



**Who am I in English?  
Language as the Face of Identity in Bilingual Individuals**

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## **Abstract**

How does switching to a life in a foreign language and culture affect one's identity? Specifically, I ask: Do I have a true self unaffected by language and culture, or am I merely a construct of my environment?

Studies in sociolinguistics overwhelmingly point to our sense of self as being largely informed by our place in the world: language, culture, gender and society weave together the intricate fabric of our being. The social and linguistic constructs available to us at any given time form the margins to who we think we are. For bilinguals like me, life in a foreign culture and language stretches these margins, as new experiences and linguistic concepts gradually alter accessible constructs and impact our sense of self. To many of us immigrants, living in an unfamiliar place and speaking in a foreign tongue can also pose a threat to our identity: the fabric of our being comes apart, forming gaping holes where cultural and linguistic concepts have fallen away and new ones have yet to be discovered.

This two-part project examines the connection between language and identity creatively as well as academically. In an extended personal essay, I consider how my immigration experience and linguistic assimilation affected my sense of self. Loosely connected memories and reflections weave together into a cohesive storyline of being and changing and becoming, thus documenting the simultaneous sense of lightness and loss, of reinvention and confusion frequently felt by immigrants. The second part of this project consists of an academic research paper examining the unique qualities and struggles of bilingual individuals' identities and how they are echoed in literature by immigrant, exiled and translingual writers.

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## Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgement.....	iv
Part One: Who am I in English? .....	1
Part Two: Language as the Face of Identity.....	33
Introduction.....	33
Definitions.....	37
Chapter One: <i>Naming the Soul</i> – Language, Cognition and Emotion.....	38
Chapter Two: <i>Meeting of Minds</i> – Attempting Intersubjectivity.....	50
Chapter Three: <i>Making Sense of Me</i> – Memory and Self-Narration.....	59
Chapter Four: <i>Welcome to Here</i> – Language Attrition, Inner Speech and Creative Writing.....	70
Conclusion.....	79
Bibliography.....	81

## Part One

# Who am I in English?

## Preface

This story is not about language, but about change. This is the story of those who have left comfort and warmth and belonging behind in order to find something new. For some the *new* may be better weather, and for others it may be love, or survival or simply just change from what they have always known. And yet even that does not matter. What matters is that when you leave the known for good, you will find yourself in transition to what you do not know. You will find that the *new* seeps in unnoticed, while the *old* slowly fades away, and one day you will look yourself in the mirror and wonder who you have become. This story is my mirror, and it is also that to all who have ventured on their own journey, wherever it may have taken you. Let's smile at our reflection.

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Why do I write in a language not my own? Will my mother understand me? This is the language of my love, you see, the one we use to laugh, to whisper and to comfort when he holds my hand. But it wasn't always so. In fact, we met in my land and laughed, whispered and comforted each other in my mother tongue. But then we moved to his home of different ideas and odd jokes, where grocery stores offer too many packages of cereal to choose from and where water is free at the restaurant, but chlorinated.

When you arrive here, you expect to feel different: the immigration officer makes it clear that this is a country where you don't mess with nobody, you understand! And then people ask how you are feeling just to say hello. Initially I thought I was supposed to answer. But they smile more here and wear more colors. Doors open with the turn of a button and windows hardly open at all. And there are restaurants where one can have breakfast all damn day long. So that's definitely different, because where I am from, there is breakfast, lunch and dinner, and the idea of a brunch is only fitting for special occasions, or a thing for the nouveau rich or the new kids that I don't even know anymore. Other than that, mealtimes stay pretty much organized where I come from.

I know I wasn't the only one who felt different here, though. This girl, a fellow freshman in my dorm hardly spoke to me when I arrived. She had a darker skin tone and probably thought we had nothing in common, which may have been true, though we both felt different, so there's that. Back in my land, I had received a letter with details about who I was going to share my room with. Her name was China, which I thought must have been a mistake, because when I was a child, you couldn't be named anything other than what ancestors from the previous two or so generations deemed "normal," which explains that lack of diversity on gravestones back home. But China was nice, as far as I know, though I really never got to know her. I do know that she

liked to straighten her hair, eat fries and listen to music on her computer with headphones on. And that she wanted to study microbiology and that she had an older brother who came to visit her once and sat on her bed, because there was no other place to sit. I don't remember if I told her that I, too, have a brother, and a sister for that matter. China also liked this boy, who would stop by our dorm room on occasion. She said she thought he was so slick, which I didn't know what that meant, but since I liked a boy too, I figured she probably felt about him the way I felt about mine.

Also in my dorm was this girl with the long brown hair, who liked to giggle and apparently knew how to speak in tongues, which somebody else had to explain to me first. People do this here? Apparently, they do, and some also eat sweet potatoes with marshmallows on top or deep-fry sticks of butter at the fair, and there is nothing wrong with that either, said the girl.

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I am not hard of hearing, you know. Speaking more loudly will not make these different accents and new words any easier to decipher. It may just take me a while to comprehend. I'm not a slow thinker, and certainly not a child. No need to dumb this down, please. It's just not that simple to understand what you are saying, and I don't mean the words. Or have you tried? One of your grandparents or their parents or an even earlier generation has tried. And here you are. And here I am. And sometimes, behind closed doors or on special days, I wipe away the same tears as your grandparents or their parents or beyond, because I miss being me. I miss not feeling different. I miss being cocooned in sameness of thought and spirit. When things taste how they have always tasted and smell how they have always smelled, so you can rest your mind and think of life instead. It must have been so different for the generations coming before me, who couldn't afford a glance back with a simple click or a call, and instead forced a single vision forward, because that was the only option to be had. It was forward or death, but death came too easily back then anyhow, so one may at least try for a future. And the future was not going to sound or smell or taste the same as their past, and I'm sure they just realized they had to simply get on with it. Except, behind closed doors maybe, or on special days, when sacred dishes and childhood carols crept their way back into the new lives of those who thought they had escaped the old. And yet the smells and sights awoke those memories seemingly safely buried away in hurried work. A whiff of their mother's recipe, perhaps, or the sweetness of grandfather's pipe, though smoked by another grandfather for another generation. And they used new tobacco and new potatoes and tried these tart berries they had never seen before, because they had to make adjustments in this new land, after all. That's when the tears came back, because just then they knew they had changed into somebody new, yet were stuck with these memories from their former selves. Maybe more work, or a move or prayer may bury them damn memories until next

time. Nostalgia is a bitch. Maybe that's why everybody here is so busy all the time? They learned to run generations ago.

I heard the sound of my grandmother's lullaby on campus one day: tone by tone, the bell slowly rang the tune from its highest tower. Instantly, she was with me, sitting on the top step in the hallway, clicking her knitting needles, and singing through the cracked door of my bedroom to the four-year-old me. How beautiful to hear her melody in this strange land, and I close my eyes and feel such peace before feeling sad. These worlds don't go together.

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I had to enroll in a course on Western history to fulfill a requirement. My Western history knowledge was just fine I think, thank you, but it wasn't American history, so maybe not western enough to qualify. I decided to take a class on slave history. It turns out humans have a tendency for the inhumane no matter where you go; we know all about it where I come from. The difference between there and here is that people in this country have a hard time moving forward, because you can't wash away the color of people's skin. Where I come from, numbers were tattooed into people's arms, which don't get inherited into the next generation in a visible way -- that is, if there was a next generation at all. I didn't understand what eradication meant until I went to a supermarket here and saw their food for the first time in my life, and heard about their traditions, and was asked what a Menorah was called in my language and I said it was probably the same but I would have to double-check. I always wonder, if deep down they think of their parent's past or their grandparents' death when they see me, even though my family had nothing to do with it personally. And yet I feel guilty now that I am here, because I have come to realize that they no longer exist where I come from, or have ceased to exist publicly, which is just another way of dying. And only then did I understand the history of my country by seeing that this group does exist and has a culture and traditional food and is very much alive elsewhere but at home.

A girl with blond, curly hair and blue eyes raised her hand in my slave history class one day and said that her grandfather had been black. And another student said the same. and yet all looked so very white to me, if there is even such a thing. In the food court, I was introduced to this gorgeous boy, some mix of everything planet earth has invented thus far: slightly almond-shaped eyes in a striking blue, soft, brown skin, broad features, and light curly hair. He must

have been able to check every race box those application forms have come up with to date. Not sure where he felt he belonged.

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Women are different here, and men are, too. Women speak in higher voices when talking to other women or children, and men call other men *buddies*, and their sons and dogs, too, which is either strange or endearing, I do not know. Women here don't like hair on their bodies, except on their heads, of course, but they like being toned and strong, and they like pedicures and stone countertops, too.

I was called a "honey" by a stranger, the other day, which is a term I thought was only used by lovers, but apparently not. And people here love each other all the time, too, it seems, as I overheard so many folks end their phone conversations to family members by saying *I love you*, which would most definitely not be the case where I come from. There, you may date somebody for a very long time before you dare to utter those words. But then, I have heard from people that in the case of romantic love, it's no different here; that people here also struggle to say those words to those they love conditionally. Still, how do you differentiate between one *I love you* and another? It's more complicated than I thought.

But the overall love-professing around society seems to be a good thing, as people are generally cheerier and funnier and not as grumpy as where I come from, so there's that. I'm intrigued with the fact that people inherently seem to know which *I love you* is which, and maybe that will happen to me eventually, or maybe not. If it does, I wonder if love will feel differently to me then? And if so, what does *I love you* mean anyhow?

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The first friend I made seemed to be just like me: We met on the running trail and crossed paths several times before we managed a hello. She seemed about my age, and it turned out her birthday was just one day before mine. She was funny and active and we went out to dinners and visited each other's homes. But then, on my birthday, she gave me the bible, and I wondered how we could ever have been true friends, if deep down she seemed to think I needed something more, that I wasn't quite complete without some additional guidance. Had I said something that prompted her to think I needed more religion in my life? Had she said something that should have given me clues about her religiousness? I must have missed them altogether.

Then I wondered if giving others the bible was maybe just an American tradition, because, where I come from, nobody talks about religion to others, except if they choose to go to Bible Study and there aren't many who do. Ironically, though, where I come from, most people actually do belong to a church, if not by choice then by custom.

I would later learn that no, giving bibles is not a widespread American tradition, but that religion most certainly is. That in the land of the free a gardener may quote a bible verse to explain away an expensive bill and that the electrician may have a bible quote on his car in blue, and that people switch churches just to get into the right social crowd or Sunday choir, and that you cannot become president if you are an atheist. And even being atheist is a well-thought-out choice in this country, because you cannot exist here without having made up your mind about religion because it is after all a choice, which implies a decision.

Where I come from, I cannot tell culture from church much of the time, because they melt into one and become part of each other on nearly all national holidays of which there are many, and I would never ask somebody whether they wanted to partake in their own culture. So I suppose if religion is a choice, then you have to think about it more precisely, which is probably

a good thing to do anyhow, since deciding to believe in a God should be considered wisely. Yet, I don't get the impression that this question is actually the one being asked here, and neither where I come from for that matter, because religion is a given in both, and so maybe giving the bible for one's birthday is just as good a gift as any in that regard.

I wondered, though, if we could ever truly be friends. I mean, how can you be friends with somebody who you can't really read?

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The next friend I made was actually less of a friend, but I could read her very well. She spoke my language and my mind. I ran into her at the grocery store, hearing her talk to her child in my language and I walked over to her to say hello, because I thought we would certainly be good friends, since we were both guests in another world. Also, I was very lonely, and I just needed to find somebody that wasn't strange to me.

She invited me to another person's home for a gathering of maybe seven of us foreigners, where we would meet for tea and coffee and talking as if we had just met back home at somebody's house. But the funny thing is, that back home we would have never met, because we were all from different areas and ages and interests, but we met here and here we were all the same.

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I heard myself swear today for the first time. I do not swear, but apparently I do now. I never had words for it before. We never used words for it before. But now I do and now I swear. I'm actually quite impressed with myself. I sound like I mean it. Do I mean it? I have to think about that. What I do know is that it feels pretty good to swear. I never knew what that felt like, and I never knew how you can feel so liberated. But I certainly could not do that in front of my mother. I would never do that in front of my mother. I am not proud of the fact that I can swear in English, and am embarrassed to admit that it even feels good. But it doesn't really feel like me anyhow, but instead like somebody I saw on TV or some other else I don't recall. All I know is that I have heard the words before and tried them for fit and they may not fit my *me* from back home, but maybe they fit the English version of me *mighty fine*; I heard those words on TV, too.

I remember another stranger from my home trying English words for fit. In her case, the words were pleasant and polite, but, since I knew her as her original self, I felt that those words certainly did not fit her. But I don't think she noticed the disconnect. And so she became somebody else in English, because you tend to become what you can say and think, I think. And how do you tell somebody that their words look like an ill-fitted dress? How do you say "You don't sound like you"? Yet to strangers like us, new words are just new words, and we are happy to have found them, and proud to be sporting our acquisitions.

But when she tried out her new words, she merely wondered why she didn't connect with the people around her like she used to, and she reminded me of a girl with a bad haircut trying to figure out why the boys are not interested, not realizing that it's just the haircut. She eventually went back home.

And so maybe I should stop swearing in English, because I don't want to become that person who swears. Though I must admit it's fun – much like a new-found guilty pleasure you

would never dare to admit to enjoy because it goes against everything you stand for and wish to portray. Then again, I don't know what the heck I am portraying anyhow, because I'm merely mixing a little of this with a little of that and seeing where it all goes.

Somebody once told me I sound just like my love. I suppose that makes sense, since I learned it all from him. And I suppose that should be fine with me, because I love him. Though, I don't wish to become him, and more importantly, he fell in love with *me*.

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Was that a joke? I didn't get that. I didn't even know I was watching a comedy until he told me. Apparently, I was watching comedic genius. Funny, how you can only be a genius among those who understand you. To the rest, you are just another person trying to be somebody or somebody else. You can't even tell apart the original from the fake, because you don't know what came first and what came second, and what the story is anyhow. You don't know the history on which the joke leans or the difference in wording to create the pun. My world in this language is flatter than yours, I'm afraid. Yet, these jokesters walk around in their real lives thinking they have made it, but to the rest of us they are nobody special, because their type of genius is limited to their own home. The problem is, that genius is all about nuance, and nuance is lost in translation and that goes both ways. But these jokesters make people laugh and people do like them and that's a universal quality I do understand.

Humor is tough, though: it needs depth and a punch line and unexpectedness, but to somebody new, everything is unexpected, so the unexpected is expected. Everything is new, and thus is strangely also old. No laughs, I'm afraid, until the new is truly old.

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I moved out of my dorm and into the home of my love. I moved alone, because he had to work, and there was nobody else. So I folded up the sheets with the pink flowers and yellow stripes I had brought over from my home back when I started this journey, not realizing that their measurements don't fit the beds here anyhow. And I packed up my clothing and lugged the mini fridge and the few books I had, rolled up the Chagall poster on the wall, waved goodbye to China, and walked out. And I told the TA that I was going to grade her papers over the summer to earn some money and my professor that I was going to miss a couple of classes because I was getting married. And that was that.

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My parents came to my graduation. I was wearing the cap and gown and disappeared in the crowd of other caps and gowns. My parents were sitting in the stands far away in the distance, yet I could see them trying to take in what was happening. My mother asked me, if we would throw our caps? She had seen that in the movies. Even as I was sitting amongst my class, I felt like an actor in a strange play. I was wearing the outfit, I was throwing the cap, but it didn't feel real even to me; I was merely participating in a foreign ritual. Sitting in the stadium surrounded by students I didn't know, I remembered how I had spent numerous hours as a little kid in front of the mirror, pretending to speak English, just like I had heard the people sing on the radio in my dad's car. I don't know why I did it, but I did, and now I still do and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

I don't know why my 4-year-old self thought English would suit me. Who did I think I would become in this language, I wonder? What did I think English would do to me?

My mother always loved Italian. There was something about the sound of it, she said, that felt just right to her. We would go to Italy frequently, rolling down the windows to our sedan as soon as we had crossed the border, in order to breathe in the air of the culture matching the reflection in my mother's mirror. But we did not move there; we always drove back home after she had her fill.

My dad didn't care much about other languages, but he liked Motown music and country music and rock'n'roll music all the same, and he started to tap his foot to the beat whenever he listened to it, except for in the car, because you need both feet for driving where I come from. My dad just loved the rhythm and knew no words, and he danced with me to Elvis Presley and to Joe Cocker and swung me wildly in the air, because he loved to dance in the living room when nobody was looking and my mother thought that rock'n'roll was definitely too wild for her taste.

Now, glancing over to the other side of the stadium, I could make out my parents in the distance. I knew they were immensely proud, yet I also knew they had no idea of which world I had now entered, and I don't just mean the country. My parents did not go to college. They stem from a generation in which the word "self-actualization" had no place yet.

So from here on out, I was on a path we would no longer share. I would begin to create memories from which there would be no bridge to my past and to their world. Nobody would ever say: "I remember this from when I was growing up." I would start to celebrate holidays which they had never heard of and I would skip those which my love has never heard of. I would fall in the rhythm of this life and out of rhythm with my old one. The holidays, which give a nation its steady pace, would shift to a different beat, and I would eventually nearly forget the old ones' meaning, because if you don't get reminded of stuff, you tend to forget it after a while, unless it was really important. So maybe those were never really important and that may just be the truth.

Maybe that's what it means to grow up, to be alone with your experiences and feelings because your parents cannot share them anymore. They want to, but it's like learning how to drive from a book. You actually have to do the driving to know what driving feels like, or at least you must have driven at some point in your past to remember it still. And driving to Italy doesn't count.

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So here I am now, in this *Land of Opportunity*, where I can drive for hours without seeing anything at all. Just trees and meadows and skies, and more trees, and I feel free, strangely free, of what I do not know. Nobody knows me here, and I can be anything I want to be, I'm told, in this land which is only prison to those it can contain, just like every bloody nation on earth. Nobody knows where I am from, only that I have some accent, possibly from the North, or from the Midwest, maybe. But they are all wrong, because I don't belong anywhere anymore, because my language is flavored with otherness not fitting into a square box. And that is alright with me. Sometimes though, I nearly pass as one of them, until I suddenly don't remember a word. Then, they know for sure that I am not one of them or they think I have some sort of mental issue, not remembering stuff. At times, I wondered myself if I have a mental issue, because my words had simply gone missing. But it's not my brain, or actually it is – it is working too hard and sometimes it burns out, and the words just don't make their way to my mouth anymore like they should. Then, I apologize for not being American, and that seems to help us both, because they can safely put me in the box named “other,” and I can safely think. I can do it all really well on paper. Writing things down gives me just enough time to think of all the rules and I can do rules. But when I talk, I sometimes have to pause and search my brain, and then it is clear that I am not one of them. I guess it's the truth. I am just not one of you. I wonder if this will ever change, or if there will always be a word not making its way from my brain to my mouth like it is supposed to, and if I will always be the other, the one with the slightest of accents, but clearly not one of you. Then again, everyone here has an accent, but they don't have to pause and think of a word unless there is a mental problem.

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It was time to go home for a visit. The airport back home had the familiar smell of cigarettes and more people than here. The immigration officer waved me through, because I have their passport and am one of them and not a threat, like one might be in the long line to my left. But I am on the right side and in the clear, and can walk right through the one-way swivel door without obstruction.

Where I landed has more glass looking out to smaller cars and smaller trucks and cleaner roads without all those broken rubber tires on the side. Where I landed you may not ever pass another car on the right, and you learn that in driving school, which takes a very long time over there, because they take these rules seriously. And so it works, and people don't get hurt as much, because they know to expect the passers only on the left. But they also get stuck sometimes, when a driver who doesn't follow the rules, or maybe an old person or a foreigner, will drive too slowly in the left lane and nobody can pass, because you definitely get in trouble if you try it on the right. So that's the downside.

My dad drove me through the familiar landscape of familiar green and mountains in the back with little crosses on their uppermost mountaintops barely visible. And we drove through the town of my childhood, where I know every corner and every inch, where for years I would take my bike to school and to friends and to the lake and felt so free to just be me. And then we arrived at my parents' new apartment, because they didn't need their house anymore after we all moved out, and it was also very nice, but not my home, of course. And I saw my siblings, which were just like they always were, I guess, though I realized we had all gone different ways over the past few years, so likely they were not in fact like they always were, and neither was I. But the food tasted of childhood, and the mowed grass outside smelled of it, too.



When I walked to the center of town, I wondered if I would see anybody I knew. There was a time when I could not have gone there *without* running into somebody I knew, but it had been a few years, and people may have moved around like me. But eventually I saw a few faces that looked like I had known them once, yet I had lost their name somewhere on the way to my current life, and I could no longer figure out where to put them in my memory other than into the past. And when my childhood friend was telling me about this or that person, I remembered their names, but not their faces, which had also gotten lost somewhere on the way to now. And I searched, and I searched, but I couldn't place them. And then my friend looked at me as if not knowing these people anymore had also changed her view of *me*, because these names and faces were so natural to her that in her mind, not knowing them anymore could only be due to a mental condition, which – trust me – I also pondered for a while. But that is how it works with memories: if you don't think about them or talk about them they tend to get lost. Or maybe that's just for the ones that were never important to begin with. And maybe that's the truth then.

And while I was walking down the streets of my childhood and my memories, I started missing my love, and knew it was time to go back, because I remember every single thing about us, and crosses on mountaintops and clean roads and the smell of mowed grass won't hold my hand.

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How do you love in another language? It is simple, you just love.

The problem is really with the words, because you say something and it doesn't come out right and then the mess gets started. And then you also can't argue well in the other language, and that's a problem too, because I think that being able to argue well with each other may have more to do with loving long-term than anything else. Because if you get that wrong you hurt somebody forever and ever and memory knows no reset button. And arguing is difficult when you don't speak each other's languages too well, but you just have to keep things simple, and I would recommend that to all folks, actually. Arguing in English was obviously easy for him, and not so easy for me; let's just say having your grammar corrected while making a seemingly important statement can be disruptive at times, if not all the time. I suggest one not do that, actually. On the upside, my English is pretty good now, and I can argue even better, because I got the grammar all neat and tidy for most of the time, and I may even use a swear word here and there to emphasize a bloody point, just because now that I have it, I may as well use it.

The good news is that if you come from two different worlds, you can assume nothing about the other person, because all you know is that they are not like you in any way other than the fact that you fell in love with each other for whatever miraculous reason. So you can't assume anything, and that would probably be a good thing to do for all couples, because then it's just between the two of you and not about how your parents raised you or the decisions you have made before you met or the odd way you celebrate Christmas and whether you want to have the dressing on the side, please. Because when you are from two different countries, you just assume that all these strange ways are simply cultural differences, and for the most part they turn out to be so. Because you only are who you can become within your own little bubble, that much I have learned.

And then you fall in love with somebody from another bubble and you both wonder how you could speak a common language without language. And maybe that's how it should be for all lovers, because once you know the words, you realize it also is not they that get in the way either, but those pesky images we randomly collected in songs and movies and fables and lies of how the other should be to be right. But I collected mine elsewhere, and so my love was never going to fit those molds anyhow, and that's alright with me, because I don't fit his either. And so it works, and it keeps working, because it's a never-ending puzzle of two people trying to figure out who they are or who they represent. Maybe we are each just the other's mirror to their four-year-old selves, or maybe we love, because we love, and what we love, we don't really know, but maybe it's the other's heart only, and their hand in ours, because the rest we don't fully understand.

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I was told that I sound just like my mother on the phone, which is interesting, because one never sounds like oneself to others, and so my mother sounds differently to herself than she does to those, who think she sounds like me.

In theory, my mother would also have liked to live abroad some place, just as much as she would have liked to have a garden with an apple tree, or a pear tree she said would be fine, too. The trouble is, that nobody ever tells you how much work a garden is. And nobody ever tells you how much work living abroad is, either, because it's no fun to tell people that they will miss their family a whole lot, especially on holidays, when everybody gets together but you, and they do what they always do, which may just be having coffee and chatting about life since the last time they saw each other without you, and the time before that and before that still, until so much time has passed that they don't even remember you were ever part of it. Or maybe they do, but at that point you may simply be the time marker to somebody else's story, like "was this before or after she left?"

But at the time you were still a part of the group, you didn't realize that one day you wouldn't be able to join them anymore. And it would have been so nice to know that then, so you would have been able to pay more attention at the time, to be fully present in the moment, like the mindful guy said in a podcast the other day. That would have been nice to know, but nobody ever tells you about that, either. I suppose nobody would dare to leave what they know, if they knew, or they would leave anyhow, because they wouldn't believe it to be true.

Being away from home may not be so difficult for people who leave as a couple, because their home is still in their home, or for those travelling back frequently to get their fill, or those who can bring their home to work every day. And it's also not difficult at first, because your new life is an exciting adventure, and you still have all your words and your memories.

The good news is that I learned quickly to pay attention and soak up all of home when I got a chance, and that because of it, I now remember when my grandmother hugged me last before she died, because we knew I would likely not see her again. And I remember when my other grandmother hugged me last because we knew I would likely not see her again. And I remember when my aunt hugged me last, because we knew she would likely not see me again. And I think about it every time I hug my parents, even though I hope I will see them again for many years to come.

You become better at detecting and acknowledging the inevitable, because you don't get the chance to witness the smooth transitioning from one phase to another. You see what you see, and what you see may be that death is nearer than your next possible visit. So when my aunt took me aside and asked me about my life in this far-away land, I knew then that it would be our last time together, and I paid attention to her intricately laced white dress and her dark brown hair, and drank up the warmth of this beautiful last sharing of words, and only then did I note how more we had in common than I had known before, because she had also lived abroad once. I know now that you may have fewer chances to experience these moments than you think, because between trips back home a lot of life and death may happen, and you never know what the world looks like a year or two down the road. And there is nothing like the finality of a last hug, let me tell you, or the last glance back to somebody you know you won't see again.

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I once heard about a study in which babies were rocked to up-beat music, facing another person, who either rocked in or out of sync with them. Later, when that person dropped a toy, these babies were much more likely to hand the person the toy back if they had rocked before in sync. As foreigners, we don't rock in sync. We may not even hear the music. There is clearly some rocking going on, but it is difficult to figure out the beat. If I don't tip enough, I won't get handed the toy back. If I don't write *Thank You* notes, I don't get the toy back. If I don't smile enough, don't have the right academic building blocks, the right names on my resume, if I don't laugh at the right jokes or pray to the right god or am religious enough or educated enough or rich enough I don't get the toy. There are just so many ways to go wrong. And it's the same where I come from, but I know what to do to get the toy. I don't even have to think about it, because I just know it. I know to have groceries bought before the weekend, because the stores are not open then. I know not to walk around with wet hair, because that's just weird, and dress up just a tad, and flaunt some brand names on clothes and on bags, and I know that hedges need to be trimmed, and that punctuality is a virtue and that people like expensive cars, even if they are just leased, because it's part of the image. And there is a lot to recycle and so many ways to get that wrong, but I like order so that comes easily to me, though nobody likes dealing with food waste, because it stinks, literally.

But I like walking around with wet hair and have become a bit lenient on timing and find trimming hedges overrated and brands, too. But I still like order and am diligent on recycling, though I still don't like to deal with food waste and have put up an outdoor compost instead. And I am starting to feel that maybe one of these days I may just get the toy back, probably when I'll no longer think about it because I'll be too busy rocking to the music that I can finally hear.

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I don't remember when we switched, but I do know that we switched. I found our old letters in a box in the attic and we both spoke in *my* language then, because that's how we met and he could speak my language very well. And now I speak his language and I think I can speak it just as well as he spoke mine at the time. And yet, that was then, and this is now and there is no in-between, because where in the world would we speak that?

We have learned to live in his language almost exclusively by now, like a chameleon adjusting to a new shade of green. He still likes to talk in my language to make a joke, because it sounds silly, he says, or when my parents come to visit. Other than that, we pretty much don't use my language anymore.

But some things won't ever go into my brain, it seems, no matter how many times I read about them or get corrected, because they appear forever stuck as if fastened with glue that hardened a long time ago and was meant to last, like a well-crafted home outlasting generations.

To be honest, sometimes I feel like my brain does not belong to me. I teach it, I train it, but at the end of the day, it does what it does, just like my cat, which seems to behave perfectly well until it doesn't. Sometimes I don't even know what I think anymore, it's all jumbled up. I've picked up words from here and there, and am trying to put them together in a meaningful way, but sometimes I get it wrong, like when apparently I must have said a swear word in front of my father-in-law, and I didn't even know it wasn't a regular word, because I most certainly heard somebody use it in conversation, and it was not an argument. So how am I supposed to know? Nobody gives you a warning, like: use this word only in this context, and that one in another.

Most don't suspect that I only know what I know in isolated buckets of words, but I do. I know all about economics in his language from my studies here, for instance, and all about cooking in mine from my mother, which is still a problem at the supermarket, trying to get the measurements figured out, because after all these years I still cannot picture what a pound looks like, or an ounce for that matter. I know all political terms from TV, and all lullabies from my mother and grandmother, and that means I know all about adult life in his language, and nothing about being a child here. And I fear I may only know how to be a woman where I come from, because I don't raise the pitch of my voice in conversation, but then again, I walk around with wet hair, and I have gone to college and beyond and I live abroad, like nobody whose words I left behind.

And now I also know all about mortgage rates and maternal care and childhood vaccinations in his language, because you've got to learn what you need.

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How do you speak to your children in a language not your own? You don't, I'd suggest, because how then are they supposed to get to know you? Unless, of course, your new language is your new you.

But sometimes you may have to speak in a language not your own. For example, when people around you get very nervous if you communicate in a language they don't understand, then as a courtesy it is best to speak their language, I have found. Turns out, people get antsy very quickly about feeling left out. With kids, you also have to communicate in their language, when there are other kids around, because otherwise these kids also feel left out and they ask your kid about what you said, which puts your kid in this strange middle position having to translate things, which I have been told is apparently no fun. So that's to be avoided as well. The trouble is, that doesn't leave much left-over time, to actually be you with them.

When my kids were just babies, I would sing them lullabies like my mother and grandmother before me, and for a moment we were insulated in the attempted replica of my own memories. But then I took them to a music class for toddlers, where they learned the lullabies of other mothers, and I wondered which ones they would sing to their children when the time came. And they played other games with other children and rocked to the music of other people's rhythms.

Here's what I found: you need an ally to be you, you cannot do it alone. Nobody tells you how tedious it is to try and be you when there is so little time and so little space and nobody else to be you with. And after a while you wonder who your children think you are, because you have to communicate in another language all the time because of friends and adults and everybody who wants to be in on the conversation, and at some point you realize that most of your life now

happens in a language not your own, or maybe it is, after all. Because how do you speak your language to the beat of another?

But I still tuck my kids to sleep in my mother tongue, and I realize that all it is to them is their mother's tongue, and that's okay, I think.

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My brother was coming to visit, which was quite exciting because we had been very close as children. We had played well together, and even though our lives took vastly different turns, there is a familiarity and understanding that never leaves you, no matter how much learning or relationships have bent your paths apart. Understanding can happen in many ways, I find. To me, he is not only family, but is part of my life before this. What I remember is that we would play in the woods or in the snow, or build blocks for hours, or go to the candy store to buy sour gummies or other goodies that are most definitely bad for your teeth. I know this, because after two years of spending our measly allowances on candy I had developed two cavities, which are still the only ones I have to date, I think. What I also remember is that he always liked to play games and was not good at losing, but had a way at winning people instead.

To my love, my brother is somebody different entirely, because he met him during his rebellious years. My brother's hair may have been blue at the time, or pink, I don't remember, because it changed so frequently back then, as did his girlfriends and jobs and places he lived in. Still, they like to play poker together, which I didn't even know my brother knew how to play. To my children, my brother is just whatever I have told them of him, combined with the few times they have met him in person. They know him as somebody who can bike really well and really fast down a mountain, and who's broken various bones over the years because of it. To them, he is one who wears cool sunglasses and who likes to joke around and is fun to be with. And to them it sounds like fiction, when I talk of the blue hair, because he looks so put together now, because he has a real job for which he has to dress up and drive a fancy car. And I wonder how much it matters who we truly are at any given time, because to others we may only be their narration of us, stuck in their attempt to keep their storyline in order. It may never be truly about us, I'm afraid.

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So this is my life now. Although sometimes it seems it could be different, had I not walked this path, but another. Where would I be now, if I weren't here? If I had simply stayed at my university back home, if I had stayed with my family and my tribe? I would likely still be at all the family-get-togethers and celebrate the holidays like I always did. And I would still have all my memories and all my words, but I wouldn't have learned a new rhythm and wouldn't know which people are worth remembering.

The problem is, unless you want to be a hermit, there is merging and changing no matter who you meet and where you live. And another problem is that once you are out, you can never get back in, because you have seen it from the other side, and it looks different from thereon out. You are never again fully enmeshed in the fibers of your home, and that's just how it is. But with each beat you get just a little better at moving to the rhythm of another home, and you may find that you have been well prepared by dancing to rock'n'roll in your childhood.

I may be some sort of immigrant dinosaur. People like me may not exist much longer. The world is more connected now. Culture can be sent and received instantly. No paper letters, no waiting periods, no time to lose a word in the in-between. And yet, something does seem to get lost; I'm not sure what it is. Maybe not a tear, but a truth, of sorts. All I know is that English doesn't have a word for what I miss. But I miss it less and less. In fact, I find that I, too, have grown tired of the newcomers all the time. All this comparing about what is different and better and worse – I've heard it all before in my head. My grandmother always said, you have to make the best of what you've got, and she would know, because she made it through two world wars and still knew how to laugh at the end. And what I've got is pretty darn good and I have learned to live in the moment, like the mindful guy on my podcast suggested.

When my love and I first met, we talked about the afterlife, the possibility of living on after death. My love was pretty clear that that was not going to happen, that death is death, that once life is over, one is done for good -- finito!

But I am not so sure, because I am maneuvering this world with the help of his words. And I am seeing his world through his eyes as he explains it in his words, and I have long ago stopped to talk to myself in the words of my childhood, but in the words I have known through him. Then how can one be dead for good, I wonder? And more importantly, how could I have ever thought I was fully myself to begin with? It turns out, I was always a part of a you.

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## Part Two

# Language as the Face of Identity

### Introduction

“Originally, everything in the human being is inside him – sensation, feeling, desire, thought, decision, language and deeds. But as the inside comes into contact with the outside world, it begins to operate independently and determines by its own unique configuration the inner and outer functions of others.”

Wilhelm von Humboldt (On Language 180)

Most of us are born into one language first; we learn to think and speak within the concepts available in our language. Through its specific linguistic lens, we reflect on ourselves and others and learn to like and love from within. Our language fully contains us and the way we see and experience the world. Yet, we tend to believe that we have an identity independent of language, that language serves merely as a tool to negotiate between the self and the world. As Humboldt suggests, we like to think that there is an original wholeness and inner truth to our self that only begins to falter when coming into contact with an other, alien world.

If that were true, however, how did we think about ourselves and others before there was language? How did we form friendships and declare our love? How did we know the difference between liking and loving and how did we distinguish between us and them? In other words, how would we have known who we are if we couldn't put *us* into words?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau once said: “One does not know where man comes from until he has spoken” (On Language 138). Indeed, language serves multiple social and psychological functions: first, through language, we identify ourselves and are being identified with a group by

others. Second, language behaves as a social tool to negotiate group membership and communicate social goals, like friendship. Most importantly, though, language acts both from within us as well as upon us. Our contacts with the world through culture and personal relationships infuse us with values and norms that become us. While we may reject certain aspects of the culture we live in, or discard specific family principles we grew up with, it is through language that we reflect and accept or reject these values, and it is through language that they can reach us to begin with. Helen Keller recalls that before the arrival of her teacher Anne Sullivan, she hardly knew she existed, but was instead “carried along to objects and acts by certain blind natural impetus,” and that “her inner life was a ‘blank without a past, present, or future, without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith’” (Pavlenko qtg. Keller, *The Bilingual Mind* 174). However, despite a degree of language influx and merging, culture and values have themselves also been born out of their own linguistic constructs, and thus propagate a micro-universe fully contained within itself. In short, as proficient speakers of only one language, we all live in a cocoon woven by culture and personal relationships of silk spun from our very own language.

When a second language enters into our lives permanently and we are forced to operate, negotiate, and define ourselves and the world through the lens of old values but with new words, the fabric of our being may temporarily come apart, unable to consolidate the old with the new. Immigrants often experience simultaneous feelings of loss and lightness, of revelation and confusion. Some even claim that living in another language feels as if they had become a different person altogether.

Numerous studies have explored the bilingual experience as it pertains to those who want or must live their lives in a language other than their mother tongue for an extended period of

time. Data from sociolinguistic and psychological research highlight the extensive underlying connections between language and cognition, and how they ultimately relate to our sense of self. Perception of space, time, number, motion and emotion appear to be deeply affected by language, as is memory. Language not only influences *how* we see the world, but it effectively steers our gaze to notice certain things and not others. Moreover, the way we choose to use language has been linked to notions brought forth in psychotherapy, such as the persona and the mask in Jungian deep psychology. Lastly, cultural and historical concepts connecting false perceptions of linguistic purity to spiritual or national identities often classify the bilingual experience as an in-between and incomplete form of existence, thus complicating questions of identity for foreign language speakers.

Needless to say, hardly a bilingual experience is identical. Besides a multitude of sociolinguistic factors, the effects of language shift on identity appear to be deeply embedded in meaning-making and connected to the individual's ability to integrate their experience into a cohesive personal narrative.

In the end, however, the central question remains: Is there a true self independent of language, or are we always just a social construct contained within the linguistic margins available to us at any given time? If a foreign language, pregnant with concepts and values, slowly seeps into the linguistic repertoire of the bilingual and thus informs the self, can the individual truly separate between operating in one language and culture versus another?

Instead, I assert that each bilingual undertakes his own linguistic and psychological journey of assimilating the outer with the inner world as he maneuvers between new language acquisition and old language attrition. I argue that we do not carry a true self from old to new cocoon, but instead expand the one we find ourselves in, woven with silk spun from old words



and new words and yesterday's tears and today's laughter. I argue that bilingualism forces self-reflection from an inherently new perspective to ask the ontological question: who was I then, and who can I be now?

## Definitions

The term “bilingualism” has been used extensively in various works of literature with slightly differentiated meanings; some consider the knowledge of a second language sufficient to refer to an individual as bilingual. Linguist Aneta Pavlenko even suggests that the term itself is misleading, as there is not a clear definition of a bilingual. She says, “bilinguals vary greatly in linguistic repertoires, histories, and abilities” (The Bilingual Mind xi), thus making precise and predictable research challenging.

For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall define as bilingual a person who: 1) operates in a language other than his mother tongue on a daily basis; and 2) has not been habitually exposed to this language as a child, but has only come into regular contact with it as a teenager or later (for reasons to be explored in more detail later). This definition includes most of the immigrants who have built the United States and those still arriving in this country today. It also includes me.

In contrast, a person growing up with just *one* language, in which he operates on a daily basis for most of his life, is monolingual -- while multilinguals use several languages frequently, such as citizens of a multilingual country like Switzerland. However, in order to highlight the cognitive, psychological and social changes of switching to a life in another language, we shall consider only late bilinguals, i.e. those who have acquired a foreign language after puberty and are now operating in it on a daily basis.

Finally, for the remainder of this paper, a person’s native language shall be referred to as L1, while the foreign language is L2.

## Chapter 1: *Naming the Soul* – Language, Cognition and Emotion

“There was a sound, the soul grabbed for it, and there it had a ringing word.”

J.G. Herder (On Language 160)

What makes me *me*? Is it the way I feel or the way I think? Am I me because of what I like or what I believe? Our identity is hard to define precisely, yet we all find ourselves in situations or with people, which seem to fit “us” or not, and which seem to align with our values and interests or not. Often it takes having things being taken away from us to realize how elemental they may have been to our being. Sometimes it is simply easier to identify what we are *not*, than what we are. Still, even this fuzzy outline of our identity is bound to change over time, molded by people and circumstance. Identities are surprisingly fragile and malleable; studies on sexual identity, for instance, one of the qualities often believed to be firmly determined by genetics, show an unexpected degree of gender fluidity in females depending on current cultural standards (Baumeister 133). In short, who we think we are is not set in stone, but in large parts molded by society.

In order to make judgements on what we believe may fit or not fit our identity, we have to rely on emotion as well as reason. Which comes first, though? Are we taking notice of our sensations and then reflect on them, or vice versa? Instinctively, one likes to believe that we feel first and then attach names to our feelings secondly. Jean-Jacques Rousseau suggests that “One does not begin by reasoning, but by feeling” (On Language 142). Conversely, though, studies seem to contradict this notion. Instead, it appears as if we only feel what we can name.

Two lines of thought exist on the interaction of language and emotion: researchers subscribing to the *deterministic* approach assume a universalist concept of emotion independent of language, i.e. emotions being collectively understood among humans of all nationalities and walks of life. This ideology assumes that a smile means happiness no matter where we go, and that there is an internal space from which our sensations arise, which is unaffected by linguistic context. Indeed, numerous studies delivered above-chance results matching facial or vocal expressions to specific emotions, leading proponents to claim that “language is not essential for emotional experience” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 251). Specifically, supporters of the *deterministic* approach argue for the existence of a subset of basic emotions including anger, fear, sadness or disgust, and suggest that even primates produce corresponding facial expressions that are universally recognizable despite their lack of knowledge of the human language. However, “the devil is in the details,” says Pavlenko and points to the fact that supporters of this theory “have failed to agree on which – if any – emotions are to be considered ‘basic’ ... [as well as] on vocal profiles of particular emotions.” Moreover, she cites additional studies on physiological states associated with emotions, which could not create universally reliable arousal patterns, thus leading critics of this theory to argue that not a single emotion has been found to be truly universally detectable, consequently severely undermining the validity of the *deterministic* approach altogether (*The Bilingual Mind* 251-252).

By comparison, new research points to the so-called *emergentist* approach, which proposes that emotions are in fact *interpretations* of internal physiological states. First, one becomes aware of a sensation and then proceeds to name it based on available words and concepts. As such, feelings are subjected to cultural, personal and linguistic influences and their interpretation is both deeply subjective, yet also astoundingly elastic. Pavlenko, for instance,

illustrates this phenomenon by pointing to the *conceptual act model*, which has been able to prove that “preexisting states of arousal are transformed into intentional emotion states through linguistic cultural resources” (The Bilingual Mind 252). She explains:

During emotional experience (“How do I feel?”) and emotion perception (“Is the rat afraid?” “Is my friend angry?” “Is my dog sad?”), representations of internal sensations from the body and external sensations from the world are made meaningful by categorizing them. This categorization uses emotion knowledge that has been learned via prior experience. Together, these three sources of information create the variety of mental states (that represent your own feelings of your experience of someone else’s behavior) named with emotion words. (Pavlenko qtg. Barrett, The Bilingual Mind 252)

Monolinguals thus interpret emotions according to how they have been socialized by personal relationships and by culture. A smile therefore means happiness in America.

Thus, monolinguals may feel something, put this feeling into words, which in turn is understood by members of the culture, from which these words have emerged. Besides individual shortcomings in communication strategies, or other language barriers arising from different language backgrounds within a culture, there is hardly a linguistic disconnect between our emotions, communication and the possibility of being understood. J.G. Herder says simply: “The sound of your feeling be of one kind to your species and be thus perceived by all in compassion as by one!” (On Language 148). In other words, within our own culture our feelings and words are shared and understood by many.

However, for bilinguals, the *emergentist* approach infers that speakers need to make adjustments at the linguistic, the cognitive, the discursive and the social level in order to interpret and verbalize their emotions effectively in L2. Pavlenko explains that “in this process,

[bilinguals] learn what events and phenomena commonly elicit such emotions, in what contexts and how these emotions are commonly displayed, and what consequences they might lead to” (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 151). Foreign language speakers not only have to acquire the corresponding vocabulary and learn when to use it, but must also approximate how to *feel* it. German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer suggests that this “process of translating comprises in its essence the whole secret of human understanding of the world and social communication” (Schulte 9).

Learning how to perceive, verbalize, and feel emotion in another language is easiest when emotion concepts are identical in L1 and L2. A smile in Germany, for instance, also suggests happiness, thus only the new word has to be acquired: *Glücklichkeit*. However, not all emotions are equally encoded in other languages, and some are not encoded at all. Many terms increase or decrease in complexity in the other language’s lexical comparative, and some exist only as relational constructs in certain languages but are described in the framework of individual experiences in others. The English language, for instance, focusses on inner states, while Samoans “see emotions as relational phenomena that arise between, and not inside, people. (...) [By comparison,] in Ifaluk ‘one person’s anger (*song*) entails another’s fear (*metagu*); someone’s experiencing grief and frustration (*tang*) creates compassion/love/sadness (*fago*) in others” (Pavlenko qtd. Lutz, *The Bilingual Mind* 254). Moreover, languages have differently sized lexica for emotion and emotion-related words; German only has between 230-250 emotion words, while English emotion words exceed 2000 (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 147).

Thus, L2 learners are mainly challenged by the verbal and emotional translation of non-equivalents, where neither the word’s concept nor structure has a corresponding vocabulary in their native language. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer concludes:

When we learn a language, our main problem lies in understanding every concept for which the foreign language has a word, but for which our own language lacks an exact equivalent – as is often the case. Thus, in learning a foreign language, one must map out several new spheres of concepts in one's own mind that did not exist before.

Consequently, one does not only learn words but acquires concepts.

(Theories of Translation 33)

Our understanding of emotions therefore rests on our interpretation of a situation. Much of perception and consequently of the interpretation of this emotional experience, however, leans on cognitive concepts, which have been shown to be mediated by language. Awareness of number, space, time and motion, for instance, have all been identified to adhere to the principles of the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis* of linguistic relativity, which claims “that language functions, not simply as a device for reporting experience, but also (...) as a way of defining experience for its speakers” (Pavlenko qtg. Hoijer 13). In other words, proponents for this hypothesis suggest that each language provides its speakers with linguistic categories to describe and interpret the world, and which in turn become our world, i.e. the cocoon from which we experience life and form our identity.

The most notable contemporary critic of this idea, linguist Noam Chomsky, instead believes that certain language structures are innate and governed by “abstract principles... that are universal by biological necessity and not mere historical accident, that derive from mental characteristics of the species” (On Cognitive Capacity 6). However, Chomsky seems to remain vague on what specifically can be identified as innate, when he states:

Human nature is not yet within the range of science. Up to the present, it has escaped the

reach of scientific inquiry; but I believe that in specific domains such as the study of language, we can begin to formulate a significant concept of ‘human nature’ in its intellectual and cognitive aspects. (A Philosophy of Language 77)

Thus, Chomsky would likely argue that studies showing language effects supporting the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis* may simply not have been designed carefully enough to fully differentiate social effects from human nature. In theory, Chomsky’s position may very well hold true, but given the complex blending of physiological, psychological, social, cultural and historical variables in each individual, it seems that the possibility of capturing the essence of human nature will remain an elusive concept for quite some time. As such, I will focus on the study outcomes that have delivered largely indisputable results, many of which strongly align with concepts of language relativity according to the *Sapir-Whorf-Hypothesis*.

To begin, we shall define how language and perception are linked in the monolingual speaker. Generally, linguistic relativity has been shown to influence basic categorical perception, i.e. language guiding the speaker’s awareness of certain categories through which he then proceeds to label his experiences and perceptions.

For instance, all languages identify number in a different manner; some don’t even identify number at all. In the West, we adhere to the *exact number standard*, thus counting each item individually and in turn making each individual count. Speakers of other languages, however, may utilize a counting system based on *number sense*, which merely approximates large numbers and only “code[s] sets up to three entities” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 86). When trying to estimate numbers beyond three, speakers using *number sense* make predictably more errors. The Pirahã, to give another example, have no concept of number whatsoever:

The few existing Pirahã ‘number’ words display referential indeterminacy and



variability in usage: hoi [small size or amount] may refer to quantities from 1 to 6, hoi [somewhat larger size or amount] may refer to 2 and also to quantities between 3 and 10, and baagi or baagiso [many/cause to come together] to quantities between 4 and 10.

Outside of this one-two-many distinction, the Pirahã do not appear to possess any other quantification words, grammatical number marking, nor the very concept of counting” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 86).

Some scholars suspect that we may have an innate category for number, independent of language, which allows us to discriminate between small numbers up to 3 or four, but use language to mediate concepts of larger numbers according to their significance within our cultural environment. For instance, hunter-gather communities did not need to employ exact number systems to the same extent as communities engaged in extensive trade. As such, available linguistic concepts are also representative of each community’s life and values.

Interestingly, the theory of innate *number sense* holds true even in the absence of language. Spaepen and associates studied number perception in deaf adults living in Nicaragua, thus being immersed in a society based on a numerate culture. Still, for numbers beyond three, these adults performed comparably to the Pirahãs, suggesting that “in the absence of conventional number language, the integration into a numerate society is not sufficient for spontaneous development of exact large numerosities” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 91).

Not only does the categorization of quantity affect our computing and perception of number, so does the grammatical composition of number words. In particular, language-specific digit order and word length have been shown to ease or hinder computing of numbers. For instance, by comparison to English, Chinese numbers are based on a 10-numeration-system, which can more easily be de- and reconstructed by merely remembering the numbers 0 through 9

and their place value than their English counterpart. Similarly, shorter number words are easier to remember and compute than long ones, further enhancing calculation speed and accuracy due to less linguistic complexity.

In all, while we may have an innate sense of small numbers, it is language which provides the linguistic concepts for large numbers, calculations and the ease with which we handle both. More importantly, though, available linguistic concepts reflect the significance of these numbers to the culture from which they have emerged, because – as Herder alluded to in his *Essay on the Origin of Language* several generations ago-- “structure and design and even the earliest cornerstone of this palace [of language] reveals humanity” (On Language 161).

Similar to numbers, time also does not appear to be a concept innate to humans. Instead, linguistic temporal markers are closely correlated with time units significant to speakers’ culture and way of life:

[For the Hopi,] who are living on their ancestral land and are clinging to what is left of their ancient traditions, time is basically an organic experience which unfolds in harmony with the cyclic rhythms of their social, agricultural, or religious events.... [while] the Pirahã, [who] sleep, eat, hunt, fish, and gather every day.... do not require a more differentiated set of time units, nor a linear conception of time and history. [Thus,] one of their key cultural values is to talk only about the present – they do not talk about the hypotheticals, the far-off future, or the distant past, nor do they have creation myths. (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 108)

Not only are linguistic concepts and perception of time affected by the culture from which they originate and vice versa, grammatical marking has also been shown to affect temporal cognition, i.e. the way we see ourselves in relation to past, present and future.

However, the degree to which these findings can be specifically linked to grammar is empirically difficult to isolate from other cultural elements. Still, strong proponents of language effects on cognition like to cite the German language as an extreme example of the impact of grammatical structure on behavioral patterns. They claim that Germans, who mainly use the same tense for present and future events, “perceive the future as close, save more, retire with more wealth, smoke less, practice safe sex, and are less obese”; by comparison, French and English speakers “require grammatical marking of future events (...) [and therefore] dissociate the future from the present and devalue future rewards” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 112-113). While these claims are highly controversial and frequently criticized, studies on event construal, which in turn rest on notions of temporal perception, do indicate clear language effects, as will be discussed later in this essay. For now, I wish to emphasize that language effects on temporal perception not only appear to exist, but even to prevail in foreign language speakers, who have been shown in various studies to continue operating with temporal concepts of L1 in tests issued in L2.

The notion of space is yet another concept affected by linguistic relativity. Many languages use *spatial terms* like right and left, front or back in order to indicate orientation of people, things or directions, while others use *cardinal terms*, such as north or south, inland or seaward. For instance, “a speaker of Guugu Yimithirr may say ‘There is an ant on your south leg’, [and] to get you to wash your face, a Tikopian may note ‘There is a spot of mud on your seaward cheek’” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 114).

Numerous studies on spatial awareness show clear language effects: speakers of languages favoring *cardinal terms* far exceed those using *spatial terms* in their awareness of

location as well as in their orientation skills. Speakers of different languages therefore define their being in the world through truly different perspectives.

Perception of motion has also been closely linked to linguistic encoding. According to the *manner salience hypothesis*, the mode of encoding motion in language impacts speakers' perception of motion and their attention to specific elements within motion. Studies suggest, for instance, that due to language-specific lexical choices, "speakers of German and Russian (...) focus on *internal* properties, such as the entity's intention, while speakers of English or Chinese consider a wider range of possible *external* arguments" (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 143). Interestingly, German grammar forces speakers to focus on the endpoint of an event, thus viewing events as one complete unit of action, while English grammar highlights the process of an event, and leads speakers to identify it as a set of individual phases instead. These results have even been confirmed in non-linguistic settings, such as eye-tracking studies, where Germans waited to make predictions or judgements about an event until the endpoint could at least be inferred, while English-speakers did not have such hesitations. These non-verbal studies suggest, therefore, that language does affect cognition long-term, even when language is no longer a factor.

This last finding is especially relevant to the relationship of language and the perception of color. Research shows that lexica describing color affect pre-attentive awareness and influence color judgements along linguistic concepts, thus rejecting the notion of a universal or basic color perception. In particular, many researchers criticize "the 'epistemological chauvinism' reflected in the assumption that the abstract Western category of 'color' is 'natural' and the reliance on color terms of American English, which miraculously coincide with universal categories, and on the dimensions of hue, brightness and saturation, associated with English

terms” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 49). In short, since English is used as a lingua franca, it is often falsely assumed that the perceptions and concepts carried by it apply to all people alike.

Given that even observations and awareness of non-linguistic concepts like color are in fact strongly influenced by the language through which they have been acquired, switching to a life in a foreign language naturally results in more momentous cognitive restructuring processes than merely the acquisition of new vocabulary. How this transition evolves depends on a multitude of mediating factors, such as the degree of congruence between old and new language, the learning context, age of acquisition of the new language, language dominance, and a speaker’s perceived proficiency, to name a few.

Generally speaking, concepts acquired in the mother tongue will prevail for long periods of time. For instance, many bilinguals continue to compute in L1, and perform better in studies conducted in L2 where prompts are aligned with temporal concepts of L1 (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 100 -101, 110). Furthermore, speakers have a life-long preference for the spatial frames of reference they acquired first, independent of their degree of complexity. L1 influence on L2 can also be noted on non-verbal tasks and even gestures, though frequently in an in-between status; i.e. performance of these tasks and gestures yield results somewhere between those of monolinguals of L1 or L2.

One of the most important determinants of how long L1 concepts are being retained in the foreign language speaker is the age of language acquisition. Studies document that, after puberty, “L1 patterns become more stable and susceptibility to L2 influence and L1 restructuring decreases” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 165). The repercussions of this finding are two-fold: merely learning another foreign language without extensive immersion and particularly after puberty often only results in a mapping of L2 words onto L1 concepts. In this case, the ideas,

values and visions carried by the foreign language will likely not be conveyed. Second, immigrants or those living and operating in L2 for prolonged periods of time and *after* the age of puberty are literally stuck in an in-between space made up of different words and worldviews. I will discuss the psychological repercussions of this phenomena in a later chapter.

For now, I shall conclude by emphasizing that research on linguistic relativity has shown substantial language effects on cognition: language acts as categorization tool, with which we selectively perceive number, time, space, motion, color and even emotion in a language-specific manner. We view the world through a lens steered by linguistic concepts, grammar and available lexical choices. As such, many immigrants struggle to use words from their new world to describe concepts formed in their old one in a *Nowhereland* of identity and belonging.

## Chapter 2: *Meeting of Minds* - Attempting Intersubjectivity

“And the cat-meaning in one head can join the cat-meaning in another’s head just by  
tossing out a *cat*”

Schaller (Pavlenko qtg. Schaller, *The Bilingual Mind* 36)

The intimate connection between language and culture has brought forth numerous theories principally since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which have continued to influence contemporary linguistic thought. Often cited as one of the most profound early voices to address the link in detail, Wilhelm von Humboldt argued in 1836 “that the character and structure of a language expresses the inner life and knowledge of its speakers, and that languages differ from one another as their speakers differ” (*On Language* 17). Von Humboldt therefore implies that, by learning a language, one may also internalize the “inner life and knowledge of its speakers,” that is culture.

Pavlenko’s current research findings still tend to agree with Humboldt’s claim, indicating that language acts as a categorization tool and thus effectively guides feelings and thoughts along linguistic concepts. Pavlenko therefore claims boldly that what we typically associate with the term “culture” is in fact language itself: “It is discourses and interpretive frames that constitute ‘the world of meanings’ which (...) we abstract from our interactions with others” (*The Bilingual Mind* 226). In other words, culture is language, because it emerges through our communication with others, who share the same understanding of meaning of ideas and things. As such, culture is created and sustained when speakers of a shared language accomplish intersubjectivity.

Wilhelm von Humboldt also addresses the concept of intersubjectivity directly, suggesting that language acts as a mediating tool bridging the world of objects with the world of human cognition:

All forms of language are symbols, not the objects themselves, not prearranged signs, but sounds; they find themselves, together with the objects and ideas that they represent, filtered through the mind in which they originated and continue to originate in a real or, one might even say, a mystical relationship. These objects of reality are held suspended in a partially dissolved state as ideas that can define, separate, and combine with one another in such a way as to defy all imaginable limitations.

(Theories of Translation 57)

Von Humboldt makes two assertions: first, he suggests that there is a reality containing all objects and ideas, for which speakers of languages create symbols in order to index them. Each such reference, then, is merely the subjective (yet collective) projection onto the *thing* by speakers of the same language. This idea is echoed in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of the *Bild*, which "functions to suspend the theorized divide between truth and construct and enables a praxis in which the two are allowed to coincide. This play of representation also demonstrates the illusionary quality of any individual subjectivity" (Engelstein 140). Thus, while intersubjectivity allows communal understanding by sharing similar or identical constructs, it also creates the inherent misconception that these constructs are in fact representing truth.

Second, von Humboldt infers that words by themselves are meaningless, unless speakers can "reach [an] agreement on the interpretation of a temporarily shared social reality" in order to create a "communion of minds," which is *culture* (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 35-36).



This “communion of minds” appears to be fully dependent on language; Hellen Keller, for instance, remembers first experiencing intersubjectivity when her teacher poured water over her hand:

As the cool stream gushed over one hand [the teacher] spelled into the other the word *water* (...). Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand.

(Pavlenko qtg. Keller, *The Bilingual Mind* 35-36)

Not unlike Keller, foreign language speakers have to gradually learn words and concepts until they have absorbed them completely and can approximate their meaning in conversation. However, to achieve the degree of linguistic sensibility required for true intersubjectivity, they must fully immerse themselves into the foreign culture, while simultaneously presenting themselves with a limited (and limiting) vocabulary, which they initially cannot *feel*. Needless to say, the passage to intersubjectivity in a foreign language environment is not seamless.

For one, besides having to transition to new lexica and cognitive concepts, one of the main hurdles speakers of foreign languages often face is the act of transferring and interpreting information in conversations. Studies in interactional sociolinguistics point to the fact that much of our communication relies on the use of nuanced linguistic undertones and cultural background knowledge that go beyond the literal meaning of words. For instance, Gumperz and Garfinkel argue the following:

Everyday talk can never be precise and detailed enough to convey what is really intended, so that interactants inevitably and necessarily rely on (...) ‘practical reasoning’ and unstated, taken-for-granted background knowledge to fill in for what is left unsaid.

(...) In so doing they display a built-in, deeply internalized, and for the most part un verbalized sense of social order. (Gumperz qtg. Garfinkel 2).

In various discourse studies, Gumperz was able to highlight how little valuable information is actually verbalized explicitly in conversations, and how often answers given by speakers of other languages or originating from different cultures are misunderstood and interpreted negatively.

It is important to note here that, due to unspoken assumptions and implicit bias, intersubjectivity is often a challenge among monolingual speakers as well, especially if they come from different socioeconomic or racially diverse backgrounds. Studies in social psychology have repeatedly shown that “preexisting attitudes and stereotypes can have enormous effects on how new information is perceived” (Fried 707). For instance, in study testing these attitudes in participants who had been primed with the notion that the violent song lyrics they were given to read were either from a rap or a country song, rated the texts significantly more “offensive and dangerous” if they believed the lyrics to be those of a rap song (Fried 705). Fried suggests that fear of the unfamiliar is often at the core of negative attitudes and stereotypes.

Naturally, foreign language speakers cannot hide their otherness and thus quickly trigger social stereotypes, misunderstanding and in some cases possibly even fear in their communication partner. Grosjean describes the role of language in this socio-psychological dilemma:

Language is not just an instrument of communication. It is also a symbol of social or group identity, an emblem of group membership and solidarity. (...) Both as an instrument of communication and as a symbol of group identity, language is accompanied by attitudes and values held by its users and also by persons who do not know the language. (Grosjean 117-118)

As such, while speakers may very well believe that they are judging our communication partner, what they “are evaluating in fact, is the group that the speaker represents” (Grosjean 118).

Gumperz expands on this notion and explains further, why these negative attitudes towards those who are different can hinder effective verbal interaction: “All communication is intentional and grounded in inferences that depend on the assumption of mutual good faith. Culturally specific presuppositions play a key role in inferring what is intended” (2). Thus, communication is most effective, when interactors are familiar and comfortable with each other, i.e. when stereotypes and attitudes are at their minimum.

Communication is not only important for information exchange and group recognition, however, but functions as a chief social tool. According to Hanks, “communicative practice [is] largely resting on the discursive practices of actors acting in pursuit of their goals and aspirations (...) [so as] to engage in an ongoing process of negotiation” (Gumperz qtg. Hanks 3,4). Due to sub-par language skills which stem from their affective disconnectedness to foreign language vocabulary, non-natives may fail to convey goals productively and hence don’t experience social success.

Some of the misunderstandings between communicators with different language backgrounds are grounded in variances in emotion perception, verbalization, and display. By comparison to performance results of *foreign* language speakers, “native speakers of Indo-European (...) and non-Indo-European (...) languages are significantly more accurate (...) in identifying emotions in their L1 based on vocal cues, even when their utterance content is neutral or unintelligible” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind*, 274). Discrepancies can arise, because emotional “concepts are embedded within larger systems of beliefs about psychological and

social processes, often viewed as cognitive models, folk theories of mind, or ethnopsychologies” (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 150). For instance, German mothers want to raise their children as “emotionally expressive and autonomous,” while Nso mothers emphasize the importance of calmness and compliance in their children’s upbringing instead (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 269). Emotions may also be appraised differently, such that one culture interprets an emotion word as positive, while the other culture views it as negative, and their meaning or display may also change over time.

Pavlenko points out that “from the earliest childhood affective socialization shapes not only our interpretive categories but the very embodiment of emotions,” and that this in turn may result in “affective mismatches and misunderstandings (...) frequently blamed on personalities [rather] than on cross-linguistic influences and different assumptions about normativity of affective styles” (*The Bilingual Mind*, 269, 278). Hence, we may read others’ emotions inaccurately, due to perception discrepancies guided by language.

Immigrants frequently claim that they have no emotional associations with the words that come out of their mouths. They cannot *feel* them. Some foreign language speakers even state that they are merely using somebody else’s words, trying them on as if they were a piece of new clothing. This is particularly pertinent for words that typically elicit strong emotional responses, such as swear words: bilinguals often note that they can hardly relate to the intensity of the meaning. For instance, Li, whose mother tongue is Cantonese, says:

I find it more difficult to swear in Cantonese than in English. Swearing in Cantonese is a big taboo for people of my educational level, however swearing in English doesn’t sound vulgar... When the subject involves cultural taboos such as sex or swear words I prefer to

use English because I feel less inhibited using L2 about cultural taboos probably because I don't feel the emotional intensity so strongly in L2. (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 158)

Given that swear and taboo words are usually conditioned and contextualized with negative associations in childhood, these words themselves lack all the emotional connotations in the foreign language context. Neuroimaging studies on affective processing show that bilinguals do indeed process words and associated emotions in L2 less automatically, as if they have to pass through a filter first. Pavlenko notes that "bilinguals' reaction times may be slower because they are accessing information in the other language, or they may be less susceptible to arousal dimensions in their L2" (*Emotion Words* 149). In other words, the lag in response is either due to the fact that bilinguals first have to map vocabulary and emotion concepts to comparable ones in their mother tongue, or because they simply don't have emotional connections to specific words because they have not been conditioned to associate them with other negative or positive feelings, such as punishments or rewards. Consequently, foreign language speakers may use highly emotional lingo differently in L2 than in their mother tongue; they may swear more or sound less loving, because they are simply using isolated words like new clothing, with no memories and feelings firmly attached.

Ideally then, foreign language speakers must immerse themselves deeply into a variety of linguistic contexts by mingling with a multitude of people who may help to bundle experience, emotions and words into a cohesive whole, which is culture. Ironically, though, the communicative shortcomings resulting *from* affective disconnectedness to L2 words and affective styles frequently *lead* to misunderstandings and therefore often cause isolation and exclusion instead. Accordingly, many immigrants find themselves in a catch-22 scenario, which eventually sees them either seeking out other immigrants, who share their experience of

ostracism, or battling the nagging sentiment of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness), i.e. Heidegger's concept of being thrown into a world in which one is never fully settled. The emergence of Chinatowns and Little Italys across the United States document how the sense of isolation and newness in a foreign world pulled immigrants together for the type of comfort afforded by intersubjectivity.

However, the outline of our cultural identities is fuzzy and permeable and will allow for the external world to seep in over time, which is reflected in foreign language speakers' improved dexterity in discourse and affective styles.

As bilinguals become more skilled with the L2 lexica and its cultural content, they often resort to rhetorical tools such as *code-switching* or *crossing* in the hopes of establishing a level of solidarity with their communication partner, while also delivering meaning directly and precisely. *Code-switching*, is a "linguistic act of identity" (Auer 404) in which the speaker injects socially or ethically loaded terms into conversation in order to highlight his or her identity, or tries to align himself with the group from which the term is borrowed. For instance, a speaker may insert terminology from minority lingo in a conversation otherwise held in the majority language depending on the communication partner and goal of the conversation. Similarly, *language crossing* expands this notion beyond isolated terms:

[It] involves code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language that they are using (code switching into varieties that are not generally thought to belong to them). This kind of switching involves a distinct sense of movement across social or ethical boundaries and it raises issues of legitimacy which, in one way or another, participants need to negotiate in the course of their encounter. (Ben Rampton 485)

Besides the use of rhetorical devices, Pavlenko finds that “to remain ‘readable’ to their interlocutors, bi- and multilinguals who live their lives in two or more languages often maintain language specific patterns of emotion categorization and expression,” thus attempting to mesh with the social patterns associated with either language (The Bilingual Mind 262).

Consequently, *code-switching*, *crossing* and separate emotion categorizations and expressions have two distinct effects. For one, they help to integrate foreign language speakers into another culture effectively by improving intersubjectivity and the degree of comfort and solidarity between communicators. However, these linguistic mechanisms also contribute to the schizophrenic feeling of living with two different identities, one of which is merely slipped over like a temporary mask, or as Carl Gustav Jung calls it, a *persona*: “Fundamentally, the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between the individual and society as to what a man should appear to be” (Jung 105). Jung argues that we choose to live through the persona, because it offers us a sense of belonging to a group, though at the cost of our individual truths. One may argue that culture is in fact the collective wearing of similar masks, but that bilinguals perform this conforming function with intent, fully cognizant of the compromise to their being.

Foreigners trying to assimilate into another culture don’t have much of a choice: their masks are created for them by the words and concepts of others. Thus, bilinguals are often left feeling either disconnected from their environment, or from themselves.

### Chapter 3: *Making Sense of Me* – Memory and Self-Narration

“Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were.”

Marcel Proust

Since “language functions as a vehicle of culture” (Marian 197), words in one’s own language not only trigger images of objects, people or ideas, but also of memories and values and of the speaker himself deeply embedded within both. Language plays a crucial role in the creation of autobiographical memory through “shared reminiscing” with loved ones, and as a socio-cultural filtering tool, highlighting certain aspects of experience more than others (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 176).

Therefore, despite extensive language immersion, not all foreign words and concepts can be successfully transposed into a speaker’s expanding cocoon, because they simply lack associations with memories. In addition, as bilinguals become more proficient in L2, they may even find that reminiscing through the lens of a foreign language context will likely not yield the same memory as it did from within their mother tongue. Studies have identified multiple factors that do indeed skew the past into a different light, depending on the language from which it is being recalled.

For example, much like the cognitive concepts of time, space, color, motion and emotion, memories are also subject to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variation. According to Pavlenko, differences arise because memories are not just a “re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces [but are] an imaginative reconstruction (...) built out of the relation of our attitude,” of personal experiences and of our interpretation of social situations (*The Bilingual Mind* 170). As such, memories are strongly dependent on the narrative, into which they are



embedded. Peterson, for instance, found that memories of 2-year olds are more fragile than those of older children, because they have not yet refined the skill of creating cohesive narratives around their memories (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 176).

Researchers have specifically focused on two concepts on which much of autobiographic memory and personal narration leans: so-called *schema* are the “active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences,” which are typically unique to each individual’s life, while *scripts* are “a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation” and are heavily influenced by societal standards (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 170). Both schema and scripts alter (and typically limit) the type of information we perceive and store in memory. As foreign languages operate through different linguistic and cognitive lenses, L1 attitudes, interpretations, and attention foci within schema and scripts are bound to change, and in turn may alter the way we remember ourselves.

Furthermore, languages appear to differ in three distinctive loci regarding memory making: “temporality, tellability, and life scripts” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 178). For instance, members of other cultures may emphasize different time events and narrative structures in their memories. According to Pavlenko, two of the main culture-specific variances in memories are their authorial stance and the function of the speaker:

Life-storytelling in English privileges the first person, while traditional Chinese writing encourages an impersonal third-person perspective or a collective ‘we’. (...) Most importantly, (...) Western life stories are told to make ‘a point about the speaker’, while in East Asia, in the Australian Western Desert, among Native Americans and the Makassar of Indonesia, personal narratives are told to make general points about the ways of the world and to position narrators in terms of social expectations and recognizable

social roles. (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 183)

Studies suggest that these cross-linguistic differences affect memories: members of cultures focusing more on individual experience, such as in the U.S., have been shown to form earlier autobiographic memories than members of cultures emphasizing communal experiences.

It is important to note that narrative focus and structure are not solely a reflection of a culture, but also of historical changes; the experience of the individual, for instance, was not celebrated until very recently, and is still considered to be odd in many parts of the world. For instance, Geertz claims the following:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of world's cultures. (Pavlenko qtg. Geertz, *The Bilingual Mind* 184)

The current emphasis on individuality of most Western countries is reflected not only in the narrative focus and structure, but also in their lexica; as a matter of fact, “the very term, *the self*, a reflexive pronoun preceded by a definite article like a discrete entity, is an English-language reification” (Pavlenko qtg. Besemeres, *The Bilingual Mind* 183). Thus, switching from one language to another may initiate a shift in self-concept solely due to available linguistic constructs. Marian studied pronoun use in individuals navigating between a collective culture (Russia) and an individualistic culture (US), finding that speakers showcased a more *individualistic* self-concept when communicating in English and a more *collective* self-concept

when speaking Russian. However, Marian believes that language may not truly affect cognitive functioning per se, but only show the effects of so-called *demand characteristics*, i.e. language triggering cultural values and consequently the way we choose to represent ourselves to the world akin to Jung's concept of the *persona*. Thus, the use of English would trigger a more individualistic worldview and increase the use of personal pronouns such as *I*, while Russian would increase the number of collective pronouns used, such as *we*.

This finding is also in line with studies on *memory encoding*. The notion of *memory encoding* rests on the premise that language and experience form a cohesive unit in our memory. Through a process called *language tagging*, the language in which an event is experienced becomes part of the memory itself. Pavlenko asserts that through this “intriguing interplay between cultural self-schemas, the linguistic resources available for narrative self-construction, and remembered selves, (...) depending on the language of encoding and recall, we may narrate (and possibly also perceive and remember) ourselves differently and focus more on culturally relevant aspects of a situation” (The Bilingual Mind 198).

Importantly, researchers have reliably been able to show that autobiographic memory recovery is most detailed and “more emotionally intense when the language of encoding and the language of retrieving matched” (Marian 196). Moreover, the *language congruity effect* suggests that we consistently rate memories encoded in our mother tongue to be qualitatively higher and more personal. Pavlenko claims that this phenomenon is rooted in the “repeated co-activation which links L1 words with multi-sensory experiences” (The Bilingual Mind 194).

These results not only show why foreign language speakers often feel strong nostalgia for their home country and childhood memories formed in their native tongue, but also suggest that, at least in theory, bilinguals ought to be able to achieve a similar quality of autobiographic

memories after many years of extensive, multi-contextual foreign language immersion. Initially, though, as bilinguals are struggling to form affective connections to the foreign language lexicon, memories of their life in their home country or native language will appear more vivid, more personal, and for many qualitatively better. Moreover, people generally rank group-oriented memories higher than self-oriented ones (Marian 198). As immigrants may lack the new community as well as affective associations with language, they hardly form group-oriented, emotional memories. Furthermore, since switching languages prompts substantial cognitive shifts, which not only alter how immigrants present themselves in L2, but also how they view and remember themselves and others from their past, immigrants often feel initially isolated from their L2 environment, from their L2-selves, and at times also from the people of their L1 past.

Naturally then, immigrants frequently struggle with tremendous feelings of homesickness and are plagued by nostalgia for the time when they felt embedded into the culture, relationships and language of their upbringing. Dante wrote wisely in Canto V of *The Inferno*:

There is no greater sorrow  
Than thinking back upon a happy time  
In misery.  
(The Divine Comedy, 80)

Still, the disconnect between memories and relationships of the past and of the present, which create the lingering feeling of not being settled into the world we now inhabit, may be bridged by creating a cohesive personal narrative relating our old to our new selves. Lumsden claims that “the creation of a self-narrative may capture a holism among experiences, as a narrative could provide a linking thread, as well as demonstrating the relationship between an experience and its owner” (161).

Analogously, Chung-Hsiung Lai alludes to the importance of a self-narrative and expands on Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit* by emphasizing its inherent motion and futural trajectory:

Thrownness, in respect of temporality, is three-dimensional: the past, the present, and the future. Firstly, thrownness, as falling projection, consists partly [*sic*] of previous moments (the *past*) which have been delivered over to Dasein as facticity, thereby opening up the horizon of Being-already-in-the-world. Secondly, since thrownness is defined as a dynamic movement which consists partly of the state of fallenness of everydayness (the *present*). Dasein's existence is a process of projecting thrownness through present action, opening up the horizon of Being-amidst. Finally, thrownness also grounds itself on the moments to come (the *future*), projecting the Self into the states of turbulence and possibility as futurity, opening up the horizon of Being-ahead-of-itself. The projective force of thrownness therefore exists in the *past*, the *present* and the *future*.

(496-497)

Thus, clinging to the past in the form of nostalgia leans on the false assumption that we possess an inherent wholeness, which in turn belies the continuous process of sculpting ourselves to the ever-changing demands and influences of our environment that started at the very beginning of our existence. Moreover, nostalgia is a symptom of mourning for the loss of being culturally embedded, of no longer "partak[ing] in a lineage backward from the current speaker to the emotions of his or her infancy, and backward again through the generations to the originator of language in his relationship with the object" (Engelstein 133). For bilinguals, this perceived disruption in lineage and loss of wholeness may be felt more overtly and possibly more substantially than for most monolinguals having to adjust to change, but certainly is in line with

others, who have had to make significant adjustments to their belief about who they thought they were and starting afresh.

In studies on bilingualism, different systems have emerged, by which speakers of foreign languages try to re-establish a coherent sense of self. All of them, however, are still hinged on the idea of purity of language, of personality, or of the self. First, the *one language-one personality* approach holds that each language is firmly attached to one personality, meaning “that we are (...) spoken by the languages we speak” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 198). While many bilinguals instinctively would agree with this theory, cognitive analyses suggest a gradually increasing overlap between L1 and L2 concepts and consequently also a merging of associated personality characteristics. It is important to note here that this view does not allow for an independent sense of agency of the speaker, thus maybe reflecting the initial state of confusion and powerlessness on behalf of the bilingual.

Similarly, the *language of the self* theory assumes that only one language (typically L1) is aligned with the speaker’s true inner self, and all others are mere personas. Many immigrants would likely agree with this point of view in the early stages of immersion, in which L2 cognitive concepts have not been fully internalized yet and speakers still feel detached from the foreign language with which they now negotiate their daily lives. Interestingly, this notion has been utilized successfully in psychotherapy, where patients gladly conducted their sessions in the foreign language, because it made them feel “safe and distant recounting their experiences in L2” (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 156). Due to affective proximity in their native language, “a switch to L1 brought either breakthroughs or emotional outbursts” (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 156).

Lastly, the *language independent self* system suggests that the self is autonomous, with language merely highlighting different sides of the self. This view also assumes wholeness of the

self, though with previously inactive elements, which are only now coming to light through the use of L2. As such, this notion leans on Jung's concept of the dynamic between *the Conscious* and *the Unconscious*; in order to fit into any type of community – even one as large or ill-defined as nationality or race – the individual chooses to inhibit all internal qualities that do not align with the *collective psyche* of the group. Jung explains:

A consciousness that is purely personal stresses its proprietary and original right to its contents with a certain anxiety, and in this way seeks to create a whole. But all those contents that refuse to fit into this whole are either overlooked and forgotten or repressed and denied. (...) Far too much of humanity has to be sacrificed in the interests of an ideal image which one tries to mold oneself. (Jung 105)

Switching to a different language and community would alter the lens through which we view and experience ourselves, and consequently free repressed parts, hence allowing them to come to consciousness and showcasing the speaker's "real ('individual') character" more fully (Jung 105).

All these theories signal the internal struggle of bilinguals trying to cope with the process of external and internal alienation, and "a preoccupation with maintaining narrative coherence across the different selves and worlds, delineated by their respective languages" (Pavlenko qtg. Burck, *The Bilingual Mind* 199).

Cognitive psychologists have long debated the connection between identity and personal narrative; with few exceptions, most researchers agree that "the self is a product of stories we tell about ourselves" (Lumsden qtg. Gazzaniga 166). Oliver Sacks says poignantly:

If we wish to know about a man, we ask 'what is his story, his real, inmost story?' – for each of us *is* a biography, a story. Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed,

continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations.

(Lumsden qtg. Sacks 165)

Thus, immigrants don't necessarily fit neatly into any of the descriptions of the above-mentioned theories because, as bilinguals, their story is one of enmeshing, transitioning and becoming instead of preserving and maintaining.

In fact, study after study shows repeatedly that purity of language and identity is a myth. This myth exists in part because, throughout history, our human fear of otherness has fueled analogous fabrications of national or linguistic purity. Nineteenth-century American philologist William Dwight Whitney, for instance, “grants each language a national sovereignty, complete with citizenship requirements and borders” (Engelstein 162). The wording in his work illustrates the importance of linguistic purity to national identity as well as the perceived threat of the mere possibility of language blending:

the grammatical system... resists longest and most obstinately any trace of intermixture, the intrusion of foreign elements and foreign habits. However, many French nouns and verbs were admitted to full citizenship in English speech, they all had to give up in this respect their former nationality... Such a thing as language with mixed grammatical apparatus has never come under the cognizance of linguistic students: it would be to them a monstrosity; it seems an impossibility. (Engelstein qtg. Whitney 162)

Similarly, the otherwise progressive thinker and world traveler, Wilhelm von Humboldt, nevertheless echoed contemporary sentiment, when in 1836 he stated:

Comparative linguistics... loses all interest when it does not proceed from the point at which language is connected to the general configuration of the national spirit. But even



one's insight into the unique character of a nation and the inner relationships of a language..., depends entirely upon one's consideration of the sum total of spiritual characteristics. For only by these... does a national character attain coherence.

(On Language 179)

While Humboldt merely linked language and national identity as a philosophical consideration, others were deeply worried about linguistic adulteration of national languages. Nearly a century earlier than von Humboldt, German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock published his linguistic theories *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* in 1774, in which "he concerned himself with the distressing use of loanwords and technical terms and the importance of orthographic reform" (On Language 14). In 1944, an orthography reform was in fact attempted in Germany, in which proponents aimed to remove foreign language origins in the German spelling of words (Wikipedia).

Thus, history has shown that national sentiments associated with linguistic evolution and diversity are often a people's collective projection of fears of otherness onto their mother tongue, and hardly about the actual state of a country's language.

Herder criticizes artificial attempts to limit and regulate language, considering it a living mechanism in a never-ending state of evolution. He states:

We have far fewer letters than sounds and how imprecise therefore the latter's expression by the former must remain. (...) What then, when the whole language is nothing but a living dialect? (...) The Russians and the Poles – however long their languages may have been written and molded by writing – still aspire to such an extent that the true tone of their sounds cannot be depicted by letters. And the Englishman, how he struggles to write his sounds, and how little is one a speaking Englishman when one understands written

English! (...) Language did not arise from the letters of a grammar of God but from the untutored sounds of free organs” (On Language 151-153).

The evolution of language throughout history is therefore analogous to that of the individual; as long as the myth of linguistic borders are upheld, though, bilinguals may very well achieve mastery in a new language – however, at the cost of the old.

#### Chapter 4: *Welcome to Here* - Language Attrition, Inner Speech and Creative Writing

Language is a mirror of mind in a deep and significant sense. It is the product of human intelligence, created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness.”

Noam Chomsky (On Cognitive Capacity 4)

What makes a person? Is it the living body in which the soul houses, or is it his unique character traits, which define someone as a person? John Locke argued that to qualify as a person, i.e. “a thinking, intelligent being,” one needs to possess self-reflective qualities “and can consider [one]self by [one]self, the same thinking thing, in different times and places” (Lumsden qtg. Locke 162).

As extensive exposure to foreign languages alters cognitive concepts and thus perception of experience, of emotion and even of the self, would Locke consider the bilingual the same person in his native and his foreign tongue? Many bilinguals dealing with the attrition of their native language after many years abroad often struggle with the same question. This feeling is particularly pertinent upon the realization that they have begun to *think* in the foreign language; it feels as if the outside world has quietly and secretively seeped into the deepest levels of our being.

Thinking in another language is not a choice; while living in a native language environment, thinking in L2 is practically impossible. Only after significant exposure to the foreign language in an L2 environment will L2 suddenly emerge as thought. In fact, the *Activation Threshold Hypothesis* holds that, for this process to occur, the speaker has to be exposed to more language impulses in L2 than in other competing languages:

An item [such as foreign language proficiency] is activated when a sufficient amount of positive neural impulses have reached its neural substrate. (...) Every time an item is activated, its threshold is lowered and fewer impulses are necessary to activate it. (...) If an item is not stimulated, it becomes more and more difficult to activate over time.

Attrition is the result of long-term lack of stimulation. (Paradis 28)

In other words, we will only begin to think in the foreign language when we have comparably more opportunities to socialize in the foreign language than in our native language. The consequence of full immersion in a new language and culture comes at the detriment of the old: L1 language attrition is a common side effect of improved L2 competence.

In research, the process of thinking is typically equated to *inner speech*. As such, language plays an important role “help[ing] us to plan and remember, to interpret our environment and gain control over situations, to encourage, comfort and motivate and to ‘talk things through’” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 210). However, bilinguals typically acquire their vocabulary from selective contexts – university studies reduced to a specific major, for instance, or the narrow family circle of their foreign-born spouse – thus limiting foreign language lexica and associated cognitive concepts available for inner speech. Moreover, as borrowers of lexical terms and phrases, foreign language speakers are frequently oblivious to linguistically coded references or interpretive frames, like number, time, or motion, as mentioned early on. As a consequence, L2 inner speech may feel incoherent, restricted and alien at first, and is often perceived as “a loss of [the speaker’s] recognizable voice” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 212).

Studies have shed additional light onto the different functions of the role of L1 and L2 in inner speech of bilinguals: until complete linguistic competence is achieved, inner speech in L1

“is commonly used for self-regulation (...) and self-evaluation (...), [while] inner and private speech in L2 are involved in imitation, repetition of other’s utterances, vicarious responses (...), mental rehearsal (...) and language play” (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 218). Again, we do not consciously choose in which language inner speech is conducted; as such, the fact that L2 is primarily used to serve adaptive functions, while L1 is chosen to negotiate with our inner selves shows that we are emotionally closer to L1.

As the foreign language feels more and more natural, however, the speaker’s available vocabulary of his mother tongue diminishes, as do all other associated functions of language, because “even ‘basic’ emotion categories, such as fear, are learned in the context of discursive practices, produced in particular social and historical circumstances,” which have now been adjusted to be compatible to L2 linguistic concepts as far as possible (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 267). Therefore, the phenomenon of language attrition not only applies to the L1 lexica, but also to emotion and emotion words. For instance, L1 swearwords appear less emotionally intense to bilinguals who report L1 language attrition than to L1 monolinguals (Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 158).

A French woman now operating in English is equally astonished and saddened by the realization that she no longer feels and expresses her feelings according to her native language:

I cannot understand why I have lost the ability to express most of my feelings in French but it has happened. Somehow it seems easier in L2 [English]; doing it in French requires more effort, concentration and involvement.

(Pavlenko, *Emotion Words* 155)

Naturally then, language attrition may also alter relationships formed in the native language environment: parents or friends might be viewed differently now through a new lens guided by

the linguistic categories and concepts of L2, while access to the native language and associated emotions and emotion display is diminishing. However, it is inherently difficult to separate language effects on the quality of close relationships from universal consequences of maturing as a person over the course of a lifespan.

Still, it is important to note that parent-child relationships are specifically affected by language; much of parent-child interaction, particularly with young children, inadvertently functions as a transference of legacy: lullabies, story times, and other family- or culture-related activities and customs serve to continue transgenerational inheritance. In families with only one bilingual, this type of transference is naturally severely hindered, because language and customs are removed from a broader cultural context. A German dish in North Carolina, for instance, is an exotic specialty unattached from its original cultural milieu; as such, it functions merely as the equivalent to a foreign language word without any affective contextual depth. Language attrition thus often coincides with culture attrition.

While many bilinguals try to function on two simultaneous language platforms for many years, most will naturally progress towards operating nearly exclusively in the foreign language. This process is mainly due to lack of opportunity to converse in L1, but can also be attributed to the foreign language becoming the dominant means of daily communication in careers and family life, and lastly is also the result of our natural inclination to decrease cognitive load. Trying to exist in two languages that bring out different personalities and viewpoints is a privilege that can also feel like a burden, because the bilingual is permanently trying to bridge the old with the new.

As time abroad increases, bilinguals are exposed to an increasing number of linguistic contexts and are able to form a nuanced vocabulary through newly made memories with a variety of personal relationships at work, with friends or romantic partners. Thus, contextual lexica broaden, affective association with vocabulary deepens and rhetorical devices like *code-switching* can be employed more sensitively to the overall improvement of intersubjectivity.

Still, the bilingual self forever rests on the duality of identity, which was built elsewhere, yet continues to expand its cocoon in its new environment. For instance, Pavlenko points out that “an internalization of new [cognitive] frames is not tantamount to a change in the system of personal values and beliefs,” suggesting that there is no clean exchange of the old with the new, but instead a merging, retaining and replacing that affects some L1 and L2 concepts, yet not others (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 242).

Adding to the phenomenon of hybrid identities, Marian has been able to show, that “mixed memories (i.e. memories that were encoded in a combination of Russian and English) were rated as most positive, suggest[ing] that the self of bicultural Russian-English bilinguals is integrated across cultures and that an amalgam of both cultures results in the most positive affect, a finding that is consistent with reported psychological benefits of biculturalism” (198).

Biculturalism implies a deep understanding and ability to accommodate two cultures, which results from extensive abroad exposure. Thus, one possible reason for the positive psychological effects of biculturalism may be found in the increase in confidence in the foreign language speaker, as he has had to successfully overcome isolation while also accomplishing the act of complete adaptation in nearly all aspects of life: family relationships, friendships, and workplace, along with culture-specific values and possibly even forms of spirituality. As all these aspects have had to undergo a degree of de- and reconstruction in the bilingual mind, the

foreign language speaker has become a bicultural. As such, he may not only experience a renewed sense of self, but frequently also embraces the possibility of re-invention, as has historically been the case for so many U.S. immigrants that it has in fact become a cornerstone to American identity. U.S. history is filled with examples in which immigrants have been able to transcend their original class and status to become prominent leaders, inventors, and businessmen here, outside of the original limitations of their own social constraints at home. Here, their native language and accent, tied to culture and class, was only identifiable to those who came to escape both as well.

Jung's deep psychology may shed additional light on the psychological benefits of being bicultural; considering Jung's position on the relationship between *the Conscious* and *the Unconscious*, foreign languages act as a gateway for the speaker to come in contact with the latter. Thus, bilinguals have "access to the collective psyche [which] means a renewal of life for the individual, no matter whether this renewal of life is felt as pleasant or unpleasant" (Jung 118). Those who can learn to embrace this mixed identity of old and new will at times even report feelings of wholeness. Polish-English bilingual Eva Hoffman, for instance, joyfully recalls the moment when she could finally *feel* in the foreign language:

But now the language has entered my body, has incorporated itself in the softest tissue of my being. "Darling", I say to my lover, "my dear", and the words are filled and brimming with the motions of my desire; they curve themselves within my mouth to the complex music of tenderness.

(Pavlenko qtg. Hoffman, *Emotion Words* 157)

Nevertheless, all immigrants are as unique in their individual experiences, as are their reasons and contexts for embarking on the journey of bicultural bilingualism. What these



immigrants have in common, though, is the ability to view either culture from an outside perspective: “That which is one’s own, . . . can only be recognized retroactively: when it has already become the other” (“Exil und Ironie”, tr. Andrea Larson 13).

This unique position has been both embraced and mourned by translingual and immigrant writers and has given rise to some of the most profound work and philosophically complex concepts in literary history. Given the cultural as well as linguistic detachment from the foreign language, some authors find writing in L2 both liberating and stimulating at the same time; the so-called *emancipatory detachment effect* posits that writing in a foreign language affords one a degree of emotional objectivity impossible in the mother tongue. For instance, Polish-American novelist and 1969 winner of National Book Award Jerzy Kosinski, wrote primarily in English after arriving in the United States at the age of 24, and says that he “felt freer to express [him]self, not just my views but my personal history, my quite private drives, all the thoughts that I would have found difficult to reveal in my mother tongue” (Pavlenko qtg. Kosinski, *The Bilingual Mind* 281).

Others, however, never feel comfortable expressing themselves in the foreign language. For instance, even though Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov wrote his most famous novel “*Lolita*” in English, he laments in a letter to a friend: “I envy so bitterly your intimacy with English words” (Pavlenko qtg. Nabokov, *The Bilingual Mind* 282).

While emotional detachment appears to aid in the creative process of writing prose, it severely hinders and practically prohibits writing poetry. The root of this problem lies “not in the lack of linguistic mastery but the lack of an emotional and physical connection,” which prevents the level of intimacy on which poetic creation rests (Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind* 283). German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, for example, attempted to write French poetry after many years of

living in Paris, but only achieved moderate success compared to his masterfully crafted works in his native language.

Not only has bilingualism been able to afford these writers an enhanced perspective guided by new linguistic concepts and lexica, but it has also given rise to unique literary concepts. Some translingual and immigrant writers have specifically chosen to echo their abroad experiences thematically or implicitly in their work. German writer Oskar Maria Graf, for instance, who lived in exile in the US from 1938 to his death in 1967, and never attempted to learn and speak English beyond the bare necessities, argued that he never felt like an emigrant, because he considered his German language his home. Graf's refusal to learn English is echoed in his 1959 novel *Die Flucht ins Mittelmäßige (Refuge into Mediocrity)*, in which Graf raises questions of belonging, of language, and of remaining an outsider in the form of his alter ego Martin Ling:

Ling had been living in New York for almost twenty years and up to now understood little more than a few indispensable English phrases. He made no efforts to improve his language skills, either; he had adopted nothing 'American' apart from what seemed automatically and mechanically comfortable to him. As a result, of course, he had made no progress and never got anywhere.

(Piller qtg. Graf, Web)

Graf believed that language and identity were closely linked, but also acknowledged the lost opportunity to grow by remaining insulated from the foreign-language speaking environment. By comparison, Rainer Maria Rilke actively pursued (though loathed at the same time) the feeling of inner fragmentation by restlessly moving from one place to another for much of his life. Spending most of his time in non-German-speaking countries, Rilke was frequently

troubled by alienation from the world as much as from himself. Yet, in moments of deep despair and solitude, he channeled his anguish into a philosophy of oneness and inner truth. His notion of *Zwischenraum*, which is also frequently referred to as *Weltinnenraum*, for example, is to be understood as the in-between space of authenticity of being, of transcendence and of wholeness, which he so dearly missed in his fragmented life. In *The Duino Elegies*, Rilke even attempted to circumvent language altogether, considering it to be too misleading at times, and instead created poems based on lyrical abstraction and decomposition of syntax; thus, he aimed to attempt intersubjectivity with his audience through cadence and word fragments, which were to allude to images, hence connecting with the reader emotionally, or as Herder would suggest by “transpos[ing] the sympathizing creature into the same tone” (On Language 155).

Thus, these translingual and exile writers were able to effectively channel their emotional experience of being an outsider suspended in an in-between state of identity into profound contributions to both literature and philosophy.

## Conclusion

“Language acts are acts of identity,” says Tabouret-Keller (315). As such, bilinguals may not have the same breadth of vocabulary or the depth of cultural knowledge or the nuanced lexica as their monolingual counterparts, but when they speak, they echo the riches of their combined imperfect wholes. As one language grows stronger while the other weakens, the bilingual may find himself in a time of identity crisis; words to things or feelings, which used to simply flow out of his mouth, may suddenly be lost, and he may ask himself: “Who did I used to be, and who am I becoming?”

Rarely do people experience these ontological questions of being as intimately as do bilinguals; usually, an act outside of us may force us to ask fundamental questions about our life, our perspective or directionality. Hardly ever do we find ourselves noticing these changes coming from within with no ability to alter the trajectory of their evolution; we realize that we are merely a construct of our environment, permanently molding and sculpting to new demands of new places. But we are also selves made of rights and wrongs, and cognitive shifts and altered lexica don’t seem to change that. Thus, we are old and new alike, paradoxical creatures complying with the laws of academic reason -- and yet going beyond.

Language reflects identity, because language is thought, and thought is apparently emotion and culture as well. Language is an outward expression of identity, a social signal to the world as to who we are now and where we may have come from. There are many such signals apart from language, yet we are often blind to them. Ethical values, cultural preferences, spiritual or religious alignments are all indicators of our identity, and thus equally vulnerable to social influences. For example, we may no longer believe today what we had believed just yesterday, yet we certainly remember what we believed yesterday, and today’s belief is fully the result of

having believed something else before, either as the derivative or in opposition to the old. Language is no different: what may feel fully whole one day is being challenged by a new environment the next, and thus will never be whole again, yet become more complete and authentic nevertheless.

Thus, we cannot switch back and forth between identities associated with different languages, because they merge in us and become us. The cocoon through which we view the world has grown larger and more colorful, yet it encapsulates us nevertheless. However, as many figures in exile and translingual literature have shown, it affords us a privileged position to view either world from the outside, because enlarged cocoons don't neatly fit into the collective molds of monolingual cultures.

Creative writing, Pavlenko said, is one of the best ways to try out a new language for fit. As I am concluding this project, I am combining many elements of my identity through language: the academic with the creative, the humanities with the social sciences, and the American with the German, who is desperately trying to embrace the ongoing evolution of identity, when all I want to ask is: "Who will I be in the end?" And then I hear myself say in my mind that it doesn't matter, because I am good and am true in exactly the space I am moving in now.

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