The bilingual self or selves?[1]

Mohammad Ali SALMANI NODOUSHAN, IECF, Iran
Jesús GARCÍA LABORDA, Universidad de Alcala, Spain

A concise but strong review of the literature on bilinguals' perception of 'self' led to the question of whether bilinguals perceive themselves as different or the same people when they function in different languages. 183 participants (N =183) randomly assigned to two half-groups took both the English and Persian versions of the Self Concept Scale (SCS) in two counter-balanced administration sessions with a time interval of 3 weeks. Results, after data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics, indicated that Iranian-Americans have a more realistic self concept when they function in English than when they function in Persian. Their average self concepts in English and Persian do not match. Moreover, the female Iranian-American shows a larger discrepancy in her English and Persian self concepts than her male counterpart. This indicates that females are more open to alienation than males. The results of this study lend empirical support to claims made by previous researchers that bilinguals have a kind of split personality. After the filed study, it was concluded that a bilingual is not a unique person who assumes different identities when he functions in the different languages he knows, but that a bilingual possess two different 'guises' or 'selves' which are language-specific and are used in accordance with the language the bilingual speaks at any given point in time.

Keywords: Bilingualism; Mercenary Relativism; Split Personality; Linguistic Schizophrenia; Multilingualism

1. Introduction

Man has not always been monolingual. Nowadays, it is quite easy to find many people who know more than one language. In some places, there are people who can speak several languages just like native speakers. This has resulted in many psycholinguists wondering whether bilinguals and multilinguals feel

---

like different people when speaking different languages (Pavlenko, 2006). It is not known whether bilinguals and multilinguals are perceived as different people or the same individual by their interlocutors. Nor is it known if they behave differently when they speak different languages, and if so, what causes these differences.

These questions are quite often asked in debates about bilingualism and multilingualism, but they have rarely been raised in the literature in the field (Grosjean, 1982; Heinz, 2001; Pavlenko, 2006). Although these questions may look naive and simplistic, some people have taken them as far as to claim that even when an individual functions in the same language, they perform as different identities. Doctors in a hospital, for example, do not function in their native language as they would do when they engage in casual conversation in supermarkets. Changing registers, contexts, interlocutors, or interactional aims will definitely leave a great impact on the language forms people choose to use. If anything, monolingualism is in essence a dynamic phenomenon (Pavlenko, 2006). Even within the limits of his native language, the individual continuously acquires novel linguistic repertoires and behaves and feels differently (moves between the selves) when he talks to his parents versus his children.

The important question to be asked is, therefore, whether bilinguals/multilinguals see themselves as different people when using different languages. This paper will try to shed some light on this issue, and will seek to answer the question. In the rest of this paper, the term bilingualism is used as a cover term for both bilingualism as well as multilingualism. By the same token, the term bilingual will also include multilinguals.

2. Background

It may be relieving to some people to assume that the study of bilingual and multilingual selves is not worth the time and energy scholars would like to invest in them. On the contrary, there may be some other people who might want to claim that the notion of the existence of bilingual/multilingual selves is short-sighted, and to argue that the bilingual/multilingual is at best a unique self who assumes bilingual/multilingual identities.

Pavlenko (2006) argues that this is misleading and reductionist for at least two reasons. On the one hand, taking such a position is in effect claiming that 'self-perception' is equal to 'performance', or that 'self' is equal to 'identity' which even the layman knows is not. The arguer who takes these terms to be tantamount is, as Pavlenko (2006) puts it, deeply discomforted with focusing on something as intangible as 'feeling like a different person' and prefers 'objective' identity performance data (conversations, texts, task performance)

over 'subjective' self perception data' (p. 1). On the other hand, mistaking 'identity' for 'self' is problematic in that it frames bilingualism or multilingualism as an extended version of monolingualism instead of taking it as a phenomenon in its own right—a unique psycholinguistic phenomenon (Pavlenko, 2006).

This claim as to the distinction between bilingual/multilingual 'selves' versus 'identities' receives further support and credence if one notices what lies behind the acquisition of a new register in a first language. The child has already acquired the phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic components of the language. As such, acquiring a new register is not tantamount to acquiring a new phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic system. Rather, the acquisition of the register is facilitated by the phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic overlaps (Pavlenko, 2002).

The learning of a new language, however, means the learning of a new linguistic system altogether, especially when the language being learnt is 'typologically' different from the native language of the learner. It may even require that the learner face new and unfamiliar surroundings (Pavlenko, 2002). When the learner is well beyond the age of puberty (i.e., in late bilingualism or multilingualism), these differences become even more pronounced. Perhaps this is because of the fact that in late bilingualism or multilingualism, the "speakers are socialized into their respective languages at distinct points in their lives, childhood versus adulthood, and in distinct sociocultural environments" (Pavlenko, 2006, p. 2).

Perhaps one of the pioneers in the field of bilingual studies is Auer (1998) who noticed that, in bilingual communities, changes in behavior, be it verbal and nonverbal, are tolerated and are readily taken for granted provided that they are accompanied by a change in language. When using two dialects of the same language, the language boundaries are often blurred. Auer (1988) further noticed that in monolingual communities with a strict localized culture, people who know more than one language are at times perceived as people with two conflicting characters by their clan members. In the 1930s, Nazi scholars in Germany took it for granted that a person was, no doubt, Jewish if he spoke two languages or more (Henss, 1931). Henss also noticed that Nazis wrongly labeled bilinguals as inferior since their pathological inner split, in their struggle for becoming one, resulted in the deterioration of their intellects and morality. Bilingualism was a demerit. A bilingual was considered as a person who had some sort of bilinguality of feelings, and was expected to switch social values and moral principles as he switched languages (Sander, 1934). This was taken too far to even claim that the bilingual was like a soldier of fortune or a mercenary who accomplishes his missions without being emotionally involved in the action being performed, a

person who drops social values, principle, and ethics as he switches the language. Early on, in North America such apparently less racist but clearly as hurting professional terms as 'anomie', 'alienation', 'social isolation', 'nervous strain', 'cognitive dissonance', and 'acculturation' were coined to ease the overt sarcasm in the term inferior (Bossard, 1945; Child, 1943; Schumann, 1978; Spoerl, 1943).

The upsurge of migration between countries in the second half of the 20th century resulted in the revival of ethnic consciousness and brought about a greater degree of social tolerance and understanding. The benefits of bilingualism found some room to show up. Nevertheless, bilingualism, in many countries and especially in those with local static cultures, is still considered as a problem of two incompatible identities—one that can be termed 'linguistic schizophrenia' (Pavlenko, 2006).

Alder (1977), in an exposition that can be considered as the treaties on bilingualism, warned that "bilingualism can lead to split personality and, at worst, to schizophrenia" (p. 40). Along the same lines, Clarke (1976) likened overseas students in the USA to schizophrenic patients who find themselves in a state of limbo and between the familiar traditional world of their origin and the modern world of the USA, to which he referred as the 'clash of consciousness'. Even in the 1990s, some scholars persisted in using the term 'schizophrenia' as the metaphor for bilingualism in their discussion of the problems brought on by cognitive, linguistic, cultural dissonance, and culture shock (Amati-Mehler, Argentieri & Canestri, 1993). In political discourse, too, the same metaphor is occasionally used. The British Home Secretary in 2002, for instance, remarked that the use of English—rather than the native language of the target community—in Asian British households would help 'overcome the schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships' in immigrant families.

The use of the term schizophrenia with positive overtones is sometimes seen in bilinguals' own reflections (Kellman, 2000; Todorov; 1985; Todorov, 1994). Translingual writers often notice that the same story written in different languages may sound differently. For instance, Pavlenko (2006) recounts the story of a childhood French-English bilingual named Julian Green (1941), who recalled that his memoir took a whole different shape when he decided to write about his early years in English rather than French. Green (1941) argued that the pattern of disclosures and omissions, the rhythm, the choice of words and details, and his stance in his memoir varied between the two languages even when the subject remained the same:

> New trains of thought were started in my mind, new associations of ideas were formed. There was so little resemblance between what I wrote in English and what I had already written in French that it might

almost be doubted that the same person was the author of these two pieces of work (Green, 1941, p. 62, cited in Pavlenko, 2006, P. 4).

Todorov (1985, 1994) narrated a similar experience. He lived in France for 18 years and then went back to Bulgaria to lecture for a group of intellectuals who could not understand him. He had to choose between denying his Bulgarian origin and go on lecturing as a French intellectual or denying his 18 years of thinking as a French intellectual and recourse to his Bulgarian habits. Finding himself paralyzed in describing this situation, Todorov appealed to Bakhtin's (1981) notions of 'dialogism' and 'polyphony' that refer to the "presence of several independent and often conflicting voices within a single text" (Pavlenko, 2006, P. 4). Other scholar who noticed the duality embedded in bilingualism were Beaujour (1989), Besemeres (2002), De Courtivron (2003), Kellman (2003), Pavlenko (2001, 2004), Perez Firmat (2003), Stroinska (2003), Valenta (1991), and Hoffman (1989). They used a wealth of terms to refer to this dual feeling; they include "tongue snatching, border crossing, borrowing, bigamy, betrayal, bifurcation, fragmentation, multiplicity, split, gap, alienation, dislocation, and double vision" (Pavlenko, 2006, P. 5). These are metaphors that convey

> . . . an array of emotions: guilt over linguistic and ethnic disloyalties, insecurity over the legitimacy of a newly learned language, anxiety about the lack of wholesome oneness, angst over the inability to bring together one's incommensurable worlds, and sadness and confusion caused by seeing oneself as divided, a self-in-between, a self in need of translation (Pavlenko, 2006, P. 5).

The literature reviewed up to here leads to the question of whether the scope of inquiry in bilingualism can be expanded from the qualitative introspections of translingual writers, immigrants, and expatriates on their own experiences to data-driven quantitative findings of empirical research. As such, the present study was conducted with the aim of providing empirical support for introspective claims made by the cited bilingual writers in relation to the dual inner self of bilinguals.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

183 Iranian American (*N*=183) participated in this study. They all belonged in the upper-middle socio-economic class. Their age range was between 21 and 56. They had all spent almost the first half of their lives in Iran followed by the second half in the USA. 96 of them were male (*n*=96) and 87 were female (*n*=87).

3.2. Instrumentation

To gauge the participants' self concept, both the English and the Persian versions of the Self Concept Scale (SCS) developed by Rogers (1961) were used. This scale consists of 25 Likert-type items. The respondents were expected to respond to the two forms of the questionnaire in each of the English and Persian versions. Form A asks the respondents to rate their own 25 attributes on a Likert scale of 1 to 7. Form B asks the respondents to rate the same 25 characteristics on the same Likert scale of 1 to 7 for the kind of person they would like to be. Items 4, 12, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, and 23 on the scale require reverse scoring. Item 25 has been reproduced here as an example:

<div align="center">

Item 25: Selfish 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Humble

</div>

To see whether each respondent's self-concept is normal, the scores of that participant on both forms should be subtracted from each other so that the distance for each item is calculated. The resulting distance values should then be squared and summed. The square root of the sum should then be calculated. If the result is between 0 and 7, the self concept of the participant is normal. However, if the result is 7+, the self concept is not normal; the higher the score, the greater the discrepancy between actual self concept and ideal self concept.

3.3. Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned into two half-groups. A counter-balanced design was used for the administration of the Persian and English versions of the questionnaire. The first half group received the English version followed by the Persian version. The second half group received the Persian version followed by the English version. There was a three week interval between the two administrations. The design has been schematically represented in figure 1.
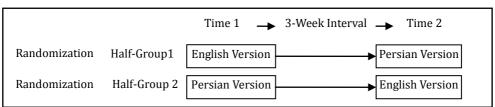

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the counter-balanced design of scale administration.

4. Results and discussion

The first step in data analysis was to identify the self-concept scores for the

participants. The distances between item scores on forms A and B of the questionnaire in both the English and the Persian versions were computed, squared and summed. The square root of the sum was then calculated and divided by N. This afforded in the self-concept 'reference' scores that are displayed in table 1.

Table 1
Self-Concept Scores for Male and Female Iranian-Americans in English and Persian

		Self Concept Score	
	N	Persian Version	English Version
Female Iranian-Americans	87	62.0053	3.2120
Male Iranian-Americans	96	74.5764	3.1735
All Iranian-Americans	183	68.6000	3.1918

As Table 1 shows, there is a huge discrepancy between the real and the ideal self-concepts of all Iranian-Americans in the Persian version of SCS (x = 68.6). The self-concept score for the same people in the English version (x = 3.19) indicates that Iranian-Americans have a more realistic understanding of themselves. When it comes to the male participants, the same result is observed again. Taking the two forms in the Persian version, Iranian-American males revealed a great discrepancy between their real and ideals selves (x = 74.57). However, when taking the two forms in the English version, there was no discrepancy; the real and the ideal selves matched (x = 3.17). The same was observed for females taking the Persian version (x = 62) and the English version (x = 3.21).

To see if the real self concept of Iranian-Americans in Persian matches theirs in English, the same procedure was followed. The distances between their self concept scores on forms A from both the English and the Persian versions (i.e., the forms which measured real self concepts) were computed, squared and summed, and then the square root of the result was divided by N. Table 2 displays the results of this analysis.

Table 2
Real Self-Concept Scores for Male and Female Iranian-Americans in English and Persian

	All	Male	Female
Self-Concept Match Score	73.7070	49.51	100.4009

As table 2 indicates, there is a statistically significant difference between the real self concepts of Iranian-Americans when they function in two languages (x = 73.70). This indicates that performing in a second language is similar to

assuming a new self. As for the males, the self concept score is 49.51; the self concept score for females is 100.40. This shows that males are more resistant to personality change than female. This is perhaps due to the stronger emotional stability of men which blocks acculturation more than it does in relation to females.

5. Conclusion

All in all, the results of this study lend empirical support to claims made by Beaujour (1989), Besemeres (2002), De Courtivron (2003), Hoffman (1989), Kellman (2003), Pavlenko (1998, 2001, 2004), Perez Firmat (2003), Stroinska (2003), and Valenta (1991) that bilinguals have a kind of split personality. It seems, based on the empirical evidence from this study, that a bilingual is not a unique person who assumes different identities when he functions in the different languages he knows. Rather, the bilingual possess two different guises or selves which are language-specific and are used in accordance to the language the bilingual speaks at any given point in time.

The Authors

Mohammad Ali Salmani-Nodoushan (Email: dr.nodoushan@gmail.com) is an assistant professor of TEFL and researcher at the Iran Encyclopedia Compiling Foundation, Iran. His research interests include language testing in general, and testing English for Specific Purposes, Computer Adaptive Testing, and Performance Assessment in particular. He is currently a member of the editorial board of *The Asian EFL Journal*, *The Linguistics Journal* and *i-manager's Journal of Educational Technology.* He also edits *The International Journal of Language Studies (IJLS).*

Jesús García Laborda (Email: jesus.garcialaborda@uah.es) is an associate professor at Universidad de Alcala (Madrid, Spain). Dr Garcia Laborda has a PhD in English Philology and an EdD in Language Education. His current research covers many areas of computer implementations for language learning and testing along with ESP and teacher training: (i) especial applications of low stakes online testing, especially focused to the Spanish University Entrance Examination for concepts such as washback, test design, beliefs, emotions, etc. This also includes the study of interface and computer architecture in other languages and their evaluation and assessment; (ii) The development of Socio constructivism approaches to computer assisted language learning, which applies ideas of Vygotsky to the development of speaking and listening skills in computer based scenarios; iii) it includes practical applications of mobile learning for commercial purposes to help to introduce a computer based test in high stakes exams as DELE (Spanish) or the

Spanish University Entrance Examination (English, French, German; (iv) the implications of implementing such test in teacher training along with more traditional approaches to teacher education and their development of both cognitive and computer skills.

References

Adler, K. (1977). *Collective and individual bilingualism: A sociolinguistic study.* Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag.

Auer, P. (ed.). (1998). *Code-switching in conversation: Language, interaction, and identity*. New York: Routledge.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. Bakhtin.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Besemeres, M. (2002). *Translating one's self: Language and selfhood in cross-cultural autobiography*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Bossard, J. (1945). The bilingual as a person–linguistic identification with status. *American Sociological Review, 10*(6), 699–709.

Child, I. (1943). *Italian or American? The second generation in conflict.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

De Courtivron, I. (2003). Introduction. In I. De Courtivron (Ed.), *Lives in translation: Bilingual writers on identity and Creativity,* (pp. 1–9). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Green, J. (1993). An experiment in English. In J. Green (Ed.), *The apprentice writer,* (pp. 47–62). New York: Marion Boyars.

Grosjean, F. (1982). *Life with two languages: An introduction to bilingualism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Heinz, B. (2001). 'Fish in the river': Experiences of bilingual bicultural speakers. *Multilingua, 20*(1), 85–108.

Henss, W. (1931). Zweisprachigkeit als pädagogisches problem. *Ethnopolitischer Almanach, 2*, 47–55.

Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in translation. A life in a new language*. New York: Penguin Books.

Kellman, S. (2000). Preface. In S. Kellman (Ed.), *Switching languages: Translingual writers reflect on their craft,* (pp. ix–xix). Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.

Kellman, S. (ed.). (2003). *Switching languages: Translingual writers reflect on*

their craft. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.

Pavlenko, A. (2001) 'In the world of the tradition, I was unimagined': Negotiation of identities in cross-cultural autobiographies. *The International Journal of Bilingualism, 5*(3), 317–44.

Pavlenko, A. (2004). 'The making of an American': Negotiation of identities at the turn of the twentieth century. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts,* (pp. 34–67). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Pavlenko, A. (ed.). (2006). *Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression and representation.* Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Perez Firmat, G. (2003). *Tongue ties: Logo-eroticism in Anglo-Hispanic literature.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rogers, C. (1961*). On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Ross, M., Xun, W.Q.E., & Wilson, A. (2002). Language and the bicultural self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*(8), 1040–150.

Sander, F. (1934). Seelische struktur und sprache: Strukturpsychologisches zum zweitsprachenproblem. *Neue Psychologische Studien*, *12*, 59-76.

Schumann, J. H. (1978). The acculturation model for second language acquisition. In R. C. Gingras (Ed.), *Second language acquisition and foreign language learning,* (pp. 27–50). Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Spoerl, D. (1943). Bilinguality and emotional adjustment. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 38*, 35–57.

Stroinska, M. (2003). The role of language in the re-construction of identity in exile. In M. Stroinska & V. Cecchetto (Eds.), *Exile, language, and identity* (pp. 95–109). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Todorov, T. (1985). Bilinguisme, dialogisme, et schizophre´nie. In A. Bennani, A. Bounfour, F. Cheng, E., Formentelli, J. Hassoun, A. Khatibi, A. Kilito, A. Meddeb & T. Todorov (Eds.), *Du bilinguisme,* (pp. 11–26). Paris: Denoel.

Todorov, T. (1994). Dialogism and schizophrenia. In A. Arteaga (Ed.), *An other tongue: Nation and ethnicity in the linguistic borderlands,* (pp. 203-214). Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Valenta, E. (1991). *Doubled selves and fractured childhoods: A study of the recit d'enfance in Nathalie Sarraute, Agota Kristof and Claude Esteban*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.