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## THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE IDENTITY OF BILINGUAL AUTHORS THROUGH FIRST-PERSON TELLINGS: GAIN OR LOSS?

The paper focuses on the problem of the mechanisms underlying second language (L2) writers' identity construction as shown in the life stories of authors who have struggled to become assimilated in a new language and culture. The memoir of Polish-English bilingual, Eva Hoffman, will be analyzed to establish first-person tellings as a source of credible, compelling and informative evidence of identity reconstruction in the process of linguistic and cultural border crossing.

KEYWORDS: bilingual writers, identity loss, identity recovery, participation metaphor, first-person narratives

### INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on the premise from New Literacy Studies that literacy is not a unitary concept simply concerned with the acquisition of a particular set of cognitive skills, but is a struggle of, as Habermas (1987) put it, concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the symbolically mediated lifeworld of another culture. This is because these beings have agency, intentions, emotions and above all life histories, which constitute the fundamental aspect of their identity: the individual self. The individual self is realized by a unique combination of qualities that distinguish the individual within their social context. As Brewer and Gardner argue, "This form of self-representation relies on interpersonal comparison processes and is associated with the motive of protecting or enhancing the person psychologically" (Brewer & Gardner 1996: 1, see also Markus 1977; Sedikides 1993). The individual self coexists with the collective self, which is a social construct formed in the process of one's alignment with the conventions of dominant practices and discourses located in a particular socio-cultural context. The construction of collective self is determined by external forces, ranging from socio-cultural influences to institutionalized power relations, which make an individual's identity a compound of multiple positionings. Therefore, I argue that because of this

dualism between individual self and collective self, which may lead to an internal conflict, and writing being a socio-culturally determined practice the reconstruction of L2 writers identity is a struggle for participation. This struggle entails individuals being continuously involved in both deliberate and forced positionings, revisions of past identity narratives, and the creation of new ones determined by new concepts of ‘affiliation’ and ‘belonging’. Following Ricoeur (1988: 246) I propose that to answer the question “Who are we?”... is to tell a story of a life.

My approach to bilingual identity construction is influenced by S. Hall’s concept of *diaspora*, conceived within postcolonial theory, which describes the identities of individuals moving between cultures as “unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of the other” (S. Hall 1995: 48). The traditional meaning of the term has been extended in the current poststructuralist research to include not only ethnic or homeland identity but also a dynamic and heterogeneous notion of community (Brooker 1999). In what follows S. Hall proposes two main ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’:

The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry have in common [...]. [The other] ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence of [...] [individual] experience. It is this identity which [...] *diaspora* must discover, excavate, bring to light and express [...].

S. Hall, 1990: 223 (words in brackets added by Lehman)

What Hall’s concept of *diaspora* and my approach to the L2 writer’s individual and collective selves have in common is the relationship between the dominant or target language and culture and the minority language and culture; whereby the dominant or target language and culture grant power and prestige to their users/participants. This observation raises important questions about agency and power and the nature of the relationship between the individual self (constituted by the agency of participants) and the collective self (formed by socio-cultural structures and practices) which underlie the process of identity reconstruction in a new socio-cultural context. The inquiry into the recovery of identity should, therefore, focus on the interplay between these two aspects of identity which entails identifying the determinants of their formation, along with the circumstances that cause one self to take precedence over the other. From this perspective, the individual self and the collective self can be perceived as complementary, mutually exclusive, or entirely independent. Although there is a general consensus that both parts of identity are social, there is, however, significantly less agreement on the nature of the interactions between them. Are they cooperating partners, staunch opponents or distant acquaintances? The important questions that can be posed here are as follows.

1. Are particular features of individual and collective selves evidenced in specific linguistic instantiations?
2. And if so, what do they reveal about the nature of this relationship?
3. What happens to each aspect of the self when an individual moves from participation in the discursive practices of one culture to those of another culture?

The way language users draw on these independent but sometimes complementary and sometimes oppositional, or “functionally antagonistic” identity options (Spears 2016: 171) is especially complex in the case of individuals who need to reconstruct their identity in a new language and culture. Their native socio-cultural framework and a new cultural and linguistic framework frequently oppose each other, leading to the construction of vague meanings, and identity conflict. This linguistically spurred conflict is the key incentive for identity change because language is one of the most rooted elements of our identity and one which is easily identifiable by others. Like many other aspects of our identity, we take it for granted and we only reflect upon it when we feel our linguistic identity is being threatened. This is the case of adult bilinguals who experience the profound reconstruction of their identity which often first takes place in written narratives, due primarily to the security granted by the writing process as opposed to the more face threatening oral communication.

Since narratives play a critical role in the account of identity reconstruction of bilingual language users my purpose in this paper is to establish first-person tellings as a source of credible, compelling and informative evidence for the reconstruction of the self, which takes place in the process of linguistic and cultural border crossings.

#### THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE ACT OF SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

The interplay between individual and collective aspects of writer identity (see Lehman 2014) has considerable implications for writing, since the act of writing is a complex linguistic activity in which self both constitutes and is constituted. The *individual self*, which has an agentive power to constitute, is influenced by *autobiographical self*, for which there is no explicit indication in the text, and *self as performer* which is evidenced in specific linguistic exponents. Since *autobiographical self* relates directly to the unique life history of each writer and shows a certain affinity with Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of ‘habitus’: an individual’s disposition to behave in certain ways, it is usually identified by authors as their real self. *Self as performer* is to varying degrees the outcome of a writer’s *autobiographical self*

and is evidenced in the particular lexico-grammatical choices an author makes to communicate with the reader; it is the voice an author wants their audience to hear. The other constituent of authorial self, the *collective self* is the aspect of the writer's identity which is formed in the process of the author's alignment with the conventions of dominant practices and discourses, situated in a particular socio-cultural context.

For successful communication between reader and writer to occur, the writer has to negotiate these two often competing aspects of authorial identity in relation to changing discursive contexts. Writing has special resources that allow for effective negotiation of identities; for example the sense of power authors can experience in constituting alternative textual identities makes it possible to resolve the conflicts they face when writing in a second language. According to Kramsch and Lam, "Written texts offer non-native speakers opportunities for finding textual homes outside the boundaries of local or national communities. The uses of of literacies in today's global, multicultural economy are likely to alter our notions who is native and who is non-native. Indeed they make non-nativeness in the sense of 'outsiderness' one of the most important criteria for creativity and innovation" (1999: 71). This was the case of Samuel Beckett who decided to write in French because he believed that writing in his mother tongue, English, made writing come too easy, as he revealed in his interview with Herbert Mitgang from *The New York Times* (1981). Writing in a second language forced him to verbalize concepts with greater clarity and economy.

Undoubtedly, due to the fact that second language writers have a relative freedom to construct alternative identities in their texts they can transcend the identity conflicts they often experience in face-to-face communication and animate alternative identities which are not tied rigidly to their ascribed national, religious, ethnic or gender selves. Therefore, writing in a L2 can be a resourceful avenue for the formation of a more empowering sense of the self.

#### PARTICIPATION METAPHOR: A WAY TO FIND AFFILIATION AND BELONGING

This concept of writing as a valuable resource for identity formation is supported by new developments in second language acquisition (SLA) theory, namely Sfar's participation metaphor (PM), which has emerged in SLA literature as a complement to acquisition metaphor (AM). AM is characterized by such terms as 'having' and 'knowledge' (Sfar 1998), typical of traditional learning whereas PM makes us think of learning a language "as a process of becoming a member of a certain community" and this process involves "the ability to communicate in the language of this community and act according to its particular norms" (1998: 6). Therefore,

it is only natural that PM is characterized by terms such as “doing”, “knowing” and “becoming part of a greater whole” (*ibid.*). Applying this view to L2 learning shifts the focus of attention from language structure to language use in context which makes us consider the importance of concepts such as ‘affiliation’ and ‘belonging’ to a particular discourse community in the process of identity reconstruction of bilingual writers.

Until recently, first-person narratives have not been considered as legitimate data on L2 learning and linguistic and cultural border crossings. Pavlenko (2014) provides two basic reasons for this marginalization; firstly, first-person tellings are found less reliable and less valid than third person tellings, being perceived as anecdotal, interesting but potentially incomplete. She mentions the introspective accounts of Schumann and Schumann (1977), who recorded their acquisition of Arabic, Bailey’s (1983) description of her learning French and Neu’s (1991) analysis of her study of Polish. However, these and similar studies are rather narrow in scope as they mainly focus on the acquisition of linguistic structures of individuals whose goal is limited to developing some degree of proficiency in language as a code without making an attempt to cross cultural and linguistic borders into the space where their identities are reconstructed. The second reason Pavlenko provides for marginalizing first-person narratives is that they are about the experience of becoming and being bilingual and have been created by people who themselves are frequently marginalized. As Sridhar and Sridhar argue, “SLA researchers seem to have neglected the fact that the goal of SLA is bilingualism” (1986: 5). It is therefore not surprising that first-person narratives of bilinguals have not yet become the subject of linguistic or SLA research.

Outside the field of SLA research, however, there are numerous autobiographic accounts of second language learning written by adult immigrants who describe their struggle for affiliation and belonging to a new cultural and linguistic setting including the memoirs of Polish-English bilinguals, Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language* and Anna Wierzbicka’s *The Double Life of a Bilingual: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*; of Russian-American bilingual, Helen Yakobson’s *Crossing Borders. From Revolutionary Russia to China to America*; of Japanese-English bilingual, Kyoko Mori’s *Polite Lies. On being a Woman Caught Between Cultures* or of Czech-English bilingual, Jan Novak’s *My Typewriter Made Me Do It*.

By drawing on PM, which accentuates contextualization and engagement with others, I aim to address the above research gap and trace the changes in identity which occur in the process of second language acculturation and socialization in order to provide a meaningful and insightful answer to the question of this paper.

## SELF-TRANSLATION METAPHOR: A UNIFYING METAPHOR FOR IDENTITY LOSS AND IDENTITY GAIN

The data I wish to analyze is taken from the first-person telling of an adult Polish-English bilingual, Eva Hoffman, on her cultural and linguistic border crossings. I have chosen to investigate the memoir of this particular author because her account is of special interest to me, as a native speaker of Polish, and because in the area of second language learning very little is known about the experience of adults who attempt to become native writers in a second language. This experience significantly differs from that of growing up as a bilingual and from the experience of the adult learners who wish to achieve a certain degree of linguistic proficiency. As Lantolf and Pavlenko (1998) observe, “[p]eople are agents in charge of their own learning, and most frequently they decide to learn their second language ‘to a certain extent’, which allows them to be proficient, even fluent, but without the consequences of losing the old and adopting the new ways of being in the world.” Therefore, an analysis of the unique story of Hoffman’s language learning “to the point of no return” (Pavlenko 2014: 162) has important implications for reconceptualizing notions of agency and power relations, and offers valuable insights into the consequences of cultural and linguistic border crossings for identity change.

Applying Pavlenko’s framework (1998) for identity loss and identity recovery I have identified particular sites of this reconstruction which are marked by internal conflicts caused by the necessity to lose some of the old aspects of identity and acquire new ones in order to develop a sense of affiliation and belonging to a new discourse community. In her framework Pavlenko (1998) has proposed five stages of identity loss and four stages of a new identity gain unified within self-translation metaphor.

According to Pavlenko the initial phase of loss can be divided into the following stages:

- loss of one’s linguistic identity
- loss of all subjectivities
- loss of the frame of reference
- loss of the inner voice
- first language attrition

The stage of recovery and (re)construction encompasses the following critical stages:

- appropriation of others’ voices
- emergence of one’s own new voice, often in writing first
- translation therapy: reconstruction of one’s past
- continuous growth ‘into’ new positions and subjectivities

## AN EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK FOR A LINGUISTIC CROSS-OVER

Applying Pavlenko's framework for the process of self-translation, which entails first a phase of profound identity loss and only later a phase of identity reconstruction, I will discuss how it plays out in Hoffman's narrative.

### PHASE OF LOSS

The first step at the phase of loss has been classified by Pavlenko (2014) as (1) loss of one's linguistic identity. In Hoffman's case it involved an imposed name change. From Ewa and Alina, the author and her sister become 'Eva' and 'Elaine'.

Nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift [...] Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself... [They] make us strangers to ourselves.

Hoffman 1989: 105

The name change, however, is not only a phonological problem to be overcome, but it is about the conversion of subjects into objects. In other words, it is about loss of agency constituted mainly through linguistic means, which marks the second stage of identity loss, (2) loss of all subjectivities, at which a person is deprived of the ability to actively participate in the discourse practices of their community. The third stage features (3) loss of the frame of reference where the signifier has become separated from the signified. The following explanation provided by Hoffman illustrates her inability to express herself in a new language, in which words are mere referents without any conceptual meanings because of her lack of experience to support them:

The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold – a word without aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connection. It does not evoke.

Hoffman 1989: 106

The natural consequence of the loss of the point of reference is (4) the loss of inner voice which functions to make sense of a person's experiences of the world in order to establish mental order, called 'consciousness' by Vygotsky (Frawley 1997). It is through inner speech that we create our experience because in inner speech life events are organized and integrated into a meaningful whole which constitutes the plot of our life narrative. The loss of inner voice is painfully documented by Hoffman:

I wait for that spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself... Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness. Its words don't apply to my new experiences, they're not coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the very air I breathe in the daytime. In English, the words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private connection could proceed.

Hoffman 1989: 107

This is a semantic black hole in which Hoffman's inner speech in Polish ceased to evoke meaning, while the inner speech in English has not begun to function yet. This marks the final stage of identity loss: (5) first language attrition, which is dramatically experienced as loss of the self.

Linguistic dispossession is a sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one's self. Blind rage, helpless rage is rage that has no words – rage that overwhelms one with darkness. And if one is perpetually without words, if one exists in the entropy of inarticulateness, that condition itself is bound to be an enraging frustration.

Hoffman 1989: 107

Loss of one's linguistic identity, all subjectivities, point of reference, inner voice and ultimately first language attrition are not just about losing connection with the world one shares with others, which affects the collective aspect of one's identity, but is predominantly about losing the connection with one's inner self. This loss makes profound changes in the individual aspect of one's identity which entails changes in one's inner world, the world of cognitions, emotions and beliefs, social norms and values and ultimately causes personality change.

#### PHASE OF RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION

According to Pavlenko's classification the initial step towards recovery and reconstruction of the self is marked by (1) the appropriation of others' voices in order to recreate a personal, inner speech. The beginnings of this process are described by Hoffman in the following passage:

Around me, the Babel of American voices [...] Since I lack a voice of my own, the voices of others invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist. They ricochet within me, carrying on conversations, lending me their modulations, intonations, rhythms. I do not possess them; they possess me. But some of them satisfy a need; some of them stick to my ribs.... Eventually, the voices enter me; by assuming them, I gradually make them mine.

Hoffman 1989: 219–220

Then (2) a new voice emerges and is frequently first captured in writing, in the accounts of one's own life history. For Hoffman, her diary was a milestone on her route towards the reconstruction of her identity. Along these lines Pavlenko



(1998) argues that this rewriting of one's life history in a new language functions as (3) a translation therapy, which is aimed to ensure continuity of one's life, and constitutes the final stage of the healing process open to (4) continuous growth 'into' new positions and subjectivities. Pavlenko observes that "Without this move, one would be left with an unfinished life in one language, and a life, begun at midstream, in another" (2014: 168). Because this reconstruction of the self happens in writing, it is experienced as a slow and gradual process. Increasingly Hoffman's second voice is becoming stronger and with it a new self is emerging.

This goddamn place is my home now... I know all the issues and all the codes here. I'm as alert as a bat to all subliminal signals sent by word, look, gesture. I know who is likely to think what about feminism and Nicaragua and psychoanalysis and Woody Allen... When I think of myself in cultural categories – which I do perhaps too often – I know that I'm a recognizable example of a species: a professional New York woman... I fit, and my surroundings fit me.

Hoffman 1989: 219–220

## CONCLUSIONS

Although my discussion of the personal narrative of Hoffman has been very brief, it leads to some important conclusions. First of all, Hoffman's memoir proves that cultural and linguistic border crossing in adulthood is possible and that discursive spaces occupied by bilingual writers are not necessarily marginal, but are places where credible authorial voices can be created. Secondly, writing in a second language creates the opportunities for new identity formation due to the reconstruction of the autobiographical past that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where their life may be going. Thirdly, the identity of bilingual authors can be successfully explored through participation metaphor and its derivative metaphor of self-translation within the framework for identity loss and identity gain proposed by Pavlenko and located within the theory of New Literacy Studies. It is my strong belief that the new metaphor allows for creating a new discursive space in which researchers can explore how bilingual individuals make narrative sense of their own lives, how they develop the stories that comprise their identities and how these stories change during cultural and linguistic border crossings. The analysis of Hoffman's first-person telling enables me to answer the paper's question by stating that a new identity the writer acquires due to writing in a second language is a gain because a native cultural and linguistic framework is extended to include another cultural and linguistic framework. These frameworks might complement or oppose each other, but eventually they enrich the identity of a bilingual writer.

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