ECHOES FROM THE HILL: HERITAGE, IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, LITERACY

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1. Multiculturalism

In Canada, we are used to speaking about multiculturalism and bi- or multilingualism. In fact, we often refer to our nation as a multicultural mosaic. Writing about the Canadian context, Yon explains:

> In the early seventies the Federal Government of Canada took measures to replace the policies of assimilation with support for cultural pluralism, and in 1971 it declared multiculturalism an official state policy. This policy was based on a view of Canada as a "cultural mosaic", suggestive of a wide range of ethnic cultures coexisting as the nation. (Yon, 2000: 20)

Following the adoption of multicultural policies, Heritage Language programs were promoted in Canada (Cummins, 1983). More specifically, Montreal's situated context in the province of Quebec, which has conflicting political views with the rest of Anglophone Canada, provides a unique linguistic nest with strong possibilities of growth for the heritage language and culture. Maguire describes this context:

> In Canada, we usually talk about majority and minority language contexts within an English and French duality. A common denominator for many Canadian children is that their formal educational experience will be a biliterate one in the two official languages. In addition to serving Anglophone and Francophone communities, many Montreal schools also serve children who come to school with diverse cultural backgrounds and from homes where non-mainstream languages are used.
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> (Maguire, 1997: 53)

2. Heritage

2.1. Educational programs

Educational programs are one of the mediums for promoting the maintenance of a heritage language. Krashen (1998: 3) defines a Heritage Language as "one [that is] not spoken by the dominant culture, but is spoken in the family or associated with the

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heritage culture". Furthermore, Tse (1998: 53) points out that, "the term 'heritage language (HL) programs' is broadly defined as those sponsored by public or private schools that use the language and /or promote its acquisition". These programs take a variety of forms from private schools with Heritage Language Studies, to one-day schools (usually held on Saturdays or Sundays), to after-school programs. Cummins reports that, "the principal aims of these programs are to promote the continued vitality of ethnic cultures and enrich children's educational experience" (1998: 4).

2.2. Montreal's Armenian community

As a result of Canada's Act of Multiculturalism, Montreal's Armenian community became blessed with opportunities to preserve and promote its language and culture. With just over 30 000 members and a history of 50-60 years, Montreal's Armenian community has several churches, three Heritage Language schools, numerous community centers, newspapers, and a number of political and cultural organizations. It is an active community that is preoccupied with the preservation of its heritage, while at the same time promoting integration within the wider, Canadian society. With regards to Armenians in North America, especially Montreal's community, and particularly for the new generation, this sense of double belonging, that is both to the ethnic and mainstream culture, and the struggle for maintaining a hyphened identity (Armenian-Canadian) are very strong.

The Heritage Language school plays a crucial role as an agent of promoting culture. Montreal's Armenian community has three Heritage Language day schools – which function through a trilingual program of French Immersion, Armenian Heritage Studies, and English as a Second Language– and two Saturday schools where Armenian Studies are taught. For the students attending such schools, this involves an experience of multilingualism from a very young age that will inevitably affect their sense of identity and their practices of language and literacy. Skutnabb-Kangas describes the basic understanding behind the multilingual nature and benefits of such programs and argues that,

> The fewer speakers a language has, the more necessary it is for the children to become high-level multilinguals, in order to be able to obtain basic necessities needed for survival. The mother tongue is needed for psychological, cognitive, and spiritual survival-cultural rights. All the other languages, including an official language of the state in which the children live, are needed for social, economic, political, and civil rights.   (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999: 58)

This quote highlights the dual, often multiple nature in understanding literacy and identity when we speak of bi-/multilinguals. As a result of their dual belonging to both the minority and majority worlds, bilinguals are often engaged in a process of negotiating literacy and constructing identity –a process that sometimes causes tension and a struggle as often it involves binary opposites.

3. Identity

Meanings of identity overlap and are constructed through negotiations of various versions. Understanding the concept of identity can be framed through two views. The first defines cultural identity as a set of values that a culture holds in common: a past to which everyone belongs. In this sense, identity is considered as an unchanging, fixed concept that is passed down (Hall, 1990: 223). In the second sense, identity is much more of an open, fluid construct, which allows for multiplicity: one can have many different cultural belongings or selves that are constantly in negotiation (Shirinian, 2000: 5). According to this second sense, then, cultural identity is not simply something we inherit. It is a matter of being, but also of becoming (Hall, 1990: 225).

Moreover, it is important to distinguish between identity and identification. Yon explains that,

> Identity is a process of making identifications, a process that is continuous and incomplete. This distinction between identity and identification is important because while the former implies an essential and fixed individual, the latter recognizes that identity is a constructed and open-ended process. (Yon, 2000: 13)

Thus, identity is a construction that emerges from a multitude of layers. Such a view of identity follows the social constructionist perspective, which argues that, "identity is not socially *determined* but socially *constructed*. This means that the possibilities for the self are not fixed, but open to contestation and change" (Ivanic, 1998: 12).

4. Language and literacy

Particularly for the case of a person with an ethnic background, competencies in heritage language and literacy skills become key players in maintaining and defining one's identity. Indeed, one of the ways for ensuring the continuity of a culture is

through the promotion of its language and ways of being. As Feuerverger (1989: 52) argues "language is not solely a medium for communication but also a unifying factor of a particular culture and often a prerequisite for its survival". Thus, learning a heritage language may become a vehicle for maintaining ethnic identity.

Just as in the case of identity, literacy, too, can be multi-natured and fluid. Street (1994: 16) argues that, "the meanings of literacy are not fixed but can be contested". In terms of defining literacy, I distinguish between being able to read and write and becoming a reader and writer. Although both require learning skills that will allow one to practice literacy, the concept of becoming literate pushes the meaning of literacy to a new definition.

Becoming literate presupposes a never-ending process of growth through the practice of literacy, unlike being literate, which implies a static state that one reaches through the acquisition of skills. Moreover, the concept of becoming literate is more closely tied to self and identity, with its focus on the reader/writer, the literate if you will: the person we become through the skills of reading and writing. Hence, literacy and identity are closely associated in that our literacy skills shape our identities as readers and writers.

Moreover, the emphasis on becoming, as opposed to being, literate is in accordance with Freire's (1970) view of literacy as a tool for empowerment, whereby literacy not only provides access to knowledge and allows one to make meaning, but also plays on these dual meanings of being and becoming literate. As such, the concept of identity becomes an inseparable component in understanding literacy in this sense. As Tavit's example will demonstrate, the process of constructing identity and negotiating literacy practices is quite complex. The following case study will offer one version of being 'multi'.

5. Tavit, an Armenian-Canadian

5.1. Background

Tavit, a young male born in Beirut, Lebanon to Armenian parents, moved to Montreal with his family at the age of four. He received home schooling by his grandmother for a year, until he reached school age. At home, his grandmother taught

him how to read and write Armenian. Tavit described this process and qualified it as having a very positive outcome in his years at the elementary school level:

> With my grandmother, I learned the alphabet and a little bit of grammar –a tidbit, but it was still more than, a lot more, tenfold more than what the [other] kids were doing. I mean the *dzaghgots* [preschool] kids were learning how to draw in colors while I was already reading and writing. So that was a huge advantage. So when I came to elementary, reading and writing were a breeze cause I understood the bigger words and I could write better cause I already knew how to. […] The other kids were, they were learning the basics –learning how to read and then applying it; whereas I already learned so I had more time to apply myself.

At the age of five Tavit was enrolled in an Armenian Heritage Language day school, like many children in Montreal's Armenian community. A kindergarten student, he began learning French through an immersion program where French was the language of instruction for all core subjects. He also had Armenian Heritage Studies where he learned how to read and write through Language Arts classes, which consisted of 9 45-minute periods a week. When he reached grade one, he was introduced to English as a Second Language classes through 3 45-minute periods a week. By the age of seven, Tavit was officially in a trilingual program and exposed to literacy in all three languages.

At the end of elementary school, Tavit had the option to pursue high school education in a mainstream environment, but he chose to remain at the Heritage Language school. Upon graduation from the high school, Tavit attended a French CEGEP (pre-university college). He found himself in a Francophone environment, but only for a short while until he enrolled in an Anglophone university in Montreal two years later. Thus, Tavit grew up, functioned, and lived in a true trilingual environment. In turn, his environment and experiences of growing up multilingual affected his language and literacy practices, as well as his sense of identity.

5.2. Language and literacy practices

In terms of pre-university education, Tavit was exposed to trilingual schooling with most teaching taking place in rather traditional settings and methods. In terms of language instruction this implied many drills and exercises, a focus on grammar and the development of skills, some analytical and comprehension essays in response to literature, oral presentations, and the like. The student population being unanimously Armenian, the mother tongue was used as the language of communication among

friends at school. In the hallways, informal use of Armenian with a constant code switch from French and English could be heard. A whole use of French and English was used mostly with teachers. At home and in the community center that Tavit attended regularly, Armenian dominated. Hence, the educational approaches and the various environments Tavit grew up in had a sustainable affect on his desire to practice literacy skills and his choices in terms of language use.

Having graduated from an Armenian Heritage Language high school and being one of the top students in his class, Tavit qualified himself as being proficient and very competent in all aspects of Armenian. He also considered himself equally competent in his second languages, French and English. Tavit enjoys reading and writing, especially in French and English. However, with regards to Armenian, he confessed that "I'd be lying if I told you that I'm an avid fan of Armenian literature or writing".

Moreover, Tavit enjoys writing, and is exploring career options in this field by pursuing an undergraduate degree in the combined fields of journalism and creative writing at an English university in Montreal. Although he writes creatively both in English and in French, he does not explore this dimension with his mother tongue.

For instance, while comparing his written literacy practices in French and Armenian, Tavit not only pointed out that he was encouraged to write more in French, which enabled him to progress and learn through practice, but he also noticed a difference in his ability to write. Tavit recalled the feeling of shock he experienced when he once read two of his essays –one written in French, the other in Armenian– which were published in the school's yearbook: "I read the French, I read the Armenian, it's like it wasn't written by the same person; it's almost as if Armenian is my weaker language!".

Although Tavit is equally proficient in both languages, he seemed confused and frustrated by the fact that his writing could be stronger in his second language. Even though several factors could cause this shift in language strength, in this case, the instructional methods play a crucial role.

His literacy practices in terms of reading Armenian are limited to the occasional events of reading the Armenian newspaper or community bulletins and political pamphlets. Speaking of his literacy practices in Armenian, Tavit pointed out,

> It's not as if I never open an Armenian book, or I never write in Armenian. I write in Armenian, but it's only when I have to. I still make an effort to uphold

the level of my Armenian, but it's never surpassing it: it's always a matter of preserving it.

5.3. Preservation and assimilation

Preservation and assimilation, along with their challenges, play a crucial role in understanding the complexities of literacy and identity faced by multilinguals. The need to preserve the mother tongue adds another dimension in understanding Tavit's choices, feelings, and attitudes in terms of negotiating literacy practices. When discussing the importance of preserving the oral aspect of his mother tongue, Tavit pointed out that, "Armenian is not a language that's spread all over the world; […] we should at least try to keep it going here [in Montreal]".

Other factors that influence the practice of language and literacy skills include access, vitality and functionality –terms, which we cannot and should not dissociate from any discussion on the theme of bilingualism and multiculturalism. Tavit offers an example to illustrate the challenge of functionality in the case of his Armenian literacy skills. He says:

> My parents told me […] the other day, "you know a lot words [in Armenian], your vocabulary is very extensive, but you don't know how to use them." […] [This] comes from the fact that I haven't been taught how to use those words, although I've learned those words by heart all my life. You know, it was only strictly on a do-the-test-task basis. It was never you-might-use-these-words-in-your-everyday-language basis, you know. So now, I'm feeling the consequences in college. It's like I talk with my friends and we speak a lot more French than Armenian.

This incident illustrates various challenges in the process of preserving and practicing language and literacy skills. Once again, the instructional methods employed in the language acquisition process influence the degree and the ways in which the language becomes used and practiced. However, other factors also add to the challenges of education. The function and purpose of the heritage language in everyday life, especially the place it is given in a world of mainstream and minority dualities, is another crucial factor in terms of language use. In this specific case, Tavit not only lacks a step of applying language in the learning process, but he also lacks a place and purpose for using some Armenian words and finds himself having recourse to French, the mainstream language.

5.4. Identity

As much as a multilingual is faced with multiplicities in terms of literacy practices and language use, he/she is faced with multiplicities in terms of identifications. Language and literacy, not only their knowledge but also their practices, play a crucial role in the identity construction process of multilinguals. The shifting nature of identity in "multi"s is closely linked with oral and written language uses.

Speaking about the role of literacy in constructing identity, Tavit said that:

> Personally, it's a matter of pride to […] know how to read and write Armenian. […] Secondly, it's a matter of knowing part of who I am, because teenage hood is a quest for identity--who you are, where you belong--and having the basis of reading and writing Armenian, it's a starting place: you're not in a nebula; you have something to hold on to when times are bad and you don't really know who you are. […] Being Armenian […] is also a matter of national identity: participating in what your community and what your country's doing, different social activities, interacting with other Armenians.

Tavit refers to issues of belonging and associating oneself, having a nest, which have an impact on identity construction and language preservation. Speaking of ethnic identity, Jusdanis writes that "[…] ethnicity […] provides a group with a sense of uniqueness, the possibility of diversity within the homogeneous whole, while at the same time maintaining a degree of sameness" (1991: 220).

However, as Tavit pointed out, his ethnic identity is only part of who he is; it is only a starting point. In its simplest way, this is what we mean when we speak of layers in identity, as well as a process of constructing that identity. The issue, then, in terms of language use and identity does not reside in the question of either/or, but is a matter of negotiation: a pinch of this, a bit of that. Fischer best explains this phenomenon of ethnic identity, when he uses the example of being Chinese-American and writes:

> […] to be Chinese American is not the same thing as being Chinese in America. In this sense there is no role model for becoming Chinese-American. It is a matter of finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity. In part, such a process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self: one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism.
> (Fischer, 1986: 196)

Identity, for Tavit's case and multilinguals such as himself, must be understood as a fluid construct. Shirinian writes:

> For many Armenians who have been in North America for some time, the old culture has weakened and diminished to be replaced by a new one that has been formed by the particular life experience in North America. What has been created is a new

identity placed in a hierarchy of social identities of which ethnic identity is but one type. (Shirinian, 2000: 57)

6. Multiplicities

Hence, for multilinguals, literacy and identity should be understood as open and fluid constructs where there is constant negotiation. For multilinguals, there is no one set way of being, no singular mode, or right answer. Hoffman, a Polish-Canadian shares her experiences of being bilingual and speaks of this challenge when she writes that, "instead of a central ethos, I have been given the blessings and the terrors of multiplicity" (1989: 164).

Across generations in Montreal's Armenian community, even though the focus on maintaining the heritage has been passed down, there is also a growing consciousness about creating new ways of being, incorporating, balancing, and constructing. True multilingualism/culturalism can be achieved only by respecting multiplicities, finding a balance, and developing a construct.

Since the experiences of multilinguals in terms of their literacy practices and layers of identity are anything but unidimensional, then cultural and linguistic pluralism should not only be tolerated but also promoted. Hence, children growing up in multicultural societies where they live in the dual minority-majority world should have opportunities to develop a whole sense of their national and linguistic identities by being exposed to the multitudes and learning how to construct a whole sense of themselves through processes of construction and negotiations. Such a perspective involves an understanding of literacy and identity as fluid and ever-evolving processes and educational methods that adhere to similar meanings. In a society where stories such as Tavit's are shared by so many, the educational systems and institutions should reflect the image of a cultural mosaic, where a multitude of individual fragments coexist and form a whole image.

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