UC Riverside
Issues in Applied Linguistics

Title
Second Language Learning by Adults: Testimonies of Bilingual Writers

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6496g7v9

Journal
Issues in Applied Linguistics, 9(1)

ISSN
1050-4273

Author
Pavlenko, Aneta

Publication Date
1998-06-30

DOI
10.5070/L491005268

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Second Language Learning by Adults: Testimonies of Bilingual Writers

Aneta Pavlenko
Cornell University

The article focuses on the relationship between languages and selves in adult bicultural bilinguals who learned their second language (L2) post puberty and became writers and scholars in this language. Their autobiographic narratives are used to identify and examine subsequent stages of second language learning (SLL) and the authors' current positioning. On the basis of this novel source of data an argument is presented for new metaphors of SLL, new approaches to SLL, and for the existence—in some cases—of two stages of SLL: a stage of losses and a stage of gains, with specific substages within.

When speaking of bilingual fiction writers, two examples are usually brought up, that of Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov (e.g., Pinker, 1994). It is important to finally acknowledge an equally astounding success of a multitude of contemporary writers, such as Andrei Codrescu, Eva Hoffman, Jan Novak, Jerzy Kosinski, Agota Kristof, Tzvetan Todorov and others, who learned their second language as teenagers and adults, and went on to become poets and novelists in this language. Their superb mastery of the new language now supersedes that of a majority of the native speakers.

The presence of these authors became especially noticeable recently, when American literature witnessed a surge of interest in the issues of adult bilingualism and biculturalism, identity and translation, displacement and belonging, marked by the appearance of such acclaimed literary masterpieces as Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* (1982), Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989), Kaplan's *Lessons in French* (1993), Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) and several others[1]. Literary theorists responded to this new wave by initiating the study of 'displacement' and 'life on the hyphen' from a scholarly standpoint (Beaujour, 1989; Valenta, 1991; Bammer, 1994; Badowska, 1995).

The autobiographic narratives of bilingual and bicultural writers and scholars constitute an intriguing and often disregarded source of evidence about the process of second language learning by adults. Twenty years ago, Steiner (1975), lamenting the state of research on bilingualism and second language acquisition, urged the field to consider such memoirs and to submit them to serious analysis. At present, these voices are still conspicuously absent in linguistic and SLA literature, shut out and banned from participation in any scholarly discussion of bilingualism, because the subjective first person singular remains a suspect genre. De-

Issues in Applied Linguistics
ISSN 1050-4273
© 1998, Regents of the University of California
Vol. 9 No. 1, 3-19

scribing the current state of the SLA field, one of the prominent 'language learning' writers, Alice Kaplan (1994), raises a complaint, similar to Steiner's:

> I read as many scholarly disquisitions as I could find on second language acquisition ... and I found methods and statistics and the occasional anecdote, but nothing, really, about what is going on in the head of the person who suddenly finds herself passionately engaged in new sounds and a new voice, who discovers that "chat" is not a cat at all but a new creature in new surroundings. ...There is more to language learning than the memorization of verbs and the mastery of an accent. (Kaplan, 1994, pp. 59, 69)

Her proposal is to turn to "an entire genre of twentieth-century autobiographical writing which is in essence about language learning" (Kaplan, 1994, p. 59). Kaplan (1994) compares this genre of 'language memoir' to the classic *Bildungsroman*, the novel of education and development: the difference between the two is that it's not an adult self that one is growing into in 'language' literature, but an entirely different self, often perceived as better, safer, more powerful and more prestigious.

It is not surprising that self and translation become the key notions in the 'language learning' narratives. As pointed out by Mercer (1990): "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (p. 43). Learning a second language in immigration or exile is often perceived as such a disclocation or de-centering of the subject. This feeling is poignantly summarized by a Russian-English bilingual, an American writer Alfred Kazin: "To speak a foreign language is to depart from yourself!" (Kazin, 1979, p. 27).

In agreement with post-modernist approaches, in this study I will approach 'identities' not as stable, but as fluid and dynamic, while at the same time grounded in a variety of local discourses, which include but are not limited to class, gender, race, ethinicity and nationality. 'Translation' will encompass making meaning of the new cultural practices and reinterpreting one's own subjectivities (self-translation), in order to 'mean' in the new environment since "the person can only be a meaningful entity, both to himself or herself and to others, by being 'read' in terms of the discourses available in that society" (Burr, 1995, p. 142).

Following Steiner's (1975) and Kaplan's (1994) suggestion, I will examine these 'second language learning narratives,' focusing on the relationship between languages and selves in an attempt to provide at least partial answers to the following questions: in which discourse is an adult bilingual more at home? what is the language of her emotions and feelings? what is her inner language? Or, as George Steiner phrases it: "In what language *am I, suis-je, bin ich,* when I am inmost? What is the tone of self?" (1975, p. 120). Subsequently I will argue for the full-fledged entry of this, unacknowledged by linguists, genre into the debate on bilingualism: in a postmodern era, when the notion of impartial objectivity is dismantled and all that is left are situated subjectivities, the voices of bilinguals themselves

must be heard at least on par with the voices of the—often monolingual—researchers who study the phenomenon of SLA.

In an attempt to reduce the irreducible, I will outline my itinerary through this literary map by the following questions in relation to the bilingual authors: first, I will discuss the *how*, the process through which they became their current selves; then, I will look at the *where* and *who*, presenting their own views of their situatedness at present. Finally, I will also approach the *what*, or, in other words, late bilinguals' views of what their two conceptual systems look like and how they function in their two discourses.

The *how*, the routes that led different individuals to their present state, are many and varied; all of them, however, have something in common: starting with displacement, often a double or triple one, they lead through a painful, inexhaustive and, for some, never ending process of translation, both inward and outward. One of the most detailed descriptions of language socialization and acculturation is provided in a widely acclaimed book by Eva Hoffman *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language* (1989). Hoffman is an American writer, whose Polish-Jewish family emigrated from Poland to North America in 1959, when the author was thirteen. In her book, she 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.

According to Hoffman, the process of change or 'translation' of one's self started for her by a 'careless baptism,' an imposed name change: from Ewa and Alina, the author and her sister become 'Eva' and 'Elaine.' What follows is a shattering loss of their linguistic identity:

> 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 appelations, 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, p. 105)

Similar comments are made by Rodriguez (1982), Hirsch (1994) and many others who went through the tormenting process of re-naming and re-learning new names that accompany their new identities. Another Polish-English bilingual, the well-known linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1985) remembers her own painful initiation :

> 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, p. 189)

The loss of the linguistic identity is accompanied by the loss of all previous subjectivities, as poignantly recalled by a Russian-American bilingual Helen Yakobson:

> 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, p. 119)

The displacement entails a complete loss of the reference frame, and, literally, geographical frame: while for Ewa and her family Poland is the center of the world, for their new friends it is a distant spot somewhere on the periphery, crowded together with other insignificant countries. For a while, Hoffman's heroine is forced to live in a split universe, where

> the signifier has become severed from the signified. 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, p. 106)

Ewa deeply mourns her ability to describe the world around her; her new words are simple referents without any conceptual systems to back them up:

> [The words] come up from a part of my brain in which labels may be manufactured but which has no connection to my instincts, quick reactions, knowledge. Even the simplest adjectives sow confusion in my mind; English kindliness has a whole system of morality behind it, a system that makes "kindness" an entirely positive virtue. Polish kindness has the tiniest element of irony. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 108)

The first step on Hoffman's road toward redemption is a desperate attempt to learn the language: the new words and expressions are picked up from school exercises, conversations, books. The two teenage sisters learn fast, but they are continuously struck by the differences in the two discourses. One, for example, is supposed to thank, when in Polish it would be unneccessary, and it is close to impossible to overrule the native script and bring oneself to say "You are welcome," implying that there was something for which to thank, that you indeed did someone a favor. As pointed out by Wierzbicka (1997) such clash of cultural scripts often leads the learner to "discover" his or her own native culture:

> One of the most important of these personal discoveries which I owe to my life in Australia was the discovery of the phenomenon of Polish culture. When I lived in Poland, immersed in Polish culture, I was no more aware of its specialness than I was of the air I breathed. Now, immersed in the very different Anglo (and Anglo-Australian) culture, I gradually became more and more aware of the distinctiveness of Polish culture. (Wierzbicka, 1997, p. 115)

Immersion in a new culture has its cost though:

> ...if the outer world associated with the English language was different from my accustomed Polish world, the inner world was even more so. For example, I came to realize that the most important everyday emotions in Polish had no place in English. For instance, in Polish, I used to say often '*strasznie sie ciesze*' or '*okropnie sie denerwuje,*' but none of these things were really sayable in English. First, the English equivalents of the Polish intensifiers *strasznie* and *okropnie* ('terribly') would sound excessive in an English-language conversation. Second, the Polish durative reflexive verbs suggested an on-going emotional process, and an active attitude (similar to that reflected in the atypical English verb 'to worry,' and in the archaic verb 'to rejoice'), and so they were quite different from the English adjectives describing states such as 'happy' or 'upset.' And third, the lexical meaning of the Polish words in question was different from any corresponding English words: *ciesze sie* was closer to the archaic *rejoice* than to *happy*, *martwie sie* combined something like worry with elements of chagrin and sorrow, *denerwuje sie* suggested a state of great agitation and 'fretting' (but without the negative connotations of the latter word) as well as something like being upset, and so on. ...What applied to emotions, applied also to religion, to the everyday philosophy of life, to values, to social relations.... (Wierzbicka, 1997, pp. 115-116)

The next loss to face, therefore, is that of the inner speech, the private voice we use for talking to ourselves and in "constructing the self:"

> 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, p. 107).

Being a teenager, Ewa starts socializing with her school friends, keeping silent most of the time because of the inability to tell stories and jokes in a new language, to engage in new and different intepersonal relationships. Wierzbicka (1997) vividly illustrates these differences in style:

> ... what was different was the whole style of interpersonal interaction. To put it crudely, diminutives like 'dear-little-herring' were not needed in English speech

> for in Anglo culture it was not seen as appropriate to urge guests to eat more than they wanted to; and a constant flood of diminutives in interaction with children was not only not needed but it would have seemed inappropriate, given the prevailing ethos of personal autonomy, independence, and self-reliance. (Wierzbicka, 1997, p. 118)

Finally, however, out of the bleak nothingness, a tiny new voice starts to emerge. It is interesting that at first this voice is captured in a diary, a private activity conducted in a public language, which grants 'the double distance of English and writing.' This 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. Step by step, 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:

> 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, p. 189)

Questioning and observing, Ewa/Eva goes through high school, college, graduate school, gets her first job teaching literature. In a search of her own, she appropriates others' voices, attempting to re-create herself through others, or, as Hirsch (1994) suggests, to "relocate through friendship:"

> 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, p. 220)

Prompted by the desire to belong, to "fit in," to be understood, language and culture learning take place on all levels of discourse, leading to profound changes in culturally constituted (and now re-constituted) selves:

> I had to learn to 'calm down,' to become less 'sharp' and less 'blunt,' less 'excitable,' less 'extreme' in my judgements, more 'tactful' in their expression. I had to learn the use of Anglo understatement (instead of more hyperbolic and more emphatic Polish ways of speaking). I had to learn to avoid sounding 'dogmatic,' 'argumentative,' 'emotional.' ... I had to learn the use of English expressions such as 'on the one hand..., on the other hand,' 'well yes,' 'well no,' or 'that's true but on the other hand.' Thus, I was learning new ways of speaking, new patterns of communication, new modes of social interaction.... I was learning the Anglo rules of turn-taking.... I was learning not to use the imperative (Do X!) in my daily interaction with people and to replace it with a broad range of interrogative devices.... But these weren't just changes in the patterns of communication. There were also changes in my personality. I was becoming a different person, at least when I was speaking English. (Wierzbicka, 1997, pp. 119-120)

Hoffman's recollections concur with those of Wierzbicka, describing the result of such "discursive assimilation:"

> My mother says I'm becoming "English." This hurts me, because I know she means I'm becoming cold. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 146)

Not surprisingly, this intense process of second language learning 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):

> ...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, pp. 263-264).

Interestingly, the full mastery of a new language is often initially achieved in and through writing, often diary writing, which, as argued above, allows a luxury of simultaneous privacy and distance. Development of writing in a second lan-

guage in successful bilingual writers is thoroughly examined by Beaujour (1989), who followed the future writers on this road to new identity, looking at their first attempts of self-expression in a second language, often in the form of letters and diaries. Beaujour found that some acclaimed writers initiated these attempts to write quite late in life. For example, Elsa Triolet's diaries, full of code-switched sentences, showed that at the age of thirty two she was still writing mainly in Russian and only attempted to discover her new voice in French. Moreover, this new voice was judged by Beaujour to be still quite stiff at the time. The researcher also found that the first attempts at writing were thematically and stylistically similar to work recently produced in a first language. Beaujour suggested that a gradual transition helps the writer to discover his personal voice in the new language and in time, some authors, like Nabokov, Triolet or Beckett become famous for their fine mastery of this language, its various styles and registers.

The form that the work in a new language most often takes is also of significant importance here. Interestingly enough, the majority of the work by the authors in question deals in one way or another with the authors' childhoods, thus, representing the genre of *récit d'enfance*. Such memoirs, sometimes verging on the documentary and at other times almost entirely fictitious, include Sarraute's *Enfance* (1983),Young's *Growing Up in Moscow. Memories of a Soviet Girlhood* (1989), Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* (1982), Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989) and many other autobiographies, as well as "childhood description" fragments within other novels. The need for repositioning vis-à-vis one's own life and experiences comes through in all of the literary works in question, even those that attempt to describe the past with the precision and thoroughness of a documentary. A good example of the latter is the autobiography of a Russian American bilingual, Cathy Young, who arrived in the US in 1980 at the age of 17. Ten years later, describing her childhood in the Moscow of the seventies, Young reconceptualizes her past in terms of her present, viewing it through the lenses supplied by the new discourse. For instance, in an attempt to provide a framework for her childhood experiences, Young skillfully uses a popular American concept of a JAP:

> Was I a Jewish Soviet Princess? There's no such term in Russian idiom (although a Russian would instantly understand what a "Jewish mother" is), but every Soviet child of my generation and my milieu, especially one who was spared kindergarten, was something of a prince or a princess, Jewish or whatever. (Young, 1989, p. 4)

Her ironic relabelling touches upon historic and literary figures which populated Soviet childhood and ranges from Lenin, "the Holy Child," to the famous heroine of a nineteenth century play *The Thunderstorm*, "beautiful and passionate Katerina, whom we might describe in contemporary American lingo as unfulfilled" (Young, 1989, p. 85). What prompts this need for resurrecting and relabelling the past, so salient in the bilinguals' prose? The need to recreate and to reframe one's story in another language is not accidental: more than anything it represents trans-

lation therapy, the last stage of the healing process, prompted by the need to translate oneself, to ensure continuity by transforming and reintegrating one's childhood into one's new past. Otherwise, one would only have an unfinished life in one language, and a life, started in the middle, in another. A need to tie the two 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. In Hoffman's (1989) book, Ewa's second voice slowly acquires more and more strength, and Eva becomes a person in her own right, crossing the dividing line between herself and her new language:

> 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 freshmen 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 think, 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, wit the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 186)

In the end, for Hoffman (1989), Novak (1994) and many others, the second language wins, becoming the language in which the rituals of adulthood are performed, the language of friendships, love affairs, marriage, favorite books and movies, and, undoubtedly, the inner language of the self, the unconscious and dreams. Novak even pinpoints the exact moment of this transition: "English had become the official language of my subconscious—the Czechs too now spoke unaccented English in my dreams" (Novak, 1994, p. 265).

On the basis of the evidence presented, I would like to suggest two stages in the process of language learning in immigration: the first stage of continuous losses (as opposed to the generally accepted view of language learning as immediate "acquisition") and the second stage of gains and (re)construction. The stage of losses can further be divided into five substages:

- "careless baptism:" loss of one's linguistic identity;
- loss of all subjectivities;
- loss of the frame of reference and the link between the signifier and the signified;
- loss of the inner voice;

- first language attrition.

The somewhat overlapping stage of gains and (re)construction can be divided into four substages:

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

Once the cross-over is completed, new challenges surface: the bilinguals have to face the fact that meaning is not equivalent in their two discursive systems, and deal with it to the best of their ability, finding their own ways to "mean" and to translate. When talking about their incommensurable discourses, bilingual authors usually bring up two major problems: 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. In an essay with a symbolic title "Tongue-Tied Eloquence: Notes on Language, Exile and Writing" Stanislaw Baranczak (1994), a Polish-English bilingual, argues that the author, particularly the author who lives in exile and harbors the ambition to conquer the minds of his foreign-tongued hosts, is never interested in approximations. His one-of-a-kind message has to come across precisely, unbent and unaltered; in this situation "the translator is the author's adversary rather than his ally, a spoiler rather than helper, a necessary evil. Even if the translator is the author himself" (Baranczak, 1994, p. 249).

Beaujour (1989), in her detailed study on bilingual authors, brings up an interesting story of recounting one's childhood in another language. Julien Green, a French-English bilingual author who lived in America during World War II, published several novels in French drawing on his American experience. He then started writing the story of his childhood in French, but the lack of a French publisher made him switch languages and create the same narrative in English. When at some point Green compared the beginnings written in French and the ones written in English, he saw that they were significantly different, a difference that Green attributed to the change in languages:

> So I laid aside what I had written and decided to begin the book again, this time in English, my intention being to use practically the same words, or, if you wish, to translate my own sentences into English. At this point something quite unexpected happened. With a very definite idea as to what I wanted to say, I began my book, wrote about a page and a half and, on rereading what I had written, realized that I was writing another book, a book so different in tone from the French that a whole aspect of the subject must of necessity be altered. It was, as if writing in English, I had become another person.I went on. New trains of thought were started in my mind, new associations of ideas were formed. There was so little resemblance between what I wrote in English, and what I had already written in French that it might almost be doubted that the same person was the author of these two pieces of work. This puzzled

> me considerably and still does. (Green, 1985, p. 180, as cited in Beaujour, 1989)

Elsewhere Green (1985) also commented on the difficulty of translating himself from French into English:

> What struck me most, however, was how little these English sentences resembled the French sentences I had written on the same subject. Now, what I had expected to read was a sort of unconscious translation from the French, or at least a very close equivalent, whereas what I saw might have been written by another hand than mine. I don't want to imply more than I mean. The subject was the same. The choice of details quite different. I did not say the same things in both languages, because, when writing in English, I had the feeling that in some obscure way I was not quite the same person...There is an Anglo-Saxon way of approaching a subject, just as there is a French way. (1985, pp. 228-230, as cited in Beaujour, 1989)

The same feeling struck Novak (1994), who was sent a Czech translation of his novel written in English:

> 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, p. 266)

Another striking example of the impossibility of faithful translation of one's own writing is described in an essay by a Bulgarian-French bilingual Tzvetan Todorov, formerly a Bulgarian intellectual and currently a French literary critic. Todorov had written a paper in French to present at a conference in Bulgaria, his former country. In this paper he argued that the native-born person is always blind to his/her own identity, that the history of a people is essentially the sum of the external influences to which it has been subjected, that, in any case, it is better to live in the present than to try to resurrect the past; in short, that there is no point in imprisoning oneself in traditional national values. Subsequently, Todorov, for whom at the time it was more natural to write in French, started translating this address into Bulgarian, and—reacting to an argument as would the Bulgarian intellectuals, one of which he had been in the past—he felt obliged to replace his argument with its contrary. He realized that the condemnation of attachment to national values critically depends on one's situatedness: while Paris may be a place that favors the renunciation of nationalist values, Sofia, placed within a sphere of influence of a larger country, is not conducive to such abandon. Pondering on this experience, Todorov states:

> 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, pp. 211-12)

If I were now to question the *what* of the bilingual mind and to ask again, whether there are two personalities, two I's, two worldviews co-existing in many late bilinguals, the answer would clearly be a positive one. There are two voices and selves, which coexist, peacefully or violently, at times reacting differently to events and people, providing contradictory, conflicting answers to posited questions:

> Should you marry him? the question comes in English.—Yes.—Should you marry him? the question echoes in Polish.—No. ...—Should you become a pianist? the question comes in English. —No, you mustn't. You can't.—Should you become a pianist? the question echoes in Polish.—Yes, you must. At all costs. ... (Hoffman, 1989, p. 199)

How then is schizophrenia avoided in this dialogic mode of existence? Once a second identity takes a place alongside the first one, bilinguals—with great pain and effort, with losses and gains—learn to navigate between the two worlds, two ways of thinking, assigning distinct functions to each of them (Todorov, 1994) and "moving between them without being split by the difference" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 273). A good example of such navigating is provided by Wierzbicka (1994) in a recent study on the relationship between language, cognition, emotions and cultural scripts. The author, discussing her personal experiences of a Polish bicultural bilingual, living in Australia, states that emotional experiences cannot be separated from context. While her own daily emotions are usually perceived and interpreted in terms of lexical categories provided by Polish (e.g., *denerwuje sie*, approximately: I am making myself upset/ nervous/on edge), within an English-speaking context she often talks and thinks about her subjective experiences in terms of the lexical categories of the English language (such as upset, frustrated, resentful, annoyed, disgusted or happy) which do not have exact equivalents in Polish. Moreover, the category of emotion per se is treated differently by the two cultures; each comes with specific cultural scripts, behaviors and attitudes, thus, suggesting a different *interpretation* of emotional experience, which, in Wierzbicka's (1994) view, cannot be separated from the subjective experience itself.

These psycholinguistic adjustments are not, however, entirely unique; they are quite comparable to the sociolinguistic register change that continuously takes place in the most homogenous monolingual environment. Just like bilinguals, monolingual speakers shift attitiudes when switching from office discourse to

friendly banter to family talk; change roles when discussing issues with their parents as opposed to their children; construct different subjectivities when dealing with different communities of practice. The only acute difference between the two modes of existence—monolingual and bilingual—is that in bilinguals' worlds some subjectivities and social identities may be incompatible and/or incomprehensible and need to be reconstructed in order to ensure full participation in discursive interactions of their new speech communities. At times, especially upon return or a visit to their countries of origin, these immigrant bilinguals ask themselves the unanswerable: what would have become of me here? what would my self and life look like? Some, like Hungarian-French-English trilingual Susan Rubin Suleiman (1993) are successful in the search for such a double:

> Eva...teaches French literature at the university and has two other academic jobs as well. ...She's about my age, plumpish, attractive, with a friendly smile... she and I have become good friends.... Is it because she's very like what I might have become if I had stayed in Hungary? French professor, married with children. But would that have been an option for me, in fact? My mind boggles, trying to imagine all the unrealized possibilities (Rubin Suleiman, 1993, pp. 72, 141)

The issues presented above lead us to the discussion of the present situatedness of the bilingual authors in question: where are they now? how do they identify themselves? where are their allegiances? The notion of *where* is crucial for the genre in question, whose language is permeated by disjunctions: the authors talk of relocation, border crossing, discontinuity, displacement, duality, doubleness, disparity, speech dis-ease and schizophrenia, taking us into a new universe, entirely different from the one where all bilinguals, "compound" and "coordinate," "score the same." The language metaphor is also different in this universe: instead of "language acquisition," the authors talk about becoming- and being-in-language (the subtitle of Hoffman's (1989) novel is *A Life in a New Language*). The former metaphor stems from a universalist epistemology, implicitly suggesting that one's subjectivity is independent of language and hierarchically above it (the self is "in control;" it possesses the language); the latter, on the other hand, draws on relativist and postmodernist approaches, presenting languages as separate worlds which define and transform the self. Language is seen as "the place where our bodies and minds collide, where our groundedness in place and time and our capacity for fantasy and invention must come to terms" (Kaplan, 1994, p. 64).

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 man's land of in-between. Some, like Wierzbicka (1997), will forever claim allegiance to their mother tongue and first culture:

> I could say, therefore, that I am both a Pole and an Australian. To my ear, however, this would sound phoney. Although I am an Australian citizen, I don't have two nationalities, as I don't have two native languages. My native language is Polish and so is my native culture. (Wierzbicka, 1997, p. 113)

Others are quite satisfied with "a home on the border:"

> 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, pp. 81, 88)

Others yet, like Rodriguez (1982), 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). They are not who they were anymore, or, as Codrescu succinctly puts it: "I was once a Romanian and I translated myself into an American" (1989, p. 45). These feelings are also shared by Hoffman (1989) who, at the end of her long and painful journey, arrives at the realization that

> 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, p. 170)

While some late bilinguals may be, like Todorov (1994), forever torn by the state of double vision and twin allegiance, others, like Brodsky (1989), Novak (1994) or Codrescu (1989), are quite comfortable and content[2]:

> 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, p. 296).

Testimonies of language/culture-related identity crises and victories, the "lan-

guage learning" narratives discussed above lead to several conclusions. First of all, they are evidence that a linguistic cross-over in adulthood is indeed possible and an adult can master a second language to a native degree, critical age notwithstanding (possibly except for phonology).

Establishing the possibility of such transition allows us to separate two important issues: being a native of a certain place versus having a native command of a language and a native place in a cultural space. While the authors presented above were born elsewhere and, depending on their personal histories, may forever claim allegiance to the place of their birth, they also undeniably belong in their second self-chosen world, not only as observers but as full-fledged participants. Moreover, often they occupy discursive spaces that are far from marginal, as is the case with many of the writers, and, in particular, Codrescu, professor of English at Louisiana State University, whose novels, poems, essays, films and running comments on National Public Radio have became an important part of contemporary American culture.

The "language learning" narratives also testify that languages are indeed separate worlds, which cannot be reduced to a simple mentalese expressed in various codes. However, for those of us who are monolingual and monocultural, these worlds are deceivingly transparent and, thus, hidden and lost in this seeming invisiblity. It is only when an attempt is made to enter a new world at will, that the limitations, boundaries and confines of both the new and the old become poignantly apparent. As Wierzbicka (1985) expressed in her article "The Double Life of a Bilingual:"

> ...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, p. 187)

The writing in the "language learning" genre also confirms the direct link between discourse and identity, providing an explanation for why cases of native acquisition of second language are rather rare. It becomes increasingly clear that it is not the memory task per se that is vexing; it is the "departure from oneself" that is ultimately the terrifying enterprise. Even when one has enough courage to embark on such a journey, the existence of one choice too many may lead many bicultural bilinguals to feel lost, disoriented, or suspended between the two languages like someone whose parachute has caught on two trees (Codrescu, 1989).

Most importantly, the narratives above allow me to suggest a new way of looking at the process of second language learning and to examine it as self-translation whereby the learner proceeds through losses to gains in an overwhelming attempt to become again a being-in-language. In this I side with Salman Rushdie, yet another bilingual writer, who once observed:

> The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across.' Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained. (1991, p. 17)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Barbara Legendre and to a fellow Ph.D. student Ewa Badowska for their generosity with time and advice.

NOTES

[1] It is with greatest regret that, focusing on late bilingualism, I leave out the work by and on such great writers as Nabokov, Esteban, Beckett and many others, whose history of simultaneous bilingualism undoubtedly deserves a separate discussion (see Beaujour, 1989; Forster, 1970; Valenta, 1991).

[2] Undoubtedly, there are also those who, through the whole experience of living in exile, with preserve the original ethnic and cultural identity, making only minor concessions to outside pressure. In this case, however, the bilingualism with be mainly reduced to bi- or multicodalism (i.e., the speakers may speak more than one language, but the meanings will all be supplied by their native one).

REFERENCES

Badowska, E. (1995). Translation and melancholia: Border crossings in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*. Unpublished manuscript, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

Bammer, A. (Ed.) (1994). *Displacements. Cultural identities in question*. Indiana University Press.

Baranczak, S. (1994). Tongue-tied eloquence: Notes on language, exile and writing. In M. Robinson (Ed.), *Altogether elsewhere. Writers on exile* (pp. 242-251). Harcourt, Brace & Company.

Beaujour, E. (1989). *Alien tongues. Bilingual Russian writers of the "first" emigration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Brodsky, J. (1993). Interview. In J. Glad (Ed.), *Conversations in exile. Russian writers abroad*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. London & New York: Routledge.

Codrescu, A. (1989). The woes of translation. In A. Codrescu *Raised by puppets only to be killed by research* (pp. 45-46). Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

Green, J. (1985). An experiment in English. In J. Green *Le langage et son double*. Paris: Editions de la différance.

Hall, S. (1996). The question of cultural identity. In: S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert & K. Thompson (Eds.), *An introduction to modern societies*. Blackwell Publishers.

Hirsch, M. (1994). Pictures of displaced girlhood. In A. Bammer (Ed.), *Displacements. Cultural identities in question*. (pp. 71-89). Indiana University Press.

Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in translation. A life in a new language*. New York: Dutton.

Kaplan, A. (1993). *French lessons. A memoir*. Chicago & London: The University of

Chicago Press.
Kaplan, A (1994). On language memoir. In A. Bammer (Ed.), *Displacements. Cultural identities in question.* (pp. 59-70). Indiana University Press.
Kazin, A. (1979). *A walker in the city.* New York: Harvest/ Harcourt.
Kristof, A. (1986). *Le grand cahier.* Paris: Seuil.
Lee, Ch.R. (1995). *Native speaker.* New York: Riverhead Books.
Novak, J. (1994). My typewriter made me do it. In M.Robinson (Ed.), *Altogether elsewhere. Writers on exile* (pp. 261-266). Harcourt, Brace & Company.
Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct.* Harper Perennial.
Rodriguez, R. (1982*). Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez.* New York: Bantam.
Rubin Suleiman, S. (1993). *Budapest diary. In Search of the motherbook.* University of Nebraska Press.
Rushdie, S. (1991). *Imaginary homelands. Essays and criticism 1981-1991.* London: Granta Books.
Sarraute, N. (1983). *Enfance.* Paris: Gallimard.
Steiner, G. (1975). *After Babel. Aspects of language and translation.* New York & London: Oxford University Press.
Todorov, T. (1994). Dialogism and schizophrenia. In A. Arteaga (Ed.), *An other Tongue. Nation and ethnicity in the linguistic borderlands.* (pp. 203-214). Durham & London: Duke University Press.
Valenta, E. (1991). Doubled selves and fractured childhoods: A study of the *récits d'enfance* in Nathalie Sarraute, Agota Kristof and Claude Esteban. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.
Wierzbicka, A. (1985). The double life of a bilingual. In R. Sussex & J. Zubrzycki (Eds.), *Polish people and culture in Australia* (pp. 187-223). Canberra: Australian National University.
Wierzbicka, A. (1994). Emotion, language, and cultural scripts. In Sh. Kitayama & R. Markus (Eds.), *Emotion and culture* (pp. 133-196). American Psychological Association.
Wierzbicka, A. (1997). The double life of a bilingual: A cross-cultural perspective. In M. Bond (Ed.), *Working at the interface of cultures: Eighteen lives in social science.* London: Routledge.
Young, C. (1989). *Growing up in Moscow. Memories of a Soviet girlhood.* NY: Ticknor & Fields.