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Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng
Crandall University, wendy.bokhorstheng@crandallu.ca

Kelle L. Marshall
Pepperdine University, kelle.marshall@pepperdine.edu

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‘Learning French is Like Trying to Skate’:
Constructing identity through metaphor

WENDY D. BOKHORST–HENG¹ and KELLE L. MARSHALL²

¹*Crandall University, Faculty of Education, 333 Gorge Road, Moncton, NB E1G 3H9, Canada*
Email: Wendy.BokhorstHeng@crandallu.ca

²*Pepperdine University, International Studies and Languages Division, 24255 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu, California 90263* *Email: kelle.marshall@pepperdine.edu*

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French immersion programs in Canada have been the focus of wide-ranging research involving questions related to language acquisition, pedagogy, policy and parental choice (e.g., Canadian Parents for French, 2017; Dicks & Genesee, 2016; Lepage & Corbeil, 2013). With the exception of Bokhorst-Heng and Keating Marshall (2019), Roy (2010), and Roy and Galiev (2011) few studies to date have investigated students’ construction of their language learning experiences, beliefs, and language identities within the French immersion context. Yet, scholarship recognizes that language students construct definite beliefs and attitudes about what they learn, how language is best taught and learned, and about themselves as learners (Duff, 2012; Kramsch, 2009; Mariani, 2017; Norton, 2010; Norton & Toohey, 2011). This recognition is an important consideration in the field of instructed second language acquisition as it conceptualizes language learners as active participants in their learning with the potential of their transformation of self (Kramsch, 2009).

Building on this body of scholarship, our discussion focuses on Grade 8 Early French Immersion (EFI) students' identities as learners of French, developed and interpreted through metaphor. The context is New Brunswick (NB), comprising a population of 747,100 (31.6% Francophones and 67.1% Anglophones), with an overall provincial bilingualism rate of 34%

(Statistics Canada, 2016). NB is Canada's only officially bilingual province, with its own provincial Official Languages Act (OLA) (implemented in 1969). The Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) further confirms NB's bilingual status and guarantees its Anglophone and Francophone communities equal status, rights and privileges. A provincial Commissioner of Official Languages ensures the rights of all citizens are satisfied vis-à-vis the bilingual policy. The Charter (Section 16.1 (1)) also specifically legislates a policy of duality in education with separate school sectors for Anglophone and Francophone students. French Second Language (FSL) instruction is required in all schools in the Anglophone sector through Education Policy 309, and FI is *mandated* where resources and conditions allow (e.g. Government of New Brunswick, 21 June 2018). In the 2015 school year, 86% of all Anglophone students in NB were enrolled in some kind of French language learning; 29% were in FI (Canadian Parents for French, 2016). In this context of provincial official bilingualism and mandated FI education, we wonder what language learning means to FI students and what identities they construct for themselves within their school-based communities of practice (Wenger, 1998/2008).

To address these questions, we first present the theoretical constructs involved in our analysis: *investment* (Norton, 2013; Darvin & Norton, 2015), *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998/2008), *metaphor* (Kramsch, 2009) and *narrative* (Leggo, 2008). We suggest a model whereby metaphors on language learning can be considered a form of narrative used to both elicit and analyse learner identity within a community of practice. We draw on three dynamics of narrative analysis (Leggo, 2008): story, interpretation and discourse. After a brief overview of the educational and curricular contexts of FI, we present similes created by Grade 8 FI students related to their French language learning, which we then group into seven conceptual metaphors. Our analysis leads to a discussion about how metaphor creation provides an interpretive space

for language learners' metacognitive reflection on their ongoing identity formation. Finally, we propose metaphor as a 'vehicle for reflection and consciousness raising' (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002) in the language learning classroom.

<A> **Theoretical constructs**

 Darvin and Norton's 'Model of investment'

According to Norton (2013), language learners 'invest' in learning a target language because they believe it will enable them to increase the value of their symbolic and material resources. Darwin and Norton's *2015 Model of Investment* (see Figure 1) locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital and ideology.

INSERT Figure 1. Darwin and Norton's 2015 Model of Investment

They draw on Bourdieu (1987) and Blommaert (2005) to define *ideology* as 'dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion, and the privileging and marginalization of ideas, people, and relations' (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 44). Their construct of *capital* is also derived from Bourdieu (1993) who regards capital as a form of power that translates material/economic capital into cultural and social capital, and ultimately symbolic capital. The value of the different kinds of capital is determined by ideological structures and is continually negotiated in different fields or sites of struggles. Darwin and Norton's (2015) third construct, and the focus of our discussion, is *identity*, which they frame in terms of Bourdieu's (1986) notion of habitus. Habitus, they argue 'configures in learners an idea of their "rightful" place in society and predisposes them to do what they believe is expected of them and to develop relations that are deemed appropriate' (p.

44). They present a social view of identity whereby identity has to do with relationships and positions one takes up in particular communities of practice (Wenger, 1998/2008) and ideological contexts and as such, is always in ongoing formation and even multiple.

Wenger (1998/2008) defines a *community of practice* as a type of learning community, whether in educational institutions or in other sorts of social contexts, sharing ‘mutual engagement,’ ‘joint enterprise’ and a ‘shared repertoire’ (p. 73). *Mutual engagement* has to do with shared practice among group members, ‘doing things together’ (Wenger, 1998/2008, p. 73) leading to the creation of shared meanings regarding a particular issue or endeavor. It is through such mutual engagement and social interaction that identity is formed. *Joint enterprise* is the collective process of group members working together towards a common goal. In the case of FI students, joint enterprise could be considered the activity of engaging in FI education – learning content through the French language, speaking French to teachers and friends in class, not participating in classroom settings with Francophone children, and the like. In the same way, for FI students, their collective group identity could be considered as part of their conceptions of their joint enterprise; they are in a stream of education that sets them apart from other Anglophone students in the building and from Francophone students in the Francophone sector, and as such, they may conceive of themselves as having unique aims and goals. Finally, FI students, as part of a distinct educational community of practice, share group discourses and have stories to tell about their educational experiences, constituting their shared repertoire. Finally, for Wenger (1998/2008), *shared repertoire* is related to the shared set of common resources, narratives, actions, discourses, and so forth that members use to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning within the group.

It is within Wenger's (1998/2008) framework of communities of practice that we situate our discussion of NB FI learner identity within investment. We regard not so much learners' individual identities as discussed in much of the work of Norton and her colleagues, (e.g. Norton, 2013; Darvin & Norton, 2015), but rather as situated within a common community of practice. Wenger (1998/2008) suggests that:

Talking about identity in social terms is not denying individuality but viewing the very definition of individuality as something that is part of the practices of specific communities. It is therefore a mistaken dichotomy to wonder whether the unit of analysis of identity should be the community or the person. The focus must be on the process of this mutual constitution. (p. 146)

Wenger's model thus allows for a discussion of the enmeshed nature of individuals' identities within a collective community of practice, in our case, FI students in their school-based communities of practice in NB.

While Darvin and Norton's model is helpful for conceptualizing identity within the broader theoretical framework of learners' investment in language learning, accessing these fluid constructs poses a challenge for researchers. Identifying beliefs about language learning has traditionally been accessed through surveys, questionnaires, interviews and reports, such as Horwitz's (1999) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory*. However, as Bokhorst-Heng and Keating Marshall (2019) argue in their discussion of pedagogically-informed methodology, eliciting data from adolescent participants can be challenging, especially when the focus is on abstract and evolving concepts such as beliefs, ideology and identity.

Like Fisher (2017), we suggest that metaphor can be an avenue to access students' beliefs and identities. But even more, we also see in metaphor the interpretive and constitutive role it

plays in constructing meaning. This interpretative nature of metaphor makes it appropriate to capture the inherent fluidity of identity, beliefs and, ultimately, investment. While metaphor and narrative are usually discussed in different contexts as if they had nothing in common (Bezeczy, 2000), the interpretive dynamics of narrative analysis suggests important possibilities for metaphor in analyses of how language learners process their language learning experiences and construct their identity. Our conceptualization of metaphor is thus developed through the lens of narrative, both as story and as interpretive device (Lawler, 2002; Leggo, 2008; Miyahara, 2015).

* Metaphor*

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe metaphor as ‘understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (p. 5). They propose that specific elements or features of conceptual domain are mapped onto another– the target domain. For example, drawing from our own data set, in the simile (a form of metaphor) ‘Learning French is like trying to skate,’ the conceptual domain is *trying to skate*, which is then mapped onto *the learning of French*, the target domain. In so doing, metaphor construction and analysis opens up broader webs of meaning (Kearney, 2016), allowing for the co-construction of meaning between the author and the reader of the simile. It is thus not surprising that studies involving language teaching and learning have utilised metaphor (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Gibbs, 2011; Mariani, 2017; Thornbury, 1991). One major incentive for utilizing metaphor in language learning research is that the metaphors language learners may use to describe their learning can reveal something about their cognitions regarding their L2 and about their learning journey (Ellis, 2008; Mariani, 2017).

Kramsch (2003) identifies two primary ways to process metaphors. The first is the social psychological approach found, for example, in work by Ellis (2008), Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

and Gibbs (2011). The primary objective of this approach is to reveal underlying assumptions, perspectives and conceptualization of an experience. This objective suggests possibilities for metaphor as a vehicle for reflection and consciousness raising, as a way for learners to discover their own underlying assumptions (de Guerre & Villamil, 2003; Ellis, 2008). But because the focus in this approach is on identifying these hidden meanings, there is a tendency to see individuals' attitudes and conceptual systems as stable and coherent when in fact, as noted earlier, they are fluid and potentially contradictory.

These shortcomings in the social psychological approach are addressed in part by the second way to process metaphor, from a social/socio-cultural perspective (e.g., de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Kramsch, 2003). The primary distinction between the social psychological and socio-cultural approaches is that the latter assumes the instability of beliefs and assumptions and embraces contradiction and paradox. The focus is therefore not on unveiling any hidden assumptions, but rather, on the construction of a 'belief space' (Kramsch 2003) – and on how, within this space, paradox can exist and meaning can be constructed. In the social/socio-cultural approach, metaphors are thus seen as a semiotic tool for 'knowing, meaning making, and guiding behaviour' (de Guerrero & Villamil 2002, p. 97).

* Metaphor as Narrative*

Rather than seeing the social-psychological and socio-cultural approaches to metaphor as divergent, we believe they come together when metaphor is conceptualized through narrative analysis. Both metaphor and narrative have at their core 'the ways humans experience the world' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). We draw on Leggo's (2008) three dynamics involved in

narrative inquiry, which we argue apply to metaphor analyses as well: *story*, *interpretation* and *discourse*. In narrative, *story* tells what happened and answers the questions of Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Kramsch's (2003) extension of Lakoff and Johnson's definition highlights the 'story' of metaphor: metaphor is bringing together two distinct conceptual domains (source and target), or 'mental spaces,' in one linguistic phrase; it is the 'metaphoric construction of a belief space, that is in part shared and shaped by others, and in which various possible scenarios are acted out' (p. 116).

The second dynamic of narrative analysis, *interpretation*, addresses the significance of the story. There are at least three components to this interpretation. First, narratives are not merely stories that tell something, but rather are 'interpretive devices' (Lawler, 2002; Miyahara, 2015), through which people make sense of their world. Narrative is thus not so much fully 'autonomous self-authoring' as it is 'active interpretation' (Ricoeur, 1991), bringing coherence to experience and sense of self. In the same way, metaphors are interpretive of one's experience and beliefs and give structure to that experience. In her research using metaphor with language learners, Kramsch (2003) describes metaphors as being used by language learners to 'construct representations of themselves and their experience' (p. 125). Second, such meaning-making is dialogic as it develops through social interaction. One reader's interpretation of that metaphoric expression may be different than that of the author or another reader as each person brings to their interpretation their own assumptions and experiences. For example, drawing again from our earlier simile, to say learning French is like 'singing in the rain' might bring significance of delight and refreshment to the one reading the metaphor when in fact the author of the metaphor regards singing in the rain as 'weird and uncomfortable.' Third, the interpretive role of narrative not only organizes the past but also shapes how we understand our future potentials (Miyahara,

2015). In the same way, metaphors can also be transformative, both in terms of how (in the context of this discussion) language learners understand themselves, but also how that understanding transforms future practice (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) in learning and using language.

The process of meaning-making aligns well with Leggo's (2008) third dynamic of narrative: *discourse*. In the context of narrative, *discourse* has to do with how the story is told. It involves interrogating elements such as pragmatic function, rhetorical forms, grammatical features and voice for how they control the story and our interpretation of that story. Leggo (2008) regards narration 'not as a noun, something solid and fixed, but as a verb, narrating, always in process, full of generative action,' requiring the researcher to give 'constant vigilance regarding how the story is told, and how the story might be told, sustaining a creative connection with the plural possibilities of any narrating' (p. 20). The dynamic of discourse thus allows for analysis of the dynamic *process* of meaning making through metaphor, especially in the tailings provided by the one making the metaphor.

Thus, by viewing metaphor as narrative, we have access to in-depth analytical tools that can enrich our understanding of students' construction of their identities expressed through metaphor. By seeing metaphor as narrative, it is possible to focus on not just what the metaphors tell us about students' beliefs about language learning, but also on the construction of these beliefs – and how metaphors also create the space for those beliefs to be constructed. We now turn to our study and the curricular context of FI education in NB.

<A> **Our Study**

 Context of FI education

There are three considerations regarding the context of French language learning in NB. First is the provision of FSL. There are three options available to students for FSL learning in K-8: English Prime, where students participate in Pre-Intensive, Intensive and Post-Intensive French instruction from Grade 4 to 8; EFI, where the first entry point into FI was, from 2010-2017, Grade 3, and currently, Grade 1; and Late French Immersion, the second entry point at Grade 6. For those in EFI, in Grades 3–5, 80% of the school day is conducted in French; in Grades 6–8, 70% of the school day is conducted in French. Most subjects are taught in French, although programming varies by school. These three options are available in most schools, although in some regions, schools may consolidate Late FI provision in one school. Second, the province's system of duality with separate school sectors for the Anglophone and Francophone communities and its FI admission policy (Policy 321) which prohibits Francophones from attending FI provide minimal educational opportunity for Anglophone students to interact with Francophones within the context of school.

The third feature of the context of FSL learning has to do with provincial linguistic ideologies surrounding FSL which feature the assumption that English/French bilingualism will facilitate Anglophones' access to better jobs (NB Department of Education, 2001). This bears on curriculum outcomes in FI as well, where the primary aim is to prepare Anglophone students to have sufficient competency in French to secure work or continue in their studies (NB Department of Education, 2001). As a result, the identities possibly accessible to these FI students are not clearly defined in educational discourse nor actively developed in curriculum programming.

New Brunswick's French Immersion curricular priorities

A document titled *Foundation for French Language Arts in French Immersion in Atlantic Canada* (NB Department of Education, 2001) provides the overall framework for student learning in NB FI (Marshall & Bokhorst-Heng, forthcoming). Of interest to us was how this document identified the learning outcomes with respect to identity development as language learners and bi/multilingual speakers.

Under a section entitled, 'Appreciation of the French language and cultural diversity' (p. 12), the *Foundation* document expresses as a goal that '*By the end of Grade 12, students will be expected to:*

- Demonstrate a positive attitude towards the French language and towards francophone communities in Canada and around the world;
- Recognize and respect cultural diversity'

The first statement considers the affect of language learning: that students will demonstrate a positive attitude. The development of affect is broken down into key stage outcomes by different grade levels. For example, 'By the end of Grade 3, students will be expected to: take pleasure in using the French language in everyday situations' and 'demonstrate a sense of pride in their uniqueness and in their accomplishments in French' (p. 24). The 'sense of pride' in learning and using the French language is identified at all key stages. Given its importance in the development of language identity (Miyahara, 2015; Norton, 2013), it is significant that affect appears as a distinct outcome for all key stages of learning. However, we note that this 'sense of pride' focuses on students' attitude *towards* French, but not necessarily their position within French communities of practice. The term 'take pride in their uniqueness' also raises the potential of identity development; however, it is not defined.

The *Foundation* document thus does include components that are important to the development of self, evident in acknowledgement of the relationship between language and culture, in the acknowledgement of students' uniqueness and evident in the attention given to affect as a goal for language learning; however, these components are not fully defined nor developed with respect to purposeful identity construction/development in FI students.

It is in light of the above-described factors – mandated FSL education within NB's dual educational policy, FI programs' structure and implementation, a lesser emphasis on bi/multilingual identity development in the curriculum, and the overarching ideological context within which all of these elements function – that we investigate FI student investment as learners of French, as members of the FI community of practice.

**** *Methodology*

This analysis is part of an on-going study in NB that began in 2015 on (inter)cultural education in FI education and, drawing on Darwin and Norton's (2015) work, on student investment in French. Our research on student investment was in part inspired by earlier work conducted by Roy and Galiev (2011) who called for more research on student perspectives in FI education. To investigate learner identity (one of the three components of Darwin and Norton's (2015) investment model), we conducted focus groups with 31 Grade 8 Early FI students in four NB schools in a bilingual region of the province, April to June 2016. All students were from homes where English is the primary (and for most, only) language used, although some lived closer to Francophone areas than others. They came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. While some were born in other provinces, they all began French immersion in NB. These students were in their sixth year of EFI, having entered EFI in Grade 3 in 2010. Focus

group sizes ranged from three to 10, and apart from one group of three girls, were co-ed. Two schools selected the students a-priori (based on academic standing); and two schools allowed us to invite all of their Grade 8 FI students to participate in the study (all students who returned signed forms participated in the study). We met with each focus group twice (1.5 hours each time) in schools, either after or during school hours. The focus group sessions were recorded using a digital video recorder and audio feed. Each session was moderated by one of the authors.

The multi-modal focus groups were framed according to the principles of constructivist pedagogy, aimed to elicit multiple forms of expression. Both sessions were conducted in English, although participants occasionally incorporated French into their discussion. Over the two sessions, participants were given the opportunity to interview each other regarding their everyday language practices, complete a language attitude survey, respond to recordings of different varieties of French, engage in activities regarding the meanings and purposes of bilingualism, participate in whole group discussion and create a promotional video regarding bilingualism in NB.

Finally, in our focus group session, and the focus of this discussion, participants contributed to a graffiti wall. Three pieces of chart paper were taped around the room, each with one of three simile prompts taken from Kramsch (2003; see also Cortazzi & Jin, 1999): *Learning French is like...*; *Speaking in French is like...*; and *Writing in French is like...* Each student was given a uniquely colored marker to contribute their thoughts on the chart paper (Figure 2).

INSERT Figure 2: Graffiti Wall

Unlike participants in other studies using similar prompts (Mariani, 2017 used a survey; Kramsch, 2003 used personal journal writing), these students were encouraged to collaborate as they developed their similes and to respond to each other's contributions (Figure 3).

INSERT Figure 3: Graffiti wall collaboration

Their collaboration was essential, premised on the view that both meaning making and identity development are constructed through interaction. Afterwards, each participant had the opportunity to explain to the group their simile. In total, the students generated 85 different similes.

Our analysis was guided by the three (overlapping) dynamics of narrative analysis identified by Leggo (2008): *story, interpretation and discourse*. Coding was conducted by both authors. We first made a list of the similes generated by the students. Because our focus is primarily on the construction of learner identity, rather than specific differences between receptive and productive skills, in our coding we combined all three prompts as a measure of *learning French language is like* (Kramsch, 2003). We then classified the similes according to the conceptual metaphors they constructed, looking for salient features and common elements in their statements, and considering what the students themselves had to say about their similes (Kramsch, 2003). Given the highly interpretive nature of this coding scheme, the classification of the metaphors was developed through discussion and six rounds of coding to achieve 100% agreement between the two coders. The 85 similes were grouped into seven conceptual metaphors (some similes were coded onto more than one metaphor; hence the percentages add up to more than 100%): (a) Perseverance (29%); (b) Challenging physical and cognitive

limitations (40%); (c) The experience of embodied change (28%); (d) Transformation of self (31%); (e) Embodied discomfort (15%); (f) Falling short (16%); and (g) Affect (73%). While the students' statements themselves were in fact similes and not metaphors, in this discussion we consider similes as a form of metaphor in that they are interpretive and constructive, joining two distinct conceptual domains (source and target) into one statement for the purposes of constructing and organising meaning. We especially considered the students' entailments in terms of how the similes organised the meanings of language learning, and how, in articulating their constructs, they depicted their learning processes with respect to identity within their investment.

<A> **Findings**

In the following analysis, we present tables corresponding to each of the seven conceptual metaphors identified through our coding and include examples for each. The bolded statement is what the students wrote on the chart paper during their graffiti wall activity; the italics are their tailings, their own explanations of their simile (where there is no italicized script, the student did not provide any further explanation). Because of their inter-relatedness, we continually weave together Leggo's three dynamics of narrative analysis, story, interpretation and discourse in the analysis, rather than discussing each component separately. We then provide some excerpts of student discourse as they engaged in the co-construction of their similes as a way to demonstrate metaphor as interpretive space within these learners' communities of practice.

 Learning French is Like...

<C> Having persevered

Perseverance emerged as a dominant theme in the students' similes. According to the online Merriam Webster dictionary (2019), perseverance is defined as 'continued effort to do or achieve

something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition: the action or condition or an instance of persevering.’ While many of the similes related to this metaphor overlap with those in the following one (challenging physical/cognitive limitations), here we focus specifically perseverance as its own focus (Table 1), with an emphasis on time.

INSERT Table 1. Having persevered

Perseverance was often expressed in terms of ‘time’ in students’ discourse, evident in statements like, *as time goes on*, and *it takes a long time*. In their discourse, they signified the need for patience and persistence, for resilience and for allowance of language learning as a process – as in *Making popcorn*: ‘long but rewarding.’ One student’s fishing simile focused on how it ‘takes a lot of patience, and a long time,’ and how, even after being successful in catching the fish, there is still ‘a lot more you have to do.’ For this student, learning French has no definitive end point; even after one “acquires” language, there is still more learning to be done.

Others stressed the need for practice. Practice was needed for perfection: Learning French is like *Shining a boot*: ‘Well, you gotta shine it. It takes you awhile to get it shiny and, to make it more shiny, you have to practice and you’ve got to shine it even more. So it is a long process.’ Practice was needed to overcome making mistakes, which were understood as part of the learning process. By interpreting their experience of language learning through these similes, these students position themselves as ones who have the attributes of patience, perseverance and grit. They also speak with the voice of experience, as knowers who have come through the challenges.

<C> Challenging physical and cognitive limitations

While the first conceptual metaphor focused on the construct of perseverance and on time, in this second one, attention is on the nature of the challenge itself – on how learning French is like working against physical and cognitive limitations (Table 2).

INSERT Table 2. Experiencing physical and cognitive challenges

Forty percent of the complete set of similes emphasised the great difficulty and highly challenging nature of language learning. For some participants, this belief was evident in the evocation of similar challenging tasks, like *Explaining why water is wet*, *Doing a backflip*, *Learning to play guitar*, or *Playing a hardcore game of football*. Emphasis was often placed on the complexity of the task: ‘Because, like, every little thing that we’ve learned, we put into writing, is a piece of it.’ The word ‘hard’ appears thirteen times and ‘trying’ appears fourteen times in their discourse. The idea of challenge also came through similes that suggested working against forces of resistance, such as *Running up a hill*, or *Writing in chains*. Through such similes of challenge, these students captured the complexity of language learning they encountered as they navigated their language learning processes. The similes thus become interpretive space wherein they frame their own response to how they view themselves within this language learning experience, and they present an interpretive schema of complexity, challenge and struggle.

<C> The experience of embodied change

The focus of the previous conceptual metaphor was on language learning as compared to challenging one’s physical and cognitive limitations, and the focus of the first metaphor was on one’s personal attribute of perseverance. Here, using a phrase from Kramsch (2009), the focus is

on the ‘experience of embodied change’ (Table 3) – a term that describes metaphors built around two clauses that represent a change in condition, from pain, frustration, challenge to one of pleasure, reward and achievement. The pleasure or joy comes not from an absence of pain, or, as Kramsch (2009) puts it, ‘the state of painlessness itself,’ but rather, from the ‘relief of pain or anxiety’ (p. 63). That is, the joy comes from the relief itself, the transition from one to the other: ‘It is almost as if one can appreciate the achievement only if one appreciates the trajectory in time and the emotional and physical tension that accompanies it’ (Kramsch, 2009, p. 63).

INSERT TABLE 3. The experience of embodied change

Relief is most commonly expressed through the conjunction ‘but,’ used in 71% of the similes in this metaphor, along with distinctly contrasting adjectives in the opposite clauses. In the first simile, the pain and emotional tension that came with learning French led the student to wonder, ‘What am I doing with my life?’ was resolved in what follows the conjunctive ‘but’: ‘But once you finally understand, you’re like, “This was worth it!”’ Likewise, skating was ‘hard when you start’ and characterised by stumbling, but with practice became ‘smoother;’ reading a huge book was ‘worth it’ when done because ‘you know something new now;’ and after one has ‘climb[ed]out of a pit’ – ‘once you finish’ – ‘it’s good.’ In the experience of embodied change is an active interpretive layer as the students evaluate their learning experiences.

Together, the first three categories of conceptual metaphor paint a picture of students’ awareness of the time necessary for language acquisition, the challenges they have encountered throughout the process, and the consciousness of the relief that comes from overcoming the challenges.

<C> Transformation of self

While similes within the embodiment of change metaphor focused more explicitly on the relief of pain or anxiety in the language learning process, other similes involved a direct reference to the transformation of self through the language learning process (Table 4). This reference was of particular interest to us because of its direct signaling of identity.

INSERT Table 4. The transformation of self

The first three similes in this conceptual metaphor attribute power, beauty and intelligence to learning French. The students are not talking about the process of learning French here; rather, they are describing themselves as learners and knowers of French, evident in their use of the stative verbs *feel*, *be* and *become* to describe their transformed selves. This transformation of self was also powerfully evident in the idea of automaticity as being the terminus of personal transformation. Automaticity is evident in images of fluidity, of effortless motion. Consider, for example, *Running a marathon*. While this simile is more indicative of the experience of embodied change, we note it here for how it ends with automaticity. The student goes from excitement to being ‘not so excited,’ to an awareness of how long the journey is, to thinking learning French is ‘cool,’ to then hating it, to finally the adolescent shrug, ‘meh.’ The effortlessness of *Speaking in waves* and *Letting your mind flutter like a butterfly* speaks of an almost out-of-body experience where writing and speaking in French has become part of one’s core self. In other similes in this conceptual metaphor, learning French was like *Talking*, *Tying my shoes*, *Cutting butter*, *Riding a bike*. This level of automaticity suggests a form of being rather than doing through conscious effort.

<C> Falling short

In contrast to the personal transformation and joy that comes from the relief of pain and anxiety discussed earlier, for some participants, learning French was the opposite, expressing instead a view of *not* finding a sense of self, of still looking for their voice, of being incomplete and of unresolved anxiety (Table 5).

INSERT Table 5. Falling short

In these similes, the conjunctive ‘but’ does not bring relief; rather, they bring the learner even deeper into the discouragement and frustration they have experienced as language learners. Students express being ‘at a loss,’ ‘not knowing,’ and losing in spite of earlier successes they thought they had. It is significant that in these similes the students do not position themselves as active agents; instead, they are ‘being told,’ they ‘have to’ do more to address deficiencies and unmet goals as defined by someone else. The fear of falling short itself was prominent in the last two similes – not wanting to ‘screw up,’ or, going back to a simile discussed earlier, worried about losing control like a ‘hot car, because it can get really fast, and it might fail... you could end up messing up. Failing.’ It is worth noting that it was the prompt, *Writing in French is like...* that generated these similes of falling short (71%), suggesting a view of writing as being the more difficult productive skill involved in language learning (Cheng, 2008).

<C> Embodied discomfort

For other students, learning French involved discomfort and being forced into undesirable experiences. (Table 6).

INSERT Table 6. Embodied discomfort

Similes mapping onto the ‘Embodied Discomfort’ metaphor present images of slow and prolonged pain and discomfort. Even the simile of ‘dropping a hammer on your toe,’ a sudden experience, nonetheless emphasizes prolonged pain. But even more pronounced is the lack of embodied change seen earlier in Table 3. In these similes, only *Picking a scab* suggested ultimate benefit along with productive pain: ‘I do it because it needs to be done.’ The other similes in this construct only state the negative: ‘uncomfortable,’ ‘weird,’ ‘painful,’ and ‘waste of time.’ As well, like those in Table 5, students here present a lack of active engagement or agency in their language learning process. Instead, they see themselves as being acted upon, victims trapped in situations over which they have no control: *Being in a nightmare*, having to watch a television show one doesn’t like, and having a *Fly buzz around your head*.

<C> Affect

Given the importance of affect in the development of language identity, it is significant that 73% of all the similes expressed some kind of affect (Table 7). In this construct, the focus is less on acquiring a skill or overcoming physical and cognitive challenges—the agentive components of the similes—and more about the stative components: the affect expressed and about, using Kramsch’s (2009) words, the ‘flesh-and-blood individuals who are doing the learning’ (p. 2).

INSERT Table 7. Affect

For some students, affect developed as a result of the language learning experience, especially evident in the similes related to ‘Embodied Change’ where change was described in terms of a

change in their affect. In other instances, the students' similes describe not a change in affect but rather, an attitude toward their learning experiences (e.g. annoyance, discouragement and excitement).

The notion of agency within learner investment is helpful here to understand the significance of affect with respect to the formation of identity. In fact, Kramsch (2013) identifies one of the strengths of Norton's construct of investment as being how it 'accentuates the role of human agency and identity in engaging with the task at hand, in accumulating economic and symbolic capital, in having stakes in the endeavor and in persevering in that endeavor' (p. 195). According to Duff (2012), 'Agency refers to people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation' (p. 417). With respect to language learning, a 'sense of agency enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or identities (including those of proficient L2 speaker or multilingual) and to take up concrete actions in pursuit of their goals' (p. 417) – to choose to invest in their language learning. Duff (2012) quotes Pavlenko and Lantolf (2002) who argue that the 'ultimate attainment in second language learning relies on one's agency...Agency is crucial at the point where the individuals... have to decide on whether to initiate a long, painful, inexhaustive and, for some, never-ending process of self-translation' (p.417). Even though children may have little choice or control over their L2 language learning, agency is still important for the level of effort these students might be willing to put into their language learning to reach advanced levels of L2 proficiency. Affect could thus be regarded as the motivating force influencing one's agency and their investment – whether or not they are active participants in directing their language learning, overcoming the challenges and embracing the adventure of new experience, or passive 'victims' of their L2 experience.

 Metaphor and interpretive space

In our analysis, we have considered the story and discourse of metaphor, and how the similes developed by the students in response to *Learning French is like...* mapped onto the conceptual domains of perseverance, challenge, embodied change, transformation, embodied discomfort, falling short and affect. Ultimately, metaphor as narrative is about interpretation. Both the story and the discursive dynamics of narrative present ways in which the students structure their own interpretation of their learning experiences through their similes. And while there are various possible scenarios that are acted out as author and reader come together in the interpretation of the simile (Kramsch, 2003), the simile creates for the authors an interpretive space within which meanings are negotiated and identity is formed. The following excerpt involving three participants, Chelsea, Andrea and Beth during the collaborative graffiti wall exercise, is illustrative of this process. Chelsea struggles to identify a simile and seeks input from her peers:

Excerpt 1

- 1 Chelsea: 'Speaking in French is like'. I need help.
- 2 Andrea: What do you think? Is speaking in French fun?
- 3 Chelsea: Yes.
- 4 Andrea: What is fun? What do you like to do?
- 5 Chelsea: Flying a kite.
- 6 Andrea: Put that! (with enthusiasm; laughs) It's like flying a kite!
- 7

8 (Chelsea writes on the paper)

9

10 Andrea: You like that?

11 Chelsea: YA!

12 Andrea: BAM!

13

14 (Beth joins the conversation)

15

16 Beth: Flying a kite? Stuck in a tree? (chuckles)

17 Chelsea: No.

18 Beth: Struck by lightening!

19 Chelsea: No. (laughter)

20 Chelsea: Flying a kite. I'm just going to leave it like that.

21

22 (Discussion continues during the debrief)

23

24 Chelsea: Well, I think it's fun. But you have to learn a lot, and then you tumble and fall.

25 Andrea: But then you get back up again!

26 Chelsea: Yeah!

27 Andrea: And the kite gets stuck in the tree but you get it out. If it gets stuck and you can't

28 get it out, you give up.

29 Beth: And then, finally, the wind picks it up and you're blown away with the kite.

30 (laughter)

31 Chelsea: Yeah! (laughter)

In Excerpt 1, Chelsea struggles to identify a simile that would capture her beliefs about learning French and solicits help from another group member. Andrea scaffolds the exercise by first establishing Chelsea's affect regarding learning French. 'Is speaking in French fun?' she asks (line 2). Once the affect has been determined, she then goes on to help Chelsea build a bridge (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) between 'learning French' and other 'fun' experiences she may have had (line 4). Chelsea identifies kite flying as the simile to capture the 'fun' she has had learning French. Beth joins in and attempts to extend the simile to further build meaning: 'Flying a kite? Stuck in a tree? Struck by lightning!' (line 16, 18). However, Chelsea rejects her suggestion and for now limits the meanings conveyed to 'flying a kite' (line 20). When she is given the opportunity to share the nuances of her simile during our subsequent debrief, Chelsea has a more distinct understanding of what she wants to convey through this simile. She comes back to the view that speaking in French is like kite flying for its 'fun.' However, this time she immediately inserts a qualifier: 'But you have to learn a lot and then you tumble and fall' (line 24). Rather than ending with any sense of soaring and success, she ends with the struggle and even potential failure. Andrea immediately comes to her rescue by extending the simile and the story's plot: 'But then you get back up again' (line 25). Andrea reintroduces Beth's earlier image of a 'kite stuck in the tree' which Chelsea had rejected earlier. While she suggests one can get 'unstuck,' there is also the possibility of remaining stuck and hence failing: 'If it gets stuck and you can't get it out, you give up' (lines 27—28). However, Beth steps in to redirect the image of despair to one of hope: 'And then, finally, the wind picks it up and you're blown away with the kite' (line 29). For Chelsea, then, while there is the potential of succumbing to the struggles of speaking in

French, she will ultimately be able to soar like a kite. Chelsea's 'Yeah!' at the end of the interchange is accompanied by facial expressions that suggest a sudden awareness or realization of new perspective. We are reminded again of Wenger's (1998/2008) notions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, all of which are at play as these students negotiate Chelsea's individual identity and position within this learner community of practice. Her own development of the simile positioned her as failure; her friends, and co-members of her FI community of practice, took her simile and turned it around so that it positioned her as a successful language learner. And so, we see in this excerpt how conceptual metaphor creates the interpretive space of identity formation, where, through a Vygotskian (1978) sense of shared cognition and joint enterprise shared in a community of practice, Chelsea's friends support her in her broadening sense of self.

Another example comes from the following exchange between Kevin, Joyce and Tim as Kevin clarifies his simile 'roller coaster' during the post-graffiti wall debrief:

(Excerpt 2)

- 1 I: And a roller coaster?
- 2
- 3 Kevin: Ah... I kind of mis/ I put the wrong word. I probably meant to put, like... a hot car.
- 4 Because it can get really fast; and it might fail.
- 5 Joyce: What?!
- 6 Tim: I thought you meant like 'hot', like 'good looking' [laughter], and I was like, oh...
- 7 an attractive car.

8 Kevin: It can get really fast... to speak, and you could end up messing up. Failing.

In this exchange, we again see how metaphor provides interpretative space for the construction of meaning and identity. As he described his simile to his peers, Kevin realised the ‘roller coaster’ metaphor failed to capture his full meaning. He replaces it with the simile of a ‘hot car.’ However, his peers, bringing their own assumptions to the simile, immediately assumed notions of attraction more commonly associated with the word ‘hot’ (lines 5—7). However, he had a completely different meaning in mind, instead focusing on the speed of learning French (‘it can get really fast’), and how that pace can quickly result in failure (lines 4, 8). His identity was thus more about his fear and insecurity, rather than his social image.

At play in both of these excerpts are the dynamics of the construction of identity through narrative’s dynamics of discourse (Leggo, 2008), providing an emphasis on the processes of identity construction and on the fluidity and ongoing nature of that construction. Drawing on Ricoeur’s (1991) quote once again, as narrative, metaphor is thus not so much fully ‘autonomous self-authoring’ as it is ‘active interpretation,’ bringing coherence to experience and sense of self. In this way, too, metaphor allows for a glimpse into how identities may be a ‘negotiated experience’ within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998/2008, p. 149): we ‘define who we are by the way we experience our selves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify our selves’ (Wenger, 1998/2008, p. 149).

<A> Discussion: Identity and investment

The focus of our discussion has been the identities of Grade 8 EFI students as language learners as they interpret their language learning experiences within their communities of practice. We have argued that, when seen as narrative, metaphors become an interpretive space for critical

self-reflection and identity formation. The metaphors, developed through simile statements, enabled our participants to “imagine out loud” through the co-construction of meaning what their language learning meant to them, and provide a window into the discursive construction and interpretation (narrative) of their experiences and identities. That is, metaphors became a semiotic web of meaning (Kearney, 2016) through which students developed meaning that was ‘relational and multilayered,’ utilizing the symbolic resources available to them (Kearney, 2016, p. 176). It was very clear in our data that for most of the students, language learning was understood as an embodied process, not merely a cognitive exercise. Through constructing their similes, students developed specific tools to think critically, making it possible for them to make the invisible visible through explicit comparison (Wormeli, 2009) and to build meaning. This activity was important not only for understanding the language acquisition process itself (i.e., it takes practice, it was hard, it gets easier), but for understanding that they were transformed as they engaged in that journey. As such, through understanding metaphors as narrative, it is possible to consider the active construction of students’ fluid identities within a selected community of practice, rather than considering identity as an end result. In that regard, this study is a response to the call made by Norton and Toohey (2011) that ‘The methods required for investigating the intersection between identity positions and language learning are complex...; methods that rely on static, inherent, and measurable learner ‘variables’ are not consistent with some of the major understandings’ (p. 426) of poststructural approaches to identity and sociocultural theories of learning.

Our data reflects just one moment in the ongoing identity construction of these adolescent language learners; hence these similes do not narrate complete stories. Furthermore, some of our participants were selected a-priori by the principals on the basis of their positive attitudes toward

learning and high academic achievement. As one participant told us in an aside, ‘You *do* know that you would have different answers from a different group of students.’ As high achievers, their perspectives may reflect more positive affect than that of other students. Some students were clearly motivated by the opportunity to miss class and were not always sincere in their responses. And we note the challenges of coding simile data. Boundaries between categories were not always clear, and there were often overlap and outliers that required careful consideration to achieve 100% agreement between coders.

<A> Conclusion: Metaphor for meta-cognition

In conclusion, we propose the significance of metaphor as a ‘vehicle for reflection and consciousness raising’ (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002) in the language learning classroom. Quoting from Holland et al. (1998), Norton and Toohey (2011) state, ‘Identities – if they are alive, if they are being lived – are unfinished and in process;’ therefore, teachers need to ‘regard students’ identities as potential, and to experiment with activities that do not lock students into “finalized identities”’ (p. 429). We suggest metaphor can be a powerful means to develop metacognition, especially to explore self and identity and to promote students’ reflection on their investment in the language learning process within their communities of practice. The best kind of reflection is often social and collaborative, because it is through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) that meaning is created and learning deepened; identities evolve when students negotiate, discuss, voice their concerns, experiences, emotions. Once students begin to realize that language learning is not just about developing linguistic competence but about the development of self within communities of practice, the opportunities for identity development may enhance their individual investment in language learning.

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