Revealing the Development of Linguistic Heritage through Language Autobiographic Accounts

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Abstract

In our paper, we explore several aspects offered by language autobiographical accounts. The data were collected through what we called "Name linguistic autobiography", an instrument that helped us explore the perceptions of 24 Romanian students regarding their experience with languages and their context of use while developing their linguistic heritage. Our analysis, drawing on a combination of linguistic analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as theoretical support, established the topics and sub-topics that were encoded by language users in name acrostics. Among them, we identified awareness of own resources, potential, strengths and weaknesses of own success and failure; effective language learning techniques; the social dimensions of language and identity shaping and re-shaping through language learning and use. The analysis also revealed the fact that emotional expression played an important part in the students' disclosure of self. Their attitudes and feelings while involved in various experiences with language were displayed freely.

We concluded that the Name linguistic autobiography, despite some limitations, may offer a basic image of the subjects' language experience and development of linguistic heritage, but it needs to be followed by a more thorough analysis to validate the results and to offer more insights into the use of language autobiographies as pedagogical and educational devices. This is why future research will have in view in-depth interviews and written language autobiographical narratives.

Keywords: *autobiographic account, identity, name acrostic, IPA, disclosure of self*

I. Introduction

This research is part of an international project[1] that worked on (young) adults' reflections on their own language learning and use, presented under the form of language autobiographies. Having as target groups adults, teachers working with adults, students and pupils, the project established four main objectives for all the member countries involved – educational, pedagogical, learning and social. The members of the project then came with their own objectives dictated by the specific context of their countries.

The Romanian context provided limited access to foreigners' autobiographical stories of Romanian language learning as a result of exile or migration, which imposed stricter boundaries in our analysis of foreign languages learning and experience with language. Under these circumstances, as partners in the project, we concentrated on some specific objectives such as: to raise awareness regarding the subjective experience of foreign languages learning in the Romanian context, to collect and analyse language autobiographies (provided by young learners of foreign languages and by foreign languages teachers) and to develop different methods/tools to help teachers and learners in offering language autobiographies under different forms: interviews, narratives, questionnaires, etc.

The main idea supporting the project was the fact that the unifying or different experiences of the language learners would enhance the comprehension of their learning processes, which would subsequently lead to better teaching practices to be included in a kit with tools for language teaching that constituted the ultimate goal of this project.

II. Theoretical background

II.1. Autobiographical account

Autobiographical accounts are "common and elementary practices of the self", a way through which "we order our experiences, memories, intentions, hopes, desires, fears, and concerns in an autobiographical perspective" (Brockmeier 2000: 53).

Through autobiographical accounts, the intentional process of self-disclosure displays what McKay et al. (2009) identified as disclosure categories: observations (the author tells what he experienced), thoughts, feelings and needs. The analysis of autobiographical accounts, that can be done from different perspectives – linguistic, sociological, psychological, stylistic, etc. –, has to take into consideration various elements of self-disclosure (Hargie 2011): informativeness, appropriateness, flexibility, accessibility and disclosure avoidance.

Autobiographical accounts based on language experience, through the sociological and pedagogical goals they accomplish, have become a generous field of research. They have double-oriented benefits, for both the researcher(s) and their authors. Their organization and encoding of memory help individuals'/authors' reflection (on past moments in their language learning experiences and development of linguistic heritage) on an affective level, create selves (Hazel 2007), display the individuals' attitudes and expectations, their positions to certain linguistic settings, and their perceived level of success (Tse 2000). They also reflect the social, cultural and political context of language learning and use and offer information about the individual's own linguistic identity and about his life, as embedded in different social relations in which other social actors are involved (Spreizer, A. et al. 2011: 28). Through the autobiographical account the individual recalls past events/experiences to memory, reveals them, becomes aware of their meanings, perceives the self in relationship with language learning and thus, has the opportunity to understand the inside and outside world. Places, time, communities of practice, happy or sad episodes (that remained in memory), as well as the world of knowledge get life in the individual's effort of retrospective reconstruction of language learning experiences.

II.2. Naming and self-disclosure

Any approach to the topic of naming acknowledges the many-sidedness and multifunctionality of personal names, which are "profoundly linked to identity and to private as long as public declarations of self and purpose; they have considerable affective power, and however unacknowledged in daily usage, a magical role as well, the power to change people's lives" (Kaplan and Bernays 1999: 22). The fascination with what lies within a name and its relation to identity has already inspired tens of books whose titles can be easily identified in library directories and retrieved via online searches. Social psychologists and anthropologists identify personal names as "identity pegs" (Goffman 1963: 75), "identity markers" (Ashley 1996) and "metaphors for the self" (Melnyk 2003). In using the mechanism of zipping and unzipping the information on names by activating such tags (Morăraşu 2011a: 245), we can trace back most theories elaborated until now.

The social constructionists and post-structuralists consider identity as being contextually situated, constructed and co-constructed in different activities that involve interactions of the individual with the others. In the context of biographical research, for theoretical and empirical reasons, Fisher-Rosenthal (2000) uses the term of "biographical construction" instead of the term "identity", considering that "developing an identity in the context of biographical analytical studies is understood as biographical work" (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007). Even though there seems to be little room left for original research, while addressing the topic of linguistic autobiographies of Romanian youngsters as part of a more elaborate editorial project, we have discovered a niche that has not been sufficiently explored so far: what people disclose of themselves in name acrostics as a response to guided elicitations of autobiographical experience. As a rule, acrostics consist of a playful concealing of one's first name in the first letters of each line. In our experiment, the role of acrostic writing was not the one of concealing but of revealing oneself. The task designed for our subjects involved using each letter from their first names to write brief descriptions of their experience with native and foreign languages. As long as the expression of personal attributes turned out to be strong statements of identity, their effect is strikingly similar to the one of self-generated nicknames, [which represent] another identity that we

want or that we, or others, feel we have within us. It projects some other self or selves that we desire to express in a name. A nickname is an obvious metaphor for the self, an attempt to articulate a truth about oneself that is meaningful to that self (Melnyk 2003: 2).

III. Research methodology

III.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is double-fold, drawing on two of the specific objectives mentioned in the Introduction. The first aim of the study is to offer an example of a method that can be used as a starting point for writing a more developed and complex language autobiography. The second purpose is to offer an insight into the subjective experience of foreign languages learning as recounted by young adults, through an analysis based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) – a framework for the qualitative research. Being interested in finding out details about the learners' personal experiences with foreign languages, we considered IPA to be a suitable tool for investigation, as "the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants" (Smith and Osborne 2007: 53).

III.2. Participants

The present study focuses on data collection from 24 young Romanian adults aged 20-27. Data collection took place in November 2013 during a project meeting with young adults who have studied at least one foreign language since kindergarten or primary school and have had at least one meaningful linguistic experience outside the school curriculum. As researchers, we anticipated that their different experiences with a variety of foreign languages in a multitude of contexts would lead to interesting comparisons and insights into the learners' subjective apprehension of language learning.

III.3. Assumptions

Having had experience with teaching for many years now (each of us for more than 15 years), our assumptions referring to the

participants could be summed up in terms of:

a)   Openness – we assumed that our students will express openness to language learning (as, generally speaking, Romanian pupils and students enjoy learning foreign languages);

b)   Competence – we assumed that they will mention their easiness and ability in learning and then using the language (Romanian students are competent learners and learn foreign languages easily);

c)   Plurilingualism – we assumed that the students will mention more than one language; they have got much experience with language learning and use, due to the Romanian educational system that allows for the study of a foreign language (at the parents' choice) in kindergarten, obliges students to start learning one foreign language in primary school and another one starting with the lower secondary school and, at the same time, offers opportunities, in universities, for students to go on studying foreign languages (as compulsory or optional courses);

d)   Contexts of learning and use – we assumed that they will mention both institutionalized and non-institutionalized contexts;

e)   Language preferences – judging from everyday experience, we assumed that they will mention language preferences (Romanian students are much attached to English as a foreign language; French and German come second or third in their preferences).

III.4. Instrument and methodology of work

Starting from the idea that "an account may be as short as a single-phrase statement or as long as a life story" (Burnett 1991: 122), we collected the data with the help of an instrument that we conceived, based on an exercise suggested by Marrs (1993) and we called it "Name linguistic autobiography". Even though the name acrostics thus created, based on the first letters in the students' names, written vertically, were used as starters for eliciting ideas and revealing oneself, their experiences are not viewed as full stories, as narratives structured in a temporal/chronological way (Wagner and Wodak 2006: 393); subjects disclosed themselves in bits/chunks of selected language learning episodes, being constrained to make them fit into their names. Nevertheless, the final products did not have a bad impact on the study as such, as our subjects managed to offer

relevant insights into their experience with language(s), as well as partly construct their self.

We provided students with an example and then we encouraged them to write about all the meaningful experiences with languages, no matter whether encountered in school or outside it. We gave the learners the following instructions:

1.   Write your first name vertically.

2.   For each letter, try to find a word that is relevant for your experience with foreign languages.

Considering that our subjects were 3rd year students majoring in English or Romanian language and literature, we assumed that they are already familiar with the template of acrostic poems[2]. Of the three poem styles generally known, we decided on the 'one-characteristic-per-line pattern' that implies finding a suggestive sentence or phrase for each letter of the subject's name written on a vertical line, on account of the fact that free-form and double acrostic styles are more appropriate for exercises in creative writing. Therefore, we simply used an example as a reminder and elicitor and refrained from giving other instructions than the ones in the requirements for the task. Technically speaking, most subjects tried not to deviate from the model pattern. Despite the limited range of grammatical and rhetorical means of expression that they were guided to use and the strict topic imposed on them (experience with languages), their resourcefulness in coping with this task was really impressive.

IV. Outcomes and discussions

In our analysis of the formal and functional constituents within the acrostic names, on the one hand, we retrieved information on our subjects' experience with languages by performing a preliminary analysis on several levels of language (phonetic, lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic). On the other hand, we employed IPA tools to answer 2 research questions:

a)   What are the main attitudes and feelings disclosed by young adults when revealing their experience with foreign languages learning?

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[2] An acrostic poem relies on a combination of certain features from every line which renders a message – in most cases the name of the subject.

b)   How is self-disclosure achieved through the initial letters of their names?

IV.1. The linguistic analysis

When considering the formal means of expression, we could refer to our subjects' names as a mere collection of letters combined according to linguistic and cultural conventions. One characteristic of Romanian names is that the ratio of vowels and consonants depends on the names being male or female. As observed from our research, in most girl names, vowels are as numerous as or higher in number than consonants, whereas boy names tend to favour consonants (in the two male names, the ratio consonant-vowel is 3:3, 4:2). A scanning of the products revealed some interesting aspects:

a)   Out of 140 words beginning the 140 name lines, 70.50% are adjectives; 12.23% – nouns; 10.78% - adverbs; 3.60% – pronouns; **2.88%- verbs; 0.71% – articles.**

b)   When the same vowel is repeated in longer names, our subjects overcame the difficulty of ascribing a different adjective (*able – amazed – ambitious – angry – annoyed – anxious – attentive*) to the same letter, by adding an intensifier (*obviously confused*) or changing the morphological class (*able – ability*).

c)   Only one subject (24) simply had a gap for the second "I" letter of her name (for the first "I" she had used the word "interested"), even though she had used the intensifier *too* (*too difficult* – 24.5) instead of an adjective starting with the letter "T", thus proving knowledge of vocabulary, easiness in handling it, as well as spontaneity and creativity in language use.

Syntactically, the typical pattern consists of an elliptical structure wherefrom both the subject (implied to be the author/the subject) and the predicator (a copular verb) are deliberately omitted, to the point that the sentence is reduced to a subject complement. Out of the 140 lines summed up of 24 acrostic names, 91 consist of such verbless clauses in which the adjectival complementation patterns are based on adjectives standing for each letter in the first names, followed by phrasal complementation. In addition to these, 29 lines display clausal complementation patterns, of which 24 are expressed by finite adjunct clauses and 5 nonfinite clauses.

A conspicuous marker in the clausal complementation of adjectives is represented by the adverb *when*, a valuable temporal

indicator of the circumstances in which particular positive or negative states, attitudes and feelings were intense, highlighting:

-   self-efficacy: *O*ptimist when I could understand Spanish people talking* (21.4).
-   lack of competence: *Angry when I couldn't understand my uncle speaking Greek* (19.5); *H*esitant when I don't know a grammar structure in a foreign language* (16.3); *R*ejected when I couldn't speak even one word in Chinese* (4.3); *A*nnoyed when I couldn't understand German* (4.6); *N*ervous when my mother spoke Russian with my father and I couldn't understand* (21.5)
-   language encounters – *S*ensitive when I listened to French music* (21.1); *R*igid when I deal with a language* (10.4); *N*ervous when I had to present a speech in Spanish* (4.5)
-   language use impediments: *Angry when I can't say in a foreign language what I think* (14.1)
-   coping with impediments: *I*nventive when I didn't know a word* (6.4)
-   self-deception: *N*ervous when I made mistakes in the foreign language* (8.6); *M*ad when I couldn't learn German* (21.3)

The suggested syntactic pattern was ignored in 16 lines, which consist of full sentences. This may be prescriptively wrong as long as it does not follow the model, but far richer and useful, due to the experiences and techniques of learning described: ***I** was shy when I met the first foreigners* (6.1); *N*o matter what, I try to learn languages, especially English* (14.2).

Morphologically, the acrostic style adopted imposes expanding each letter into a complex adjective phrase containing more or less heavily postmodified adjective heads. As long as these heads open the lines, they are made even more prominent by capitalization. In exploring the polymorphic behaviour of the adjectives used, we may observe not only their syntactic positioning as complements of the missing copular verbs, but also the variety of meanings they may take, depending on their context.

In functional terms, we could refer to the missing copular verb as establishing the relational process between the Carrier entity (the I of the author) in intensive mode, having some quality (Attribute) attributed to it. In a different type of writing where the copular verb would be used to express the intensive mode (Morăraşu 2011b: 103), our subjects may have chosen inceptive verbs such as *become, get, go,*

durative verbs (*remain, stay, keep*), appearance verbs (*appear, seem, turn out*) or sense-perception verbs (*look, sound, smell, feel*). Without relying on such "current" or "resulting copulas" (Quirk et al. 1985), to what extent does the name itself influence the range of attributes to be disclosed? In our opinion, it is just the form and not the meaning and its associations that have a significant influence; the motivation lies in that each of the letters in the name function as a filter to the opinions which subjects would want to give and finally orients the message expressed.

Given the high degree of subjectivity, it is evaluative and affective adjectives (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980) that are prevalent. Out of about 40 different subjective adjectives (some of them being used by several subjects and even twice by the same subject – e.g. *interested* with 10 occurrences; *angry* – 7; *nervous* – 5; *anxious* – 5 etc.), the highest ratio (about 30 of them) is held by affective adjectives, which reflect an emotional state, whereas evaluative adjectives reflect an evaluation in relation to norm (non axiological adjectives) or to a system of values (axiological adjectives such as *interesting*: **I**nteresting to know many languages (3.2); *easy*: **E**asy to learn while playing (3.5); *impressive*: **I**mpressive to understand an international star talking in a TV show (18.5); *lovely:* **L**ovely lyrics from an English old song, great to use sometimes (18.2)).

According to Quirk et al.'s classification of adjectives in terms of other semantic features such as aspect, most adjectives chosen by our subjects are 'stage-level', because they express a temporary or accidental property: *angry:* **A**ngry when I can't understand people speaking another language which I don't know (7.7); *reticent:* **R**eticent to too many new things I was about to learn (24.2); *nervous:* **N**ervous for not being able to memorize the right pronunciation (22.2); *annoyed:* **A**nnoyed when I couldn't understand German (4.6). Individual-level adjectives, indicating a generic, permanent or inherent property (e.g. *clever, tall,* etc.) are infrequent.

Considering the thematic constraint, three verbal paradigms, *learn, speak* and *understand*, make reference to the range of experiences through which the subjects pass. Not surprisingly, the recurrent modal adjective (15 occurrences) combined with them and used for the letter **A** is *able*, indicating how important it is for each of the subjects to acquire language abilities.

Part of the adjectives subcategorize prepositional complements: *Confident in my English in high-school* (2.3); *Terrible at French while in France* (2.6); *Tired of hearing foreign words instead of native ones* (9.1); *Anxious about speaking French during my visit in France* (21.6); *Attracted to English projects in middle school* (2.2).

The complementation patterns also involves "to" infinitival phrases in which the transitive verb is combined with a direct object.

Thus, our subjects are:

a) able to acquire new knowledge/languages: *Able to learn new languages* (16.2); *Able to learn many languages* (14.3); *Able to learn basic words of a foreign language* (6.7); *Able to learn a bit of Turkish* (10.1)

b) able to use their knowledge in new contexts: *Able to speak English and French during Erasmus stay in France* (2.7);

c) able to make the most of their knowledge: *Able to make connections between languages* (22.3); *Able to understand Russian* (16.4); *Able to make new friends* (3.7).

Variations in terms of means of expressing ability are found in the name Monica, who considers herself *capable of learning new languages* (11.5) and endowed with the *ability to manage in many other countries by using English* (11.6). As for the verbal means used by several subjects, *could* and *couldn't* are directly linked with success or failure in understanding other speakers of a language.

IV.2. IPA analysis

Starting from the idea that the subjects' acrostics represent a piece of their identity revealed through self-disclosure, we have further applied a mixed type of research (quantitative and qualitative). Thus, the first thing we did was to choose one sample and look carefully for emergent topics. We wrote them down. Then, we did the same with the other acronyms. During the third stage, we identified similar topics and compared them in terms of complexity of expression. We also looked for new topics and the way in which they were approached and expanded.

The sample we started from was:

1.1. *Reluctant to speak a foreign language because I was too shy*

1.2. *Angry when I couldn't understand my grandparents speaking Hungarian*

1.3. *Limited encounters with native speakers of English or French while I was in secondary school*

1.4. *U*nderstanding of Portuguese, which I studied for a year when I was a student

1.5. *C*onfident in my abilities to learn and speak a foreign language when I was in high school

1.6. *Able to learn new languages quickly*

The analysis of the sample started with the process of coding (thus, for example, 1.2. is to be decoded: 1 = the subject; 2 = the line in the subject's acrostic name) and with a brief analysis that made us draw the following conclusions:

a)   with one exception, all the beginning words in the analysed sample are adjectives;

b)   language learning is understood as a social process (the subject belongs to a community; the experience with language implies a social frame and interactions with the people around);

c)   the name acrostic blends experience, behaviour, attitudes and feelings;

d)   the emerging topics and sub-topics are as follows:

Table 1. Topics and sub-topics identified in the sample acrostic name

Topics	Sub-topics	Identification	
Attitude towards language/ language learning/ language use	Attitude towards language use - willingness vs. lack of willingness	1.1. 1.5.	reluctant confident
Feelings experienced	Desirable vs. undesirable feelings - anger	1.2.	angry
Potential vs. lack of potential		1.6. 1.2.	able; learn quickly couldn't understand
Language learning/ experience contexts	Non institutionalized context Institutionalized context	1.2. 1.3. 1.4.	grandparents high-school student
Exposure to a specific language		1.2. 1.3. 1.4.	Hungarian English; French Portuguese

Impediments in learning and using the language	External vs. internal impediments - shyness	1.1.	(too) shy
Limits		1.3.	limited encounters

Having in view that we eliminated three products considering them irrelevant for the study – as subjects seem to have either not understood the exact requirements of the task or to have had little inspiration – we followed the procedure with the other 21 samples and, analysing the results, we drew the conclusion that it was not only the themes, or what Wagner and Wodak (2006) called "the macro-topics" related to language experience that could be of interest, but also the sub-themes/micro-topics, as well as their syntactic, morphologic and pragmatic aspects.

Thematically, the acronyms basically reveal the existence of the same topics and sub-topics with variations determined by each subject's experience with the (foreign) language. Thus, the subjects' self-disclosure reveals knowledge, awareness, attitudes (developed through their self-perception), desires and feelings, as well as degrees of their self-efficacy (Bandura et al. 1999) related to success in language learning and language using.

Table 2. Overview of topics and sub-topics identified in the study

	Topic	Sub-topics
Self-disclosure/ Biogra-phical work	Language learning	▪ learning contexts: institutionalized (pre-university/ university system) vs. non-institutionalized (family; self-study) ▪ motivation (reasons for learning/not learning a certain language) ▪ language preferences ▪ learning strategies ▪ efficient learning techniques ▪ language learning rewards
	Language use	▪ contexts of use (institutionalized vs. non-institutionalized) ▪ self-efficacy ▪ impediments in using the language: fear of exposure; shame

		▪ coping with difficult situations ▪ limits ▪ perceived success ▪ perceived ability
	- self-perceptions	
	- attitudes and feelings	▪ interest vs. lack of interest ▪ willingness vs. lack of willingness ▪ curiosity ▪ determination ▪ fear vs. courage ▪ self-confidence vs. lack of self-confidence ▪ openness to languages ▪ desirable vs. undesirable feelings ▪ self-esteem
	- hopes; intentions; plans for the future	

The subjects' written products reveal knowledge and experience with learning languages, their ease or impediments in acquiring foreign languages and putting knowledge and skills into practice. At the same time, they offer the researcher/the reader the subjects' means of making sense of all the experiences they passed through and of the way in which their linguistic identity is (re)shaped along these experiences. We have to mention, for a better understanding of the analysis we are offering, that these things cannot be separated from each other. Gaining knowledge and experiencing new encounters with foreign languages and people from different countries contribute to the dynamic process of identity building.

Their readiness is constantly emphasized, although awareness of difficulties is mentioned in an implicit way: *Ready to start learning a new language* (23.1); *Ready for the challenges that learning of a new language brings* (22.6).

Interest and openness to other cultures is expressed by different dynamic, gradable adjectives, belonging to either the group of simple

or compound ones; with their mentioning of:

- contextual features, such as time, for example: *Interested in learning English since I was young* (4.4);
- multilingual matters: *Interested in different cultures (22.7); Interested in learning as many languages as possible* (5.1);
- extrinsic motivation: *Interested in Italy when my cousin went to visit it* (21.2);
- feelings accompanying interest: *Anxious about learning new things in different languages* (22.1); *Ambitious to learn new things* (24.8);
- explicit attitude: *Open-minded for new languages and cultures* (11.2) – even to less traditionally taught ones in Romanian schools: *Open-minded towards exploring more exotic languages* (9.4).

What is more relevant is the fact that they do not only manifest their willingness and disposition to do that, but they also feel able to. Self-disclosure reveals this in a logical order:

- from general things: *Able to learn something new every day* (5.5) where the declared potential is completed by the presence of the indefinite pronoun and of habitual time reference;
- to specific ones: *Able to learn new languages* (19.3; 201.2; 13.1); *Able to learn new languages quickly* (22.5; 23.2; 17.2). The adverb of manner (*quickly*) highlights the (sometimes) remarkable capacity of the Romanian students of learning a foreign language, no matter the type of context: formal/informal/non-formal.

By contrast, in *Able to learn basic words of a foreign language quickly* (6.7) the adverb of manner gets a new reference: potential is restricted to just a part of the lexis, namely to basic words.

Potential reference is also present in the following examples, where particular languages are mentioned, this time, accompanied by a relevant preposition and a general partitive (*a bit of*) which also impose restrictions: *Able to learn new languages very quickly, except Dutch or Chinese* (15.2); *Able to learn a bit of Turkish* (10.1) or *Able to learn (eventually) a bit of Hungarian* (7.4). Such exposures of own (lack of) potential can find an explanation in the fact that learning the mentioned languages represents a more difficult task, as they do not belong to the same language family as the students' mother tongue.

 For our subjects, the experience with a foreign language meant their mentioning of both learning and using it in different contexts; this includes social, behavioural, affective and psychological dimensions.

In the institutionalized context (from kindergarten to university), subjects, while joining learning communities, display interest and attraction for learning languages: *Interested in foreign languages when I was in kindergarten* (24.3); *More interested to learn foreign language since in university* (17.1), as well as confidence in their strengths: *Confident in my English in high-school* (2.3).

Attitudes with negative connotation are not absent, yet, as in:

a)   *Nervous about English and French when starting Faculty of Letters* (24.7) – where the subject's nervousness is normal and understandable under the circumstances of a new beginning in life.

b)   *Reticent to too many new things I was about to learn* (24.2) – where awareness of the complexity of the language itself, does not only trigger nervousness in the student, but also the state and quality of being reluctant and unwilling to embark on the language learning journey to language proficiency.

The subjects' attitudes and feelings are often revealed in conflicting terms when they talk about their interest/lack of interest in language learning and use, which manifested in several areas:

• lexis and attached meanings: *Curious about the messages hidden behind Polish words* (4.1); *Obviously I was angry when I couldn't understand foreign words* (15.1);

• grammar: *Not afraid of learning new words or grammar* (11.3); *Hesitant when I don't know a grammar structure in a foreign language* (16.3); *Unwilling to try to learn French grammar* (9.2);

• specific type of activity: *Attracted to all English projects in middle school* (2.2); *Desire to learn more about the history of a foreign language* (19.1);

• a particular language: *Interested in learning the German language* (19.2); *Interested in learning Hungarian* (20.4); *Horrified about learning French* (7.3); *Lack of interest in learning French* (7.6). Openly declared attraction is evident in *A language that I like is Spanish* (5.3) or in *Italian language – my first love* (11.4). It is not surprising to find these two languages among their top preferences. The explanation can be found in two facts: on the one hand, they are both Romance languages, just like Romanian, and the resemblance between words makes them easy to be acquired. On the other hand, many families in Romania have among their members individuals who have been working in Spain or Italy for several years since the Romanian Revolution. Thus, their children have opportunities of travelling to

Spain or Italy and get into contact with these two languages and cultures. Our students are not exceptions from this.

• specific language elements/deep knowledge in language: *Attentive to the nuances of a language* (22.8); *Ready to learn more about the intricacies of the English language* (9.5);

• a particular skill: *Anxious to improve my abilities of speaking foreign languages* (10.5); *Nervous for not being able to memorize the right pronunciation* (22.2).

The reactions in front of the first encounter with the foreign language are also recorded, as in *Obviously confused when I had my first encounter with French* (4.2) or *Rigid when I deal with a language for the first time* (10.4) – where the viewpoint adverb "obviously" hints at the student's intention of establishing common ground with the others, in the same situation.

An important variable in language learning is, undoubtedly, the motivation that supports the individual effort: both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is mentioned. Thus, subjects engaged in language activities because they were "enjoyable and satisfying to do" (Noels et al. 2000: 61) or because subjects got some rewards: finding a job; getting much performance in language. These are mentioned in a mature, lucid way as in *Ability to find a job easier* (3.4) – or, in a more explicit construction: *Studying foreign languages gives me the possibility to find a good job* (13.5), as well as in *Able to make connections between languages* (22.3).

As intrinsic motivation is more frequently voiced by our subjects, it can be analysed according to the taxonomy suggested by Vallerand et al. (1992) in their tripartite Intrinsic motivation (IM) Model:

a) IM-Knowledge – Our subjects want to know more about languages, about the people speaking them: *Interested in learning Hungarian* (20.4); *Interested in learning about new cultures* (8.5). The affective states related to knowledge are mentioned; thus, they feel/are *Happy to discover new cultures* (3.3) or *Amazed knowing new people belonging to other cultures* (6.5);

b) IM-Accomplishment – Our subjects are motivated by different tasks accomplishments: *Able to understand what people say in Russian* (16.4);

c) IM-Stimulation – Our subjects are motivated by aesthetic appreciation or fun: *Funny to understand something from a foreign joke*

(18.1); *Impressive to understand an international star talking in a TV show* (18.5).

Motivation/lack of motivation is even more explicitly voiced in *More attracted to speak English because it seemed easier than French* (7.1); *No passion for learning Spanish because I consider it to be too easy* (10.2); *Too difficult to study French* (24.5) – where complementary reasons are offered.

Sometimes, impediments of different sorts hinder both the process of learning and that of using the language. They are strictly linked to the subjects' character traits and constitute reasons for their lack of full/complete involvement in language activities: *Reluctant to speak a foreign language because I felt embarrassed* (18.4); *Reluctant to speak a foreign language because I am shy* (20.3); *Shy to speak out my thoughts because I was afraid to express myself* (24.4).

Limitations are, though, an integrative part of the subjects' account and they do not fail to mention them, as in *Limited experience in English during middle-school* (3.6). Particular situations/moments of language experience are recorded in terms of the feelings the subjects experienced, especially when needs were not satisfied: *Nervous when I had to present a speech in Spanish* (4.5); *Nervous when I made mistakes in the foreign language* (8.6); *Nervous for not being able to memorize the right pronunciation* (22.2); *Anxious when I need to speak English in front of a crowd* (23.6).

Yet, determination characterizes them and becomes a strong support for their intrinsic tendencies: *No matter what, I try to learn languages, especially English* (14.2). Self-determination is also related to subjects' identity formation. "Self-determination theory postulates that increased perceived competence results only if the two other basic needs – autonomy and social elatedness – are fulfilled" (Taylor 2011: 225).

When success is achieved, it triggers courage, optimism, confidence, satisfaction and pride from their part. They internalize these positive feelings: *Nobody taught me Spanish; I did it myself* (5.4); *Indeed, I am happy that I know many languages* (13.7); *Nice to know to speak many languages* (15.3).

Students are not always self-satisfied with their accomplishments in language and seem aware of their future necessary efforts, as mentioned in *Anxious to improve my abilities of speaking foreign languages* (10.5).

The accounts also mention some effective methods, strategies or techniques that contributed to the subjects' performance, thus allowing teachers to draw pedagogical conclusions:

- use of visual material: *Much easier to understand while working with pictures in primary school* (3.1);
- learning by playing: *Easy to learn while playing* (3.5);
- explanations offered by the teacher: *Explanations given by the high-school teacher made me like English* (7.5);
- oral interactions with the others: *Asking and talking to other people helped me to enrich my vocabulary in French and English* (13.9);
- written tasks: *Elaboration of essays helped me a lot in learning English* (16.5);
- use of authentic material: *Lovely lyrics from an English old song, great to use sometimes* (18.2).

Our students are also fully aware of:

- language and language learning: language awareness is obvious in some impersonal constructions of the type: *Each lesson in the foreign language is a step forward* (8.1); *Nothing seems impossible when you know a foreign language* (6.6); *Learning a new language can be done by reading books* (8.4); *Many ways to learn a new language* (11.1) *Various sources from which you can learn a foreign language* (8.2).
- themselves as learners and users of languages. Language activities are accompanied by development of language learning selves. Self-knowledge manifests at several levels:

    - disclosure of self-image: *Understanding and speaking Russian characterizes me* (13.4); *Confident in my abilities of speaking Italian* (23.5); *Daring towards learning more languages by myself* (9.3);

    - declared proficiency level (when progress is measured against goals and models offered by class-mates or other people around): *Able to understand Russian since I was five* (12.5); *Ill-prepared in French in high-school* (2.4); *Terrible at French while in France in high-school* (2.6);

    - awareness of own suitable learning technique: *Oral communication seems to be the best for me to learn a foreign language* (18.3);

    - undesirable feelings linked with lack of abilities *Another reason for my anger was that I couldn't understand German* (15.4); *Annoyed when I couldn't understand German* (4.6); *Mad when I couldn't learn German* (21.3).

Not knowing a language/not having the necessary abilities to cope with oral or written interactions with the others trigger various attitudes and feelings: *Main clause: angry when I couldn't understand a foreign language* (20.1); *Obviously I was angry when I couldn't understand foreign words* (15.1).

In non-institutionalized contexts, subjects experience opposite or ambivalent attitudes and feelings towards language experience. This is in strict connection with their relationship with individuals or particular languages in various learning contexts. As language and literacy learning is deeply embedded in the social fabric of school and homes (Li 2007: 285), it is no wonder that subjects mention the family background as important setting in which their experience with language took place. Besides this, they also mention other "meetings" with language(s) and people speaking them:

a)   experience with language in the family background: *Interested to learn and understand Hungarian from my grandparents* (7.2); *Angry when I couldn't understand my grandparents speaking Hungarian* (2.2); *Angry when I couldn't understand my parents speaking Russian* (16.7)

As it is well-known, immediate context favours language acquisition. A language spoken in a more or less extended family background, in daily interactions, can become a good motivation for individuals to start learning it. The idea springs from the Language Socialization theory: individuals acquire a language in order to become competent members of the community to which they belong. Success in language acquisition becomes part of the individual's socialization through the use of language; lack of language knowledge brings anger and frustration. In our case, we expected Hungarian and Russian to be part of the family background language mentioned by our subjects, as some students in the group belong to either Csango[3] families or Moldavian[4] ones.

b)   experience with native speakers – it is a common knowledge that the contact with native speakers is among the external crucial factors influencing language acquisition. Our subjects seem aware of

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[3] A Hungarian ethnographic group living in Romania, more exactly in the north-eastern part of the country (the largest number is identified in Bacău county). They speak Romanian, but also a Hungarian dialect (Csango).

[4] Many students from The Republic of Moldova study in Romanian universities (Bacău included).

the fact that it contributes to their success. Their Erasmus mobility and personal travelling to different countries brought them into contact with natives and, at the same time, helped them learn through experience. Hence, their awareness of the:

- surrounding reality requirements: *Necessity of speaking a foreign language when being abroad* (18.6); *Nowhere could I travel knowing just one language* (13.8);
- benefits: *Expanding skills by talking with natives* (8.3); *Traveling to USA helped me to improve my English* (13.6); *Understanding a new culture when I visited Turkey* (6.2);
- own language proficiency: *Able to speak English and French during Erasmus stay in France* (2.7);
- own limits: *Only the Polish language was a problem for me when I was abroad* (5.2); *I was shy when I met the first foreigners* (6.1);
- feelings experienced: *Nervous when speaking with native speakers of French* (19.4); *Optimist when I could understand Spanish people talking* (21.4); *Anxious about speaking French during my visit to France* (21.6); *Lost among foreigners* (6.3); *Rejected when I couldn't speak even one word in Chinese* (4.3);
- self-perceptions as formed through interactions and evaluations within one's social context (Taylor 2011: 65): *Not confident in my English while abroad* (2.5); *Obviously happy when I could understand English while abroad* (17.1);
- desires: *New wish: to learn Ukrainian and Bulgarian* (12.4);
- motivation: *Interested in Italy when my cousin went to visit it* (21.2);
- students internalize the emotional states; thus, they feel *Lucky to have the opportunity to travel and learn new languages* (23.3) or *Glad that I had the possibility to talk to American people* (13.3); *Tired of hearing foreign words instead of native ones* (9.1), as the experience with the other(s) left marks in their heart and memories: *Incredible experience with native speakers in France* (12.3).

c) other informal experiences – our subjects mention some other opportunities of acquiring languages. Television programmes are by far on top of them, as they feel motivated by them: *Curious to know and understand English when watching different TV programmes* (24.1); *Interested to learn from cartoons* (2.2); *Sensitive when I listened to French music* (21.1); *Impressive to understand an international star talking in a TV show* (18.5).

V. Conclusions

In this paper, we have proposed an analysis of autobiographical accounts on language experience and development of linguistic heritage. The assumptions referring to the participants to our experiments were validated by the subjects' openness and disposition to, as well as their interest in learning new things (in general) and things about foreign languages and foreign cultures (in particular). Thus, many lines of the acrostics reveal such aspects through the subjects' choice of explicit lexis, meant to offer information about their character traits.

Throughout our research, the linguistic analysis of the acrostic names prefaced the topics and subtopics specific to identity and biographic work, subsequently presented in following the steps suggested by IPA (Smith and Osborne 2007). As a result of the ideographic approach, we obtained general characterizations starting from the analysis of a particular sample continued with the others. We found out that the main attitudes and feelings displayed by the subjects range from willingness and motivation to lack of willingness and indifference, from shyness to anger and frustration. Self-disclosure is mainly achieved through the use of (positive and negative) adjectives that emphasize the subjects' different attitudes and feelings towards languages.

We are consciously aware of the limitations of our study in terms of the number of experiences mentioned by our subjects (because of the work instrument and the procedure we have used), as well as in terms of reliability of all accounts. We are not fully convinced that the subjects could always display linguistically the true attitude or feeling towards one language/one experience or another. This is why our empirical evidence will be just a starting point for future research. This will be done through the analysis of complete language autobiographies (offered by subjects in oral form - through in-depth interviews – and in written form) which, in our opinion, can have pedagogical implications. They can become educational devices, as they are based on reflection, self-awareness, critical thinking and self-evaluation – components that we, as educators, need to develop in our students (Bonta and Galiţa 2011: 65-73).

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