

Multilingualism and persistence in multiple language learning

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Abstract

For language learners who aspire to become multilingual, commitment involves a personal journey. Defining persistence as a preoccupation with goal-focused action directed to a desired future state and drawing on research from cognitive psychology and the mental time travel paradigm, this article presents an identity-based framework of persistence in multiple language learning. In the framework, persistence is supported through the operation of 3 interconnecting processes: (a) the generation of personally meaningful goals aimed at becoming multilingual, (b) the conjuring of mental images that represent states, events, and values associated with being multilingual, and (c) the integration of representations of multilingualism within an unfolding personal history. To illustrate these processes, data from online sources and research literature exploring language learners' narrative biographies is used. The relevance of the framework is critically assessed in relation to (a) the development of interventions supporting motivation for foreign language learning, (b) the exploration of motivational processes through narrative-based inquiry, and (c) the varying linguistic, social, and societal contexts in which multiple language learning takes place.

KEYWORDS

goal self-concordance, linguistic biographies, mental time travel, multilingual identities, multilingualism, persistence

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Something that links my three languages is the fact that they make me multilingual and special. I am special because I have a gift of languages, but also because I work hard to improve my proficiency. Being multilingual is equal to being self-reliant and fulfilled. It is also being independent and autonomous in different situations (. . .). I am a happy multilingual who knows herself and knows that my languages are one of the sources of that happiness. (Participant S8, Gabryś–Barker, 2019, p. 358)

The description above opens a window onto the holism of a multilingual identity and the positive effects on a language learner's psychology. For this Polish preservice teacher, knowledge of herself as a developing multilingual connects with experiences of autonomy, personal well-being, and a perseverant approach to learning. For most participants in Gabryś–Barker's (2019) study, multilingual identities were in an emergent state. While second language (L2; English) identities were robust, third language (L3; German) and multilingual identities were "still under construction" (Gabryś–Barker, 2019, p. 357). Although this student could already experience how her three languages made her feel special, she was aware that her multilingual identity was still developing. Like other study participants, she found herself trying to understand "what being a multilingual is, as a process of becoming both a unique person and a social being" (p. 358).

Until recently, research into multilingual identities has focused on experiences connected to being multilingual. Mostly, investigations have taken place in contexts of multilingual practice (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). However, as Block (2015) has argued, and as Gabryś–Barker's (2019) study clearly demonstrates, identity is also implicated in becoming multilingual. Taking the view that becoming and being multilingual constitute overlapping phases in a language learner's development and that multilingual aspirations can positively influence motivation to learn additional languages (Henry & Thorsen, 2018), this article presents an identity-based conceptualization of persistence in multiple language learning. Rooted in theorizing from cognitive psychology explaining the effects of personal goals and imagined identities on motivated behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999), and drawing on work from the mental time travel paradigm (D'Argebeau, 2016, 2020a), persistence in multiple language learning is conceptualized to be supported through the operation of three interconnected processes: (a) the generation of personally meaningful goals that involve becoming multilingual, (b) the conjuring of mental images that represent states, events, and values associated with being multilingual, and (c) the integration of representations of multilingualism within an unfolding personal history.

The article is divided into four parts. In the first part, persistence in multiple language learning is conceptualized, and a tripartite framework is outlined. In the second part, the framework's components are illustrated using narrative data from online sources and from research in which written and visual narratives are used to explore multilinguals' identity experiences. In the third part, the relevance of the framework is discussed. Research directions are mapped out, and implications for motivation-enhancing interventions are evaluated. In the fourth part, the value of an identity-based conceptualization of persistence in multiple language learning is critically assessed.

CONCEPTUALIZING PERSISTENCE IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Achieving proficiency in a foreign language can be an arduous undertaking. Developing skills in a further language can be more demanding still. If there is a defining characteristic of people who are successful in developing higher levels of proficiency in one or several additional languages, it is persistence (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2023). A topic of significant interest in mainstream motivation science, and now also in the psychology of language learning, there is a plethora of overlapping

constructs that explain perseverant functioning (Dörnyei & Henry, 2022). Among these constructs, grit—conceptualized as the “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087)—has received most attention in second language acquisition (SLA; MacIntyre & Khajavy, 2021). Alongside grit (Teimouri et al., 2020), academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008)—which targets the capacity to cope with everyday adversity and the pressures, setbacks, and challenges associated with academic study—has been shown to be important in L2 learning (Yun et al., 2018). In the identity-based framework presented here, the conceptualization of persistence is aligned with self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), where motivation arises from a “gap” that is perceived to exist between a current and an ideal self (the motivation-generating mechanism in Dörnyei’s, 2009, L2 motivation self-system model). Following work on locomotion (Higgins et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2016)—a regulatory mindset focusing goal-oriented future motion—persistence is understood as an enhanced awareness of and concern for the future, decision-making that consistently benefits future selves, and a preoccupation with goal-focused action that “entails moving from one’s current (less desirable) state to a future state that is more desirable” (Kruglanski et al., 2018, p. 406).

Dörnyei’s multicomponent framework and its extension to multiple language learning

In recognition of the need for greater focus on motivational sustainability in language learning, Dörnyei (2020) developed a multicomponent framework explaining long-term motivation. In this framework, perseverant learning behavior is supported when the goal of developing L2 proficiency has a high degree of personal importance and when the vision of a future state (i.e., an ideal L2 self) connects to a person’s core identity. However, when language learning is part of a project of personal development—for instance, when a person seeks to become someone who is a language teacher or someone who is multilingual—persistence can be supported in an additionally important way. In such circumstances, representations of desired states can become integrated within an autobiographical history that connects knowledge of the self in the past, in the present, and in the future (Henry, 2020). When this happens, representations of self-relevant goals and goal states can gain a privileged phenomenological status, and goal-focused behavior can be affected in positive ways. In the sections that follow, these ideas are explored in relation to multilingualism, and an identity-based conceptualization of persistence in multiple language learning is presented.

Identity and goal pursuit

Prominent in the theory of directed motivational currents (Dörnyei et al., 2016), and in Dörnyei’s (2020) conceptualization of long-term motivation, is the notion of goal self-concordance. Developed in the 1990s by researchers working with self-determination theory (Ryan et al., 1996), self-concordance involves the alignment between goals and identity. It indexes the degree of personal ownership that a person experiences in relation to a goal that is self-generated. With a focus on the qualities of people’s goals and the effects on long-term striving and regulatory sustainability, the terms “self-concordant” and “nonconcordant” were coined to distinguish goals closely aligned with aspects of personality relevant to growth, and those lacking such a fit (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). The theory suggests that for goal-directed behavior to endure, it is not sufficient that a goal be autonomously generated. Rather, for energy to be sustained over time, a goal needs to have deeper personal significance.

Self-concordant goals represent a person’s beliefs, convictions, passions, and enduring interests (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999). Because goals that align with a person’s identity and core values can “feel like they would be interesting and meaningful to pursue, rather than being a burden or a drag,” (Sheldon et al., 2019, p. 127) the intensity and longevity of goal pursuit can be enhanced. In dozens of

studies carried out in different parts of the world, self-concordance has been demonstrated to explain differences in motivational persistence, long-term striving, optimism about success, and the generation and durability of well-being (for overviews see, Sheldon et al., 2015, 2019). If goal pursuit is to be sustained over time, self-concordance becomes a necessary precondition for successful striving.

Identity and mental imagery

The interrelationship of identity, desired futures, and motivated behavior is similarly central in Markus and Nurius's (1986) theory of possible selves. Often downplayed in the L2 motivation literature, the motivational importance of a close connection between a possible self and a core identity has been consistently emphasized by Markus and her associates (Markus, 1977; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Stein & Markus, 1996). As Markus (1977) made clear, the degree to which the image of a future self connects with one or more of the individual's self-schemas will be one of the factors influencing future-directed behavior.

Self-schemas encompass domains of the self in which a person is deeply invested, and self-knowledge that organizes and guides self-related information in social experiences. For a possible self to function effectively, it needs to connect with a self-schema of current importance:

One source of variability among possible selves is the extent to which they are tied to an existing current self-schema. Some possible selves are closely tied to a current self-schema such that they represent an extension or elaboration of the self in the domain. Others have little or no connection to the current self-definition. Possible selves function most effectively to motivate goal-directed behavior when they are closely tied to established current self-schemas. (Stein & Markus, 1996, pp. 366–367)

The necessary connection between mental imagery representing a desired future state and a person's central identity concerns has been highlighted in research exploring motivational effectiveness and the effects that visionary images have on people's implicit (nonconscious) motives (Schultheiss, 2021). As Rawolle et al. (2017) have explained, mental representations that relate to an identity that a person aspires to achieve will be closely linked to central aspects of the self, to the degree that they can come to represent "an image-like instantiation of that identity" (p. 770). In consequence, only certain types of mental imagery may function to promote persistence and to sustain motivated behavior over longer periods. Those most effective in prompting and sustaining action are likely to encompass picture-like representations or "embodiments" of a positive or desired state relevant to a person's identity (Kehr et al., 2022; Rawolle et al., 2017; Schultheiss et al., 2011). Visions of future events that are linked to core aspects of a person's identity are associated with a stronger sense of "realness." They generate more positive and intense emotions and are more effective in underpinning long-term endeavor (Ernst et al., 2018).

Identity, mental time travel, and autobiographical knowledge

Separately, or in combination, a self-concordant goal and mental imagery in which a personally important future identity is instantiated can be highly effective in generating and sustaining motivation (Schultheiss, 2021). However, as suggested by the theory of episodic future thinking (D'Armentau, 2016, 2020a), a further factor can play an important role in supporting the enduringness of motivated behavior. This involves mentally locating a desired future state onto a projected personal history. According to this theory, long-term striving will be fully supported to the degree that mental representations of self-concordant goals become integrated parts of a temporally constructed autobiography that links the past, the present, and the future (D'Armentau, 2020b).

Before exploring this idea in more detail, let us return to the Polish preservice teacher whose reflections on becoming and being multilingual prefaced the introduction to this article. In another part of her narrative, this student reflected further on her evolving multilingual identity:

The last but not least important component of my multilingual language identity is being a teacher. This is the place where all my three languages meet (. . .) (each language: Polish, English, German) influence the way I function and perceive the world. They also have a tremendous impact on the way I teach. (Participant S8, Gabryś–Barker, 2019, p. 354)

As these words reveal, her sense of self as a multilingual is embodied in experiences that connect to two self-schemas: one that involves personal values (“the way I function and perceive the world”), and another that involves the practice of teaching (“the way I teach”). Self-schemas are part of an evolving personal history (Markus, 1977). For this student, the representations conjured when reflecting on her multilingual identity—which embody the sense of “being self-reliant and fulfilled” and of “being independent and autonomous in different situations” (Gabryś–Barker, 2019, p. 358)—become closely meshed with currently important themes consistent across life domains.

According to the theory of episodic future thinking (D’Argembeau, 2016, 2020a), the relationship between an imagined event and a person’s projected personal history will be highly significant for motivational persistence (D’Argembeau, 2020b; Demblon & D’Argembeau, 2017). A form of mental time travel (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007), episodic future thinking concerns the ways in which people “preexperience” events that are anticipated in their lives, and how they mentally “try out” different possibilities for the future. When a self-relevant event is mentally simulated, the person becomes a character with a central role in an unfolding action (Ernst et al., 2019).

While it is possible to imagine the self as a character in any simulated situation, mental constructions are rarely random. Rather, the events in which we tend to imagine ourselves as protagonists are those that are, or have the potential to be personally important. As D’Argembeau (2020b) has made clear, the experience of travelling to the future is not an intrinsic property of an event representation. Rather, the feeling of preexperiencing the future is most likely to arise when an imagined event is placed in an autobiographical context. Similarly, a person’s belief in the actual occurrence of a simulated event will be modulated by the degree to which it is autobiographically contextualized.

A key feature of episodic future thinking therefore involves the interplay between event representations and autobiographical knowledge. As D’Argembeau (2016) has explained, autobiographical knowledge comprises knowledge about the self, projections of anticipated events, and expectations that a person has about a future life:

Future-oriented autobiographical knowledge may consist of abstract representations of possible selves (e.g., personality traits, preferences, social roles, professional occupation, and lifestyle; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and future life periods (e.g., “when I’ll have children” or “when I’ll own my own business”), as well as representations of future events that are not specific in nature (often referred to as “general events”), including summary representations of extended events (e.g., going on vacation in Italy next summer) and categories of events (e.g., family parties) that could happen in our lives. (p. 201)

Seen this way, autobiographical knowledge constitutes a filter through which event representations are organized, its function being “to link and organize imagined future events in coherent themes and event sequences” (D’Argembeau, 2020b, p. 2042). In consequence, episodic future thoughts will often be embedded in event clusters that center on pervading themes in a person’s life, and which are interrelated causally and temporally.

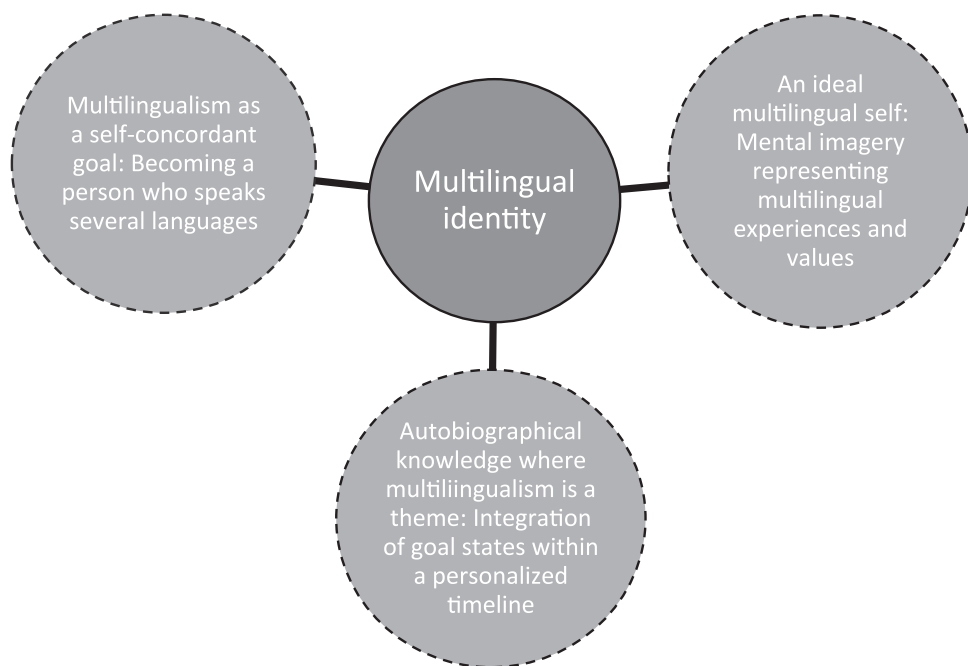


FIGURE 1 An identity-based framework of processes supporting persistence in multiple language learning

Through the process of contextualizing an event within a personal life story and locating it on a mentally mapped timeline, autobiographical knowledge can be understood as a pragmatic, instrumental, and motivationally effective form of mental time travel. It is through autobiographical knowledge that self-relevant events gain a prominent position in fantasies about the future, and it is in this way that consistent forms of striving can arise:

The attribution of personal meaning and the sense of realness of imagined events may increase one's motivation to connect present actions to desired future states, and to organize the sequences of actions necessary to reach these states. As such, an important function of autobiographical knowledge in prospection may be to screen and sort out imagined events that are consistent with one's personal situation and expectations from those that are not—thus preventing people to follow unrealistic or unproductive expectations—and to distinguish future events that are effective for reaching desired states from those that are not. (Ernst & D'Argembeau, 2017, p. 1054–1055)

An identity-based framework of persistence in multiple language learning

Drawing on these interrelated strands of identity-focused theorizing, persistence in sequential or multiple language learning will be supported (a) when the goal of becoming a person who speaks several languages is connected with central aspects of identity (i.e., having multilingualism as a self-concordant goal), (b) when mental representations reference multilingual values or encompass images of engagement in multilingual practices (i.e., visualization of an ideal multilingual self), and (c) when mentally conjured goal states map onto the salient themes of a projected personal history (i.e., having autobiographical knowledge where multilingualism is a theme). This conceptualization is modeled in Figure 1.

ILLUSTRATING THE FRAMEWORK

To illustrate the phenomena modeled in this framework, and to shed light on the processes conceptualized to support persistence in multiple language learning, I draw on examples from online narratives and narrative-focused research investigating personal multilingualism.

Becoming multilingual as a self-concordant goal

Relative to other aspects of language-learning psychology, little is known about language learners' goals or the processes in which goals are set (Lee & Bong, 2019). In the absence of dedicated research, it remains an open question as to whether people involved in the process of learning or acquiring two or more additional languages formulate goals that, beyond becoming a speaker of the separate target languages (TLs), encompass aspirations of becoming multilingual. Lacking empirical findings upon which to base an examination of goal formulations, I turn instead to contexts of online self-presentation where articulations of multilingual aspirations can be found in personal narratives.¹

In an age where online media creation and social networking offer extensive opportunities for self-presentation, narratives posted on professional networking sites can provide valuable insights into people's ambitions and personal goals. LinkedIn is the world's largest site for professional networking. With some 750 million members in over 200 countries and territories, LinkedIn provides a shopwindow and an effective means of professional self-promotion (LinkedIn, 2022). Complex algorithms enable connections to be made with fellow professionals and prospective employers.

On LinkedIn, the user's profile is the key feature of self-presentation (Chiang & Suen, 2015). A profile is most effective when it is concise, and when it suggests personal qualities attractive to potential employers. In this sense, a LinkedIn profile can be understood as a carefully curated act of impression management (van Dijk, 2013; Zide et al., 2014). While LinkedIn profiles generally foreground a person's accomplishments, they can also reflect idealized professional attributes and personal goals. Users of LinkedIn tend to present themselves authentically. The "importance of constructing a consistent personal-professional image online" (Chiang & Suen, 2015, p. 522) is well recognized, and overt self-promotion is generally avoided (Sievers et al., 2015).

Even a cursory search of LinkedIn profiles reveals how language skills are prominent in platform-users' self-descriptions. This is hardly surprising. In contemporary labor markets, bilingual and multilingual competence is highly valued. In a recent Spanish study, it was found, for example, that almost 80% of employers who used LinkedIn or Infojobs (a career-building site operating in Spain, Italy, and Brazil) placed a high value on foreign language skills. While 58% of employers demanded at least one foreign language, 21% required knowledge of at least two additional languages (Marta-Lazo et al., 2018).

Given that LinkedIn is an arena where articulations of personal goals referencing multilingualism might be found, I carried out searches of the site, focusing on user profiles. Because LinkedIn seeks to facilitate networking and professional matchmaking, the platform supports effective searching. Using Boolean codes suggested by LinkedIn (n.d.), I entered various formulations containing key words and phrases connected to being and becoming multilingual and to having multilingualism as a goal (see Online Supporting Information A).

Among the innumerable profiles where LinkedIn users listed the languages they spoke, the searches revealed thousands of profiles in which people described themselves as being multilingual and/or having multilingual skills. Descriptions indicating a desire to become multilingual and where multilingualism was a personal goal were far fewer—just a handful. Below are four examples (with the goal formulations underlined). Additional examples are provided in Online Supporting Information B.

EXAMPLE 1

Originally from California, I have a wide range of work experience including: retail, customer service, neighborhood youth programs, food & hospitality, payroll and compliance, and medical records. I speak Spanish as a second language, and have a goal of becoming multilingual. (Female, United States)

EXAMPLE 2

Biomedical Engineer in the making. A young, thoughtful adult who is constantly trying to evolve and become a holistically better person with a comprehensive outlook on life.

Also enjoys meeting people, psychology and has a goal of being multilingual someday! (Female, Poland)

EXAMPLE 3

I am a mature undergrad student, excited to be starting the iBA program in Linguistics and Language Studies at York/Glendon this coming year, trilingual stream (French, Spanish, English). Beyond achieving my bucket list goal of becoming multilingual, I am looking forward to investigating how language shapes our identity, culture and psychology as well as the ways the brain neurologically processes and acquires language. (Female, Canada)

EXAMPLE 4

Although I am no longer able to ride roller coasters, my adventures will continue through reading. I am excited that I can now read in two languages which will help me maintain my German language skills as I pursue additional higher education possibilities. I also plan in learning more languages because it has been a life goal to be multilingual. (Female, United States)

As these profiles indicate, people who take on the challenge of learning multiple languages can formulate goals that extend beyond achieving L2 and L3 proficiency. For these individuals, it is noteworthy how the (as yet) unrealized goal of becoming multilingual is of sufficient personal importance to be included in a condensed, pithy, and skills-oriented self-depiction characteristic for a LinkedIn profile. As these examples show, formulations reference a defined aspiration—“[I] have a goal of becoming multilingual” (Example 1) and “a goal of being multilingual someday!” (Example 2)—and frame multilingualism as an accomplishment of significant personal importance: a “life goal” or a “bucket list goal”² (Examples 3 and 4; see also the examples in Online Supporting Information B).

Baked into the most concise of personal portraits, the self-concordance of these multilingual goals is evident. Like the participant in Gabryś–Barker’s (2019) study, the LinkedIn profiles indicate how the goal of becoming multilingual can relate to some of life’s most central concerns. Evidenced in formulations such as “A young, thoughtful adult who is constantly trying to evolve and become a holistically better person with a comprehensive outlook on life” (Example 2) and “a mature undergrad student, excited to be starting the iBA program in Linguistics and Language Studies” (Example 3), multilingual goals connect with self-schemas that represent growth and personal development (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994). As such, they have the potential to underpin enduring forms of goal-directed behavior.

Being multilingual as an ideal self

If knowledge about the quality, content, and effects of language learners’ goals is scarce (Lee & Bong, 2019), this is hardly the case for future selves. In Dörnyei’s (2009) theorizing of L2 motivation, the vision of a future language-speaking self functions to “guide” a learner’s behavior. Demonstrated to be a consistent predictor of motivated behavior (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2021), in appropriate conditions, an ideal L2 self can contribute to the long-term sustainability of motivation for language learning (Dörnyei, 2020).

In situations where additional languages are learned on a parallel basis or where a person who already speaks two or more languages embarks on the process of learning a further language, a multilingual self guide can have a similar function. Referencing the identity experiences of multilinguals

recounted in Pavlenko's (2006) research into the linguistic, psychological, and physiological processes that shape identity construction, and propositions that multilinguals can develop identities that extend beyond those relating to individual languages (Kramsch, 2009; Kramsch & Huffmaster, 2015), Henry (2017) suggested that interactions between L_x and L_y selves can lead to the emergence of multilingual self-guides. Drawing on work explaining the operation of the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987), Henry argued that when interactions are harmonious, an ideal multilingual self can emerge. When this happens, cohesion is created within the multilingual motivation system. Learning behavior becomes steered not only by the desire to become a speaker of the L_x and the L_y, but also by a desire that is broader in scope and that encompasses values and aspirations that extend beyond achieving linguistic proficiency in the respective TLs.

In studies drawing on narrative data, insights into the phenomenology of idealized multilingual identities are beginning to emerge. Like the goal formulations in the LinkedIn profiles, mental images representing an ideal multilingual self tend to be abstractly formulated. As descriptions in the literature demonstrate, representations of multilingual selves connect with personality, values, and a person's core self-image:

For me openness is something very important and being able to speak several languages opens more doors. You are less limited. And so when I see myself in the future, I have an image that I am multilingual and I have opened more doors. (Participant in Henry, 2017, p. 558)

I feel that speaking other languages makes me unique, and I love being able to communicate with other people in their own language. (Participant in Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 338)

My language skills are relatively broad. (. . .) I think they [the languages] open up a bigger world for me and broaden my identity. (Participant in Huhtala et al., 2021, p. 381)

It (being a multilingual speaker) has enhanced my self-confidence. I used to think that I knew nothing and didn't know much, but now I can tell people that I speak Japanese and I think I am cool. I think my existence is meaningful and of value. (Participant in Wang et al., 2021, p. 425)

I gradually realised that the benefits of learning French are not only to speak French in the future, but also to be a multilingual individual who can be more creative, open-minded and culturally-sensitive in a globalised world. (Participant in Wang & Fisher, 2021, p. 17)

As these descriptions reveal, a multilingual identity is linked with self-knowledge. Like the participant in Gabryś-Barker's (2019) study—who was prompted to reflect that “I am a happy multilingual who knows herself and knows that my languages are one of the sources of that happiness”—these reflections reference the personal importance of a multilingual identity. They similarly indicate how the exercise of imagining a multilingual identity can be positive and uplifting.

When imagining multilingual futures, language learners can become engaged in trying out multilingual interactions and “experimenting with multivoiced discourse” (Kramsch & Huffmaster, 2015, p. 118). The pleasure involved in mentally rehearsing scenarios involving multilingualism is aptly illustrated in research by Wang (2020). In this study, one of the participants described the excitement she experienced when imagining a future multilingual self and envisioning the multilingual interactions in

which she would be involved: “I feel excited by imagining myself wearing a slim-fitting business suit, putting on a pair of black high heels and switching between three languages in the workplace” (Wang, 2020, p. 15). In the *mise-en-scène* of situations such as this, a multilingual identity can find expression through engagement in multilingual dialogues. In a study by Henry (2011), one of the participants who had developed a multilingual identity described how he sought out and enjoyed opportunities to express this identity, both in real-time interactions with peers, and in dialogues played out in the mind.

As Kramersch (2009) has made clear, multilingual subjectivity is immanently connected with the imagination. Engagement in identity construction can trigger a range of psychological responses, and multilingual identities can be expressed through “multiple channels of perception” (Kramersch & Huffmaster, 2015, p. 118). For another of Wang’s (2020) participants, a multilingual identity found expression through the creation of a fictional alter ego who benefitted from the cognitive advantages attached to being multilingual: “I fantasized about writing a novel with the use of Chinese, French and English. It is about a British detective who could also speak Chinese and French. His linguistic advantage helped him decipher an important code book” (p. 15). Here, the experience of being multilingual involved the pleasure of crafting a narrative and, in the mind’s eye, visualizing the three languages interwoven on the pages of an imaginary manuscript. For this participant, future multilingualism is dynamically enacted in acts of doing. Performing an identity through the imaginal action of writing a novel, a narrational self is invoked (Kramersch, 2009). A narrational self is a self that is actively engaged in multilingual practices and in the shaping of different identities (here as a multilingual author; Lvovich, 2012).

Beyond performativity, the notion of a narrational self also encapsulates the synchronicity of imagination and personal history. As Kramersch (2009) has suggested, a narrational self “brings into focus the indispensable role of private memory and imagination in language learning: *remembering how* [emphasis in original] (past experiences and emotions) and *imagining what if* [emphasis in original] (future scenarios for action)” (p. 74). It is to this relation—the positioning of images that evoke multilingualism within an unfolding personal narrative—that I now turn.

Multilingualism as a theme in autobiographical knowledge

In mental time travel, retrospection (remembering how) and propection (imagining what if) take similar forms (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Self-defining memories and self-defining future events are connected in autobiographical networks that are organized around themes relevant to a person’s life and in sequences of identity-relevant events (D’Argembeau, 2016, 2020a). When people are prompted to think about self-defining events—not only “past experiences and emotions” but also “future scenarios for action” (Kramersch, 2009, p. 74)—representations gravitate toward specific life projects (Demblon & D’Argembeau, 2017).

These ideas are strongly resonant with findings from research investigating the linguistic biographies of multilingual language learners (Chik, 2019; Melo–Pfeifer, 2017; Melo–Pfeifer & Kalaja, 2019; Molinié, 2019). Revealing how a multilingual identity is constructed as part of a life history, examinations of the linguistic biographies of people engaged in processes of becoming and being multilingual show how identities are constructed in event sequences. These sequences begin in the past, traverse across the present, and point toward the future (Melo–Pfeifer, 2017; Molinié, 2019).

Linguistic biographies are “narrative accounts of (planned or unplanned) trajectories of language learning, and reflections upon and evaluations of language learning progress” (Melo–Pfeifer & Chik, 2020, p. 1). Among other purposes, linguistic biographies have been used to explore “the identity of the multilingual subject and individual trajectories of being and becoming multilingual” (p. 1). While a linguistic biography can take the form of a written narrative, identities can also be visually represented through cartographic and multimodal techniques. As Melo–Pfeifer and Chik (2020) explained, by taking a multimodal approach, it becomes possible “to analyse the multi-semiotic and transsemi-

otic representation and (re)constructions of the multilingual self” (p. 1), and through these analytical endeavors, to generate “insights into beliefs, emotional landscapes and lived experiences” (p. 1) of a multilingual person.

Research examining multimodal linguistic biographies has highlighted how identity construction often takes the form of a personal project. Spanning over time, these projects connect past, present, and future events in a language learner’s life (Melo–Pfeifer & Chik, 2020; Molinié, 2019). In a study of 33 visual linguistic biographies created by preservice teachers of Spanish at the University of Hamburg, Melo–Pfeifer and Chik (2020) examined the construction of participants’ multilingual selves. Findings revealed the common use of temporal metaphors, and how multilingualism was associated with personal accomplishments, growth, and self-fulfillment. As Melo–Pfeifer and Chik observed, their participants’ drawings represented language learning as “part of a broader life venture” and themselves as “personally invested-plurilinguals” (p. 20).

Among the many temporal metaphors, journeys were commonly represented. In the case of a student whose visual biography took the form of a linguistic journey through different countries, Melo–Pfeifer and Chik (2020) could identify “a strong belief about the role of studying and/or living abroad in becoming (an authentic?) multilingual” (p. 15). In another student’s drawing, a biographical path was represented through images depicting mobility. Here, well-being connected to the experience of learning different languages was expressed in images referencing positive emotions.

In one example of personal growth, a student drew a picture of a person ascending a series of stairs. While each tread represented a different language, a question mark was placed on the final step, the staircase continuing in an unknown direction. Melo–Pfeifer and Chik (2020) argued that the stairway metaphor represented “the multilingual self at different moments of the language learning process” (i.e., the self in the past; p. 17), suggesting that it also functioned to illustrate how the “pathway can be represented as incomplete, leaving other linguistic projects open” (i.e., the self in the future; p. 17).

In research by Molinié (2019), multilingualism as “an incomplete project” functioned as a similar leitmotif. Here, Molinié invited multilingual students enrolled at a French university to illustrate their trajectories of mobility. Similar to the participants in Melo–Pfeifer and Chik’s (2020) study, the images chosen to represent pathways contained structured sequences of events. Like the participant who drew a staircase, some of Molinié’s participants chose to illustrate their mobility in the context of projected futures. For these students, Molinié (2019) suggested, task instructions were interpreted “through the notion of *project* [emphasis in original] and represent[ed] their mobility in relation to current plurilingual and intercultural experiences as well as future experiences” (p. 79).

With pictures that included intersections, crossroads, labyrinths, and stylized globes, Molinié’s (2019) participants had construed the instructions “predominantly in their projective dimension (future-oriented), rather than adopting a retrospective orientation (past-oriented)” (p. 83). In representing mobility as a project, Molinié argued, they were engaged in “mastering an opening to the world” (p. 83). Some of these students had chosen differing back-and-forth tropes to represent their mobility. For example, one participant (whose picture was entitled “A Citizen of the World”), had depicted herself situated in the middle of a globe where eight countries were represented. Holding a sign displaying the word “French,” she was surrounded by speech bubbles with the word “hello” written in different languages. Based on these findings, Molinié (2019) argued that the visual representation of a journey functioned both to reflect and to form the identities of her multilingual participants. Providing a means of mediation, the visual narratives allowed participants “to adopt a reflexive position and to experience their mobility as a negotiation not only between old and new perceptions of the world, but also between actions taking place in the present and projections of themselves into the future” (p. 92).

RELEVANCE, RESEARCH DIRECTIONS, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Relevance

In her exploration of multilingual subjectivity, Kramersch (2009) described how, in “organizing, casting, [and] recasting a multilingual experience,” her student narrators were “looking back and consecrating the past [and] projecting themselves into the future” (p. 150). Demonstrating how affective phenomena (heightened perceptions, awareness, and emotions) and imagined identities are central to multilingual subjectivity, Kramersch lamented SLA’s failure to connect with the intensity of multilingual experiences. By not engaging sufficiently with the imaginary, she argued, SLA had “bypassed a large domain of what makes us human, namely, the need to identify with another reality than the one that surrounds us” (Kramersch, 2009, p. 14).

In the years following the publication of *The Multilingual Subject* (Kramersch, 2009), there has been a growing interest in the identity experiences of multilinguals. There is now an expanding body of work in which multilingual identity development is explored (for timely reviews, see, Fielding, 2021; Fisher et al., 2020; Forbes et al., 2021). Inspired by the groundbreaking scholarship of Block (2007), Creese and Blackledge (2010), Norton (2000), and Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), much of this work has drawn on poststructuralist and sociocultural theorizing (Fisher et al., 2020). Studies where identity development is explored through the lenses of social and cognitive psychology are far fewer. Indeed, it is only in the wake of the special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* on motivation to learn languages in a multicultural world (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017), and key articles on motivation for multiple language learning (Busse, 2017; Thompson, 2017; Ushioda, 2017), that psychological perspectives have come into play.

In providing an identity-based conceptualization of processes underpinning motivational sustainability in multiple language learning, I have suggested that persistence is supported when goals relating to multilingualism are self-concordant, when representations of desired states involve multilingual engagements and reference multilingual values, and when mental projections of multilingual experiences, practices, and accomplishments are integrated within an autobiographical timeline. Multilingualism involves a “deeply intimate personal journey” (Lvovich, 2012, p. 225). The conceptualization presented here makes this journey motivationally relevant.

Recognition of the need to connect cognitive and affective phenomena to learner biographies involves a shift in how multilingual motivation is understood. While any form of language learning can be represented in terms of a journey toward anticipated TL use, and while the ultimate aim of research into motivation for language learning is to understand “what helps people travel the long road to fluency” (Ryan, 2019), there is a fundamental difference in becoming a speaker of an L2, and becoming someone who is multilingual. In relation to an L2, purposes are identifiable, and goals are tangible. People are generally able to identify situations where they can imagine using (and not using) the L2, contexts where L2 skills might prove useful, and instrumental benefits attaching to L2 proficiency. When appropriately prompted, many can also describe a future L2 self and the person they want to be in this role.

In the case of multilingualism, however, prospection can take a different form. As Kramersch (2009) has reminded us, multilingualism is as much an experience as an accomplishment. While a multilingual identity connects to each of the languages a person speaks, it transcends language-specific identities in particular ways. While an image capturing future multilingualism might be elaborate in the aspirations it embodies, it can be diffuse, abstract, and sometimes difficult to visualize (Henry, 2017). In the framework presented here, autobiographical knowledge where multilingualism is a theme functions to situate multilingual goals and multilingual selves within an evolving personal history. When anchored in this way, representations of future multilingualism can become integrated with self-schemas, and meaningfully attached to projects that define a person’s life (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Stein & Markus, 1996). This means that abstract images can become easier to conjure, experiences

can feel more realistic, and simulated events can be perceived as more likely to occur (D'Argembeau, 2020b).

Research directions

In the psychology of language learning and teaching, there is growing recognition of a need to “engage consciously and explicitly” (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022, p. 4) with the parent disciplines of mainstream psychology. In motivation research, this is evidenced by the trend of aligning conceptualizations, objectives, and designs with advances in mainstream paradigms (Dörnyei & Henry, 2022). It is in a spirit of productive engagement—here with mental time travel—that the conceptualization of persistence in multiple language learning is situated.

While research into episodic future thinking has been undertaken for some 20 years (D'Argembeau, 2016, 2020a), and while empirical work supporting the motivational functions attributed to autobiographical knowledge is steadily accumulating (D'Argembeau, 2020b), the transferability of constructs imported into SLA needs to be critically appraised. With varying agendas (as “pure” and “applied” fields of motivation science) and differences in methodological traditions, findings from the mental time travel paradigm should not be presumed to extrapolate automatically to language learning contexts. While work exploring multilingual experiences in written and visual narratives testifies to the functions associated with autobiographical knowledge (Huhtala et al., 2021; Melo–Pfeifer & Chik, 2020; Molinié, 2019; Wang & Fisher, 2021), it is important that dedicated empirical work takes place.

Alongside the need to investigate the nature, quality, and motivational effects of goals formulated by learners of multiple languages, and the ways in which multilingual goals and multilingual self guides might interact in potentially beneficial combinations, an important avenue for future work involves examining how representations are contextualized within evolving personal histories. Given the “flourishing tradition of narrative inquiry in language learning and teaching” (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p. 1) and the multiple ways in which narrative research can be synchronized with specifically defined research objectives (Consoli & Dikilitas, 2021), methodologies from narrative paradigms can provide valuable tools for exploring the autobiographical contextualization of representations of multilingualism. With opportunities to work at the interface of narrative analysis and language learning motivation—exemplified by Hiver et al.'s (2020) application of McAdams et al.'s (2006) thematic coding scheme in examining autobiographical narratives, and Ahn's (2021) use of narrative and semi-otic multimodal analyses to explore the construction of imagined L2 identities—this would appear to be a fruitful direction for future work.

Pedagogical implications

It is well established that interventions directed to developing, enhancing, and maintaining visions of future L2 use can support motivation (Vlaeva & Dörnyei, 2021). Emerging research suggests that interventions focused on the development of a multilingual identity can have similarly positive effects. For example, in a rigorously conducted intervention designed to promote multilingual identity development among primary school children in Germany, Busse et al. (2020) showed how the intervention group displayed enhanced multilingual aspirations in posttesting. In line with Schachter and Rich's (2011) framing of identity education as “the purposeful involvement of educators with students' identity-related processes or contents” (p. 222), a team from the University of Cambridge investigated links between multilingual identifications and learning outcomes in UK secondary schools (Fisher et al., 2020). Findings showed that a multilingual identity can have a positive influence on foreign language learning. Reflecting the importance of the “beliefs, emotional landscapes and lived experiences” of a multilingual person (Melo–Pfeifer & Chik, 2020, p. 1), the research revealed how multilingual identities were shaped by learners' experiences of languages and language learning, their evaluations of themselves as learners and speakers, and their emotions connected to both of the above (Forbes et al., 2021; Rutgers et al., 2021).

So far, identity-based interventions have not included narrative-based components in which future selves are autobiographically contextualized (Vlaeva & Dörnyei, 2021).³ By incorporating elements in which participants can contextualize goal representations and self-images within a personal biography, the effects of an intervention stand to be enhanced. While Segal (2006) has underscored the value of narrative in exploring possible selves and of situating a possible self within an anticipated personal history, Packard and Conway (2006) have argued that when possible selves are contextualized as part of “a story in action to be co-constructed and changed over time” (p. 264), change-directed behavior can be further incentivized.

Through written or visual narratives (or combinations of both), experiences of being and becoming multilingual can be explored as part of a “story in action” (Packard & Conway, 2006, p. 264). In addition to identifying multilingual goals, constructing multilingual selves, and visualizing the social roles that might attach to a multilingual identity, in pedagogical interventions, projected identities should also be positioned within a broader autobiographical context. To understand how contextualization within a story in action might be effectuated, it is worthwhile to return once more to Gabryś–Barker’s (2019) study. To stimulate reflection, and to elicit TL and multilingual identities, Gabryś–Barker provided participants with written tasks where identity perceptions could be expressed through associations. In the students’ writing, multilingualism was frequently portrayed as “a complex way of being” (Gabryś–Barker, 2019, p. 354): In several texts, metaphors referenced temporally framed undertakings (e.g., “an adventure,” “taking a journey,” “a never ending story [with] gaps to fill,” pp. 352–353). In constructing these stories of multilingualism, students can be understood as engaging in mental time travel. By mentally travelling through time, multilingualism could emerge as a coherent theme within a personal history that connected past, present, and future experiences:

I have different memories and experiences connected with these languages which helped me become who I am now [PAST]. I learn a lot combining these languages and cannot imagine who I would be without them [PRESENT]. I am more organised, determined and stronger because I know that I can achieve what I plan or have somewhere in my mind [FUTURE]. (Participant S1, Gabryś–Barker, 2019, p. 355; capitalized text inserted)

CONCLUSIONS AND CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

This article began with the words of a preservice teacher describing how she experienced herself as an emerging multilingual. For this student, and for the other language learners whose experiences are highlighted here, I have suggested that becoming and being multilingual can be understood as converging phases in a process of identity construction that connects the past, the present, and the future. Drawing on constructs central to the conceptualization of L2 persistence (Dörnyei, 2020) and insights from research into episodic future thinking (D’Argembeau, 2016, 2020a, 2020b), I have argued that in multiple language learning, persistence is supported in three ways: (a) when the goal of becoming a person who speaks several languages is self-concordant, (b) when mental imagery involves engagement in multilingual practices and references multilingual values, and (c) when representations of multilingual experiences are mapped onto a personalized timeline and become coherently structured in projects of personal development. In highlighting the role of personal goals and emphasizing the importance of contextualizing representations of multilingual experiences within an unfolding autobiographical history, the conceptualization offers an understanding of persistence in multiple language learning and can inform the design of identity-based interventions.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that perseverant behavior in multiple language learning can arise in circumstances where experiences are far from positive, and where striving is characterized by emotional discomfort. As Ushioda (2019) made clear, in relation to multiple language learning and the learning and use of languages in multilingual environments, “people’s motivations to learn and speak particular languages are inescapably bound up with the macro-level and micro-level

sociohistorical, cultural and interactional contexts in which they live and with which they engage” (p. 208). For many people, efforts to develop skills in an additional language(s) can take place in contexts of linguistic and social duress (Ortega, 2018). When the need to learn an additional language is “imposed” by an educational system or societal ideologies (social duress), and when sociocultural factors restrict access to opportunities for meaningful TL communication (linguistic duress), persistence can be driven by goals that are externally generated. Rather than an idealized identity as a future multilingual, motivated behavior can be steered by self-guides that predicate obligation and encompass fears for the future.

In contexts of societal multilingualism and situations of linguistic and/or social duress, an ought-to multilingual self can emerge (Henry, 2020; Liu, 2022). As Coetzee–Van Rooy (2014) has suggested, an ought-to multilingual self can direct people to believe “that if they are not multilingual in this society, they do not ‘fit in,’ because well-integrated citizens in this society are multilingual” (p. 124). In migration settings, multiple language learning can take place in similar conditions. Here, avoidance-focused motivation can derive from the fear of becoming a person who does not develop the skills necessary to function effectively in host country society (Henry & Davydenko, 2020). In contexts where degree requirements demand proficiency in a third or fourth language, and where students perceive an obligation to expand their linguistic repertoires, motivated behavior can be guided by a prevention-focused ought-to multilingual self (Liu, 2022).

In the current era of globalization, and the widely differing contexts in which multiple language learning takes place, it is important that the psychological factors underpinning patterns of striving are carefully identified. Just as perseverant behaviors can be supported by aspirations to achieve a sought-after future state, they can also be underpinned by desires to avoid unwelcome outcomes. Because different types of perseverance have differing effects on well-being (as well as motivational sustainability), an important direction for future research involves systematic investigation of a broader range of persistence-focused constructs (Dörnyei & Henry, 2022) and their antecedents, influences, and interrelationships.

Sounding a similar note of caution, it is important to consider the effects that a focus on mental imagery and life-story narratives can have on students. First, it is important that work with identity is embedded into mainstream teaching and becomes a meaningful part of the curriculum. As current research indicates, sporadic initiatives may not be appreciated by students and are unlikely to have enduring effects (Evans & Fisher, 2022; Vlaeva & Dörnyei, 2021). Second, when students are asked to imagine future situations involving multilingualism, and are invited to contextualize these imagined events within a personal history, there is an inherent risk that implicit suggestions are made about “what they should imagine” (Henderson et al., 2018, p. 4). For many students, it may be difficult to visualize a future involving multilingualism. They may struggle to conjure an ideal multilingual self (or, for that matter, an ideal L2 self). As teachers of foreign languages and researchers of language development, we need to be alert to inbuilt biases that can favor multilingualism. We need to respect and give consideration to the circumstances and situations of students and study participants brought up in monolingual environments (home and societal), and we need to reflect carefully on how monolingual and bilingual identities are framed in instructional practices and research outputs. Most importantly, we need to be aware of the risk of situating the absence of multilingual aspirations “in the failures and deficits of individuals, rather than in the structures that shape them” (Henderson et al., 2018, p. 4).

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the absence of findings generated in empirical work, SLA has often turned to personal narratives. Classic examples involving language identities include Hoffman’s (1989) autobiography *Lost in Translation*, Kaplan’s (1993) *French Lessons*, and Lvovich’s (1997) *The Multilingual Self*.

² A goal with central importance in a person's life.

³ In Ogawa (2018), findings point to the potential of including language learning biographies.

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