BIBLIOTEKARZ PODLASKI
2/2020 (XLVII)
<https://doi.org/10.36770/bp.471>
ISSN 1640-7806 (druk) ISSN 2544-8900 (online)
<http://bibliotekarzpodlaski.pl>

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Language, narrative, self, and memory in two language memoirs: Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Ilan Stavans's *On Borrowed Words*

Abstract: This article focuses on two memoirs authored by a bilingual and a multilingual author – Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Ilan Stavans's *On Borrowed Words*, respectively – to examine how their authors construct their linguistic selves, what they tell us about living in two (or more) languages, and how the process of recalling their past contributes to the construction of their self and what the role of language is in that process. The first part of the essay shows that language, narrative, memory, and self are mutually dependent and constitutive, and that memory, especially in its individual manifestation, is not given enough attention in autobiographical research. The second part examines how the interplay between these four concepts is captured in the memoirs of Eva Hoffman and Ilan Stavans. Both authors show what it means to be trapped in the space between languages, when one feels that no language adequately captures the events of the everyday life, and how it influences the sense of self and the formation of memories.

Key words: language, narrative, autobiographical memory, self, memoirs.

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Introduction

The majority of autobiographical narratives treat language as a transparent medium of communication or as a raw material to be molded into an elegant narrative. There are, however, memoirs that have language at their core. These are usually memoirs that deal with some sort of identity crisis. Among them there are memoirs written by people who either moved to another country and had to acquire a new language, or grew up in bilingual families, memoirs of those who were deprived of language, or memoirs written by people who recount either their relatives' or their own struggles with the loss of memory due to head injuries or various medical conditions such as Alzheimer's. Not only do these memoirs make evident the importance of language and narrative to our sense of self – also noted by some contemporary neuroscientists like Joseph LeDoux or Antonio Damasio, psychologists like Robyn Fivush, and theorists of autobiography studies like Paul J. Eakin – but also point to the close interdependence of language, narrative, memory and the self. In the course of this paper it will become clear that this quartet – language, narrative, memory, and self – is so interconnected that at times it may seem seamless, and therefore it is often taken for granted. This article focuses on two memoirs authored by a bilingual and a multilingual author – Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Ilan Stavans's *On Borrowed Words*, respectively – to examine how their authors construct their linguistic selves, what they tell us about living in two (or more) languages, how the process of recalling their past contributes to the construction of their self, and what the role of language is in that process. Consequently, the aim of this essay is twofold, and it is reflected in its structure.

The aim of the first part is to show that language, narrative, memory, and self are mutually dependent, and that memory, especially in its individual, psychological manifestation, which I consider here, is not given enough attention in autobiographical research¹. Memory is an essential ingredient of narrative iden-

¹ Paul John Eakin is one of a few life writing theorists (that I am aware of) who elaborates on the role of memory (understood in his works from a psychological and a neurological perspective) and language in the emergence of the extended self [Eakin employs Ulric Neisser's model of the self which distinguishes five registers of self-experience: the ecological self, the interpersonal self (both present in infancy), the extended self (the self that exists outside of the present moment and usually develops by the age of three), the private self (our mental life), and the conceptual self (social concepts of the self) (Eakin, 22-23)]. In the third chapter of his seminal book *How Our Lives Becomes Stories* (1999), Eakin draws on then-very-fresh research on autobiographical memory conducted by

tity. We can say that thanks to memory autobiographical texts are produced in the first place. Although we sense that to create a life narrative of any kind – be it informal and spoken, or written and published – we need to engage in the process of remembering, this process is often taken for granted, as if its own aspects had little bearing on autobiographical texts or the construction of the self. While most critics in autobiography studies focus on narrative identity, the construction of the self on the pages of life stories, or the process of self-fashioning, memory is rarely given center-stage. Assuming that any text of an autobiographical nature is not only an interpretive but also recollective enterprise – while at the same time acknowledging that remembering is, in fact, an act of reconstruction and therefore of interpretation – I build my argument around memory. Memory will be the point of departure for our examination since to write a memoir one has to employ memory. One has no choice but to go back in time – to engage in mental time travel, as renowned psychologist and neuroscientist Endel Tulving would put it² – if one wants to write about bygone times. I will focus on the individual dimension of memory – that is on autobiographical memory – drawing on findings from cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, and neuroscience. Due to space restrictions, I will not consider here the enormous amount of research conducted on collective memory, although at this point I would like to indicate that autobiographies and memoirs, being cultural products which are accessible

such renowned developmental psychologists as Katherine Nelson or Robyn Fivush to demonstrate that “the development of autobiographical memory [which is always connected with the acquisition of language and narrative skills] in early childhood prepares for writing of autobiography – when it occurs – in adult life” as both narratives produced by children and literary autobiography written by adults “belong to a single, continuous, lifelong trajectory of self-narration” (113). This essay follows in Eakin’s footsteps.

There is also prominent line of research in life writing and narrative studies which focuses on memory from the perspective of psychoanalysis and/or trauma studies. This approach is represented, for instance, by Nicola King’s *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000) that uses two models of memory, both inspired by Freud, to analyze a variety of autobiographical texts and first-person fictional accounts. King is particularly interested in memory as the “continuous process of retranslation” (8) and in the recovery of the (often traumatic) past. It is a very different approach to the one employed in this essay.

There are also works that do not provide a specific definition of memory. Such seems to be the case with James Olney’s dense *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing* from 1998 in which he analyzes how various writers and thinkers since St. Augustine has defined the nature of memory. Olney traces models of memory suggested by these authors and shows metaphors they employed to describe the process of remembering in their life-writing or quasi life writing texts.

² E. Tulving, *Episodic memory: From mind to brain*, “Annual Review of Psychology”, 53:2002, pp. 1-25.

to various audiences, contribute in many ways to the development of collective identity. Moreover, the fact that I disregard collective memory in this essay does not mean that I ignore the social dimension of remembering. On the contrary, the social context will be central to my understanding of memory processes, as it is also for scholars working on autobiographical memory.

My second aim is to examine how the interplay between these four concepts is captured in the memoirs of bilingual/multilingual authors, and to demonstrate that autobiographers intuitively spell out important connections between the self, memory, language, and narrative. People have intuitively sensed and successfully described many phenomena related to our mind, long before they were dissected by scientists in their labs. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud observed and described the phenomenon of infantile amnesia without having access to neuroimaging scanners³. Childhood amnesia is now widely accepted, and there are a plethora of studies trying to understand the reasons behind it. I therefore believe that life narratives can provide us with valuable research material which can shed some light on the workings of our mind. This view is shared by other critics who examine life narratives. For instance, Anna Wierzbicka, a professor of linguistics and a Polish-English bilingual, believes that testimonies of bilingual people can constitute a supplement to other methods of examining the phenomenon of bilingualism⁴. Finally,

³ Freud put forward his theory of infantile amnesia in 1905 in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in which he described it thus: "What I have in mind is the peculiar *amnesia* that hides from most people, though by no means all, the earliest beginnings of their childhood up to their sixth or eighth year. It has not hitherto occurred to us to feel any astonishment at the fact of this amnesia, though we might have had good reason for doing so. For we are told that during those years, of which we later recall nothing but a few incomprehensible fragments of memory, that we reacted vivaciously to impressions, that we knew how to express pain and joy in a human way, that we showed love, jealousy, and other passionate feelings by which we were strongly moved at the time, and indeed, that we said things which were noted by grown-ups as good evidence of insight and the beginnings of a capacity for judgment. And of all this we, as adults, have no knowledge of our own! Why does our memory lag so far behind our other psychical activities?" (11.5). Further in the essay he provides his explanation for this phenomenon: "I believe, then, that infantile amnesia, which turns the childhood of each individual into something like a *prehistoric* past and screens from each one the beginnings of one's own sex life, is responsible for the fact that in general no importance is attached to childhood in the development of sexual life" (11.9).

⁴ A. Wierzbicka, *Preface: Bilingual Lives, Bilingual Experience*, "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development", 25 (2&3): 2004, p. 95. There a plethora of studies devoted to bilingualism from a variety of perspectives, such as Aneta Pavlenko's excellent *The Bilingual Mind* (2014) (which examines the phenomenon from a linguistic and cognitive point of view), Mary Besemeres's *Translating One's Self* (2002) (which analyzes autobiographical texts authored by bi-

I also wish to indicate how broadly understood discourses circulating in a given culture shape narratives and self-understanding, as any life story is necessarily an interaction between our memory (which itself is shaped by cultural discourses) and socially constructed subject positions.

Language – narrative – self – memory

This part will start with an attempt to define language and narrative, as they can be easily confused. It will be followed by a brief revision of the relationship between narrative and the self, and in the further part of this section memory will take center-stage.

I would like to begin with elucidating how I understand language and narrative, what the relationship between them is, and how each of them influences the formation of self/identity, although I need to indicate at this point that language and narrative are so interconnected that at times it is impossible to completely distinguish between them, and there will always be a certain degree of overlap. At its fundamental level, I understand language as our ability to communicate with other human beings. This ability is facilitated by the existence of various specific language systems that are based on conventional rules and use symbols to represent human experience. I also use language to refer to the use of such systems by various communities and groups. According to Nancy Budwig, language in relation to self can be understood in two ways: language as grammar and language as a discursive action. The language-as-grammar approach focuses on certain grammatical features of language such as pronouns, voice, or the choice of specific lexical items. The discursive approach concentrates on discursive practices and the way they constitute the subject. The latter perspective is therefore more interested in culture and the subject positions the speakers of a given language can take up⁵.

Narratives are defined by Anna De Fina as “texts that recount events in a sequential order.”⁶ Obviously, those texts need to be recounted in a particular

lingual authors), or Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Tongue Ties* (2003) (which considers bilingualism from the perspective of emotional bonds in the writings of Hispanic writers).

⁵ N. Budwig, *Language and the construction of self: Developmental reflections*, 1995. Retrieved from <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/nancy/nancy2.htm> (17 January 2015).

⁶ A. de Fina, *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003, p. 11.

language, and different languages allow for different stories to be told, both from the grammatical point of view and from the perspective of discursive positions that are made possible by a given culture, which is inevitably in a close, mutually dependent relationship with a language. Not only is culture, with all its conventions, expressed in a given language, but it also shapes language, which also constantly shapes culture in return. What interests me here is the relationship between identity and narrative which is emphasized by critics from various disciplines from psychology through philosophy to sociology, and which is often expressed in the term “narrative identity.” After Paul John Eakin, an eminent critic of autobiography studies, I take the view that “narrative is not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; it is an essential part of our sense of who we are”⁷. A similar view is voiced by De Fina who, in her examination of immigrant stories, treats narrative as “the locus of expression, construction and enactment of identity”⁸.

Following Bruner, and many other contemporary scholars, I take the view that there is no essential self – “rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future”⁹. It has to be noted, however, that memoirs both fix the self in a given moment and reconstruct the self – or rather the succession of selves – that no longer exist(s). In our daily life, our identity is constantly negotiated in various contexts, and it depends on our interlocutors and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In memoirs, both the present and past selves are perceived through the lenses of the self at a specific moment in time and place – it is usually the moment of the production of a life narrative. The self presented to us in a memoir is therefore a self frozen in time. The narrative covering the same years but told from a different vantage point or at a different time would be a different narrative because it would be told through the prism of a different

⁷ P. J. Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How we Create Identity Narrative*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, p. ix.

⁸ A. de Fina, *Identity in Narrative*, p.13.

⁹ J. Bruner, *Self-Making Narratives*, [in] *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self*, Eds. R. Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2003, p. 210.

self. And self, as it was already pointed out by Buner, is inextricably connected with memory. The importance of our past to our selfhood is deeply ingrained in the Western tradition. As Mark Freeman explains:

when asked who and what we are and how we might have gotten that way, we ordinarily turn to our personal pasts for possible answers. Far from being a merely arbitrary choice, this is precisely how it must be, at least for now. The idea of the self, as we have come to know it, and the idea of history are in fact mutually constitutive¹⁰.

Although such a conceptualization of the self might seem obvious and universal, is it not for everyone. Freeman gives an example of Trobriand Islanders (Lee 1959) for whom “there apparently is no firm boundary between past and present”¹¹. Freeman therefore posits that “a life history, rather than being a ‘natural’ way of accounting for the self, is one that is thoroughly enmeshed within a specific and unique form of discourse and understanding. As such, it is but one among numerous possible modes of conceiving of and accounting for the self”¹². Before I delve into the relationship between the self and autobiographical memory, I need to explain what autobiographical memory is since it is this type of memory that is of interest here.

Endel Tulving states that people tend to be surprised when they are told that only a small fraction of memory concerns the past¹³. Indeed, memory functions go well beyond the role that we normally attribute to it, that is the recollection of our past life, and memory controls many of our daily activities. We need memory to function properly: to speak, to walk, to drive a car. These and other actions, which most of us take for granted and do not associate with memory, are, according to psychologists and neuroscientists, performed by our implicit memory. Other activities, such as recalling the name of the French capital or remembering the events of the previous weekend, belong to the realm of ex-

¹⁰ M. Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 29.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ E. Tulving, *Episodic Memory*, p. 6.

plicit memory. Explicit memory is further divided into semantic and episodic memory. In fact, the two above examples – recalling the name of the French capital and recalling the events of the past weekend – are performed by semantic and episodic memory, respectively. These two types of memory underpin autobiographical memory, as when recalling our last Christmas we combine the particulars of the specific occasion with general knowledge about things we usually do at Christmas time¹⁴.

The symbiotic relationship between autobiographical memory and the self is well captured by Martin Conway, according to whom memories define us while we, in turn, determine the nature of our memories. It is expressed in the things we find worth remembering or types of memories we attend to and share with others. In 2000, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce advanced the self-memory system (SMS), which Conway has refined over the years. At the heart of the self-memory system lies the conviction that memory is motivated by our goals, and it is “the data base of the self”¹⁵. Most importantly, Conway’s model also highlights the social context of memory processes. Conway and Jobson explain: “The self that the SMS emphasizes in autobiographical remembering is a psychological reality that is rooted not only in the brain and the body [...] but also in the sociocultural context. [...] Consequently, autobiographical remembering both is shaped by culture and is a shaper of culture”¹⁶. They elaborate further:

the sociocultural world – through societal factors and pervasive ideas (e.g., economic, historical, environmental, religious, scientific, what is good? what is normal? what is moral? what is self?), institutions and products (e.g., education, health, politics, media, language), and daily situations and practices (e.g., home, work) – influence the conceptual self and, hence, autobiographical remembering.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of various types of memory, see for example *Memory* by Alan D. Baddeley, Michael W. Eysenck, and Mike Anderson, 2nd ed., Psychology Press, London 2015. Chapter 1 presents a division of different kinds of memory, and chapters 6, 7, and 11 discuss episodic, semantic, and autobiographical memory, respectively.

¹⁵ M. Conway, *Memory and the self*, “Journal of Memory and Language”, 53: 2005, p. 594.

¹⁶ M. Conway and L. Jobson, *On the Nature of Autobiographical Memory*, [in] *Understanding Autobiographical Memory: Theories and Approaches*, Eds. D. Berntsen and D. Rubin, Cambridge: CUP, 2012, p. 58.

As culture changes, the conceptual self changes, and in turn, autobiographical remembering changes¹⁷.

Although remembering seems to be an individual process, it is in fact social to the backbone and on so many different levels. First of all, as many scientists have proved, one of the major functions of autobiographical memory is a social function which promotes interpersonal interactions through memory sharing¹⁸. The role of memory, not only for individuals but also for whole societies, is also stressed by neuroscientists, like Eric Kandel, who explains:

Memory is essential not only for the continuity of individual identity, but also for the transmission of culture and for the evolution and continuity of societies over centuries. [...] All human accomplishments, from antiquity to modern times, are products of a shared memory accumulated over centuries, whether through written records or through a carefully protected oral tradition¹⁹.

Another factor that points to the social nature of remembering is the fact that our memories, especially those we share with others, are formed in language, and therefore in the frameworks of a highly cultural and social structure. There is much debate as to whether autobiographical memories exist prior to the development of language, and there are some critics, like Mark Howe²⁰, who claim they do. I, however, follow Fivush in this respect, who, together with many other psychologists and neuropsychologists, maintains that although autobiographical memory does not have to be linguistically based, narrative performs a vital function: "it is through narrating the past with

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁸ See for example S. Bluck, *Autobiographical memory: Exploring its functions in everyday life*, "Memory", 11 (2): 2003, pp. 113-123.

¹⁹ E. Kandel, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of the New Science of Mind*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 10.

²⁰ Howe says: "it is the emergence of the cognitive self in the second year of life that is the key event that launches autobiographical memory. [...] [L]anguage serves to preserve [...] or potentially to alter [...] memory records of personally experienced events, but it is not a prerequisite to their foundation." In *Early Memory, Early Self, and the Emergence of Autobiographical Memory*, [in] *The Self and Memory*, Eds. D. Beike, J. Lampinen and D. Behrend, New York: Psychology Press, 2004, p. 46.

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others, through joint reminiscing, that we come to have a sense of ourselves through time”²¹.

That language plays a central role not only in sharing but also in the formation of our memories can be clearly seen when we observe the development of children and their memories. Many developmental psychologists believe that there is a close correlation between language development and cognitive development. Children are usually unable to remember anything prior to the age of two to four years – this phenomenon was mentioned earlier and is known as childhood amnesia. Some critics believe that the failure to retrieve memories from this period is not only due to neuropsychological development but also due to the lack of language. As soon as children start to acquire language and narrative competencies, they begin constructing stories of their past. At the beginning, this process is helped by parents or carers²². Nelson and Fivush explain that “the adult provides a linguistic ‘scaffold’ that helps to focus the child’s attention and organize the event into a coherent whole”²³. This leads Nelson and Fivush to argue that language is important for the development of autobiographical memories for three reasons:

First, language is not simply the way in which memories are expressed, but is instrumental in providing an organizational structure for personal experience. Second, language allows children to enter into dialogues with other people about their experiences, and these dialogues facilitate children’s developing abilities to form organized representations of their experiences. Finally, these dialogues highlight for children the fact that memories are representations of events that occurred at specified points in the past and that are evaluated from multiple perspectives²⁴.

²¹ R. Fivush, *The development of autobiographical memory*, “Annual Review of Psychology”, 62 (5): 2011, p. 565.

²² R. Fivush, T. Habermas, T. Waters, and W. Zaman, *The making of autobiographical memory: Intersections of culture, narrative and identity*, “International Journal of Psychology”, 46 (5): 2011, pp. 5-7.

²³ R. Fivush and K. Nelson, *Culture and language in the emergence of autobiographical memory*, “Psychological Science”, 15 (9): 2004, p. 574.

²⁴ Ibid.

The importance of language to the formation of memories can also be seen in Helen Keller's moving autobiography *A Story of My Life*, which was published in 1903. Keller lost her hearing and vision before she managed to acquire language, and her communication was hindered until the age of seven – the time when she began being trained in tactile sign language. Up to this point her memories are a mixture of descriptions of sensations and dry facts about her family and her household, which could have been provided by any family member, and which might have been obtained after she acquired tactile language. I would risk saying that many of these memories formed part of her semantic memory – things she knew but did not necessarily remember. The fact that we need language to form a coherent story of our life is suggested by Keller herself in the following fragment: "Many incidents of those early years are fixed in my memory, isolated, but clear and distinct, making the sense of that silent, aimless, dayless life all the more intense"²⁵. Keller clearly states that she remembers some of the events but they are isolated; they contribute neither to the coherent story of her life, nor to the coherent sense of self, which is in line with Fivush's observations on the role of language and narrative in the formation of life stories.

Keller also narrates a very interesting incident which can suggest that our mind is textually structured to a considerable degree. In the course of acquiring tactile sign language, Keller was fond of having books read to her, and later she tried her hand at composing narratives. In one of the chapters, she recounts how she unintentionally and unconsciously plagiarized a story. She wrote a story and sent it to a magazine, but as soon as it was published it turned out that a very similar tale had already existed. Keller comments, "At that time I eagerly absorbed everything I read without a thought of authorship, and even now I cannot be quite sure of the boundary line between my ideas and those I find in books. I suppose this is because so many of my impressions come to me through the medium of others' eyes and ears"²⁶. And then she adds: "It is certain that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and texture of my mind."²⁷

²⁵ H. Keller, *The Story of My Life*, New York: Bantam Classic, 2005, p. 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

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Keller remembered new words but not the circumstances of reading. I find the last part of her statement particularly fascinating because it shows the extent to which our mind is textually and culturally structured, how the stories we hear and read contribute to our ideas, and how they ingrain themselves unconsciously in our memory.

These four aspects – memory, language, narrative and self/identity – are therefore closely interrelated. Language, narrative, memory, and self are in a circular interdependence. When we lose our memory, we often lose language and narrative capacities together with our sense of self (this can be particularly observed in Alzheimer's patients). And conversely, to be able to use language one has to have knowledge, that is memory, of it. Language and narrative are then used for the construction of our self through recounting and sharing memories. Memory feeds our sense of self and is constantly shaped by it as our changing self can change our memories, which turn out to be very plastic. As Schacter explains, "We often edit or entirely rewrite our previous experiences – unknowingly and unconsciously – in light of what we now know or believe. The result can be a skewed rendering of a specific incident, or even of an extended period of our lives, which says more about how we feel *now* than about what happened *then*."²⁸ Our self therefore influences which memories are favored, which ones are recounted and shared, and how they are perceived.

Language, narrative, self, memory in language memoirs

Autobiographical texts give us a rare opportunity to witness how narrative identities are constructed. For Aneta Pavlenko, and I agree with her in this regard,

Narrative identities, constructed in fiction and non-fiction writing, often emerge as reactions to available identity options, reproducing some and rejecting or re-imagining others. Autobiographies play a central role in the process of identity negotiation in writing, as they are a prime example of 'identity narrative' [...]²⁹

²⁸ D. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001, p. 5. [Original italics].

²⁹ A. Pavlenko, "The Making of an American": *Negotiation of Identities at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, [in] *Negotiations of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*, Eds. A. Pavlenko and A. Blackledge, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2003, p. 35.

This negotiation of available identity options is particularly visible in memoirs written by people who are, at least to a certain extent, outsiders to the cultures they describe, and such is the case with both authors analysed here.

Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* published in 1989 concentrates on the acquisition of the English language and describes how her identity was influenced in the process. Hoffman, a Jewish-Polish author, divides her narrative into three parts: the first one, entitled "Paradise," is devoted to her childhood in Poland; the second, "Exile," narrates her move to Canada, and the third one, "A New World," depicts her life in the United States. The other analyzed text, written by a bilingual, or in this case multilingual, author is Ilan Stavans's *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* published in 2001. Stavans, a speaker of Yiddish, Spanish, Hebrew, and English, spent his childhood in Mexico, several years of his youth in Israel, and eventually settled in the United States. Despite being written over a twelve-year span, these texts share many reflections and observations on language and beyond, although there are also some considerable differences among them. While some of these disparities are the result of the authors' personal circumstances, others stem from the subject positions and discourses available at a given time and place. However, it is not the aim of this essay to provide a comprehensive comparison of these narratives.

Although I refer to these books as memoirs, I realize that providing them with such a label is debatable, as at least one of them might be easily characterized as autobiography. Defining life genres, however, is difficult, and distinguishing between autobiography and memoir is particularly so. Julie Rak observes that in the North American publishing industry "memoir is in the process of becoming a byword for autobiography."³⁰ Some critics therefore treat them interchangeably, like Ben Yagoda in his study *Memoir: A History*, while others try to make a distinction. Differentiating autobiography from memoir, Thomas Couser notes that "*autobiographies* are generally more comprehensive – in chronology and otherwise; *memoirs* are generally more focused and selective."³¹ According to this classification, Hoffman's narrative can be regarded as autobiography because her story is recounted in chronological order

³⁰ J. Rak, *Are memoirs autobiographies?: A consideration of genre and public identity*, "Genre", xxxvi: 2004, p. 305.

³¹ G. T. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*, Oxford: OUP, 2012, p. 24. [Original Italics].

and covers most of her life. Stavans's text is different in this respect. In fact, Stavans plays with autobiographical genres and is well aware of it, for at the end of his narrative he states: "My book is not really a memoir in the traditional sense, but a series of snapshots," and describes it "a disjointed picture, the way life really is – incongruous"³². However, both texts are treated here as memoirs because both authors reconstruct their past through the prism of language. The focus on language shapes their narrative, their reminiscence, and their self-understanding. The importance of language is even evident in the titles and subtitles they chose. Framing their stories by concentrating on language, both authors pierce its transparency so often assumed in other memoirs, and their texts can be classified as "language memoirs"³³.

Hoffman and Stavans take similar views on how their languages contribute to their sense of self and to their identity. Aneta Pavlenko, a professor of linguistics particularly interested in the phenomenon of bilingualism, conducted a survey among bilingual people asking "Do you feel like a different person sometimes when you use your different languages?"³⁴ Analyzing her data, she distinguished four systems of coherence that speakers employ to understand their various selves. The first one – "one language – one personality" – suggests that each language creates a different self; the second one – the "in-between system" – allows for the intersection of various languages and selves; the third one posits that only one language – usually the native one – is the language of the true self; and the fourth one, "language independent self" asserts that there is one self and it is not related to the languages we speak³⁵.

Hoffman clearly fluctuates between the first and the second perspective. On the one hand, she writes about the conflict between the Polish and English self and illustrates it quite vividly by simulating the conversations, or rather arguments, between them. She endows each self with different views, beliefs,

³² I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language*, New York: Viking, 2001, p. 248.

³³ See for example A. Pavlenko, *Language Learning Memoirs as a Gendered Genre*, "Applied Linguistics", 22 (2): 2001, pp. 213-240 in which she mentions Hoffman's book as an example of a language memoir.

³⁴ Idem, *The Bilingual Mind: And What it Tells us about Language and Thought*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014, p. 198.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 198-99.

and sensibilities, but towards the end of the narrative, she manages to integrate them, coming to the conclusion that “Each language modifies the other, cross-breeds with it, fertilizes it. [...] Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages [...]”³⁶ Stavans also seems to waver between the first two perspectives, but, like Hoffman, he eventually leans towards the second one. He clearly states that there is no essential self that would be unrelated to his languages, and that he is “not one, but two, three, four people,” which would be in line with the first system of coherence – one language – one self. However, in the course of his memoir, it becomes clear that there is a crossbreeding between his various selves and languages. At some point Stavans quotes Mary Antin – the author of the well-known immigrant autobiography entitled *The Promised Land*, which has been popular ever since its publication in 1912 – who points to a clear divide between her past and present self, stating in her preface that “*she*, and not *I*, is my real heroine”³⁷. Stavans says that he is unable to create a similar split “for I sense that miscegenation has taken place: my Mexican self is not altogether gone, nor is my American self so prevalent as to erase everything else”³⁸. Although he favors English, his other languages coexist with it, and they all contribute to the person he is. As he explains, although initially “[t]he immigrant feels trapped in the space in between words and in the intricacies of the journey. [...] sooner or later, loss is transformed into gain: the immigrant is born again [...]. [T]he successful immigrant feels the fusion of tongues as an addition rather than a subtraction.”³⁹

Schrauf and Rubin demonstrate that memory is language-specific for bilinguals, and from this they draw the following conclusion: “insofar as memory is language-specific, it makes sense to think of the bilingual immigrant as inhabiting different worlds and having the experience of language-specific selves”⁴⁰. They also believe that “bilinguals seem to retrieve memories in

³⁶ E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989, p. 273.

³⁷ I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, p. 253. [Original italics].

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁰ R. Schrauf and D. Rubin, *On the Bilingual's Two Sets of Memories*, [in] *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self*, Eds. R. Fivush and C. A. Haden, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2003, p. 141.

the same language in which they were encoded”⁴¹. As a result, they suggest that the loss of mother tongue can entail the loss of memories for childhood events⁴². The relationship between memory and language is evident in Stavans’s story of his Jewish grandmother, Bobbe Bela, who was born in Poland and managed to flee the country for Mexico before Hitler’s invasion. Interestingly, once she left the country, she decided to never speak Polish again despite the fact that she arrived in Mexico as a grown-up (she was 19) and therefore was a fluent speaker of that language. Stavans comments: “her past needed to be overcome, even erased, if survival was to be achieved. Not only a new country and a new culture but a language was on the horizon when she left Nowe Brodno”⁴³. Although Spanish first overwhelmed her, “to survive, she would need to master it, to make it her own. [...] She would think: What is ‘nostalgia’ in Polish? And she would not be able to come up with the right word, for it had retreated to depths she would no longer be capable of reaching.”⁴⁴ His grandmother’s refusal to speak Polish indeed suggests that the erasure of language in a way prompts the erasure of memories. She forces herself to forget the language, hoping that it would bring the loss of unwanted and difficult memories and make space for a new self in a new language. Stavans comments: “pain and unpleasantness ought to be ignored, eliminated from memory, nullified”⁴⁵.

However, his grandmother has never given up Yiddish – her mother tongue, which erupts whenever she is in distress or when she talks to herself. Yiddish seems to be the language of her emotions. The connection between languages and emotions is aptly described by Mary Besemer, another Polish-English critic, who illustratively explains:

If Polish has the words like *ptaszku* [little bird] and *córuchna* [sweet-daughter-of-mine] whereas English does not, this is not an arbitrary idiosyncratic fact about the language, unrelated to other aspects of Polish culture. For a Polish-English

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 129.

⁴² Ibid., p. 138.

⁴³ I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

bilingual, the emotional style made possible by such words is part of the two emotional worlds that she lives in, which engage different parts of her self⁴⁶.

For that reason, Stavans is disappointed in his grandmother's choice of language for her diary – a piece of very intimate writing – which she composed in Spanish. He appreciates that this decision was motivated by that fact that few members of her family were familiar with Yiddish, and her aim was “to be read, understood, appreciated”⁴⁷. Yet Stavans regards it as a form of treason, saying that her diary strikes him as “inauthentic”⁴⁸. Stavans wonders whether the translation from the languages available to her in adolescence to Spanish skewed the memories of the past. He writes:

I try to imagine how Bela would have written to me in her *true* tongue: Yiddish. I conjure the warm, gentle sounds articulated in its sentences, the magic of re-creating Nowe Brodno as it felt to her. [...] In seeking words absent from her childhood (simple forms: *se me declaró, un malparido* [son of a bitch, bastard], *Puerco Judío* [Jewish pig]), has she amended her own past?⁴⁹

He suggests that the things experienced in one language are often not translatable into another, at least not fully.

A similar dilemma presented itself to the adolescent Hoffman, who recounts being given a diary by her Canadian friend. Hoffman could not decide in which language she should write in it. She admits that “writing in Polish at this point would be a little like resorting to Latin or ancient Greek”⁵⁰ – remote and impersonal languages – so she decides to keep it in English, even though it makes her diary devoid of typically teenage subjects such as “sentimental effusions of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about

⁴⁶ M. Besemer, *Different languages, different emotions? Perspectives from autobiographical literature*, “Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development”, 25(2&3): 2004, p. 156. [Original italics].

⁴⁷ I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, p. 51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* [original italics].

⁵⁰ E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, p.120.

death”⁵¹, for, as she explains, “English is not the language of such emotions.”⁵² With time, however, she admits that writing in English, like Stavans’s grandmother’s use of Spanish, begins “to invent another me”⁵³.

Stavans is also bothered by the choice of language for his reminiscences. He admits that “crafting my memoir in English will, in and of itself, be a form or treason. For shouldn’t it be written in at least three or four languages (Yiddish, Spanish, Hebrew, English), the four tongues in which – and through which – I’ve experienced life”⁵⁴. But he knows that “no publisher in his right mind would endorse such an endeavor”⁵⁵ and indeed it would be daunting for an average reader. Moreover, he, like his grandmother, is also motivated by a desire to be read. He writes openly about his reasons for not expressing himself in a marginal language like Spanish. “Spanish”, he claims, “in spite of being the third-most-important language on the globe, after Chinese and English, is peripheral. It is a language that flourishes in the outskirts of culture, more reactive than active.”⁵⁶ Writing in English guarantees authors a bigger audience and the cultural validation they seem to crave. English seems to endow these writers with public identity, with a voice, and even with acclaim. This obviously points to the hegemony of English, but it is a marginal remark that is beyond the scope of the present study. Would these memoirs be published in other languages? Would they gain such popularity? It is doubtful.

In one of the evocative fragments, in which she describes her beginnings in Canada, Hoffman emphasizes the interdependence of language, memory, and the self. She explains:

The small event, instead of being added to the mosaic of consciousness and memory, falls through some black hole, and I fall with it. What has happened to me in this new world? I don’t know. I don’t see what I’ve seen, don’t comprehend what’s in front of me. I’m not filled with language anymore, and I have only a me-

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 121.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

mory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don't really exist⁵⁷.

Hoffman tries to capture the perceptions and emotions of her adolescent self. Having spent too little time in Canada to master the new language, Hoffman is temporarily devoid of language that would adequately express her experiences in a new place. During the transition period, English is too limited and does not feel “the language of the self”⁵⁸, and Polish “is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past”⁵⁹. Neither of the two languages available to her can effectively encode her experiences in a new environment. Hoffman therefore implies that language is important in the understanding and framing our experiences, and, as a result, it is central to forming new memories because as soon as we try to grasp the present moment and put it into words, it becomes our past. Without language to capture the here and now and to turn it into memories, Hoffman feels as if she did not exist. The lack of language equals the lack of memories, which, in turn, equals the lack of the story of the self.

Stavans emphasizes the importance of language and memory to our selfhood, too. After an already quoted fragment, in which Stavans says that he is “not one, but two, three, four people,” he continues: “Is there an *original* person? An essence? I’m not altogether sure, for without language I am nobody.”⁶⁰ His selves are therefore in a mutual relation with languages, and for that reason he cherishes all his languages because in them he can find his past selves. As far as memory is concerned, Stavans decides to finish his memoir – a decision that is very telling itself – with a story that clearly shows that devoid of memory we dissolve into non-being. In the last pages, Stavans recounts a rather impersonal story of a woman whom he encountered at the airport. While awaiting his flight, Stavans spots and starts observing the woman, who seems to be oblivious to her surroundings and who remains weirdly immobile, except for repeated movements such as checking her nonexistent watch or

⁵⁷ E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, p. 108.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶⁰ I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, p. 250 [Original italics].

opening and closing her handbag. As it turns out later, the woman, whom Stavans describes a bit cruelly as “a lifeless object”⁶¹, “automaton,” and “robot”⁶², has lost her memory. This incident provokes the following thought: “Memory: Is there a more fragile human faculty? Without it, what are we? It is the only record we have of who we were and what we want to become. Take it away and only a spiritless machine is left, free of conviction, free of purpose.”⁶³ Indeed, clinical studies conducted on patients suffering from either retrograde amnesia (the inability to remember the past) or anterograde amnesia (the inability to form new memories), or both, confirm that the life and identity of amnesiacs is highly disturbed. Alan Baddeley, for instance, reports the case of a patient named Clive – a talented musician and conductor who suffered a brain infection from herpes simplex virus which led to deep amnesia. Clive had some very general, sketchy, and scarce ideas about his past life – he knew, for example, that he graduated from Cambridge University – but he did not remember any specific episodes. Despite the fact that he was still able to play instruments, read music scores, or conduct a choir, he could not remember anything from his current life, which almost totally incapacitated him. Clive could not follow any conversation, book, or program. He was unable to leave the hospital because he immediately got lost. As Baddeley comments, Clive “was locked into a permanent present, something he described as ‘hell on earth’. ‘It’s like being dead – all the bloody time’.”⁶⁴ Our ability to mentally time travel is therefore more crucial than we might realize as memory is essential for the self.

The way Stavans develops his narrative resembles the process of reminiscing. His memoir is divided into six parts, although the sixth one seems to serve as a kind of afterword, which recounts the conversation with his friend, Richard Rodriguez, and provides a metanarrative on the process of writing his memoir. The first five parts concentrate on (1) his Mexican childhood, (2) his grandmother, (3) his father, (4) his brother, and (5) his journeys, although in each of these parts memories from various periods of his life appear. Each

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 261.

⁶² Ibid., p. 260.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 263.

⁶⁴ A. Baddeley, *What is Memory*, [in] *Memory*, Eds. A. Baddeley, M. Eysenck and M. Anderson, London: Psychology Press, 2015, p. 4.

story is represented by an item: pistol, *la pistola*, of his Mexican childhood, his grandmother's diary – *diario*, his father's car keys, the childhood photograph of his brother, and his passport. All these objects, as he puts it, "constitute a kind of almanac, a registry of reminiscences"⁶⁵. They seem to trigger memories and serve as a springboard for other reflections, and his memoir, as he states in the last part, is "a series of snapshots" which, he hopes, "add up to a cinematic picture, not of me but of my mind"⁶⁶. Stavans therefore tries to capture his mind at work, and he does so rather convincingly. His book is a collection of reminiscences: Some of them are related while others spring up unexpectedly. Stavans's memoir resists the narrative urge to organize his recollections into a coherent and chronological narrative. Of course, this is not to say that his memoir is an exercise in freewriting. On the contrary, his narrative is very controlled and deliberate; yet one has the impression that his thoughts, reflections, and memories flow freely through his mind (and narrative), as they often do in real life.

To give just one example: the first part starts with the story of him packing books from his personal library in New York (although at that point we do not know it is New York) – the story that will not only recur at different points of part one but will also conclude it. Packing his books, he is suddenly struck with an image of a small pistol that his father kept locked up in a safe-deposit box. This triggers memories of his Mexican childhood. He talks about his obsession with the pistol, which often led him to wonder why his father kept it in the houses. His obsession with the pistol is compared with his lack of interest in books in his adolescence, which, in turn, is juxtaposed with his love of them now. The memory of the pistol turns into a reflection about the presence of guns in Mexico, and then he goes back to contemplating particular books that he either had or has in his library, for he believes his collection tells a lot about the person he is and has been. Although it focuses mainly on Mexico, the narrative moves between various reminiscences of his life in Mexico and in New York, and his reflection on his personal collection of books serves as a thread that binds together the first part of his narrative.

⁶⁵ I. Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, p. 248.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

That memories might indeed be encoded in a specific language is suggested in both memoirs by the presence of non-English words in the text. Each part of Stavans's book is concentrated on a given language, and thus, the first, third, and fourth parts are centred around Spanish, the second around Yiddish, and the fifth one is a mixture of Hebrew and English – his two newly acquired languages. Stavans feels the need to include words in the language in which he experienced life at a given time, and his narrative is peppered with words and sentences, or even whole passages, in his four languages. For some of them, like a Spanish tongue-twister or a Hebrew song, he does not even provide any translation. Thus, he distances the reader, who may experience indirectly what an migrant feels when s/he moves to a land of a foreign language. His insistence on having equivalents of certain words and phrases in other languages also suggests that languages do not easily translate, and that culture may determine slightly different connotations, even for apparently equivalent lexical items – a fact that any person with a reasonable mastery of at least two languages is aware of or at least intuitively feels. This is clearly spelled out by Hoffman, who, for instance, explains that there is a cultural chasm between what Poles and Canadians mean by referring to a person as a friend. She says that in Polish, friendship “has connotations of strong loyalty and attachment bordering on love” and for that reason she first tries to distinguish between “acquaintances” and “friends,” but because in English the term “friend” “is such a good-natured, easygoing sort of term”⁶⁷, she quickly adopts it in circumstances in which she would not necessarily use it in Poland.

Hoffman's narrative is also full of Polish words, which feature particularly prominently in the first section devoted to her childhood in Poland and at the beginning of the second section, devoted to her transition to Canada, so the time when Polish was still her predominant language. Inserted in her recollection, these words constitute an inseparable part of the landscape of her Polish childhood and evoke nostalgic feelings. They act as cues by bringing back certain reminiscences. Hoffman often tries to capture the essence of these words, words which for her seem to ooze a certain aura or which trigger various associations. She explains the meaning of certain Polish words, trying to show that a simple translation does not suffice as words have different overtones in

⁶⁷ E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, p. 148.

different languages. Such is the case with “ *tęsknota*” – a word she mentions whenever she misses Poland or yearns for something unknown. It appears for the first time at the very beginning of the book when she recounts her departure from Poland and says that she experienced a bout of nostalgia or rather “ *tęsknota*” – “a word that adds to nostalgia tonalities of sadness and longing”⁶⁸. To a larger degree than Stavans, Hoffman dissects the way words represent our experiences. Using structuralist discourse, popular at the time when she wrote her memoir, she explains the process of the acquisition of a new language:

the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. “River” in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. “River” in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke⁶⁹.

For Hoffman, river – “ *rzeka*” – in Polish is most likely associated with the Vistula River (*Rzeka Wisła*) – the longest river in Poland, along which are situated the most important Polish cities, such as Warsaw, Gdańsk, Toruń, and Cracow where Hoffman grew up. The Vistula features prominently in Polish literature and culture, and for Hoffman, who has just moved to Canada, it brings to mind certain memories. Over the years spent in Poland, Hoffman most likely acquired many experiences connected with rivers (“ *rzeki*”), and with time these experiences turned into memories. In her newly acquired English, river is just a word, a sound, a visual representation, devoid at this point of any recollections. Experiencing life in languages, we build associations. Each of us, upon hearing the word “river” in our mother tongue, has a different mental image of this natural stream of flowing water. It might be the river close to our house, or the river we pass on our way to work, or the one by the banks of which we spend our free time. The fact that words bring to mind memories is often used by psychologists, who use them as cues words in their experiments to examine the remembering process.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

In order to recount stories of our life we need not only to remember our past and to possess language capacities to describe it, but also to have the knowledge of social and cultural conventions that govern the creation of stories. This brings us to another important aspect of self-making, namely the fact that we tell our lives adopting cultural scripts, which brings culture into the equation. For Conway, cultures determine the self-concept – a model for the self constructed at the intersection of the beliefs one holds about oneself and social norms and expectations. Fivush and her colleagues state that “culture provides organizational and evaluative frameworks for narrating lives, including canonical cultural biographies, life scripts, and master narratives”⁷⁰. Canonical biographies are simply life narratives significant in a given culture thanks to which we can learn what people at a given time and place mean by a valuable life. For Stavans and Hoffman, a canonical biography is Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, a classic immigrant autobiography from the beginning of the twentieth century which glorifies the process of assimilation and frames immigration from Europe to the United States as a success story. This is the text mentioned by both writers, who, being immigrants, measure themselves against its famous author, rejecting the model of the self put forward by Antin. Stavans, as mentioned above, rejects Antin’s split between the past and present selves, for he strongly believes that his linguistic selves are in a close, mutual relation. Hoffman, in turn, points out that she would not be able to produce a story similar to Antin’s because not only did she arrive in a different America than Antin, but also her own times predispose her to tell a different story. She explains:

she, like I, was affected by the sentiments of her time [...]. The America of her time gave her certain categories within which to see herself – a belief in self-improvement, in perfectibility of the species, in moral uplift – and those categories led her to foreground certain parts of her own experience, and to throw whole chunks of it into the barely visible background⁷¹.

⁷⁰ R. Fivush, T. Habermas, T. Waters, and W. Zaman, *The making of autobiographical memory*, p. 322.

⁷¹ E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, pp. 163-64.

Hoffman's words touch on the third element mentioned by Fivush and her collaborators in the above quote, namely master narratives or, in other words, the ways in which we frame our stories. Hoffman lists things that were important in Antin's time, and says that her own story must be framed within the "blessings and terrors of multiplicity"⁷². Hoffman's narrative incorporates contemporary discourses – structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. Her, and Stavans's, focus on language is not accidental either. In her article "The Making of An American": Negotiations of Identities at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" Pavlenko explains that language was not important to immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century in the way it is for many immigrants these days, and she provides a few reasons why this is the case. First of all, she mentions that before 1924 immigrants could use their native languages freely – a freedom that was curtailed only by the Immigration Act of 1924 – and therefore they did not feel the need to defend their right to express themselves in their mother tongues. She also acknowledges that the cultural ambience of the 1960s made language an important part of the struggle for ethnic identity⁷³. She fails to recognize, however, at least one more significant factor, namely that the linguistic turn triggered a focus on language as an important part of our identity. Previously, language had not been necessarily considered as a vital element of the self.

As for the cultural life scripts, Fivush et al. understand them as "the culturally shared expectations regarding the temporal order of normative significant life events (e.g. getting married then having children)"⁷⁴. They explain that if one's own life differs from the prescribed cultural scripts, one feels obligated to explain his or her choices (like not getting married or having children), whereas one never gives reasons for expected events (like getting married or having children)⁷⁵. Hoffman beautifully illustrates the importance of life scripts for self-understanding in the conversations between her English self and her Polish self that appear at different points of her book. As Jarczok notes:

⁷² Ibid., p. 164.

⁷³ A. Pavlenko, "The Making of an American": Negotiation of Identities at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, pp. 62-63.

⁷⁴ R. Fivush, T. Habermas, T. Waters, and W. Zaman, *The making of autobiographical memory*, p. 331.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 332.

Anita Jarczok, *Language, narrative, self, and memory in two language memoirs...*

The most compelling, and at the same time the most advertised⁷⁶, fragments of Hoffman's autobiography are the dialogues between her Polish and American self. The conversations in which she engages during the most momentous times of her life, such as deciding whether to get married and later divorced or whether to pursue her music career, reveal subject positions one can take up in a given culture⁷⁷.

Jarczok illustrates this with the example of divorce:

Divorce, a topic of the third and final conversation, is... treated differently in both cultures. A few decades ago divorces in Poland were rare and Hoffman knows that if she had lived and got married in Poland, she probably would not consider a divorce. In 1970s America, the second wave of feminism introduced significant changes in divorce law, and these were accompanied with the discourse of individual happiness and individual responsibility for that happiness. Divorce is therefore thinkable. In Poland Hoffman might have felt exactly the same in the confinement of an unhappy marriage, but she knows that in Poland divorce would not be something she would consider because she "would exist within the claustrophobia of no choice, rather than the agoraphobia of open options" (1989: 230-231)⁷⁸.

Each culture enables a different way of being in the world, and being an outsider to that culture makes these life scripts more evident. These scripts and

⁷⁶ The following fragment:

"Should you marry him? the question comes in English.

Yes.

Should you marry him? the question echoes in Polish.

No." (199)

is quoted in a range of academic and non-academic sources. Just to give a few examples: It is a fragment that features on the back cover of the American hardcover edition of the book. It is quoted in a recent article on language in *The Scientific Mind*, in Pavlenko's study *The Bilingual Mind* as well as a number of other publications (Judith Oster's *Crossing Cultures: Creating Identity in Chinese and Jewish American Literature*; Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzman (eds.), *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*; and Peter Auer and Li Wei (eds.), *Handbook of Multilingualism and Multilingual Communication*).

⁷⁷ A. Jarczok, *Re-constructing the self in language and narrative in Eva Hoffman's "Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language" and Anaïs Nin's "Early Diaries"*, "Studia Anglica Posnaniensia", 50 (2-3), p. 29.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

master narratives determine what we remember and how we remember it, and the memories we select for attention regulate our life stories, which, in turn, affect our self.

I hope that the above reflections have shown that memory processes, and research conducted on memory by psychologists and neuroscientists, need to be given more attention in autobiography studies for they can open up new ways to understand the relationship between the self, memory, language and narrative, as well as new ways to interpret memoirs, particularly those that concentrate on language. I have argued in this essay that language, narrative, memory and the self are mutually dependent and constitutive and together they contribute to “narrative identity.” Although the relationship between the self and narrative has been well-established and widely examined in many disciplines, memory processes need to be investigated more explicitly in our discussions of narrative identity because stories we tell about ourselves (and which shape our identity) often concern the past. Our life stories –whether spoken or written – are therefore produced at the intersection of our memories (which themselves are sociocultural to a large extent), subject positions, which are specific to various cultures and their languages, and narrative patterns, which are also inextricably linked to culture and language. While culture influences what we attend to forming and then retrieving our memories, languages (and various narrative schemes) help us encode, frame, and later share various experiences. Most of us experiences life in a language, and in language we build associations. These experiences and associations eventually become the repository of our memories, and memories inform our sense of self. The examined authors and their memoirs can help us better understand these various processes and correlations. Both authors show what it means to be trapped in the space between languages, when one feels that no language adequately captures the events of the everyday life, and how it influences the sense of self and the formation of memories.

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