Research Article

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Cultural and Linguistic Translation of the Self: A Case Study of Multicultural Identity Based on Eva Hoffman’s Lost in Translation

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Abstract: The present article explores the profound impact of intercultural contact on identity, a topic that is gaining in relevance as multicultural experiences become increasingly common in globalised societies. The focus of the investigation is on the impact of culture and language upon the process of migrant identity (re)building in interaction with the new environment. Theory is applied to the analysis of Eva Hoffman’s memoir Lost in Translation—A Life in a New Language (1998), which offers a profound insight into these complex dynamics. In the first section, intercultural contact is investigated as a bidirectional translation process with both a disruptive and a reinforcing influence on individual identity, as shown through the concepts of hybridity and triangulation. The first section also highlights the points of contact between self-translation and interlingual translation to enhance understanding of their shared challenges. The second section focuses on the interconnection between language and migrant identity and argues that L2 proficiency may be regarded as the fundamental competence to accomplish successful self-translation. The depth of this impact is shown at multiple levels of identity: personal, enacted and social.

Keywords: intercultural contact, identity, psychology, linguistics, translation studies

Introduction

The present article aims to throw light on the deep connections between culture, language and individual identity—an issue that is relevant to all individuals living in societies increasingly affected by migration and globalisation. In particular, the article focuses on the profound personal changes favoured by intercultural contact and by the desire for social integration. Moreover, it explores the ways in which multicultural experience can be subtly disruptive, but also reinforcing for individual identity.

In the first section of the article, I will explore the dynamics of intercultural contact, in which the individual interprets and is interpreted by the new environment and tries to interpret the new self that is emerging. This process will be analysed as a form of translation, a term that can designate the transformation from one language and culture into another not only of texts but also of individuals (Buden et al. 197). I will attempt to show how an interdisciplinary comparison between multicultural identity and translation studies theories can be mutually beneficial to shed light on the shared challenges in translating individuals and texts. In the second section, I will explore in greater detail the crucial role of language in the self-translation process and hence the impact of second-language competence upon different levels of the migrant’s identity.

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Throughout the article, I will apply theory to the real-life example of migration portrayed in Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation—A Life in a New Language* (1990). The moment her family leaves Poland to move first to Canada and later to the U.S. marks a turning point in Ewa’s life. For her, the physical emigration coincides with a psychological departure from her monolingual and monocultural self towards a new identity, symbolised by her name, Ewa, being accommodated to the host society and turned into Eva. The author’s retrospective analysis of this experience was chosen as a case study because it offers a privileged point of observation of the challenges that migrants might face in the process of translating their identity into a different language, for a different culture. The author’s struggle to affirm herself in what she calls “the new world” lasts throughout her whole youth and not until her adulthood does she solve her inner conflict due to a perceived split in her identity. This memoir provides valuable empirical evidence for the theories around multicultural identity that I proposed. It also offers the opportunity to observe closely the process of losing and regaining identity in migration experiences and the many ways in which the degree of second-language proficiency influences this path. Therefore, it represents a means for understanding the topic of multicultural identity with greater clarity and for bringing more vividness to the discussion.

**Identity in Translation**

“I have to make a shift in the innermost way. I have to translate myself”

(Hoffman 211).

The present section analyses intercultural contact as a “bilateral translation” process. It shows that translation of one’s identity may not be regarded as the mere act of moving across cultural and linguistic spaces, but should be considered as a creative activity giving rise to a hybrid identity. The result of this process is a perpetual comparing and contrasting of perspectives that the article will explore as triangulation. This condition of hybridity is argued to represent both a potential threat to individual identity, inducing a loss, as well as a gain. Identity translation is said to be bilateral because it is not just the individual who interprets the world around them and themselves. The individual is also perceived and interpreted by the host society according to its cultural parameters. Therefore, migrants are faced with the challenge of translating themselves effectively and faithfully. It will be shown how the comparison to translation of texts, termed interlingual translation (Jakobson 233), may shed light on the challenges in accomplishing a faithful cultural adjustment of one’s identity. In turn, it will be shown how Eva’s quest for effective expression of her personality and search for an untranslatable part of the self makes it possible to define some crucial principles of interlingual translation.

**Loss in Translation**

Through the contact with a new culture, the individual acquires a new perspective on the world as well as the self. As pointed out by Bhabha (2004), that of migrants is a hybrid identity. Because of the perduring influence of the cultural perspective of the country of origin, the migrant does not completely identify with the system of values of the host society. However, the contact with the new culture impacts one’s thoughts and beliefs, so that the individual no longer fully identifies with the source culture either. Both cultural frameworks remain as interpretative paradigms simultaneously activated in one’s interpretation of the world and of oneself. This condition of hybridity can be unsettling for the individual, because of the loss of a univocal cultural model. The increased awareness of society and culture as shaping forces can compel the individual to redefine their self-image and their conception of the very notion of identity. Under the pressure of this relativistic perspective, identity no longer holds as a stable construct. The individual may stop considering their identity certain and start regarding it as a transitory stage of the ever-changing self throughout life.

In *Lost in Translation*, it can be observed how the relativising effect of multiculturality can mould identity and shape individuals’ interpretation of the world and of themselves. In the initial phase of migration, after moving to Canada and then to the United States, Eva tries to resist this external force. She
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perceives every progress made towards integration as a step away from her Polish self, which she considers her only and her “real” identity (Hoffman 120). Therefore at this initial stage, translation appears to be a dividing force, generating a split in her identity. The intensity of the feeling of a loss of unity weakens as her self-translation proceeds. However, the journey of identity neither concludes returning to the point of departure nor culminates in the full identification with Canadian/American culture:

The tiny gap that opened up when me and my sister were given new names can never be fully closed up . . . The gap cannot be fully closed, but I begin to trust English to speak my childhood as well, to say what had long been hidden, to touch the tenderest spots . . . The gap has also become a chink, a window through which I can observe the diversity of the world. (Hoffman 273-74)

Although the author accomplishes reconciliation between Polish Ewa and Canadian/American Eva, the “loss of unity” (Hoffman 273) remains a major difference from her monolingual and mono-cultural identity. The condition of being a “pure” Polish is irreversibly contaminated by the American system of values, which now influences her view of the world and of herself. However, she does not fully embrace this perspective either, keeps questioning it and comparing it to her previous cultural system. Therefore, even after her translation is successfully completed, she feels that she remains a “resident alien” (Hoffman 221) in the target culture. All this causes a sense of “displacement” (Hoffman 132), given the loss of a cultural model to identify with and of an integrated interpretative paradigm of reality. Eva ends up questioning the essence of identity and starts conceiving of herself as an “ephemeral” (Hoffman 276) product of her socio-cultural environment.

Gain: Translation as a Therapeutic and a Creative Process

Despite the feeling of disorientation in cultural relativity, the condition of hybridity can be enriching for the individual. Drawing conclusions from Eva’s case, translating oneself can have a negative, disorientating effect for the individual and cause a loss because the condition of belonging to one culture and speaking one language is compromised. At the same time, Eva’s experience highlights the potential benefits of coming into contact with another culture, trying to grasp it and making an effort to translate oneself.

The beneficial effects of multiculturality for identity can be understood in the light of the theory around the development of identity from inborn individual characteristics in interaction with external factors (Martens 146, schematic view of personality). Individual identity and behaviour are defined as the emergent product of the interplay of environmental influence and innate personality traits, called the psychological core of the individual. The stronger the outer pressure of the environment, the more behaviour will diverge from the expected neutral condition. The experience of migration can be considered as one of such cases in which the external influence of the host society, combined with the stress response of having to adapt to a new environment, the feeling of uncertainty and the desire to integrate into the target community, come to play a pressuring role for the individual. Translating between cultural perspectives relieves the individual from some of the social pressure deriving, for instance, from morality, etiquette, clichés and system of values of the given culture. Once this pressure has been lifted, individuals have the opportunity to discern between the personal and the cultural side of identity and to define own parameters of evaluation of the self and the world. From a psychological perspective, it can be said that both cultures act as filters for the external stimuli that are incorporated into self-image, providing the individual with more clues to perform the scrutiny. For this reason, shifting from one cultural perspective to the other can serve as a personality building tool. This crafting of identity through translation can be compared to a process of triangulation (Hoffman 275). The term triangulation is borrowed from the field of navigation. In its original context of use, it refers to the method of determining one point’s location in space “with the convergence of measurements taken from two other distinct points” (Rothbauer 892). The concept has been applied to several other disciplines. In psychoanalysis, triangulation is a communication technique used by the therapist, who acts as a mediator within a couple or a group to enable reconciliation between parts in
conflict. As a research method, triangulating between data sources enables the researcher to obtain a well-rounded view of a single phenomenon. In the same way, the two cultural points of reference can help individuals get a more complete understanding of the world and of themselves. Simultaneously translating into different cultural frames generates psychological distance from reality, allowing for objectivity, since judgments are made integrating both perspectives.

In the case of Eva, saying that her self-translation is comparable to a process of triangulation has multiple implications for her process of recreating her identity. First of all, as far as the relationship to the social world is concerned, the “triangulating translation” of Eva enables her to interpret others and herself without the bias of a monocultural perspective. At personal level, this represents her ultimate solution to the condition of disunity, and the way to compensate for the loss induced by the condition of hybridity of the self: “in my translation therapy, I keep going back and forth over the rifts, not to heal them but to see that I—first person singular—have been to both sides” (Hoffman 273). Translation becomes Eva’s personal therapy to resolve the dissonance between her Polish and her English self by identifying her true personality that is not influenced by culture or environment. In fact, the resolution of her identity dilemma depends upon the identification of her psychological core, which she calls her white blank centre (Hoffman 276):

This is the point from which I have to try to triangulate, this private place, this inassimilable part of myself. We all need to find this place in order to know that we exist not just within a culture but also outside it. We need to triangulate to something—our past our future our own unnamed perception—if we’re not to be subdued by the temporal and temporary ideas of our time if we’re not to become creatures of ephemeral fashion. (Hoffman 276)

This way, Eva overcomes her feeling of her identity being ephemeral and is able to strengthen her self-concept and her personality, as she lets her own set of values and beliefs crystallise as her personal point of triangulation.

Parallels to Interlingual Translation

Self-translation and interlingual translation share some similarities (Temple 16), which make an analysis of one activity complementary and informative of the other. The journey towards a new multicultural and multilingual identity contradicts the traditional view of translation as a direct movement from a source to a target. In fact, in the case of Eva, the translated identity does not fully assimilate to or identify with the host society. At the end of the translation journey, the multicultural individual appears to fluctuate in-between the source and the target cultures and keep travelling between them in a constant act of comparing and contrasting perspectives, which has been compared to triangulation. The same can be held true for the translation of texts. As emphasised by Buden and colleagues (2009), translation can be considered as a highly creative activity that requires much more than replacing one word for another.

Both self-translation and interlingual translation are strongly dependent on culture: “You can’t transport human meanings whole from one culture to another anymore than you can transliterate a text” (Hoffman 175). Both activities revolve around the effort to adapt the form—of a text in one case, of individual personality, thoughts and beliefs in the other, to make the content accessible to the target culture. As Umberto Eco argued in his Dire quasi la stessa cosa (100-150), the overarching aim of interlingual translation is to recreate with the target readers, the receivers of the translated text, the same relationship that the author of the source text aimed to established with the ideal reader. In other words, the translation should enable the target reader to perceive the same emotions as the intended reader of the original text and to obtain the same amount of information, in terms of both semantic and pragmatic meaning. The translation should open a window upon the communicative intention of the writer just like the original text did. Making this world accessible for the target readers means establishing communication between them and the author through the translation. The main barrier to effective communication between the writer of the text and the target reader of the translation is often not language, but culture. The reason for this lies in the very nature of communication, which premisess on shared extra-linguistic knowledge between sender and receiver of
the message and on implicit information reconstructed through inferences (Giani 80-86). When writing a
text, the author selects the information that will be overtly mentioned and discussed and other information
that will be only evoked through linguistic correlates. The author’s choice of relevant information is
based, above all, on the characteristics of the ideal reader (Chiera 271-72). The author assumes that certain
elements of knowledge are known to the reader. These will be explained thoroughly but only hinted at
through linguistic correlates. For example, an American novelist writing for his countrymen will most likely
talk metaphorically about a “kick-off” without indulging in explaining the rules of American football, nor
will he explicate the analogy. He will presume that the shared world knowledge will enable the readers to
fill the gap of implicit information, immediately relate to the referent and infer the intended message. The
challenge for the translator stems from the complexity of this system. In fact, the reader of the translation
may or may not interpret the text on the same socio-cultural premises as the reader envisaged by the author.
To recreate a level playing field and make communication through the translation possible, the translator
might need to provide the target reader with the necessary background knowledge. Alternatively, he could
adjust the source text, for instance by replacing the metaphor with another one that is more evocative in the
target culture, sacrificing its original linguistic form for the sake of understanding. In her self-translation
process, Eva is faced with the same challenge at a much more personal level:

My American Friends are so many, and they share so many assumptions that are quite invisible to them, precisely because
they are shared. These are assumptions about the most fundamental human transactions, subcutaneous beliefs . . .
(Hoffman 210)

She realises that her only way to get her personality across to the members of the host society is to translate
herself not only linguistically but also culturally. This requires adapting her expression of her personality,
thoughts and beliefs in a way that makes them understandable and acceptable to the target culture:

The reason why he is so territorial is because he is insecure,” I think of a difficult colleague, and an imp of the perverse
says, “Well, simply, he’s a bastard . . .” But I’m less likely to say the latter to my American Friends, and therefore the phrase
has a weaker life (Hoffman 273)

In adapting the outer form of the message, both types of translation share the delicate task of preserving
its content. This represents the primary challenge for the translator, which is reflected by the long-standing
debate in translation theory about the balance between adjustment for the reader and fidelity—for instance,
synthesised in Lawrence Venuti’s introduction to The Translation Studies Reader (4-6) and discussed in
the first chapter by Walter Benjamin (15-25). In order to change the meaning of the text remaining faithful
to its meaning, the very notion of meaning must be defined first. In other words, the translator needs to
identify that aspect of the message that must be preserved at all costs and let this non-negotiable substrate
of the text guide the choice of translation approach and techniques. The same holds true for translation
of identity. As it has been said, finding the inassimilable part of the self beyond the sphere of cultural
influence becomes Eva’s solution to her condition of disunity. In the same way as the guiding principle for
interlingual translation is the preservation of the deep meaning, or the communicative function, of the text,
her “white blank centre” becomes Eva’s parameter to accomplish faithful translation of her self, “without
becoming assimilated—that is, absorbed—by my new world” (Hoffman 211).

Language and Identity

“It’s not that we want to speak the King’s English, but whether we speak Appalachian or Harlem English, or Cockney, or
Jamaican Creole, we want to be at home in our tongue. We want to be able to give voice accurately and fully to ourselves and
our sense of the world” (Hoffman 124).

The present section deals with the pivotal role played by migrants’ proficiency in the host country’s language
for them to recreate their own identity in the new socio-cultural environment. In the previous section,
the process of manifesting one’s identity mindful of cultural differences from the host society has been analysed as a translation process and has been compared to the translation of texts. Linguistic competence in both the source and the target language is generally agreed to be the most fundamental premise for translators to accomplish their task of turning meaning from one language and culture to the other. The present section argues that linguistic competence is also indispensable for migrants to accomplish accurate and effective translation of their identity.

Language is one of the primary means through which individuals can make their thoughts, their personality, their values and beliefs—in short, their identity known to others. This is true to the extent that identity should be regarded as one of the primary functions of language, as Joseph argues in his Language and Identity. However, this generally valid assumption becomes relative in the case of a second language. Several factors influence the individual’s capability and willingness to use L2 to express identity and for introspection. The depth of this influence will be explored, in the first place, applying linguistic and psychological theories to Joseph’s tripartite model of individual identity: personal, enacted and social. Secondly, the dramatic influence of language on each level of the self will be highlighted through examples from Lost in Translation, showing the dependency between Eva’s attempt to reshape, voice and give the right form of expression to her identity and her degree of competence and confidence in the second language.

This section first explores the mediating role of language in shaping the individual’s self-image, their personal identity, through theories about narrative and silent speech. Secondly, the analysis in this section reveals how language influences the individual’s enacted identity, which is the way in which the self is perceived by others, as the persona manifests in actions and speech. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion on the role of language in establishing one’s social identity, one’s position within the socio-cultural community.

**Personal Identity**

Identity means, in the first place, the way individuals conceive of their personality, the set of values and characteristics that they attribute to themselves. This intimate sphere of identity is termed personal identity, because “the self is the sole authority capable of determining what it is” (Joseph 81). Personal identity is constructed in interaction with the environment and is the result of a process of inward reflection on personal experiences triggered by external feedback. Through this direct or indirect feedback, the environment provides individuals with information about the acceptability of their behaviour and acts as a mirror providing self-information, with a potentially crucial influence on the process of personal-identity building. However, not all of the information received from the environment is then incorporated into the person’s self-concept. Through self-reflection, individuals evaluate the environment’s feedback and select the information considered coherent with their own self-image. Since this process of self-reflection is largely verbal, language plays a pivotal role in construing one’s personal identity, as Hall argues in his article (7). More specifically, the cognitive function of self-reflection is largely carried out in the form of an inner dialogue with oneself, as it is shown by studies on inner speech (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough 932). Inner speech plays a plethora of crucial functions for the individual, from social functions, to self-regulation, self-motivation, meta-cognition, self-awareness and self-understanding:

One can compare inner speech to a flashlight used to find one’s way through a dark room. Without the light, one will still be capable of approximate perception (e.g., one can utilise touch to discern furniture and objects [self-information] in the room); but perception (self-awareness) will be much more vivid and precise if one puts the flashlight on. (Morin 129)

Through inner speech, the external stimuli that provide a basis for self-awareness are expanded, reflected upon, evaluated and then integrated into one’s self-image or discarded as being inaccurate. With these mental operations, the external world becomes meaningful to the individual, and it is possible to be self-aware outside social situations (Morin 122). Internal speech functions as a perspective-switching device that facilitates self-observation.
Eva’s memoir offers the opportunity to observe closely the repercussions of language-mediated introspection on the process of individual identity formation. The author establishes a strong link between her ability to process verbally thoughts and emotions and the identity-building potential of the experiences she makes:

The small event, instead of being added to the mosaic of consciousness and memory, falls through some sort of black hole, and I fall with it... I’m not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don’t really exist. (Hoffman 108)

A clear example is provided by the passage in which she describes the alteration of her internal speech at night, before going to sleep. The author used that moment of tranquility to recollect events, to reflect on them and construe her identity:

This interval before sleep used to be the time when my mind became both receptive and alert, when images and words rose up to consciousness, reiterating what had happened during the day, adding the day’s experiences to those already stored there, spinning out the thread of my personal story. (Hoffman 107)

In the early phase of language acquisition, Eva feels that both her mother tongue and her second language are inadequate means of expression. Her Polish seems to be atrophied, unable to describe her new experiences, whilst English has not become familiar enough for her to use it at the subconscious level. As a consequence, she reports the feeling of losing contact with herself, as the natural flow of interior dialogue seems to be obstructed by her reduced linguistic means. She calls this bottleneck “linguistic dispossession” (Hoffman 124), showing that “in terms of expression of her self—this period of her life is effectively voiceless” (Granger 69). For Eva, losing language means losing a way to process experiences and make them her own: “I have no interior language, and without it, interior images—those images through which we assimilate the external world, through which we take it in, love it, make it our own—become blurred too” (Hoffman 108). This loss of connection to her inner self is reflected also in the fact that her efforts to put her experience into writing repeatedly fail. As she attempts to construct her new English identity through her diary, she initially reports of a distance from her literary self, which prevents her from writing about her own experience in the first-person singular and forcing her to recur to the much more detached you. Reconciliation with her English-self takes place only much later in Eva’s life when she is a grown-up woman. As the author herself states in an interview that appeared in Psychology Today in the year 2017, the turning point for her is marked by a dream she has in English:

We need to distinguish between functional and internal bilingualism. You can speak two languages very well, but not incorporate them into your psychic life... For me, one crucial moment in my trajectory was when I started dreaming in English... that was the moment when I understood I had become truly internally bilingual. (Grosjean)

Only once “language comes from below consciousness” (Hoffman 243) does Eva feel that her acquisition process has been successful and that the foreign language has become “a transparent medium” (Hoffman 243) to perceive, conceive of and interpret herself and the world around her.

Enacted Identity

Individual identity is not a fixed construct, but a context-dependent and ever-evolving state. The outward manifestation of an individual’s values, beliefs, desires through actions and words influences others’ perception of their personality. Personal identity seen from the outside and interpreted by others is called enacted identity. Different persons may have dramatically different conceptions of the same individual. While personal identity is a unitary concept depending solely on the individual’s self-analysis, one is attributed to many different personalities as there are people with whom he/she entertains social contacts (John 88). Despite the subjectivity of enacted identity, language can contribute to reducing the gap between
individuals’ self-concept and other people’s interpretation of them. Through verbalisation of their thoughts, individuals make their personal identity accessible to others (Ushioda 206). For this reason, lacking L2 competence can be threatening to one’s personality:

All forms of representation and all communication are filtered through the individual’s way of expressing. This means that in a situation where we are forced to use a language that is not our native language we might be able to communicate and we might be able to show a representation of the world, but there is a risk that we might not be able to show our inner self. Our identity, the person who we are is taken away from the language and since identity is formed both from within ourselves and from the outside by other people our identity becomes threatened. (Eriksson 9)

The obstacle that lacking language competence can represent to the expression, or enactment, of one’s personality is clearly shown by Eva’s experience. Language initially represents a barrier to her self-translation, because she feels unable to communicate her personality to others: “I’m becoming a very serious person, missing the register of wit and irony, although I see irony all around me” (Hoffman 118). The inability to fully express herself largely prevents her from making herself known to others. She feels that her controlled, uncertain speech fails to express her true personality and leads to a flattening of her identity: “my speech, I sense, sounds monotonous, deliberate, heavy—an aural mask that doesn’t become me nor express me at all” (Hoffman 118). Her insecure use of language is perceived to be an obstacle, which makes it impossible for others to see the true Eva “through the guise” (Hoffman 119).

Social identity

Identity can be said to be “socially and interactionally produced” (Morita 26) as members of a discourse community interact with each other. Social identity is the term used to refer to one’s self-definition in relation to the social context, requiring identification with a certain group. This self-categorisation has an impact on the person’s behaviour (Park 9-11) since actions are influenced by the role, position of power and responsibilities that the individual believes to have in relation to the other group members. Furthermore, the individual might subconsciously adopt distinctive modes of behaviour to signal belonging to the social group. Social identity also requires being accepted into the target community. For this reason, as in the case of enacted identity, social identity can be considered to be a context-dependent “site of struggle” (Peirce 16), where individuals try to assert their position, attribute to the other a certain role and negotiate the terms of their relationship. One of the primary weapons employed in this social battle is language. Language is socially and culturally meaningful because it is reflective of the constraints of the socialisation process, such as the role of the speakers, social function and context of interaction. When people talk, they try to achieve their communicative intention, take and negotiate their social stance through language (Park 6-7). Borrowing a transactional analogy from Shigematsu (10), in order to secure their position in the “social market” individuals must be able to employ their linguistic capital with the aim of a successful negotiation. This social motivation is regarded as a crucial factor influencing L2 acquisition since effective language use represents the prerequisite to being recognised as a member of the discourse community (Ushioda 200). In concrete terms, language proficiency has been found to have a dramatic influence on immigrants’ integration into the host community and labour market success (Safi 37) as well as on academic achievement (Armon-Lotem et al. 156).

Eva is aware of the importance of language to integrate into the target society. She describes how her different accent, clearly signifying different geographic origin, differentiates her from her American peers:

Some of my high-school peers accuse me of putting it [the Polish accent] on in order to appear interesting. In fact, I’d do anything to get rid of it . . . Sociolinguists might say that I receive these language messages as class signals . . . belonging to a “better” class of people is absolutely dependent on speaking a “better” language. And in my situation especially, I know that language will be a crucial instrument, that I can overcome the stigma of my marginality, the weight of presumption against me, only if the reassuringly right sounds come out of my mouth. (Hoffman 123)
The desire for social recognition and for an equal position within the peer group spurs her to improve her L2 competence. She recognises that, for most immigrants, the awareness of their integration opportunities depending upon their language proficiency speeds up acquisitions. This drive deriving from the fear of social exclusion, which she calls “immigrant energy” (Hoffman 157), prompts her to make rapid progress, strive for excellence and eventually earn her place in the social category “professional New York woman” (Hoffman 170). At the same time, however, she never fully assimilates into American society nor is she identified by her peers as an American. Consequently, she remains an integrated outsider. She feels at ease in the role, because this condition does not represent a social disadvantage in her life but rather brings her popularity: “They are curious about what I have to say, and fascinated by the fact that I am a “European,” which in their minds guarantees some mysterious and profound knowledge. I must admit I do nothing to dispel this impression” (Hoffman 179). Her accent remains the linguistic marker of her social identity, since she never loses her Polish accent despite her profound knowledge of English. This represents a concrete example of the function of language in the negotiation of one’s social identity. Since Eva never fully embraces American identity and ideology, she accepts the role that has been attributed to her by her peers and lets her self-categorisation shine through her English: the rich and academic vocabulary and sophisticated language use that signals her intellectual passion together with the slight non-native accent that manifests the hybridity of her personality, her system of values not being grounded in American culture but in her own individual point of triangulation.

Conclusion

In the present article, I addressed the impact of a new language and culture upon identity in migration experiences. I combined theory with some concrete examples from Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, an autobiographical account of migration that offers profound insight into the influence of multiculturality upon identity. I argued that the complexity of the mechanisms involved in multicultural exchanges is better comprehended when regarding them as a “bilateral translation.” Recurring to the concepts of loss and gain, I highlighted the challenges and the opportunities for individual identity that accompany the process of self-translation. I also presented some reflections on the connections between translation studies and multicultural personality theories. I attempted to show that these theories may be seen in complementary relation to one another and that a comparison between the two can add to the disciplinary knowledge of both fields. Furthermore, I combined some studies from the fields of psychology and linguistics to show the impact of L2 proficiency on migrant-identity building in the new context. Using John E. Joseph’s categorisation of identity as my base, I highlighted how language influences the building of multicultural identity on several levels.

Overall, the main challenge posed to individual identity in multicultural settings seems to lie in the need to mediate between one’s identity before migration and the culture of the host society. For their self-translation to be successful, individuals have to adjust their expression of their personality to the target society, in a way that enables them to be understood when passing through its cultural filter. This holds true also for the translation of texts. As I have argued in the article, the challenge in self-translation can be compared to the attempt, in interlingual translation, to adjust the source text to achieve equivalence in the difference. Eva resolves her inner conflict by defining the non-culturally mediated part of her personality (in the author’s words her “white blank centre,” or her psychological core in Martens’ terminology) and using it as a compass to guide her self-translation. In translation theory, it is generally argued that preserving the deep meaning of the source text, despite the different linguistic form and the need for cultural adjustment, is the guiding principle that enables the translator to remain faithful to the original. Just like profound knowledge of both the source and the target language is the prerequisite for translating texts, proficient and effective use of L2 is also the prerequisite for cultural translation of the self to be successful. To translate effectively into the other culture, the individual needs linguistic means that can bridge the gap between the inner and the outer world and make these two dimensions of human experience mutually accessible. For this reason, language emerges to be much more than a mere instrument to describe reality and exchange information about external referents.
By focusing on the deep personal changes favoured by intercultural contact, the article has highlighted the creative nature of translation. Experiences like that of Eva challenge the traditional metaphor of translation as a linear process. The journey away from the existential state of monolingualism towards multilingualism and multiculturality appears to be much more than the mere superficial reshaping of an individual's identity. Eva's translation journey does not end at the predictable destination—which is the full assimilation into the target society, but the self does not revert to the initial state either since personality is deeply influenced by the contact with the other culture. The trajectory of Eva's journey creates a “third space” (Bhabha 56), with the two cultures acting as two points of triangulation. Therefore, much more than a precise, predictable and straight trajectory from a source to a target, self-translation appears to be a creative and dynamic process. Taking a step beyond the metaphor of the triangle, the identity that is created in this process can be described as a polygon, the angles of which are built each by one cultural perspective the individual becomes acquainted with.

To summarise, when individuals come into contact with a new culture and language, they acquire a new outlook on reality and linguistic means to describe it. This has been said to represent both the threat of a loss of identity and a potential gain. The downside of multiculturality emerging from the analysis derives from the loss of an absolute cultural identification, which generates a feeling of uncertainty. Since the one culture subliminally becomes an assessment tool to evaluate the other, the individual may not be able to identify with one of them in the same unconditioned way anymore. This concept may be considered a crucial interpretative factor of today's social dynamics since cultural relativism is regarded as one of the defining traits of postcolonial multicultural identities (Buden et al. 196-210). On the other hand, however, the analysis highlighted that this perpetual comparing and contrasting of cultures can also be constructive for individual identity. In fact, translation can act as a triangulating force, enabling individuals to identify the core of their personality beneath the layer of social influence. This positive view is particularly important now that multicultural experience has become a common phenomenon, while critical voices are becoming louder and claims are being made that globalisation is a levelling force and a threat to cultural diversity. Defining its impact and quantifying its risks and rewards for individual identity is one way to offer a positive view of intercultural contact without ignoring the complexity of its internal dynamics. Such a discussion may encourage further reflection on the psychological impact of intercultural contact and contribute to enhancing the value of multicultural experience.

Works Cited


