AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES FOR A POST-CARTESIAN MODEL OF PLURILINGUALISM

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1. MONOLINGUALISM: A MODERN INVENTION

From the Renaissance and the decline of Latin as a lingua franca, Europe's vernacular languages underwent a process of codification and grammatisation to become idealised standard languages befitting the newly emerging ideology of the nation-state model (see Gramling, 2016). While most people within several of these states did not actually speak the same language for some time, monolingualism was posited as the 'ideal', and prestige linguistic varieties became enshrined as the national standard indissociable from national identity, unity and loyalty to the values of the state. This process was hastened and secured during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the centralising of national education, industry, civic and military structures.

The impact of these structural developments has long been analysed within sociological research (following traditions established by Durkheim and Weber), but standardisation as a political ideology and a form of social control has also had important ramifications for language education and the way we apprehend pluri- or multilingualism. As languages competed for supremacy and were increasingly controlled through official academies and national agencies, beliefs that languages themselves had intrinsic qualities became woven into popular lore at the service of national and regional identities. This tendency, begun in the medieval period and anticipating the Renaissance (with, for example, Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* in 1304), gathered pace so that by the eighteenth century, for instance, from an English perspective, French could be perceived as, simultaneously refined and elegant, while also foppish and effeminate, in contrast with English which was cast as concise, direct and manly.

Descartes' famous mind-body duality, where the mind represents control and rationality and the body represents lack of control and emotion, is "reproduced powerfully in the modern State" (Handelman, 2007: 124) where rational bureaucracy serves to constrain and regulate the emotions of its citizens. The Enlightenment shift toward the rational, while yielding great advances in terms of science and rational philosophy, de-emphasised the role of the body and emotion in education and learning. The Cartesian model of education posits knowledge as a substance to be transmitted: knowledge is in the mind, separate from the body. The purpose of education within a Cartesian pedagogy is, therefore, to develop logical thinking skills, free from emotion (the passions). The goal of language learning

within this model is to develop a set of competences which may be cultural as well as linguistic but that do not fundamentally affect the core identity of the citizen subject.

Against this backdrop, modern languages developed alongside other subjects as an expected part of the school curriculum in the nineteenth century, intending in some cases to provide intellectual and cultural training through the appreciation of the language and literature of other major powers, as well as functional linguistic competence for trade and travel. Language teaching, though, did not set as an objective *intercultural* empathy or any interrogation of identity affiliation, a line of consciousness raising that would be deemed dangerously unpatriotic.

The establishment of learning as a field of research, dating from the professionalisation of teaching and the even more recent growth in the science of education, did little to challenge the prevailing monolingual / monocultural ideology – hardly surprising given that researching learning has been largely legitimised through the scientific paradigms of behavioural and cognitive psychology that dominated the twentieth century. The reality of demographic diversity in recent decades, however, has disturbed the status quo and necessitated a broadening of perspective, both practically to meet new classroom realities, and theoretically to be able to re-conceive learners' experience.

Recent theoretical advances in applied linguistics, specifically sociolinguistics, have increasingly emphasised that languages are "not autonomous and closed linguistic and semiotic systems" (García, Li Wei, 2014: 42), some authors even claiming that the notion of "a 'real language' is a normative fiction" (Klein, 1998: 541). In sociolinguistics, the monolithic model of the native-speaker standard has been challenged in favour of more nuanced, diverse models, including that of the plurilingual repertoire. Nevertheless,

> in language policy discourses and in sites of popular characterisation such as the print media, the national border-language model, with its corollary conceptions of standardised unity pitched against foreignness, tenaciously resists the challenges of linguistic complexity. Furthermore, the model of politico-linguistic homogeneity rooted in the ideology of Westphalian sovereignty, has generalised, in various mutations, beyond its Western European origins, to inform regimes of language boundary maintenance across the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in systems of national education (Coffey, Wingate, 2018: 2).

Given the systemic inertia of deeply-engrained structural constraints, the challenge, therefore, is not just how to re-conceive theoretical models but how to how to translate these into workable and accessible formats that acknowledge teachers' and students' personal and social histories as coherent forms of knowledge. One way of working towards this goal is through the frame of auto/biographical experience.

2. PLURILINGUAL REPERTOIRES AND THE AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL TURN

The turn to auto/biography in foreign language teaching and learning is embedded within a broader epistemological shift toward first person subjectivity that gathered pace throughout the late twentieth century. In the social sciences (more exactly sociology), the Chicago school of the early twentieth century is often credited with pioneering

ethnographic methods of observation and documentary analysis with life history data to research the behaviour and attitudes of representative samples of groups or types. Life history as a method continued to be used to a limited extent throughout the century, including in some key studies of teachers' lives and careers (Ball, Goodson, 1985; Lortie, 1975). An early study into the lives of motives of modern languages graduates turned lecturers was Evans' *Language People* (1988).

Since the 1990s auto/biographical approaches have diversified tremendously to meet evolving questions about the nature of learning and speaking different languages as multilingual subjectivity ('the multilingual subject' described by Kramsch, 2009). Increasingly creative approaches have helped us to our understand multilingualism as a deeply emotional enterprise that sees language competence not simply as an additive set of communicative assets but as an integral process of negotiating material and symbolic relations between self and the world. The impact on actual teaching and learning practices does not, inevitably, always keep apace with epistemological developments in theoretical and research-based fields of knowledge production, a lag which can, at least in part, be explained by the intensified political pressure felt by teachers and the inertia of implementing institutional changes of long-established practices.

The recent autobiographical turn in applied linguistics fits conceptually with the formulation of language knowledge and proficiency as a plurilingual repertoire. Plurilingualism, a concept advocated by the Council of Europe, "refers to the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use, and is therefore the opposite of monolingualism; it includes the language variety referred to as 'mother tongue' or 'first language' and any number of other languages or varieties" (Beacco, Byram, 2007: 8). As a theoretical model, plurilingualism emphasises variable and fluctuating competences in different languages rather than mastery or linear proficiency in the traditional model of additive bilingualism. The concept of repertoire has been widely theorised since its development from Gumperz' verbal repertoire, to provide a more nuanced schematic inventory of an individual's language(s), and there remains further scope still to avoid overly instrumental links between languages and specific functions (e.g. English for business, French for daily use, Arabic for family life). This characterisation of domain-specificity does not always capture the affective rapport individuals have with languages, nor the role of the imaginary in the way languages are invested in. Language auto/biographies can be powerful modes of reflexivity that show how languages are enfolded in affective memory and in current and future life projects.

2.1. *Narratives of language learning as an identity project between the social and the personal*

The first wave of language auto/biographies were inscribed in the 'narrative turn', which looked specifically at spoken or textual accounts of teachers' and learners' language learning stories. In his review of the field, in which he lists the pivotal studies in the field of narrative research on a timeline from 1995-2014, Barkhuizen (2014: 450) notes that

> What stories are, and indeed what narrative research is … remains far from agreed upon in language teaching and learning research. There is no single, all-encompassing definition of narrative.

This strand of narrative research was aimed at practitioner development in particular (e.g. Barkhuizen, 2011; Johnson, Golombek, 2011) and drew on life history methodologies that had already been developed in education and sociology research. Others drew insights from published language learning memoirs of language learning and migration, language *memoirs* being a term first coined by Kaplan (1994: 59) to denote a literary genre of "autobiographical writing which is in essence about language learning"[2], a term that can be distinguished from *language auto/biographies* which are elicited for research or training purposes.

Speaking personally, I first turned to language auto/biographies during my PhD in the early 2000s. With the intention of investigating the motivation of British learners of modern languages I had originally intended to use the established tools of motivation research i.e. the attitude measurements such as had been formulated by Gardner and Lambert in Canada and which have been refined by different applied linguists since the 1960s. It was only when I read a short language autobiography that I had elicited from a colleague for my pilot study that I realised how rich and intersectional narratives of language learning could be in contrast with what I saw as the restrictive scope of synchronic surveys of (psychological) attitudes to languages. My analysis therefore shifted from a somewhat positivistic position of 'collection' of data to confirm my original starting point toward a less predictable, interpretative perspective as I began to see how participants adopted different subject positions according to which narrative stance they were constructing i.e. not only which life history episode was being narrated (childhood, adolescence etc.) but how identities were enacted by the manner in which the account was told.

I was struck by the element of narrative performance in the account: overcoming adversity, pursuing goals, and adapting to life's circumstances. While language auto/biographical text can be analysed drawing on narrative frames (e.g. Labovian structure), there was also an important articulation of the personal and the social that reached beyond the form of the text. Individual stories are always constructed against a social landscape, positioning personal subjectivities within a range of historicities: "our identities as social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations" (Schiffrin, 1996: 170). The language auto/biographies I collected of adults talking about their schooling in the 1960s, for instance, illustrated how education could represent opportunity for social mobility for the baby-boom generation, and in particular how language learning could represent an integral component of self-reinvention.

The desire to reinvent oneself through the absorption or appropriation of the voices of others is a common motif in many of the autobiographical accounts of language learning (Coffey, Street, 2008). Kinginger (2004) reports on an American woman called Alice, for whom the emotional investment in French became a bid for a better life, a "bid to break free of the confining circumstances of a peripatetic, working-class childhood and to become

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[2] Most work in this area has focused on the experience of migrants who have written about their passage from one language and culture to another (e.g. Eva Hoffman, Anna Wierzbicka, Andrei Codrescu) – see the contribution of Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) for an early analysis of language learning memoirs which the authors use to argue for the legitimacy of first person subjectivities within applied linguistics. The accounts of learners describing their journey to a new language and a new country are often characterised by a strong emotional attachment to or rejection of one's mother tongue and the often ambivalent relationship to the 'new' language.

a person she can admire" (240) through an imagined France "populated with refined, interesting, cultured people" (228).

The prospect that, through learning a new language, one can consciously re-invent oneself in a new language is a theme which resonates through many of the accounts in my doctoral study. This perspective has only recently been acknowledged as a potential motivating factor in language learning theory – at least that which seeks to integrate the role of *emotion* into understanding identity construction of language learners. Proficiency in French or German was not just gaining a set of functional competences but offered a form of cultural capital that entailed access to new professional opportunities, and also, critically, to new social fields. In other words, being a Francophile is as much about indexing a British identity as about linguistic competence (Coffey, 2010).

Auto/biographical accounts are not neutral, and any analysis needs to examine the conditions of production and the performative dimension of the narrative that the teller constructs. Published memoirs of adult migrants writing about the experience of developing new, second-language identities, for example, have been shaped by their genre as literary artefacts. While eloquent, rich life story accounts of language learning they are rooted in the tradition of literary memoir rather than spontaneously elicited narratives within the methodological frame of social science. While published memoirs are integral texts unaffected – at least in their production – by the research process (Pavlenko, 2007), they are, nonetheless, constrained by their genre inasmuch as they constitute carefully crafted accounts aimed at and marketed at a public readership. As such, they typically represent a particular range of voices i.e. that of the publishing author, most commonly white, middle-class and female (Pavlenko, 2001).

Elicited accounts, though more spontaneous, are also shaped by their mode of production. I found, for instance, that written language autobiographies produce neater, paragraphed episodes and tend to focus more on institutional settings, compared with oral accounts which tend to be more multi-directional and to focus to a greater degree on the affective influence of others. Tellers draw on setting-specific repertoires to evoke different episodes, so that childhood memories of schoolteachers, for instance, draw on schoolchild caricatures like "battle-axe" to describe teachers, whereas when participants describe their own professional lives as adult teachers they use more specialised professional terminology.

The use of autobiographical accounts for teacher reflexivity helps teachers build empathy with the learning journey of their own students, not least in highlighting potential feelings of shame or embarrassment (Coffey, 2020) as they take on the identity of the other through speaking a different language. While speaking a foreign language might be a simple matter of learning a new form of linguistic code for some, most learners know that the enterprise involves a lot more personal identity engagement, which can be rewarding and sometimes risky in terms of misunderstandings or reduced capacity to express oneself fully.

### 2.2. *Different modes of narrating emotion and embodied experience of language*

Most of what I call here, for convenience only, 'first wave' language narrative research has focused on realist interpretations of auto/biographical accounts that are presented as coherent narratives. More recent research has sought to complement this branch of inquiry

with more varied methods that may be non-textual, or may capture textual fragments. These alternative modes of expression can reveal different experiences of emotional and somatic experience that may not be manifest in fuller, developed accounts.

It is clear that school students, like teachers and indeed all human animals, invest their whole being in the enterprise of learning. Echoing earlier educational theorists such as Comenius and Dewey, psychologists like Damasio (1994), who points to Cartesian duality as a false binary, have begun to (re-)emphasise the emotional and embodied dimensions of cognition, Similarly, in linguistics Lakoff and Johnson's (1980, 1999) concept of the "embodied mind" shows how mental conceptualisation is inextricable from sensory, embodied interactions with the world, interactions which can only be formulated through the metaphorical categories offered by language.

Language body portraits have been a popular method for encouraging auto/biographical reflexivity in a non-linguistic mode. I use the method regularly (see Coffey, 2015) in workshops with teachers and student teachers as a complement to more traditional audits of 'subject knowledge' to extend narrowly mentalist and functional conceptions of language competence. A key goal of the workshop is to encourage participants to reflect on the affective relationship with different languages: affect (not proficiency) is often expressed through core-periphery relations as more emotionally invested languages are drawn in the main trunk of the body. Some participants also metaphorise languages as being in the head, rather than near the heart or other parts denoting affect. Three examples are included here (Figure 1) as illustrations of the variety of representations; in fact of the hundreds of portraits I have elicited in different workshops, each is unique, although there are discernible patterns. Most drawings include solid blocks within the body shape, with very few individuals showing languages as lines coursing through the body as we see here in portrait 3. This may point to a tendency to separate and compartmentalise languages rather acknowledging the fluidity and messiness of plurilingualism. Colours chosen are often representative of colours associated with languages which relate to colours of the flag, colours which are often replicated in textbook covers and associated design material (e.g. the 'tricolour' *bleu, blanc, rouge* for French or red and yellow for Spanish).

Figure 1. *Examples of language portraits from Coffey (2015)*
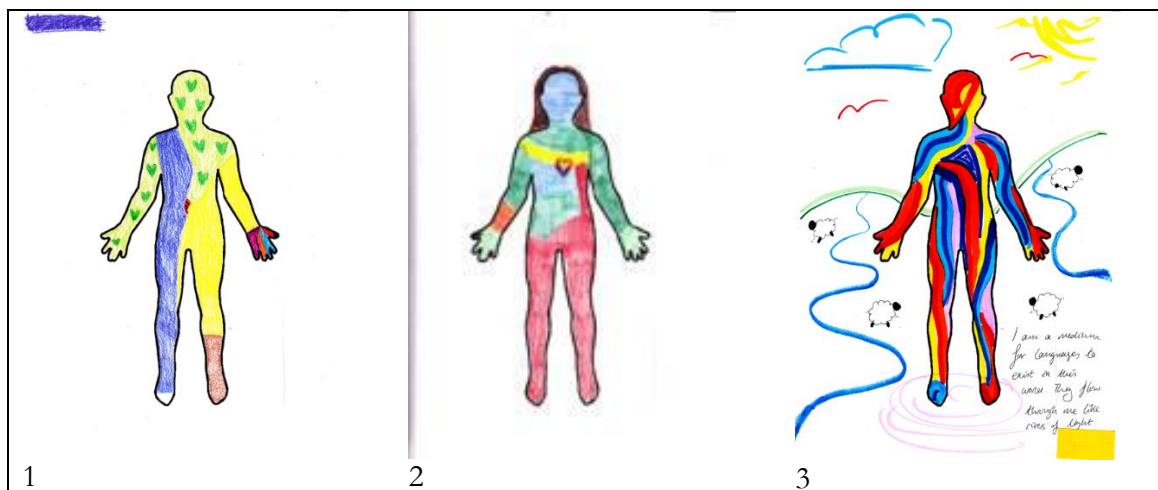
Originally developed as a means of expression for primary school children (bilingual children in monolingual elementary schools, see Krumm, 2011; Krumm, Jenkins, 2001), the language portrait approach has now been used by many other researchers and teachers in different contexts. Kalaja and Melo-Pfeifer (2019) showcase a wonderful collection of case studies using this and other multimodal approaches – see also Molinié (2009) for a range of 'reflexive drawing' methods, and Prasad (2014) who extended the body portrait by moving from using fixed body silhouettes to encouraging children to invent their own multimodal forms. The body portrait approach has also been used to complement a wider toolbox of methods to understand subjectivities of plurilingual mobility trajectories (see Ruet, 2019, for example). Ever more sophisticated and innovative models of inquiry are developing to research plurilingual repertoires, and the current challenge is to take account of new forms of communication, in particular how language is used to enact identities in on-line interactions and to perform versions of digital selves. Narratives in these cases may not be fully-fledged but rather fragmentary indexes of other identity investments and so multi-faceted and longitudinal studies will provide a fuller picture (see, for example, Georgakopoulou, 2017).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Educational theorists from Comenius to Dewey advocated a more holistic approach to understanding knowledge, and learning as a multi-sensory engagement, but education *systems* have tended to reproduce the Cartesian view that "the mind is disembodied", a perspective that has shaped "a good deal of Anglo-American philosophy of mind" and is woven into "other academic disciplines, into our educational systems and into popular culture as well" (Lakoff, Johnson, 1999: 400-401). Cartesian rationalism bequeathed a totalising logic upon which monolithic models of the nation state were founded, and which promoted the ideology of a standard language and monolingualism. While this logic inferred popular unity and coherence on an unprecedented scale as well as, arguably, facilitating scientific advancements, it also marginalised the role of the body and emotions in intellectual discourse.

Centralised systems of education, at the service of the state, provided an important mechanism for minimising linguistic diversity and for producing model citizens. Against this backdrop, education, including language teaching and learning, has been theorised through mentalist models of knowledge and functional competence. Only recently have we seen a turn to embracing the symbolic dimension of language as experienced by and expressed through the body and the emotions. Recent demographic shifts combined with a more liberal social and political conception of the individual, have presented systemic challenges for how we are able to both forge social cohesion while at the same time respecting cultural and linguistic diversity. In language education, auto/biographies – in different modes and media – can offer a form of articulation that provides narrative coherence for an individual telling their story *and* an important method of 'listening' to the experience of others. In other words, auto/biographies offer a reciprocal reflexivity, where this can "move researchers and teachers away from dogmatic, essentialised truths about themselves and others" (Byrd Clark, Dervin, 2014: 3).

Ways of applying language auto/biographies as a methodology have matured. Storytelling never takes place in a vacuum, and auto/biographical accounts cannot be seen as autonomous artefacts of inherent value. Rather, they can serve to address a particular question and can complement other methods (e.g. observations, questionnaires, artistic or literary outputs). Attention to narrative structures may yield, for instance, differences according to gender, such as identified by Thomson. In his analysis of educational life histories[3] Thomson compared two accounts: those of Joan and George, both retired. His comparison highlighted the different structuring devices of the accounts which he attributed to gender, concluding that Joan's account was "reflective and more thematic", including more detail of significant others, whereas George's narrative was "mainly structured through short, staccato paragraphs, arranged in strict chronological order, each of which outlines a particular stage in his education and training" (1995: 171).

Equally, there needs to be transparency about the conditions of production and analysis of the auto/biographical accounts, both materially and epistemologically. This is still absent from many published studies that use forms of auto/biographical analysis. Language auto/biographies have been increasingly used as data to understand the subjective experience of language learning and language contact, and several researchers have shifted from a realist to a more constructivist perspective, in keeping with the general epistemological trend in life history work: "to report one's memories is not so much a matter of consulting mental images as it is engaging in a sanctioned form of telling" (Gergen, 1994, 90). The use of language body portraits cited in this paper, for example, while affording a non-textual mode of articulating language subjectivities, also sets up particular metaphors. Asking teachers or students to draw their languages onto a body silhouette obviously metaphorises their languages onto parts of the body. If participants had been asked to express their languages in a different format other metaphorical articulations would have been afforded.

Plurilingualism refers to the repertoire of varieties of language which individuals may use, and is therefore the opposite of monolingualism; it includes the language variety referred to as 'mother tongue' or 'first language' and any number of other languages or varieties. However, a plurilingual repertoire is more than a toolbox of linguistic codes: it is the complex kaleidoscope of affective and somatic engagements with others and is forged at the interface between personal and social subjectivities.

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[3] Generated for the Mass Observation Archive stored at the University of Sussex (the 1991 Spring Directive asked contributors to write about their lifelong learning, yielding 453 life histories).

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