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LIVING AND LEARNING IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES: THE NARRATIVE OF A CONTEMPORARY COSMOPOLITAN

Идентитет корисника језика наслеђа представља стимулативну и изазовну тему у истраживањима везаним управо за ову врсту мањинског језика. Расправљало се о томе да приповести имају важну улогу у овој области пошто оне отварају канале за разумевање и тумачење сложеног сплета формирања идентитета. Дакле, кроз приповест покушавамо да откријемо личну причу Алекс, вишејезичне особе и говорника српског као језика наслеђа. Централно питање које постављају и учесник и истраживач је питање идентитета схваћеног као лични осећај интегритета и континуитета који служи за повезивање себе са светом. У овом раду, нарочито се фокусирамо на улогу окружења и недостатак формалног образовања на језику наслеђа за изградњу идентитета, и ми покушавамо да успоставимо могуће импликације за одржање језика наслеђа.

Кључне речи: идентитет, језик наслеђа, образовање на језику наслеђа, приповест, српски језик.

1. Heritage language

Depending on the criteria of analysis, the relationship between a language user and a language can be described on different levels, that is, the order of acquisition (first, second, third...), its functions (primary, secondary) and its sociopolitical dimension (majority or minority language) (Montrul, 2012). This classification only represents an instrument of analysis that enables operationalization of the phenomena related with language acquisition and learning, its use, and, possibly, language attrition. However, when dealing with heritage languages (HL) (also called ethnic minority languages or community languages), it seems even more difficult to separate the three levels of analysis since their interaction is what creates and recreates a complex identity of the heritage language user.

Defining heritage language is far from being problematic, as testified by a growing number of papers that deal with the topic (e.g. Carreira, 2004;

Carreira & Kagan, 2011; Jovanović & Vučina Simović, 2012; Jovanović & Vučina Simović, 2015; Kagan, 2005; Kreeft Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001; Montrul, 2012; Valdés, 2005; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). Fishman (2001) differentiates between three types of heritage languages in the United States: 1) immigrant heritage languages, which are spoken by immigrants arriving to the United States and by their descendants; 2) indigenous heritage languages spoken by the peoples native to the Americas, that is, by the autochthonous groups, and 3) colonial heritage languages spoken by the groups that colonized what is now the United States. This classification emphasizes historical, political, and social situatedness that needs to be considered in relation to the heritage language, whether we are dealing with HL in the United States or elsewhere, such as in this case of a HL used in the European context.

Fishman (2001) also emphasizes that a heritage language has "particular family relevance to the learners" (81). Similarly, van Deusen-Scholl (2003) maintained that HL users are "raised with a strong cultural connection to a particular language through family interaction" (222). However, this broad description does not take into account the level of competence in HL, which was brought up mainly by researchers interested in heritage language education. In fact, van Deusen-Scholl (1998) made a useful distinction between heritage learners and learners with a heritage motivation to differentiate between individuals with certain level of competence and those that have not been active users of HL.

Polinsky (2008) specified that HL "was first for an individual with respect to the order of acquisition but has not been completely acquired because of the switch to another dominant language" (149). Although it captures two important aspects of the problem, that is, order of acquisition and language functions, Polinsky's definition excludes heritage language users who have indeed reached high levels of communicative competence. On the other hand, Valdés (2001) elaborates on the concept of bilingualism to illustrate a large continuum of bilinguals of different types and with different strengths, so that any level of competence in two languages (majority and heritage) should be considered as bilingualism. However, Valdés (2001) maintained that "[t]he comparison group against which bilinguals of different types are to be measured is the monolingual group, the group of

individuals who have competence in only one language" (41). Here, however, we defend that monolingualism and bilingualism/multilingualism are incommensurable constructs. As proposed by Grosjean, "the bilingual person in not two monolinguals in the same body, but a unique language user with a complete language system" (in Athanasopoulos, 2011: 29). His or her competence is qualitatively different than that of a monolingual user, which is manifested not only in the linguistic code and behavior, but in all aspects of a person's individual, social, and cultural engagement.

These considerations call for an epistemological orientation that can address complex aspects of the heritage language user. It is repeatedly emphasized that narratives are not new in humanities and social sciences. Still, they have a particularly important role in the research on heritage languages since it is through a narrative that we can understand and interpret "the wealth of reflections on thinking and speaking in two languages" (Pavlenko, 2011: 4). Here, narrative is conceived not only as a methodological instrument, but also as a tool for constructing and identifying one's identity. While interactions of personal experiences, cultural models, cultural and social contexts, all determine identity construction (see Filipović, 2009: 44-46), we further suggest that this identity is brought to consciousness and further transformed through autobiographical accounts. It is, thus, through a series of in-depth interviews, conversations, and electronic correspondence that we try to capture this entanglement of factors, that all act together in the construction of the personal story of a heritage language user named Alex. Alex is a contemporary cosmopolitan, a plurilingual individual and a heritage user of Serbian whose personal experiences, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and ideals reflect specific worldview that sheds more light on the role of environment and education in identity formation.

In the following section, we discuss the concept of identity in relation to heritage language users with a special focus on its dynamic, complex, and emergent character. The main body of the paper is dedicated to the personal story of Alex, in which we explore her identity, which is understood as a personal sense of integrity and continuity that is constructed through the totality of personal, educational, and professional experiences. We particularly focus on the role of formal education in the heritage lan-

guage (that is, its absence), which has influenced critical aspects in linguistic and personal biography. We close with reflections on the role of HL in education and we try to offer possible implications for heritage language education.

2. Evolving identity

The notion "identity" has been discussed from the perspective of different disciplines and approaches, so it is fairly expected that there would be inconsistencies in the way we conceive of it. Psychological studies usually conceptualize identity to include ideas of continuity, a sense of uniqueness, and a sense of affiliation based upon who one has been, and who one might potentially be (Marcia, 2002). In that sense, identity represents "a conscious or intuitive sense of sameness over time" (Horowitz, 2012: 1.2. section, para. 2). In comparison, in applied linguistics, identity is mainly defined in relational terms, "as projections as well as projects of the self, and serve to connect the self to the world in a multiplicity of ties, roles, aspirations and practical activities" (van Lier, 2004b: 96). Consequently, identity cannot be considered separately from the notion of "self", that is, the sense of ourselves, "the sum total of all the connections between the brain and rest of the body, in constant calibration and feedback" (van Lier, 2004b: 94).

Van Lier (2004a) explains that self is a complex, multilayered, dynamic system that relies on different kinds of self-knowledge and develops throughout the lifetime as people constantly seek to establish their place in the world (see van Lier, 2004a: 107-132). Mercer (2014) also defines the self as a complex system that has five crucial attributes: it consists of interrelated multiple components; it is dynamic, in a constant state of flux; it follows a non-linear development; it is a self-organizing system, and it is emergent, ongoing, open. Crucial for this definition of self is the notion of complexity since the self is not a mere sum of its elements. It is decentralized, in that all components of the system are interdependent and changes in one part of the system lead to changes in other parts. System is meaningful as a whole and "the collective functioning of the system as one organic whole cannot be deduced from an understanding of the

individual components" (Mercer, 2014: 162). Furthermore, emergence, as a "property of complex adaptive systems" (Filipović, 2015: 35), is deeply rooted in the notion of interaction, "in the idea that all there exists in this world is comprised of a much larger number of complex (rather then linear, ordained) systems consisting of components which cannot be analyzed or understood independently or in simple, one-on-one relationships" (Filipović, 2015: 30).

The research on identity integrates the individual language learner and the larger social world, mainly by focusing on the relationships between the self, practices, and resources. Norton (2013) postulates that identities are produced and negotiated through practices common to institutions such as homes, schools and workplaces and influenced by available resources, whether they are symbolic or material (2-3). Language is crucial in this process of identity construction because every time a specific language is used, the language user is organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. In that way, identity is the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. It is the importance of the future that is central to the lives of many language learners, and is integral to an understanding of both identity and investment. (Norton, 2013: 4)

The notion of identity is, then, defined in dialogical terms between the individual and his or her surroundings. Furthermore, it differs across time and is strongly influenced by the moment in the person's lifespan, his or her lived and current practices, available resources, aspirations, and projections. As van Lier (2004b) explains, "when people find themselves in a new culture with a new language, they need to develop new identities to reconnect their deep sense of self to the new surroundings" (96), which requires certain reciprocity between the individual and host culture. Contrary to this, when a person is confronted with a hostile environment, his or her identity construction may be hindered (see Norton Peirce, 1995).

Specific circumstances under which individuals acquire HL influence a creation of complex identities and, possibly, "an everyday intercultural burden that is not familiar to second language learners or native speakers of the language" (Kagan, 2012: 72). They usually identify them-

selves through hybrid identities (see Bhabha, 1994) of their dominant and heritage cultures. However, affiliation with either community, whether real or imagined, is further problematized by the social, historical and political circumstances in which the individual encounters him or herself. In this sense, politics will play an important role in who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged with respect to these issues (see Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 2004). In the following section, we will explore how these conflicts are represented in the narrative of a HL user Alex.

3. This research

As previously explained, Alex is a plurilingual individual and a heritage user of Serbian with whom the researcher has maintained a long-term personal relationship through family ties. Inspired by the shared interest in heritage language and culture, in 2013 we both agreed on maintaining a continuous, open-ended investigation of issues related to Alex's language use, so we arranged a series of semi-structured interviews and electronic correspondences. The data for this study mainly come from the interview conducted through Skype, in the Serbian language, in May 2015, which lasted 61 minutes. The interview has been entirely transcribed and coded for themes following a bottom-up approach (Manning and Cullum Swan, 1998: 249-250). Recognized themes have been analyzed and interpreted in relation to different social and cultural contexts in which Alex has been living. Repeated consultations with the participant represented an integral part of the data interpretation since it has been crucial to verify the meanings the researcher ascribed to the data, to obtain certain clarifications and further explanations.

Alex

Alex is approaching her 30th birthday and has a double major in Philosophy and Theater Studies and a Doctorate in Theater Studies. She was born in Switzerland to a Swiss father and a Serbian mother. She has lived in Switzerland, where she completed her undergraduate studies, but also in England and Germany. She has had repeated and prolonged stays

in Serbia and other republics of ex-Yugoslavia. Alex uses German, Switzerdeutsch, Serbian, English, French, and some Russian. When asked to say something about herself, she always says her full name and her current position at the university. Instead of explaining her origin, she prefers to name the city of her current residency.

> *I probably identify mostly with that which is not permanent because I think that, and especially in academia [laughs], in academic contexts, people mostly identify with the profession, unfortunately. I also identify through my job and through my research.*

It seems that profession is for Alex not only a central attribute of her self-concept but also a means to construct her identity and affiliation. Instead of identifying *with* her professional engagement, she claims that it is *through* profession that she recognizes her identity. Additionally, this way of presenting herself is an easy solution for the complex question:

> *I never know how to present myself. And, it is somehow easier to say that I've lived in Switzerland, not that I am originally from Switzerland. I mean, my father is Swiss. And if they ask me 'where are you from?', I say half-half. My mother is Serbian, which means, I am, I have family and relatives and I am attached, of course, to Belgrade. And of course I am also emotionally attached to Switzerland because my father is Swiss. (...) I generally try to avoid the question of national affiliation. The easiest thing for me to say, the easiest is to say that I currently reside [in Germany].*

This passage reminds us of Kagan's (2012) reflection on "intercultural burden" that is specific to users of HL. This is further problematized in the context of both dominant Swiss and German cultures, as well as in her heritage Serbian culture. According to Alex, the question of national origin and affiliation is extremely important in these cultures, which creates a conflict between herself and her surroundings. While she has accepted her hybrid identity, she feels as if she needs to defend it against the dominant and heritage cultures.

The concept of a person who comes from two cultures, like myself, for example, who was raised in two cultures and who defines herself through two cultures doesn't exist. It doesn't exist because you can only define yourself in terms of self or other. You can't have another category that would include people like me.

This is particularly salient in the post-migrant context that is, incidentally, in the focus of Alex's research. It refers to the second generation of migrants who grow in different cultures and identify through them but have no intention of returning to the "country of origin". This also explains why Alex prefers the use of the terms "heritage language" or "community language" to that of "minority language"—she does not want to be defined in contrast to the majority cultures because they also represent part of her complex identity.

These concerns have been acute in different moments of Alex's personal history and particularly so in the early years of her formal education. While her early childhood occurred in a more or less balanced proportion of Swiss and Serbian, first years of primary school were marked by an effort to try to integrate and even assimilate with the majority Swiss context. This period began in the early 90s and was particularly difficult for her because it was the time when people from ex-Yugoslavia were frequently stigmatized due to the war and overall political situation in the republics of ex-Yugoslavia.

In that period we sensed, what is the word, ehm, xenophobic attacks against people from ex-Yugoslavia. In that sense, I wasn't particularly interested in identifying with that side. And that is why I probably fought against going to Yugoslav school.

Even in this brief passage and from a significant time distance, it is possible to perceive certain detachment from the heritage culture materialized in the usage of words. It is as if *her* family sensed stigmatization directed toward Yugoslavs, with whom they did not necessarily relate. As Alex explains, she avoided being associated with former Yugoslavia, since she could sense intolerance directed toward its peoples in her everyday life

and in her school. Unsupportive environment outside her family home had a strong influence on young Alex. It is in this time that she showed certain revolt against her heritage culture mainly manifested in her decision not to attend Yugoslav Sunday school. Interestingly enough, her mother, who was working in the Sunday school at the time, wanted her to attend it but accepted her daughter's decision. Importantly, in spite of her personal conflicts, Alex did not renounce on using Serbian in her family context even in this time; she also used it with a friend of Bosnian origin and even read books mainly under the influence of her mother and aunt. Serbian was her private language.

It was not until her early teens that she started to identify consciously with Serbian culture. It seems that in this period she also felt empowered enough to be publicly associated with her heritage culture. In addition to the family support, she had now created new friendships with girls who were also of Yugoslav origin and she entered a Serbian folklore association.

Given that I am really attached to Serbia and to my family, and all, I was very interested in everything that is… so I wanted also that my Swiss life, my life outside the family house, get connected more with [Serbian] context and… yes. I think it was then that I decided with mom to use strictly Serbian, not to mix. (…) So, we started to use strictly Serbian in communication, like we only speak Serbian and don't use German words. Well, ehm, it takes a while to make a sentence [laughs], but we have to think of a Serbian word.

The change in Alex's attitude toward her Serbian identity brought a change in her investment toward the Serbian language. It was a conscious decision to communicate in Serbian and to stick to the heritage in spite of the environment that has not always been supportive in this respect. Conversely, the support of her immediate and extended family had been crucial for the preservation of Alex's positive attitudes and strong emotional connections with different parts of her origin. As Fishman has pointed out, the family represented a natural boundary that served as a bulwark against outside pressures (Fishman 1991, in Shwartz, 2010: 172).

The fact that she has never studied Serbian in formal context is followed by certain self-doubt in relation to this language, even though she perceives it as her first language.

As a child, I was, ehm, close with the Serbian language and Serbian was probably my first language, I think. Or, at least, I have that impression.

This is further confirmed by her insecurity in the level of communicative competence in Serbian:

> I use it in the private domain. And then, I also use it in the professional domain because, ehm, I wrote about Shakespeare's Hamlet in the former Yugoslavia. In that sense, I communicated a lot with the institutions, I had some professional conversations… In that sense… Well, I don't know, you'll tell me afterwards…

Alex knows that she has been capable to successfully use Serbian in academic and professional domain, but she has not developed metacognitive skills that would enable her to evaluate the quality of the linguistic use. Her competence is reflected in the other's judgment; she needs a confirmation of another person to be able to assess her proficiency. This reveals a certain lack of autonomy in HL that might be a result of the lack of formal education in HL, as she herself explains:

> *I feel that, I feel that, well, the fact that I haven't learned Cyrillic, for instance, and that I haven't gone to Serbian school, I feel it is a deficiency. Because I can't express myself in Serbian the same way as I would express in German, in the professional sense, in writing. (…) I am not equally eloquent as in German, I say, far from that. Even my English is better than Serbian.*

Serbian is Alex's language of emotions; it is her most intimate language in which she feels more secure than either in German or English. There is some ingenuity and spontaneity in her use of the heritage language that is typical of children.

> *I mean, how to put this, I would be able to write for you everything in Cyrillic [laughs], only it will look like a child wrote it.*

When asked whether she would like to change something in this respect, she responds affirmatively; unfortunately, on the list of her current priorities, personal and professional engagements, she would hardly be able to find the necessary time. However, when I asked Alex whether she ascribed importance to learning the Serbian language, her response was very emotional:

What does it mean to me, because I think, what does it mean to me [accelerated], I am, I am part of that culture. I am part of my family. I want to be a part of that culture, a part of that family, and for me it goes largely through the language. It is a very personal reason.

In this sense, heritage language is "the vehicle whereby the cultural memory of entire peoples is transmitted over time from place to place, from community to community, and from generation to generation" (Trifonas and Aravossitas, 2014: xiii). As Alex herself explains, *the intimacy and the understanding can't be achieved without knowing the language.* Her identity is created and recreated through modalities of her linguistic experience and differently challenged in changing circumstances of her life.

4. Final remarks

The preceding section offers a schematic portrayal of a contemporary plurilingual individual with Serbian heritage background. For Alex, being plurilingual implies the capacity to communicate fluently in different languages and to move with ease between them. It is a manifestation of a complex identity that is created through the sum of personal, professional, and socio-political experiences.

The central characteristic of the participant's identity construction is its ongoing, emergent nature marked by interaction—interaction between the individual and her surroundings, but also between different parts of herself. When reflecting on her personal and linguistic biography, Alex talks in relational terms and compares her primary, secondary and tertiary language. When evaluating her linguistic proficiency, she reaches out and seeks feedback from her environment. Intimate struggles revealed through

the narrative account underscore the importance of family support for identity formation and call for more attention on family language policy in language maintenance (see Shwartz, 2010).

In Alex's autobiographical narrative, a particularly interesting theme refers to the role of education in her linguistic development. It seems that the absence of formal education in heritage language is related to a certain insecurity and self-questioning in respect to the level of proficiency in HL. It would be reasonable to expect that the lack of formal education in HL affects linguistic performance in the professional and/or academic domain, especially in written code. However, it is the lack of metacognitive strategies for self-evaluation that is particularly revealing in this respect. The importance of formal education in HL would, then, be important not only for the development of communicative competence in different domains, but also for the metacognitive development and language user's autonomy. Finally, we believe that a narrative may also be used as an instructional tool since it reveals critical points in a person's (linguistic) biography and creates a springboard for an individualized approach in language education.

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Abstract

The identity of heritage language users represents a stimulating and challenging topic in the research related to this particular kind of minority language. It has been argued that narratives have an important role in this field since they open channels for understanding and interpreting the complex tissue of identity formation. It is, thus, through a narrative that we try to unveil the personal story of Alex, a plurilingual individual and a heritage speaker of Serbian. The central question that both the participant and the investigator pose is the issue of identity understood as the personal sense of integrity and continuity that serves to connect the self to the world. In the paper, we particularly focus on the role of environment and the absence of formal education in the heritage language for the construction of identity, and we try to establish possible implications for heritage language maintenance.

Keywords: identity, heritage language, heritage language education, narrative, Serbian language.

Biographical statement

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