

Discursive worlds of the language learner: a narrative analysis

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Resumen

El análisis de las narraciones autobiográficas permite la comprensión de muchos constructos clave en la teoría de la adquisición del segundo idioma. Tales enfoques toman el aprendizaje del lenguaje mas allá de la adquisición/asimilación de estructuras lingüísticas para centrarse en los alumnos a través de su compromiso con el “proyecto de aprendizaje del lenguaje”. En este artículo el autor analiza el marco teórico de su investigación de doctorado en la que analizó el aprendizaje del lenguaje hablado y escrito de seis alumnos de inglés de edades entre 30 y 62 años. Al reflejar sus historias, los alumnos acuden a un mundo de palabras que estructuran tanto el lenguaje como la historia que narran. El enfoque interpretativo utilizado en este estudio puede ayudar a comprender no solo como el que aprende puede mover diacrónicamente a través de diferentes posiciones de identidad sino tambien como esas posiciones están discursivamente estructuradas.

Abstract

The analysis of autobiographical narratives has recently been cited as extending our understanding of many key constructs in second language acquisition (SLA) theory. Such approaches take language learning beyond the acquisition/assimilation of linguistic structures to focus on learners as social selves actively enacting a range of social identities through engagement with the “language learning project”. In this article I discuss the theoretical framing for my PhD research for which I analysed the written and spoken language learning (his)stories of six British language “learners” aged between 30 and 62. In telling their stories, learners have recourse to a number of discursive worlds which structure their agency both as language learners and as story-tellers. The interpretive approach used in this study may help us to understand not only how a learner may move diachronically through different identity positions but how these positions are discursively structured.

The shift in the last decade toward viewing the language learner as a social actor (Dörnyei, 2006; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kramsch, 2006; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko, 2002; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Thorne, 2005) has led to range of interesting new paradigms in SLA. Among these “new approaches” (Dörnyei, 2006) is a greater focus on how commitment to language learning –what I call the “language learning project” (Coffey & Street, under review)– fluctuates over time,

both in formal learning contexts (Benson & Nunan, 2006; Breen, 2001b, Norton, 2001) and as a process of enculturation into a linguistic community (Norton Peirce, 1995; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). In the latter category, Norton's study of immigrant women in Canada stands out as pioneering analytical work for its use of reflexive accounts to understand how learners "invest" (Norton Peirce, 1995) in specific contexts of language use through engagement with a Bourdieuan social landscape where linguistic capital is manipulated by gatekeepers as symbolic power. Norton's work gave voice to the subjective experience of language "learners"¹ as actors in the world striving to do things, have things, be things. Although the longitudinal study focused on data collected during a finite period of learning the social selves that the learners projected onto their learning project reached (implicitly) back to their past selves and projected forward to the selves they were becoming and desired to be. In this sense their language learning projects were rooted in the life stories of the women.

Norton's concept of "investment" reconceptualised established, positivist SLA concepts of motivation² to emphasize the agentive capacities of the language learner in the social world. While earlier attempts to apply social identity theory in SLA had been constrained by positivist methods and reified notions of the native-speaker and a monolingual language community³, Norton, after Weedon (1987), qualified learners' social identity by emphasising the complex experience of the individual as subject in the following way.

Three defining characteristics of subjectivity, as outlined by Weedon, are particularly important for understanding my data: the multiple nature of the subject: subjectivity as a site of struggle: and subjectivity as changing over time. (Norton Peirce, 1995, 25)

My work also seeks to understand the evolving subjectivity of my participants with relation to what I call the "language learning project" i.e. their language learning history and the impact of this on their life. If most language learning

¹ The word "learner" is problematic (FIRTH & WAGNER, 1997) but is used here in preference to alternatives such as non-native speaker. The "learning" here refers to engagement with the foreign language in formal (pedagogical) contexts, and in informal, naturalistic contexts both in the UK, where the research is based, and abroad in target language communities.

² I am referring here to the "traditional" canon of language learning motivation research, based largely on Gardner's canonical concepts of integrative vs. instrumental motivation GARDNER, 1985; GARDNER & LAMBERT, 1959; GARDNER & LAMBERT, 1972). It should be noted, however, that Gardner's concepts have also been taken in new directions to fit new contexts and research questions e.g. see CZÍZÉR & DÖRNYEI (2005); DÖRNYEI (2006).

³ Since the seminal work of social theorists like Foucault and Bourdieu in the 1970s, traditional sociological and anthropological ways of talking about groups and group belonging have given way to seeking to represent individual, first person experiences i.e. how does the individual *experience* social categories. The use of earlier social identity constructs such as Tajfel's (1974) in-group / out-group taxonomy led to some influential ethnolinguistic theories in SLA (e.g. GILES' (1979) accommodation theory; Schumann's (1978) acculturation theory). However, these have since been criticised for privileging a monolingual perspective and for their restrictive definition of a learner (see PAVLENKO, 2002).

memoirs consider “becoming bilingual” as a renegotiation of identities I wanted to investigate how foreign⁴ language learners articulate their own experience of language learning with reference to life events, in other words, how the self-told narrative of being a successful language learner –someone who speaks French, Spanish etc.– is figured into their life (his)stories.

Autobiography as performance

Life history is now a recognised genre in the social sciences which allows us to get a hand on first person experiences (Erben, 2001; Jolly, 2001; Roberts, 2002). However, what people say about their lives is not only not always true but can never be a complete picture. Life histories therefore are partial and contingent upon the context of their telling. In the study discussed here life histories are not treated as revelatory, but, rather as performative accounts (Bauman, 1986). People recount events and stories about themselves for certain reasons –they want to be perceived in certain ways and their memories are filtered by language and restricted narrative structures. Autobiography– telling the self –is not, therefore, a record of past events, nor even a voice expressing inner-subjectivities, but rather a socially constructed project: “To report one’s memories is not so much a matter of consulting mental images as it is engaging in a sanctioned form of telling” (Gergen, 2002, 90).

That which is told, therefore, is far from random, but is subject to norms of “tellability” which are culturally construed. There is a double bind at work in both adhering to collective narrative norms and carving out a particular story of an individual life. Bruner (2001) reiterates the dual function of autobiography to

...present ourselves to others (and to ourselves) as typical or characteristic or “culture confirming” in some way. That is to say, our intentional states and actions are comprehensible in the light of “folk psychology” that is intrinsic in our culture. In the main we laugh at what is canonically funny (and feel) sorrow for what is canonically sad. This is the set of “givens” in life. ... However, to assure individuality... we focus on what, in the light of some folk psychology, is exceptional –and, therefore, worth tellin– in our lives. (Bruner, 2001, 29-30)

It is within the tension between these two narrative orientations, described by Piller & Takahashi (2006) as the “macro-domains of public discourses and the micro-domains of individual experience” that discursive agency is enacted. In the context of my study, participants (all British and currently resident in England)

⁴ I consciously use the word *foreign* as the participants in this research are all first language English speakers talking about engagement with learning a “modern foreign language”, often, though not always, a foreign language that they first came into contact with at school. In this respect my research is distinctive from much language learning narrative research which has focused on the experience of second language learners (usually of English) *in situ*.

frame their individual language learning projects within common, iconic references to France/French, Germany/German etc. as well as within a particular British narrative of *being* a foreign language learner.

Life as Narrative

Narratives allow an individual to make sense of their own past, present and (predicted or imagined) future. Indeed, continuity across time is a key feature of narrative (McCabe & Petersen, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1995; Ricœur, 1984). Bruner's claim –in his influential paper “Life as narrative” (1987)– that “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told” (ibid: 31) posited that we can *only* make meaning of our life through narrative patterns i.e. everything is narrative! What we tell ourselves and what we tell others is structured by culturally determined patterns of meaning.

Through the act of telling we create stories and characters of our own lives but these draw on existent narratives so that any telling is only a reconfiguration. Narratives are collectively told within groups to reinforce a sense of community and tradition (Anderson, 1983; Hopsbawm & Ranger, 1983) as well as within families, groups of friends, married couples, colleagues and so forth. Gee (1991) suggests that we share and repeatedly retell events (so that they are “rehearsed”) in a particular way in order to remember them. Indeed, he posits that at the origin of narrative as a universal human form (of cognitive processing) may lie our need to remember events. He argues that personal memories function in the same way. If they are “unrehearsed” they disappear so we retell them to others and to ourselves until they are woven into (a version of) autobiography.

The narrative turn in SLA theory

The current “narrative turn” in the social sciences –now to be found in “almost every discipline and profession” (Reissman, 2002, 696)– does not claim to offer a single, unified theory but is, rather, an orientation “that aims at examining the nature and role of narrative discourse in human life, experience and thought” (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001: 10). Narrative analysis has been taken beyond the formal(ist) linguistic level to be acknowledged as a tool for sociocultural analysis (e.g. Hymes, 1996; Labov, 1972) pointing to specific ways of telling as culturally embedded narrative forms which act as a potential mechanism for holding or withdrawing symbolic power.

In SLA theory there has been a particular emphasis on the reconstruction of social selves through language learning. Narrative analyses have been carried out both of literary memoirs of identity reconstruction into a new culture/language (e.g. Besemeres, 2002, 2004; Kinginger, 2004; Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko & Lantolf,

2000) and of language learners' accounts of their learning elicited expressly for empirical research purposes (e.g. the edited collection of studies reported in Benson & Nunan, 2005)⁵. The groundbreaking insights of these studies highlight how the shaping of identities through language learning can be a powerful motivating force as learners engage with and appropriate, consciously and unconsciously, identities which are determined by overlapping narratives. Contextualising language learning as an identity project within a life history takes the experience of language learning beyond the acquisition/assimilation of linguistic structures to focus on learners as social selves actively enacting a range of social identities. Furthermore, narrative analysis of language learning stories –in both content and form– allows us to see how identities are performed in the account. Subjectivities (of “bilinguals”, both circumstantial and elective) are expressed as orientations towards narratives of self and otherness. Thus, for example, language learners situate themselves between two or more iconic cultures, language communities, language selves etc. in the same way as the autobiographer situates herself discursively across past, present and future moments.

Toward an analytic frame

Using Labov's (1972) principle of the *narrative event* and an interpretive coding approach rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2002, 2003) I developed a narrative analytical frame which treated the accounts of learners' own language learning as discursive constructions of selves embedded within a complex net of identity positions that are enacted by the research participant in the act of narrating. Labov's distinction between the “present here-and-now” *I* and the “then / in-the-story” *I* allows us to see how the *narrating* and the *narrated* selves are brought together as performance in the event of telling. The story teller appears as both narrator and character, the *narrative* event itself an evaluation of the *narrated* event. If indeed, “narrative is the most powerful mode of persuasion” (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, 41) then the people, stories and places that are invoked in the act of telling and the manner of their invocation serve a rhetorical function, accomplished dialogically with the listener and, indeed, with innumerable invisible audiences. This type of narrative approach allows the language learning experience to be articulated as a long-term life project from the emic perspective of individual learners while also recognising that common cultural narratives draw this experience across shared frames of reference. These narratives are structured ways of telling and acting akin to Gee's “Discourses”:

A *Discourse* is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions and “artefacts”, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting

⁵ Kramersch's book *The Multilingual Subject* (still under review at the time of writing though previewed in Kramersch, 2006), includes both literary memoirs and elicited language learning histories.

that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network” or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful “role”. (Gee, 1996, 131)

The discursive worlds which participants invoke in describing their experience(s) as language learners combine sites of identity that are oriented toward material, cultural worlds (e.g. the world of being a language teacher, of being an English person, of being a foreigner). In the act of telling, these subjectivities are metaphorically interpreted to fit (shared) narrative conventions, for example, the narrative(s) of the outsider, the success story. This narrative approach seeks to represent how learners inhabit different subject positions, thereby acknowledging that “categories” or “labels” –like “personality traits” (Candlin, 2001)– are dynamic.

For my own research I asked six “successful language learners” to write a potted autobiography of their language learning⁶. Participants were asked to include formal and informal learning contexts, any periods abroad and any events or people that they might identify as motivating or demotivating factors. After reading these I then organised an interview with each participant, which I semi-structured with a list of prompts, then taped and transcribed. The written accounts served both as a means to collect preliminary background data to help me and the participant to prepare for interview and as a means to triangulate the discursive narratives.

Unsurprisingly, there were clear structural differences between the written text and the spoken narrative of the interview. Whereas the written accounts, following the rubric, enumerated a series of formal learning and professional contexts, the

⁶ “Successful language learners” are defined here as adults who had studied languages to degree level or who had gained proficiency in a language by living in the target language country and/or using foreign language(s) in their professional life. Of the six participants, two are men and four are women. I am mindful of the “gender bias” in language learning memoirs reported by Pavlenko (2001) and there may be potential for further data analysis based on gender, though this has not been the main focus of my study. Other “under-represented voices” cited by Pavlenko in the same article include the “gay voice” and the “working class voice”. Again, as some of the participants in my study were gay, this, too, might yield some interesting findings. Many of my participants inadvertently did refer to the freedom of anonymity which speaking a foreign language afforded and how this is construed as freedom from being socially bracketed:

I suppose it’s a bit more than anonymous – you can be anyone you want to be. People don’t know all your history ... I mean you can be somebody else and, well, you’re automatically more interesting to people – you’re sort of exotic, you’re different, which makes it a lot easier ... you can be more accepted into a community with the language differences.

Glenda – interview (2003)

Yeah. That’s interesting because I think (...) when I’m speaking in English (...) I’m pretty sure that people start to pigeon-hole you because of your accent, right? (...) but when I’m in– when you’re in France, you see, you have– there is no social baggage in that sense.

Sue interview (2005)

Of the six participants: two are former colleagues, two are social acquaintances, and two were introduced to me by people who knew about my research. Each participant gave willingly of their time and all told me afterwards that they had enjoyed their involvement in the study as it had made them “think about why I did certain things” (Paul – interview, 2006). Consent to publish data, in anonymised form, was obtained by all participants.

interviews were characterised by more flashback and flashforward. The two different accounts privileged considerably different events and perspectives, sometimes even yielding contradictions in terms of reported content (e.g. one participant's memory of her year abroad was quite rose-tinted on paper but framed negatively in the interview). It was, therefore, during the follow-up interview that I was able to bring in the etic framing concepts and questions to encourage participants to talk about how they identified themselves as characters, how they represented the experience of time abroad and contact with target-language speakers and the target-language culture and how their language learning project had influenced and been influenced by wider, non-(formally)-educational aspects of their life e.g. marriage, career, the desire to travel, the desire for independence, for anonymity, for group acceptance, for self-fulfilment.

Narrative worlds of language learning

The written and spoken accounts which I report on here are seen as narratives that provide insights into how learners describe their language learning projects with reference to their experience as over time. The language learning project is described as acted upon by the narrated self (the learner) being subject to, occupying and appropriating series of narrative worlds. When asked to recount their language learning histories, participants in this study often made unexpected links between the language learning project and other aspects of their autobiographical landscape. Key moments in “becoming” bilingual and/or engaging with new contexts of foreign language use were not expressed in terms of technical, linguistic progression, which has, historically, been the focus of SLA research, but rather in terms of expansion, self-realisation, critical incidents, cultural types, metaphors of struggle.

Many of these elements seemed to be built on previously self-told memories of understanding the world with relation to the language learning experience. Of course, the role of the interpretive frame and my involvement as researcher in shaping the narrative resulted in a jointly constructed (Mishler, 1986; Block, 2000) set of stories bound by specific theoretical and epistemological strands. The narratives, then, represent social acts of engagement in the process of constructing identities for both personal understanding (i.e. diachronically, across a lifetime) and social positioning (i.e. synchronically, at a given moment). This type of analysis goes beyond the positivistic position of “collecting” data about the lives and stated attitudes of categories of learners toward a less predictable, interpretive –and always contingent– perspective. It soon became apparent that participants conflated accounts of their identities as language learners with those of other subject positions according to profession and social status as well as their personal logic of narrative construction. The common themes which can be used for analysis therefore do not

emerge at the level of particular events or actual common experiences so much as at the level of what participants say about these and how the narratives are individually and collectively shaped. The analytic frame, then, treats the life stories as discursive constructions.

Drawing on these insights, the subjectivities expressed by participants in my study are realised through different narrative worlds of the language learner which act as gravitational pulls, each constituted by personal and cultural referents. After sorting both sets of textual data, first chronologically then thematically, I was eventually able to identify a set of thematic categories which were stable across the narratives:

- Childhood: school - memories of teachers
- Childhood: school - language(s) as a school subject
- Childhood: family influences
- Adult learning (formal and informal learning contexts)
- Time abroad (self as foreigner / as missionary / as adventurer etc.)
- Professional Self (as)
- Professional Self (as)

As different selves are evoked at different times of the interview, so participants have recourse to different, context-specific rhetoric. For example, when describing memories of schoolteachers participants (of all ages) sometimes slipped into a familiar “playground rhetoric”, reinforcing iconic teacher types:

It was probably just as well I had her because the other - erm, one of the other teachers, her name was Miss Bromfield, and if you can imagine that, sort of, the original dragon with, sort of, knickers down to her knees, you know what I mean? Absolute real dragon, a real dragon. I'm sure if I'd have had her as a teacher I'd have been so frightened it would have put me off.

Sue - interview (2004)

I liked the teacher; he was a little “off the wall” and had a reputation for living in a different world but had the nickname “dynamite” from his initials T.N.Titchmarsh.

Paul - written account (2006)

At other times, teachers were referred to negatively to support a narrative of success in the face of adversity:

GEMMA I went to a very rough comprehensive where languages were very very very badly taught.

COFFEY Were they?

GEMMA Yeah, by French mother-tongue speakers who'd had a very very formal training so it was all very very traditional?

COFFEY And, erm given that, I mean why do you think you went on to study languages at degree level?

GEMMA Well I loved languages and it was taught so badly so I decided that I would like to train as a language teacher myself and do it properly.

COFFEY Oh wow. Really?

GEMMA 'Cos the teachers were so appalling.

Gemma - interview (2005)

Views of “learning” were articulated differently according to the immediate narrative context. Sometimes participants framed their language learning experience as a “school subject”, other times linked to a desire to travel or to realise self-fulfilment, or as a natural capacity, or as a professional skill. These were not either/or accounts of experience, rather, an exposition of how one person’s language learning project is experienced across and articulated through the range of “sedimented” (Holland, Lachiotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain, 2001) narrative worlds that constitute a life history. The following extracts are all taken from an interview with one participant, Sue.

Without the discursive context of each utterance, the extracts show bold, disparate statements, yet they also reveal some of the tensions in Sue’s own understanding of how she figures language learning (in Sue’s case, French) into her life:

1. French as school subject;
2. language learning associated with travel and excitement;
3. language skills as professional capital;
4. language learning as a private / solitary (maybe eccentric) activity;
5. language proficiency as an indicator of an adaptable, social self;
6. a romanticised image of France as a mythical other place;
7. language proficiency as anonymity (freedom from the scrutiny of L1 shared frames of reference):

1. SUE I don’t remember anything about the text book we used, but the methodology was firmly grammar-translation throughout my secondary school life. (...) I liked French right from the start. (...) I think English and French were the two, and history actually. Geography I gave up because it was rubbish teaching and we had to choose between history and geography.

2. COFFEY Did you always fancy the idea of travelling?

- SUE Mmmm. Yeah. When I was fifteen I wanted to be an air-hostess -
3. SUE As I saw my career trajectory more with the languages field, I began an MA course in 20th Century French Cultural studies.
4. SUE (It's funny because there is this sort of thing about knowing a language, especially being good at it, sets you a little bit apart from a lot of people.
5. COFFEY (W)hen you're speaking French in the French context, do you feel that you slightly become a different person, or you take on -
- SUE I'm a chameleon -
- COFFEY or you take on a French persona?
- SUE I'm a chameleon.
- COFFEY Yeah.
- SUE I'm a chameleon and I think I probably should have been an actress which was the other thing that I really wanted to do.
6. SUE I mean, there's an escape form the, sort of, Protestant work ethic type, you know. The idea that the good life is OK, you know, to enjoy life, through things like good food, good wine and enjoying yourself sitting round a table for three hours, it can actually be quite nice, and to sit talking.
7. SUE (W)hen I'm in –when you're in France, you see, you have– there is no social baggage in that sense.

There are many interesting comparisons that could be made between these subjectivities. Some, especially those associated with formal learning (attitudes to language study in schools, metaphors for learning, metaphors for teachers) have already been the focus of important narrative analyses, for example, Oxford's (2001) narrative analysis of learners' constructions of language teachers. Yet Sue's sense of her own agency is constructed discursively between and in the overlap between different subjectivities. "Schoolgirl Sue", for example, reinforces the traditional division of school-learning by subject, referring to learning and teaching exclusively as a pedagogical, school-bound process. "Schoolgirl Sue" is therefore constructed from a different narrative backdrop from the Sue who explains her love of French through reference to the wider social processes of learning (learning as aspiration, language learning as opportunity). In other words, no explicit connections are made between Sue's discursive *learner as schoolpupil* and Sue's discursive *learner as person-in-the-world*. This second category draws on a range of broader cultural motivations such as interest in travel and wanting to go beyond the parochial (the "cosmopolitan self"). The difference in the way Sue frames language learning experience according to which autobiographical world

she is describing therefore represents a striking division between narrative domains.

Discursive selves of the language learning project

While the figured worlds above refer to situated, material worlds (school, work, abroad), each participant enacts a range of discursive identities which are woven through the accounts. By sorting and categorising the written and spoken accounts (Charmaz, 2002, 2003; Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach & Zilber, 1998) by theme (content) and by isolating recurring language features (form) I characterised each participant's "performance" through the narratives. In other words, I claim that the following discursive sites of identity are enacted, in different ways, through the telling of the language learning project. The discursive macro-structure common to all narratives comprised the description of a *cosmopolitan self*, both personally and socially situated.

The cosmopolitan self

- *Social landscaping (reference to iconic events / times / Zeitgeists)*
- Escape from the ordinary (in search of ...)
- The "chameleon"
- Metaphors of place / Images of the other

Social landscaping

Participants all situated their past and present selves in social contexts (centred around expectations / perceptions shaped according to social class, gender, contemporary educational norms, professional contexts, political Zeitgeist etc.). These descriptions both frame and justify the idiosyncratic, and show participant' social awareness of the agentive structures that they are operating in at different stages.

Escape from the ordinary (in search of ...)

The language learning histories (of these elective bilinguals) describe a trajectory which is not simply linear but expands outward. Learners describe the language learning project as a site for increasing symbolic power, often through increased opportunity to integrate new areas of experience into their lives. A common narrative trope is the movement away from physical and psychological points of origin which are viewed retrospectively as restrictive. The "mundane" is

often characterised as a geographical place and is contrasted with excitement, even glamour, associated with new opportunities afforded through language learning. These are both real and imaginary world of newness which are constructed as desire for change / escape (Kramsch, 2006; Piller, & Takahashi, 2006).

The “chameleon”

Self-portrayals of successful language learning are cast within a narrative of being adaptable and open to change. They portray perceptions of an idealised language learner who is able to engage with different cultural contexts. As well as demonstrating a positive personal quality the “chameleon” self highlights a “benefit” of being the outsider / the unclassifiable which may constitute a powerful motivating force to become “cosmopolitan”. In other words, cosmopolitanism gives licence to being a chameleon i.e. not entrenched in a fixed social category.

Metaphors of place / Images of the other

In all the accounts, geographical spaces are used as metonymic references. These may represent discursive spaces of childhood, limitation and boredom (in the way Huston describes Calgary, 1999) or places of otherness to strive toward which represent in some way a better life (the good life). Sometimes this other place is particular e.g. France (my British participants freely subscribe to the British Francophile narrative) and well “rehearsed” (Gee, 1991) stereotypes are used to invoke positive and negative images of other places and their inhabitants. But places of otherness can also be described by what they are not i.e. not here. Language learning may, therefore, be as much about renegotiating one’s own space as yearning for another.

Final thoughts

Most theorists would now agree that social identities, rooted in contexts of engagement with others, are multiple and managed as contexts overlap and fluctuate over time. However, individual agency is also shaped by discursive ritual, institutional practices and other cultural habits which lead the individual to appropriate identities in certain ways. This is what Hall (1996) calls being “sutured” to certain subject positions⁷. I am suggesting here that narrative analyses of

⁷ Although Holland *et al.* suggest that this metaphor “makes the personal and the position seem to arrive performed at the moment of suturing” (2001: 33) and suggest, rather, “co-development” as a more appropriate metaphor, emphasising the ongoing dialogic principle of unfixed boundaries and shifting negotiation between personal and social selves.

language learning autobiographies, now an exciting, burgeoning field of enquiry in SLA, need to be problematised both to acknowledge the immediate context of narrative production and to consider that narrative structures arch through any such account, shaping the discursive worlds to which they simultaneously give access. The potential implications of this line of enquiry are manifold. In my own context of foreign language teaching in London, for instance, such analysis can offer the potential to compare the narratives of “successful language learners” with those who are disinterested in (or disillusioned with!) the project of learning languages. As our understanding of learners’ subjectivities expands we are

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