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Article:

Harvey, L orcid.org/0000-0003-4726-4428 (2016) "I am Italian in the world": A mobile student's story of language learning and ideological becoming. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 16 (3). pp. 368-383. ISSN 1470-8477

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1168049>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Language and Intercultural Communication* on 13 November, available online:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1168049>

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“I am Italian in the world”: A mobile student’s story of language learning and *ideological becoming*

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Abstract

This article theorises the relationship between language and intercultural learning from a Bakhtinian dialogic perspective, based on the language learning story of Federica, a mobile student in UK higher education (HE). I first outline the context of UK HE and its internationalisation agenda, discussing how research in this field has conceptualised language, intercultural communication (IC), and international students in terms of a totalising boundary between *self* and *other*. I link this to current concerns in IC regarding the philosophical underpinnings of the field, specifically the aporia created as a result of the totalising *self/other* relation in prevailing IC discourse (MacDonald & O’Regan, 2013). I then present a means of addressing this aporia through a Bakhtinian theorisation of the relationship between language and intercultural learning. This theorisation offers a relational perspective on the *self* and the *other* in which intercultural learning is a process of *ideological becoming* (Bakhtin, 1981) with the other, enacted in, with and through language, as illustrated in Federica’s story of learning English. The article concludes with a call for language and communicative practices to be placed at the heart of HE internationalisation agendas and for HE practitioners to recognise shared responsibility for intercultural communication.

Questo articolo teorizza la relazione tra lingua e apprendimento interculturale dalla prospettiva dialogica bachtiana, basata sulla storia di apprendimento di Federica, una studentessa universitaria transnazionale. In primis contestualizzo il percorso formativo universitario del Regno Unito e la sua internazionalizzazione, spiegando come gli studi in questo settore possano concettualizzare la lingua, la comunicazione interculturale (IC) e il confine tra *sé stessi* e gli *altri*, in particolare degli studenti internazionali. Queste trovano spazio negli ultimi studi di IC in termini filosofici, specificatamente la aporia creata come risultato della relazione totalizzante *sé stessi/altri* nel suo discorso (MacDonald & O’Regan, 2013). In seguito presento come indirizzare questa aporia attraverso la teorizzazione bachtiana della relazione tra lingua e apprendimento interculturale. Questa teorizzazione offre una prospettiva relazionale del *sé stessi* e degli *altri* nella quale l’apprendimento interculturale è un processo di *divenire ideologico* (Bakhtin, 1981) con gli altri, attivato tra, con e nella lingua, come dalla storia di apprendimento della lingua inglese di Federica. L’articolo si conclude col discutere la necessità di posizionare la lingua e le pratiche comunicative al centro dell’internazionalizzazione dell’istruzione universitaria, auspicando che i professionisti del settore possano riconoscere una responsabilità condivisa sul tema della comunicazione interculturale.

Keywords

language learning; intercultural learning; higher education; mobile/international students; dialogism; ideological becoming

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Introduction

This article presents the language learning experience of Federica, a mobile student in a UK HE context, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concept of *ideological becoming* to theorise the relationship between language and intercultural learning. I briefly outline the context of UK higher education and its internationalisation agenda, identifying how language has been conceptualised in this field as a barrier between *self* and *other*, then discussing the ways in which this conceptualisation is reflected in research in intercultural communication and international students. I then offer a relational perspective on the self and the other based on Bakhtin's dialogism, illustrated by Federica's story. Through three constructs drawn from Bakhtin – *Seeing through the other's eyes*, *Finding the other in herself*, and *Learning to live on the boundary* - I demonstrate how Federica's language learning and intercultural learning were inextricably related in a process of *ideological becoming* with the other. In this process, language learning was fundamental to her developing intercultural identity and to her personal and social growth.

A note on terminology: Throughout the article I use the general term "international students", as employed in the higher education literature, to refer to students studying at universities outside their countries of origin. In the UK, however, the term "international student" refers only to students from outside the European Union – EU students are classified as "home" students for purposes of immigration and fees. Federica, being from Italy, would therefore be recognised as an international student in HE research terms, but not in UK administrative terms. I therefore use the term "mobile student" to refer to Federica specifically. While I fully acknowledge that this distinction is highly problematic and in need of exploration and critique, this is unfortunately outside the scope of this article.

Context: Language and internationalisation in UK higher education

Internationalisation has become increasingly important in higher education (HE) contexts across the world (International Association of Universities [IAU] 2005), and a considerable body of research has developed around the phenomenon and its processes (Knight, 2008; Robson, 2011). In HE strategy and policy, internationalisation is considered to be positive and beneficial in terms of increasing and enhancing the range of international activities within and between universities, such as international research collaboration and greater social and economic impact, and more international students and academic staff (Deem, Mok, & Lucas, 2008; Teichler, 2004). This has created a fruitful context for the study of intercultural communication, with an increasing body of research into the acculturation experiences of international students (e.g., Glass & Westmont, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Stadler, 2009).

However, although language is the vehicle for intercultural communication, a substantial proportion of this research reflects a prevailing deficit discourse of language in English-medium HE contexts, in which multilingual and non-native English-speaking international students are viewed as problematic or deficient (Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2011; Preece & Martin, 2009). This discourse is rooted within a technicist and assimilationist assumption that language "problems" can be easily repaired by English for Academic Purposes teachers and university language centres, who can help students to master the forms of the language so they can participate fully in their (chiefly academic)

university lives (Turner, 2011). In UK and English-medium HE, therefore, consideration of language has tended to be underpinned by a philosophical assumption that language creates a barrier between *self* and *other* which needs to be erased in order for effective intercultural communication to take place.

In this article I challenge this deficit and *othering* perspective of language, demonstrating how for one student, language learning was a site of fundamental and sustained engagement with an *other* and was inextricably bound to her intercultural growth. I now explore the ways in which the *othering* inherent in the deficit view of language in UK HE is reflected in prevailing notions of 'culture' in intercultural communication and in studies of the international student experience.

Intercultural communication and international students: problematising "universal consciousness"

The widespread deficit discourse of language in UK HE reflects the problematics of the term "internationalisation", which establishes a dichotomy in which the "international" or "non-UK" is always already positioned as *other*. Such a dichotomy can also be seen in the field of intercultural communication (henceforth IC), in which culture is often conceptualised as a barrier between the *self* and the *other*. This conceptualisation has led to the formulation of the concepts of adaptation and competence upon which intercultural training is founded (Ferri, 2014, p. 9, citing Moon, 2010; see also: Holliday, 2011; Phipps, 2013). Such training is based on the premise that awareness of the behavioural patterns associated with a (nationally- or geographically-bounded) "culture" minimises the stress, uncertainty, and miscommunication potential of intercultural encounters. These behavioural patterns are manifest in essentialist features such as high/low assertiveness and high/low responsiveness (Hall, 1995). With the acquisition of appropriate skills and competences, the intercultural speaker may 'interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures' (Wiseman, 2003, p. 192; see also Deardorff, 2006). Successful intercultural communication occurs when the intercultural speaker can identify and categorise the cultural *other* and achieve a clear and recognisable form of communication based upon this categorisation.

However, the assumption of such cultural differences and their enactment through interaction, reifies and essentialises the *other* in communication, and fails to account for the broader political, historical, social and economic factors which shape the interactional context (Blommaert, 1998; Piller, 2011). This reification, essentialisation and ahistoricism is mirrored in a large part of the body of research on international students, who, over the last thirty years, have often been studied from either a 'deficit' or a 'surplus' model (see Chowdhury and Phan 2014 for a comprehensive review). In the deficit model, international (non-Western and non-native English-speaking) students have been stereotyped as passive, uncritical, reluctant to participate orally in class, and unwilling to engage with domestic students (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Gu & Maley, 2008). Students tend to be characterised as a "'reduced Other" and/or as a fixed and static homogenous group' (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014, p. 10). In contrast, the surplus model characterises international students as valuable resources from which Western academia can learn (e.g., Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005). This approach moves closer to recognising the complex subjectivity of international students, but, in its tendency to place international students on a pedestal, becomes little more than another, albeit more acceptable, mode of stereotyping (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014). The surplus model reflects Holliday's (2011) description of neo-essentialist intercultural research, which employs

the category of cultural difference to analyse the experience of international students and thereby reinforce the dichotomy between *self* and *other*, or home and international. Furthermore, the marketisation of HE has led to a correspondingly neoliberal conception of the international student, particularly prevalent in HE promotional materials. Like the communicative agents in IC research, international students are portrayed as asocial, autonomous consumer-agents, rationally choosing their future prospects from an open market (Sidhu & Dall’Alba, 2011). Such conceptions ignore the emotional, moral, relational, embodied aspects of the student experience and the socially- and historically-constructed nature of their motivations, desires, and identities (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014). Although more critical and multilingual perspectives on the international student experience are emerging (see, for example: Sovic & Blythman, 2013; Fabricius & Preisler, 2015), international students remain broadly positioned as *other* – to domestic students, to native English speakers, and to “Western” educational traditions.

This essentialisation and reification of the *other* in IC discourse, as reflected in aspects of the HE literature, has been addressed in a recent critique of the IC field, levelled by MacDonald and O’Regan (2013), developed by Ferri (2014) and implicit and supported in the work of other IC and HE scholars (Holliday, 2011; Monceri, 2003, 2009; Phan, 2009; Phipps, 2013). MacDonald and O’Regan and Ferri identify that IC draws on a Kantian tradition of the autonomy of the individual in which self/other relationships are characterised in terms of ‘tolerance’ and ‘acceptance’. This tradition is evident in the aims of IC, understood by MacDonald and O’Regan (2013) as seeking to ‘raise awareness of the role of language in constituting national and supra-national identities and cultures’, and which includes ‘envisaging more cosmopolitan subjects who traverse the transnational terrain with openness towards, and tolerance of, the other’ (p. 1106, citing Starkey, 2007). In the IC and HE/international student literatures underpinned by this philosophical tradition, this goal may be expressed as ‘a desire for transformation in the mind or consciousness of the individual speaker’ (p. 1006). Intercultural learning and communication are best facilitated within this transformation: the intercultural speaker is first able to recognise and tolerate difference from the *other*, and is ultimately able to embrace these differences and become ‘transcultured’ (p. 1006). The concept of a transformed, expanded consciousness, and its logical conclusion, the idea that ‘the people of the world can communicate’ in ‘harmonious coexistence’ (Asante & Yoshitaka, 2008, p. 6), depend upon a conception of wholeness and the development of a more complete, universal consciousness in which difference is effaced: in the transformation of the consciousness of the intercultural speaker, the boundary between self and other collapses (MacDonald & O’Regan, 2013, p. 1007). This desire for oneness creates an *aporia* in IC, a logical contradiction within its underlying philosophical assumptions:

the ontological impetus towards transculturalism in the form of an integrated human consciousness simultaneously implies closure, finitude and the resolution of difference within what is supposed to be an antinomic intercultural terrain. In other words, by presupposing “oneness”, IC discourse systematically effaces the premise of its own ontology – the irreducible relation to the other. Thus, by means of the passage of the many to the one, intercultural communication brings about its own dissolution. (2013, p. 1008)

In prevailing perspectives in IC and HE research, then, the boundary between the self and the other is central and totalising: it is a problem to be overcome, a barrier to be effaced in order for

consciousness to be transformed. The aporia cited by MacDonald and O'Regan is only possible within these totalising conditions. My aim in this paper is therefore to offer a means of addressing this aporia through a Bakhtinian theorisation of the relationship between language and intercultural learning. This theorisation offers a relational perspective on the self and the other which *works* the boundary in a dynamic process of intercultural growth. In this perspective, IC is not a constructed body of knowledge and understanding about the other, but a process of *ideological becoming* with the other, enacted in, through and with language.

A Bakhtinian perspective: Dialogue, outsidership and ideological becoming

Language, as 'a living, socio-ideological concrete thing' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293), was central to Bakhtin's work. For Bakhtin, all human action, ethics, existence and knowledge are fundamentally linguistic. This does not simply mean that these are expressed in language; rather, they are determined by the concrete existence of language as communication in dialogue, which is manifest in the dialogic utterance (Holquist, 2002; Matsuo, 2015). The utterance is the specific response to a specific moment, always responding to something and always anticipating a reply, and therefore always in dialogue with other utterances. The utterance is produced by a concrete addresser and oriented towards a concrete addressee. It is located in a particular time and space, yet seeks to locate itself within the social relationships of its particular context: 'each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293), weaving 'in and out of complex interrelationships' (p. 276) and 'populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others' (p. 294). Consequently, the word in language is always 'half someone else's': the 'living language' lies on the 'borderline' between self and other (p. 272), and so authorship of an utterance is always shared between self and other: it is through the other that 'my thought becomes actual thought for the first time' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94).

In the utterance, therefore, the dialogic relation between self and other is realised. Self and other are always dependent on each other, coming together in the utterance through the 'simultaneous unity of differences' that the utterance expresses (Holquist, 2002, p. 36). This relation is not deferred until the attainment of a transformed, unified consciousness; it is immanent and material, located in the lived, interpersonal moment of the utterance. Dialogism therefore 'integrates language, communication and ethics' (Matsuo, 2015, p. 7). This also means that language is always ideological: the utterance represents 'a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for social significance' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 333), and any speaker is automatically an *ideologist* (Tappan, 2005).

In the dialogic self, then, the *I* cannot exist without the *other*:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. ... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he [*sic*] is always and wholly on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another*. ... I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance). (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 287, original italics)

The boundary is a particularly important concept in Bakhtinian thought. Just as the utterance is always a two-sided act, coming into being through a 'simultaneous unity of differences', people, cultures and territories too come into existence only on their boundaries. And yet, the boundaries make them distinctive, and interlocutors must remain distinctive in order for meaningful dialogue to be possible. Each participant in the dialogue must find the other in themselves (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287), but must also maintain their unique self and remain different from each other. For Bakhtin, we are entirely reliant on the other's position outside us, as only in what the other reflects back to us can we see ourselves (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 15). This *outsideness* (Bakhtin, 1986) is a fundamental element of the *creative understanding* which, in a critique that resounds into MacDonald and O'Regan's aporia, Bakhtin cites as the aim of intercultural communication. For Bakhtin, intercultural understanding involves working the self/other boundary by simultaneously entering and remaining outside another culture, for 'one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole ... our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*' (1986, p. 7). If *outsideness* is maintained, perspectives are broadened, for neither participant has the right to articulate final meaning: 'each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched' (p. 7). Outsideness is inhabiting the border, where there is no unified relation to the external world which constitutes the self; the self is conceptualised through the ideological and discursive phenomena which shape it in an ongoing historical process, and is thus continuous, fluid, unfinalised, constantly "becoming". There is no point at which we are complete, at which we have seen a finite number of perspectives on ourselves. There is therefore no ontological certainty or closure; no-one can know for us, and 'there is no alibi for being' (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 40). We can only exist dialogically - and this interdependency implies responsibility for ourselves and for others.

As this dialogical existence is enacted at the level of the utterance, language is fundamental to human life, as Bakhtin points out:

I live in a world of others' words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others' words ... The other's word sets for a person the special task of understanding this word. (1986, p. 143)

This "special task of understanding" is reflected particularly clearly in the process of language learning. Language learners emerge and exist on the boundary between languages and cultures, trying to understand and orientate towards the words of others in order to gain enhanced interpersonal and intercultural understanding. To then make those words their own – to take them from 'other people's mouths' - is a 'difficult and complicated' (1986, p. 143) learning process, but one that, for Bakhtin, is elemental to human development: 'the ideological becoming of a human being ... is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others' (1981, p. 341). The process of *ideological becoming* represents the process of the self and the other finding themselves in each other and working towards creative understanding, a process which takes place through language, through the selective assimilation of others' words. Ideological becoming is a process of learning to be in the world, of maturation and development in a shared story of persons-in-relation. I will now demonstrate how this process unfolded for a mobile student, Federica.

Methodology

Design and participants

The data presented below comes from a study of the English-language learning motivation of six mobile students (Harvey, 2014). Federica was one of these participants, three men and three women aged 19-28, from different countries and at different stages of tertiary education in a major city in northern UK. Three participants responded to an advertisement I had placed on my institution's research recruitment pages; the other three were personally known to me, including Federica, who had been a colleague on a Masters programme. The study sprang from a concern to account for learner voice in language learning motivation, both conceptually and methodologically, and so narrative was chosen as the methodological paradigm. In its concern with locatedness and co-construction of knowledge between speaker and listener, this paradigm resonated with Bakhtin's philosophy: 'we know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, through the stories we tell' (Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 7). This shared discovery and revelation can be understood as part of the process of ideological becoming; stories, as Daiute (2011, p. 330) describes them, are a means of making sense of the world and how we fit into it. The basic research design was a series of four interviews with each participant. These were carried out over approximately fifteen months (from May 2011 to September 2012), in order to facilitate in-depth engagement and reflection over the participants' periods of study. Interviews took place in four rounds, with each participant being interviewed once in each round for around two hours, making a total of twenty-four interviews and around forty-eight hours of data. My rationale for interviewing in rounds was that following each interview I would analyse the data from that interview, and from this construct the questions for the next round.

Data generation and analysis

The first interview elicited the participants' English-learning and using experiences in roughly chronological order, giving an outline of their English-learning lives to that point. Drawing on Bakhtin's writings on the polyphonic novel, I adopted the concept of talking *with*, rather than talking *to*, participants, with the aim of facilitating a dialogical analysis which would avoid giving participants 'secondhand and finalising definitions' and instead 're-create them in their authentic unfinalisability' (Bakhtin, 1984a: 68). In practice, this meant developing a co-theorising approach in which I analysed each interview for recurring themes, then wrote these themes up in explanatory paragraphs for each individual participant, supplying them with their supporting data on a separate document. For the second interview, I asked for the participants' responses to my paragraph-themes, which elicited very rich and reflective data. After the second round of interviews, I analysed all the interviews across all the participants for common themes, wrote these themes up in explanatory paragraphs (which this time included supporting data), and sent all of them this document as the basis for the third interview. Engaging with aspects of what the other participants had said was very interesting for them, and again led to rich and reflective data. After the third round of interviews I created each participant's individual language learning story based on the data from all the interviews, and sent each participant their story, as we had constructed it together, as the basis for

the final interview. The final interviews consisted of further reflective responses to the stories, as well as requests and suggestions for corrections, additions and omissions. See Harvey (2015a) for an in-depth discussion of this methodology.

All the participants' stories foregrounded different aspects of their language learning motivation and ideological becoming. I here present Federica's story as a particular example of the ways in which the concept of ideological becoming can illuminate the relationship between language learning and intercultural learning.

"I am Italian in the world": Federica's story

Early language learning: Seeing through the other's eyes

Federica was born in Italy in 1982. At the time of the research she was studying for a PhD in Linguistics and had lived in the UK for around three years. She started learning English when she was six, in compulsory lessons. From the first, she was very attracted to English, particularly loving the unfamiliar /th/ sound, and she excelled at English in her classes. She was also attracted to the UK, initially by pictures her teacher would bring into school, of squirrels and green urban spaces, and latterly by a perception she and her peers had of a country with functioning infrastructure, institutions and social systems, as opposed to Italy, which she felt was "just a mess". The UK and English therefore represented a cultural "other" in their perceived difference from Italy and her own experience.

Federica's first awareness of the inadequacy of language as forms alone came at the age of 12 or 13, when a pen pal exchange with English students was organised for her middle school class. Because the students' knowledge of English was so limited, and because the classes were very form-focused, the pen pals ran out of things to say to each other and the project ran aground. She liked it because "it was an opportunity to learn... I sort of discovered actually the real world outside Italy and outside learning a language", but the experience now seems "quite limited in terms of what a person can really learn and even in terms of a personal experience". In these early language learning experiences, Federica is viewing English and the world, in a very limited way, through the other's eyes – through the pictures of the world presented to her in English lessons, and to a small extent, through her pen pal. While seeing the world through the eyes of the foreign culture was 'a necessary part of the process of understanding it', this was the only element of understanding for Federica, and was therefore 'merely duplication', without 'anything new or enriching' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7).

Nonetheless, Federica continued to be very successful in English, and went on to study English and Spanish at university in Napoli. In 2004, during her time at university, she visited London for three weeks with an Italian friend. Although she had previously been to the UK when she was fifteen, this second visit really marked her first immersion in an English-language context, and represented an important stage in her learning:

when you're in Italy and you learn a foreign language you think it's a kind of a game you don't think that everything that happens to you happens to another person in English... so it's a game it seems fictional... I really think that this fiction reality thing... there is a bridge and you have to walk that bridge

Federica's metaphors of "fiction/reality" and the "bridge" occur frequently in her story. The "fictional" nature of English when she was learning in Italy represents its otherness, its separation from herself by a clear boundary. She illustrates this thus:

in Italy you learn a language so you could say yeah I speak English because I've been studying for so long... and then when you come here [to the UK] you see that you don't know anything about English ... you know the grammar but you don't really know anything... so this challenge this self-discovering and this discovering of what the language can really mean

In the language becoming real, the *other* inherent in the production and understanding of her utterances became concrete and explicit. She became aware that the language lived in its speakers, that English utterances (her own and others') represented 'specific points of view on the world' and were 'interrelated dialogically', co-existing 'in the consciousness of real people' and 'living a real life' (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 291-292).

Visiting the UK: Finding the other in herself

This growing awareness demonstrates Federica's growing awareness of the boundary and the possibility of moving along it or inhabiting it, represented by the "bridge". From her vantage point on the bridge, she began to gain some outsidership on her English speaking in Italy: she was able to see how *other* English was to her in Italy. Understanding the language as "real", as meaningful to others, was an important step in English becoming real and meaningful to Federica herself. She exemplifies thus:

in Italy you think that when somebody's asking you a question in English you just have to say yes or no... but then when you come here you realise that yes or no could actually prevent to have social communication with somebody or miscommunication because you realise that here they say yes please and no thanks... [in Italy] it's kind of like the real communication doesn't happen... this is why I'm talking of discovering... and motivation of really learning how other people perceive what you say... and you don't have feedback in terms of yourself as well ... now I am an Italian who speaks English in the UK which was very different

In taking her steps on the bridge, she began to understand her own role and responsibility in communication. By understanding how the language was embodied in others - by its becoming "real" – she was becoming aware of how others might respond to what she said, and began to take into account 'possible responsive reactions' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94) in the construction of her utterances. She gained 'feedback in terms of [her]self', realising that she was reliant on the other's position outside her, and that she could only see herself in what the other reflected back to her. In 'learning how other people really perceive what you say', she began to 'take into account the value of [her] outward appearance from the standpoint of the possible impression it may produce on the other' (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 15). The conscious awareness of the other when constructing her utterances represents her beginning to find the other in herself and "selectively assimilate" the words of others,

as part of her process of ideological becoming. Federica was aware of this as a process of growth and development:

F: I think that bridge [between fiction and reality] is the motivation... but you don't realise that there is a bridge and that you have to walk that bridge until you analyse the maturation process you have gone through

L: okay so the thing that's joining fiction and reality is the learning

F: yeah... absolutely... the only tool to connect these two worlds these two opposite worlds is just you... it's nothing else ... [teachers] have to make sure that [students] have basic grammar... but then there's more than grammar... and this is actually the communication act that you have to make when you go abroad... so that is the bridge you have to walk

Here, Federica characterised herself as the boundary, as “the only tool to connect these two worlds”, a connection which took place through her “communication act”. This represents the intercultural insight which developed through her language learning; she was not simply learning the language in terms of its forms, as she was in Italy, but engaging in intercultural communication, learning to inhabit border territory.

For Federica, seeing herself through what the other reflected back to her was uncomfortable; she became aware of the limitations of her form-focused English learning in Italy. This awareness was reinforced when she spent six months as an ERASMUS student in Scotland in 2006-7, where she realised that she was responsible for learning to listen as well as to speak:

this is a motivation to learn how to listen to others and to perceive the outside because ... you're not necessarily involved in speaking but you are involved in listening and understanding and so put yourself in the situation of being in a place... imagine a situation where they are all Scottish and they all speak in very strict Scottish accent... you can either push yourself and try to understand a bit of what they're saying... or just leave the place... I mean there is no other choice you cannot say okay... you stop and now you talk the way I speak so that I can understand... you are in the position that you have to do something you have to make sense

Federica was learning that she lived ‘in a world of others’ words’, and that the other’s word set her ‘the special task of understanding this word’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 143). She knew that she was “involved in listening and understanding” and that she had to learn to listen as well as to speak. But learning to speak did not mean learning to speak just like the other:

it doesn't mean that after four years you have to talk like them... so like when they say ah you have an Italian accent... is alright can you understand me?... and it's a voice myself as well... you can say there are different voices in the Scottish voice the Australian the US the England kind of way of speaking English... but then there is also my way of speaking English

Federica was learning to inhabit the border, becoming, in her words, “an Italian speaker of English”. And just as she had to learn to listen to others, she understood that others needed to learn to listen

to her, asking the rhetorical question “is alright can you understand me?”. Learning to inflect her English words with her Italian voice was part of her ‘selective assimilation’ of others’ words, part of her process of ideological becoming. In navigating the ‘task of understanding’, she became changed, developing in ‘new and enriching’ ways (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 6-7) through the viewpoint of the other.

Living in the UK: Learning to live on the boundary

Federica took an MA in Linguistics in Bologna in 2008, then moved to England in 2009 to embark upon her PhD. By now highly linguistically proficient in English, Federica’s intercultural learning continued through the development of her voice as an Italian speaker of English, through becoming aware of her concomitant responsibility for the communication acts she performed in that voice, and becoming aware of the complex implications for her relationships. The following incident, which occurred at a regular film night Federica and her colleagues held at their university, is particularly illustrative of this learning:

I was watching a movie and at some point this friend of mine was laughing and then I said ‘but why are you laughing? I mean... you contributing in deciding the movie’ and I don’t think there is anything to laugh apart if you want to mock it to make fun of it... so I said a sentence that in Italy would be totally accepted and people will laugh about the sentence that I said which was like “you have a strange face”

Here, Federica made an assumption that a phrase she would use in this context in Italian would create a similar response if translated into English, and that her interlocutor would share her understanding. However, in the immediacy of dialogue, those assumptions were brought into question:

she overreacted telling me that I shouldn’t say these things her face is alright... and that she built confidence in herself and she doesn’t want anyone to tell this... and I was completely shocked because I just said this sentence that honestly was completely like if I say it to my friend my friend said “ah yeah look at yours” or he or she wouldn’t have taken that seriously... and then I realised and I said wow... I mean I’m a linguist and this is what I did I caused a kind of miscommunication because she came up with this philosophical thing that she built up her confidence and doesn’t want me to tell her that she has a strange face... and then I was like oh my god you know... and I realised that maybe I was walking one step more on that bridge

Federica found herself in an unexpected and unpredictable position for which, as she recognised, she was partly, though not wholly, responsible. Perhaps an intercultural competence perspective would seek analysis of this incident with a view to repair strategies and avoidance of future misunderstanding, assuming the participants to be knowable as cultural beings, learning to tolerate each other as the autonomous, rational agents of Kantian tradition. However, Federica does not look for repair: her response is to apologise, but not push the point. From initially feeling that her friend “overreacted”, she moves to a position of concern for the pain she caused through her utterance, understanding that “this is what I did”; but at the same time she knows that she is not responsible

for her friend's interpretations, as after all, it was her friend who "came up with this philosophical thing" about her face and her confidence. She maintained a position of outsidership, reaching a new understanding of herself by seeing herself reflected through the other. And through her concern for the other *qua* other, indicated by her decision to leave the conversation be, Federica moved closer to creative understanding; she walked "one step more on that bridge". This episode highlights the immanence and materiality of the self/other relation as located in the utterance, and Federica's deepening awareness of this is manifest in her understanding of the relationality and mutual responsibility of the self and the other in and for their interpretations. In seeing the self and the other find each other in her utterance, Federica was ideologically becoming – learning further about how to be with others in the world.

As her time in the UK went on, Federica's learning became about finding ways in which she could "still express being Italian with the English language". She was "still walking that bridge", hoping to become "a person that doesn't get in trouble when she speaks"; a person who could be recognised as an Italian speaker of English, with "a voice myself as well... my way of speaking English". She saw developing her "Italian way of speaking English" as "part of a big big project ... I am Italian in the world", part of becoming a person with a complex and cosmopolitan identity who can engage interculturally while still speaking from a specifically located, embodied position; a person who inhabits borders. She was aware that the hard work she had already put in was part of an ongoing, unfinalisable process of growth: "I think that there is a long long walk... I know that I walked lots of miles already... but I still think that there's more to do". This process of ideological becoming, her 'selective assimilation' of the words of others, demonstrates how her language learning was inextricable from her intercultural learning. By "being Italian with the English language" she inhabited and worked the self/other boundary: she did not efface it by being transformed into something universal, but negotiated the particular within the universal by being "Italian in the world". As Federica recognised, is it on the boundary that learning takes place – if the boundary is effaced, there is nothing to learn. For Federica, the boundary she inhabited through her language and intercultural learning opened up myriad possibilities for learning to be in the world:

through English you can understand also the cultures that I couldn't understand... I speak with somebody I don't know from whatever country... and you don't speak their language so the point of communication the lingua franca is English... but you can still express your... being Italian with the English language... and I think this is really interesting... it's a means it's not the end of everything it's actually the start of everything

Conclusion

In this article I have presented a Bakhtinian analysis of the relationship between language and intercultural learning, exemplified by Federica's story. This analysis offers a relational perspective which demonstrates how the boundary between the self and the other is negotiated through language in an ongoing process of ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981). Through understanding the self/other boundary as dynamic and non-totalising, where self and other are interdependent yet must remain outside each other in order to move towards creative understanding, this perspective offers a response to a recent critique of the IC research field which calls for an expansion of philosophical perspectives in order to address the limitations of Kantian conceptualisations of

intercultural competence and responsibility (Ferri, 2014; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013). This perspective demonstrates relationality rather than dichotomy, outsidership and creative understanding rather than oneness, and the fundamental importance of reciprocity. It recognises the 'crucial task of intercultural studies': that of highlighting 'the processual character of communication as an activity that is always situated and negotiated between speakers in both intercultural and intracultural situations' (Ferri, 2014, p. 10, citing Dervin, 2011). It offers a liminal, fluid, conceptually challenging understanding of people and cultures, which speaks to 'the feeling of what it is like, moment by moment, to be living in a hyper-connected, multipolar/multilateral world' (Matsuo, 2015, p. 18).

However, this understanding can be difficult to grasp because of long-held, stable and familiar notions of the totality of territories, spaces and places. It contrasts sharply with conceptualisations of international students in HE discourse, where, in the very designation "international", students are always already categorised and reified as cultural others. There is no indication in Federica's story that she feels subject to this domestic/international dichotomy in her university life, perhaps because in UK HE terms, she is an EU rather than an "international" student. Nevertheless, learning to live on the boundary was a long and difficult process for her; she still had to negotiate the "reality" of English in her UK student experience. Her story draws our attention to the borders, and to how these borders are created and reinforced in our practices, strategies and policies. Therefore, as HE practitioners, we must interrogate our beliefs, practices and policies for their conduciveness to genuine intercultural dialogue, particularly when internationalisation agendas are increasingly driven by economic imperatives (Robson, 2011) rather than a desire for 'international understanding' and 'learning to live together' (UNESCO, 2014). I suggest that such interrogation would most usefully start with an examination of language: of the ontologies of language (Hall, 2013) underpinning the ways in which language is used and understood in policy, and of the language and communicative practices taking place among the participants subject to and engaging with these policies. Indeed, understanding language as practices enables us to move away from a view of language as a product "owned" by speakers from certain nation-states, and towards a view that all language users adapt, contribute to, and share in the language. If language practices are something we all do, it becomes a collective responsibility to pay attention to our own practices: to how we adapt to, accommodate, and employ our various linguistic resources with speakers of different language backgrounds and varieties, regardless of their national origin. Close attention to the language practices of all students, whether "domestic" or "international", "native" or "non-native" speakers, will illuminate the ways in which communication takes place, leading to deeper understanding of how processes enabling intercultural engagement are enacted, and representing a move towards genuinely reciprocal intercultural understanding (Harvey, 2015b; see also for suggestions as to how HE institutions might put linguistic hospitality into practice). This should also entail broadening the study of language in HE beyond HE as an academic setting (e.g., in the study of academic literacies) to include HE as a social setting. Federica says little of her academic experience at university, and yet her story of being an international student is all about her learning – learning which has taken place chiefly through her social life. This social dimension of HE must be researched if we are to develop more in-depth and holistic understandings of students' experiences and intercultural learning.

Finally, the reciprocity inherent in the Bakhtinian perspective I have presented here decrees that all participants have responsibility for communication, that all must put in the work in order for “mutual enrichment” to take place. In the UK, and doubtless in other HE contexts, we expect international students to understand their responsibilities in this regard, not only by learning and being appropriately proficient in English, but also by integrating with domestic students in order to make the most of their UK HE experience (Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, & Williams, 2014). However, we all face the challenge of intercultural communication; whether we are “domestic” or “international”, it is a shared responsibility. If HE is to internationalise responsibly, sustainably and ethically, we must all rise to this challenge: HE leadership must recognise and acknowledge the increasingly multilingual nature of their internationalising institutions, and provide language and intercultural training for all. This would not only send a welcoming message to international students, but would be of enormous benefit to domestic students, giving them opportunities for active language and intercultural learning and reflection. It would represent a genuine move towards a peaceful and sustainable global society, for which everyone has some share of responsibility, and in which we may all learn how to be with others in the world.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Federica, Richard Fay and Susan Brown, for their contributions to the research here reported. I would also like to thank my colleagues Khawla Badwan, Jessica Bradley and Rob Sharples, and the two anonymous reviewers, for their very helpful and supportive feedback.

Funding

This work was supported by a studentship from the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

Biodata

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