

Psych 124 The multilingual experience

Claire Kramsch, April 5, 2004

I. Two adolescent/adult L2 learners' experiences in school settings

Alice Kaplan, an American teenager learning French

1. I speak my lines with muscles quivering. . . The Mouth [has to be] in the right position to make the vowel sounds: lip muscles forward and tighter than in English, the mouth poised and round. Americans speaking French tend to chomp down hard on their consonants and swallow their vowels all together. . .

In September my 'r' is clunky, the one I've brought with me from Minnesota. It is like cement overshoes, like wearing wooden clogs in a cathedral. It is like any number of large objects in the world – all of them heavy, all of them out of place, all of them obstacles. *Je le heurte* – I come up against it like a wall. (Kaplan 1993:54) . . . that feeling of coming onto the 'r' like a wall was part of feeling the essence of my American speech patterns in French, feeling them as foreign and awkward. I didn't know at the time how important it was to feel that American 'r' like a big lump in my throat and to be dissatisfied about it. Feeling the lump was the first step, the prerequisite to getting rid of it.(54)

It happened over months but it felt like it happened in one class. I opened my mouth and I opened up: it slid, out, smooth and plush, a French 'r.' . . . It felt – relaxed. It felt normal! (ibidem p.55)

Richard Watson, an American philosopher and amateur speleologist, learning French

2. I loved learning to read this new language. It was all in the mind. The instructor devoted, at most, fifteen minutes of the first class period to French pronunciation, but we were never required to speak or write the language, only to read it. I read it very well, earning an A for the yearlong, ten-hour course. Moreover, some years later when I took the Ph.D. reading exam in reading French, I scored 100 percent (Watson 1995:1)

3. [Learning to speak French] was like diving naked and alone into ice water. I was frozen with panic. I found to my horror that I was not an able student, as I always had been before (ibidem p.8).

4. I was more tense than I have ever been in my life or ever want to be again. . . The first time I ever climbed a mountain wall with hundreds of feet of exposure below me, that time we arrived back at the entrance of a cave to find a wall of water roaring in and had to crawl down stream as fast as we could for a long distance to clamber up into passages above water level, my Ph.D. oral exam –none of those times could begin to compete with the state of tension I was enduring now. .(ibidem p.39).

5. Why did I resist [French] so? Because, I think, all my life I have been trying to learn to write. These new French [spoken] forms threatened to destroy what little progress I had made so far. Not only did I use English forms in speaking French, I was appalled to find myself using French forms when I was writing English. French was undermining my very being! My personality was in danger of disintegrating! A great clanging of alarm bells was set in my deep unconscious, irritated by these alien influences seeping down from above (Watson 1995:57).

6. . . what made me realize how much I dislike the sound of French was the continual, unctuous, caressing repetition of "l'oiseau" ("the bird"). It is a word the French believe to be one of the most beautiful in their language. It is a word that cannot be pronounced without simpering, a word whose use should be restricted to children under five. I did not want to speak French because it gave me the bird. . . So how does one handle such an irrational response? I wondered if it was just the contrast with the English 'bird', which is a strong hard word. . . American men don't like to simper. And as I said, they get their notion of Frenchmen from the movies. Certainly no American boy of my generation ever wanted to grow up to be Charles Boyer (ibidem p.53).

II. Children's and adolescents' L2 learning experiences outside school

Tawada, a Japanese child learning German in Hamburg

7. When I came to Hamburg, I knew all the letters of the alphabet, but I could look for a long time at the individual letters without grasping the meaning of the words . . . I repeated the S-sounds in my mouth and noticed that my tongue suddenly tasted foreign. I didn't know up to now that the tongue could taste of anything". (Tawada 1996:39 my trsl)
Every foreign sound, every foreign sight, every foreign taste had a disagreeable effect on my body, until my

body changed. The Oe-sounds for example drilled deep into my ears and the R-sounds scratched my throat.. There were also idioms that gave me goose pimples, like, for example “to get onto someone’s nerves”, to “have it up to here”, or “to sh...in one’s pants”.

Most of the words that came out of my mouth did not express what I was feeling. That’s where I noticed that there was no word in my mother tongue either that expressed what I was feeling.. I had not felt that way before I started to live in a foreign language (ibidem: 41)

8. Children take the language at its word. Every word acquires a life of its own, that makes it independent of its meaning within the sentence. There are even words that are so full of life that they can, like mythical characters, develop their own autobiographies. (ibidem:13) [the word I liked particularly] was *Heftklammerentferner* [staple remover]. Its wonderful name embodied my desire for a foreign language. This small object, that reminded me of a serpent’s head with four fangs, was illiterate. . . It could only remove staples. But I favored him because the way he separated the stapled pages worked like magic.. . In the mother tongue, words are stapled. . . Thoughts are stapled to words to such an extent that neither can fly freely. In a foreign language, you have something like a staple remover: it removes everything that is stapled together and sticks together (ibidem:15).

Makine, a Russian child learning French in Siberia from his grandmother.

9. Neuilly-sur-Seine was composed of a dozen log cabins. . .For our grandmother had indeed said to us one day, when speaking of her birthplace, “Oh! At that time Neuilly was just a village. . . “ She had said it in French, but we only knew Russian villages. And a village in Russia is inevitably a ring of *izbas*; indeed the very word in Russian, *derevnya*, comes from *derevo* – a tree, wood. The confusion persisted, despite the clarification that Charlotte’s stories would later bring. At the name “Neuilly” we had immediate visions of the village with its wooden houses, its herd, and its cockerel. And when, the following summer, Charlotte spoke to us for the first time about a certain Marcel Proust – “By the way, we used to see him playing tennis at Neuilly, on the boulevard Bineau” – we pictured the dandy with big langorous eyes (she had shown us his photo) there among the *izbas*! (Makine 1997:23).

Alice Kaplan, now an American college student studying in France

10. What I wanted more than anything, more than Andre even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French, and so even as he was insulting me and discounting my passion with a vocabulary lesson, I was listening and studying and recording his response. (p.86) He was in all my daydreams now. I wanted to crawl into his skin, live in his body, be him. The words he used to talk to me, I wanted to use back. I wanted them to be my words. (88) . . I spent a lot of time reading and sitting in cafes...and writing in my diary about Andre and what he meant. He wanted me to be natural, and I wanted him to make me French. When I thought back on the way the right side of me had swelled up, my neck and my ear and my eye, it was as if half of my face had been at war with that project. Half of me, at least, was allergic to André. (p.89)

11. It was the two of them against me. Two people who had the words and shared the world and were busy communicating in their authentic language, and me, all alone in my room. Maité had something I couldn’t have, her blood and her tongue and a name with accents in it. I was burning with race envy. (p. 89)

12.It hadn’t been spelling that I wanted from [André]. I wanted to breathe in French with André, I wanted to sweat French sweat. It was the rhythm and pulse of his French I wanted, the body of it, and he refused me, he told me I could never get that. I had to get it another way. (94)

III. Bilingual children’s experiences: Dorfman, Esteban, Canetti

3-year old Ariel Dorfman, father American, Mother Chilean

13. I realize my father is calling to me in Spanish and that I am not answering him, that he is angry because I did not answer, that now he is switching to English and to this I reply, I call out something, anything, I flush the toilet, I wash my hands, I open the door. So that’s what this is about: my refusal to let on that I understand his words unless he adapts to my language. My first memory: how I built a space of my own where Spanish cannot enter, where I can keep myself separate from its threat, forever apart, unyielding. The central act of my early life: I hide in the toilet with my nakedness and my privacy and my shit and my English, I reject that voice in Spanish, the voice of tradition that is echoed by words inside me that I refuse publicly to acknowledge. This is how I create, day by day, my identity. This is how I deny, day by day, the brother who is in my mind and understands Spanish, how I deny him the chance to resurrect. (Dorfman 1998:61)

8 year old Claude Esteban, father Spanish, mother French

14. *Jaune* (Fr. yellow) was subjected to the phonetic attraction of *jeune* (Fr. young). *Jaune* became a juvenile color, but as if weighted down, shriveled, darkened by the sound *au* in which I perceived a kind of weariness, melancholia, material heaviness. *Jaune* represented, if I may say, the sensory synonym, the chromatic equivalent of the contradictory, unacceptable notion of ‘young old man’. Most of all it was eclipsed from my verbal horizon by the Spanish word *amarillo*, in which I recognized precisely all those characteristics that I connected with the color yellow - vivacious and frothy, unctuous and fragrant, appetizing and sweet - and that made in my mind the four syllables of the word *amarillo* into the quintessential yellow creamy dessert [that I loved]. This created all kinds of difficulty when I had to express myself in French. Since I was not allowed to use the word *amarillo* which immediately came to my mind – school had taught me to censor my desire -, and since I could not longer retrieve this *jaune* that I had discarded, I was obliged, like certain aphasics, to resort to a circumlocution to express the presence of this color in my verbal schema – or, even more painfully, I had to forego mentioning the color of the object altogether or use an equivalent color. These tiny defeats, of which my listeners knew nothing, were loaded with a moral sense of guilt that hurt me more than anything. (Esteban 1990:34 my transl.)

8 year-old Elias Canetti, L1 Bulgarian, mother’s L1 Spanish, father’s L1 Turkish, parents’ Lg. German

15. Of the fairy tales I heard, only the ones about werewolves and vampires have lodged in my memory. Perhaps no other kinds were told. . . Every detail of them is present to my mind, but not in the language I heard them in. I heard them in Bulgarian [*auf Bulgarisch*], but I know them as German [*ich kenne sie deutsch*]; this mysterious transposition is perhaps the oddest thing that I have to tell about my youth. . . All events of those early years were in Spanish or Bulgarian. It wasn’t until much later that most of them were translated into German within me [*haben sich mir ins Deutsche uebersetzt*]. Only especially dramatic events, murder and manslaughter so to speak, and the worst terrors have been retained in me [*sind mir geblieben*] in their Spanish wording, and very precisely and indestructibly at that. Everything else, that is most things, and especially anything Bulgarian, like the fairy tales, I carry around as German [*trage ich deutsch im Kopf*]. (Canetti 1977:15 my emphases; my transl.)

16. So, in a very short time, [my mother] forced me to achieve something beyond the strength of any child, and the fact that she succeeded determined the deeper nature of my German; *it was a belated mother tongue, implanted in true pain* [*es war eine spaet und unter wahrhaftigen Schmerzen eingepflanzte Muttersprache*]. The pain was not all, it was promptly followed by a period of happiness, and that tied me indissolubly to that language. It must have fed my propensity for writing at an early moment. . . (Canetti 1979:70, my emphasis)

IV. The immigrant’s language learning experience

Eva Hoffman, 13 year old Polish immigrant to Canada

17. Nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us – but it’s a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn’t refer to us: they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can’t yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves. (Hoffman 1989:105).

18. [T]he problem is that 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. . . The river before me remains a thing, absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of my mind.” (Hoffman 1989:106) [T]his radical disjoining between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colors, striations, nuances- its very existence. It is the loss of a living connection.” (ibidem:107)

Asian-American college students in the U.S

19. In my junior year, I began to realize the importance of *my culture*. Being Korean is part of *my identity*. I saw the folly of anglicizing my name and at that point I made a mental note to change my name back to [Korean name] in college. Now thinking of my parents who had immigrated to find a better life in America, I find my parents’ decision to cross over to be tragic. . . I feel a need to return to Korea. I know that I can study hard and soon become equally fluent in both languages, and by then, I will return and live in Korea (Hinton 2001:245 my emphases).

20. I don't have the blond hair nor the white skin; I had lived three fifths of my life in Korea, not in the U.S.A.; and also, I definitely speak better Korean than English. All of these *segregate* me from being a white American. However, who are the *true Americans*? Isn't the U.S.A a country for everyone? *I truly believe* that being a white American is not the only reason that makes a person a *true American* (ibidem, my emphases)

21. As for English, I do speak the language but I don't think I'll ever talk it. English is the language that flows from the mind to the tongue and then to the pages of books. It is like a box of Plato blocks which allows you to make anything. But a Plato house cannot shelter human lives and a Plato robot cannot feel! I only talk Vietnamese. I talk it with all my senses. Vietnamese does not stop on my tongue, but it flows with the warm, soothing lotus tea down my throat like a river, giving life to the landscape in her path. It rises to my mind along with the vivid images of my grandmother's house and of my grandmother. It enters my ears in the poetry of *The Tale of Kieu*, singing in the voice of my Northern Vietnamese grandmother. It appears before my eyes in the faces of my aunt and cousins as they smile with such palpable joy. And it saturates my every nerves with healing warmth like effect of a piece of sugared ginger in a cold night. And that is how I only talk Vietnamese. (Hinton 2001:243)

22. Poem by a Korean-American college student

To belong

In what category do I fit?

Name. Valerie.

DOB. 8/02/83

Korean American

Am I Korean and American?

South Korea. The crowded streets filled with bustling people.

They all pass by...

An elderly *halmuni* from the local *yakgook* with medication for her ailing back

An *ahghushi* in business garb stepping off a hurried bus

A girl clothed in a *che-ik bok* with her *mulrhi dae-ed*

...and I remain

unnoticed

I am a cactus. Water. Need water

Q: Mool jool soo ees suhyo?

Here is fertile ground – the homeland

A: It can make me whole

Soak in the culture

Immerse yourself with Koreans, with the language, the environment

But I begin to drown...

Drown...

Drown...

At the bottom of the pool awaits a woman.

"Ah you prum Ah-meh-rhi-ca?"

I am caught. Discovered.

California. The streets are wide. Maybe here I will feel like *I belong*.

They all saunter by...

A woman so involved in putting on her eyeliner that she runs into me

An angry teen on the phone screaming in Spanish

A black boy running, dribbling a basketball gracefully

...am I at home here?

Yes, I was born in the U.S.

Yes, I speak the language without an accent.

So why do you stare? What more do you want?

Do you want me to dye my hair, bleach my skin, forget my history...

merely to 'assimilate'?

You're Korean?

Yep.

Jin jah? I thought you were Chinese... or Japanese.

Nope. I'm Korean. American. Korean American. Actually...

My name is Val.

I am Val. Valerie. *Hyunna*.

A daughter, sister, granddaughter, and friend

A *keun ddal*, *unni*, *sohn nyuh saekki*, and *chin goo*

A girl who loves and is loved

Sarang eul joogo battgo

No category necessary

Glosses for the Korean:

halmuni: a grandmother

Yakgook: a pharmacy

Ahghushi: middle aged man

Choe-ik bok: a school uniform

Mulrhi dae-ed: braided hair

Mool jool see ees suhyo: can you give me some water?

Jin jah: chin chah - gasp (oh my goodness!)

Hyunna: endearing term used by her grandmother

keun ddal, unni, sohn nyuh saekki, chin goo: eldest daughter, sister, granddaughter, friend

sarang eul joogo batto: you give your love and then your receive love

V. Multilingual writers reflect on their writing

Eva Hoffman, Polish writer of English

23. My diary is an earnest attempt to create a part of my persona that I imagine I would have grown into in Polish. In the solitude of this most private act, I write, in my public language, in order to update what might have been my other self. The diary is about me and not about me at all...I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self – my English self – becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives...For a while, this impersonal self, this cultural negative capability, becomes the truest thing about me. When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing – an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me (Hoffman 1989:121)

A Spanish speaking college student of German

24. ..“La verdad es que no se ni como ni cuando, aber dieser Mann hat in meinem Herz einen Platz gefunden” [the truth is that I don't know how nor when, but this man found a place in my heart]

- Some of the code-switching was either because it fit on the page or the structure. This part in German sounded better than in English or Spanish ‘Dieser Mann hat in meinem Herz einen Platz gefunden’ ...um..it has this..you know..because of the verb at the end... it just has this beauty in it. Not just the words themselves but the structure the way it's set up... but in Spanish it would be so plain... well the part *corazon* would be romantic, but the rest? (Belz 1997)

“A year, only a year later, *waren wir* so much *verliebt* [in love], *daB* we were *verlobt* [engaged].” (bold and italics in the original)

- I love that part. It's so funny., I did that on purpose. I thought it was so cool because [*verliebt* and *verlobt* are] like almost the same word.. It has different meanings you know and it's just the vowel...at first I was going to write it ... in English but 'engaged' ... you know. . .engaged it just didn't go and so I looked for the word in German and I realized the match and I thought it was so cool that I just left it that way. I really love it. It's just the two vowels here and that one vowel there and that's the only change in the whole word.” (Belz 2002b:71)

Samuel Beckett, Irish writer of French

25. Beckett claimed: "It was a different experience from writing in English. It was more exciting for me – writing in French." On another occasion, he suggested that, for him, English was overloaded with associations and allusions, his work in English throughout the 1930s bristled with erudite and literary allusions and what he called 'Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatism.' In this respect, the shift to writing in French may have been an important way of escaping from the influence of James Joyce. It was also easier, Beckett maintained, to write in French 'without style'. He did not mean by this that his French had no style, but that, by adopting another language, he gained a greater simplicity and objectivity. French offered him the freedom to concentrate on a more direct expression of the search for 'being' and on an exploration of ignorance, impotence, and indigence. Using French also enabled him to 'cut away the excess, to strip away the color' and to concentrate more on the music of the language, its sounds and its rhythms. (Knowlson 1996:324)

Gino Chiellino, Italian writer of German

26. It is only by maintaining his or her difference that the foreign author writing in German can contribute to dislocating the German language. (Comment by my German editor: according to the dictionary, 'to dislocate' is to 'radically disrupt'. Surely that is not a desirable goal. I suggest 'contribute to extending the boundaries of national goals!') (Chiellino 1995:28)

Wenn das Schweigen	G.: When the silence
Gegen uns sich weiß färbt	G.: becomes white against us
Me spagnu	Sicilian: I fear
Ja, ich deutsche mich sehr	Sic/G.: Yes, I fear German a lot
Come together	E: Come together
nel mondo dei colori di Benetton	It.:to the world of colors of Benetton
and learn to live as friends	E: and learn to live as friends
im Lande der Nichtraucher wo die Fremde	G: in the land of non-smokers where the foreign
wie Farben von Benetton geraucht wird.	G: is smoked like colors from Benetton (Chiellino 1992:53, 77)

From Sylvia Molloy, Argentinian writer of Spanish and English

27. 'One always writes from an absence, the choice of a language automatically signifying the postponement of another. What at first would seem an imposition -- why does one have to choose -- quickly turns into an advantage. The absence of what is postponed continues to work, obscurely, on the chosen language, suffusing it, even better, contaminating it with an *autrement dit* that brings it unexpected eloquence... I wrote the word 'alterity' which brings to my mind the French for satisfying one's thirst, *désaltérer*. The writing of a bilingual writer, I would venture, is of need always altered, never 'dis-altered'; always thirsty, always wanting, never satisfied. And is also, in another sense, *alterada*, in the way I used to hear the Spanish term used by my mother, my aunts, when referring to somebody who was slightly off, who could not control her thoughts, her voice'. (Molloy 2003:73-74)

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