

## Chapter 1

# 'The Making of an American'<sup>1</sup>: Negotiation of Identities at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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### Introduction

In the past decades, narratives and, in particular, stories people tell about their lives, have gained increasing stature outside the fields of literature and folklore and have become the focus of the evolving interdisciplinary field of narrative study, which posited narrative as the central means by which people construct identities and give their lives meaning across time. Consequently, scholars in a variety of disciplines expressed new interest in autobiographies as a unique, 'rich and unsurpassed resource for an understanding of the inward experience of how social and individual forces may interact' (Sollors, 1990: xi). The fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism are no exception to this trend: lately, several researchers have turned to stories people tell about their language learning and use (Kramsch & Lam, 1999; Pavlenko, 1998, 2001a,b,c; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Schumann, 1997; Tse, 2000; see also Kinginger, this volume). All of these investigations, however, examined contemporary stories, either published or elicited by the researchers. The goal of the present study is to see how sociohistoric circumstances impact ways in which people view the relationship between their languages and identities and construct their language learning stories. In order to answer this question, I will examine negotiation of identities in a corpus of narratives that has not previously been discussed in the field: immigrant autobiographies from the turn of the twentieth century. I will then compare narrative identities negotiated in this corpus to the ones constructed and negotiated in cross-cultural memoirs published in the past two decades.

In what follows, I will first introduce the theoretical framework and methodological approaches to narrative inquiry adopted in the present investigation. Then, I will examine which identities were negotiated in early-twentieth-century immigrant narratives. I will argue that these memoirs differ from contemporary immigrant autobiographies as far as the relationship between language and identity is concerned, and will attempt to explain the differences through ideologies of language and identity dominant in the early twentieth century. In doing so, I will show how sociopolitical, sociohistoric, and sociolinguistic circumstances shape individuals' understandings of themselves and their relationships with the languages in their environment.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in the present paper is situated at the nexus of critical and poststructuralist theories (Anderson, 1991; Bourdieu, 1991; Weedon, 1987), with the focus on autobiography and narrative identity construction (Green, 2001; Hokenson, 1995). In this perspective, identity is viewed as a dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions, or identity options, such as mother, accountant, heterosexual, or Latina. At various points in history different societies make somewhat distinct identity options available to their members (for instance, being anything but heterosexual may not be a legitimate option in some societies). Furthermore, at different times these options are negotiable to a different degree. Narrative identities, constructed in fiction and non-fiction writing, often emerge as reactions to available identity options, reproducing some and rejecting or reimagining others. Autobiographies play a central role in the process of identity negotiation in writing, as they are a prime example of 'identity narratives,' i.e. 'narratives constructed or construed as statements about the identity of the speaker and perhaps about the community of which she or he is a member' (Green, 2001: 8).

The focus of the present paper is on narrative identities constructed in American immigrant autobiographies, i.e. memoirs written by first generation immigrants who had arrived in the US as children or adults and who discuss the story of their assimilation. The aim of the paper is to examine sociohistoric constraints on these identity narratives and, consequently, on immigrant identity options seen as 'imaginable' or 'negotiable' in the US at the turn of the century. To explore ways in which European immigrants used the genre of autobiography to imagine and legitimize new identities for themselves and fellow immigrants, I will

draw on Anderson's (1991) notion of nation-states as imagined communities. This notion is particularly apt for discussions of the encounter between new arrivals and the country they had imagined and in which they now had to imagine themselves. In addition to the notion of imagination, I will also appeal to Bourdieu's (1991) concept of speaking rights that will allow me to analyze which new immigrants had 'the right to speak' and the right 'to impose reception' in the process of identity negotiation. Finally, to explain why turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrant memoirs may depict second language learning and the relationship between language and identity differently from contemporary cross-cultural autobiographies, I will resort to a sociohistoric analysis of the circumstances in which the two sets of narratives were produced and to a rhetorical analysis of tropes and narrative plots available to early- and late-twentieth-century immigrant autobiographers. I will argue that history has a profound impact on identity stories, not only in terms of material, social, and political circumstances in which they take place, but also in terms of ideologies of language and identity dominant in a particular place and time and in terms of identity options considered negotiable, legitimate, or particularly desirable.

### Methodology and Research Questions

The present study will analyze 11 full-length immigrant memoirs and one collection of essay-length immigrant autobiographies. The memoirs were published between the years of 1901 and 1935 and written by (or in case of Holt's (1906) volume, collected from) immigrants who had arrived in the US between 1870 and 1913, mainly during the Great Migration wave. While many other memoirs were published at the time, I chose the autobiographies below on the grounds of representativeness and visibility. In other words, I aimed to include memoirs that were well known and widely discussed at the time of publication. In order to offset the bias of focusing exclusively on narratives of successful middle- and upper-middle-class professionals, I also chose to analyze an edited collection which contains autobiographies of working-class immigrants from a variety of backgrounds (Holt, 1906). Below, I list the memoirs in the corpus in the chronological order in which they were originally published. To facilitate subsequent discussion, I offer a brief commentary on each author's ethnic, social, and linguistic background.

(1) Riis, J. (1901) *The making of an American*. Born in 1849 in a middle-class family in Denmark, Jacob Riis emigrated to the US in 1870. In 1873, after

a series of jobs in the shipyards and in the ironworks, he became an editor of a weekly paper in Long Island City and, in 1878, a police reporter for the *New York Tribune* (Holte, 1988). His articles, dramatic photographs, and books, in particular the widely-acclaimed *How the other half lives* (1890), exposed the impoverished conditions under which immigrant workers labored and lived in the urban slums. Riis also led a number of urban renewal projects which positively transformed some of the communities described in his work. His autobiography was immensely popular at the time of appearance and went through 12 editions in seven years, even though some reviewers criticized its writing style and the amount of self-praise (Holte, 1988; Hutner, 1999).

(2) Antin, M. (1912) *The Promised Land*. Mary Antin, a Russian Jew from the small town of Polotzk, arrived in Boston in 1891 at the age of 10, fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian. She soon distinguished herself as a good student, a writer, and a poet, and published her first account of her journey in 1899 with a preface by Israel Zangwill. *The Promised Land*, her best-known memoir, met with an enthusiastic reception and sold 85,000 copies in 34 printings (Handlin, 1969). Afterwards, Antin spent several years giving public lectures on Americanization all over the US and received many literary and civic honors (Hutner, 1999).

(3) Steiner, E. (1914) *From alien to citizen: The story of my life in America*. Edward Steiner was born in 1866 in Slovakia, in a multilingual German-Jewish family. He arrived in the US in the late 1880s as a well-educated young man who, in his student days, visited Tolstoy in his estate in Yasnaya Polyana. For several years Steiner travelled around the US, working with immigrants wherever his journey took him. His budding interest in Christianity and knowledge of Judaism brought him to a seminary at Oberlin College, Ohio. Eventually, he converted to Christianity and became first a minister, and then a professor at Grinnell College, Iowa. Steiner put a lot of time and energy into the study of immigration, publishing 15 books on the topic.

(4) Ravage, M.E. (1917) *An American in the making: The life story of an immigrant*. Marcus Ravage, a multilingual Romanian Jew, arrived in New York City in 1900 as a young man. He tried a number of occupations and eventually graduated from Missouri State University. As a public figure, Ravage participated in numerous debates on immigration.

(5) Bok, E. (1921) *The Americanization of Edward Bok: The autobiography of a Dutch boy fifty years after*. Edward Bok arrived in the US from Netherlands in 1870 at the age of six together with his upper-middle-class family.

At the age of 13 he quit school to work as an office boy at the Western Union Telegraph Company. While working there, he wrote for several magazines and in 1884 became the editor of *Brooklyn Magazine*. In 1889 he was appointed the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and remained in that position for 30 years, becoming one of the most influential journalists in the United States. His autobiography won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1921 and went through over 30 editions in four years (Holte, 1988).

(6) Panunzio, C. (1921) *The soul of an immigrant*. Born in southern Italy in 1885, Constantine Panunzio arrived in the US in 1902 as a sailor. Three years later he went to Maine Wesleyan Seminary, then to Wesleyan University, and then to Boston University School of Theology. Just before the First World War, he converted to Methodism, became ordained as a minister, and worked in several eastern cities as a mediator between Italian immigrants and surrounding communities. He went on to become a professor of sociology at the University of California and was honored at the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair as a foreign-born citizen who had made outstanding contributions to American culture (Hutner, 1999).

(7) Yeziarska, A. (1925) *Bread givers*. A Jew, born in Russian Poland, Anzia Yeziarska disembarked at Ellis Island at the age of eight in 1890. She left home at the age of 17 and worked in sweatshops and laundries while going to school and then university. In 1915 she began publishing short stories about immigrant life in the Lower East Side, the struggle against poverty, and Jewish women's experience of reconciling the New World with the Old. Her first collection was made into a Hollywood film which brought her wealth and fame. She went on to publish more stories and several novels until the topic went out of vogue in the 1940s and 1950s.

(8) Cahan, A. (1926) *The education of Abraham Cahan*. Abraham Cahan, a revolutionary Jewish refugee from tsarist Russia, landed in Philadelphia in 1882 at the age of 22. He is best known for founding in 1897 the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a popular Yiddish newspaper which he edited for the rest of his life. Cahan also gained respect as a writer, in both Yiddish and English, in particular for the acclaimed novel *The rise of David Levinsky* (1917). He publicly criticized Riis's 'other half' approach that, in his view, unnecessarily otherized and exoticized the incoming immigrants, in particular Eastern European Jews.

(9) Bartholdt, R. (1930) *From steerage to Congress: Reminiscences and reflections*. Richard Bartholdt arrived in the US from Germany in 1872, at the age of 17; he spoke German, English, French, and a smattering of other languages. A few weeks after landing in New York City he was already

working in a Brooklyn printing office. Eight years later he was a legislative correspondent in Albany, New York, for a German-American newspaper. In 1892, he became a Congressional representative from Missouri, the first German-American to become a member of Congress. He retired from Congress in 1915. Even though earlier Bartholdt had planned to run for Senate, the First World War and resulting anti-German feelings killed this ambition.

(10) Adamic, L. (1932) *Laughing in the jungle: The autobiography of an immigrant in America*. Louis Adamic arrived in the US from Slovenia in 1913 at the age of 14. He started out working for a Slovenian newspaper, *Narodni Glas (People's Voice)*. Later, he became a journalist and a writer, authoring a number of books on various social issues and participating vigorously in public debates on assimilation and Americanization.

(11) Nielsen, T. (1935) *How a Dane became an American, or Hits and misses of my life*. Nielsen came to the US from Denmark in 1890 at the age of 15, along with his brother and father. The family joined relatives in a little town in Iowa where Nielsen went to school. Eventually, he graduated from Cornell College, married an American woman and became an English-speaking Methodist minister, giving up the Lutheran faith and his native language, which aroused strong resentment from the local Danish community.

(12) Holt, H. (1906/1990) *The life stories of undistinguished Americans (as told by themselves)*. These stories first appeared separately in Holt's newspaper *The Independent*. Then a representative selection of the life stories was published together as a collection.

The methodology chosen to analyze the texts is informed by Denzin's (1989) sociohistorical approach to the study of personal narratives, which sees autobiography as a 'literary and sociological form that creates particular images of subjects in particular historical moments' (p. 35). This approach leads me to consider personal narratives not simply as ethnographic data, subject to content analysis, but rather as a genre which is shaped by local contexts, as well as by social, historical, cultural, and linguistic influences. Thus, I will look not only at the content of the stories, but also at the sociohistorical contexts in which the narratives were created, at the ideological forces which shaped particular tellings, as well as particular silences and omissions, and, finally, at the voices which were – and weren't – being heard. Current literary scholarship also acknowledges that autobiographies produced in different

literary traditions may be very distinct in shape and scope (Hokenson, 1995; Wong, 1991). Several authors who compared personal narratives written and published in English in the US with those constructed in other languages and for other audiences – even though at times by the same authors – found that these stories have different storylines and different foci, and are performed through distinct linguistic means (Pavlenko, 2001a; Taubenfeld, 1998; Wong, 1991; Yin, 1998). Consequently, the arguments in the present paper will be limited to the corpus of narratives written and published in English in the US in the early twentieth century.

Three questions will be asked in the present study: (1) which identities were negotiated in the immigrant narratives in the corpus; (2) what is the role of language and linguistic identities in these narratives; and (3) whether portrayals of second language learning and use in the early twentieth century narratives differ from those in contemporary immigrant autobiographies.

## Negotiation of Identities in Immigrant Memoirs

### 'The making of an American'

Consistent with the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, prior to analyzing the narratives, I will discuss the sociohistoric context which shaped the life trajectories of their authors. In the 44 years between 1880 and 1924, often termed the Great Migration, approximately 24 million immigrants entered the United States (US Bureau of the Census, 1975). The vast majority of these immigrants came from Southern and Eastern Europe. These new arrivals were often negatively compared to 'old immigrants,' who came to the US prior to 1880s, predominantly from Northern Europe, and were perceived to be relatively assimilable. In contrast, the 'new immigrants' were considered distinct from the mainstream Anglo population ethnically, culturally, and linguistically, with differences often described in terms of racial, intellectual, and moral inferiority. The overwhelming influx of new arrivals raised numerous concerns about national unity and the capacity of American society to assimilate such a large body of newcomers, leading to national anxiety as to what was meant by 'We the People of the United States' (Boelhower, 1991). These concerns resulted in a search for new means of ensuring social cohesion and fashioning national identity. The resulting movement, which aimed to assimilate immigrants through instruction in English, civics, and oftentimes personal hygiene, eventually became known as Americanization. While a more detailed discussion of Americanization of

European immigrants can be found elsewhere (cf. Hartmann, 1948; Weiss, 1982), the present paper will examine how negotiation of who is to become an American and on what terms took place in immigrant autobiographies.

Anderson (1991), Boelhower (1991), and Green (2001) underscore the key role literary texts play in the identity project, i.e. the creation of the 'national text,' which aims to impose and preserve a particular version of the nation's collective experience. Thus, it is not surprising that, among other projects which promoted Americanization, the country's leaders strongly encouraged publication of immigrant memoirs, which served as testaments of the authors' thorny yet successful paths toward assimilation. Over the years, numerous immigrant authors responded to the call of times, producing Americanization stories which aimed to justify immigration in the face of a rising sentiment for restriction, to inspire fellow immigrants, to educate mainstream America (while being accepted by it), and to contribute to the ongoing national identity project. Some authors explicitly acknowledged the fact that their work responded to sociopolitical demands and concerns of the time. Thus, Constantine Panunzio (1921) revealed in his foreword that, while initially he was hoping to leave his humble beginnings behind, with the end of war

and with the unprecedented way in which the American public has turned its attention to the all-important question of the assimilation of the immigrant, it became increasingly clear to me that I owed it to my adopted country to give the story to the public. (Panunzio, 1921: x)

Several prominent public figures aided in bringing this work – and the plight of the immigrants – to the public's attention. Thus, many of the memoirs in the corpus initially appeared as separate chapters in periodical publications – Riis's (1901) story in *The Outlook*, *The Churchman*, and *The Century Magazine*, and Antin's (1912) in *The Atlantic Monthly*. A prominent journalist, Hamilton Holt, made a concerted effort to publish interviews with recent immigrants in his newspaper, *The Independent*, and several other newspapers and periodicals published similar accounts (Sollors, 1990). The genre even inspired simulation and a writer, Broughton Brandenburg, wrote up a memoir, *Imported Americans* (1904), posing as an Italian immigrant (Sollors, 1990). Several of the memoirs, in particular work by Mary Antin, Edward Bok, Jacob Riis, and Anzia Yezierska, became immediate bestsellers. The fact that Yezierska's first book was made into a Hollywood movie brought additional recognition to the author and further raised the public's awareness of challenges faced by immigrants. Some of the authors, including Louis Adamic,

Mary Antin, and Constantine Panunzio, also became popular on the lecture circuit where they familiarized their audiences with immigrants' needs and concerns. Americanization brochures often included references to this body of literature, recommending the use of the memoirs for the purposes of teaching English and civics (cf. Bach, 1923; Roberts, 1920). Together, these facts suggest that, with the growing interest in the issues of immigration and assimilation in the first two decades of the century, immigrant memoirs were part of the mainstream literature, read and responded to by the general public.

What identities were negotiated in these memoirs? The analysis of the autobiographies in the corpus suggests that, in addressing the themes of immigration, readjustment, and assimilation, the authors engaged in renegotiation and reimagining of national, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sometimes even religious identities. Ethnic identities play a particularly prominent role in these autobiographies, since for many European arrivals ethnicity was a relatively new concept, oftentimes imposed on them by the new environment against their will. Some authors, like Panunzio (1921), recall ethnic slurs they experienced or witnessed and stereotypes they had to struggle against. In turn, Louis Adamic (1932) perceptively points out that America not only promotes stereotypes but in fact constructs ethnicity, with ethnic identification and self-identification being another outcome of the immigrant experience. Oftentimes, the identification is non-negotiable and first generation immigrants have no choice but to accept the label forced upon them. To give an example, Adamic brings up Slavic immigrants, who, in the old country, used to define themselves in terms of obscure provinces rather than nation-states, and in the new were often 'assigned' an ethnic label that was more familiar to their American interlocutors:

If a Slovenian was asked what his nationality was, he very likely replied that he was a Kranjec or Krainer or Carniolan, from Kranjsko. . . . If he really knew what he was, he declared himself a Slovenian, but that, to the average American, Irishman, or Scandinavian, meant no more than Carniolan . . . before he was through explaining, presto! he was an 'Austrian'. (Adamic, 1932: 101)

Yet another experience common for many immigrants was that of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization, whereby previous peasants, villagers, and small-townners became urban dwellers. This transition also entailed new social identity options, which had to be understood, internalized, and inhabited. For instance, Marcus Ravage recalls that his community relied on a social dichotomy of 'intelligents'

vs. 'clodpates,' which assigned distinct behaviors and values to the two characteristics:

I continually heard people in the shop, and in the quarter generally, referred to as 'clodpates' and 'intelligents', and I knew that an intelligent was a person who went to lectures and read books and preferred tragedy to vaudeville, and looked upon America as a place which afforded one an opportunity to acquire and express ideas, while a clodpate cared more for dollars than for ideas. . . . I was already being classed as an intelligent among the hands at the shop. (Ravage, 1917: 153)

Not all identities were necessarily new or imposed – the immigration experience also offered a perfect chance to reject some subjectivities and allegiances seen as constraining. Both Antin's and Yeziarska's stories describe a rebellion of young Jewish women against gender roles prescribed for them by Orthodox Judaism. Antin recalls that

in the mediaeval position of the women of Polotzk education really had no place. A girl was 'finished' when she could read her prayers in Hebrew, following the meaning by the aid of the Yiddish translation especially prepared for women. (Antin, 1912: 111)

It is not surprising then that she was quite excited about joining her father in America, where, according to him, 'all the children, boys and girls, Jews and Gentiles, went to school' (Antin, 1912: 148). There, Antin longed for opportunities offered by the American womanhood:

A long girlhood, a free choice in marriage, and a brimful womanhood are the precious rights of an American woman. (Antin, 1912: 277)

For some immigrants then, as for these Jewish women, assimilation also involved secularization. For others, it involved a change of a religious affiliation, often from a more marginal religious identity to a more mainstream one. Thus, Steiner (1914) abandoned Judaism to become a Protestant minister, while Panunzio (1921) and Nielsen (1935) gave up, respectively, Catholic and Lutheran faiths to become Methodist ministers. In his lectures, Steiner often framed his story as that of conversion and assimilation through faith, arguing that 'a Christian America could melt all people into one strong society' (Hutner, 1999: 169).

These and other authors also describe transformations of identity that take place in political, socioeconomic, and cultural realms, oftentimes involving names, appearance, clothing, values, and behavior. The main purpose of their books, however, is not merely to describe what they had

seen or experienced with regard to their own and others' multiple identities. The key goal for early immigrant writers is to rewrite the American national identity narrative so that it would become available for appropriation. They do so by appealing to the dominant master trope of the time – that of the 'self-made-man.' Decker (1997) argues that, in the early twentieth century, the archetypal myth of a 'self-made man' became vital in the construction of American identity, linking national character and individual success. Consequently, American autobiography took a shape of a 'rags-to-riches' narrative à la Horatio Alger (Boelhower, 1991; Decker, 1997; Hokenson, 1995; Sollors, 1990). In contrast to earlier Protestant rhetoric of moral character and inner virtue, which privileged white middle-class Anglo-Saxon men, the new 'luck and pluck' plot was available for appropriation by women, immigrants, and racial minorities who managed to succeed in the marketplace. The analysis of the memoirs in the corpus demonstrates that, in order to position themselves as Americans, immigrant authors continuously appeal to the metaphors of individual uplift:

I began to realize that, even with the serious handicap placed upon me by my foreign birth and lack of language, work would win; that I was, after all, the 'captain of my soul.' I really began to believe, what I had seriously questioned before, that if a 'foreigner' really tries to make good, recognition will come. (Panunzio, 1921: 171)

The 'self-made-man' rhetoric also appears in Antin's tract, *They who knock at our gates* (1914), where she uses the trope to write new immigrants into the canon of national character:

There is a phrase in the American vocabulary of approval that sums up our national ideal of manhood. That phrase is 'a self-made man.' To such we pay the tribute of our highest admiration, justly regarding our self-made men as the noblest product of our democratic institutions. Now let any one compile a biographical dictionary of our self-made men, from the romantic age of our history down to the prosaic year of 1914, and see how the smell of the steerage pervades the volume! (Antin, 1914: 76)

The rags-to-riches formula is also manifested in recurrent descriptions of job interviews, employment opportunities, and advancement and, in particular, in a continuous bookkeeping urge reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's memoirs (cf. Holt, 1906: 24, 54–58; Ravage, 1917: 227). The importance of financial success for realization of the American Dream was reinforced not only in public discourses of the time, but also in

Americanization materials and English textbooks which devoted numerous chapters to discussions of the virtue of thrift, to descriptions of banking and savings procedures, and to the planning of family budgets (cf. Beglinger, 1922).

Even the titles of the autobiographies in the corpus make the ritualistic nod toward the trope of 'self-making' and the narrative of 'luck and pluck': Riis's (1901) memoir is entitled *The making of an American*, Steiner's (1914) *From alien to citizen*, Ravage's (1917) *An American in the making*, Bok's (1921) *The Americanization of Edward Bok*, Nielsen's (1935) *How a Dane became an American*, and Bartholdt's (1930) *From steerage to Congress*. 'I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over' are the first words in Antin's (1912: xix) autobiography. And while some authors, like Bok (1921) or Riis (1901), simply position themselves as 'remade' Americans and tell their story, others offer an argument as to why they should be considered American. Thus, an Italian immigrant, Constantine Panunzio, poignantly states:

I have now been in America for nineteen years; I have grown up here as much as any man can; I have had my education here; I have become a citizen; I have given all I had of youthful zeal and energy in serving my adopted country; I have come to love America as I do my very life – perhaps more and yet they still call me a 'foreigner.' (Panunzio, 1921: 328)

Notably, these narratives are not written simply as an enthusiastic monologic pledge of allegiance, which reaffirms an American identity and tries to sneak in a few Eastern European Jews and Italians who 'transformed themselves' into Anglo-Saxons. While, as will be shown later, some narratives do exhibit an implicit belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, the immigrant authors in the corpus use their mastery of the key tropes of American autobiography not only to demonstrate the efficacy of the 'melting-pot' success, but also to revise the national identity narrative, to create space for 'new Americans,' and to bring in new cultural scenarios, typically taking place outside of the normative American space and unfamiliar to the general reader (Boelhower, 1991). In doing so, they appeal to yet another popular American trope, the opposition of the Old and the New World. Thus, in proclaiming their rights to the designation of an American, these authors offer their own understanding of what makes an American and what differentiates Americans from the inhabitants of other countries. Some, like Richard Bartholdt, point out that the newly emerged American does not have to be made in an Anglo-Saxon mold:

America cannot be made Anglo-Saxon any more that it can be made Irish, German, French, or Italian. We must cultivate a type of our own, the American type . . . and no one race should be allowed to be the sole judge of what is good and what is evil. (Bartholdt, 1930: 85)

Other authors problematize a superficial view of Americanization as a 'two-hundred-hour course' (Panunzio, 1921: 184) or 'an affair of a rubber stamp and an oath of allegiance and bath tubs' (Ravage, 1917: 137). Panunzio suggests that America cannot content itself

by delegating to a few hundred public school teachers the enormous task of transforming fourteen millions of 'foreigners' into Americans, a task which belongs to the whole citizenry. (Panunzio, 1921: 184)

In turn, Bartholdt (1930) points to a coercive and ultimately futile nature of such an enterprise and instead tries to present Americanization not as a task, but as a process that involves all citizens. Edward Bok also suggests that it is the American-born who may be in need of insight and reform, while Marcus Ravage argues that immigrants are the truest Americans of all:

One fundamental trouble with the present desire for Americanization is that the American is anxious to Americanize two classes – if he is a reformer, the foreign-born; if he is an employer, his employees. It never occurs to him that he himself may be in need of Americanization. (Bok, 1921: 445)

It is the free American who needs to be instructed by the benighted races in the uplifting word that America speaks to all the world. Only from the humble immigrant, it appears to me, can he learn just what America stands for in the family of nations. The alien must know this, for he alone seems ready to pay the heavy price for his share of America. . . . Yes, we immigrants have a real claim on America. Every one of us who did not grow faint-hearted at the start of the battle and has stuck it out has earned a share in America by the ancient right of conquest. (Ravage, 1917: ix, xii)

And, just as they are critical of mainstream America's desire to assimilate the immigrant into the Anglo-Saxon mold, these authors are also disapproving of their compatriots who adopt new values and behaviors wholesale. Rather than being enthusiastic about the speedy assimilation of their countrymen and women, Cahan (1926) points to the losses involved in the process, while Ravage (1917) ridicules such behavior as a 'degeneration':

Even their names had become emasculated and devoid of either character or meaning. Mordecai – a name full of romantic association – had been changed to the insipid monosyllable Max. . . . Whole battalions of people were called Joe; the Harrys alone could have repopulated Vaslui; and of Morrisises there was no end. With the women-folks matters went even worse. It did not seem to matter at all what one had been called at home. The first step towards Americanization was to fall into one or the other of the two great tribes of Rosies and Annies. This distressing transformation, I discovered before long, went very much deeper than occupation and the externals of fashion. It pervaded every chamber of their life. . . . Good manners and good conduct, reverence and religion, had all gone by the board, and the reason was that these things were not American. (Ravage, 1917: 78–79)

These arguments show that early immigrant writers were not uncritically accepting of the America they encountered; on the contrary, their narratives demonstrate a complex interplay of consent and dissent (Sollors, 1986). How successful were these authors in negotiating membership in the new community or, in Bourdieu's (1991) terms, in 'imposing reception'? In view of the differences in positioning of 'old' and 'new immigrants,' it is not surprising that Northern Europeans led among those who managed to be heard, to enlist support from public figures for their causes, and to become visible as 'exemplary Americans.' Three of the authors in the present corpus, Richard Bartholdt, Edward Bok, and Jacob Riis, count American president Theodore Roosevelt among their personal friends. Riis and Roosevelt had met in 1890, after the publication of Riis's revolutionary book, *How the other half lives* (1890), which brought attention to the horror of life in New York slums. Shortly after the book was published, Riis received a scrawled note from Roosevelt, who then served as the city police commissioner: 'I have read your book, and I have come to help' (Crichton, 1998). Crichton (1998: 126) states that, before his term with the city was over, 'Roosevelt has come to see Riis as "the most useful citizen in America," and Riis had acquired enormous respect and affection for the reform-minded police commissioner.' Many years later, Roosevelt said the following about Riis in an issue of *The Outlook*, published on June 6, 1914:

He did not come to this country until he was almost a young man; but if I were asked to name a fellow-man who came nearest to being the ideal American citizen, I should name Jacob Riis. (Roosevelt, in Riis, 1901/1961: xi)

Riis, Bok, and Bartholdt are not the only ones, however, who managed to capture the public imagination and Roosevelt's attention. Antin's (1912) and Yeziarska's (1925) work turned out to be equally, if not more, successful in appealing to the masses. Louis Brandeis noted that Antin's (1912) message rekindled the latent patriotism in many a native American (Handlin, 1969: vii); later on, Antin also managed to help convert Roosevelt to the cause of women's suffrage. Thus, we can see that, as individuals, some, if not all, of the authors in the present corpus were extremely successful, with Mary Antin, Edward Bok, and Jacob Riis lauded by the press as exemplary American citizens who inspired fellow immigrants and raised patriotic feelings in the American-born. The authors' key achievement, however, is not the individual one – it is the fact that they had made the American national identity negotiable for other European immigrants, turning the United States from an Anglo-Saxon into 'an immigrant nation.'

Clearly, most of first generation and at times even second generation European immigrants were not as successful in being accepted by mainstream America and continued to live in what were seen as 'foreign' or 'ethnic' enclaves. At the same time, they now had a blueprint of an identity narrative at their disposal to which they could appeal in their quest for a place in the United States. In contrast, thousands of immigrants from various parts of Asia, who settled in the US at the same time, were not considered eligible for American citizenship and, as a result, were segregated from the mainstream of American social and economic life. In light of this racial bias, it is not surprising that the corpus does not contain any identity memoirs by Asian authors. As Kim (1982) points out, early Asian immigrants did not see the American culture as something that belonged to them and to which they could contribute. Moreover, in many Asian cultures autobiographical writing was virtually unknown, since for a scholar to write a book about himself would be considered egotistical in the extreme (Kim, 1982). Consequently, while a few autobiographies written by Chinese and Japanese authors were published at the time, they did not engage in identity negotiation along the lines described above – instead, the authors aimed to educate the general public about life in their home country (cf. Wing, 1909; see also Hutner, 1999; Kim, 1982). In Bourdieu's (1991) terms then, not all immigrants had 'the right to speak': while European arrivals were 'allowed' to make a bid for an American identity, immigrants from racial minority groups were notably absent from the negotiation process.

The analysis of the narratives also underscores the inequities existing between immigrants from Northern Europe and Eastern and Southern

Europeans. Professionally successful Northern Europeans from Denmark (Nielsen, Riis), or the Netherlands (Bok), who arrived in the US between 1870 and 1890 as a part of the 'old migration,' did not see the need to establish or argue their Americanness – they simply told the reader that this was who they were. An intriguing exception here is Richard Bartholdt (1930). While his initial political career attests to a high degree of social acceptance, this acceptance of Bartholdt and other German-Americans came to an end, at least temporarily, when the anti-German movement during and after the First World War challenged the legitimacy of hyphenated Americans (Luebke, 1974, 1980; Pavlenko, 2002; Wiley, 1998). His memoir is an attempt to re-establish this legitimacy and to argue that a hyphenated American can nevertheless be a valuable citizen. Similarly, Eastern European Jews (Antin, Cahan, Ravage, Steiner, Yeziarska), a Slovenian (Adamic) and an Italian (Panunzio), who had come to the US between 1882 and 1913 as a part of the 'new migration,' felt the need to explain to the general public what made them and fellow immigrants American.

In sum, the analysis of the autobiographies in the corpus suggests that the main goal of immigrant memoirs, published in the US in the first quarter of the twentieth century, was to inscribe European immigrants into the American national identity narrative. The authors managed to do so by appealing to two dominant tropes of the time. The rhetoric of individual achievement allowed them to position themselves and fellow immigrants as legitimate Americans who achieved this status by 'luck and pluck.' In turn, the opposition between the Old and the New World allowed them to contest the Anglo-Saxonization of the American national identity and to argue for new approaches to Americanness that would be closer to the forefathers' vision. With time, narratives of successful assimilation created by Riis (1901), Antin (1912), and Bok (1921) became 'the immigrant canon' and images of enthusiastic voluntary Americanization displaced other, more problematic and ambivalent, narratives that depicted Americanization as an enforced and coercive process (cf. Bartholdt, 1930). They also obscured racial inequities in American identity politics and the fact that the immigrant myth applied only to Europeans. In other words, the national identity at the time was negotiable for European immigrants (more so for Northern Europeans), but non-negotiable for members of racial minorities. The analysis of the memoirs in the corpus also shows that negotiation of identities was discussed by the authors in terms of national, as well as ethnic, gender, cultural, and religious identities, but rarely if ever in terms of language. Considering the fact that English was seen as the key to assimilation then

– just as it is now – this omission is intriguing. Consequently, in what follows I will examine how linguistic identities were constructed in the immigrant narratives in the corpus.

### Individual language learning trajectories

Steiner (1914: 173) terms English the most vital force in the process of Americanization, one that ‘is not foisted upon the stranger by any official decree, but which has back of it a still greater compulsion.’ How, then, is the learning of English discussed in the memoirs in the corpus? To begin with, with the exception of Antin’s (1912) and Ravage’s (1917) memoirs, the references to language learning are few and far between. Riis (1901) does not devote more than two or three sentences to the fact that he had to study English to transform himself from a Danish carpenter into an American writer and journalist. It is only from Nielsen (1935) that we find out that, in his later years, the Great Dane, Riis, still had a Danish accent. Yeziarska (1925), so intent on preserving the colorful vernacular of her characters, acknowledges that her protagonist had to study English, but does not describe when and how the learning took place. Others make brief and often joking references to the challenges posed by English. In other words, while they provide lengthy discussions of the protagonists’ negotiation of political, social, and economic realities of American life, immigrant authors in the corpus rarely discuss the intricacies of mastering English grammar, pronunciation, or rules of politeness.

If depicted at all, second language learning is portrayed as an enterprise which proceeds through a series of comic blunders to a happy conclusion. Thus, Ravage states tongue-in-cheek that his acquisition process started out with a purchase of a dictionary:

As it was my purpose to learn the whole English language and nothing less, I meant to start at the letter A and proceed alphabetically right through to the end. . . . But when I beheld that bulky volume, and found on the title-page something about thirty thousand words, my enthusiasm got a little chilled. I had never realized that Americans were so loquacious. (Ravage, 1917: 104)

Nevertheless, the protagonist perseveres in memorizing words, reading the Bible and the newspapers, and interacting with his native and non-native interlocutors. In fact, he soon starts offering English lessons to the less accomplished and fortunate. Then, he goes off to college in Missouri and there realizes that, despite his native-like pronunciation and significant ease with writing, his English ‘was still the very grammatical and

very clumsy book-English of the foreigner’ (Ravage, 1917: 220). Marcus also sees that the stories and jokes he tries to tell fall flat, because of subtle shades of meaning that still escape him, and that his colloquial and idiomatic vocabulary is rather impoverished compared to that of his jolly and vivacious Midwestern friends, who ‘had command of a whole vast and varied vocabulary of which not a trace could be found in any dictionary, no matter how diligently I searched’ (Ravage, 1917: 222). Eventually, however, through the friendship with his college classmates, he masters the skills of convivial self-expression and ends his memoir on a high note:

I had become one of them. I was not a man without a country. I was an American. (Ravage, 1917: 266)

An even more rapid and much more romanticized trajectory is depicted in Antin’s (1912) autobiography. This optimistic narrative portrays a happy immigrant child, hungry for education, who welcomes the educational and linguistic challenge offered by the public school and produces her first literary essay after only four months of English instruction. After that, Mary, supported by an open-minded father, a caring family, and an array of adoring teachers, proceeds to win multiple prizes, kudos, and acclaim for her poems and essays in a newly acquired language. Her celebratory account ends in an appropriately star-spangled fashion:

And I am the youngest of America’s children, and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage. . . . Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future. (Antin, 1912: 364)

While other autobiographers in the corpus are more reticent when it comes to discussions of learning English, the stories they do tell strongly resemble Antin’s (1912) and Ravage’s (1917) narratives in the speed of acquisition and in its successful outcome. With little variation, the learning trajectory described proceeds from the purchase of a dictionary, to the reading of shoppingsigns, billboards, newspapers, and magazines, to the Bible and literary texts (Adamic, 1932; Cahan, 1926; Nielsen, 1935; Panunzio, 1921; Steiner, 1914). Bok (1921) mentions that he learned English through immersion in a public school; others, including Steiner (1914), Ravage (1917), and Adamic (1932), note that they briefly attended evening schools. Antin (1912), Panunzio (1921), Ravage (1917), Steiner (1914), Yeziarska (1925), and Nielsen (1935) also give some credit to their college experiences, which allowed them to further polish their linguistic abilities. In fact, it appears that language learning proceeds successfully for all, regardless of the environment and oftentimes thanks to the efforts of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Thus, Panunzio (1921) takes

private lessons from a grade school teacher, Miss Richmond, Adamic (1932) is helped by the three children of his landlords, Riis (1901: 25) in his 'observations on the American language' finds 'a volunteer assistant in Julia, the pretty bare-footed daughter of a coal-miner,' while Ravage (1917) recalls grumpy assistance offered to him by fellow immigrants.

One may point out that it is not surprising that immigrant children and adults who had the advantage of comprehensive education and middle-class upbringing were successful in learning English. Interestingly, language learning is also portrayed as a successful enterprise by Panunzio (1921) and Ravage (1917), born in small European villages, and by working-class immigrants whose stories were collected by Holt (1906). There, an anonymous Lithuanian worker states, four years after his arrival in America:

I help the [union] movement by being an interpreter for the other Lithuanians who come in. That is why I have learned to speak and write good English. The others do not need me long. They soon learn English, too, and when they have done that they are quickly becoming Americans. (Holt, 1906: 20)

Similarly, a young Polish girl, a worker in a sweatshop, proudly acknowledges:

For the last two winters I have been going to night school. I have learned reading, writing, and arithmetic. I can read quite well in English now and I look at the newspapers every day. I read English books, too, sometimes. (Holt, 1906: 27)

A Greek peddler complains that his boss didn't want him to learn English, so, instead, he asked his relatives in Greece to send him a Greek-English dictionary:

when it came I studied it all the time and in three months I could speak English quite well. (Holt, 1906: 45)

The acquisition process appears to be similarly fast for the Swedish farmer:

I studied English coming out on the vessel, but I was here six months before I could speak it well. (Holt, 1906: 58-59)

The narrative of second language learning as a speedy enterprise is not limited to the stories in the corpus – it can also be encountered in newspaper articles published in the 1920s and in the accounts of Americanization professionals and educators eager to celebrate rapid

linguistic assimilation of immigrant children and young adults. For instance, a Portland, Maine, local newspaper once published a story entitled 'Greek pupils at Staples School learn to speak English in a few months,' while school principals in Gary, Indiana, told visitors that, after the first semester, they could not differentiate between the foreign-born and local children (Olneck, 1989).

Whatever difficulties in the language learning process are reported, they are usually of a transitional nature. For instance, a French dress-maker states that, in the beginning of her American employment, she and her friend were taken advantage of and it took them six months to learn 'enough of the English' to start negotiating better payment (Holt, 1906: 74). The only instance of linguistic discrimination encountered in the corpus is described by Nielsen (1935), who talks about his struggle to become an English-speaking minister serving English-speaking congregations:

The ministry seems the only place where it is written on the door, 'All who have been brought up in any other language than the English cannot enter here.' (Nielsen, 1935: 263)

Nevertheless, Nielsen proceeds in his chosen career and is ultimately successful in establishing a personal and professional identity in the new language. Neither for him nor for others is the learning process linked to pains or losses; if anything, the transformations involved appear to be joyful, as in Panunzio's memoir:

I am in a special way happy to have learned the English language and through its medium to have become acquainted with the stalwart thought of the Master minds of the Anglo-Saxon race. (Panunzio, 1921: 294)

Panunzio is not the only one who uses the printed page to profess his love for English – similar declarations come from Antin and Nielsen:

I am glad, most of all, that the Americans began by being Englishmen, for thus did I come to inherit this beautiful language in which I think. It seems to me that in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear. (Antin, 1912: 208)

soon I made a discovery. I liked English better than I did Danish. I liked it better, not simply because I was in America, but because of the power and beauty of the language. To me, English seems more euphonious, in some ways softer, with more of a variety of shades and notes and tones. As for power of expression and

pungency, I think the English language has almost unlimited possibilities. (Nielsen, 1935: 121–122)

In sum, it appears that early-twentieth-century immigrant authors devote little time to discussions of second language learning and use in their portrayals of Americanization. When they do mention English learning, it is commonly described as a rapid and successful process, devoid of any but the most trivial challenges. And, while immigrant authors are keen on positioning themselves in terms of their new national, social, or cultural identities, they – and others in their environment – seem to take their new English-speaking identity for granted. This is especially intriguing, since language is crucial for performance of their professional and public identities as journalists, writers, editors, politicians, ministers, and public lecturers. And yet, except for Nielsen, we do not hear from them about any linguistic discrimination, that is, instances where their accents or grammatical and semantic errors would be used to contest their legitimacy as professionals or Americans.

### **Comparative analysis of immigrant identity stories**

How does negotiation of identities in early immigrant memoirs compare to that in contemporary immigrant autobiographies? To begin with, similar to the memoirs discussed above, present-day immigrant authors use their autobiographies to create new national, ethnic, racial, social, cultural, and gender identities for themselves and for public imagination (Pavlenko, 2001c). In contrast to their predecessors, however, contemporary authors do not necessarily aim to create all-American identities for themselves and opt for hybrid, hyphenated, or transnational and cosmopolitan identities. Linguistic identities occupy a primary position in these narratives: several recent memoirs and edited collections focus exclusively on second language learning (Hoffman, 1989; Lvovich, 1997; Ogulnick, 1998, 2000; Rodriguez, 1982; Stavans, 2001), or at least assign linguistic construction of identity a significant role (Danquah, 2000; Dorfman, 1998; Mori, 1997). The authors appeal to the safety and authority of writing to claim ownership of their new language and to construct legitimate linguistic identities for themselves and their fellow bilinguals, challenging the native/non-native speaker dichotomy which grants unique authority to monolingual native speakers of English (Pavlenko, 2001c).

Recent analyzes of contemporary immigrant memoirs also show that these narratives often depict second language learning as an excruciating

and anguishing journey, a painful process of self-translation, in which some identities may be lost forever and others acquired and constructed anew (Pavlenko, 1998, 2001a,b,c; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). In contrast, as argued above, turn-of-the-twentieth-century memoirs rarely deal with language *per se* and, if so, portray language learning as a rapid and joyful process. On the other hand, they privilege lengthy discussions of one's employment and financial standing, which rarely if ever appear in contemporary memoirs, even those that deal with class and poverty. And, while early immigrant authors clearly do aspire to literary expressiveness and aim to show off their superior, and in many cases superb, mastery of English, these attempts are distinct from the explicit arguments offered in contemporary work. For instance, after recalling a number of incidents where she and her family members had to defend their right to legitimacy as English speakers, Julia Alvarez, a Dominican-American writer working in English, bluntly states that she refuses to imagine herself as anyone else but a legitimate speaker of English and an American writer:

The truth was I couldn't even imagine myself as someone other than the person I had become in English, a woman who writes books in the language of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, and also of the rude shopper in the grocery store and of the boys throwing stones in the schoolyard, their language, which is now my language. (Alvarez, 1998: 72)

In contrast, when we look at turn-of-the-twentieth-century memoirs, we don't see anyone denying the writers the right to be legitimate speakers of English in the same way as some deny them – and their fellow immigrants – the right to call themselves Americans. How should we understand these differences? How could we interpret the repeated tale of outstanding and rapid linguistic progress when, 50 years later, second language learning appears to take years or even decades? And how could we explain the relatively painless nature of turn-of-the-twentieth-century learning that is in contradiction with later accounts, which associate second language learning and socialization with losses, ambiguities, and linguistic discrimination of non-native speakers of English?

One possibility is that the only stories published at the time were those of happy linguistic assimilation and the ones depicting linguistic discrimination and difficulties never saw the light. Clearly, we may never know which memoirs did not get published, and we have definitely lost the stories that weren't written down in the first place. At the same time, the analysis of the narratives in the corpus shows that many immigrant authors take an explicitly critical stance toward their new country,

criticizing ethnic and racial discrimination (Panunzio, 1921; Steiner, 1914), exploitative working conditions in the sweatshops and a dehumanizing living situation in boarding houses (Adamic, 1932; Panunzio, 1921; Riis, 1901), negative consequences of the assimilation process (Adamic, 1932; Ravage, 1917), and the attitudes of the native-born toward 'the foreigners.' Panunzio (1921: 207), for example, points out that many Americans would prefer to Americanize 'the foreigner' at a distance, at the same time drawing a sharp line between 'us' and 'them' and, thus, encouraging the creation of little Italies and Polands. Bok (1921) criticizes the public school system for paying insufficient attention to increasing numbers of foreign-born children, while Adamic (1932: 73) ridicules the English class he took from a teacher who was clearly less educated in his native language than many of his Italian, Jewish, Dutch, and Eastern European students were in theirs. Ravage (1917: 59–61) talks about multiple ways in which immigrants are invariably disappointed in America. This explicitly critical stance is not unique to well-educated middle-class immigrants – several autobiographies in Holt's (1906) collection also voice some form of social criticism. This stance did not go ignored by the reviewers, one of whom inquired upon the publication of the volume

there is not in a single one of these histories of life, a word of acknowledgment or gratitude to the country which gave them the chance and the success. Why is this? Was there anything lacking in the gift? (as cited in Sollors, 1990: xxiii–xxiv)

In other words, it seems that, if the narrators were not afraid to criticize major flaws in the social fabric of American life, they would not have had a problem evoking ways in which Americans discriminate against immigrants with limited English proficiency or with an accent. Perhaps, with the exception of Nielsen (1935), these authors were simply not attentive enough to language? This possibility is not borne out in the examination of the corpus either: as writers and journalists, many authors display an outstanding sensitivity to language, using a rich variety of linguistic devices to portray the speech of their characters and offering explicit criticisms of the linguistic 'impurities' in the speech of their fellow immigrants. Ravage, for instance, is critical of the transfer of Yiddish and Romanian patterns into the speech of his countrymen:

My friends were finding English contemptibly easy. That notion of theirs that it was a mixture of Yiddish and Rumanian, although partly justified, was yielding some astonishing results. Little Rumania was

in throes of evolving a new tongue – a crazy-quilt whose prevailing patches were, sure enough, Yiddish and Rumanian, with here and there a sprinkling of denatured English. They felt no compunction against pulling up an ancient idiom by the roots and transplanting it bodily into the new soil. One heard such phrases as 'I am going on a marriage,' 'I should live so,' 'a milky dinner.' (Ravage, 1917: 103)

His sentiments are echoed by Cahan, who criticizes the Yiddish used by the fellow immigrants:

I have already described how the Yiddish of American-born children grated on my ears. The Americanized Yiddish of the immigrants, studded with English expressions, was no better. My anger rose when I heard such expressions as 'er macht a leben' (he makes a living) or 'er is vert tsehn toisend dolar' (he is worth ten thousand dollars). Or such horrors as 'vindes' (windows) or 'silings' (ceilings) and 'pehtaytess' (potatoes). (Cahan, 1926: 241–242)

It appears, however, that these new speakers of English are also the ones most critical of the speech of other second language users. In turn, they themselves encounter little if any criticism and linguistic discrimination. Even Nielsen (1935: 263) who complains that people are critical of his performance from the pulpit, acknowledges that 'there is no such discrimination in other vocations in America.' The absence of incidents of linguistic discrimination in the narratives suggests that the authors' linguistic identities were rarely contested. Consequently, they did not feel the need to negotiate this identity and to argue their rights to legitimate ownership of English. To find reasons for such dramatic differences in the portrayal of second language learning, I will examine the sociohistoric, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic circumstances that influenced autobiography as a genre and linked American identity and English in distinct ways in the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century.

## Language and Identity in the US in the Twentieth Century

### Language ideologies during the Americanization era

As already pointed out, turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrant narratives were written at a time of a national crisis, engendered by the unprecedented influx of the 'new immigrants' that started in the 1880s. As time went by, individual philanthropists and charity organizations

started looking for ways to facilitate the transition and assimilation of the new arrivals. Eventually, it became clear that these efforts were insufficient and that many immigrants and naturalized citizens were still unable to speak English. The separation between the mainstream society and the ethnic enclaves and availability of jobs for which English was unnecessary account for some of this lack of proficiency. For some immigrants, the reluctance to learn English was also compounded by their real or perceived sojourner status. Interested in earning some money, but not in becoming Americans, these new arrivals did not consider it practical to devote time to English and citizenship classes (Wyman, 1993). To respond to the problem, in 1906 Congress approved a major change in the US naturalization policy, the Nationality Act, which required aliens seeking citizenship to speak English, and thus further reinforced the importance of language in the public mind. Even this measure did not prove to be entirely effective and large numbers of aliens continued to live in the US without naturalizing their status or acquiring English proficiency. The census of 1910 revealed that 13 million, or 14.8% of the total population, were foreign-born persons and, of these, 23% of people 10 years of age and over were unable to speak English (Macias, 2000).

While worrisome, this slow assimilation was seen as a temporary condition, which could eventually be remedied with the immigrants' children. Consequently, at least until the beginning of the First World War, liberal Americanization efforts often focused on obligations of citizenship and participation in the American system of self-government (often taught in multiple languages), rather than on native-like mastery of the English language. It is quite possible that, if not for the war, assimilation efforts would have remained the domain of various agencies and philanthropists, rather than the government and the wider public (Hartmann, 1948). The conflict in Europe heightened the sense of American nationalism and highlighted the persistence of Old World ties, language among them, among the European-born. With patriotism on the rise, immigrants were noticed by the previously indifferent public, and Americanization began to assume the proportions of a national crusade (Hartmann, 1948). Now, however, it was no longer enough for the immigrants to learn English and to assimilate: the political climate of the era required them to discard hyphenated identities and with them all other languages and all other allegiances but to America (for an in-depth discussion, see Pavlenko, 2002). This new attitude was particularly evident in two types of legislation adopted between the years of 1917 and 1922. More than 30 states passed Americanization laws, which obligated aliens unable to speak or read English to attend public evening schools and, in some cases,

authorized funding for such schools and imposed fines on non-compliant aliens. Thirty-four states also passed official English-language policies, which declared English the only language of instruction and effectively terminated bilingual education and foreign language education in elementary schools, a blow from which the German-American community – which took significant advantage of dual-language instruction – never recovered.

And so it is within this particular, and shifting, constellation of language ideologies and identities that immigrant writers had to position themselves. They did so in different ways, depending both on the time of their arrival in the US and on the time in which their memoirs were published. In the relatively tolerant atmosphere of the nineteenth century, the quality of 'old immigrants' English was rarely scrutinized and so it is not surprising that Bartholdt (1930), Bok (1921), and Riis (1901), who came to the US in 1870s, evoke few, if any, difficulties in learning or using English. More attention was paid to English learning by the 'new immigrants,' who were the target of the Americanization efforts, and thus Antin (1912) and Ravage (1917) discuss language learning at length, while several others mention attending, and later on teaching, Americanization classes. It is important to remember, however, that the overwhelming concerns of the time were not with the quality of the immigrants' English, but with the basic proficiency. Little if any attention was paid to the 'non-native-speakerness' of immigrants who did manage to master English. On the contrary, oftentimes their achievements were applauded and glorified as a model for others. Clearly, not everyone was thrilled by the 'aliens' who claimed the rights to the Anglo-Saxon linguistic inheritance, and several public figures did step up to defend the English language. The most prominent among them was Henry James, who, in 1905, after 'traumatic' visits to Ellis Island and to the Lower East Side, delivered an impassioned speech to the graduating class of Bryn Mawr, warning the students against an imminent threat to the civilized tongue from

the vast continent of aliens whom we welcome, and whose main contention . . . is that, from the moment of their arrival, they have just as much property in our speech as we have, and just as good a right to do what they choose with it. (James, 1905, cited in Brumberg, 1986: 6-7)

Not many immigrants, however, interacted with either James or like-minded individuals, and, overall, as compared to the vast majority that still had to acquire even a basic level of proficiency, those who could function in English had all reasons to consider themselves – and to be

considered – successful. The key factor that significantly contributed to this situation is the industrial economy, where many jobs required minimal or basic proficiency only. A similar situation existed in the service economy, and Antin recalls that her mother, who went to work immediately upon arrival, made quick progress due to the interaction with the store customers:

as she could perform the acts of weighing, measuring, and mental computation of fractions mechanically, she was able to give her whole attention to the dark mysteries of the language, as intercourse with her customers gave her opportunity. In this she made such rapid progress that she soon lost all sense of disadvantage. (Antin, 1912: 196)

The third factor that worked to the advantage of the new arrivals was their multilingualism. Looking at the authors in the present corpus, we can see that Bartholdt (1930) came to the US speaking German, English, French, and a smattering of other languages; Ravage (1917) arrived from Romania fluent in Romanian and Yiddish, with some German in the mix; Antin (1912) had been educated in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian; while Cahan (1926) came from Lithuania fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, and familiar with German, Latin, and Greek. While the knowledge of classical languages may be limited to well-educated members of the middle- and upper-middle-class, multilingualism in general was quite common among the European arrivals. Cahan (1926: 225) recalls that 'even the uneducated immigrants could speak Russian, although they preferred Yiddish.' Similarly, a Polish sweatshop girl talks of her mother, who worked in a grocer's shop in a little village in Poland and could speak Russian, German, Polish, and French (Holt, 1906: 21).

The multilingualism of the immigrant writers explains not only the ease with which they acquired yet another language, but also the fact that this acquisition did not seem to produce any internal conflicts. In the pre-First World War atmosphere of linguistic tolerance, where bilingual education, ethnic press, and mother tongue literature, entertainment, and religious service were the order of the day (Kloss, 1977; Pavlenko, 2002; Wiley, 1998), English learning did not necessarily entail any losses. During and after the First World War, the attitude toward native language maintenance changed and this shift was reflected in the memoirs by Bartholdt (1930) and Nielsen (1935). The two authors take opposing positions on the issue of native language maintenance. Nielsen (1935) opts to give up his Danish and to live his personal and professional life in English only. He explains his decision both through the low prestige of Danish in

America and through the way in which his own variety of Danish positioned him as an individual:

In Danish I spoke the low language. That had been the language of my stepmother, and though I could speak the high, it was very awkward for me. I found that most of the Danes in America spoke the high language, and so I was often a sort of stray sheep and the butt end for jokes, even among Danes. I think that was one reason why I started to go the American way so soon after arriving in America. (Nielsen, 1935: 123)

While Nielsen (1935) is glad to give up his native language and negotiate a more advantageous social position through the use of English, Bartholdt (1930) mounts a spirited defense of the right of any ethnic American to use his or her language alongside English:

The right of the German, the Dutchman, the Scandinavian, the Italian, the Greek, the Slav, to live up to his racial traditions (which include the privilege of using the mother tongue in family, school and church), is a fundamental one, and the moment we proceed to abridge it, we depart from American principles and ideals. (Bartholdt, 1930: 31)

His dissent, however, was lost in a sea of consent, either voluntary or, in Chomskian words, 'manufactured' and, with time, monolingualism in English became inextricably bound to American national identity. In what follows, I will argue that it is this reinforced link between monolingualism and Americanness that prompted late-twentieth-century immigrant writers to see their second language learning as painful, to negotiate their linguistic identities, and to defend – or in Rodriguez's (1982) case, give up – their right and desire to be bilingual.

### Assimilation in immigrant memoirs

After an almost 40-year respite, in the 1970s and 1980s, US society witnessed a new influx of immigrants, predominantly Latin American and Asian in origin. Similar to the Great Migration, the appearance of these immigrants led to a renegotiation of the American national identity, with race and ethnicity coming to the foreground of discussion (Schmidt, 2000). Once again, immigrant and bilingual writers occupied a central role in raising public awareness of the issues implicated in linguistic and cultural transitions. The renewal of interest in immigrant and ethnic lifewriting was marked by the appearance of such acclaimed literary masterpieces as Kingston's (1975) *The woman warrior*, Rodriguez's (1982) *Hunger for memory*,

and Hoffman's (1989) *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*, all of which dealt with the role of language in the shaping of identity, and viewed language socialization as intrinsically related to race, ethnicity, class, and gender. These narratives, in turn, inspired an explosion of cross-cultural lifewriting with the focus on language, evident in numerous recent memoirs and collections (e.g. Danquah, 2000; Dorfman, 1998; Lvovich, 1997; Mori, 1997; Ogulnick, 1998, 2000; Stavans, 2001).

Representative of the new immigrant demographics, many of the contemporary authors are either Latino (Alvarez, 1998; Dorfman, 1998; Rodriguez, 1982; Stavans, 2001) or Asian and Asian-American (Kingston, 1975; Mori, 1997). Influenced by the 1970s' revival of ethnic and racial consciousness, these writers challenge the racial biases permeating American identity and language politics. A few, in particular Rodriguez (1982), still view assimilation as the only desired or possible outcome, but most of them question this assumption, offering new and hybrid linguistic identities for public imagination. Rather than portraying straightforward trajectories, they focus on contradictions and multiplicities of contemporary existence, privileging the role of language in the shaping and reshaping of linguistic, racial, ethnic, class, and gender identities (Fischer, 1986; Hokenson, 1995; Pavlenko, 2001a,b,c). This disjunction is recognized by the Polish-American writer, Eva Hoffman (1989), who acknowledges that 'the postmodern condition' requires a different narrative than the one written by her predecessor, Mary Antin:

A hundred years ago, I might have written a success story, without much self-doubt or equivocation. A hundred years ago, I might have felt the benefits of a steady, self-assured ego, the sturdy energy of forward movement, and the excitement of being swept into a greater national purpose. But I have come to a different America, and instead of a central ethos, I have been given the blessings and the terrors of multiplicity. . . . If I want to assimilate into my generation, my time, I have to assimilate the multiple perspectives and their constant shifting. (Hoffman, 1989: 164)

To sum up, I suggest that the links between language and identity depicted – or omitted – in the two sets of immigrant autobiographies are critically influenced by the sociohistorical contexts in which the authors learned and used their languages and produced their narratives. In the turn-of-the-twentieth-century atmosphere of relative linguistic tolerance, the immigrants' rights to English were, for the most part, uncontested. Thus, linguistic trajectories in their narratives were depicted as rapid and successful, and Americanness was constructed primarily through the

rhetoric of individual achievement. In contrast, several decades later, when the national identity became strongly bound to monolingualism in English, second language learning was transformed into a painful journey, involving a loss of primary identities linked to the mother tongue (Hoffman, 1989; Rodriguez, 1982). In the atmosphere of linguistic intolerance of the late twentieth century, immigrant authors in the US strive to defend their rights to legitimate ownership of English and, consequently, create Americanness out of linguistic hybridity.

## Conclusions

In the present paper, I argue that the notion of 'negotiation of identities' needs to be approached from a sociohistorical perspective, which illuminates how identities considered to be negotiable at present may have been non-negotiated or non-negotiable in the past. The analysis of turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrant memoirs demonstrates that European immigrant writers, drawing on the rhetoric of individual uplift, successfully reimagined American national identity in a way that would make it negotiable for new arrivals not only from Northern, but also from Southern and Eastern Europe. At the same time, racial minorities, in particular large numbers of Asian immigrants, had no access to the negotiation process and were not 'imagined' as legitimate Americans.

Moreover, while national identity was a subject of heated contestation, linguistic identities do not appear to be contested in the same way in the memoirs of the era. Even though some of the writers in the corpus still had accents and at times produced an unfortunate turn of phrase, in an atmosphere of linguistic tolerance and of concern over basic levels of English proficiency, their errors were generally ignored and linguistic achievements celebrated as a model for other immigrants. In contrast, at present immigrants find themselves in a position where learning the second language implies losing or giving up the first and thus contemporary language learning stories are often accounts of painful experiences. Many contemporary immigrant and bilingual writers are also thrust into positions where they have to defend their linguistic rights and ownership of English; consequently, their memoirs foreground negotiation of linguistic identities. The shifts in negotiable identity options examined in the present study offer a unique opportunity to understand how sociohistoric circumstances impact negotiation of identities and remind us that personal narratives of individuals are not simply individual performances, but also complex stories written by and for individuals 'by law, literature, politics, and history' (Zaborowska, 1995: x).

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## Note

1. I fully realize that there is more to America than the United States. In the present chapter, I will use the term 'America' to refer to the United States exclusively in a poetic and historic sense, in order to faithfully reflect the discourses of the immigration and Americanization era.

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