"TO SPEAK A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS TO DEPART FROM YOURSELF": LATE BILINGUALISM AS (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

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While the issues of identity construction and marginality in multilingual communities receive a lot of attention in the field of bilingualism, the process of reconstruction of social and linguistic identity by adult immigrants, striving to become bilinguals, remains an often ignored and underrepresented topic (see, however, Lieblich, 1993; Peirce, 1995). The goal of the present study is to look at how the theory of bilingua1ism can be informed by examination of the relationship between language(s) and social identity of adult bilingual immigrants.

I would like to consider the data, continuously marginalized in the field of Second Language Acquisition: first-person narratives of adult second language learners / bilinguals. The data comes from two sources:

1) ten published autobiographic narratives by contemporary writers and scholars who came to the USA, France and Australia from Eastern Europe and learned their L2 post puberty as teenagers and adults (Stanislaw Baranczak, Andrei Codrescu, Marianne Hirsch, Eva Hoffman, Alphred Kazin, Jan Novak, Tzvetan Todorov, Anna Wierzbicka, Helen Yakobson, Cathy Young);

2) ten tape-recorded life story interviews with Russian immigrants currently living in Ithaca, NY, all of whom learned English post puberty as a result of relocation to the USA (this group also consisted of 5 males and 5 females).

These personal narratives are used to examine the relationship between discourse and identity, and to look at the stages of successful L2 learning leading to late bilingualism (and not just minimal or medium proficiency) as well as the informants' current positioning within their various discourses. On the basis of this novel and rich source of data I argue that the process of successful L2 learning necessitates reconstruction of one's linguistic, cultural and social identity, or at the least the development of new ones. In short, as Andrei Codrescu, an American writer of Romanian origin, states: "I was once a Romanian and I translated myself into an American" (1989: 45).

How is this miracle performed and is there a price to pay? The detailed analysis of the personal narratives in question allowed me to identify as paramount the process of self-

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translation, which differs from the generally accepted banking metaphor of language learning as immediate 'acquisition'. Self-translation is a two step process, which initially entails a phase of continuous loss and only later a second phase of gain and (re)construction. The phase of loss can be further segmented into the following stages:

- loss of one's linguistic identity ('careless baptism');
- loss of social networks and previous subjectivities / marginalization;
- loss of the frame of reference and the link between the signifier and the signified;
- loss of the inner voice;
- first language attrition.

The phase of gain and (re)construction seems to encompass four critical stages:

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

I will discuss these stages in detail now, with illustrations from the most detailed description of language socialization and acculturation to date, Eva Hoffman's "Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language" (1989), as well as other narratives.

Currently an American writer, Hoffman was thirteen when her Polish-Jewish family emigrated from Poland to North America in 1959. Her autobiographic book provides a penetrating account of a gradual personality change, together with deep insights into Polish and Anglo cultural attitudes and norms that have clashed in her personal experiences.

The first step on the route to self-translation, identified by Hoffman (1989), is a name change, often imposed. Due to this 'careless baptism' from Eva and Alma, the author and her sister become 'Eva' and 'Elaine'. What follows is a shattering **loss of their linguistic identity**:

> (1) Nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us-- but it is a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were us as surely 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).

Similar comments are made by another Polish-English bilingual, a well-known linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1985), by a Romanian-American scholar Marianne Hirsch (1994) and many others who went through the tormenting process of re-naming and relearning new

names that accompany their new identities. Here is how Wierzbicka remembers her own painful initiation:

> (2) When I came to Australia to live, one of my most keenly felt experiences was the loss of my (linguistic) identity. For my English-speaking acquaintances I was neither *Ania* nor *pani Ania* and not even *pani Anna.* I was *Anna* and this did not correspond in its socio-semantic value to any of the forms used in Polish… the switch from the Polish *Ania* to the English *Anna* is more than a linguistic change: it is also a switch in the style of interpersonal interaction (Wierzbicka, 1985: 189).

The loss of the linguistic identity is often accompanied by **the loss of social networks and all previous subjectivities,** as recalled by a Russian-American bilingual Helen Yakobson:

> (3) My "Americanization" took place at all levels of my existence; in one sweep I had lost not only my family and my familiar surroundings, but also my ethnic, cultural and class identity (Yakobson, 1994: 119).

Oftentimes, belonging to an immigrant group is an experience of marginality. The process of **marginalization** is vividly illustrated by one of the Russian-American bilinguals, interviewed for this project, a 21 yr old male student at Cornell University:

> (4) One thing, I mean, they never let you forget, because they treat you like a Russian person, the fact that you may have that little accent, you know, they keep up bringing it up, so it's really hard for you to forget that you are Russian, that you are not from over here... they remind you that you are Russian and you can't get away from that...

When asked who the 'they' are, the informant replied:

> (5) Well, one thing is, just the American people in general... you know, the way you talk to them, they kind of let you know that you are different, whether it's your language, whether it's the way you dress, whether it's the kind of music you listen to...

Another **loss** experienced in displacement is that **of the reference frame.** For a while, Hoffman's heroine is forced to live in a split universe, where the signifier has become severed from the signified. Ewa deeply mourns her ability to describe the world around her; her new words are simple referents without any conceptual systems or experiences to back them up:

> (6) 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 an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke (Hoffman, 1989: 106).

The next and the most painful **loss** to face, according to Hoffman, is that **of the inner speech,** the private voice we use for talking to ourselves:

> (7) I wait for 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 breath 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).

Not surprisingly, for these bilinguals the process of second language acquisition is often accompanied by **gradual attrition of the native language,** as witnessed by Hoffman (1989) and another late bilingual, an American writer of Czech origin, Jan Novak (1994):

> (8) … my Czech had begun to deteriorate. There were times now when I could not recall an everyday word, such as “carrot”, “filer”, or “sloth”. I would waste the day probing the labyrinthine recesses of my memory because to get help from the dictionary seemed only to legitimize the loss. Computers, graft, football and other things were becoming easier to talk about in English. Most disturbingly, however, now and then a straightforward Czech phrase would suddenly turn opaque and abstract on me. To comprehend it, I would have to replay it in my mind as if it reached me wrapped in a thick, unfamiliar accent. I would not be sure whether it was correctly put; there was a sense that something was wrong with it, but I could not say what. The fleeting glimpses of Czech as a foreign language unnerved and depressed me... gradually I realized when drafting [my poems] that I was now explaining things that a Czech reader would know. I had started to write for Americans; my linguistic transformation was under way. It was to happen in three delicately unburdening stages, as I moved from writing in Czech about Czechs for Czechs to writing for Americans in English about Americans (Novak, 1994: 263-64).

The first step on the learners’ road toward construction of a new self is **appropriation of others’ voices**, or, in Bakhtin’s terms, “ventriloquation” of the voices of others, in an attempt to re-create oneself through others. As this is most often done through establishing new social networks, Hirsch (1994) dubbed the process ‘relocation through friendship’. The beginnings of this recreation process can be observed in the following excerpt from Hoffman (1989):

> (9) All around me, the Babel of American voices, hardy midwestern voices, sassy New York voices, quick youthful voices, ‘voices arching under the pressure of various crosscurrents... 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 yet 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: 220).

Eventually, from a bleak and meaningless void, tiny new voices start to emerge. It is interesting that often at first the voice is captured in writing, in many cases in a diary, a private activity conducted in a public language, which grants ‘the double distance of English and writing’. For Hoffman a diary is the first stepping stone on Ewa’s way to becoming Eva; it allows her to face a new, English self, which is addressed as the double, Siamese-twin “you”, since it cannot be called an ‘I’ yet.

The need for repositioning vis-à-vis one’s own life and experiences comes through compellingly in all of the narratives in question. Consequently, the authors cosidered here

write about (or, in effect, rewrite) their childhood experiences in the new language. This rewriting of one's life story in another language represents above all **translation therapy,** the final stage of the healing process, prompted by the need to translate oneself and to ensure continuity by transforming and reintegrating one's childhood into one's new past. Without this move, one would be left with an unfinished life in one language, and a life, begun at midstream, in another. The necessity of binding the two halves together prompts the authors to look into their past from a position of double displacement: in time as well as in cultural space.

As excruciating and anguishing as the journey through the borderland may be, for many there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Step by step, Hoffman's Ewa / Eva discovers and inhabits the new territory, learning to preserve cultural distances and to read subtle signals, becoming socialized into cultural rituals, behaviors, traditions. She is continuously searching, not just for the right ways to express herself linguistically, but for the right landmarks and metaphors on her way to adulthood and womanhood, getting continuously lost in the double displacement:

> (10) The question of femininity is becoming vexing to me as well. How am I to become a woman in an American vein, how am I to fit the contours of my Texan's soul? The allegory of gender is different here, and it unfolds around different typologies and different themes. I can't become a "Pani" of any sort: not like the authoritative Pani Orlovska, or the vampy, practical Pani Dombarska, or the flirty, romantic woman writer I once met. None of these modes of femininity makes sense here, none of them would find corresponding counterparts in the men I know (Hoffman, 1989: 189).

Slowly Ewa's second voice acquires more and more strength, and Eva becomes a person in her own right, finally crossing the dividing line between herself and her new language:

> (11) But it's not until many years later, not until I've finished graduate school successfully, and have begun to teach literature to others, that I crack the last barrier between myself and the language... It happens as I read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", which I'm to explicate to a class of freshman at the University of New Hampshire... My eye moves over these lines in its accustomed dry silence; and then - as if an aural door had opened of its own accord - I hear their modulations and their quite undertones. Over the years, I've read so many explications of these stanzas that I can analyze them in a half a dozen ingenious ways. But now, suddenly I'm attuned, through some mysterious faculty of the mental ear, to their inner sense... Bingo, I thank, this is it, the extra, the attribute of language over and above function and criticism. I'm back within the music of the language, and Eliot's words descend on me with a sort of grace. Words become, as they were in childhood, beautiful things –except this is better, because they're now crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought (Hoffman, 1989: 186).

In the end, the new bilinguals succeed in developing a new voice, a new way of organizing their narrative, a new way of meaning as their second language becomes the

language in which their adulthood is experienced, the language of friendships, love affairs, marriage, favorite books and movies, and, undoubtedly, the inner language of the self, the unconscious and dreams. Novak comments on this transition: "English had become the official language of my subconscious - the Czechs too now spoke unaccented English in my dreams" (Novak, 1994: 265).

Once the cross-over is completed, the bilinguals have to face the potential incommensurability of their two discursive systems and the difficulties of having two ways to mean:

> (12) . it is not impossible (though very difficult) to leave the experiential world of one's native language for that of another language, or stretching the metaphor to the limit, to inhabit two different worlds at once. But when one switches from one language to another it is not just the form that changes but also the content (Wierzbicka, 1985:187).

The bilingual authors in question consistently mention the enormous difficulty, bordering on impossibility, of translating one's own text and the resulting fact that one's story has a tendency to change with the change of language in which it is narrated. Novak (1994), upon reading a Czech translation of his novel written in English, comments:

> (13) I started reading it and it was my novel all right, my stories, my characters, my long breathless rhythms, my words that said everything I had wanted to say - and yet I could never have written this book. Had it been composed in Czech, the novel would have been a totally different work (Novak, 1994: 266).

In a similar vein, a French writer, scholar and literary critic of Bulgarian origin, Tzvetan Todorov (1994), comments:

> (14) My twin affiliation produces but one effect: in my own eyes it renders inauthentic each of my two modes of discourse, since each can correspond to but half of my being. I am indeed double... My two languages, my two kinds of discourse were, from a certain point of view, too close. Either was capable of mediating the totality of my experience, and neither was clearly subordinate to the other. Here, one presided, there, the other took over. But neither ruled unconditionally. They were too much alike, and therefore could do nothing but take the other's place: they could not be combined (Todorov, 1994: 211-12).

All those who inhabit multiple discourses agree on their correspondence to multiple, often incompatible and incommensurable, worlds, delineated by the languages and cultures in question. To designate a passage between the two, an attempt to 'transpose' or 'transfer' meanings, or to describe the living experience of a bilingual person, the writers resort to the metaphors of translation and border crossing (Badowska, 1995). In search of their own, personal *where* and *who,* the displaced subjects find themselves on either side of the border, or, oftentimes, in the borderland itself, 'lost in translation', condemned to live forever in a no mans land of in-between. Some are quite satisfied with 'a home on the border':

(15) My history of multiple displacements –linguistic, religious, relational– makes displacement (and relocation) my strategy of survival. …Often longing for a more singular and straightforward sense of identity and identification, I nevertheless embrace multiple displacement as a strategy both of assimilation and of resistance (Hirsch, 1994: 81, 88).

While some late bilinguals may be, like Todorov (1994), forever torn by the state of double vision and twin allegiance, others, like Novak (1994) or Codrescu (1989), are quite comfortable and content:

(16) I have lived in Romania the first nineteen years of my life –and I have been in America nineteen years. I stand at the precise crossroads of this life of mine, split in two temporal halves like a metaphysical grapefruit. Another image occurs to me –that of a man standing with one foot on one island and the other on another. But I give it no heed. On the contrary, I find myself oddly happy in my dual being (Codrescu, 1989: 296).

Similar opinions are expressed by some of the immigrants interviewed for the project:

(17) 1 think of myself as being Russian American... you know, being that I am from that country I will never forget my roots, I will never forget where I came from, you know, I mean, as much as I can still try to go there, and make sure I have friends there, I have a lot of my relatives there, so forgetting my roots would not be a good idea... and no matter how much you get Americanized, there is still that, you know, that attachment that you have... to your old land, I mean, it's your homeland, that's where I was born and I have to respect that...

Others, like Young (1989), or Novak (1994), while acknowledging the doubleness, claim their 'at homeness' within a new language and identify with the new culture, calling this 'losing perspective' (Young, 1989). These feelings are also shared by Hoffman (1989) who, at the end of her long and painful journey, arrives at the realization that

(18) 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 am a recognizable example of a species: a professional New York woman… I fit, and my surroundings fit me (1989:170).

Even though my discussion of personal narratives has been necessarily brief, it does point to several conclusions. Most importantly, the narratives are evidence per se that a linguistic border crossing in adult life is indeed possible, critical age notwithstanding.

Based on the narratives presented, I would also like to argue that the ultimate attainment in second language learning relies on one's agency. While the first language and identity are an indisputable given, the new ones are arrived to by choice. Agency is crucial at the point where the individuals must not just start memorizing a dozen new words and expressions but must decide on whether to initiate a long, painful, inexhaustive and for some never ending process of self-translation. From this perspective I suggest that often an

objectivist view of 'failure' in second language learning is imposed where there is none: those who do not become members of another culture, never set out to do so in the first place, never intending to translate and alter themselves to fit the new networks, to step into the new roles and to behave according to the new rules of gender, ethnicity, adulthood or parenthood.

In light of the above, I believe that new metaphors of second language learning, corresponding to the new perspective, have to be introduced to account for the profound changes attested to in the study; "becoming" and "being in language". While the popular banking and "conduit" metaphors place one's subjectivity as independent of and hierarchically above the language (the self is in control, it possesses the language), the "being" and "becoming" metaphors draw on postmodernist and constructionist approaches which conceive of language not as representing the world and self but as constituting and reconstituting both.

I also hope to have demonstrated through a theoretically informed examination of personal narratives the richness of insight available on aspects of second language learning from the data that previously has not been part of the mainstream literature in our field. I further hope to have at least begun to make the case that narrativity ought to enjoy equal status with the "hard" data derived from such practices as controlled experimentation and survey instruments, and that those who have read this paper will realize that personal narratives, confirming the direct link between discourse and identity, should be taken seriously by the fields of Bilingualism and SLA. Finally, I also hope to have shown, that as yet another bilingual writer, Alphred Kazin remarked once: "To speak a foreign language is to depart from yourself!" (Kazin, 1979: 27).

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