

A Narrative of Language Learning: Power, Identity, and Social Practice

Lance Stimp

Abstract

In this article, I further build on the work of narrative inquiry as I draw on the experience of a single learner of Japanese, Karen Ogulnick. Language use, culture, race, and gender all appear as social constructed phenomenon, as seen through the text of her language memoir, *Onna Rashiku (Like a Woman)*, (1998). When looking at Karen's memoir, often we see her resisting participation in a community of language users. This area of resistance is a place where we find a complex system of rich human activity and conflict. Furthermore, it is where we find Karen challenged by an overwhelming amount of unfamiliar information, participation, and social activity. Social and cultural participation present several problems for Karen as she continually manages her needs, desires, and expectations of herself and others. Ultimately, language acquisition becomes a complicated social skill fundamentally tied to the rich social practices of a community and always related to power.

Key Terms: Japan, identity, gender, language learning/acquisition, narrative

To be a language learner living abroad in a foreign country means several things. It means to challenge traditions, ethical values, experiences, and knowledge. A process ensues, where one integrates the old with the new. This cycle repeats itself until what emerges is a developed, and in many cases, matured individual with a broader perspective on many aspects of the world around them. This experience builds both knowledge and character.

In the struggle to be accepted in a socially mediated world, some language learners sometimes draw on private writing exercises, what might be referred to as personal narratives of a lived experience. By drawing on personal narratives as *researchers*, we can further our understanding of what it means to be a language learner immersed in an unfamiliar community and social world. This in turn has implications in the fields of Applied Linguistics or Second Language Acquisition in defining what a 'language learner' is and how to mediate real problems that manifest in response to complex learning environments.

I will draw on the experience of a single language learner, Karen Ogulnick to create a discussion of identities as they appear for her in her language memoir, *Onna Rashiku (Like a Woman)*, (1998). Her story begins in Hiroshima, Japan. At the time of her writing, she is in her early 30s. Although she begins writing her story in January of 1993, her experience in Japan begins several years earlier, from 1985 to 1987. Her experience is shaped by the perception of Japan over a span of several years living both within, and apart from Japan. As we unravel her story, we will see conflicting identities and contradictory behavior as she manages social activity with others.

A (RE)STORY

In part, the choice to use the narrative voice of memoirs over a researcher-observed scientific inquiry is the need to pursue a particularization of subjectivity in each dynamic moment of Karen's experience. It is the place where we find "the intersection of the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of language, and mediating between different, often conflicting, historicities and collectivities" (Pavlenko, 2001). In other words, these complex interdisciplinary dimensions of language and self-identity are revealed as a form of linguistic self-expression and reconstruction of a lived experience of an actual human being.

Narratives also act as a way to organize the experience of the individual writer. For each person, these texts reveal how identity is not fixed in each event described, but fluid and changing from one moment to the next. These memoirs of language learners are tools that provide personal cohesion to their very lives, at the same time justifying the very existence of a specific life, in a specific time, and in a specific place (Lantolf 2000). It is simultaneously a reconstruction of a life and an accountability by the individual for those actions.

Restorying is defined by Ollerensha & Creswell (2007) as the approach to narrative analysis, where the researcher ‘retells’ the story of the individual experience. In this study of a single language learner’s memoir, I carefully position myself, another language learner with an experience of my own, inside the stories of Karen Ogulnick. I offer a restorying of several of Karen’s experiences of living in Japan, as told by her published memoir, *Onna Rashiku (Like a Woman)*. Language learning is a story for Karen with real people, places, and experiences that were lived.

Her Desires and Expectations

This morning, a traumatic event flashed through my mind. It was an incident that occurred when I was about 6 years old...It was of my father picking up my doll carriage and throwing it at my mother...I was very attached to my doll at that time, and was completely devastated...My father’s violence certainly silenced me- I never knew when I might be suddenly struck- sometimes for crying, sometimes for saying a bad word. I also recalled the “tit” incident, which I hadn’t thought of for a long time. I was only about 6 at the time. I was sitting in my fathers car, looking at a picture of a pinup girl on an air freshener...thinking she was beautiful...I announced that when I grew up I was going to “let my tits hang out just like she does.” Suddenly, he slapped me in the face...What is bringing up this memory? Is being in Japan bringing up feelings of fear? Am I afraid of saying something wrong? January 23, 1993 (pp.20-21)

Although having lived in Japan a few years prior, Karen’s first few steps back in 1993 are painful, and invoke strong childhood memories of being silenced by her father. Her sense-making practices in the physical world draw on the need to connect her childhood experience with being in Japan. As an adult now, her self-perception of what gender means is beginning to resurface itself. She is struggling to make sense of being in Japan, where her own self-perceptions of gender do not align themselves with others’ perceptions around her. Here we can see this conflict:

It seems that everywhere I go I run into other faculty members- the supermarket, the baths, even Hiroshima City. There is no escaping them...I’m also beginning to get frustrated that I don’t seem to have enough contact with Japanese people- and not enough chances to speak the language. The Japanese staff at the college don’t seem to interact much with the American faculty members. They seem busy all the time- and not very approachable. There are two women about my age who look as though they stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine. I feel, more than I ever had in New York, self-conscious of my gender-neutral clothing. January 31st (p.26)

Despite not being able to ‘escape’ from her coworker’s sense of gender, she struggles to want to associate with them in Japanese. Her self-perception of being a woman in gender-neutral clothing may be preventing her from approaching them to fulfill a desire to communicate in the language. A deep, perhaps dark history on what it means to be perceived as a woman continues to shape how she participates with the people around her. This sense of gender and self ultimately influences how she approaches a situation: as conflict of gender roles or an opportunity for communicating with her Japanese coworkers.

The following entry reveals another complex layer of self-perception of gender. Karen describes a scene with Satoko, a language learning partner, but surely a close friend to her as well:

The restaurant, which Satoko had picked out, reeked of elegance. As soon as we entered, I felt self-conscious about my casual clothes and wind-blown hair...I suddenly wished that I had been wearing a dress and had my hair pulled back neat in a ponytail. Satoko was well dressed, as usual, casually, but she seemed very sophisticated and carried herself confidently in the restaurant, while I felt awkward and out of place.

Satoko said that people usually have “lively conversation” while eating this kind of lunch. She did most of the talking, mostly about her new roommate...I didn’t have any trouble understanding anything she said-but I did have a little trouble in talking in the beginning. Then at some point, which I can no longer remember, I began to feel more comfortable and became less aware of being “out of my element.” Satoko spoke a lot and very animatedly. I noticed that when it took too long for me to respond to something she said, she didn’t wait for me to finish, which ended my struggle- and attempt- to speak. June 13th (p.101)

We can see on the one hand, Karen perceives herself to be ‘casual’ person, one who does not want to be viewed as ‘elegant.’ Yet, this scenario pressures her to become more sophisticated in her appearance. Ultimately, her self-criticism and discomfort is reflected in the lack of having a ‘lively conversation’ with Satoko. It may be that Satoko is trying to make up for the lack of liveliness by dominating the talk, not realizing it is further discomfoting Karen in the interaction.

Continuing in the same entry, we can see why Karen continues to feel discomfort in her interaction with Satoko. Karen seems to be resisting Japanese womanhood, as exemplified by Satoko, and it becomes another area where we see conflict and struggle. For Karen, to be a woman is something different from to be a woman in Japan. Later in the evening:

I noticed that a couple times that Satoko covered her mouth when she spoke to the older [Japanese] man. The same person I thought was so self-assured earlier in the day seemed to become transformed into a shy girl- she spoke in a high-pitched tone of voice and ended almost everything with *kedo* [but] and *kana* [I wonder]. June 13th (p.102)

Satoko, who Karen highly respects as being a woman earlier in the day, suddenly loses her status as a ‘self-assured’ Japanese woman. Satoko’s aspects of high-pitched voice, shyness, and using conditional linguistic markers (‘but,’ or ‘I wonder’) seem to further place her out of the position of respect Karen had for her. Karen’s inability to read the situation and understand the ability of Satoko to ‘reach into different registers’ limits her understanding of the local and dynamic nature of gender and language use.

Karen is continually self-conscious about both her appearance and her actions with Satoko. This continues to shape how she interacts with her; she herself feels inferior, awkward, and silent when not able take on a Japanese woman’s persona. Yet at the same time she perceives them to be submissive, weak, and excessively feminine. In her analysis, Karen remarks on the need of Japanese women to be feminine in interactions with men: “This is especially true [using feminine speech] when speaking to Japanese men, who generally will not listen to a woman if she sounds ‘too strong’” (p.90). Later, however, she criticizes this type of behavior from Satoko, “...when more men were present, Satoko’s adjustments in her speech and nonverbal behaviors made her seem to me more childlike and perhaps less secure about her femininity” (p.106). Is Satoko really less secure about her femininity, or is it a misinterpretation on Karen’s part of the expectations and linguistic resources that Japanese women use? Although she recognizes the advantages to taking on a feminine persona- to get Japanese men to ‘listen’- she ultimately resists accepting this ‘childlike’ (p.106) behavior.

The above examples illustrate how gender complicates her actions and perceptions. In the next section, we will move the focus onto the actual physical space of the places that shape her individual behavior and participation in the interaction. Karen becomes more active in her participation as she starts to explore the physical space around her, at the same time forcing herself to meet with the Japanese people. Karen resorts to exploring her surroundings as a method of getting involved and accustomed to the physical space.

The Physical Space That Shapes

The physical surroundings, including the places, objects, and the people in the interactions become a powerful influence on Karen as a language learner. Self-aware of her surroundings, she makes active attempts to control the places and people around her to purposefully achieve her desire: to become a natural user of Japanese.

This morning the weather was nice and sunny, which made it hard to stay indoors, despite all the work I had to do to prepare for my classes...I felt like exploring on my own, so I cycled into town and tried to get my bearings. I think I know where “everything” is now, which didn’t take long, since there isn’t much here...I stopped in the community center to ask about classes. I did it mostly to practice my Japanese, since I already had a class schedule. An old man and woman were there. I could hardly understand the old man’s Japanese...I couldn’t understand a word he said...Then I went into a 7-eleven, just to see what kinds of junk food they had in there. Naturally I ran into another faculty member...Then I rode down the main street checking out the family-run shops. I stopped in one little grocery store... January 29th (p.23-24)

Her exploration of the town indicates a need to make sense of the places still unfamiliar to her. At the same time, it is clearly an attempt to ‘get out’ and practice her language skills in many different situations with a variety of people. In part, the reason for wanting to approach many Japanese people in a natural situation may reflect the desires of the language learner: to move away from the self-perceived ‘learner’ of Japanese into ‘user’ of the Japanese language. It is a desire to self-perceive competence in the language practically and be perceived by others as such.

Turning now to a focus on her language learning tutors, this physical space continues to shape how she perceives the activity as either constructive or inhibiting her language learning process. Her sense of being comfortable and relaxed in the situation affects the degree of participation and language use. The following two entries with her male Japanese tutor, Keio, show Karen’s sensitivity to her physical surroundings:

Keio just left my apartment. We had an interesting discussion. After an exhausting day, I came home, changed my clothes, and began to feel comfortable. By the time Keio arrived my mood was much better. I was cheerful, talkative...I felt good about my Japanese. Keio wasn’t correcting me. April 1st (pp.40-41)

[In a classroom] I am now listening to a tape of a conversation with Keio. I am talking about my Japanese class, how difficult it is. He interrupts me in the middle of a sentence, using a word I don’t understand...He corrects my sentences with complex sentences that I find hard to repeat...there is no laughter, no real conversation... April 8th (pp.43-44)

The feeling of being in a physical classroom may be indicating that the interaction is much more rigid, typical of educational institutions that define clear teacher versus student roles. Whereas once inside her own apartment, the labels of this relationship breaks down, allowing them to perceive one another as friends. She actively seeks such similar homelike places in her encounters with her other tutor as well.

I met Akemi today at 4:30 at our usual place, the second-floor faculty lounge...It is the most “homey” room in the building. I like sitting there, except for when other faculty members walk in and out. This makes me feel self-conscious. Feb 16th (p.55)

Although I’m feeling more comfortable with Akemi, I became very inhibited when other teachers walked into the room. I noticed myself clam up. I don’t know why, but I feel uncomfortable speaking Japanese in front of the other American teachers. March 19th (p.64)

In these two excerpts, not only do we see the physical environment shaping her self-perception of being a language learner, but we get a glimpse of her own perceived role as a teacher, in a community of foreign faculty members. The participants who are not directly involved with her in the interaction become the ‘physical backdrop’ and shape her sense of being a language learner. The shifting role, of her as an English teacher into one of a Japanese language learner, makes her self-conscious of her political position as a faculty member. Going from expert (in English) to novice (in Japanese), in a sense, weakens her self-perception as a professional; someone who should be qualified to teach, not learn.

Although Karen seeks to control the environment with nearly all of her tutors, she emphasizes that her deliberate effort to do this may be due to the fact the Keio is a man. “I did not feel the need to seek out places outside of the college, as I did with Keio, with whom I was more conscious of the physical environment.” (p.60) Despite having difficulties in associating with Japanese women, she still believes the need to carefully control her interaction with her male tutor the most.

As a language learner, Karen is very sensitive to the physical aspects of her interactions. The environment impacts participation in social discourse by continually shaping her self-perception; sometimes as someone comfortable, natural, and relaxed, and “inside” the Japanese social context as a user. Furthermore, when in these comfortable situations, relationships of power become challenged and help to fulfill her desire: to practice the language not as a language learner, but more as a competent user. In contrast, when she is directly aware of her role as “the learner,” discomfort, awkwardness, and silent behavior develops and she continues to distance herself away from the participants. She comments on her behavior after the fact similarly, “When the setting felt abstract, so did my language, and therefore relationship” (p.40). The societal roles, as shaped by the physical surroundings, have a large impact on the way she feels her language and relationships with people develop over time.

As Karen becomes accustomed to the context, she actively tries to integrate herself within the community. To further place herself as a linguistic and cultural “insider,” and limit her position as an “outsider,” Karen continually takes on a common aspect of Japanese language in use: the art of using indirect speech and actions to convey personal intentions and expectations. Her response to these actions comes as direct or indirect action and speech. In the section that follows, we can slowly begin to see how silence becomes a creative tool, as well as a place of discomfort for Karen.

A Response: The Art of Indirect Speech

Conflict of desires and expectations are also managed by Karen through the form of co-constructed language, often referred to as indirect speech. She begins to resist the roles forced on her by the participants in her interactions, both men and women. In her attempt to manage the personal desires with the social Japanese norms, she uses indirect speech and action as a way to make her intentions or desires be known and still be sensitive to the other participants. While sometimes successful, often this backfires on her as she ultimately resorts to more direct forms of communication. Below, Karen is in an interaction with one of her male Japanese tutors, Keio:

Today’s lesson with Keio was very frustrating. I was reading out loud from my book, *Issunboshi*, and whenever I came across words that I didn’t know, Keio would look them up in a dictionary and give me the translation. I found this annoying, but didn’t know how to convey it. I became quieter...He had his head in the dictionary most of the time I was reading. My reading got slower and my voice lower...I was so tired of the corrections that I just continued to read, but he kept looking up words in his dictionary again. At one point, I just stopped reading aloud... May 15th, (pp.47-48)

A conflict arises between the desire on one part to be more communicative in her reading strategy, and on the other part to escape the complex social expectations of her tutor. Moreover, her gradual transition from reading activity to silence turns into a form of indirect passive-resistance:

Then I said (in Japanese) that I didn’t want him to translate more words for me, that it would be more helpful if he explained them in Japanese and gave examples. He became silent and glared at me. I asked if we could talk about this part of the book. He told me to finish reading the page, so I did. We finally had some useful conversation about the part I had read in the last five minutes or so. May 15th, (pp.47-48)

In the end, her indirect methods of conveying her desires are not heard. She finally resorts to directly showing her discomfort, perhaps further distancing her from her tutor. This entry seems to reveal how silence manifests itself as a linguistic tool for her to deal with the complex social pressures- not wanting to submit to a particular style of language activity. Possibly, Karen's perceived position of Keio as teacher continues to silence her participation in the interaction. Moreover, despite having used both indirect and direct forms of resistance, Keio maintains the power he has over her in the relationship, perhaps not only being self-perceived as the "expert," or "teacher," but possibly one complicated by gender as well.

Her indirect form of resistance continues with Japanese women as well. The conflicting assumptions on perceptions of gender and sexual orientation bring about the need to deal with the content of the conversation in indirect ways. Several Japanese women are conversing with Karen at a party in the following excerpt:

[Noriko] asked if I knew that Robert, a staff member at the college, tried to "hit on" all the single women. I said yes. Then she mentioned that another single male teacher sometimes goes to a "love hotel" with a student. I responded by asking if it was a girl. Noriko looked at me incredulously and exclaimed, "*Mochiron...*": Of course a girl! What do you think, he's going to go with a boy? You mean he's gay! I shrugged and said, "Well, you never know." There was a look of horror in her eyes. At the same time I was taken aback by the fact that she had no idea that there were gay men on the faculty, when it seemed so obvious to me. April 15th (pp.130-131)

Being alienated by the idea that the Japanese woman in this conversation seem to assume the sexual orientation of men is always decided, her indirect response leads to take a secondary role in the conversation, and she resorts to even further indirect forms of communicating:

Luckily, Shuna came back before she asked me any more questions, and they continued their conversation for about another hour. I stopped even trying to follow what they were saying and felt like lying down and going to sleep...In the car on the way back, Noriko talked about her stay in Oregon when she was a college student. She said that she hadn't made many friends because Americans were cold to her. She said that Americans at the community college she had attended sometimes had ignored her. She said it had upset her a lot. I said that sometimes I felt ignored too. She looked shocked when I said this. April 15th (p.131)

Karen clearly positions herself as separate from the conversation, despite having actively just been a part of it before. She tries to convey both her actions (resisting further participation in the conversation), and conveying her opinions (that she feels ignored, and understands the cold behavior) through an indirect means of communication. Neither are ultimately noticed by the women in the situation. In sum, misunderstood perceptions on sexual orientation and language learning experience lead Karen to purposefully adopt a linguistic 'passive-aggressive' role to deal with the confining situation.

Not all of her indirect methods of communication go unnoticed. As she progresses chronologically in her diary, we see a shift in the ability to pick up on and use silent forms communication and use them to her advantage:

I did not have a great time at this party. It felt awkward and uncomfortable to be at an intimate gathering with people I hardly knew, and the conversation seemed rather boring, although the food was good, and as usual, I did a lot more eating and drinking than speaking. At one point, Mr. Horikawa asked me if I wanted a "home-stay" I said that I thought it would be interesting to get to know a family in the area. Then he said I could have a home-stay at his house(!).

Here we can revisit the physical space shaping the interaction for Karen as she takes on a secondary role in the participation of this social event. Her response to having a home-stay, in part, reflects some indirect methods to deal with the question Mr. Horikawa is asking by saying yes, without directly accepting his invitation. Although somewhat successful, being indirect opens up a possibility for Mr. Horikawa to interpret her response as a 'yes', which leads Karen to deal with Mrs. Horikawa instead:

At this point, Mrs. Horikawa made a comment about my hair, saying it was *kirei* [pretty] and asking if it was natural. Then she said that I was *kawairashii* [cute and small]. I felt myself turning red. Then she asked me several questions about my parents...

The talk continues to be dominated by Mrs. Horikawa, perhaps in an attempt to deflect her husband's invitation, and maintain a position of power over Karen as an older woman:

She said that her daughter is 18, "close to your age" (!). I responded by saying that I was probably closer to her (Mrs. Horikawa's) age than her daughter's...Then, not long after this pleasant little exchange, I took the opportunity to make my escape...I said "*Moo soro soro*" [It's getting to be about that time]. March 27th (pp.111-112)

At first glance, it may seem like the people in this situation are manipulating Karen by controlling the topic for her. Yet, in many cases, Karen is picking up on the meanings of the Japanese people she is conversing with, without being outright and upfront about it.

In the final part of this scenario, we see the perceived ages of Karen and Mrs. Horikawa strike a beginning to a longer and more complex conflict. Karen notices that Mrs. Horikawa's barrage of compliments may be intentionally forcing her into a position she is not comfortable with-one regarded as a young woman, and possibly threatening to Mrs. Horikawa's own relationship with Mr. Horikawa. Without outwardly using offensive language, Karen maintains the ability to control what is said, without "saying it" in her remarks, "I responded by saying that I was probably closer to her age than her daughter's."

This strikes a resonance with Siegal's (1994) findings, the ability of language learners to create a system of language use that reflects their self-identity. Ultimately, Karen's after-the-fact analysis is noteworthy:

While for the most part, my way of speaking reveals a willingness to blend in for the sake of maintaining harmony, I seemed to want to strike a dissonant chord in my response to Mrs. Horikawa's age...I was also annoyed at the feeling that she was trying to diminish me because she perceived me as a threat... I felt objectified and manipulated in the interaction...I seemed highly conscious of my physical gestures and carefully controlled my responses. (Ogulnick, 1998, p.114)

Her ability to carefully control her actions and speech show how a careful balance of participation and silence work to manage the difficult situation she is placed in by others. This system, created within and for this particular interaction, is always mediating language use and participation. To participate in social activity or not depends on two major factors: the ability of the language learner to have this system acquired, and the contextual power relationships involved that shape its use.

POWER

Karen's experience, seen from the eyes of her language learning memoir, shows us that the times when she is not actively participating in language or social activity are the result of complex identity issues surrounding her own beliefs, desires, and expectations. Both the people and the place also make each encounter a new experience for her. It may give insider status- the ability to be perceived as more than a language learner, but a proficient user in the language. This space can also backfire on her, further pushing her into the position of an outsider, one who

does not have the knowledge or competence to use the language. As Karen comments herself, to be “inside” of social activity marks the ability to be relaxed, engaged, and natural, as we rely on our intuitions to participate in the interactions around us. Yet, when pushed to the “outside”, the more one is controlled by the social context, the more one becomes detached from personal intentions and expectations (Ogulnick, 1998, p.76). Being inside or outside demarcates these boundaries, shaping self-identity and participation of language use.

In some sense, Karen continually shifts from a position of doing what is *expected* of her to what is *desired* by her. The act of silence is used differently depending on the social expectations of others and personal desires she is experiencing at that moment. Sometimes this is a method of resistance in the interaction, and other times an appropriate form of indirect communication. The appearance of passive behavior should not be viewed as a deficiency in understanding the complex situation, but as an active attempt to use a system of indirect forms of communication while simultaneously attending to the desires and expectations of the participants. “Power and positionality are inherent in linguistic interchanges, language learners manipulate conversations to create face, their image within a particular conversational interaction” (Siegal, 1994, p.358). These instances of her encounters indicate the need to ‘save face’ in some situations, and ‘push the envelope’ in others.

Two things are at constant struggle for Karen: her own desires are constantly at odds with ‘saving face’- or the need to fulfill a particular societal obligation. So the question remains, when can her participation succeed, in both fulfilling her desires, and maintaining ‘face’ in complex situations? At what point is she successful? The answer remains unclear. Norton (2000), questions traditional language acquisition models of motivation or ability:

Theories of the good language learner have been developed on the premise that language learners can choose under what conditions they will interact with members of the target language community and that the language learners access to the target language community is a function of the learners motivation. (Norton, 2000, p.5)

In other words, learning opportunities are sometimes not chosen, but forced or awarded to language learners based on language community and acceptance. Often, the typical characteristics of the *ideal* language learner never take into account the questions of, “what is actually possible,” or “what am I allowed to do.” (Norton, 2000). Simply put, the complexity of power in relationships with other members never escapes the language learner. Power constantly forces the language learner to manage their own desires with the expectations of others who hold this power over them. When we shift the focus to what Karen is able to do with others, her actions are responses to a complex and interconnected construction of her identity, never outside of power.

Her gender, race, age, and occupation all create and shape these identities for her. The mere fact that she *is* choosing to resist expectations and perceptions of these socially constructed identities further demonstrates that power is not invariant or something physically obtained, but always is there, at the micro-levels of the local context as well as at the macro levels of society (Norton, 2000). Walsh (1991) summarizes this point nicely:

Language is more than a mode of communication or a system of composed rules, vocabulary, and meaning; it is an active medium of social practice through which people construct, define, and struggle over meanings in dialogue with and in relation to others. And because language exists within a larger social structural context, this practice is, in part, positioned and shaped by the ongoing relations of power that exist between and among individuals. (Norton, 2000, p.101)

Participation, or lack of participation, becomes a factor fundamentally related to the perceived relationships of all the individuals in the interaction. Furthermore, contradictory behavior can be explained in that it is a response to a dynamically changing medium of language and interaction. Until we unravel the complicated power relationships in each interaction, the concept of learning as participation becomes an ever-complicated social process. In the end, “language” is not purely an internal skill one acquires through hard work and participation, but it is a skill

fundamentally tied to the rich social practices of a community of users and the status of power among them. External factors are always working to provide the boundaries of what the learner is allowed to do, or viewed from the perspective of the learner, what actions or speech are at odds with their personal motives.

CLOSING

The Text as a Mirror

For both the writer, and future readers, the actual text of memoirs becomes a mirror of the moment: it reflects thoughts back onto you. It is both a tool to capture this reflection for the writer, and a process of generating an existential reflection for the reader. The mirror is never pre-constructed, nor invariant. In the act of writing a memoir, we see a complex human being and a life experience reconstructed. Therefore, in looking at Karen's memoir as both a reader and a researcher, I am seeing an empty mirror being written into "on the fly." It is generative, emerging, and extremely interesting. Her language learning memoir shows us a rich source of language and identity issues.

In response to many of her entries as a language learner, Karen also offers a retroactive interpretation of her entries. In these after-the-fact reflections, she takes a stance as a language learner, woman, and a person who wants to make sense of what happened in her life experience. She criticizes her memoir in the form of a socio-linguist, one who is interested in larger structures such as language, society, and power in relationships. This type of narrative account is tied to a specific sociolinguistic context: living and learning a language abroad. The focus shifts from merely an informational one to a look outside, shaping how and why the information is presented. The importance of narrative study for SLA is noted by Pavlenko (2002):

I suggest that the informed narrative study has great potential for the field of L2 [second language learning] learning, because it will allow us to uncover multiple layers of social, historical, and rhetorical influences that shape the narrative construction: understanding better how stories are told, why they are told, whose stories remain to be untold (or not heard), and why. (Pavlenko, 2002, pp.216-217)

The application of memoirs to second language acquisition and learning methods is threefold. First, it allows us to understand the complex issues of identity and language as they unfold for each individual differently. By better arming ourselves with an understanding of where language learners struggle, we can then pay more attention to developing educational paradigms that are sensitive to these needs. Second, it allows us to focus on language learning as 'participation.' The real people, places, and events that learners engage with and their participation in social discourse, or as I have argued here, the *constructive use of resisting participation*, further lets us grasp the complex system of language learning as fundamentally social. Third, the memoir remains a fundamental part of how human beings make sense of the world- as a rhetorical tool with actors in a plot of important events, ultimately tied to a single life. Rhetoric of these memoirs triangulate language learning, literacy, and social discourse. Sfiard's (1998) participation metaphor emphasizes that learning, rather than being an internal collection of linguistic features, is an external process of becoming a member of a community and having the ability to act according to social norms (Lantolf, 2000, also see Young & Miller, 2004). This participation in language further stresses that engagement of activity in communities, both at macro and micro levels, are how learners become social beings. This is part of the complex nature of struggle to integrate oneself into a specific community of language and practices.

What remains to be asked is: how are other language learners participating (or not) now, nearly two decades after Karen's experience? How can we move away from the analysis of memoirs of a single language learner, into one that is sensitive to Japanese language learners of many different backgrounds? How do men living in Japan, who are often underrepresented in narrative research, adhere or resist to a highly gendered model of narration presented by Pavlenko (2001)? Finally, what is the true role of the researcher in interpretation of language learner's memoirs? These questions, among many others, should be invaluable in the future of rhetorical narrative inquiry, Japanese society and language learning methodologies.

References

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. (Second ed.). California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Norton, B. (2000) *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Pearson Education, 6-16, 109-129.
- Pavlenko, A. (2001). Language learning memoirs as a gendered genre. *Applied linguistics*, 22(2), 213-240.
- Pavlenko, A. (2002). Narrative study: Whose story is it anyway? *TESOL quarterly*, 36(2), 213-218.
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155-177). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ogulnick, K. (1998). *Onna rashiku (Like a woman): The diary of a language learner in Japan*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Siegal, M. S. (1994). *Looking east: Learning japanese as a second language in japan and the interaction of race, gender and social context*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of California at Berkeley), Available from UMI. (9529497 id=).
- Walsh, C. E. (1991). *Literacy as praxis: Culture, language and pedagogy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Young, R., & Miller E., (2004). Learning as changing participation: Discourse roles in ESL writing conferences. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88(4), 519-535.

