

# Acquisition, loss, dreams:

## (Re)construction of identity through language autobiographies

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This article aims to present and briefly analyse language autobiographies written by 17 foreign students at Uppsala University during Spring 2011. The analysis concerns the contents of their writings, but the narrative aspect of the texts will also be taken into account. This study was initiated within the framework of KALECO (Kaléidoscope – Langues en couleurs<sup>1</sup>), a project funded 2008-2012 by the European Commission.

### Language autobiography: definition and problematisation

In this paper language learning is seen as a major factor in social integration. Linguistic behaviour is an important aspect of cultural behaviour, and linguistic competence is part of socio-cultural competence.

This work and research with language autobiographies is partly inspired by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, CEFR, (COE:2001). The EU and the Council of Europe's language policy programmes emphasise the importance of languages for individuals and society. One goal is to equip as many citizens as possible with two languages, in addition to their mother tongue. Language skills are also highlighted as part of democratic citizenship.



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The CEFR defines common language proficiency levels, explains a number of concepts around language learning, and discusses various principles and methods in language learning, teaching and assessment. The European Language Portfolio, ELP, which has been developed in accordance with the contents of the CEFR, is an educational tool to help students become aware of their own language learning and development. It consists of three parts: the Language Passport, the Language Biography and a Dossier. According to the descriptions of the Council of Europe, “[...] The Language Biography facilitates the learner’s involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress; it encourages the learner to state what he/she can do in each language and to include information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts; it is organized to promote plurilingualism i.e. the development of competencies in a number of languages.” (<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/ELP-biography-EN.asp>, 01-04-2013)

The Biography also includes checklists that give the teacher an idea of where the student stands in his/her language learning and what she/he needs to develop. However, one could say that in the Biography, intercultural competence is considered separately from communicative proficiency, and the emphasis is on evaluation and self-assessment as means to progress and set further goals. The construction of the Self through language acquisition, learning or meeting with/confrontation with other languages is more or less left out. The emotional dimension of language learning is also not given much weight.

The development of language *autobiography* as a tool to encourage language awareness and subsequently ease language learning is, indeed, inspired by the studies conducted during the last two decades around the ELP, but in the language autobiography the evaluative component contained in the ELP is, however, omitted. Instead, the narrative aspect is promoted, which allows the Self to emerge through her experience, her encounters with different languages, and not only through her competence in those languages: it deals with a (re)appropriation of the languages met, not so much as *linguistic* objects, but as part of the construction of the Self.

I assume, with Philippe Lejeune, that an autobiography can be widely defined as “[...] un récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité” (Lejeune 1996 (1975):14). Given the strong connection between language and life, the term ‘language autobiography’ allows the writer to express

him- or herself with great freedom about matters that are intimately connected with an individual's life and personality. 'Autobiography' can be considered to be a *mode* of expression rather than a literary *genre*, although some of the productions tend, through their disposition or use of tropes to be very literary. Furthermore, some of the tools used in this analysis are often used in the analysis of literary pieces of work.

## Corpus and method

The practice of writing language autobiographies ) was, during Spring 2011, presented to 17 foreign students who were all spending a few months in Sweden and attending a course at Uppsala University, taught in English and called "The Classroom – A Social and Cultural Meeting Place".

The students came from the following countries: Austria, Cameroon, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Scotland, Spain and Wales.

Before they wrote their language autobiography they attended lectures about language acquisition and learning, bilingualism and integration, which meant that they had, to some extent been made aware of the issues involved in language acquisition. Most of them had also been attending integration classes at different levels, some with newcomers, others where the students could study maths, physics and other subjects in Swedish. It is not a surprise, then, if some more general topics in the autobiographies reflect the discussions that sometimes took place in the classroom.

The writing of the language autobiography was a compulsory assignment. The students were given the following text:

"A *language autobiography* is a narration in which the owner captures his or her experience of learning and using second/foreign languages and encountering other cultures. The language of origin (native language) is of course taken into account."

They were asked to write between one and four pages, which they could do at home. They had 10 days to do so. All students wrote in English, which, with one exception, was not their native language. The quotes from their texts have not been modified. We are well aware that writing in a language other than one's native language may affect the narratives, cause "cross-linguistic confound" and that "considerable research now shows that languages differ in how their particular morphological, lexical, and syntactic conventions shape the expression of detail in narrative" (Schrauf and Durazo-Arvizu 2006:292).

I have here chosen to analyse the production according to a few topics, mainly the narrative and the different paths of language learning.

## Narrative analysis

In spite of their small size – between two and five A4 pages, the LAs display an appropriation of writing typical for the autobiography as a genre. Two of the students chose to give their text a “real” title: “My language autobiography- The story of a passive bilingual”, and “Being a French guy (Language autobiographie)”. Six students chose to call their text “My language autobiography”, one “Autography of my languages” (sic) and eight “Language autobiography”.

Our “passive bilingual” (R) claims having being raised bilingual (Slovak and German) until she started attending Kindergarden, German taking over partly because other kids bully her when she speaks Slovak. R explains how she even starts to develop what her relatives call a Hungarian –not German accent whenever speaking Slovak. It is as if she would unconsciously create some kind of language identity of her own in order to escape the fight going on between her languages (her mother is very disappointed when she stops answering her in Slovak). The images used by R in her text to describe her journey through languages often refer to a struggle: “not easy”, “very hard”, “I was shocked and hurt”; some teachers are described as “a real bitch” or a “total beast”. Without going deeper into other details, let us quote the last sentence : “I think I like learning languages after all, when they are not combined with hate and fear”. All along her narration, R very subsequently connects language learning with emotions.

The French student (J) also claims being raised in a bilingual family, but in his case only people “born before [him]” speak both French and Alsatian, which J describes as a “mix between German and French”. J underlines that even if he does not understand his family’s dialect, he feels related to it, and misses a part of the relation that he could have with by

example his great grandfather, who only speaks Alsatian. As in a big majority of the LA the trans-generational aspect is taken into account. Emotions are named: love, hate, pride. J, who dropped his first foreign language at school, German, because “when you are a teenager, learning German is not ‘cool’ anymore”, now speaks quite a good English, but does not consider himself as bilingual. On the

opposite, he values his proficiency in his mother tongue compared to other languages as making a difference about who he is: to go back to the title of his text, a “French guy”, an identity perfectly fitting his first name, as underlined in the incipit of his text: “My name is J (one of the most frenchy name ever) B[...]”. The last name is typically Alsatian, and one could say that the “French” first name reflects J’s own identity in opposite to the last one, clearly referring to his roots, a part defined as outside of him even if he seems to entertain very good relations with his family.

## Openings

The students use different kinds of openings. Some of them are at a meta-level, producing a discourse about language in a more or less sophisticated way and using quotes whose sources are not always given:

“Given that autobiographical memories are more sensorially complex, temporally drawn out, and narratively structured and given that personal experiences are intimately linked to cultural context, the role that language plays must be integral”

Some students give their openings a more personal touch: “This is a very interesting topic to write about”, “Language, a really important topic as I realized the last few months”, “I have always loved languages”, “Learning a language was, is and will always be a really interesting process for me”. And some students chose to be even more personal: “My name is Jacques (one of the most frenchy name ever) B[...]”, “I’m Enza, I’m 22 years old and I’m Italian”, “Hi, my name is Nathalie L[...], I am coming from Germany”. In a few cases the theme of language just after or even before birth is introduced: “When I was born, I was just crying to tell everybody, that I am here”, “Since I was in my mother’s womb I’ve heard only my native language – Czech language”.

A majority start *in media res* and write about their languages: “I was raised bilingual”, “I speak, I would say, Japanese, English, and a slight of Chinese, Spanish, French and Bisaya, which is a local language of Filipino”, “As far as I remember the first foreign language which I started to learn was English”, “I am 21 years old and I have learned 9 languages so far”.

## Emotions and identity

Aneta Pavlenko, among others, has deepened research into the strong connection between language learning and emotions (Pavlenko: 2006). She also stresses how language switching emotionally influences language production.

A French student affirms his pride of being French even if this “Frenchness” has to be shown through a faulty use of English: “Sometimes I get enoying to here that French people have a strong accent, that French people don’t speak English in France and so one. Of course I think that’s right but it is understandable. I’m proud of my language as the English speaker is”.

Several of our students describe that by writing their LA, they were made conscious of the official language in their country not being their first language. Some give their other language or dialect a very strong importance for their identity. A student from Germany writes: “If I would have to make an order I would consider “Wälderisch” as my first an “German” my second language”. Another German student wonders how her parents, coming from different parts of the country, could fall in love and communicate, their dialects being so different.

The most emotional parts are those about the transmission of language by parents or relatives. There is a lot of gratefulness towards the persons considered as transmitting the first language, along with some regrets about not being able to carry on the family’s language legacy: “I think I miss a part of the relation that I could have with my family, with my great grandfather who speak only alsacien for example”. On some occasion, parents are mentioned as interaction in the choice of a second language: “I guess, that was my dad decision to start second foreign language [German], because I still had my private English teacher so why not? I remember my disagreement”.

There are even some descriptions of parents choosing one specific language when being in conflict with each other, or using a language that only they know as a “secret language”, something rather frustrating for the child.

Yet one could argue that the unveiled feelings expressed in the texts may be as much related to the recall of one’s life through the autobiographic genre as to the process of language learning or acquisition itself.

## Language learning in informal and formal contexts

In many LAs, the students stress the difference between learning a language in informal – or natural – contexts, and in a formal (school) context when talking about their native language: “When I started Primary school was the first moment when the language learning become formal and I also learned to read and write during the first and the second year (I was 7 years old).” Another student describes the same kind of almost dichotomous development: “Since I was born all my environment is an Spanish one, my family spoke with me since I born, with the years I started to learn firstly some sounds, then some words and finally I started to make sentences only with the knowledge of my family gave me. When I started school, teachers taught me different aspects of the language most focus on grammar rules. In this way and through making mistakes I could learn my mother tongue language”.

The students are mostly grateful to those who helped them to acquire a language in what they consider a “natural way” (learning *vs* acquiring). There are some complaints, though, about parents or other relatives refusing to help for different reasons, for example fear of bilingualism, of talking to them in their own mother tongue, in some cases a dialect. It is indeed very clear in all LAs that there is a hierarchisation of languages, some being considered more useful, of course; but the aesthetic dimension is also taken into account, as well as the culture or history to which a particular language may be related. The European students often consider German as useful, but ugly and even “violent”, or even worse: “Everybody told me not to learn German, because it is a cruel language”.

In this case, the LA reflects not only the individual’s path in life but even, if not consciously, a part of collective European history, or rather a mental representation of that history, rewritten by a younger generation and conveying a number of prejudices.

In the parts of the LA describing more formal learning, teachers are often negatively described, the blame for not learning a language being put upon them rather than the learner, with a few exceptions, one being a disability such as dyslexia. Here are some examples representative of what we find in most of the LAs: “The teacher was a total beast”, “The worst thing was our teacher”, “For German we had a horrible teacher”, “Everything they [the teachers] taught me knew I, and others, already from tv or computer” (this student alleges that she learned English by playing *The Legend of Princess Zelda*, a Nintendo computer game), “However, next years’ teachers were not

that supportive and did not pay attention to our needs. This eliminated my interest in learning German language. Today, I can recall some phrases that my favourite teacher taught us, but I do not want to learn that language”.

## Learning language skills

The students compare and evaluate the difference between talking, reading and writing, the two latter kinds of reflexion mostly done about the native language. I would like to quote two of them, which also illustrate the richness of the tropes sometimes used in the LA. The first one gives a chronology of language learning by using, along with a diachronic report of her language learning, a time metaphor (from cave age to modern time):

“But the most appealing element of language for me is writing. I learned the Greek alphabet home. Although I knew how to shape a few words with using letters, I tried to start “writing”. Therefore, I used to “decorate” my books or my parents’ books with these incomprehensible “words”. I felt like prehistoric man, who decorated caves in order to let the others know what he discovered. At the kindergarten, I learnt how to write my name, read stories with very simple vocabulary and count till twenty. At elementary school, my knowledge of reading and writing gained coherence and became more specified. Through school’s years and university’s life, my vocabulary was enriched by studying different subjects.”

Another student describes the learning of literacy, which is, more or less consciously, a common topic in a number of the LAs:

“I thought that reading was something that, once you had learned it, you could choose to do or not to do: like walking. When you can walk, you don’t start to walk *all the time*. But when you need to, you can. Once I learned to read, I realized that there was no way back: I now would automatically read all the words I met. I was sitting in the car and didn’t even have to try to read the signs: I just saw the words immediately. My eyes had become reading machines.”

## Language teaching methods

There is unanimity about the methods most commonly –and, it seems, worldwide- used in the classroom: mostly grammar, no real practice of the L2, instructions given in L1, etc. As one student expresses it, “Which kind of meaning would have learning only grammar rules that you can’t use in your daily life?”



The LAs contain many comments about learning strategies, “learning through another language” being a popular one: “About German ancient Greek helped me in the grammar and the structure, English in the vocabulary and French in the pronunciation”.

Translation as a method is criticized by most of the students: “I think that learning Swedish through English was a very good improvement too, because I could not be helped by French translation”.

## Final remarks

These texts show how the construction of the Self is closely linked to its relationship to language. The construction of the Self in relation to language or languages has an individual dimension but also a social one in the relation to “others” and the impact upon, and the power to influence on, the surrounding world. The active practice of one or several languages is recognised as introducing a negotiation that is sometimes satisfactory, sometimes frustrating, between the Self and society. This negotiation, in which the foreign students involved in this study are immersed, is recognised, in most cases, as an asset in the construction of individual and social identity.

## Note

1 143452-2008-IT-KA2-KA2MP

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