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Tracing stories of a heritage language: personal accounts of diasporic experience (DRAFT)

We propose to share personal narratives with a common focus on the relationships between personal identities and heritage language. It is said that the acquisition of the heritage language, also called family language or community language, is accompanied by a specific “intercultural burden” (Kagan 2012) manifested through the intersection of different influences and psychological tensions that are always resolved in a more or less successful way. This psychosocial and cultural reality brings potential for a development of a truly intercultural identity, frequently denominated as hybrid identity, that brings together contradictions and conflicts of inherited cultural differences. The multiplicity of identities that is conditioned by personal, social, cultural, and other factors reveals itself through attitudes toward the language and, in fact, it becomes (de)activated by the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves throughout our lifespan. Here, through a prism of three personal narratives, we create a puzzle of questions and reflections in relation to the heritage language. The three voices are articulated through three auto-biographic accounts of individuals—two linguists and a dramaturge—professionally invested into the topic of Diaspora. The common thread is the experience of the Serbian as heritage language: from the perspective of an ex-migrant who decided to return to the native country, a first-generation migrant who is confronted with the role of heritage language in her professional life as a teacher and in her personal life as a mother, and a second-generation migrant who teaches her daughter her heritage language so that it continues to manifest as a family language on different levels. As an aspect of personal identity, the idealized concept of heritage and heritage language affect one’s identity and make a decisive impact on potentially life-defining decisions.

Keywords: heritage language, identities, intercultural identities, hybridity, narratives, Serbian language.

Shared framework

Understood as “a conscious or intuitive sense of sameness over time” (Horowitz 2012), the concept of identity comes with an intrinsic contradiction between maintenance and change, preservation and evolution. It is the process and the result of a person’s experiences – with other people, with the surrounding, with oneself – that gives us a sense of uniqueness and continuity based upon who one has

been and who one might potentially be (Marcia 2002). At the same time, identity is always transforming since life in itself implies change and learning. This process might be explained through the notion of symmathesy, introduced by Nora Bateson, to describe “contextual mutual learning through interaction” (2015). When there is an interaction – and every living system is always interacting within multiple contextual variables – there is learning that will be idiosyncratic to each member of the ecosystem. It is crucial to perceive the system as “an organic whole [which] cannot be deduced from an understanding of the individual components” (Mercer 2014). The same is true for the context: it exceeds the sum of singular parts and emphasizes the importance of interdependence. In other words, a change in any part of the context will affect the whole system and will influence mutual learning. What is more, according to Bateson, learning happens at the boundaries. “The boundaries are the differences, the areas of intersection, the communication interfaces that provide the contact, the dependency and bias of the process of ecology” (Bateson 2015). It is the meeting place of differences that generates potential for change. This resonates strongly with the authors who define identity in relational terms, as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton 2013; cf. van Lier 2004). Identity is, thus, created through a dialogic process of constant change whose aim is, paradoxically, to preserve “the sense of sameness over time”.

In current research, identity is usually described as multiple, multilayered, complex, dynamic... (e.g. Hall 2014; Norton 2013). The same is true for members of diasporic communities whose identity is frequently tagged as hybrid – as if not all identities were hybrid. The concept is, however, used to point to the “increasingly frequent contact with culturally diverse people [that] has led to refraction, mixing of cultures and new forms of belonging” (Marotta 2011, in L. Jovanović 2017). This contact occurs through different semiotic systems among which the language plays a crucial role since “every time a specific language is used, the language user is organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (A. Jovanovic 2017). Furthermore, in addition to being defined by its use, language identity is largely created on the basis of linguistic attitudes: perceived value of one’s language and, by extension, of one’s identity, depends on other peoples’ perception of that language (and/or variety). The case of heritage language is emblematic because it is always perceived in relational terms, contrasted and compared with the majority language, but also with the language of the ancestral lands. It is accompanied by a specific “intercultural burden” (Kagan 2012) manifested through different forms of cognitive dissonance that occur “when people believe that the two of their psychological representations are inconsistent with each other” (Cooper 2007, in Kagan 2012). It is this state of dissonance, dislocation, and ambivalence in which the different identities become challenged, confronted, connected, and evaluated. Precisely the awareness of this dissonance forms a learning interface and opens creative potential for different self-conceptualizations within the society.

Here we share three personal accounts about dissonance. We reflect on our beliefs and attitudes toward Serbian as a heritage language. A common thread is related to the themes of investment and burden. Investment refers to the language learning commitment influenced by one’s identity (Norton 2013: 3). It may explain the dedication and perseverance for learning a language or passing on a language to the next generation. It implies specific decisions, agreements, and actions whose aim is learning and/or maintaining the heritage language. On the other hand, burden represents a fear of failure, of remaining the other, and marking otherness within the dominant society which might be stigmatized. It refers to two different aspects: 1) personal responsibility for the language we are practicing with and teaching to our children and 2) social perception as the other since our heritage language marks a crucial difference to the

dominant society. As Pajic (2014) explains, the groups come into being and are maintained through comparison with another imaginary group, where there is a tendency of favouring of their own group and demonization of “others”; for “us” to exist, there have to be “them”, otherwise, if there were not “them”, everyone would be “the same” (Pajić 2014). The relation through which the differences between members of a migrants group and the dominant culture are affirmed includes two processes: the exclusion process (“we : others”, “we : they”) and identification process (“we : we”, “we : others”) (see L. Jovanović 2017). The solution might be found in an active construction of a “community of emotions” which creates a new belonging (Appadurai 2011). It implies identification with the community of emotions and an investment in its values where shared language (in the literal and symbolic meaning of the word) is perceived as the utmost value.

Should I stay or should I go?

It was a while ago, but the migrant experience has transformed me. It still does.

At the last year of my undergraduate program at the University of Belgrade I approached a professor, the one I consider my academic mother, to ask whether she could give me some guidance in relation to a graduate program at my faculty. I was planning to continue my studies simply because I didn't have a clear idea about what I was able to do and how I could earn my living – the only thing I knew how to do was to study. She proposed a graduate program at a public university in the United States. I was surprised with this suggestion, to say the least, but I accepted it as an interesting challenge without overthinking the consequences of this decision. It was different with my boyfriend – a husband to be – who perceived the whole thing as another quirky idea of his ambitious but beloved girlfriend. Why would we ever want to leave Belgrade? Our life was perfect, with loving families, great friends with whom we bonded through sports and shared activities... Prospects for professional growth were blurry, but, after all, work is only one segment of a person's life. Unwillingly, he accepted the idea after my elaborated argumentation on the professional benefits that this experience might bring to both of us; it was understood that after two years we would return to our hometown. Two years turned into four and the longer we stayed in the US, the more difficult it was to decide what would be the right life choice. The academic environment was extremely stimulating, heterogeneous, open-minded, and supportive; never had we felt such an intellectual growth and encouragement. We even felt part of the academic community, which was crucial for our emotional wellbeing. Strings of friendships were delineated and we were being more at home which each new semester.

And more away from our homeland. Together with the language, our Serbian identity was an island, constrained to the walls of our home (and to sporadic Skype sessions). Even there I felt the need to defend my language as a fragile entity because, it happened more than once, after an exhausting day at campus and a multilingual cacophony from the department of foreign languages, I wouldn't even be able to speak in Serbian. It was also leaving my dreams and retreating before English and Spanish. If I wanted it to stay with me, I needed to make a conscious effort for finding ways to introduce the Serbian language to other domains of my daily reality. However, my imagined Serbian community and the one I met in Chicago were two worlds that – other than the language – didn't have much to share. It seemed to me that in an attempt to maintain the Serbian identity, they dehydrated the richness of our cultural experience and fermented in the state of folkloric manifestations. The semiotics of their rituals, symbols, and communication patterns wasn't really mine, so in the midst of Serbian community I felt more of a foreigner than I did at the campus. What is worse, by becoming aware of this border between *them* and *us*,

I was parting my personal identity, because they did represent *my* community. It was part of my heritage, caricatured and distorted, but still part of the heritage I wanted preserved.

We got to know the other extreme through those individuals of the Serbian origin already assimilated by the American melting pot. They lived the American life with houses in pretty suburbs and cars parked in driveways, family people. Their children didn't use the heritage language, though, and their Serbian identity was, at least seemingly, limited to fond memories of childhood. However, their strong curiosity for the current events "back there" was bringing an atmosphere of yearning, an accentuated nostalgia, that was in sharp contrast with some sort of resentment toward the homeland. Something was missing.

In the meantime, our vibrant community in Serbia was transforming (as were we) and it was painful to understand the obvious: one cannot be at two places at the same time. "Evolution emerges in interrelationality" (Bateson 2015), mutual learning demands contact, and it was up to us to decide with which community we wanted to grow. More importantly, in which community I wanted my future children to grow.

For many of our fellow countryman, the decision to return to Serbia was silly but brave because it implied certain insecurity in the most basic, financial sense – no one could guarantee that we would make a decent living here. It was certainly a conscious decision. If maintaining the Serbian language was a challenge for me, it could only be that much harder for my children. I wanted them to be able to grow close to their grandparents and to be part of the "community of emotion" encumbered by the existential dilemma of belonging and affiliation. However, I sometimes wonder whether it was an act of cowardice, influenced by the unwillingness to assume the responsibility for the preservation of the Serbian heritage. If my husband and I had decided to remain in the United States, our twin daughters would be second-generation migrants. How invested would I be to create and maintain the net that would appropriately nourish their Serbian identity? Would it be enough? Would they resent their heritage? Would they resent their parents for making this decision for them?

Or will they resent us now for not making it?

All the people like us are We, And everyone else is They (Kipling)

As a first-generation migrant I would like to structure my presentation in two parts - from the aspect of my family and from the aspect of my professional framework in Berlin, in the context of the use of Serbian as the heritage language and the complexity of "maintenance", "change" and/or "creation" of the cultural identity.

After my husband had got a job in Berlin, we moved from Serbia to Germany with our then 3-year-old daughter, in 2014. I came to Berlin with no knowledge of German, so my aim and Germany's migrant policy was to start learning it as soon as possible. I received an obligation from Germany to attend the so-called Integration Course (it included the German language and Orientation course where I learned about German society, organization, history, customs, habits ...).

At first, I felt like "No Name" person, without personal, cultural or language identity. No one asked me who I was, what I was, what and how much I knew, I was simply a migrant, like "a blank sheet of paper". A friend who had lived in Berlin for several years, knowing that I was a teacher of the Serbian language and literature, told me to forget it all because nobody in Berlin needed it. "How it would be possible for me to 'forget' something that is me? If I 'forgot' it, I would forget myself", I wondered.

During my first year in Berlin while I was trying to find a kindergarten for my daughter, the German language had a technical or instrumental purpose. However, after my daughter started to learn it in kindergarten and started to "bring" it to our home, I became aware of the threat and force that was now directly interfering with our mother tongue; it mercilessly threatened to swallow it up. I realized that until our daughter entered the educational system, German had been for me the language of the environment, the language I was learning, the language my children were to learn as well, without being aware of the contact of the two languages and of the necessary consequences of that contact. Whenever my daughter was unhappy because she could not speak German and for not having friends in kindergarten at the beginning, I would always tell her: "You will win. You do not know German, but you know Serbian. 'They' only know German and 'they' will not learn Serbian. You will know both languages. So, it's your win!". I started to notice that I was using the construction - "you will win" or "we will win" more and more and I wondered what I was struggling with and what was the meaning of the "victory"...

I need to stress that our daughter moved to Germany with an excellent knowledge of the Serbian language, linguistically advanced compared to her peers, and I naively believed that there was nothing that could destroy it. However, her daily exposure to the German language began to affect her linguistic competences in Serbian. She was transferring more and more grammatical structures from German to Serbian and, at the lexical level, she began to create new words, combining Serbian and German. She started using German at home as well and I could often hear her speaking German while she was playing. Then we agreed that the threshold of our house would be the border and as soon as it was crossed, only Serbian could be spoken at home. After our daughter unconsciously broke the deal several times, our agreement turned into an explicit ban: Only Serbian was allowed at home! From that moment on our family language policy was unambiguous, and the very need for a family to make a contract-like agreement indicates the severity of the problem when it comes to preserving the heritage language. But also the awareness and the responsibility for it. As a confirmation of our decision, in the kindergarten we received an official written recommendation only to use the mother tongue at home. It was emphasized that it was the language of feeling, in which the emotional messages could be most reliably transmitted to the child.

At that moment, I began to struggle not against the German as the majority language, the language of the surrounding, but for the preservation of Serbian as the heritage language and, in those circumstances, "an island language". Moreover, after three years in kindergarten, our daughter declared: "I am half Serbian, half German." I asked her who had told her that and why she would say it. She replied: "No one, that is what my heart tells me." It seems to me that this moment of declaration of "dual affiliation" was the breaking point and the moment of enlightenment in raising the issue of identity, of what will happen to our children, how to preserve our language, who we are and what we want. Should we have left our country? Should we go back? It has become a burden to hold one culture in yourself and live in another.

We always bring a lot of books from Serbia and we read every day in Serbian. It has become a sort of a ritual, as a concept or a program. It is as if, by some invisible instruments, I measured what would be our ideal daily exposure to Serbian in reading, speaking, listening, or singing... These readings in Serbian seem to my children spontaneous and natural, but they are very thoughtful and pragmatic from my perspective, a conscious and planned strategy on my part as a parent. It is a very specific kind of burden. Living in parallel, both quantitatively and qualitatively in two cultures, is impossible in the same measure and intensity, but I have to. These are great efforts to maintain and improve the Serbian language in our children as their mother tongue and heritage language. As a parent, I have an obligation and

responsibility to convey to our children (now a seven-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son) our traditional culture and to nurture it, but I am also aware that they are part of a new culture with which we have a respectful relationship, and that they are exposed to it through formal education on a daily basis. We celebrate our traditional holidays, orthodox Easter and Christmas, but at the time of the German Easter and Christmas, we practice those rituals related to children: chocolate eggs and rabbits and the purchase of an advent calendar with sweets, and sweets in socks or boots for St. Nicholas. It helps our children not to feel isolated because, when they say at school and kindergarten that we bring them socks for sweets, they tell it to the whole group and my kids are part of the group...

At first, I was curious to get to know the Serbian cultural clubs in Berlin, because the program of each of them stated that they were, among other things, committed to preserving the Serbian language and culture. I wanted to contribute and get involved in the programs, but I soon realized that many of the programs were merely declarative. As a teacher of the Serbian language and literature my professional identity is also related to the Serbian language. I teach Serbian at the Serbian supplementary school in Berlin, which is attended by most of the children belonging to the 2nd and 3rd generation of migrants. And the position of Serbian as the heritage language and the motivation for learning it are most clearly described by the statement of one pupil: "My parents told me that if I want to be a Serbian, I need to know Serbian." Teaching at the Serbian school in Berlin, which organises classes only on Fridays and also attended by my daughter, is my personal and professional contribution to the preservation of the Serbian heritage language, "community of remembering" and "community of memories", because it is a way to preserve and consolidate part of the heritage identity and create a precondition for building intercultural identity and competences in our children.

Finally, I am also a PhD student at Humboldt University. My thesis is about migration and identity, language and identity and the Serbian language in Berlin, which may be a kind of compromise and a way of overcoming all doubts and questions, seeking answers by learning what I am living through.

"Remember me"

As a Shakespearean my relationship with Serbian as my heritage language could best be described as 'haunting'. I am a second-generation migrant (with a Serbian mother and a Swiss father), who was used to practice Serbian within the safe context of family and friends. I never went to Serbian school and learned to read and write in Serbian with my mother's help. In order to get more confident with the Cyrillic alphabet I took a Russian class in high school for one year. Although I read in Serbian on a regular basis and I am (as a theatre scholar and cultural worker) certainly interested in south Slavic literature and theatre, my education remains very limited.

The function of Serbian as a language being used within the safe context of family and friends quickly changed during my studies of philosophy and theatre studies. Suddenly, I was confronted with Serbian as a professional language: At first during an internship at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade. Then, especially during my PhD on Shakespeare's Hamlet in the region of the former Yugoslavia. And currently, as part of my employment as dramaturge in a transnational theatre project between Switzerland, Serbia and Kosovo.

Coming back to the concept of haunting I certainly do not want to think of my heritage language as a vengeful ghost, but still I would like to pick up old-Hamlets phrase "remember me" as a starting

point to think of the many mutual learning contexts in which Serbian as heritage language is practiced (Symathesy as learning together).

With the act of “remembering” Serbian as a heritage language comes the burden that originates in the first place from the awareness of one's own weaknesses. As an academic and dramaturge, I have to train my writing regularly and I am bound to have friends and family willing to correct and to translate my work. Without this network, I wouldn't be able to publish in Serbian and do work which is considered to be part of my profession. Since I enjoyed my education mainly in German, I have to actively acquire the professional vocabulary in Serbian through its practice. When I use Serbian in my professional environment, I am always confronted with my inadequate language. As a dramaturg and scholar who works with language, this means in concrete terms that I am peaceable with a lower quality. On the other hand, I have a positive experience of a learning effect: Since I practice Serbian all my life, I find it easy to incorporate the professional language into my existing vocabulary. The more I work with Serbian sources and texts, the more often I use the language in my professional life, the better it becomes. To a certain extent, I surrender to the professional situation and survive through active participation. “Learning by doing” not only affects my actual language abilities, but I also become constantly aware of my intercultural or better transcultural identity, which is marked by the awareness of limits (e.g. regarding language, cultural knowledge).

As a mother, who decided to speak to her daughter in Serbian, I mainly remember the version of Serbian in my childhood. With my daughter, I read the books my mother read to me. I hear and sing the children's songs that are sung to me. The language I can pass on to my daughter seems almost preserved, as she has little to do with contemporary Serbian. I have actively decided against sending my daughter to a Serbian kindergarten in Switzerland, because these institutions are very close to the church. Accordingly, the active exchange with other (Serbian) children in a learning context is almost completely omitted. In order to “refresh” the language we travel on a regular basis to Serbia, visit the family and buy contemporary books and song compilations. She practices Serbian exclusively in a family environment with my mother and me. So, the burden is the responsibility for this language I pass on her. For example, to avoid language mixing, to agree on certain codes for communication within the multilingual family context (Serbian, German and Swiss German). Here again, the experience of a transcultural identity is marked through clearly defined boundaries, which separate daily life (e.g. day care) from the family context.

In both cases, my professional and my private life, Serbian haunted me. Of course, I have decided on a certain research topic in my PhD or actively accepted the position in the theatre project. I have also decided to speak only Serbian with my daughter. Nevertheless, the quality of these decisions differs greatly from, for example, everyday decisions. My experience of limitations as part of my cultural self-understanding plays into other areas of life and forces me to check them again and again. And exactly this constant process of self-assurance could be described as haunting.

But is this a bad thing? For Hamlet probably yes. But what is the added value of this awareness? Probably the creative potential to it. In my testimony so far, I have talked about a burden linked to certain forms of investment. These investments are the conscious examination of the language, the search for contexts in which it can be learned and actively applied. It is precisely the constant awareness of language and its boundaries that constructs my transcultural identity. In this sense I would like to describe this form of haunting as something, which makes me aware of my heterogeneous identity, in which the different parts are not in conflict but rather the source for creativity. This experience comes close to the concept of a transcultural identity, which is dynamically brought into existence by multiple cultural identities (e.g.

Mark Terkessidis 2010). Therefore, the above discussed limits and boundaries connected to the use of the heritage language could turn into a form of empowerment, which denies a homogeneous understanding of culture and refers to a lived transcultural experience in a globalised world.

Post-reflection

Three different experiences of migration and identity... Evidently, these are narratives told by participants belonging to a privileged group of academics and telling these stories problematizes our role in the society. There is no doubt that migration forces us to think of community construction and our position within it. And exactly this is the complex and problematic aspect of the term “diaspora”: what kind of community are we talking about? And how does this affect our construction of “community of emotions”?

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