The Concept of Conversation in Desiderius Erasmus

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ABSTRACT: The following text represents a contribution to the cultural history of conversation as a form of non-pragmatic, free and delightful verbal communication between two or more people. Although the concept of “conversation” in this specific cultural sense developed during the Italian Cinquecento and was cultivated mostly during the French 17th century, a very important and influential predecessor of its theory and practice was the European humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. Especially in his Colloquia familiari, but also in some other didactic texts on education and decent social behavior, Erasmus formulated basic principles of lovely and often on the first glance “useless” human communication. Colloquia familiaria is a collection of situation-bound dialogues, written in Latin, which brings many samples of every-day communication within almost all social groups and classes in Europe in the early 16th century. The ethical, philosophical and rhetorical dimensions of Erasmus´ dialogues refer to the classical legacy (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Lucian et. al.), but the every-day aspects of the dialogues afforded opportunity for a broad reception. In the 16th century, the translations of Colloquia familiaria to many vernacular languages helped to form the early modern European consciousness of conviviality based on speaking.

Keywords: history, literature, Renaissance, Erasmus of Rotterdam, conversation, education, language

For Stephen Brockmann

The register of terms that may denote a recorded convivial social talk, now often referred to as “conversation”, or its parts or segments,¹ in medieval and restored

¹ The attempts to define the term conversation on the background of its historical meanings are numerous and they mainly differ by the number of given characteristic features of conversation; as a result of the consensus reached in the latest scholarly literature, its main features are considered to be especially the cultivation, aloofness, informality, spontaneity, autotelism and self-referenceness or narration, or its impracticalness (Cf. BEETZ, Martin. Leitlinien und Regeln der Höflichkeit für Konversationen. In Geselligkeit und Gesellschaft im Barockzeitalter, Teil II. Ed. Wolfgang Adam. Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz, 1997, pp. 563-579, but especially p. 567; SCHNELL, Rüdiger (ed.). Konversation in der Vormoderne. Geschlechter im geselligen Gespräch. Köln; Weimar; Wien : Böhlau, 2008, p. 7). From among the older definitions of conversation we can mention an apposite one by Gabriel Tarde: “By conversation I mean every dialogue that has no direct or immediate utility, where one talks primarily to talk, for pleasure, play or out of politeness. This definition (...) does not exclude (...) a mondaine flirt nor love talks in general, despite the frequent transparency of their objective that, however, does not hinder the purposeless charm of language expression.” In: TARDE, Gabriel. L’opinion et la foule. Paris : F. Alcan, 1922, p. 215. Quoted according to: MUKAŘOVSKÝ, Jan. Studie z poetiky. Praha : Odeon, 1982, p. 215. – Vilém Mathesius highlights the aesthetic aspect of conversation and promotes the term “beautiful talk” for it. He writes that “it is conducted just for pleasure and is aimed at no practical objective or it
ancient Latin as well as in the developing national languages in the Western European Renaissance period or in the transition period from the Late Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age, is rich and differentiated. The general reason for this terminological diversity should be sought in the fact that, on the one hand, Renaissance represents an era of the boom of dialogical literary culture and, on the other hand, it contents itself with the heterogeneity of dialogical practice. Not only does it not have a need to define a unified theory of a convivial social talk, but, in most cases, even to distinguish among individual forms or subgenres of talks. Semantic shading among the terms sermo, dialogus or dialogo, convivio or convito, conversatio or conversazione, ragionamento, further colloquium, tischrede, gesprech, conferer, can follow from the relationships to the communication contexts that are mostly defined by the estate membership of the talk participants (clergy, nobility, an expanding bourgeoisie) and by affiliation to individual genre, intellectual and spiritual traditions to which the authors of literary recorded talks or their fictitious or stylized participants refer (most often the Socratic or Platonic, Ciceronian, Lucian’s dialogues, scholastic dialogue, Latin school colloquy, philosophy of platonism and neoplatonism). An important role is, however, also played by the functions of individual dialogical literary texts (communicative teaching of Latin, practice of rhetoric and stylistics, education of princes, definition of ideal courtier, knowledge in a certain area, pursuing of moral-religious or catechetic objectives, etc.) and also by the formal context in which conversation takes place, i.e. the presence or absence of communication frameworks (e.g. friendly meeting or get-together, dining, celebration, parlour game, etc.). A literary rendering of social conversations does not even have to be based on existing reference reality or the possibilities naturally provided by this reality; their context can also be created by mythological imagination (the world of gods, the talks of the dead in the underworld) or can be projected into the future, as it is in the case of More’s Utopia that contains, inter alia, an outline of the principles of sociability in an ideal state.

The transitions between the terms of sociable talk and a talk with the characteristics of sociability are, however, usually smooth. A number of terms are used as synonyms, as, for instance, in one of the central writings of Italian Renaissance conversational culture Il libro del cortegiano (The Book of the Courtier) by Baldassare

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2 This, however, does not exclude 16th century individual, relatively comprehensive attempts to define a dialogue (conversation) in Baldassare Castiglione (Il libro del cortegiano, 1528), Carlo Sigonio (De dialogo, 1561), Stefano Guazzo (La civil conversazione, 1574), Sperone Speroni (Apologia dei Dialogi, 1574) or Torquatto Tasso (Discorso dell’arte del dialogo, 1586).

3 When describing the principles of conviviality in his ideal state, More chiefly focused on the hierarchy during dining (according to age), on the function of sociability (rest after work) and on the structure of convivial communication (reading a text promoting good morals after which “the elders take the lead in sound conversation, neither too solemn nor without charm”; summoning the youth to speak; there is always music during suppers and the Utopians “leave nothing undone that might cheer their fellow diners”), cf. MORUS, Thomas. Utopia. Leipzig : Reclam, 1985, pp. 68-69. (English translation borrowed from Sir Thomas More’s Utopia [online]. Available on the internet: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/thomas-jeffersons-library/interactives/sir-thomas-mores-utopia/>. [28 Sep 2015, 08:40].
Castiglione (1528) in which a term social conversation is, besides the terms dialogo and ragionamento, also expressed by the word conversazione (or the verb conversare) which was a term saturated in contemporary Europe with the medieval use of Latin conversatio either in the sense of good Christian life of an individual or, generally, of interpersonal relations (communion) while its semantic core did not necessarily have to be connected with verbal expression. In Renaissance authors, there are also semantic transitions among the Latin terms sermo, convivio and colloquium; the first word, during the whole Middle Ages generally denoting a speech or a conversation in a small circle of close friends, refers to Cicero’s work De officiis (On Duties), with conversation characterized as an event of private character. It is not characterized by special rhetoric rules but, on the other hand, by wit and esprit (sal, facetiae), and fairness (lepos). It is supposed to arouse joy (delectatio) but at the same time it is characterized by clearness, thoughtfulness, but also adequacy, so by a proper estimation of communication situation. At the time of transition to the Early Modern Age the term sermo also functions in the meaning attributed to it by Saint Augustin – as the diegetic or prosaic heart of heavy dialogues. The fact that sermo originates in the Latin rhetoric would eventually also determine the meaning of the English word sermon from which the original dialogical principle would definitely disappear. – The term convivio, on the other hand, primarily expresses a life context of sociability (friendly meeting) with a relevant background represented by an appropriate locus amoenus, mostly outdoors – it can be a lovely natural landscape, grove, garden or a favourite tree – or a symposial framework. However, it also denotes the sociability itself of a friendly get-together and is often synonymous with the term colloquium that expresses a common talk or a community united by a talk. In the 16th century, the early neo-German word gesprech had the same meaning, as well as tischrede, as a talk (verbal expression) during the convivial get-togethers with Martin Luther was denoted by his fellow diners. – The French word

4 Cf. PLOTKE, Seraina. Conversatio / Konversation : Eine Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte. In SCHNELL, Rüdiger (ed.). Konversationskultur in der Vormoderne. Geschlechter im geselligen Umgang. Köln; Weimar; Wien : Böhlau Verlag, 2008, pp. 31-120 (pp. 58-59). – S. Plotke gives the history of the term and word “conversation”; we are, on the other hand, based in the fact of convivial social talk which in certain historical moments merges with the term conversation.


7 Cf. PLOTKE, Conversatio / Konversation, p. 105.

8 The full title of the collection of Luther’s Tischreden, containing 6,596 records that were collected, thematically sorted and published by Luther’s pupils after his death, is Dr. Martin Luthers Tischreden oder Colloquia, so er in vielen Jahren mit gelehrten Leuten, fremden Gästen und seinen Tischgesellen geführt, nach den Hauptstücken der christlichen Lehre zusammengetragen (Dr. Martin Luther’s Table Talk or Colloquia as He Held Them with Scholars, Foreign Guests and His Fellow Diners During Many Years, Collected According to the Main Parts of Christian Doctrine). Cf. the 1878 publication, Leipzig, Reclam; further cf. BAINTON, Roland H. Martin Luther. Tübingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967, p. 260 and next.
conférer, as it was used by Michel de Montaigne in his Essays in the late 16th century (it had already been known before), already put less emphasis on the social aspect of conversation with the aim to maintain conviviality. It was, rather, supposed to express “the most pleasant way” of cultivating the spirit of an individual in the meeting with their conversational partners because, unlike reading books, conversation “teaches us something and keeps us in motion as well”. Montaigne’s understanding of social conversation is exclusively focused on the verbal side of social intercourse and on the intellectual utility following from it for an individual. By this it differs both from the medieval conversatio and from ancient philosophical dialogues the primary goal of which was to enhance knowledge. Far and away the most widespread genre term in Renaissance, however, was dialogus (dialogo) that refers to the ancient tradition of Platonic or Socratic dialogue. In modest forms it remained in existence in the Middle Ages but it was revived with great intensity in the Italian and subsequently in the French Renaissance. At the same time, however, here it lost its exclusive role of communication form directed toward philosophical knowledge because its other aspects began to be duly appreciated, especially beauty. In accord with the conviction and style of the era, the literary dialogue assumed the form of thought openness and incompleteness and was gaining new contents of conviviality.

Besides the term dialogus, the term colloquium was the most used Latin expression for conversation at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. Its objective had to be neither a deeper philosophical knowledge nor a comprehensive embracing of a specific topic but, above all, a loose social talk on a certain topic in spoken Latin or an instruction how to hold it – and thereby, at the same time, formation and strengthening of the community having a discussion through a thematically aimed common talk. The primary educational focus puts this sort of conversation as a more or less set literary genre in the area of Latin school or university where it helped pupils or students manage conversational Latin; here it is called Latin school colloquy. However, the influence of these dialogues or colloquia could occasionally exceed the school framework. Deliberate, but also subliminal cultural importance of Latin dialogue (colloquium) was enormous especially in the 16th century; it contributed to the “Latin articulation of life” but, at the same time, “it showed the

10 “For 2,000 years, the dialogues have been stage-managed according to one criterion of mimesis, either according to Plato as an imitated language of characters instead of author’s language, or according to Aristotle as a poetic fiction of stage-managed dialectics or a thought drama instead of an unpoetical treatise.” In: MOOS, Peter von. Gespräch, Dialogform und Dialog nach älterer Theorie. In FRANK, Barbara - HAYE, Thomas - TOPHINKE, Doris (eds). Gattungen mittelalterlicher Schriftlichkeit. Tübingen : Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997, pp. 235-259 (252).
11 On the background of the medieval tradition of literary dialogicality relying especially on Cicero, St. Augustine and Boethius, P. von Moos points, in the sense of accentuating the aesthetic aspects, to the rediscovery of the Platonic and Lucian’s dialogues in the 15th and 16th centuries. MOOS, Gespräch, Dialogform und Dialog, p. 248.
forms of spiritual communication valid for the life situations in which those who had left the schools and universities found themselves later in life. In the original educational meaning the tradition of Latin school colloquies dates back to the 9th century and it continues with sporadic collections of conversations for the pupils of Latin (trivial) schools in the 11th to 15th centuries. However, the beginnings of the humanistic school conversation itself date back to the period around 1480. Its main European centres were large parts of Germany, the Netherlands, present-day Belgium and Switzerland.

The completion and at the same time surpassing of the tradition of Latin school colloquies with their first-plan educational objectives is represented by the most famous work of this genre written in the 16th century – Desiderius Erasmus’ collection known as the Colloquia familiaria. By publishing this compilation of forty-eight to fifty-seven colloquies on various topics, set in miscellaneous settings, and written and compiled over many years, the genre of Latin school colloquy entered a new period that differed from the previous periods primarily by purer, more elegant Latin, refined according to ancient examples characterized by subtle semantic and stylistic nuancing. Moreover, thanks to the unique literary style, Erasmus’ work far surpassed the standard of conventional educational writings using the form of colloquy and it could also function, in the sense of a full-fledged literary work of Latin humanism, as a collection of Latin “dialogues for adults” (i.e. for the readers of Latin texts for whom these texts did not serve as “phrase books” for learning or improving Latin). As such it constituted, according to the assessment by Franz Bierlaire, a sort of “human comedy” with the scenes from private, public,
military, country or religious life. Numerous translations of this work to national languages confirmed this tendency and, actually, denied its original (or outward) aim. The spread of Erasmus’ *Colloquia* in their translations was the highest award for the work as a literary artefact of European humanism - thanks to the original rendition of communication situations, but also thanks to their verbal humour, they served to the amusement of readers. Since the basis of these colloquies is Renaissance tolerance associated with Christian world view, they worked in the period moral sense, too. However, they could also serve as a guide in the sense of the cultivation of the cultural techniques and tools of social intercourse and communication adequate for the time when they were published.

The circumstances of the origin and spread of Erasmus’ colloquies are closely connected to these functions that, thanks to the immense popularity of the work, came more and more to the fore over the course of years. Erasmus began to write a series of Latin dialogues during his second stay at the Collège Montaigne in Paris in 1495 when he, as a poor student, taught Latin to make some money. For this purpose he created a series of simple Latin dialogues for his pupils. Initially, the original colloquies were simple exchanges of conventional conversational lines between pupils or between a pupil and their teacher in the most ordinary everyday situations (greeting, excuse, goodbye, etc.). From the very beginning, their participants had Latin or Greek names that were intended to epitomize their character traits or attitudes. In the course of time, these colloquies grew into larger, rhetorically more sophisticated, more elaborated and situationally more differentiated conversations and the author increased the social circle of communicating characters as well. A certain earthiness, brevity and dynamics, indicative of the original educational aim to teach pupils to quickly respond in Latin in various communication situations, remained, however, in the later editions of the work as its primary base. The evaluation of Erasmus’ collection of colloquies, as was, after four centuries, made by Johan Huizinga on the basis of its final shape, not only characterizes the high literary level or the high aesthetic qualities of individual dialogues, but also contains a reference to conciseness that constituted its original base:

“The colloquy is a radiant adagio here. It is a real conversation. Erasmus was a master precisely at always being able to really change language in short sentences. Every line is interconnected with the previous one, like one rhyme is interconnected with the second one or pentameter iamb with hexameter one. The whole dialogue flows smoothly like a brooklet. It could be staged and presented with strict text fidelity. In elegant Latin of these *Colloquia* lies the Renaissance artwork that, in its flowery fairness and plain harmony, perhaps resembles an early Italian work of art, rather than a contemporary German or Dutch painting.”

In 1518 the first edition of the work, edited by Beatus Rhenanus, was published in Basel (without the author’s knowledge). Shortly afterwards (1519), this “pirate edition” was corrected, supplemented, inter alia with a preface, and published by the

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21 In the final version of the *Colloquia* of 1533, several original school colloquies have been preserved.
author himself under the title *Familiarium colloquiorum formulae. Et alia quaedam, per Des. Erasmum Roterodamum.* In the following editions (especially between 1522 and 1526) new colloquia were gradually added to the work. Since 1526 Erasmus’ work has been entitled *Colloquia familiaria.* Between 1518 and 1533, when the author gave his work its final shape, A. Bömer counted 77 Latin editions in various supplemented versions in the workshops across Europe. By the end of the 18th century, approximately 300 complete or individual Latin editions, intended mainly for teaching Latin in schools, were recorded. The spread of the work across Europe was not brought to a halt even by several church prohibitions – first by the Sorbonne in Paris (1531), later in England and Spain. For the whole Roman Catholic world the decision was sealed at the Council of Trent in 1559 that decided to ban all the author’s works. In the period from 1524 to 1549/50, various versions of the *Colloquia* were translated nine times to German and in 1530 to 1584 thirteen times to English, in 1897 A. Bömer recorded 246 complete and 150 individual or selected editions in the translations to English, French, Italian, German, Dutch and other languages.

One of the questions that arise on the background of the enormous spread of the *Colloquia* in Latin, but especially in national languages, is how could this work which already by its primary focus thematized communication – besides the works *Laus stultitiae* (*The Praise of Folly*) and *Adagia* it was Erasmus’ most popular work – participate in the formation of the period communication consciousness. This question was only partly answered by the author himself who in his correspondence as well as in the afterword to the *Colloquia* (1526, supplemented in 1529) defended against his church critics primarily the purity of the Christian world view of individual colloquies and explained the moral-educational aim of the work by his own criticism of hypocrisy, superstition, vices and a wrong way of life, or by the effort to “bring the spirit to religious consciousness” and the endeavour,

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24 LUDWIG, Formen und Bezüge, p. 70.
25 This ban was tempered by Pope Pius IV in 1564. Six Erasmus’ works, including his *Colloquia*, remained, however, on the Index. Erasmus’ writings were definitely freed from ecclesiastical censorship only in 1900. Since the 16th century, the *Colloquia*, along with other author’s works, were continuously spread, especially in the Protestant parts of Europe.
28 The first condemnation by the Sorbonne in Paris took place as early as in May 1526. However, it was made public only in 1531.
besides teaching good Latin, “to teach young people a God-fearing outlook”.\textsuperscript{29} If the Colloquia somehow participated in the forming of the period communication consciousness, it was, first of all, thanks to their contents, i.e. at the level of their moral-educational mission. The breadth of various aspects of life, embraced by Erasmus in his colloquies in the course of time, is expressed by the thematic diversity of the Colloquia. It ranges from learning through education and pseudo-education, celebrations, dining, good manners, falsehood, laziness and dishonesty, the status of women in society, love, marriage and motherhood to the reflexion of life experience in old age, various superstitions, the horrors of war, the life of soldiers, but also the role of clergy and religious orders in society, the formalization of faith, monastic life and natural disasters. The literary genre used by Erasmus in his Colloquia was not subject to deeper author’s reflexion; the author, in accord with tradition, considered a school colloquy a relatively common and, as it were, obvious didactic means through which it was possible to efficiently accomplish moral-educational goals.\textsuperscript{30} The term “familiaria” itself meant for him in connection with “colloquia” something “common”, rather than “familiar”. The character of conversation as a special cultural model requiring or providing concrete forms of behaviour and able to form and maintain more coherent relationships among the participants or create the atmosphere of togetherness also remained relatively poorly reflected in Erasmus. The latter briefly outlined the question of the relationship between verbal expression and human sociability only in the apologies of the colloquy The Wooer and the Maiden\textsuperscript{31} and The Old Mens Chat.\textsuperscript{32} In both cases, however, he formulated this question only as a general requirement of socially adequate language behaviour, without a concrete relationship to the genre and possibilities following from the exchange of conversational lines. Apparently, it is nevertheless possible to talk in the case of the Colloquia, on the background of the objectives assigned to them by the author, literary tradition as well as critics, about the particular strategies or techniques of the formation of new informal consciousness of social communication.

The basis for this new consciousness is, on the one hand, Erasmus’ critical attitude to certain rigid communication practices of his time, on the other hand, educational tendency that characterizes the great part of his undialogical writings as well. The serious activities of the majority of theologists of that period as well as his contemporaries educated in other arts, Erasmus considered a “meaningless play”. Contrarily, real activities of philosophers and theologians were discussion and debate.\textsuperscript{33} Scholastic dialogue, existing since the Middle Ages as a widespread dialogical form

\textsuperscript{30} “So I crawled into the skin of, as it were, young spirits who, as Aristotle justly wrote, are not willing to listen to his ethics, especially when it is taught according to strict rules.” Ibid., p. 497.
\textsuperscript{31} “I wish that all the wooers were like that my character and that all marriages were entered into only based on such conversations! What do we get from the fuddy-duddies who lack every charm and consider everything which resembles friendship and pleasure shamelessness?” Ibid., p. 502.
\textsuperscript{32} “Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens to earth; I have brought it even into games, informal conversations, and drinking parties.” Ibid., p. 504.
of scholar literature, did not, apparently, meet Erasmus’ vision of dialogicality. In accord with the Renaissance humanism the direction of Erasmus’ educational tendency can be characterized as civilization or cultivation, or it can be aptly expressed by the modern term “culture” that, although still unknown for a man of the early 16th century, as “civilitas”, “urbanitas” and “humanitas” constituted a live conglomerate consisting of the principles of Christian ethics, Renaissance humanism and the code of courtly behaviour. For Erasmus, like for his contemporaries, it was possible to express this tendency by crystallizing against what defied his positive vision of the level of culture or civilization and for what the term barbarism as locus communis had been used for centuries.

The term barbarism, originating in Greek antiquity and abundantly frequent in Erasmus’ writings, was understood by the author primarily as lack of culture and rudeness in social intercourse, incapacity for cultivated verbal expression and lack of good manners that he was acquiring from ancient literature and understood as a social ideal. From the late 15th century, Erasmus used this term largely in accordance with Italian humanists who in the Quattrocento used it for “Gothic” (transalpine) foreigners due to their rough customs and lack of sense for beautiful language. In 1513 this connotation was supplemented with a particular political dimension by Niccolò Machiavelli in his mirror of a prince Il principe in which, on the background of the military unrest in Italy in the early 16th century, he labelled the military expanding Spaniards and French as barbarians and in the case of his own advices to the ruler he referred to the ancient political examples. In the Italians the designation “barbarism” in this political-cultural meaning as a negative prejudice would persist against the French until as late as the beginning of the reign of King Louis XIV. In Erasmus the term “barbarians” does not contain the political connotation serving in Renaissance Italy the reinforcement of cultural identity in the sense of crystallizing against the transalpine civilizations – even though he would find barbarism mainly in the north of Europe – but, like Macchiavelli, he

34 The typical features of the medieval scholastic dialogue were summarized by Roger Friedlein; they include abstractness of speaking characters, thought essentiality, turning away from historical and individual aspects of interlocutors; cognitive interest consisting in the deriving phenomena from divinity, strongly formalized courses of conversations and often a predetermined scheme. The scholastic dialogue primarily serves to clarify theological issues or for the moral. Cf. FRIEDLEIN, Roger. Bernat Metges Lo Somni (1398) : Die Konkurrenz der Erkenntnisweisen zwischen scholastischem und humanistischem Dialogmodell. In HEMPFER, Klaus W. (ed.). Poetik des Dialogs. Stuttgart : Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004, pp. 97-130 (103).


38 “Before the century that I have called after Louis XIV and that starts around the foundation of the French Academy, the Italians called all transalpine people barbarians; it must be owned that the French in some degree deserved this reproachful epithet. Their fathers joined the romantic gallantry of the Moors with the Gothic rudeness. They had hardly any of the agreeable arts among them”, etc. VOLTAIRE, François-Marie Arouet: Vláda Karola XII. / Storočie Ludovíta XIV. Bratislava : Tatran, 1988, p. 150.
relates it to the sphere of martialism. At the same time, and this is new, it is directly related to the class of scholars of his time. As stated by R. Padberg, the young monks of Gouda, to whom Erasmus used to belong, in the last third of the 15th century used the term “barbarians” for a part of the contemporary European scholar elite, including their anti-humanist teachers and superiors “who did argue from miscellaneous starting points, but they had one in common: they looked on the performing arts and poetical-rhetorical efforts of the young with much distrust and tried to suppress their humanism.” How much Erasmus linked “barbarism” to the medieval scholastic teaching methods is apparent, inter alia, from his autobiographical feature of about 1523 in which he described the monastic school in Deventer that he had attended as a boy. As an attribute of European clergy, he most thoroughly explained barbarism in the voluminous dialogical work *Antibarbarorum liber* (*The Antibarbarians*, 1494–1520) in which he termed it philistinism by the part of contemporary Christian theologians promoting an alleged lack of education of the Apostles and church fathers. According to Erasmus it is disregard for fine ancient education in which he himself most appreciated “the rules of rhetoric, ethics, people’s decisions and priestly provisions” as principles that are, at least partially, applicable in the contemporary Christian world as well and are able to reconcile Christianity with antiquity. Civilization means criticism, overcoming and getting rid of barbarism in free contact and verbal communication by the form of syllogical argumentation, patient historical arguing and referring to natural human needs. “Anti-barbarism”, which could be termed “the will to culture or civilization”, was not supposed to be, however, only a matter of individual growth, learning and humanistic education or formation of elites (e.g. according to the mirrors of rulers) based on ancient literary examples, their leading to the use of correct and appropriate expressions (culture of speech), etiquette and exemplary social and ethical behaviour at every level, from the relationship to the subjects to the European courtly diplomacy. As a civilization ideal it crossed the borders of educational personalism and was related to a broader and more general group, to a community with its members communicating with each other. In the case of the *Colloquia* themselves, Erasmus emphasized the collectively directed civilization tendency of this effort in his letter to Johannes Reuchlich dated 8 November 1520 in which he wrote that his aim was, through his colloquies, to lead the Germans (!) to *civilitas*, i.e. to the proper behaviour within the community.

40 PADBERG, Personaler Humanismus, p. 40.
41 “The local school was then barbaric. The teachers taught Pater noster and verb conjugations were exacted. Eberhardt and Johannes de Garlandia were taught, with the exception of the fact that Alexander Hegius and Jan Synthen began to introduce a better sort of literature (...). Nobody did more to uplift noble education and, therefore, they were heavily affected by the hatred of barbarians and monks.” Quoted according to: SVATOŠOVCI, Michal a Martin (eds.). *Živá tvář Erasma Rotterdamského*. Praha : Vyšehrad, 1985, pp. 99-100.
43 Paraphrased according to: SCHOCH, Gerold. *Die Bedeutung der Erziehung und Bildung aus der Sicht...*
In the *Colloquia*, there are several examples of transalpine barbaric behaviour. One of them can be found in the colloquy *Inns*, inspired by personal experience, in which two main characters William and Bertulf compare their travel experiences. While the first one was very satisfied with the kindness, hospitality and friendship of the French during his stay in a Lyon inn, the second one expressed his different experience with German customs as follows:

“Whether the method of treatment is the same everywhere, I don’t know. I’ll tell you what I saw. No one greets the stranger, lest they seem to be on the lookout for a guest; that they consider base and degrading, unworthy of Germanic seriousness. When you’ve shouted a long time, someone finally sticks his head out of the little window of the stove room (...). You must ask him if you may put up there. If he doesn’t shake his head, you know there’s room for you. Those who ask where the stable is are directed by a wave of the hand. There you may look after your horse as you like, for no servant lifts a finger. Though if the inn’s one of the better-known ones, a servant does show you the stable and even a place for your horse - a very poor place, since the better ones are reserved for the use of later guests, especially nobility. If you ask why, you hear instantly ‘If you don’t like this, look for another inn.’ (...) But if they set eyes on a foreigner, whose dress gives him an air of distinction, they all stare intently at him, gazing as if at some new species of animal imported from Africa. This is carried so far that after they’ve sat down at table they turn round and continue to stare, not taking their eyes off him; they forget to eat. (...) Among these folk it’s a principal part of good management to melt everybody in sweat. If someone not used to steam should open a window to escape suffocation, he hears instantly, ‘Close it!’ If you reply, ‘I can’t stand this,’ they tell you, ‘Then look for another inn.’”

In contrast to this description, in which unkindness and gloomy soundlessness prevail and verbal communication is limited to curt commands or it even contains verbal intimidations, is Erasmus’ positive (ideal) vision of conversational sociability, as rendered in another colloquy entitled *A Feast of Many Courses*. In this colloquy of two characters (Spudus and Apicius), the more experienced gives the less experienced advice regarding the properly conducted conversations at a ceremonial banquet in which foreigners also take part. The advice is about the tasks of a host. Unlike the previous description, the colloquy in which the central role is played by

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*Desiderus Erasmus, Verzameld werk, Vol. 1 („Gesprekken”). Amsterdam : Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2007, pp. 176-178. (English translation borrowed from the Collected Works of Erasmus : Colloquies, Vol. 1 (ed. by Craig R. Thompson). Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1997, pp. 334-335). An important contribution to the historical interpretation of this colloquy was made by Norbert Elias who believes that the difference between Erasmus’ description of the German and French inns reflects not only the differences between the two cultures, but also a gradual squeezing out of the late medieval (in this case German) and the beginning of the Renaissance (in this case French) form of social intercourse; Elias’ indicator of this transition is the felt “awkwardness” of old form. Cf. ELIAS, Norbert. Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen. Bd. 1. Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 1976, especially pp. 91-95.*

the principle of natural accommodation (adaptation) and moderation has a character of regulation:

“(…) To talk to every one in his own tongue from time to time and make the dinner merry with entertaining stories, introduce a variety of subjects everyone likes to recall and no one hears with displeasure. (…) Old men are fond of recalling what most people have forgotten. They praise the good old days when they were in their prime. To wives it’s sweet to revive memories of the time when they had suitors. Sailors who have visited strange and distant parts of the world talk readily about things which, because nobody has seen them, everybody marvels at. Also, as the proverb says, recollection of dangers past pleasant if they’re such as are not joined with vice - if for example they’re about war, travel, and shipwreck. Last of all, everybody enjoys conversation about his own specialty and about what he’s expert at. These are generalities. I can’t describe idiosyncrasies one by one but - for example - one man is especially eager for praise, another wishes to be thought learned, another is happy if thought rich. This man is somewhat garrulous, that laconic; some you’ll find irritable, others genial. There are some who hate to appear old even though they are old, and others who want to be regarded as older than they are (…). There are women who are vain of their figures, others who are affected. When these dispositions are recognized, it’s not hard to carry on conversations acceptable to anyone and to avoid topics that spread gloom. (…) Season the talk with jokes now and then, but avoid ones that might offend. (…) If you (as a host – A. B.) don’t like to choose places by lot, take the trouble to choose from all those present three persons who are naturally good-humoured and talkative. Put one at the head of the table, another at the foot, the third in the middle, to dispel the silence and moroseness of others. (…) I’ll add a conclusion or rather repeat what I said at the beginning: in this as in all of life, don’t try too hard to please everybody. Then you may sooner please them all. The best rule of life is: ‘Nothing to excess.’”46

One of the most illustrative examples of the collision between barbarism and civilization, or the will to civilization, set in the framework of social conversation, was presented by Erasmus at the end of his work The Antibarbarians. In this publication he described a conversational situation in which one of his characters, a young humanist, found himself. It is a dinner scene at a Flemish host’s who blames intellectuals and draws attention to himself and his primitive likes. The educated and gentle humanist fails to re-educate the host in their conversation (such a goal is, however, owing to his status of guest, unacceptable). Nevertheless, through his behaviour and manner he provides an example how to treat a modern barbarian: the objective is to tactfully try to divert the conversation toward where it would be, at least partly, possible to neutralize unculture:

In the meantime, I noticed that that man (host – A. B.) was an absolute villain. It occurred to me that I must offer him his cup of tea. Therefore, I purposely turned conversation to the topics at which I assumed that he was very good: different sorts

of wines, culinary art and hunter’s banquets. As if it were a very important topic, he suddenly sat upright like a candle and in reverent silence and with great authority started a long, intelligent, detailed and elegant lecture. He could enumerate about six hundred sorts of wines by heart. He boasted that he hadn’t learnt all this from the physicists’ works but thanks to his own mature tongue. He declared Pliny (as I mentioned him) insane because in such an important matter he trusted more the writings of others than his own taste. If you heard him to talk about cooking and seasoning meals, you would never again have respect for any other cook: any Catius, Philoxenus, Apicius and even Platyn.”

From the further development of this small story, as well as from the overall context of the book, it is clear that, for Erasmus, the Flemish host embodies an example of incorrigible and uneducationable ignoramus. Thank to his aggressiveness, a boor wins out in the cited conversational scene. However, the scene offers the way how to present the effort of the well-bred conversational partner in the positive light and thus have a cultivation effect on readers.

In Erasmus’ Colloquia, there are no comparably clearly defined conflicts between new barbarians and the civilized, i.e. examples of colloquies of humanists with modern barbarians. Their cultivation strategies are mostly indirect – they are literary more demanding, structurally more complex and psychologically more sophisticated. Besides the good manners regulations and explicit instances of adequate communication, that are, however, rather rare (A Feast of Many Courses, A Lesson in Manners), the most frequent and, with respect to their development, also the most original cultivation strategy of the Colloquia is an unstudied working of apt sayings, comparisons or metaphors from Greek and Roman antiquity in the lines of characters. While in the Latin original of the Colloquia these references to ancient education (they are countless) were supposed to co-shape the language and cultural consciousness of readers, in the translations of the work to national languages especially their more general value of cultural message was important.

If in the Colloquies there is sometimes an open dialogical crystallizing of the world of humanists against the prejudices, philistinism and other frailties that characterize modern barbarians, the emphasis is usually on another problem of that time, as it is, for instance, in the colloquy The Abbot and the Learned Lady (in this case it is contemporaries’ prejudices against learned women).

In this colloquy, Erasmus let a gentlewoman to convincingly argue in favour of her classical education during her visit to a church dignitary. At the forefront of the conversation, there are, from the very beginning, the questions of the woman (Magdalia) as a simple (fatic) element by which this character stays in touch with her conversational partner (Antronius). In addition to the fact that she tries, according to Socrates guidance, to rationally persuade him about the importance of edu-

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48 A number of them can be found and are explained in Erasmus’ Adagia.
cation for a woman, she simultaneously demonstrates her erudition by drawing him wittily into the conversation. By disrupting petrified communication expectations she even takes slightly over from her counterpart:

"Antronius: What furnishings do I see here?  
Magdalia: Elegant, aren’t they?  
Antronius: How elegant I don’t know, but certainly unbecoming both to a young miss and a married woman.  
Magdalia: Why?  
Antronius: Because the whole place is full of books.  
Magdalia: Are you so old, an abbot as well as a courtier, and have never seen books in court ladies’ houses?  
Antronius: Yes, but those were in French. Here I see Greek and Latin ones.  
Magdalia: Are French books the only ones that teach wisdom?  
Antronius: But it’s fitting for court ladies to have something with which to beguile their leisure.  
Magdalia: Are court ladies the only ones allowed to improve their minds and enjoy themselves?  
Antronius: You confuse growing wise with enjoying yourself. It’s not feminine to be brainy. A lady’s business is to have a good time.  
Magdalia: Shouldn’t everyone live well?  
Antronius: Yes, in my opinion."

(etc.)

This dialogue also indicates another tendency of Erasmus’ colloquies. It is a new literary rendition of mutual emancipated communication between partners with different social status. For the Renaissance culture of “dialogues for adults” this rendition is new to the same extent as to which the vision of communication of the representatives of socially relatively homogenous groups (scholars or noblemen or members of the higher bourgeoisie) was gaining ground in the tradition of Platonic and Ciceronian conversations at the beginning of modern age. The relatively set class homogeneity of classical dialogues, still persisting in the 16th century in the Platonist Castiglione (here it was aimed at spiritual and social formation of a courtier), was, however, disturbed by the unequal status of interlocutors (pupil/student – teacher) in the very germ of the genre itself of Latin school colloquy. This disturbance was, of course, limited by the hierarchic status of interlocutors, which, on the other hand, brought about the possibilities of educational influencing in the sense of the getting over adequate communication means in the contact between socially unequal partners. Virtually, Latin school colloquy represented a possibility to mimetically put on stage a socially relatively heterogenous setting without equalization of interlocutors in their communication.

Obviously, in the Colloquies the class boundaries are not removed yet either; they still persist. However, Erasmus, at least in some cases, implicitly criticised socially unequal communication as abortive. Inter alia, he did so in the colloquy The Mas-
ter’s Bidding, in which he introduced a tyrannical master (Rabinus) giving orders and his servant (Syrus) commenting the impossibility to fulfil the orders as his counterpart.

"Rabinus: After you see to the other things, go to the butcher’s and buy me a shoulder of mutton; make sure it’s roasted nicely. Do you hear these orders?
Syrus: More orders than I could wish.
Rabinus: But see that you remember.
Syrus: I’ll hardly be able to remember half of them.
Rabinus: Still standing here, idler? You should have returned already.
Syrus: What single person could do so many things?..."

(etc.)

In Erasmus, an ideal of language communication, which includes not only understanding, counting clear instructions for proper or successful acting, but also certain social qualities as well as a vision of content, happy and peaceful coexistence, is connected with two principles contradicting the principles of exclusion: Christian egalitarianism and the vision of humanity stemming from ancient education. Erasmus as a disciple of devotio moderna and, at the same time, as one of the initiators of reformation, put in all his writings, in which he expressed his ideas on the social aspects of religion, principal emphasis on the equality of all Christians regardless of their social status, origin or family line. Erasmus gave reasons for the Christian equality that creates conditions for democratic communication among a community’s members but is, at the same time, based on respecting “natural”, estate, family and national (ethnic) differences as on the factors shaping human identity, in his work Enchiridion militis christiani (The Manual of a Christian Knight, 1501):

“We all be members each one of another, members cleaving together make a body. The head of the body is Jesu Christ, the head of Christ is God. It is done to thee it is done to everyone, it is done to Christ it is done to God: whatsoever is done to any one member whichsoever it be, whether it be well done or evil: All these things are one, God, Christ, the body, and the members. That saying hath no place conveniently among christian men, like with like. And the other saying, diversity is mother of hate: for unto what purpose pertain words of dissension where so great unity is, it savoureth not of christian faith that commonly a courtier to a town dweller: one of the country to an inhabiter of the city: a man of high degree, to another of low degree: an officer, to him that is officeless: the rich to the poor: a man of honour, to a vile person: the mighty to the weak: the Italyen to the Germayne: the Frensheman to the Englysshman: the Englysshe to the Scotte: the grammarian to the divine: the logician to the grammarian: the physician to the man of law: the

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51 From the gender point of view, the most interesting Erasmus’ colloquia are those a central theme of which are the rights of women and female corporeality (e.g. The Female Parliament, The Abbot and the Learned Lady, The New Mother, A Marriage in Name Only or The Unequal Match).
learned to the unlearned: the eloquent to him that is not facounde and lacketh utterance: the single to the married: the young to the old; the clerk to the layman: the priest to the monk (...) and that (lest I rehearse all diversities) in a very trifle unlike to unlike, is somewhat partial and unkind...” 52

The Manual of a Christian Knight is just one of many works in which Erasmus repeatedly promoted the idea of human equality based on Christian spirit. This idea, however, succeeded to take root in the European thought on social preconditions of interpersonal communication only in the second half of the 16th century. It happened thanks to Stefano Guazzo and his programme concept of “civil conversazione” that combined the possibility for a free and democratic conversation across the estates, social classes and, eventually, regardless of family identity as well. 53 This idea was, however, already sufficiently clearly present also in Erasmus of Rotterdam. For the latter even the differences in the level of education or achieved spiritual standard did not play any role in communication because everyone, regardless of their estate or education, could favour others with pleasant, instructive or edifying conversation. For Erasmus’ Carthusian monk an equal conversational partner can be both primitive soldier and the representatives of the highest Christian spiritual tradition (colloquy The Soldier and the Carthusian 54) with whom he can, via reading, establish connection over the time gap:

“Carthusian: You see this book of the Gospels? In it one talks with me who long ago, as an eloquent companion of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, caused them to forget the hardship of their journey but made their hearts burn most fervently in their wonder at his enchanting speech. In this book Paul speaks to me, in this Isaiah and the rest of the prophets. Here the honey-tongued Chrysostom converses with me, here Basil, here Augustine, here Jerome, here Cyprian, and other teachers as learned as they are eloquent. Do you know any other talkers so delightful that you would compare them with these? Or in such company, which never fails me, do you suppose solitude can become tedious?” 55

Perhaps in the most radical form the idea of communication egalitarianism appeared in the author’s works dealing with the Turkish threat that reveal even deeper anthropological fundaments of Erasmian understanding of equality, exceeding the framework of Christianity. 56 According to Erasmus it is possible and necessary


53 According to Helga Hübner, in Guazzo “conversazione becomes a means for communication of all people who have qualità dell’ animo, i.e. civil follows in forma di vivere”. In: HÜBNER, Helga. Stefano Guazzo La Civil Conversazione in der französischen Kultur des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts. Frankfurt am Main; Berlin; Bern; Bruxelles; New York; Oxford; Wien : Peter Lang Verlag, 2012, p. 102.


56 Cf. NAGY, Imrich. Erazmus Rotterdamský a jeho svet. Kraków : Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2012, es-
to also apply equality in contact with the representatives of other religions. This should be, however, done not only in regard to the hope of the conversion to Christian faith of the opponents (even if this idea also exists and is very important in Erasmus’ thought). This motif is a typical product of the time which brought with it new quality of relations with non-European civilizations and, thus, allowed the expansion of cultural transfers. According to Erasmus, the precondition of equality in the relations – today perhaps the most apt attribute for it would be “intercultural” – is not, however, Christianity in its complexity and uniqueness, but, above all, certain human quality given and enabled by Christian faith: it is a capability to give up violence, to be able even “to fight against a Turk” in oneself, so it is a capability to suppress one’s own tendencies to violence and barbarism, but, at the same time, to establish and maintain rules of mutually enriching social intercourse; Christian love is a means of how to understand and accept the natural human equality and make it, inter alia, a base for peaceful coexistence and unforced communication.

The second basic pillar of Erasmus’ ideal of equality of interlocutors is represented by ethical principles having been told from ancient times. In the colloquy A Lesson in Manners Erasmus let a teacher to instruct his pupil:

“Look pleasantly at those who are speaking; say nothing yourself unless asked. If anything risqué is said, don’t laugh but keep a straight face, as though you don’t understand. Don’t disparage anybody, or put on airs, or boast about your things, or belittle another’s. Be cordial even toward companions who are poorly off. Don’t accuse anyone. Don’t let your tongue run away with you. Thus you will find sincere approval and make friends. If you notice that the dinner’s dragged out, excuse yourself, say goodbye to the company, and leave the table.”

When formulating the principles of adequate behaviour and verbal expression in the society, Erasmus evidently took into consideration, besides the principles of conversation formulated in Cicero’s work On Duties (moderation, absence of obdurateness, wit, fair changing of lines, the relationship between the topic and the way of talking), one of the principles of Aristotle’s ethics, according to which a fundament of optimal sociability was maintenance of an individual’s balanced mental state relying on the virtue of mean, while the pursued objective was the maintenance of balanced state in the whole community that, as the only one, could guarantee human blessedness. The virtue of mean, crucial for Erasmus’ under-

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61 In this sense, there are evident links to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics in Erasmus’ short educational treatise De civilitate morum puerilium libellus (A Little Book of Good Manners for Children). First published in 1530, it was addressed to Henry of Burgundy. The treatise gives instructions on how a boy
standing of successful communication, had already according to Aristotle implications at different levels of human behaviour. As for the closer social intercourse, in a noble man it supports, apart from his ability to “tactfully jest”, also “decency” and avoiding ridicule.  

Besides anti-barbarism and egalitarianism, as the third most significant and at the same time the most important aspect of Erasmus’ conception of civilized sociability tolerance comes to the fore. It includes both the respect for an individual’s autonomy and communication strategies supporting this autonomy and, simultaneously, not disturbing stability of communicating community. In this context, the respect for autonomy means resignation from enforcement of one’s own truth in the way that would be at the expense of personal integrity of the counterpart with different views or representing different lifestyle. It is a case of general quality by which Erasmus as a Renaissance thinker followed in the discovery of value relativism in Greek antiquity or in the anti-authoritarian thought of sofistry.

Although the respect for the counterpart’s autonomy and world of values can, at a glance, defy the Erasmian civilization tendency as the suppression of barbarism, it defines it, however, only seemingly because it contains in itself a civilized human’s firm imperative, i.e. the prohibition of any violence against the others, including verbal violence. This, on the other hand, does not mean that Erasmus absolutely avoided word persuasion; a number of his colloquies are based on the persuasion of conversational partners about the benefits of moral life (e.g. The Young Man and the Harlot, The Soldier’s Confession, The Old Mens Chat, etc.). Basically, it can be, however, said that in the case of verbal exchange Erasmus prefers soft procedures full of humour and embellished with such rhetorical figures that allow the interlocutors to save their face. He prefers them to a radical confrontation with polemic tone because it seduces to opinion unicity, which usually means one-sideness and narrow-mindedness. The standard communication strategies of open-mindedness in Erasmus’ works include primarily the procedures inherited from ancient rhetoric; these help him create satirical literary frameworks as well. It can be said that in Erasmus open-mindedness dresses into satire like into a period gown.

The most important rhetorical instrument of Erasmian tolerance in the literary habit of satire is a form of praise (declamation) that, in Erasmus’ times, constituted a playful and intellectually appealing way how to present the life phenomena in the...
manner that would reveal their paradoxicality and, at the same time, allowed to avoid their first-plan moral judgement. As stated by J.-C. Margolin, inspirational sources of satirically focused declamation for the humanists of Erasmus’ times had been a number of ancient pagan as well as several early Christian authors. Although the Renaissance satirical declamation can constitute an independent literary structure (in Erasmus it is mainly the case of The Praise of Folly, but, according to J.-C. Margolin, also of his less known works like The Praise of Medicine, The Praise of Marriage or The Praise of Death), it does not limit itself to it, because satirical declamatory elements can be used in other genres, too, for instance in dialogues.

There are also other rhetorical procedures inherited from ancient times that serve both the satirical aim and the promotion of the idea of tolerance. They include especially the trope of irony (eironeina or dissimulatio) and its subcategories (sarcasm, euphemism) that, in a small space, express the opposite of what the author is performing outwardly. In his Adagia (III 3, 1) Erasmus dealt in detail with the trope of irony using the example of Alcibiades’ Silenus in Plato’s Symposium. According to the passage from the classical text, Socrates, like the Silenus’ statuette, outwardly appears differently than what he actually hides in his soul. In his comparison of Socrates with Silenus, Alcibiades put a special emphasis on the contradiction in Socrates’ talking which was outwardly veiled “in language that is like the skin of the wanton satyr (...); but he who opens the bust and sees what is within will find that they are the only words which have a meaning in them and also the most divine, abounding in fair images of virtue, and of the widest comprehension, or rather extending to the whole duty of a good and honourable man.” Erasmus, who in his Adagia returned to the Silenian character as to allegory, concentrated on the ironic tension of this character following from the paradox of the latter’s unlovely appearance or simple and ostensibly meaningless language and more deeply hidden spiritual value and, at the same time, he presented its miscellaneous examples from the history of Christianity (Jesus, church fathers) as well as from the present. Thus, he created space for the humanistically tolerant evaluation of man and, at the same time, he revived a topos through which it was possible to depict ambivalent phenomena in the Renaissance literature.

In Erasmus’ understanding, the trope of irony corresponds, as regards its form and effect, with the principles of Quintilian’s rhetoric (VII, 6, 54). According to the
latter, irony can be understood “either based on how it is expressed or according to a person or theme. After all, if something from these things is contrary to the words, it is clear that language wants to express something else.”

70 The basic aspects of thus understood irony are either praise or reprimand, meaning the opposite of what they express outwardly.71 In the *Colloquies*, one of the principal ancient literary examples both for satirical declamation and irony are the dialogues of the sophist Lucian of Samosata, rediscovered at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. These served Erasmus, on the one hand, as one of the sources of “classical Greek, elegant style and colourful, plastic descriptions”,72 but, on the other, by their “general orientation towards common sense, hedonistic nodding to life, turning away from asceticism and belief in miracles” they were meeting the author’s humanistic world view halfway.73 How the people unfavourable to Erasmus viewed the presence of the ironical literary procedures and satirical spirit of Lucian’s dialogues in his works is testified, perhaps in the best way, by Martin Luther’s invectives. Besides for his alleged opinion (and moral) ungraspability (“slipperiness”, “being slippery like an eel”), the latter also reproached Erasmus for “carrying godless Lucian in his chest”.74 Nevertheless, Luther himself occasionally (ironically) lauded Lucian but always in order just to concurrently humiliate his adherent and follower Erasmus “because he (Lucian – A. B.) acts freely and derides everything publicly; Erasmus, however, falsifies everything which is divine and the whole divine blessedness turns to the semblance of divine blessedness, therefore he is much worse and more harmful than Lucian”.75 Luther’s lines regarding Erasmus’ ambiguity or ungraspability can be largely interpreted as an evidence of the reformer’s lack of sense for those communication strategies of Renaissance tolerance thanks to which authors do not present their opinions in a confrontational way because they try to maintain the integrity of their counterparts and to keep balance between interlocutors.76 Luther


71 Ibid.


75 *Dr. Martin Luthers Tischreden oder Colloquia*. Leipzig : Reclam, 1878, p. 240.

76 In the dialogical part of Erasmus’ work, the alleged ungraspability of his stance results from the fact that he gives all the participants in the conversation a free space to express themselves. Thus, it is often difficult to say to a reader’s identification with which person or opinion the author encourages. The problem of the acceptance of freedom in conversation is also remotely connected with the core of the theological controversy over the free will and the attainability of God’s grace between Martin Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam. While the former held the opinion of human acting being abso-
himself lacked a sense of these qualities of Renaissance dialogicality, even despite the fact that he would take part in many significant and culture-formative dialogues of his time. However, while his theological polemics and disputations are apodictic and demagogic, his own “colloquies”, i.e. “common talks” (Tischreden), often abound with irony; in spite of their name, however, they are ultimately only monologues in which Luther’s conversational partners and their opinions completely vanish. Irony in the service of satire and, at the same time, tolerance as the most characteristic feature of so-called folly literature of European Renaissance primarily constitute a problem of new communication code. This new code defies an open conflict, ideological and verbal confrontation and focuses on such a way of verbal acting, which does not directly expose a moral stand nor persuasion, but it rather tries to uncover and throw light on the inner discrepancies of life and world and, if possible, to provide their colourful examples.

One of the examples of explicitly not evaluating irony (although with a clearly satirical aim) is offered by Erasmus’ colloquy A Meeting of the Philological Society. It is based on a pseudo-etymological discussion about the expression “anticomarita”, which is a corruption of the Latin word “antimariani” (the opponents of Mary) or “antidicomariani” (a Jewish-Christian sect of Palestine denying the virginity of Our Lady). In this colloquy, Erasmus staged a meeting of seven linguists speculating about the meaningless word, trying to derive it from the Latin expressions familiar to them and, subsequently, to assign it a meaning. The meeting of the scholars is an implicit criticism of the philological pedantry of that time and Erasmus’ personal revenge on one of his opponents. In the structure of the conversation, various views on the origin and meaning of the unknown word are authoritatively presented. However, they are instantly rejected in order to be replaced by other, equally absurd opinions. The colloquy takes place as a speculative scholarly debate with references to the period philological authorities. Tolerance is here represented by the respect for the plurality of opinions, although it must be clear that all of them are nonsense.

Another example of the connection of irony and tolerance can be found in the colloquy A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake, in which a character called Menedemus, with a personal respect for his neighbour Ogygius, very carefully disproves the latter’s reasons for the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, Walsingham and Canterbury. The colloquy is designed as a criticism of worship of religious relics, which

77 To be honest, to a large extent this can be charged to the first publishers of his Tischreden, who, as real Luther’s conversational partners, gave up their lines in this collection and published just the lines of their master, after having arranged them according to topics. This, however, nothing changes on the fact that at his home table Luther also presented his views apodictically.
Erasmus considers a pagan superstition. Even though an enthusiastic participant in the pilgrimage, Ogygius, when recalling experienced situations, under the influence of thoughtful questions of his conversational partner several times critically comments on the superstitions connected with an inappropriate adoration of relics.

In the Colloquies, there are, however, also examples of conversations that develop the techniques of communication tolerance without satirical habit. If we take into account that Erasmus did not have anything available for his Colloquies but the language of his characters, i.e. any stage directions, any stage props, any dramatic action and just basically socially defined characters that, however, could successfully cast doubt upon the validity of these definitions by their eloquence – and, on the other hand, he had before his eyes everyday situations, rather than a major epistemic issue – then his colloquies are, in fact, heading towards a mutual dependence of the interlocutors, to the dependence on one’s own language and the language of their counterparts, which is in all its manifestations the only means of self-expression of interlocutors and, at the same time, creates conditions for mutual acceptance.

As a matter of fact, in this situation of absolute dependence on what has been uttered (and with full trust in word), no other attitude to the partner is possible than personal tolerance. The latter keeps the world of Erasmus’ colloquies together. Without it this world, as a construct of successive lines, would collapse, it would implode as a whole, as a relatively closed complex of characters’ utterances about themselves. If we, therefore, talk about a social cohesion of interlocutors, we see it as an at the level of lines implemented principle of mutual tolerance and inevitable acceptance of the speaking counterpart as a person. As shown by the following examples, this at the level of language implemented and on the principle of tolerance and personal acceptance based cohesion need not have, as a conversational ideal, anything in common with opinion consensus. In the conversational situations, cohesion is created not thanks to opinion consensus but on the borderland of individual lines, often attesting to different attitudes.

In the colloquy The Wooer and the Maiden,81 the girl Maria is rejecting exaggerated flatteries of her wooer Pamphilus by ordering him to always rationally substantiate them. Pamphilus has to respond at lightning speed and cleverly not only not to degrade himself before his favourite but also to keep her interest in him. A one-sided scene of erotic seduction quickly turns to a scene of tight witty verbal duel with the rules of fair play, bringing pleasure to both of them. The girl will not succumb to the wooer’s smart arguments, which makes him esteem her all the more. Eventually, he promises to ask Maria’s parents for her hand.

The colloquy The Girl with No Interest in Marriage82 offers another situation: a very young girl wants to follow her naive childhood dream and decides to enter a nunnery. Her relative and friend Eubulus, first, tries to tactfully find out what troubles her and, eventually, to discourage her from her hasty resolution. Already

the first lines make us anticipate tension which can be released only by common
collection for which Eubulus strives. His persuasion primarily aims at making
his counterpart willing to talk together:

“Eubulus: How green and smiling the world is everywhere! This is its youthful
season, surely.
Catharine: So it is.
Eubulus: But why isn’t your springtime equally bright?
Catharine: Why do you say that?
Eubulus: Because you’re rather sad. (…)
Catharine: Stop asking about what doesn’t concern you. (…)
Eubulus: You won’t tell me, when I love you more than my own sister? Don’t
be afraid, Catharine dear. Whatever’s the trouble, you can trust it safely to these
ears.
Catharine: I’m safe in saying that I fear there’s no use telling it to one who can’t
help.
Eubulus: How do you know? If I can’t help in the business itself, maybe I can
give comfort and advice. (…) Then will you admit it if I guess?”
(etc.)

Catharina, however, does not get discouraged by Eubulus’ arguments (distorted
vision of beauty and purity of monastic life, unsuitability of monastic life for her)
and decides to go her own way. But in the next short colloquy The Penitent Virgin,\textsuperscript{83}
following in the previous colloquy, Catharina, in the last moment, i.e. in advance
of making vows, eventually backs away from her chimeric vision of happiness in
the nunnery and prefers real life. Even though she does not explicitly confess to
what helped change her mind, it is clear what an important role was played by the
previous conversation with Eubulus, contrasting by its friendliness and tactfulness
with the pressure from the side of the clerics as well as of her parents:

“Eubulus: It was very well that you recanted before you had professed yourself
for good and all. But still, I don’t hear what it was that changed your mind so
suddenly.
Catharine: I never told any mortal yet, nor shall.
Eubulus: What if I should guess?
Catharine: I’m sure you can’t guess it; and if you do, I won’t tell you.
Eubulus: Well, for all that, I guess what it was. (…)”
(etc.)

An unusual and, in certain sense, even perverted example of tolerance, was pre-
sented by Erasmus in his colloquy The Argument.\textsuperscript{84} Technically, it is a very simple
but at the same time extreme and, in its thought consequences, radical example

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., pp. 126-129. English translation based on Desiderius Erasmus, All the Familiar Colloquies of Desid-
erius Erasmus of Roterdam, Concerning Men, Manners, and Things (transl. into English by N. Bailey).
\textsuperscript{84} According to: SVATOŠOVCI (eds.), Živá tvář Erasma, pp. 195-197 (195). English translation borrowed
from Desiderius Erasmus, All the Familiar Colloquies of Desiderius Erasmus of Roterdam, Concerning
of irony with which Erasmus approached a common case of “barbarian” behaviour in conversation, as which not listening to the partner can be considered. Nevertheless, at the same time, Erasmus did not condemn this behaviour but he only presented it. Seemingly, the dialogue The Argument is a school exercise, but it is not innocent at all. It uncovers timeless aspects of highly deficit informal conversation and its literary quality approximates it to absurd drama of the 20th century:

Annius: I was told that you were at Pancratius’s and Albina’s wedding.  
Leucius: I never had a more unhappy voyage in my life, than at this time.  
Annius: What say you? Was there such a power of company then?  
Leucius: I never would have taken less for my life, than at that time.  
Annius: See what it is to be rich; now I had but a few at my wedding, and they were poor folks too.  
Leucius: We were scarce put to sea, but a great storm arose.  
Annius: Why, you’re talking of an assembly of deities; were there so many noblemen and ladies there?  
Leucius: Boreas tore the sail in pieces, and blew it quite away.  
Annius: I know the bride, she’s a perfect beauty.  
Leucius: Presently a wave comes and tears off the rudder.  
Annius: It is every body’s opinion. And her bridegroom does not come much short of her in beauty, according to common report.  
(etc.)

The principle on which this colloquy is based deserves more attention because it offers an inside look at the darkest corner of conversational practice from the absolutely timeless point of view. The paradoxicality of the conversation of the two interlocutors, who are not listening to each other, lies in the fact that the thematic non-intersection of their lines, about which much later Mukařovský would say that it made a dialogue impossible, surprisingly does not lead here to the breakdown of conversation. Contrarily, since the non-intersection is reciprocal it creates a – albeit fragile – communication balance. Conversation is maintained here, at least momentarily, without those elements that usually guarantee a semantic coherence of mutual meaningful conversation. Diametrically different interlocutors make do here with their own lines: either with their own narration (Leucius) or with their own replies to their questions (Annius). In fact, both characters are conducting either a monologue or a dialogue with themselves. Even though the communication balance of this colloquy is fragile, because neither in Erasmus’ nor in the present time most probably no one would be able (nor willing) to hold a conversation in this way forever, it seems that Erasmus captured here a certain more universal feature of superficial and informal conversation, distinguishing it from a meaningful dialogue: the diffusion of superficial conversation need not have an immediate effect on the balance of individual parts and on the stability of the overall communication situation because what matters ultimately is only an unswerving will to “talk

But if Leucius and Annius do not listen to each other - and they have probably not been listening to each other for centuries - we could ask: why actually do they then “talk together” in this way? Their will to “talk together” does not follow either from their information interest in the outer world or their interest in each other or it does not even follow from the rules of the talk itself. Apparently, it is only a consequence of a personal and eternal need to, face to face, “confide” in another human being. It is a personal verbal exhibition without a need for accepting; its inevitable precondition, however, is the presence of a (human) talking counterpart. From the descriptive point of view, this communication situation is related to the Bakhtinian raznorečie (heteroglossia) because its basis is a plurality of discourses which itself, however, does nothing for a harmonic orchestration nor creates a communication harmony. Harmony, if there is any, may perhaps be only of higher order and as such it is unexplored. At a glance, it is, however, deficient because it is determined by a bare possibility to confide in another person (or rather in the presence of another person), even without a promise or expectation of response. - The first-plan satiricalness of Erasmus’ colloquy (mockery of non-intersection communication) is thus not its only dimension; this conversation captures personal preconditions for interpersonal intercourse as possibilities of verbal confiding, even without a claim for a real presence or engagement of others. The conversation is, actually, a primordial human “being together”, i.e. what, since time immemorial, had been the essence of conversation and what was only in later understanding covered and justified by verbal communication.

“Being together”, which can be found as a sediment at the bottom of many Erasmus’ colloquies, is an older (medieval) but still legitimate semantic content of the term conversatio. It is reliably identified as a valid social and existential essence of a convivial social talk as such. Obviously, Erasmus’ Colloquies cannot be reduced to this sediment. Its presence, however, is an unmistakable trace of live substance consisting of anti-barbarian civilizing efforts, egalitarianism, fine rhetorical procedures, practical rationality, erudition, tolerance, humanity and humour. This trace would have never been so clear in Erasmus if it had not openly manifested itself in the characteristic method of conducting his colloquies. The method of Erasmus’ colloquies is usually aimed at the concentrated development of common talks around a particular thematic core. The concentration on the thematic core primarily constitutes a capability of intellectual concentration in joint conversation. It is a willingness to listen and, if possible, clearly answer questions, not to keep digressing from the subject of conversation but, contrarily, to develop this subject together (this, however, does not have to automatically mean its deepening). An ability to follow the topic with concentration, trained according to ancient philosophical dialogues, rhetoric and classical examples of good manners, includes a respect for conversational partners and, as an expression of social accommodation, is a sign of ethics-conscious communication. It is an expression of willingness.

86 The only exception is the colloquy The Argument. It, however, proves the thesis of conversation as “being together” out of the verbal-thematical framework, at the level of simple common presence of interlocutors.
to join a conversation, to take part in it with pleasure and to respect other participants as persons.

Erasmus’ colloquies did not yet know two other methods of conducting a conversation which would be used later, namely association and semantic turn. Although in a colloquy association constitutes a continuation of the topic being developed, by its latitude it actually already overlaps the previous topic because, as a surprising and subjective involvement in the colloquy it means a promoting of sovereignty of the associating person and it demonstrates their independence from the lines of conversational counterparts. Associations, which are always a result of an individual’s individual cognitive activity, need not be, unlike logical arguments, shared experiences and common “cultural luggage”, always intelligible. They go at the expense of communicative expectations arising from the initially raised topic and from the common objectives set by the conversing society. Although, by their imaginativeness, they draw attention to the speaking person, in reality they very seldom cause the development of a joint conversation. Contrarily, by their inconsiderate subjectivity they mostly silence the conversational partners.

Association constitutes an intermediary stage between the semantic coherence of conversation still characterized by respect for a partner and honest belief in the weight of word and in the seriousness of the subject of conversation and radical, totally abrupt semantic turn. The conversational associativeness is, however, not an invention of the following restless epochs unable to develop in the colloquies the thematic core with concentration. It has probably existed since time immemorial, just as semantic turn has also always existed, only Erasmus did not consider it an appropriate strategy for conducting a sociable talk or a culture-formative factor of a jointly developed, fine personal conversation. The only trace of conversational associativeness in Erasmus can be found in his colloquy The Fabulous Feast in which nine friends are having fun by telling fictional and real stories. The participants in the conversation assigned roles to each of them. Who tells the most interesting or the most boring story will cover all their expenses in the inn. The ad-hoc anecdotes have nothing to do with a specific being, personal experiences or the current world of interlocutors because they come from other than personal experiential worlds. As an expression of amusement and given rules of narration they constitute a less strict form of social game or literary entertainment where the issue is to “stand a round” or outdo the previous stories with one’s own, more interesting anecdote – in this colloquy, there is hidden a significantly different genre of conversation than in other Erasmus’ colloquies carefully developing particular social themes. Its literary model is Boccaccio’s Decameron (1340–1360, first published in 1470) as a collection of autonomous narratives delimited by a basic conversational situation.


88 They most often include stories having been told since antiquity, medieval exempla or fragments of historical event in which the interlocutors did not take part in person.
In Erasmus’ time the continuation of this genre can be found in Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptameron* (1549).\(^{89}\) It was exactly *Heptameron* that apparently constituted one of the earliest works of European literature in which the principle of “associative and contrastive arrangement of novellas”\(^{90}\) won its way – together with controversial discussions provoked by particular stories (this kind of discussions was not yet present in G. Boccaccio).

The absolute absence of semantic turns (i.e. digressions from the topic) as a conversational technique is connected in Erasmus with the fact that the objectives pursued by a semantic turn either were not highly valued among humanistic scholars of his time or were achievable by other means.\(^{91}\) One of the primary goals of the abrupt change of the subject of conversation is avoidance of open confrontation, conflict, boredom, fastidiousness, an unpleasant, awkward or uninteresting topic or situation\(^{92}\) or it is an effort of the speaking person to save their face or to save face of their conversational partner, i.e. to “save the situation” and thus the conversation itself. In the case of Erasmus’ colloquies saving one’s face was a matter of the aforesaid communication strategies based on the idea of tolerance. In this sense, besides their literariness, his *Colloquies* also maintained an educational character, i.e. besides indirect moral instructing they wanted to be a tactful model for adequate language acting in various, even delicate communication situations. In other words, Erasmus’ *Colloquies* were intended to teach how to skillfully, cleverly and satisfyingly conduct a conversation with the means available for an educated man. The techniques of avoiding answers, dodging and distraction of attention, which are connected with the semantic turn, have yet no place in this conception.

For these techniques Erasmus lacks, inter alia, the prerequisite which we find, in the time of writing the *Colloquies*, in another promoter of sociable talk and social conversation – in Baldassare Castiglione. The latter, who in his dialogical work *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) formulated the principles to be followed by a courtier of his time, promoted a term *sprezzatura*\(^{93}\) for the characterization of courtly behaviour. This word “obscures that what we know we had strenuously learned; we have to look as if what we do is not arduous and we have to pretend that we do

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\(^{89}\) In addition, the concept on which the conversational situation of *Heptameron* is based differs from Erasmus’ conception of a “common talk” by a social structure of the interlocutors. In Marguerite de Navarre there are noblemen, while the scholars as well as the representatives of the people are excluded from her colloquies.


\(^{91}\) The only example of semantic turn can be found in the aforesaid anecdote in Erasmus’ work *The Antibarbarians* (cf. supra n. 47). In the *Colloquies*, there are no semantic turns.


\(^{93}\) This key term is hard to translate. In modern English *sprezzatura* is translated as “nonchalance” (cf. JAVITCH, Daniel [ed.]. *Baldesar Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier : The Charles S. Singleton Translation*. New York : W. W. Norton, 2002). Benedetta Craveri states that in 17th century France the French “le naturel”, which was used in the sense of “the second nature”, was accepted as an equivalent of the Italian *sprezzatura* (cf. CRAVERI, Benedetta. *L´Âge de conversation*. Paris : Gallimard, 2002, pp. 85-86).
everything thinking of something else”.

94 *Sprezzatura* as a basic precondition for ideal courtly communication directly opposes the Erasmian dialogical straightness because its content is pretence. The latter is a norm both for Castiglione and the later French theorists of courtly and salon conversation of the 17th century. According to this new, to the Erasmian humanism quite alien conception, the adaptation to conversational partners in conversation no longer happens on the basis of natural joining the talk and tolerance of different or differently presented views, but on the basis of consensually accepted and interiorized rules. These rules include, inter alia, a programme-based avoidance of conflicts or escalation of aggression.

The basis of the new programme, however, is no longer the idea of humanistic enlightenment and cultivation by erudition but pragmatic (diplomatic) techniques of managing social situations within the socially exclusive environment of courtly culture. Besides the maintenance of the cohesion of the communicating courtly society, the objective of these techniques is principally to acquire or maintain a relevant social status.

**SUMMARY**

The Concept of Conversation in Desiderius Erasmus

The study constitutes a contribution to the historical research of conversation as a social and cultural practice and focuses on the early modern visions of informal and beautiful social colloquy without a particular aim as they had developed within the dialogical genres of the Western European Renaissance. From the late 15th century the most significant role of creator and propagator of the visions of good convivial verbal communication in Europe had been played by the humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466/9–1536). By his Latin work “Colloquia familiaria” (1518/33) he created conditions for the spread of examples of civilized, ethical and across the social classes carried out verbal communication for various everyday situations. Erasmus’ work “Colloquia familiaria” the original purpose of which had been to teach pupils to communicate well in Latin, very early – even during the author’s lifetime – began to be translated into vernacular languages and was spread in print throughout Europe. The numerous translations of the work challenged its original purpose and revealed its hidden paradigmatic function consisting in the mediation of examples of adequate communication behaviour. Erasmus’ colloquies cover a wide range of topics: from learning through education and pseudo-education,

94 CASTIGLIONE, Kniha o dvoranovi, p. 31.

95 In connection with 17th century conversational rules of the French court and salons, Christoph Strosetzki promotes a fitting term “social and literary pragmatics” or “communication pragmatics”. Cf. STROSETZKI, Christoph. *Konversation als Sprachkultur. Elemente einer historischen Kommunikationspragmatik*. Berlin : Frank & Timme Verlag, 2013.

96 Christoph Strosetzki mentions, inter alia, the boom of so-called duel booklets that appeared in France and Italy in the early 17th century. The aim of the booklets was to teach the courtiers how to efficiently prevent the “barbarian” behaviour of the military nobility at the court. Ibid., pp. 369-378.
celebrations, dining, good manners, falsehood, laziness and dishonesty, the status of women in society, love, marriage and motherhood to the reflexion of life experience in old age, various superstitions, the horrors of war, the life of soldiers, but also the role of clergy and religious orders in society, the formalization of faith, monastic life and natural disasters. Despite such thematic diversity of his dialogues it is possible to identify three fundamental principles which Erasmus tried to keep in each of his colloquies: anti-barbarism, egalitarianism and tolerance. While anti-barbarism constitutes a programme element of Erasmus’ struggle for education or civilization in terms of the renaissance of ancient heritage (in practice it was the rejection of rude and inadequate social behaviour which was, inter alia, typical for the part of contemporary Catholic clergy as well), the principle of egalitarianism was derived by Erasmus mainly from the early Christian visions of functioning of religious community and from the ideal visions of Christian spirit in general. The principle of tolerance in Erasmus includes the respect for the autonomy of an individual and, at the same time, communication strategies supporting this autonomy, and as such it is the most distinctive manifestation of the author’s humanism.

The most significant rhetorical instrument of Erasmian tolerance in the literary habit of satire is a form of praise (declamation) that, in Erasmus’ times, constituted a playful and intellectually appealing way how to present the life phenomena in the manner that would reveal their paradoxicality and, at the same time, allowed to avoid their first-plan moral judgement. – Based on numerous dialogues contained in the “Colloquia familiaria” it can be shown how these three fundamental principles overlap one another and how they remain the constants of Erasmian understanding of informal and beautiful social conversation. It is, however, also possible to show how the Erasmian world that was indeed thematically sufficiently open to his time but nonetheless largely, in terms of communication, closed in itself, did not reflect certain techniques that were crucial for the development of conversation as a social and cultural practice especially in the courtly environment and which in the 16th century, thanks to the manuals of rules of conduct for courtiers (chiefly B. Castiglione), won through as a new standard of informal communication. These techniques include, above all, semantic turn (abrupt change of the subject of conversation) that had found its legitimacy as an important conversational technique at the European courts and from there it spread to the European salons in the 17th century and the following period.

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