Forms of Language and Culture Mediation in Plurilingual and Pluricultural Environments: Towards a (Self)Narrative Methodology in the Teaching of a Second Language

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Formes de la médiation linguistico-culturelle en milieu plurilingue et pluriculturel: envers une méthodologie (auto)biographique en didactique des langues secondes

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Abstract

This paper retraces the history of a post-doctoral research project (2008-2010) which was carried out within the framework of the research group "Politica, educazione, formazione linguistico-culturali" at the University of Macerata. It focuses in particular on the relationship between self-narration, language education and identity construction of migrant women in Italy. It discusses the disciplines which contributed to developing the research design and, thus, to enriching the field of language teaching methodology, as well as increasing our understanding of female migrants' shifting identities and their integration process.

Keywords: self-narration and language story, migrant women, L2 teaching methodology, identity construction, interdisciplinarity.

1. Résumé

Cette communication retrace l'histoire d' une recherche post doctorale (2008-2010) menée dans le cadre du groupe de recherche « Politica, educazione, formazione linguistico-culturali » à l'Université de Macerata. Elle met l'accent en particulier sur les relations qui se tissent entre le récit de soi, la formation linguistique et la construction identitaire des femmes migrantes en Italie, et interroge les disciplines convoquées qui ont contribué au développement de l'objet de recherche et, par conséquent, au champ de la didactique des langues, ainsi qu'à la compréhension de l'identité en mouvement et au processus d'intégration des migrantes.

Mots-clés : récit de soi/des langues, femmes migrantes, didactique des langues secondes, construction identitaire, interdisciplinarité.

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0.   Introduction

During my PhD research I became aware of migrant learners' urge to narrate themselves, particular.ly in the case of women. Self-narration, especially when it deals with languages, proved to be a reflexive space for reflecting on one's own plurilingual repertoire and an occasion to legitimize oneself in the immigration country by giving visibility to one's own linguistic and cultural capital (cf. Cognigni, 2007). Other research projects (e.g., Gohard-Radenkovic & Rachédi, 2009) have widely confirmed the formative value of *self-narration* and *language story* as a "third space" in which to reconstruct one's own identity after mobility.

The research project "Italiano, lingua d'*altre*" aimed to take a step forward by developing and experimenting with teaching practices for female migrants which would take into account gender needs in mobility, as well as their languages and cultures. In order to respond to their different needs as *women, migrants* and *language learners*, the research investigated the applicability of a (self)narrative methodology in the teaching of the L2 so as to enhance their linguistic and (inter)cultural competences and to make them active participants in their integration process in the host country. Self-narration was therefore promoted to provide them with a real "right to speak" (Norton, 2000), "un espace de parole" in which to learn the L2 but also to express themselves and co-construct an intercultural competence *in* and *through* the second language.

The complex relation between self-narration, language education and migrants' identity construction from a gender perspective was explored by means of a plurality of research tools and disciplinary contributions as discussed below. After clarifying the principles underlying the research project, I will explain how I came to develop it focusing on the disciplines involved and making clear the different "forms of mediation" advocated in the title.

1.   The research project: from women's needs to L2 teaching through (self)narration

In order to achieve its objectives, the research project was divided into two main phases. The *first phase* made it possible to explore migrant women's needs and to highlight some potentialities and limitations of current courses of Italian as an L2 for migrant women in the light of the scientific literature on the different theoretical aspects involved (e.g., language learning and mobility from a gender perspective, self-narration and language story, mobility and identity construction, and their possible interrelation).

In this preliminary research phase, an extensive survey of migrant women's learning needs and teaching practices was conducted by means of questionnaires on a national level, as well as interviews with teachers and organizers of L2 courses on a local level, so as to better understand current language policies concerning citizenship education for migrant women.

As the data confirmed, for religious or cultural reasons female learners show a stronger need than male migrants to develop production and interaction skills, particularly oral ones (cf. Favaro, 2006). This is because they have fewer opportunities to come in touch with native speakers. Most of these learnenrs are North African or Asian mothers of Muslim culture, who feel a great wish to understand the host country's cultural codes and to acquire the basic functional instruments for

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communicating independently in the new language, especially in those areas of gendered practices (e.g., prenatal and baby care, pediatric assistance, children's education, etc.) which could help them to regain their parental status in the immigration country (cf. Quercioli, 2004).

The response to these needs is generally by means of a notional-functional approach to language teaching, even though a gendered perspective on the new language is often promoted. However, with Pavlenko I argue that a syllabus including gendered topics of discussion is necessary but not enough in itself to develop an intercultural competence since "it rarely goes beyond acknowledgement of diversity and a static sense of possibility" (Pavlenko, 2004, p. 63)[2].

1.1   Self-narration and L2 teaching: mediating between concepts and disciplines

The same static view of identity emerged from the analysis of textbooks for migrant women which often disregard the renovating process undergone by migrants through mobility. The presence of an overall "immersive approach" to L2 learning, which makes no real attempt to bring the learners' languages and cultures into the classroom, keeps the learners' traditional roles before migration covertly unchanged, thus preserving the host country's power hierarchies (cf. Cognigni, in press-b).

The recent publication of textbooks and teaching materials for children, adolescents (Mastromarco & Fiorio, 2010), and migrant women, applying what is generally called "metodologia narrativa" in Italy, testifies to the extensive implementation of (self)narration in the teaching of Italian as an L2. In the texts for migrant women, not only is self-narration encouraged in specific sections (Marelli & Rodondi, 2010) but it sometimes represents an overall methodology for language teaching (Veneri & Angius, 2008).

Mainly drawing upon the work of Italian pedagogists in the field of adult education, this methodology seems, however, to be equally biased by the conception of autobiography as "therapy" (Demetrio, 1996). Moreover, no reference is generally made to the importance of narrating one's own languages or to expressing one's own language subjectivity (Lévy, 2008). Even though *language biography* is often used, it is mainly conceived as a "diagnostic tool" for understanding the learner's sociolinguistic background (e.g., Favaro, 2007). This may depend on the fact that, in Italy, "biografia linguistica" does not have a clear status in language teaching methodology studies, while it is generally investigated in the domain of sociolinguistics (e.g., Franceschini, 2004; Veronesi, 2008).

Therefore, the first challenge was to come to terms with the different national and disciplinary definitions and interpretations of basic concepts such as *récit de vie* and *récit de langue* and, most importantly, to mediate between them so that the potential of the pedagogical and sociolinguistic dimensions could merge into one effective methodological tool for language learning and teaching.

1.2   Second-language teaching from a critical gendered perspective

All these reasons confirmed the need for a gendered approach but also provided the opportunity of

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2 In the American critical feminist approach to language education, this need for *inclusivity* in terms of topics envisages such issues as "sexual harassment, violence against women, pregnancy on the job, maternity leave […]" (cf. Pavlenko, 2004, p. 63). Since in this research female migrants' main concerns were noticeably different and varied, gendered topics of discussion were elicited from the learners themselves (see section 1.2).

implementing narration and self-narration so as to involve learners as active participants in their identity construction process through L2 learning.

In this regard, North American applied linguistics and sociolinguistics from a gendered perspective were extremely helpful, especially "critical and feminist FL/L2 pedagogy" (Pavlenko, 2004) which combines feminist poststructuralism and critical enquiry in applied linguistics. Sharing the poststructuralist concept of language as discourse, critical and feminist FL/L2 teaching methodologists view *gender* as a system of culturally constructed power relations which are (re)produced through language, thus emphasizing the fact that it varies across cultures as well as over time within a culture (Weedon, 1997)[3].

The importance of these studies relies on their conception of L2 classes as an opportunity to view gender and oneself from the perspectives of other cultures and thus acquire a "multivoiced consciousness" (Kramsch & von Hoene, 2001), which, in my view, is an intercultural competence that may be profitably developed through narration and self-narration (cf. Crashaw et al., 2001; Cognigni, 2009).

With these concerns in mind, the *second phase* of the research included the experimentation of some teaching units from an intercultural and gender perspective through action research[4]. Indebted to Prabhu's *procedural syllabus* (Prabhu, 1987) and to task-based language learning (Wilson, 1996), the (self)narrative methodology applied was based on a negotiated syllabus of gendered topics such as *family*, *the household*, *shopping and cooking*, but also *the school system* and *the healthcare services* in Italy (for more details on this part of the research see Cognigni, in press-a).

At the same time *participant observation* was effected within a mutual self-help group for language and culture female mediators of foreign origin, on the basis of a partial reciprocity with the training methodology of the above mentioned courses. Since peer interaction and self-narration were here extensively applied for the exchange and the co-construction of intercultural competences, this research setting inspired the implementation of communication strategies and group-management techniques in the L2 courses. Moreover, narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) were conducted with the group participants, who were envisaged as "privileged witnesses" of L2 learning from a gender perspective and of that urge "to reply" (Hooks, 1989) through self-narration which was frequently experienced during the group meetings (for more details on this part of the research see Cognigni 2011).

2. Researching plurilingualism and pluriculturalism: different disciplines to draw upon

Dealing with the complexity of plurilingual and pluricultural research settings, I became aware of the great importance of making a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the research object: this can be achieved by adopting *a plurality of methodological tools* and, most of all, a *bottom-up approach* to research questions so as to facilitate the questioning of 'concepts' instead of 'disciplines' or, better, of

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3 Another fundamental contribution from this area of studies regarded the relationship between the restructuring of gendered identities and L2 learning (see Pavlenko, et al. 2001; Menard-Warwick, 2009), which led to incorporating the notion of *agency* in L2 learning for migrant women (Norton, 2010).

4 The action research carried out in these courses included the use of different research tools such as questionnaires, self-evaluation grids, and interviews with the learners. For more details see Cognigni, in press-a.

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concepts by means of several disciplines.

The open-ended list below reports the different disciplines I have drawn on for my research work, in the attempt to underline the importance of a pluri/interdisciplinary approach to research which is, however, guided by one's own research questions:

- *language and communication studies*: sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, language acquisition research on Italian as an L2 or "linguistica acquisizionale" (Vedovelli & Villarini, 2003), especially as regards narration (e.g., Duso, 2002; Lo Duca, 2003);

- *society and culture studies*: sociology of migration (Decimo, 2005; La Salandra & Sardella, 2008), comprehensive sociology, ethno-methodology, and cultural anthropology as regards the research method (e.g., Kaufmann, 1996; Fele, 2002);

- *education studies:* intercultural pedagogy and andragogy (Demetrio, 2003; Giusti 2001), action research, teaching methodology (e.g. task-based learning and cooperative learning for the implementation of a narrative methodology to language learning);

- *psychological studies:* social psychology (social representations), cultural and transcultural psychology concerning narration and self-narration from an intercultural perspective (cf. Leichtman et al., 2003).

The subdivision into these four main disciplinary areas was inspired by the metaphor of the "flower" representing Italian Language Teaching Methodology or "Glottodidattica", which is based on the knowledge and findings from several disciplines[5]. Communication among the four different disciplinary areas (petals) and Glottodidattica (core) is two-way since the former gives life to the latter, which in turns feeds them with its own vital sap.

However, as the example of "autobiografia linguistica" showed, the "petals" are not always enabled to communicate among them and hybridize, thus missing the possibility of having effective interdisciplinary contributions from other areas of study. In point of fact, interdisciplinarity inevitably entails a certain flexibility of theoretical references as well as of the methodological framework. Consequently, critical aspects of researching within pluri/interdisciplinarity such as the possible location of one's own research work within a specific discipline, or the always-lurking uneasiness of making disciplinary bricolage or misappropriation are "risks" one has to assume, having courage to experiment and innovate by letting plurality become a guiding principle rather than a mere objective of analysis.

That is why cooperation between researchers in the field of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism on an international level is more than desirable: This cooperation should be founded on the realization of a plurality of national perspectives and academic discourses concerning the didactics of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism (Zarate, Lévy, & Kramsch, 2008), as well as on the implication of different disciplines, even when they are apparently divergent in scope or aim, or have a different name in other national research traditions.

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5 The pluridisciplinarity of "Glottodidattica" is well represented by a well-known picture of a flower with four petals (disciplinary areas) and a core (glottodidattica). The relationship between the petals and the core happens by *implication* rather than by application, thus distinguishing "Glottodidattica" from "Linguistica Applicata" (cf. Balboni 2008).

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