Creating oneSELF new spaces: Bilingual migrants’ identity positioning in personal blogs

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the potential of blogs for bilingual adult migrants to appropriate new social spaces, develop multiple literacies and (re)construct bilingual identities. It does so against a broader context of significant conceptual shifts: (1) the emergence of more equitable and empowering pedagogies where learning is conceptualised in the context of identity, language and literacy (Norton and Toohey 2004; Mantero 2007); (2) the reconceptualisation of new literacies/multiliteracies (multimodal and increasingly online) as rooted in social practice (Gee 2002; Coiro et al 2008); and (3) construction, presentation and communication of knowledge increasingly mediated through web-based media, resulting in redefined notions of text and authorship and presenting new opportunities for digital self-presentation. Positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004) provides an explanatory framework for instances of identity construction through bilingual means in personal German–English blogs created by immigrants to New Zealand.

**Challenges and opportunities of diversity**

The challenges of an increasingly diverse and connected global world place growing demands on educators and learners alike. At the same time, technological innovations and the growing multilingual capacities offered by the Internet (Crystal 2001; Danet and Herring 2007) provide new opportunities for the construction of knowledge and identities in digitally mediated settings, where a shift to Web 2.0-based participation (Warschauer and Grimes 2007: 2) encourages authorship through user-generated content. Furthermore, with the recognition of identity as a key driver for investment in language learning (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004), aspects of identity and self-construction have become central concerns in new literacies (Coiro et al 2008), where considerations of language, literacy and technology intersect.

The Internet gives unprecedented access to authentic, self-selected and meaningful communication and self-expression, offering individuals the ‘possibility for language development in the transcultural spaces of noninstitutional online environments and associated cultures-of-use’ (Thorne and Black 2007: 149). These are increasingly found outside formal learning contexts, across private and public, as well as educational and non-educational, domains. These new opportunities empower those whose voices tend not to be heard or who have been positioned as powerless by the discourse of the majority, including migrants and language learners. Their needs for voice, agency and participation have primarily been studied in relation to second- or foreign-language learning, but a growing body of work focuses on the Internet as a medium for local, minority or indigenous languages. This includes studies of minority languages use and the creation of space and identity in online communities (Cunliffe and Harris 2005; Lam 2006; Kissau and Hunger 2008; Mitra 2008), online language distribution and choice among bilingual professionals (Warschauer, El Said and Zehry 2002), and online writing in web blogs among American heritage learners of Korean (Lee 2006). As yet, only a few studies have investigated the potential of blogs for identity construction of bi/multilingual migrants.

**Identity as a dynamic process**

From a social-constructionist perspective, identity formation and self-construction are understood as dynamic social processes, which are contingent on interaction (Davies and Harré 1990). Identities are thus seen as verbally enacted discursive products, which also facilitate social positioning (Harré and Moghaddam 2003). Such ‘interactive positioning’ represents jointly constructed expectations or
possibilities, although individuals may also assign their own preferred positions through ‘reflective positioning’ (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004), which plays a crucial part in the negotiation of identities.

In speaking and acting from a position people are bringing to the particular situation their history as a subjective being, that is, the history of one who has been in multiple positions and engaged in different forms of discourse (Davies and Harré 1990: 48).

Thus, language connects an individual’s past with the present and the future in a personal narrative. Walker (2004) showed that the languages of migrants can play a crucial role in the construction of a bi/multilingual sense of self and sense of continuity. The study also revealed an ongoing importance attached to writing for personal, literary or translation purposes, as well as electronic uses in Internet/email. This finding contrasts with a reality where the ability to write migrant languages is usually the most difficult ability to maintain across generations, even where families desire intergenerational transmission of their home languages (Vaccarino and Walker 2008). The need for cultural and linguistic continuity does not necessarily decrease as migrants settle into a new sociolinguistic environment. In the New Zealand context, for example, practices associated with the origin culture, including language, continue to be valued over time (New Zealand Immigration Service 2004).

Narrating oneself through writing via web technology: blogs

Writing is social practice, and the ability to read and write represents an element of what defines a person (Street 1994). However, notions of what constitutes literacy, text and authorship are dramatically changing, as evidenced in the proliferation of online writing in web blogs or social networking sites. Blogs have experienced explosive growth both in popular and educational domains. By March 2008, 184 million people worldwide started blogs and 346 million read blogs (Technorati 2008). The ability of bloggers to make their own authorial and linguistic choices in self-selected publishing (Murray and Hourigan 2008) encourages authentic communication and promotes agency (Kern, Ware and Warschauer 2004; Hunter and Cooke 2007). For example, Canagarajah (2004) observed that teenage learners constructed different, self-selected subjectivities and alternate identities than those that may have involved imposed or even unfavourable identities in a classroom context. How this empowering potential of blogs might apply to bilingual migrants is presented through some of their voices in the following section.

Aim and methodology

This study explores bilingual blogs as an avenue for migrant writers to practise multiple literacies ‘through discourses they are competent in’ (Canagarajah 2004: 123). While supported through findings from the literature, the study has also been inspired by my personal experience as a German immigrant to New Zealand. I have an interest in the complexities associated with language in migration in my roles as researcher, community member and volunteer,1 particularly where it concerns matters of bilingual/biliterate proficiencies and identity construction. Blogs provide an emerging and rich context to explore these processes. This study involves an analysis of four personal or family blogs created by German, Austrian and Swiss immigrants to New Zealand for evidence of reflective positioning and identity construction. These examples of German–English bilingual blogs were chosen randomly from the public domain of the Internet, to illustrate how individuals claim new spaces and position themselves in ways that might construct new or multiple identities.

Bilingual blogs of German–English migrants to New Zealand

Some German–English immigrant blogs are associated with groups or organisations that have a community focus, and aim to provide a point of contact for Germans in New Zealand (for example http://www.deutsche-in-neuseeland.de/) or an insider perspective on life, schooling or economics in New Zealand (for example http://www.neuseeland-blog.com/tag/neuseeland/). Individual German-writing immigrant bloggers may want to ‘keep in touch with friends and family all over the world’ or just
be there for anyone considering emigrating, as the following example shows. Such merging of private and public is revealed in the open invitation, *Willkommen in unserem Leben* [welcome in our lives], exemplified in Figure 1 translation:

> [In 2005 we, Diane and Kai, decided to turn our backs on Germany and get involved in a New Zealand venture. What is a dream vacation for some has quickly become our new home and meantime we can hardly imagine living anywhere else. We established our own business Ventego Creative and regularly report in our blog about our every day life and small or big adventures – primarily in order to keep our family and friends around the world informed, but also to answer questions of potential emigrants. Welcome to our life.]

**Figure 1: Integrating private and public dimensions of blogs**

The following analysis focuses on the category of personal blogs.

**Individual personal blogs**

**Example 1**

The Austrian immigrant’s bilingual blog in Example 1 starts with an ‘About’ entry, which positions her in several ways indicating multiple possibilities: (1) as an author who expects to have a lot to say (‘I will add a lot of things’), (2) as a wife and mother of children of whom she is very proud and (3) as a new immigrant looking forward to the ‘good things’ about life in a different society. These different strands of being intersect in her blog, woven together as dimensions of her previous, current and imagined life. There is a clear sense of excitement about personal ownership of ‘my homepage’ and an expectation of future possibilities for agency (‘I will add a lot’). The following extract illustrates how this blogger has claimed ‘her’ space and intends to use it.

Yes, it’s my homepage and I will add a lot of things.

I am a mother of 3 great children, *Jonas* my big boy, *Aileen* my little romp and *David* our sunshine.

My husband brought us to New Zealand where we learn many good things about living and sharing our life within a multicultural society. Nature here is great and we enjoy going to the beach.

*Juhuuuu! Ich hab eine Webseite und werde vieles hinzufügen!*  

Interestingly, it is the German version that makes her positive emotions more apparent. The exaggerated German exclamation ‘Juhuuuuuu!’ [Jippeeee] and bolding of the statement that follows contrast with a more neutral English version and impart a heightened sense of joy about the start of her blogging venture. The writer also signals things that are important or interesting to her and her family: life in multicultural New Zealand and the country’s beautiful nature.

After four months of blogging bilingually, from July to November only English entries are posted. A clue as to why this might be can be found in the following entry, where the author expresses her delight about her children learning the alphabet and numbers. In particular, she is pleased about her two-year-old son’s progress and says:

He makes big steps since his birthday in May. David talks a lot more. Mostly English. So Granny be warned! You get a lesson in English when you come to New Zealand… also he understands Austrian

It is a common phenomenon for migrant parents to accommodate their children’s choice of the host language such as English, for example, due to increased exposure to it in school or peer pressure. This might coincide with a shift to English in the family context, which is aimed to help with the adjustment to an English-dominant society. In a similar comment, the author expresses delight about her daughter’s emerging writing practice (Figure 2), which she assumes was modelled in her family:

I can’t believe it! She already picked up some habits from us, like writing important things

Figure 2: Child’s writing sample

The picture and writing might be school work and hence in English, but no comment is made on that. However, the fact that her blog has turned monolingual seems to be on her mind. In a German-only exchange with a fellow Austrian, the author writes:

Bei meiner homepage bin ich ein bisschen ratlos, da ich manchmal nicht weiss ob ich doch noch in Deutsch schreiben soll… dann werden die Posts einfach zu unebersichtlich, oder nicht?

Was meinst du???

[I am at a bit of a loss regarding my homepage, as I sometimes don’t know whether I should still write in German… then the posts will simply become too muddled, won’t they? What do you think??]

Unfortunately, no responses to this entry are shown; in fact, there is very little dialogue in the blog. But in December 2007 bilingual blogging resumes with an entry involving Christmas cookie making. Perhaps Christmas baking represents a significant cultural practice, which this writer associates with German and which might afford her a sense of continuity in the new cultural context.

What a great time!

We had a cold snap (Season Greetings from Antarctica). This gave us the idea to heat our room through baking. Yummy what delicious cookies we made.
My Aunt Kathi send me her recipe of Vanillakipferl and they are the best I’ve ever made! Thanks Aunty!

Today we went to Willowbank again and soaked up the sun.

What a great life!

Endlich wieder Sonne!

Wir hatten in den letzten Tagen einen Temperatursturz von 10 Grad (Weihnachtsgruesses aus der Antarktis). Als es so kalt war haben wir die Zeit genutzt und einige Kekse gebacken. Das heizte unsere Wohnung ein und liess uns durch den Duft von Vanillakipferl, Butterkekse und Lebkuchenmaennern das Wasser im Mund zusammen laufen!

Dank Tante Kathi hab ich die besten Vanillekipferl gebacken die wir je hatten! Sie hat mir das Rezept gemailt (Dank an Dino der das moglich machte!)

Heute haben wir die Sonne genossen und sind wieder an unseren Lieblingsplatz gegangen wo am Rand des Spielplatzes ein Bach fließt.

Einfach herrlich!

What is noticeable in entries such as this posting is the more detailed and at times more idiomatic way of expressing her thoughts in German, as the following example illustrates:

the idea to heat our room through baking. Yummy what delicious cookies we made.

Als es so kalt war haben wir die Zeit genutzt und einige Kekse gebacken. Das heizte unsere Wohnung ein und liess uns durch den Duft von Vanillekipferl, Butterkekse und Lebkuchenmaennern das Wasser im Mund zusammen laufen!

[when it was so cold, we made use of the time and baked some cookies. That heated our flat and the aroma of the (names of Austrian cookies) made our mouths water.]

What seems to be a more minimalist English version in fact shows quite a high level of functional and pragmatic skill, which allows the writer to reduce her message to the essential points and make them each quite idiosyncratic. Instead of literal translation, she expresses herself effectively and creatively, with a view to her audience, too. For example, some Austrian readers may be unfamiliar with New Zealand place names, such as Willowbank, which are replaced by generic place descriptions in the English text; similarly, Austrian place names such as Laternsertal in Vorarlberg become ‘my home valley’.

The writer of this blog comes across as someone who is highly proficient in both German and English, allowing her to be confident and in charge of her writing. Her experience of having been supplanted to the opposite side of the world does not come through as a sense of dislocation, but she expresses an awareness of becoming someone new, for instance in relation to her physical environment of the Southern hemisphere. The seasons have been turned on their head and she reconstructs herself as:

Autumn child

Actually I was born in spring, but since we changed the hemisphere I am an Autumn child now.
**Example 2**

Figure 3 shows the start page of a blog, and the quote that follows provides an explanation for this author’s bilingual approach.

**Figure 3: Blog start page**

My blog has to serve multiple purposes. On one hand I’d love to just write down my thought and ideas. I love to talk about my knitting, my yarn addiction and show off all my finished projects. But we’re also homeschooling, so maybe I should try and keep a record of what we’re up to. Which really isn’t that easy when you’re unschooling. The whole keeping record becomes a bit of a chore. But one of the main reasons I also blog is because I’d like to let our friends and family know what we’re up to and how we’re doing.

And that brings me to my biggest dilemma: which language? You see most of our family and many of our friends live in Switzerland. And to be fair, I should write my blog in German. But I’m more fluent in English (though far from perfect) and writing in German just doesn’t come naturally. So what to do?

Solution: my blog which is called ALL KINDS OF WRITING. It ties up nicely all purposes and I’ll do some parts in German and some parts in English. And hopefully that will make everyone happy.

The German version adds some additional ideas elaborating on the English declaration.

[And in German it is more laborious and as you can see it’s full of errors. I am sure you’ll fall over laughing when you read my blog. But I want to write and tell those who don’t have English how we spend our days. But keep up a whole blog in German?]

[My solution is simple. The title of my blog translates into ALL KINDS OF WRITING. And here I merge all blogs into one. Maybe ‘a bit of a mixture’ (dialect) but at least doable. Depending on my mood I’ll write in English or German. The photos are explained in English, as our family all know German. Knitting matters are in English, as most of my ‘knitting’ colleagues speak English]
Interestingly, this blogger writes more extensively in her weaker language, German, where she has the fluency though not always the structural accuracy. This does not deter her; instead, she makes a self-deprecating comment about making her readers laugh. Nevertheless, she seems to feel in command of the language and is determined to use German to keep her overseas family informed – while sharing her knitting passion in beautifully composed entries integrating predominantly English text and artistic photographs of something she knows about – her woollen creations with fanciful names such as Hobbiton Socks (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Reflective positioning through textual and visual means**

Example 3

This blog of a German-background immigrant contains musings on being a German abroad who came to New Zealand after eight years in the United States. Right from the beginning, this blogger positions herself through multiple identities: a digitally literate and fluent writer of English, a professional who works as a business analyst and web project manager, and a blogger who writes in both English and German (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: The homepage – a space to signal multiple positionings**
She positions herself as an expatriate German, an identity that is meaningful to her given her dual emigration history. This is a person who is comfortable with her self-assigned role, something she sees as worth celebrating and reflecting on: the point of departure for her blog.

*Denk ich an Deutschland [When I think of Germany]*


... [not only was 2007 the start of a new year, but also of the beginning of my 2nd decade as expatriate German. I left Germany on 7 January 1997 en route to San Francisco, stayed there for eight years, and now we are in our third year in New Zealand. A reason for celebration and reflection (emphasis added)]

The writer also recognises that her relationship with Germany has changed. In one posting she articulates the emotional changes experienced after emigration and how she relates to her original and adopted cultures.

... Je länger ich im Ausland wohne desto deutlicher wird mir bewusst wo ich herkomme, und wie meine Herkunft diejenige, die ich heute bin, beeinflusst und geformt hat. Die Distanz bewirkt dass ich die guten Seiten meiner Heimat mehr schätze und die schlechten durch meine Erfahrungen besser einzuschätzen weiß. Oder vielleicht werde ich ja auch nur alter, weiser und milder.

[The more I live abroad, the more I am conscious of where I come from and how my origin has formed and influenced who I am today. Distance has meant that I value the good aspects of my homeland more and know how to better judge the bad ones through my experiences. Or maybe I´m just getting older, wiser and more mellow.]

This blog entry mirrors a kind of ‘critical cultural continuity’ in the sense of her own awareness of how her origins have shaped her into the person she is, and at the same time her own awareness as someone with a sharper ability of judgment.

Her creative choice of blog titles and picture captions underlines the importance of her German origins to her sense of self. They make reference to poetic or other artistic expression in the German cultural context, adding expressive force to the textual/visual message. For example, *Denk ich an Deutschland [When I think of Germany]* are words by the famous German émigré Heinrich Heine in exile in Paris. Sibylle’s appropriation of this voice is interesting because, in the context of her blog, it lends emotional depth, rather than nostalgia or negativity. The caption shown in Figure 6 is taken from a German rock song [‘Oh, America, don’t do this to us’] and adds a critical commentary on the newspaper heading in the photograph.

*Figure 6: Matching caption and text creatively*
The narrative about the experience of a sea journey (Figure 7) is illustrated with photographs and captioned with lines from a German sea shanty: *die brausenden Wogen* [the foaming waves] and *der eiskalten Winde rauhes Gesicht* [the raw face of the icy winds].

**Figure 7: Visual and discursive construction of identity**

This blog is expository, expressive and introspective – not dialogic. Its creative integration of text, visuals and intertextual captions creates new meanings and provides evidence of reflective positioning by a writer who projects herself visually and discursively in a blog with creative appeal and as a space to project her identity as ‘Auslandsdeutsche’ [expatriate German].

**Example 4**

This blog is by an Austrian couple who state that *In Neuseeland wird auf Deutsch geschrieben* [in New Zealand we write in German]. The imperative function of the German passive voice suggests the bloggers’ determination to write in German in this blog. The majority of posts (89) are indeed in German, but English is also used (14) by both authors, sometimes explicitly for the benefit of non-German readers such as ‘English-speaking colleagues’.

After the first six months of writing primarily about arriving, settling and travelling in New Zealand, the blog becomes increasingly reflective or entertaining, covering a range of general topics. Most entries are quite comprehensive and descriptive/reflective, rather than dialogic, although there is a clear sense of writing for an audience. The story, below, of the water leak is a case in point.

… *im Swimmingpool*…[in the swimming pool]

This is just too good to be missed by some of our audience, so this is my first attempt at a bilingual blog entry. Cheers!

It is a bilingual entry, and although the details in the English version are condensed to the main points, both versions reveal a subtle sense of humour, for example, in a tongue-in-cheek comment by the husband about ‘knowing his duties’ as a male to get up and investigate a mysterious noise in the night. The German version tells of the nagging Thomas can expect if he fails to check things out:
Mittwoch Abend, 23 Uhr. Der Thomas und die Lydia gehen schlafen. Soweit nichts Ungewöhnliches. Lydia schläft ein wenig unruhig, weil das Haus ungewöhnliche Geräusche macht.

Donnerstag Nacht, 1 Uhr. Lydia fängt an, herumzumeckern. Irgendwas ist zu laut und sie kann nicht schlafen. Da Thomas weiß, dass sie immer weiter meckert, wenn er sie ignoriert, steht er lieber auf. Er geht ins Bad und schaut mal, was da los ist. Nichts ist los. Thomas geht ins Bett und will weiterschlafen. Kaum liegen wir wieder im Dunkeln, sagt die Lydi: 'Das ist nicht draussen!' und dreht das Licht im Schlafzimmer auf. Das war der Anfang einer schlaflosen Nacht.

Last Wednesday night Thomas and Lydia think of no evil and go to sleep at 11 pm. Two hours later, Lydia starts to complain about noises and that she can’t sleep. Thomas knowing his duties checks if anything is obviously wrong in the bathroom [emphasis added], finds nothing, goes back to bed. A few minutes later, about to fully wake up, Lydia realises that what she was hearing is not as distant anymore, turns on the bedroom light and sees…

The remainder of the account reads like a detective story told from a third-person perspective, complemented with photographs as visual evidence.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper presents snapshots rather than in-depth analysis but it provides a small insight into the unique and creative approaches taken by the blog writers to project aspects of their past, present and future that reside in them – as personal histories, experiences and possibilities. While clearly writing for an audience, the blog authors rarely engage in dialogue. They present their vignettes, observations and experiences from the position of people who have stories worth telling and voices worth hearing. While blogs are interactive by design and offer opportunities for interactive positioning, the writings here reveal identities constructed primarily through reflective positioning, with the authors taking and projecting positions of their own choice, as people with wide-ranging interests, views and areas of expertise. They create their own spaces where they can construct their idiosyncratic narratives through bilingual means.

The bilingual nature of these blogs gives expression to what is a natural part of the bloggers’ identities: they are bilingual and biliterate and continue to have a use for their German language, even though they are perfectly fluent in English and live in an English-dominant context. They are also transcultural people with ongoing links to their origin cultures and elsewhere. Yet, their blogs do not seem to serve a communication purpose to bridge the distance, but rather act as a platform for expressive-creative positioning in a space the authors have appropriated for their own ends. They all draw on their balanced or near-balanced bilingual proficiencies, in contrast with observations made of mixed or non-standard language in similar blogs (eg Lee 2006) and participate as creative producers of new media and as agents.
of purposeful communication and action’ (Kern, Ware and Warschauer 2004: 254), thereby enhancing authenticity, authorship and agency (Kramsch, A’Ness and Lam 2000).

The ability to participate in the virtual environments of personal blogs answers not only a personal need but also responds to the demands of a linguistically diverse and increasingly digital global world. Educational contexts, and particularly language education, ‘will need to accommodate emerging communication tools and their attendant communicative genres that are, and have been for some years, everyday dimensions of competent social and professional activity’ (Thorne 2008: 440). Like other information communication technologies, blogs have created ‘convergences between consumers and creators, between reading and writing, or between public and private spaces’ (Godwin-Jones 2006: 8). They could also be at the interface between formal and more open forms of lifelong learning, including language learning contexts.

The study’s findings, albeit limited, may hold implications for language teaching, particularly the teaching of migrant learners. Blogs can provide safe spaces for learners to use and develop languages. They also offer the potential means to overcome resistances or barriers to classroom-based learning, for example, where gate-keeping practices exist (Norton 2001; Rida and Milton 2001). Although real world patterns of dominance may also operate on the Internet (Cunliffe 2007), Web 2.0 technology provides learners with empowering opportunities to create alternate spaces under their own rules of ownership.

Personal blogs may also provide models for teachers who want to provide conditions that facilitate reflective positioning as a mechanism for identity construction through discourses learners themselves determine and where they can position themselves as experts and through multiple repertoires. This could encourage agency among learners with lower target language proficiency to write and express themselves in the language they have expertise in, promoting confidence and a sense of continuity (Walker 2006). Whereas this approach may be perceived as inconsistent with English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching in contexts such as Australia or New Zealand, it represents a response to an increasingly diverse environment and a call for new empowering pedagogies (Glynn 2003; Norton and Toohey 2004; Dabic 2008). Thus bilingual blogs could help address what researchers bemoan as a narrow and often monolingual orientation in second-language acquisition (Ellis 2001) and particularly ESL (Cook 2002; Milton 2005). Authoring bilingual blogs involves ‘forms of literacy which may differ significantly from traditional forms of school literacy’ (Koutsogiannis and Mitsikoupolou 2004: 84), but it also supports emerging bilinguals in the process of negotiating their different positional identities through their own voices.

Note

1 For example, as a former Ethnic Council President of the Manawatu region and Vice President of the Federation of Ethnic Councils of New Zealand.

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