Reconciling language anxiety and the 'Montréal switch': An autoethnography of learning French in Montréal and negotiating my Canadian identity through language

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Abstract

In this autoethnography, I explore and attempt to make sense of the tensions I experienced in negotiating my identity as an adult learner of French as an additional language in Montréal. Using a critical sociolinguistics lens (Heller, 2007; Lamarre, 2013), I discuss and critically analyze my experiences of using French in the world beyond the language classroom, particularly what it was like when I spoke to people in French and they switched to English (I refer to this practice as the *Montréal switch*). I discuss how notions of citizenship and belonging intersected with my feelings of language anxiety in dealing with the Montréal switch, and attempt to unpack my assumptions and (mis)perceptions of my experiences with this linguistic phenomenon. My analyses have the potential to shed light on the wider social and cultural world of being a language learner in Montréal. My experiences may be of interest not only to learners of French as an additional language but also to additional language researchers and teachers looking to support and prepare learners for the world beyond the language classroom.

Introduction

Born in Canada to Polish and Australian parents, I was raised in a culturally diverse home surrounded by different languages and accents. I have, therefore, always been interested in how people speak the languages they know and make sense of the world through language. As a doctoral researcher, my interests are focused on language anxiety, particularly that which is experienced beyond the traditional language classroom. My interest stems from my professional concern as a language teacher, as well as my language anxiety as an adult learner of French in Montréal. In 2009, after eleven years in Australia, I returned to Canada to learn French. I was an excellent student in the language classroom itself, but beyond the classroom I found that my everyday experiences of trying to negotiate and assert my identity as a legitimate user of French were sites of struggle (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). In particular, I found it difficult to understand why speakers of French in Montréal responded to me in English when I spoke to them in French; I refer to this practice as the *Montréal switch*. My experiences of the Montréal switch caused me great anxiety in terms of negotiating my identity as both a language learner and as a Canadian.

Drawing from critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2007; Lamarre, 2013), the purpose of this study is to use autoethnography to explore the tensions that I experienced in negotiating my identity as a language learner and language user in Montréal. In particular, I look at the intersections between my feelings of language anxiety in the face of the Montréal switch, attempting to make sense of how these experiences informed, and were informed by, my emerging identity as a newly bilingual individual.

Identifying a Conceptual Framework

I use critical sociolinguistics as a conceptual lens for my study, drawing from two key Montréal-oriented researchers (Heller, 2007; Lamarre, 2013). I view languages as part of a given set of socially distributed resources that learners draw from in their negotiation of social meaning (Heller, 2007) and approach my inquiry "from a point of view that views social relations as problematic" (Lamarre, 2013, p. 6). I see languages as socially distributed through historical, political, and economic processes that may inform what resources are assigned what value, by whom, and with what consequences (Heller, 2007). From this perspective, "the negotiation of language has to do with

judgments of… how one expects to be treated in such a situation" (Heller, 1982, p. 118), and language choice can reflect issues of power and inequality (Auer, 1998). Drawing these ideas together as a set of conceptual lenses, I critically examine and problematize my experiences of learning and using French within the context of Montreal's complex sociolinguistic dynamic (Lamarre, 2013). I critically interrogate my personal history, expectations, and assumptions to consider how my own language choices and those of the people around me played into my language anxiety. Ultimately, this conceptual lens provides the scope for me to move beyond description of my experiences towards a more analytical consideration of how issues of power, ideology, and social organization played into the tensions that I experienced in learning and using French in Montreal.

Methodology

A critical sociolinguistics approach is particularly appropriate for autoethnographic research because both critical sociolinguists and autoethnographers seek to make sense of culture and society. Autoethnography is not simply autobiographical writing or telling personal stories. This is to say that not all personal writing that examines culture can be considered autoethnographic (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). I go further than storytelling by using my personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and thus "make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis et al, 2011, p. 4). Similarly, critical sociolinguistics calls for links to be drawn between the language practices of individuals and more general social organization. Therefore, I not only narrate my own story, but also use my analyses to make sense of my experiences for myself and for others through my telling. In this sense, my autoethnography has the potential to shed light on the wider social and cultural world of being an additional language learner in Montréal. The analyses of my experiences may be of interest to readers outside the Montréal context, as well as learners of French as an additional language in Montréal.

Autoethnography uses researchers' personal experiences to illustrate facets of cultural experience and thus "make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 4). Since starting my doctorate, I have wanted to write about my own experiences and struggles of becoming bilingual in Montréal because I felt "thoroughly storied" (Collins, 2010, p. 242) as an insider to the experiences and themes that I am exploring in my doctorate, namely language anxiety and learning French in Montréal. In this sense, autoethnography has been a highly valuable tool for me as a doctoral researcher; it has helped me understand my positioning, values, and relations to others within the historical and cultural context of my field. Indeed, Starr (2010) describes autoethnography as ideally suited for educational research related to the exploration of identity because it allows us to "take stock of experiences and how they shape who we are and what we do" (p. 4). Autoethnography is, therefore, a particularly appropriate methodology as I attempt to make sense of the forces that have shaped and continue to shape my sense of self (Starr, 2010) as a language learner, language teacher, and language researcher.

This autoethnography came to be through a series of personal experiences and self-authored documents produced in the first two years of my doctoral studies. I analyzed multiple versions of a reflective piece about my experiences of learning French in Montréal. I identified significant themes and categories that responded to the central question that guided my inquiry: *How do I make sense of the tensions that I experienced in negotiating my identity as a language learner and language user in Montréal?*

In the following sections, I narrate my experiences semi-chronologically, couched within the central themes that have emerged from my analysis. My voice varies between being narrative, autobiographical, and formal. In this way, I seek to emulate Jones' (2013) approach, weaving "a rich tapestry of evocative, analytical, and theoretical materials" (p. 748). My intended result is a "blend of evocative and analytic prose" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 443), which reflects my duality as an individual for whom language is part of my personal and academic identity.

Emergent Themes

Retracing the Role of My Duel Citizenships and Dissonant Identities

In order to make sense of the tensions that I experienced in negotiating my identity as a language learner and language user in Montréal, I first explored how and why I began learning French: I asked myself what I was seeking by investing in French as an additional language (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 1995). I can now see that I sought

more than just the material rewards that being bilingual could offer me in job opportunities and travel experiences; rather, I sought the symbolic reward of membership in an imagined community (Norton, 2000) of bilingual Canadians. The seed of this imagining came from my experiences of being an audibly displaced teenager, growing up in one country with the accent of another. I left Canada as a pre-teen and moved to a relatively remote part of Australia where my paternal family has a long history and strong cultural ties, but always had an accent that sounded Canadian. Despite my Canadian accent, by the time I was in my early twenties, I had a stronger sense of being Australian than I'd ever had about being Canadian. Yet, I was still marked as Canadian by the way that I spoke English. First encounters with strangers were often punctuated by the question, *Where are you from?* followed by its skeptical cousin, *Where are you **really** from?* While I didn't doubt the well-meaning intentions of these curious strangers and new acquaintances, their questions underscored the tensions I experienced in defining my own nationality, citizenship, and identity. Simply put, I felt Australian but sounded Canadian.

Reflecting now, my belief is that the question *Where are you really from?* reflects a genuine human desire to understand one another. Yet, the question also has the power to *other* those who do not fit in. *Where are you really from?* challenges and casts doubt on the individual who has already named their from-ness, and has the power to render them voiceless in their capacity to be self-determining in defining their own nationality. In my case, *Where are you really from?* made me feel like an imposter: claiming to be Australian but audibly not.

People often ask me why I moved to Montréal. The simple answer is that I came to learn French. Peeling back the layers, however, *Where are you really from?* also played a role in my return to Canada. I had often felt marked as Canadian by my accent, but I grew up feeling like an outsider because I no longer knew or understood what being Canadian meant to me. I now consider my leaving Australia and returning to Canada as a kind of self-rebellion against my dissonant identities. I renewed my Canadian passport, booked a ticket to Montréal, and signed myself up for intensive French classes. Unconsciously drawing links between my identity and language, I was fixated on the idea that learning French would be my ticket to rediscovering my *Canadian-ness*. Nostalgia likely played a part in why I was exploring my identity through language; French echoed across the landscape of my Canadian childhood in memories of learning the names of animals in elementary school French class, translating the backs of cereal boxes, and trying to play with French-Canadian kids on family vacations to New Brunswick. Either way, the narrative running through my head when I returned to Canada was, *Good Canadians speak French. If I speak French, I'll be a good Canadian. Therefore, I'll be **Canadian**.*

Explorations and Struggles with Languaging and Language Anxiety

Within a year of arriving in Montréal, I had completed the remaining levels of the intensive French program and achieved my certificate of proficiency in French. Slowly, my life of language learning transitioned from the classroom to the world beyond. I began looking less frequently at exercise books and my French-English dictionary and the notes I had stuck all around my apartment. Phipps (2010) describes this leaving behind of the artifacts of the language classroom as the beginning of *languaging, w*here, as language learners, we begin to live our lives in our additional language. Phipps (2010) conceptualizes languaging as the "full, embodied and engaged interaction with the world that comes when we put the languages we are learning into action" (p. 12), distinct from the effort of using languages in classroom contexts. Used in this way, the notion of languaging reframes "languages [as] more than skills; they are the medium through which communities of people languaging engage with, make sense of, and shape the world. Through language, they become active agents in creating their human environment" (Phipps, 2010, p. 2). In other words, by languaging, I was engaging with the social and material world of my everyday interactions, and attempting to develop different, more relational ways of interacting with the people and the phenomena that I encountered in my everyday life (Phipps, 2010; Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). Fundamentally, my languaging was a social experience, interwoven with the politics of language and the negotiation of sense of self and identity (Phipps, 2010; Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004).

Yet, life was unexpectedly difficult in Montréal outside the bubble of a language school classroom and beyond the "artifacts of a language classroom" (Phipps, 2010, p. 98), and my attempts to *dwell* (Derrida, 1998) in the political, social, and cultural world of my additional language were often frustrating and anxiety-fraught. I had been an excellent language learner in the language classroom and had looked forward to more opportunities to interact with people other than my classmates, but it seemed like I never got to use my French. When I was out or at parties, shopping, eating in restaurants, or talking to colleagues at work, I would start in French, but people often answered

me in English. Talking with friends who also spoke French as an additional language, I learned that the Montréal switch is a common experience for learners of French. As one Montréal blogger emphatically wrote, "if your accent isn't 'French', and if you stumble around with your words a bit, people in the city will INSTANTLY switch to English" (de Guzman, 2013, para. 4). My frequent experiences of the Montréal switch made me question my legitimacy as a user of French outside the language classroom because when people switched into English with me, I felt that I was being positioned as monolingual. Even then, I knew that monolingualism was not an attractive quality for an *anglophone* in Montréal; and that "admitting that you are not perfectly bilingual (for an anglophone) entails a loss of face" (Heller, 1982, p. 114).

At a certain point, I saw every interaction I had in French as a test of my proficiency: I passed if they responded to me in French, but failed if they responded in English. This set me up for failure and disappointment because English responses happened a lot. I began to constantly replay what I had said to see if I could uncover the conjugation mistake or pronunciation error that had triggered the Montréal switch. Like many people before a test, I was nervous, stressed, and anxious: all feelings that are indicative of a phenomenon known as *language anxiety* (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Language anxiety is generally understood to refer to the feelings of stress, fear, apprehension, or tension that additional language learners experience when faced with the task of learning or using their additional language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Language anxiety can also involve physical symptoms, such as shuddering, perspiring, an inability to speak (Bekleyen, 2008), and changes in facial expression, eye contact, posture, body movement, and gesturing (Gregerson, 2005, 2007). While this helped me put a name to what I was feeling, I noted that the language anxiety literature is largely classroom-based research, suggesting a gap in our understanding of the language anxiety experiences of learners beyond the language classroom.

Expectations and (Mis-)perceptions of Montréal's Complex Sociolinguistic Dynamic

My increased understanding of language anxiety helped me define and understand my feelings in regards to the Montréal switch. However, in order to truly make sense of my experiences, I must go further by interrogating the intersection between my language anxiety, the Montréal switch, and my identity. Because my Canadian identity was wrapped up in my bilingualism, I allowed my proficiency in French, as well as my identity as a Canadian, to be determined by the language that people spoke to me. This surely increased the intensity of my language anxiety. French-speaking Montrealers were, in my view, members of and gatekeepers to the imagined community I was trying to enter (Norton, 2000; 2001)- that of bilingual Canadians, *good Canadians*. I have never felt as monolingual than in the moments when people responded to my French with English. This was important because every time I spoke French, I was negotiating my sense of self as a legitimate user of French; I would only successfully become part of this imagined community (Norton & McKinney, 2011) of *good Canadians* once I was bilingual.

Similar to my feelings about *Where are you really from*? I did not doubt the good-natured intentions behind the Montréal switch. Perhaps people heard my accent and assumed that as an anglophone I preferred English. Switching to be accommodating or helpful is sometimes described as *convergence,* where individuals converge to their interlocutor's speech style, motivated by a desire for social approval, communicative efficacy, and positive social attitudes (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Geneese & Bourhis, 1988; Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1987; Giles, 1973). Looking at the Montréal switch as convergence may support the idea that perhaps people switched to English to be helpful. The notion of convergence has also helped me understand why I hated it when people replied in English. While convergence to an individual's speech style may be intended as an act of accommodation or solidarity, it can simultaneously be interpreted as undermining of the individual's competence. This is generally referred to as *overaccommodation* or *overconvergence* (Street, 1991). While I understood the possibility that people may have had good intentions by switching to English with me, I still experienced language anxiety because I was sure that their switching pointed to my shortcomings as a French user.

However, the concepts of accommodation and overaccommodation can only take us so far in attempting to make sense of my experiences because they do not account for the complex dynamic of language choice, language practice, and mixing of linguistic resources I encountered on the ground in Montréal. I looked beyond my superficial feelings of being overaccommodated and also considered my judgments of how I expected to be treated in a given situation (Heller, 1982). I asked myself, what expectations and assumptions was I bringing to these interactions? I realized that not only did I expect people to speak French to me; but I also expected them to welcome and appreciate my French. These expectations were couched within a simplistic understanding of Montréal's complex

sociolinguistic dynamic (Lamarre, 2013).

Through this autoethnography, I better understand the extent to which Montréal's linguistic and social interactions are intrinsically interwoven with the city and cannot be separated from it (Lamarre, 2013). Indeed, I now believe that any study related to language in Montréal needs to be located within an understanding of Québec's history, language laws, and ongoing sociolinguistic tensions (Crump, 2014). Through my autoethnography, I have gained a better understanding of how language has long been a defining feature of Québec and "the defense of the French language and the fear of assimilation and cultural deprivation have been constant themes throughout Québec history" (Mills, 2010, p. 139). I can now more clearly appreciate the role of *La charte de la langue française* (Bill 101), Québec's current formal language policy, in allowing "Quebéc's people to express their identity" (Dickinson & Young, 2003, p. 324), while still working in a spirit of fairness, open-mindedness, and respect for the English-speaking communities of Québec (Québec, 2015).

I now see that I was approaching speech situations with the expectation that everyone would speak to me exclusively in French once I knew their language. In doing so, I made assumptions about the monolingualism of the other (Derrida, 1998), failing to acknowledge the other bilingual person as someone who could also speak additional languages and be self-determining in the linguistic choices they made. In acknowledging how my expectations and assumptions informed my experiences of speech situations, I have also begun to understand that there are a multitude of reasons, beyond accommodation, for why someone might choose to respond to my French with English. For example, perhaps they felt more comfortable using multiple languages because it allowed them to express their personal identities (Dewaele, 2010; Lamarre & Paredes, 2003) or group identities (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). In other words, perhaps, like me, they too wanted to demonstrate their own bilingualism. It is also possible that, unrelated to my proficiency in French, they switched to English with me to create social boundaries (Heller, 1988; Woolard, 1988) or reinforce social distance (Ross & Shortreed, 1990); perhaps they wanted to highlight my shortcomings as a way of dressing me down. Understanding the multitude of potential reasons for why people switch between languages and mix linguistic resources has helped me make sense of the interactions I was having and why the Montréal switch was a site of struggle in negotiating my identity as a legitimate user of French (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013).

Concluding Thoughts

Using my own experiences of language anxiety and the Montréal switch as sites for research, I have gained a clearer understanding of my identity as a language learner and of my sociolinguistic environment. I now recognize the role that learning French and asserting a strong bilingual identity (Norton, 2013) played in my sense of self as a Canadian, something I felt I had lost as a child and needed to reclaim as an adult. I now more clearly see the links between my language anxiety and the Montréal switch and understand the significance of these practices to my sense of self as a Canadian. At the time of writing, I am still living and languaging in Montréal. People still switch to English with me and I still feel anxious about my French when they do, although perhaps less than before. That said, in exploring articulating my experiences through autoethnography, I have been able to begin to tease apart the links between my language anxiety, the Montréal switch, and my identity. This is to say that I am beginning to feel that my anxiety about the Montréal can co-exist with my ability to assert a strong identity and claim the floor as a legitimate user of French (Norton, 2013).

Ellis and Bochner (2006) argue that autoethnography makes a difference in the world, and has the potential to change people. Indeed, in producing this autoethnography, I have been changed because the action of production and the product itself both hold therapeutic value for me (Ellis, 1999). However, the conversation is far from over. As one of few autoethnographies about language anxiety and one of only a handful of studies about language anxiety in non-classroom contexts, my study underscores a gap in our understanding of the non-classroom language anxiety experiences of additional language learners. Moreover, given that the world is only becoming more multilingual, additional language learners, more than ever, face the possibility that members of and gatekeepers to the imagined communities they wish to join will also speak the other languages they know. In this new reality, language learners will likely have to negotiate language switching practices like the Montréal switch. Is there a Seoul switch or a Barcelona switch? Conversations with colleagues who are teachers of English as an additional language in overseas countries and who try to learn the local language suggest that there may be. I am left wondering what role the language switching of others might play in their experiences of languaging (Phipps, 2010),

and if they may also experience it as a site of struggle or source of language anxiety.

As one of the few studies to explore a relationship between identity, language anxiety, and language switching my study highlights the need for ongoing research and reflection on these themes. By continuing these conversations in the classroom and in the field, language teachers and researchers may be able to better support and prepare learners for the complex sociolinguistic dynamic of the world beyond the language classroom.

Acknowledgments

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