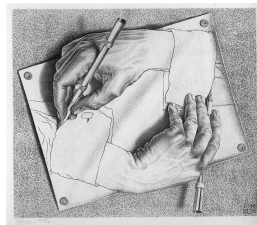


Language, Identity and Writing for Bilingual Writers: Problem or Resource?



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This project investigates the identity concerns of bilingual writers. It applies psychological theories on identity to literary works, namely to autobiographical texts written by bilingual writers.

After an examination of identity as a question pertaining to all human beings, I specifically address the peculiar challenges in identity development produced by bilingualism/biculturalism. My study is based on the psychological theories on identity formation developed by **Erik Erikson** and **Dan P. McAdams**. Bilingual identity is described mainly through the work of **John Edwards**, whose research is focused on language, identity, and their mutual interactions. I then consider the role of writing – in particular autobiographical writing – in identity formation, mostly drawing on McAdams' theory of **identity as a life story** within his narrative psychology research. Finally, moving from Edwards' observations on the bilingual brain, I analyze the relationship that bilingual writers have with writing in terms of choice of language, contamination, and code-switching.

These reflections are then verified through the study of actual texts by bilingual writers. My main focus of study is **Eva Hoffman's** memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*. Hoffman immigrated from Poland to Canada at the age of thirteen, going from living in what she perceived as "Paradise", into a state of hostile "Exile", as the titles of the first two sections of her book underline. Years later, Hoffman decided to undergo a further emigration – voluntary this time – into "The New World" (title of the third and final section of her memoir), which geographically corresponds to the United States but, metaphorically and psychologically, represents a mature decision to embrace her English-speaking, academic, writing self.

I then analyze the relationship between identity, language, and writing through a series of essays written by other bilingual authors, and published as a collection under the title of *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*.

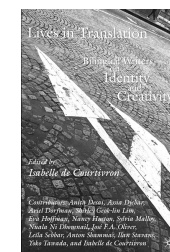
Bilingualism, in and of itself, does not cause just one specific type of consequence on an individual's identity. As testified by the different perspectives on identity given by the bilingual authors studied for this project, other variables, such as immigration, colonialism, class, poverty, race, ethnicity, family, and personal circumstances combine with bilingualism to create different outcomes in the bilingual experience. It is true, however, that some common patterns, reactions, and challenges in identity construction do seem to exist for bilinguals. The ultimate aim of my research was to establish, according to those shared patterns, whether bilingualism/biculturalism and the constant act of "translating" and "back-translating" oneself (and one's self) is more beneficial or rather detrimental to the unity of self, and to the development of an effective literary voice.

In spite of a pervasive sense of uncomfortable inner **split** in all of the texts, often exacerbated to the point of literary **aphasia** and "**schizophrenia**", bilingualism is seen as a positive and enriching resource for the creativity of bilingual writers. The blend of their two linguistic selves creates a **complex, but rich synthesis** and provides bilingual writers with a unique literary voice.



Polish is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past... Because I have to choose, I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present even if it's not the language of the self... Writing gives me a written self... This language is beginning to invent another me.

From Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language*, 1989



My speech, capable of doubling and trebling, participates in many cultures, even though I have but one manner of writing: the French one... Am I doomed to be a woman in transition, a passing writer, to deliver the message in stereo, so that instead of double loyalty it is double betrayal that awaits me?

Assia Djebar, "Writing in the Language of the Other", in *Lives in Translation*, 2003