as *liquid* (Bauman) and unfixed. I will also explain how the students construct and enact the selves that are linked to both their tribes and the “Other” in their narratives on their stays abroad.

Identity and otherness: “what are we becoming?” vs. “who am i?”

Scientific theories of identity have massively rejected a vision of identity as being “solid”, “unique”, or a mere affair of the self. As such, various scholars in many different fields agree on the fact that identity is a co-construction which depends on many and varied elements such as power relations, emotions, contexts of interaction, intertextuality, etc.

(Ouellet, 2002: p. 14). An important factor which impacts on the co-construction of identity is the presence of the Other (Bhatia, 2007, p. 4). This Other can be a *Same* (s/he belongs to the same “in-group”), another *self* (Dialogical Sciences, amongst others, have demonstrated the plurality of voices inside each and every one of us, cf. Hermans, 2004) or an *Other* (s/he is part of another “tribe”). This is confirmed by the Canadian scholar P. Ouellet (2002), who proposes that, rather than querying identity using the verb “to be” in the question ‘who am I?’, individuals should reflect on the question of ‘who are we becoming?’, implying *me* and *my interlocutors* when we talk to each other. It is thus through identity “staging” in interaction that identity dynamics take place (Vasseur, 2005). Michel Maffesoli (1988) has suggested that we should talk of *identification* rather than identity when discussing this process.

In reaction to this liquidity (Bauman, 2004), quests for solid identity and unicity are taking place worldwide (new nationalism, extremism, rebirth of “roots”, etc.), which often lead to “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995), racism, xenophobia, stereotypes and prejudice. This is where the concept of community plays a major role. In international contexts, national communities (or “imagined communities”, using terminology from Anderson (1991) allow people to provide explanations for their behaviours, tastes, opinions, etc., and to oppose themselves to the *Other* (usually a “macro-Other”, Eriksen, 1995: p. 427). Eriksen (1995: p. 427), using an idea from Sartre, proposes two models of group belongingness: *we-hood* and *us-hood*. This dichotomy can help researchers to investigate the *us vs. them* issue. *We-hood* involves the “interdependence and internal cohesion of a shared task” (Eriksen, 1995: p. 427) while *us-hood* “signifies cohesion by virtue of an external agent” (Eriksen, 1995: p. 427). In other words, *we-hood* represents the inner solidity of a group while the characteristics of *us-hood* are based on a comparison with Others.

In addition to this dichotomy, it should be noted that A. Sen (2006: p. 37) has underlined the illusion that ‘the sense of belonging to a community, while strong enough in many cases, need not obliterate –or overwhelm – other associations and affiliations’. As such, the concept of community has been highly criticized by scholars for its solid vision. Theorists such as Michel Maffesoli (1988) or Zygmund Bauman (2004) have called respectively for a renewal of the concept through the notions of “tribes” and “peg-communities”, which are more flexible and allow translating the fact that, while some sense of community might be strong on a macro-level (Nation-State), belonging to various and short-lived communities has become the “norm”. This has an impact on the strength of the faithfulness to these communities. In order to investigate the processes of identification which are attached to peg-communities or tribes and *we-/us-hood vs. them-hood*, discourse analysis, a valuable tool for scholars, which will be employed in this paper.

Identity and discourse analysis: deconstructing group-belongingness

Identification has been approached in a variety of manners in various subfields of linguistics, anthropology and sociology: conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, Critical Discourse Analysis, narrative analysis, etc. (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Several terms have also been introduced to describe identification in research: role, position, subjectivity and agent. I use the concept of *identification* to describe the fact that individuals identify on a permanent basis and co-construct who they are, be it in interaction with others or with each other. As previously stated, identification is not solid in the sense that people may modify their faithfulness to their “tribes” (in-groups), depending on contexts, moods, emotions, and the person to whom they are speaking.

The following analysis is based on the theories of the second French school of discourse analysis (Mazière, 2005), theories of utterance (Maingueneau, 2002; Marnette, 2005) and pragmatics (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2002). These theories allow us to both concentrate on the *us-them* dichotomy, as well as unearthing the oppositions which may take place within *we-hood* itself. These approaches have demonstrated that discourse is heterogeneous and unstable, with individuals thus “torn” between signs of unicity and fragmentation when they identify. Otherness is recognized by these approaches as being constitutive of any discourse involving identification - i.e. identity discourse is co-constructed and co-enunciated by interlocutors, be they the *doxa* (“common sense”), unidentifiable “third parties”, and/or discourses that speakers have previously come across (Culioli, 1976). Hence the idea, in discourse analysis, that any speaker is complex as s/he is composed of a speaker (the person who speaks), an utterer (the voices that are introduced in discourse, for example as in the sentence *one never knows* where *one* is not always an identifiable voice), and a co-utterer (the interlocutor and/or other voices that one includes in one’s speech and with whom one discusses). The speaker also has to deal with an interlocutor (the one who listens and/or any other potential listener). Given the multiplicity of these voices, discourse can be compared to *drama* (Ducrot, 1984).

In the French language (which was used to collect the data), many linguistic signs can be used to display this construction. In the analysis of the interviews, I will concentrate on two aspects: the use of the pronoun *on* (in English: *we*, *one*, *you*, *they*, etc., depending on the linguistic context) and represented discourse. In French, two personal pronouns can be used to express group-belongingness: *nous* (*we* in English but also *I* in case of royalty) and *on* (which can mean, amongst other things, *we* if used in group identification). The pronoun *on*, which is more frequent than *nous* in oral French, has an unstable semantic content as it can represent various entities and be problematic when it comes to unearthing its referents (i.e. who hides behind it) and thus translating it into other languages (Boutet, 1994; Dervin, 2008)². The pronoun can therefore be considered as an illusionist or a chameleon (Mülhaüser & Harré, 1990), as it can allow the

² In the interviews which will be analysed, the questions were always addressed to the students directly, but they very often used various ‘on’ to answer, not I.

insertion of discursive strategies in one's speech through not revealing its referent entirely. In the following excerpt, for example, this French speaker explains speaking English to other foreigners embarrasses her when she is abroad because she believes that the French are extremely poor at English: '*Surtout quand on parle aux autres étrangers c'est gênant parce que nous les Français on est nuls en anglais*' [especially when **one** speaks to other foreigners it is awkward because we the French **we** are so bad at English]. This example shows that, while the French sentence contains *on* as the subject of all the verbs, in English two different pronouns are needed to express the ideas (*one* and *we*). Though we can guess that the speaker refers to herself in the first part of the sentence (*when one speaks to other foreigners*), it is difficult to clearly identify if she places other entities (the French) within this first *on* or not. Having recourse to 'we the French are so bad at English' (which has another *on* in French) at the end of the sentence seems to help her to put forward a ready-made excuse for her inability and/or unwillingness to speak English to others. In terms of identification, the study of the pronoun *on* can thus allow the researcher to work through the identity processes that are taking place during, for example, interviews or focus groups. In my corpus, the presence of *nous* is negligible, while *on* is continuously used by the students. Despite my use of the English pronouns *we* and *one*³ in my English translations of the excerpts below – since English does not always have a direct equivalent to *on* - the reader should bear in mind that, in French, the translated pronoun is actually always *on* (and not *nous*).

As far as *represented discourse* is concerned ("indirect/direct reported speech" in everyday language), this takes place when an individual includes someone else's voice into their own discourse (example - he said to me: 'how very dare you?'). Whether the voice it contains is identifiable or not, this phenomenon participates in acts of identification (de Fina, 2006) as it contributes to the process of putting forward a certain image of the self and the Other. What I will be looking at in this article is referred to as "auto-citation" (Rabatel, 2006; Lopez-Munoz, 2006) or what I call *Virtual voices* (Dervin, 2008), i.e. when a person introduces speech that they attribute to themselves ('I said to myself, I asked myself...') in their own discourse.

Through these two devices, varied Othernesses (selves / other people / in-groups / various us-/ we-hoods / outgroups / they) intervene in the discourses to help construct not only *us-them* identification, but also, as infidelity to *we-hoods* is quite common in identity discourse, *I-hood* as opposed to *we-hood* (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2003: p. 36).

Analysis

My paper has two aims. First, it will demonstrate that identification can be multi-faceted, appearing both simple and complex in discourse, and that the juggling between *us-hood* and *we-hood* versus *them-hood* has an important role to play in this matter. Second, as a consequence of the above, signs of infidelity to *we-hood* in identification can be revealed

³ Though it would be more common to use *you* to translate some impersonal occurrences of *on* in spoken English - *one* gives a formal feel -, in the following analysis, *one* will be used in such cases in order to avoid complicating the analysis.

by examining the use of *on*, oscillations between *on* and other pronouns, and manifestations of virtual voices. The extracts used are taken from 12 interviews in French that were carried out in Turku, Finland. The reader should bear in mind that, though interviews are an effective method of collecting data, one needs to remember that the presence of the interviewer, his/her questions, the context of the interview, etc., all have an impact on the answers and on the consequent instability in the discourse. Hence, in this paper, the interviewer's questions may contribute to the *us/we-hood vs. they-hood* game, along with the unstable identification.

The analysis revolves around three aspects: criticism towards the students' tribes (when *we-hood* is criticized), criticism towards France and contradictory statements about the self and others. We will provide evidence of oscillations between the two selves, along with highlighting contradictions and the instability of identification. As such, examples will be provided of how identification is not just based on an opposition to *them* but also between *me* and "we".

Criticising their own tribes

In this first category, examples of how the students criticize their own tribes of Erasmus/international students, their "we-hood", are provided. While using *nous* (we), the students identify with their tribes. But at the same time, they use *on* to condemn what they consider as less worthy tribal practices.

The first criticism towards the students' tribes is based on the idea of *être-ensemble* (togetherness), with students showing signs of tiredness of this aspect. As the students remain within the same environment and Erasmus community for several months – leading them to feel segregated as it implies that they cannot meet the "locals" –, this often emerges in discourse. In the following excerpt, for example, Florence⁴ talks about partying and emphasizes the segregation that she feels in her Erasmus surroundings. Many parties are organized especially for Erasmus students - parties which very few Finns attend.

I⁵: Do you like partying?

F: Yes, I like it but it is true that always seeing the same people... well, after four months, in fact it is just that **we do not meet Finns**, it is a bit of a shame. **We always stay together.**

While the beginning of the student's answer ("I like it", i.e. partying) is personal in tone and quite positive, the discourse subsequently turns into impersonal criticism, especially in the sentence which is introduced by *but* ("always seeing the same people"). What is expressed by *we* (*on* in French) in "we do not meet Finns", "we always stay together" could be interpreted as a strong criticism directed towards her context. Moreover, the assessment of this situation ("it is a bit of shame") and the use of the

⁴ The students' names have been altered.

⁵ All the excerpts have been translated from French.

adverb *always* in “we always stay together” point towards this criticism. There could therefore be traces of the tiredness of Erasmus *we-hood* or a “stifling” *we-hood* here.

In some of the students’ interviews, criticism about fake interest in other exchange students (faked and weak *we-hood*) was noted. For instance, when Christine was talking about her picture-taking habits in Turku, she stated that:

Interviewer: Do you take pictures?

C: A lot, I am into photography. I take pictures of everything in daily life (...) right after this interview, I am going to get the pictures I took in St Petersburg, two films, so I am looking forward to that and... **one also takes** a lot of pictures of... of the group of international students, Erasmus students... pictures where everybody is like *we are all friends and all*

I: Why do you take pictures?

C: Why? I don’t know there are times when it makes me happy, that it is sincere but honestly sometimes **one says to oneself** we are all a little bit hypocritical and **one says to oneself** we do it because we are all together but there are people with whom I tell myself... (...).

Again, this excerpt shows how Christine moves from very personal and enthusiastic statements (“I am into photography, I take pictures in daily life...”) to impersonal discourse when she starts talking about taking pictures of people in Turku. At the end of the first turn, she even includes represented discourse of the imagined Erasmus group (“everybody is like *we are all friends and all*”), which gives her an *alibi*, an *authority* for introducing her criticism in the next turn. In order to answer the next question, Christine uses several virtual voices whose subject is *one*, to criticize what appears to be fake interest in others (‘one says to oneself’), as if she was drawing a line or marking some distance between herself and what she asserts, while simultaneously forcing the resulting words into other students’ mouths. As such, two represented discourses expressed through *we* are used in order to explain her criticism that “we are all a little bit hypocritical” and “we do it because we are all together”. This suggests that the student is hinting at superficiality in relationships and that she is aware of the fact that she plays a ‘game’ with the others, with her ‘we-hood’, as much as other students do. To a certain degree, this is something that they have in common. In this second excerpt, the inconsistency of the *we-hood* gives emphasis to the way the student identifies with her tribe is not as solid as expected and therefore that *we-hood* might be quite weak in this situation.

Criticism towards France

Rather surprisingly, and contrary to previous research, I found that the students were much more critical about France than Finland in their narratives. In other studies, the locals are perpetually the target of stereotypes and of the *us-hood vs. them-hood* mechanisms. The fact that the interviewer in this study is partly French himself could probably have impacted on their discourse: the students may have thought that he shares the same negative ideas about the French.

In the corpus, France is negatively evaluated in comparison to Finland and other countries through the use of negative auto-stereotypes; in other words, stereotypes related to the *we-hood* (Boyer, 1999). In the first instance, Alain talks about language skills and criticises French people for their insufficient mastery of these skills. In the French text, he only uses the pronoun *on*:

A: I think that French people, ah there is progress... something should be done for languages in France too but I hope that... I don't know... **our generation that arrives** in Finland **we all have some... we all become aware** of... something must be done (...) I say to myself **one has to stop being fucking silly... one should stop** that... stop being stupid because it works in Finland... **we are not more** stupid than them, are we?

In this extract, Alain is harsh on his imagined community and on the state of language learning in his country. The student seems to be playing the role of the *spokesperson* (Vion, 1998) in what precedes as he includes other students in his critical speech: '... I don't know our generation that arrives in Finland we all have some... we all become aware of... something must be done'. Not only do they become his co-utterers here but also (and especially) his positive "*we-hood*" as they are represented positively (despite the sentences not being full, the semantic content can be presumed). The macro *we-hood* (the French, "*one*" in the English translation) seems to be therefore partitioned into micro *we-hoods* (younger generations of French people, "*we*" in the first part of the English translation), and thus turned into a kind of *them-hood*. Alain uses several deontic phrases (*must, have to*), expressing obligation, which he addresses to some entity in his discourse: "something must be done, one has to stop being (fucking) silly". In this sentence, the *on* used is different from the previous *on* which was translated in English by *we* in the excerpt. This *one* clearly refers to his *we-hood*, the French, as the sentence is a strong criticism towards his own country – yet he probably does not include himself in this pronoun as he clearly disapproves of the situation. Here, macro *we-hood* leads to negative assessment and questionings, along with the creation of micro-*we-hoods*.

The same sort of assertions and imaginary arguments were found in Pierre's discourse when he compares the French to natives of other countries:

I: Now let me ask you more general questions. Did the Erasmus experience make you aware of something related to our contemporary world?

P: I became aware of the fact that the French are very bad at English (Laughs). And that **we are not...** (...) (Laughs) compared to the rest of the Europeans, Germans, etc. **Our lack of mastery of English** is a bit scary (...)

Unfavorable judgment against the French is also contained in his discourse (note the adverb "very" in "the French are very bad"). Though he distances himself from his country at the beginning of the excerpt (the French are...), Pierre compares their level of English to that of other Europeans and to Germans in a *we-sentence* ("compared to the rest of the Europeans, Germans, etc. we really have a bad level of English'), resorting thus to the same strategy as observed in Alain's discourse. At the end of his turn, he uses

negative evaluative formulae to qualify the lack of mastery of English in France (« bad » and « scary »). In this instance, *us-hood* does not necessarily lead to positive feelings of superiority (or ethnocentrism) but is actually toned down.

All in all, comments on the students' imagined community's language skills tend to be rather negative. Of course, we cannot but bear in mind that the interviewer being partly French may also have had a role to play in these utterances. Had the students spoken to someone from another country, it may have had a different impact and implications on what they would have asserted and the image they would have put forward (e.g. would they have been less critical?).

Apart from comments on poor language skills, some students criticise the French for being narrow-minded and chauvinistic (which seem to be typical negative auto-stereotypes). In response to the same question as in the previous statement, H el ene answers:

H: We are... I have the feeling that we are French, right?... **we are well too self-centered**, well, I don't know your opinion about the French news but... it makes me sick. I say to myself... well... **one must travel** because people do not realise how ridiculous and stupid they can be.

Her first sentences appear to be tautological (“we are... (...) we are French”) in the sense that it reveals what appears to be a “logical” and implicit equation between being French and what is going to follow (i.e. negative assessment). The discourse is also very strong, affective and critical (“it makes me sick”, “stupid”, “ridiculous”) in this extract. H el ene believes that the French are self-centered (and includes herself in this: “We are well too self-centered” and thus expresses *we-hood*) – which does not mean that she considers herself to be like that. This could also be a strategy, however, to include the interviewer who may share – she probably thinks – the same opinion about the French. The interviewee actually directly includes the interviewer when she says ‘I don't know your opinion about the French news’, as if she was trying to obtain his support. In the virtual voice that she inserts (‘I say to myself... one must travel’), H el ene also uses a *deontic* form (*must*) combined with an impersonal and less identifiable *on* (‘one must travel’), which is, together with the comment on ‘people’ being stupid and ridiculous (note how unclear this term is, it is no longer just *we-hood*), very categorical and aggressive. The use of *people* in this sentence allows the speaker to break down *we-hood* and classify the version of *we-hood* that she rejects as an Other (allowing it to become *them-hood*).

Acts of identification that are contradicted/contradictory

In this final section, I shall look at acts of identification which are contradicted and contradictory in two instances; firstly, between two individuals who were interviewed separately and who knew each other (they were flat mates), and secondly, within the same interview. Let us start with the first case.

Chantal, Marie and another girl share an apartment in Turku. In the first excerpt, Chantal uses a metaphor - that of a ship - to describe their experience in Turku:

Ch: (...) anyway Finland is a ship, **we often say** that Finland is a ship... in the sense that... well **we are the three captains** onboard and it is like a parenthesis. Marie likes to use this phrase, it is a ship.

In what she says, the three girls seem to merge ('we often say...'; 'we are three captains'; "on" in French) to describe the strong links that they have developed through the metaphor of the ship which was elaborated by her flat mate. The atmosphere that they experienced in Finland is compared to the ships that commute between Finland and Sweden every day, where thousands of people party and have a good time. Chantal explains in her interview how the three of them are always together and do everything with each other, and expresses "perfect we-hood" – this is probably why the identification of the referents behind on is simple here, and can without any hesitation be translated by we in English ('we are three captains').

If we take a look at Marie's interview, the flat mate paints a different picture of their relationship:

M: (...) well, generally speaking I can easily bear doing things on my own, while, when I see... in comparison to my two flat mates, they always do everything together, "at what time do **we take the bus?** At what time are **we going to eat?**", it is always "we" but in my case, I always say "I".

Marie thus does not really seem to share Chantal's vision (the one attributed to her by Chantal, "three captains on a ship") and is rather critical of the fact that her flat mates always do things together. In fact, unlike Chantal's excerpt, she turns her flat mates into *them*, and even uses their own words to make them identify with each other in their "imagined" we-hood ('at what time do we take the bus? At what time are we going to eat?'). It is also interesting that Marie claims that she does not use the pronoun *we*, while a closer look at her interview shows that she uses the group version of the pronoun *we* nearly all the time when she talks about her daily activities.

Other types of contradictions were also found within a conversation turn. In the two following excerpts, the students contradict their "message" of open-mindedness towards other nationalities by resorting to stereotypes. Let us remind the reader here that one aspect of the Erasmus program is officially to develop intercultural competence and promote open-mindedness towards others. In the first example, Théo answers a question concerning what he learned about our world during his Erasmus time:

T: Euh some differences... well, I didn't think that there would be differences of... I am tempted to say culture but it is a bit strong... but that there are differences between euh nationalities in the sense that being **Erasmus students we are all the same** but well for instance, for Poles, I didn't know that they were that religious, that catholic...

Théo identifies with the other Erasmus students (we-hood) and expresses their resemblances ('we are all the same'; *on* in French) but he contradicts himself by commenting on how religious Poles are ('very religious', 'very catholic'), and, consequently, on how different they are from the others, thus creating various categories in his main "we-hood" – Polish students also become in a way "them".

In the next excerpt, Patricia talks about Finnish people and shows how she learnt to go beyond stereotypes that she had of them (she said that she had taken a course on intercultural communication, which helped her to 'get rid of her stereotypes'):

I: Are they shy [i.e. Finns]?

P: euh... I think that they are like everybody, **one should stop that**, I know tons of them who are shy and silent but maybe Finns are more reserved but I think that the climate plays a big role and maybe that **we and our Latin blood we are a bit more...** pushy and yes I don't know, to be honest, I don't find them that silent, no I think that they are a bit more cautious yes the word cautious fits them very well shy and silent I think that's too much

In this example, Patricia replaces a (auto- and hetero-) stereotype about the Finns (*they are shy*) with another (*they are cautious*). She also contradicts herself several times when she asserts that Finns are like everyone else ('they are like everybody') thus trying to diminish differences between us and them but then: 1. she describes herself and her 'tribe' as 'pushier' - *we Latin people* (implying that her enlarged imagined community [i.e. not just France but The South] is not like "everybody"), and 2. she uses the adjective *cautious* to qualify Finns. In these two examples, even though the students try to show signs of open-mindedness by their willingness to go beyond stereotypes, they still fall into the trap of classifying and organizing new *us-hoods* and *them-hoods*.

The final examples from the corpus show how the students identify "positively" with their Erasmus tribes in some parts of the interview (*we-hood*) and how they distance themselves from them in other parts, flatly contradicting what they previously stated. In the first excerpts, Mireille answers two different questions: 1. *If one is not an Erasmus student, is it easy to enter the Erasmus group?* and 2. *Why did you say that you wouldn't keep any contact with other Erasmus students?*

1. M: It is rather difficult because **we have this code**, as I said earlier on, **we speak one** language, we speak English but **we have...** how shall I put it? Things in common that we share.

The use of *we* (which is *on* here in French) shows how Mireille places herself within the entire Erasmus group (which becomes her in-group) to answer a question which, in a way, opposes this group to an out-group (those who are not Erasmus students) as she explains that "outsiders" cannot easily enter her in-group ("it is rather difficult"). The vision of the Erasmus group is quite generic here and the use of *on* in French reinforces this feeling. The answer to question 2 (which appears approximately 10 minutes after the previous extract) clearly contradicts the statement above:

2. M: Yes, because these are not people with whom... outside the fact that **we are all Erasmus**, I have nothing in common with these people...

In the first excerpt, Mireille makes use of *we* to express the similarities that she shares with her large in-group (the Erasmus group is actually composed of many and varied subgroups) while, in this second extract, she expresses, in an utterance that has *I* as a subject, the contrary – even though she still recognizes the fact that they all share a solid identity, that of being Erasmus students. The influence of the type of questions asked by the interviewer and the different stakes in the identification game could have had a role to play in these answers. As such, the first question required identification against another group to ‘defend’ and ‘positivise’ her own identity while the second question deals with the future, life after her stay in Finland and with her Erasmus in-group.

Conclusion

My chapter has underlined several inconsistencies in the students’ discourses about the groups they belong to and that they insert in their narratives about their daily lives in Finland. Be they their peg-communities (Erasmus tribes, neighbours, “friends”) or their imagined community (France in this case), it is clear that their introduction in the line of argumentation or discourse allows the students to position themselves and propose an identity and/or various (contradictory) identities to the interviewer, while being sometimes disloyal to them. As such, in the interviews, it appeared very clear that the maintenance of distance and boundaries between *we-/us-hoods* and *them-hood* are changeable, complex and often interwoven. All in all, it seems that *we-hood* or the comparative *us-hood* are not always used for demonstrating the “inferiority” of the Other but for alternative purposes such as repressing one’s own tribes and groups.

This study confirms the much debated idea that interviews are not ‘innocent windows into the participants’ interiors’ (Bamberg, 2004: p. 365) and that one act of identification may be contradicted by another. The analysis of the use of the pronoun *on* and virtual voices shows that internal and external othernesses contribute to the expression, creation and (co-)construction of multiple identities. This is why research approaches using interviews as methods should be critical about what is presented as the “truth” by participants: interviewers, their status, contexts and questions do have an impact on the image (*we-hood/us-hood*) that people want to put forward in interviews. Identity is a buzzword in research at the moment (as much as in the media and daily speech) and it needs to be questioned and carefully looked at, in order to avoid essentialist, determinist and contradictory visions of the other, of the interviewee and the people s/he talks about. This, in turn, explains why the image of Erasmus students as a solid “stronghold” of foreigners on European campuses needs to be reviewed...

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