

Call Me “Madame”: Re-Presenting Culture in the French Language Classroom¹

H. Jay Siskin
Cabrillo College

Abstract: This study examines autobiographies of American teachers of French in order to make explicit their beliefs regarding French language and culture. The themes of class and power are prominent in these teachers’ belief systems, as is the desire for self-transformation through mastery of French and miming a subset of French behaviors. These notions can be transformed into student expectations and outcomes. Such beliefs originate in mythologies surrounding the French language, in particular, the existence of *le français correct*² and its symbolic role as a signifier of national identity and community affiliation. In light of these beliefs and practices, instructors are urged to examine their assumptions about language and culture and reflect on the importance of developing critical distance—a privileged space between outsider and insider.

Key words: culture, French language teaching, teacher education

Language: French

Introduction

“Madame, Madame,” I hear the cry for help from the back of the room. “Comment dit-on ‘doorknob’ en français?” [How do you say doorknob in French ?]

When I hear “Madame” I am not an intellectual. I am part mother, part policeman, part dictionary.

“*Poignet de porte . . .*” [Doorknob . . .] (I’m pleased that I know it) “*mais je ne suis pas dictionnaire!*”³ [but I’m not a dictionary!] (Professional responsibility: I’m not a dictionary.) “*La prochaine fois, cherchez le mot vous-même.*” [Next time, look it up yourself.] (Kaplan, 1993, p. 125)

This anecdote, excerpted from Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons*, previews a number of important issues in teacher cognition, a term Kagan uses to designate the epistemological construct of “. . . teachers’ self-reflections, beliefs, and knowledge about teaching, students, and content” (1990, p. 421).

Allen (2002) cites three rationales that justify research in teacher cognition:

1. examining the interaction between teacher beliefs and classroom actions can result in greater reflective practice;
2. engaging teachers in examining their belief system is crucial for effective teacher education;

H. Jay Siskin (PhD, Cornell University) is Professor of French at Cabrillo College in Aptos, California.

3. attempting to implement new classroom practices without considering teachers' belief systems can be counterproductive. (p. 519)

With these justifications in mind, this article seeks to explore teacher cognition in the context of the French language classroom. I will first examine the literature related to teacher cognition, highlighting the role of subjective belief systems in the formation of teacher practice. Then I will examine the importance of narrative as a source of qualitative data that elaborates these beliefs. Specifically, I will relate tokens of teacher narrative—in particular, autobiographical texts—to larger belief systems regarding French language and culture. These beliefs represent cultural “intake” and privilege issues of class and power. Moreover, teacher behaviors can actualize these beliefs and serve as instruments of cultural transmission. I will locate the origin of many of the beliefs expressed in these autobiographies in a linguistic mythology that binds French prescriptivism to national identity and social order. After illustrating autobiographical instances in which this mythology is purposefully rejected, I will identify the pedagogical implications of the study.

Teacher Belief Systems

Belief systems play a critical role in shaping teaching practices. Nespor (1987) asserts that “beliefs are more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks and problems and are strong predictors of behavior” (p. 309). In 1992, Pajares catalogued 16 fundamental assumptions that reasonably may be made when initiating a study of teachers' educational beliefs. Among the most relevant for this study are the following postulates:

- beliefs are formed early and tend to self-perpetuate;
- some beliefs are more incontrovertible than others;
- beliefs about teachings are well established by the time a student gets to college;
- beliefs are instrumental in defining tasks and selecting the cognitive tools with which to interpret, plan, and make decisions regarding such tasks;
- individuals' beliefs strongly affect their behavior; and knowledge and beliefs are inextricably intertwined (Pajares, as cited in Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999, pp. 324–326)

Belief systems concerning teaching and learning are developed in large part during our schooling experience. Lortie's (1975) “13,000-hour apprenticeship of observation”—the 16 years spent in continuous contact with teachers from kindergarten to the granting of an undergraduate degree—is widely cited to support this argument. Lortie asserts that this observation is not passive:

. . . it is usually a relationship which has consequences for the student and thus is invested with affect. Teachers possess power over their charges; for those who aspire merely to “survive” school, the teacher must at least be placated. But for persons with higher aspirations (e.g., the hope to attend college), the stakes are higher; they learn the significance of good grades and the value of teacher favor. In the terminology of symbolic interaction theory, the student learns to “take the role” of the classroom teacher, to engage in at least enough empathy to anticipate the teacher's probable reaction to his behavior. (Lortie, 1975, pp. 61–62)

Thus, by investing in a teacher's belief system, a student will be rewarded. It is no wonder that teachers acquire lasting impressions from their own experiences that are altered only with great effort (cf. Kennedy, as cited in Bailey et al., 1996).

In terms of language teacher preparation, Freeman (1992) reports on a longitudinal study in which teachers recalled their own language learning experiences. He concludes that “the memories of instruc-

tion gained through their ‘apprenticeship of observation’ function as *de facto* guides for teachers as they approach what they do in the classroom” (p. 3).⁴

Teacher Narratives

Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000)—who examine the narratives of bilinguals—remark that the social and human sciences have marginalized narrative as a legitimate source of data, even in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA). First-person narratives are perceived to be less reliable and less valid, potentially incomplete, or erroneous compared to third-person narratives. The authors also describe the imposition of “rationalist epistemology and experimental methodology” (p. 157) on SLA research, the latter field hoping to mimic the “stunning achievements” of the natural sciences. In an appeal to objectivity, first-person tellings were transformed into third-person research.

Hartman (1998) recalls the central role of teacher narrative in earlier educational practice:

To read the educational literature in this country a century ago is to realize how narrative the ways of our profession once were. Stories were the cases, the lessons, the examples, and the means which informed teacher growth and development. They were central to the enterprise of teaching and learning, not peripheral. But as the mindsets of efficiency and scientism made their way from the business and science communities into education, narratizing lost favor as an important way of communicating our professional knowledge. (p. 4)

Noting that narrative has reemerged in disciplines such as anthropology and psychology, Pavlenko and Lantolf argue that first-person narratives are valid and productive data sources. Carter (1993) insists that teachers’ stories “capture more than scores or mathematical formulæ ever can, the richness and indeterminacy of our

experiences as teachers and the complexity of our understanding of what teaching is and how others can be prepared to engage in this profession” (p. 5). She contrasts this with the “traditional atomistic and positivistic approaches in which teaching was decomposed into discrete variables and indicators of effectiveness” (p. 6).

Narrative, Biography, and Autobiography

Bruner (1990) posits five characteristics that define teacher narratives:

1. They are sequential, with meaning deriving from “the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole—its plot or fibula.”
2. They are grounded in cultural traditions and conventions.
3. They explain or explore the transformation of ordinary acts into extraordinary events, charging them with significance and providing another way of seeing the world.
4. They reveal moral stances.
5. They are experiential and epistemological constructs. (pp. 43–52)

Pavlenko and Lantolf remind us of the retroactive nature of narrative, in that “it re-presents events in accordance with their outcomes” (2000, p. 161). They further explain that narrative-based research entails detection, selection, and interpretation. Indeed, intentionality motivates the interpretation process, since a narrator’s casting of events and actions reveals a predetermined outcome.

Kelchtermans (1993) is one of a number of education researchers who has focused on the biographical perspective in teachers’ professional development. He focuses specifically on the “career story”: the way teachers retrospectively reconstruct their career experiences as a story. “In this story the facts, situations and experiences are presented in their subjective meaning for the teacher and organised into a personally meaning Gestalt” (p. 444). Kelchtermans distinguishes two strands

in the biographical narrative: During their career, teachers develop a professional self—the persona they wish to project—and a subjective educational theory, incorporating knowledge and beliefs related to their work. The researcher’s job is to reconstruct both of these constituents based on the career story.

Kelchtermans’s biographical perspective is based on five theoretical constructs: narrative, constructivistic, contextualistic, interactivist, and dynamic. In calling this perspective narrative, Kelchtermans is emphasizing the subjective, focusing less on the facts than on the meaning they have for the writer. The approach is also constructivistic: Teachers actively construe their career experiences into stories that are meaningful to them. Discourse events are always presented in their institutional, social, cultural, and intrapersonal context. Human behavior is determined by a meaningful interaction with the social, cultural, or institutional context. Finally, the dynamic aspect highlights the temporal and developmental dimension of the career story.

In their studies of autobiography in an educational context, Abbs (1974) and Graham (1991) raise many of the same points cited above. In addition, Abbs emphasizes the temporal component:

Autobiography is . . . concerned with time: not the time of the clock, but the time in which we live our lives, with its three tenses of past, present and future. Autobiography, as an act of writing, perches in the present, gazing backwards into the past while poised ready for flight into the future. (p. 7)

For Butt and Raymond, autobiography reveals “personal bias and selective recall”⁵ (as cited in Graham, 1991, p. 113). Ingham embellishes on the temporal construct in autobiography, calling it a search backwards in an effort to evaluate the true self. He cites Markus and Nurius (1986), who discuss “possible selves,” selves which, in contrast to the now self or the working self,

represent what a person might become in the future. The possible selves may express individual creativity and purpose, drawing on cultural values and simultaneously providing a cognitive frame for evaluating the actual self. Positive and negative possible selves affect motivation.

Career Stories of French Teachers

In this study, I have chosen to examine a small corpus of autobiographies, i.e., those of American teachers of French whose stories appear in print form.⁶ I have singled out American nonnative French speakers in order to focus on questions of identity and re-presentations of French culture in the classroom. I have limited myself to conventional print publications—as opposed to electronic publication—for several reasons, both pragmatic and conceptual.

In order to achieve publication, a manuscript must meet certain selection criteria, including a sufficient audience to merit the financial investment. In the case of autobiography, a publisher—and potential reader—would no doubt seek the point of view of a mature teacher, looking back at his or her career after significant events that may be construed as exemplary, i.e., containing one or several “morals” (see Bruner’s fourth point).

The book format also endows the work with a certain gravitas: a book is physically “weighty”; its dimensions can be measured; and it may be found in a quiet, sober space designed to house it.

Web publication, on the other hand, can be ephemeral. Because materials may be published on the Web without any selection criteria, they may lack the perceived validity and universality of the printed book. And because Web publishing is immediate and dynamic, it may represent an “in the moment” work in progress, rather than a mature reflection.

From Belief to Act

We have seen that there is a reciprocal relationship between teachers’ educational

beliefs and their classroom practices. In the introductory anecdote, Kaplan (1993) describes teacher behavior as “part mother, part policeman, part dictionary” (p. 125). Each of these roles involves power: a mother who nurtures, but at the same time disciplines a child for transgressions against the social code; a policeman who protects the community from unlawful or antisocial acts; and a dictionary that dictates correct spelling and linguistic usage, serving at the same time as social arbiter: incorrect spelling and pronunciation exclude the speaker from the community of the learned. An examination of Kaplan’s career story reveals the construction of these beliefs.

During an early stay in France, Kaplan developed a relationship with a man named André. Years later, after rereading a love letter in which he corrected her French usage, she remarked:

This should have been my first clue that what I really wanted from André was language, but in the short run all it did was make me feel more attached to him, without knowing why I was attached. . . . What I wanted more than anything, more than André even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French. . . . (p. 86)

Reflecting on André’s rejection of her, Kaplan confesses:

I wanted to breathe in French with André, I wanted to sweat French sweat. It was the rhythm and pulse of his French I wanted, the body of it, and he refused me, he told me I could never get that. (p. 94)⁷

In this episode, Kaplan sought to redefine her identity by acquiring “the true sounds of being French.” A number of researchers have provided a theoretical framework that validates Kaplan’s act. Weedon points out that “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and

contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (as cited in Norton, 2000, p. 21). In her study of identity and language learning, Norton notes that a student constructs identity in the space delimited by the power wielded by language learners and target language speakers. Sford’s participation metaphor (1998) interprets the act of language learning as a means of acquiring membership in a community, an act that signifies affiliation and belonging.

These insights allow us to reframe Kaplan’s relationship with André: Kaplan sought to become a member of the French linguistic community through a physical and emotional union with a native speaker. André’s grammatical corrections were a display of linguistic power, a symbolic denial of entry into this society, similar to the power of a dictionary or grammar book that judges usage as *le français correct*² or *un barbarisme* [a grossly incorrect or non-existent form].

Similarly, Kaplan’s anxiety over the pronunciation of the French “r” during her initial study in Switzerland betrays her desire to overcome her midwestern upbringing. Her American “r” is a source of dissatisfaction, an obstacle to her passing for French:

In September my “r” is clunky, the one I’ve brought with me from Minnesota. It is like cement overshoes, like wearing wooden clogs in a cathedral. It is like any number of large objects in the world—all of them heavy, all of them out of place, all of them obstacles. *Je le heurte*—I come up against it like a wall. (p. 54)⁸

In describing her American “r,” Kaplan uses images that may be applied to the peasant, the worker, the socially inferior, the outsider. Mastering the French “r,” on the other hand, identifies her as an insider and, by inference, advances her socially:

So that feeling of coming onto the “r” like a wall was part of feeling the essence of my American speech

patterns in French, feeling them as foreign and awkward. I didn't know at the time how important it was to feel that American "r" like a big lump in my throat and to be dissatisfied about it. Feeling the lump was the first step, the prerequisite to getting rid of it. (p. 54)

Kaplan has discarded her wooden clogs and her peasant status, and presumably feels at ease in the lofty cathedral.⁹

Clearly, Kaplan's motivation in learning French is integrative: "The desire to learn a language to integrate successfully with the target language community" (Norton, 2000, p. 10). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Norton asserts that learners invest in a second language to acquire a greater wealth of symbolic and material resources, thereby increasing the value of their "cultural capital" (p. 10) (cf. Bourdieu, 1982).

The notion of investment is amply illustrated in the biography of Mary D. Nelson (1989), a longtime high school teacher of French. French permits Nelson to transform herself into an upper-class woman, with the distant, authoritarian, and even contemptuous attitude that such social status may confer:

I was a French ambassador in and out of my classroom. I was Madame. In everything I said and did I created a French aura about me. In all, my note writing to students, parents, administration, and colleagues, my signature was Madame. A certain aura is a must for any teacher.¹⁰ (p. 8)

"Madame" puts this aura to good use in establishing her authority, as the following anecdote illustrates:

One day a disgruntled parent came to the guidance counselor of her child to lodge a complaint against me. The parent did not want to face me.

"Why this 'Madame' bit with Nelson?" she began as she sat down.

The counselor contemplated her visitor for a minute and replied, "Because that is who she is—Madame Nelson."

I never heard the complaint of the parent, but my guidance counselor friend delightedly told me the story and assured me that the parent went away satisfied with the counselor's explanation of my grading system. She perhaps felt no fear in facing a "Mrs.," but didn't want to face a "Madame." This can be a useful technique for self-protection. (p. 10)¹¹

During one difficult occasion, Nelson met the gaze of her adversary "with a stare more frigid and haughty than his, then I extended my hand in the typical gesture of a French upper-class woman. This was more eloquent than words" (p. 10). Upon hearing the German accent of the chair of an evaluation team, Nelson remarks:

Cultural remembrance rose within me, filling me with rebellion and thoughts of the invasion of France by German troops three times within seventy years. I extended my hand, palm down, and spoke to him in French. M[onsieur] S., the guidance director, protested, "But Madame, perhaps D[octeur]. B does not speak French." I replied in French, "My dear Monsieur S., every cultivated European speaks French." (p. 10)

Madame has "invested" in French and her cultural capital has increased.

Recalling Kaplan's desire to be transformed by the study of French, Fowlie (1977) describes his acquisition of French as a process that allows him to relive his life in a fresh and better fashion:

When we began using the first phrases in French, such as opening a door and saying that we were doing so, it was not only a new experience in language for me, but I actually seemed to be opening the door in a new way. I seized upon the opportu-

nity of making French into a ritual by means of which I might correct all my past blunders and come fresh upon the universe to manipulate it anew. French was to be, justifiably, my studied and rehearsed approach to life, the very kind I had been searching for unwittingly. (p. 14)

Lortie (1975) notes that many teachers want to add something personal to their curricular responsibilities. In addition to cognitive outcomes, these teachers hope their teaching will produce affective changes: positive attitudes among their students toward school or a particular branch of learning. This is certainly the case with Finnegan (1998) and Gegerias (1998).

As a beginning teacher, Finnegan compared herself to a medieval alchemist and magician: "I would turn the base metal [her students] into gold. I would find the magic formula; I would wield the magic wand" (pp. 57–58). But her career story reveals an entirely different outcome:

I have come to the conclusion that I have not discovered the magic formula to change my students into the earnest French scholars I thought I wanted. They still don't seem to care about the proper use of the subjunctive, although we have reaped great satisfaction together blaming it all on Cardinal Richelieu and the *Académie Française*. (p. 61)

Like Kaplan, Finnegan's students are excluded from the social order because of failure to master linguistic form. Cardinal Richelieu and the Academy, rather than André, are the villains here. But unlike Kaplan, they "don't seem to care" about this exclusion.

If Finnegan can't transform her students into gold, she believes she has still effected change: "Could we have created an alloy that is stronger and more beautiful than gold?" (p. 61) Could Finnegan instead have created a critical understanding of cul-

ture? Like Kramsch (1993), she problematizes the image of teacher as alchemist:

. . . should it really be our goal to develop in our students the same uncritical insider's experience of the target culture as those who are instrumental in forging it in a given society? Should we not give our students the tools for a critical understanding of the target culture and its social conventions? (pp. 181–182)

Apparently by coincidence,¹² Gegerias also characterizes her method of teaching as a "Cartesian elixir from the ancient art of alchemy" (p. 66) that "transmute[s] basic metals into gold" (p. 70). It is "the matrix for transforming hesitant American students of French into more confident francophiles" (p. 65) and the source of an "intellectual transformation" (p. 68).

These teachers believed that before studying French, students were equated with base metals which, through an alchemist's (i.e., teacher's) intervention, could be turned into the social signifier of wealth, status, and power: gold. French could transform the mundane into the glamorous, the hesitant into the confident.¹³

Re-Presenting French in the Classroom

The symbolic value of correct French can affect classroom behaviors, creating a distinct classroom culture. Cazden and Mehan (1989) identify the confluence of factors that create this culture: Some manifestations of the behavior prescribed for participants in the classroom community are generated from settings outside the classroom, whereas others are generated within it, influenced by the surrounding institutional context, i.e., the school and school system in which the classroom is embedded.

Teachers are primary actants in the transmission of cultural values, as Kramsch (1993) describes:

[Teachers] enact the traditional culture of the instructional setting in which they were trained; they echo

the native culture of the society in which they were socialized; they act out the behavior of speakers from the target society, which they have studied; their discourse and that of their students are full of invisible quotes, borrowed consciously or unconsciously from those who have taught them—parents, teachers, mentors—and from those who have helped build the discourse of their discipline. In fact, language teachers are so much teachers of culture that culture has often become invisible to them. (p. 48)¹⁴

Indeed, these autobiographies portray nonnative speakers who, adopting features of French cultural discursive behavior (identified below as cultural intake), transmit this behavior to their students. Kaplan describes a student who is striving to “pass” for French:

Edna is helping me think about the estrangement of working in French in American university French departments. What codes and tics and class prejudices we pass on to our students when we encourage them to speak “perfect French,” whatever that is. (p. 77)

Be it mastery of the French “r” or the subjunctive, mastery of linguistic form is confounded with personal transformation, social advancement, and power.

Language Myths and Symbolic Power

Second language acquisition theory distinguishes between second language (L2) input, the environmental language, and L2 intake, that subset of input that becomes incorporated into the learner’s developing L2 system (Mitchell & Myles 1998). A parallel distinction may be made in cultural acquisition, where second culture input represents the environmental culture and second culture intake represents a subset of input that may be the source of selected beliefs about the nature of culture.¹⁵

Although it would be highly speculative to draw firm conclusions from these biographical texts, they nevertheless suggest several questions. Given a presumably broad corpus of cultural input, why are power and class recurrent themes in these teachers’ cultural intake? How does linguistic prescriptivism empower a speaker?

To begin to answer these questions, it is useful to examine several of the myths surrounding the French language, that is, ideas about language that are so well established that they have entered the culture (cf. Bauer & Trudgill, 1998). Two of the most powerful myths concerning French are its clarity and logic. Prescriptive treatises became prominent in the 17th century with the writings of the poet and commentator Malherbe (1555–1628) and with Vaugelas (1585–1650), author of *Remarques sur la langue française* [Remarks on the French Language] (1647). The *Académie Française* (mistakenly maligned above as the perpetrator of the subjunctive) was founded in 1634. It was Richelieu’s intention that these “forty immortals” should exert absolute power over literature and language (Hall, 1974, p. 180). The Abbé Tallemant (1693) felt that French “is endowed with such a clarity and neatness that when it is used for translating purposes it has the effect of a real commentary” (as cited in Swiggers, p. 118). Louis le Laboureur (1669) wrote in his essay *Avantages de la langue française sur la langue latine* [Advantages of the French Language over the Latin]: “In all our utterances we follow exactly the order of thinking which is the order of nature. . . .” (as cited in Swiggers, p. 118).

These notions achieve notoriety in Rivarol’s prize-winning essay *Discours sur l’universalité de la langue française* [Treatise on the Universality of the French Language], published in 1784:

What distinguishes our language from the ancient and the modern ones is the order and structure of the sentence. This order must always be direct and necessarily clear. In French the subject of the discourse is named first,

then the verb which is the action, and finally the object of this action: this is the natural logic present in all human beings . . . French syntax is incorruptible. It is from this that results this admirable clarity which is the eternal basis of our language: what is not clear is not French. (as cited in Lodge, 1998, pp. 23–24)

This prescriptive tradition continues to our day, with tirades—and legislation¹⁶—dictating correct usage (see Ager, 1996, for a detailed discussion).

The importance of correct language can be linked to Romantics' notion that a language reflects national character. Lodge (1998) invokes an historical moment that inextricably bound the French language to French national identity: With the death of Louis XVI in 1793, the French language replaced the king as the symbol of national identity and as a device to ensure solidarity among the citizens. Since the French language became symbolic of the nation, representing the values of French democracy and nationhood, using the national language improperly (or not at all) makes one unpatriotic or even a traitor.¹⁷

The late 19th century linguist Graham observed that “a nation is so closely identified with its language that when one is judged, the other is necessarily; and that the language is a lasting monument of the nature and character of the people” (as cited in Crowley, 1990, p. 40).

Put in terms of more contemporary sociocultural theory, ideologies of language involve a process of “referential projection,” whereby linguistic structure is seen as both “symbolic of, and intrinsic to, the structure of the social world” (Silverstein, as cited in Albert, 2001). Thus, an orderly, uniform, and rule-governed language serves to maintain the same qualities in the larger society. It is not hard to understand why such a notion engenders a strong tradition of linguistic purism. Any surrender to linguistic innovation will disturb the social order.

Access to social power and status depends to a great extent on practicing the high-prestige variety of French. Garmadi (1981) makes a distinction between the *norme* [norm] and the *surnorme* [super-norm]. The *norme*, while ensuring communication between interlocutors and speech communities, is tolerant of variation. The *surnorme* is imposed from above: It is a register that must be used if one wishes to conform to aesthetic or sociocultural ideals, or operate within a prestigious or powerful milieu. Lodge (1993) observes that France is a society in which the *surnorme* has become particularly powerful.

Creating a Critical Distance

Nancy K. Miller begins her essay *The French Mistake* (1991) with a confession: “I am a recovering francophile. More specifically a recovering francophonie-o-phile. French has become for me a foreign language; I have given up all aspirations to the world for *français impeccable . . .*” [faultless French, with a nuance of admiration] (p. 48).

Miller had initially embraced the linguistic prescriptivism that many teachers privilege as a manifestation of cultural identity: “I was hooked on trying not to make [mistakes] and caring intensely about whether I and other people did” (p. 49).

So desirous was Miller to pass for French (i.e., not make errors) that she uses corporeal images to describe the pleasure of succeeding and the shame of failing:

I have a moment of veritable *jouissance*¹⁸ [pleasure] when a French colleague tells me I only make one mistake in pronunciation. (p. 54)

The whole point of the French mistake is that it is intersubjective and social; and like a fart or any other failure of politeness, it never goes unnoticed. (p. 49)

Miller chose to renounce the teaching of French, at least for a time, because of the anxiety created by making French mistakes. In doing so, she denied herself

the opportunity to transmit her specialized knowledge:

It's 1988. I've now become, at least in title, a professor of English, although I'm also welcome to teach in the French program. I discover that contrary to my previous practice (of teaching in my "native" language), one is expected to teach in French. But, no way. I'm not about to teach a graduate course and worry about making French mistakes in front of my students, some of whom are . . . native speakers. This could mean that I won't be teaching for the program again because "tout en français" [all in French] has become something of an article of faith. Since I am new, they graciously make an exception for me, this one time. What price French mistakes. (p. 55)

Kaplan recounts a "recovery" with a happier ending:

I read an interview in a big French daily paper with an American theater director working in Paris. This was a man who had lived in France for years and had worked his way through the system to the point of being made a director at the national theater, the *Comédie Française*. He directed, among other pieces of the patrimony, an ensemble of Molière farces. He stated in his interview that there was a moment in his life in France where he would rather have died than commit a grammar, a pronunciation, or an intonation mistake. During this period, he claimed, he had whipped his language into shapes and sounds that made it completely indistinguishable from native French. Finally "one day," as it were, he had some kind of cultural revelation and reassumed his accented French—the happy sign of his difference, which had always been his pleasure and right. (p. 178)

Pedagogical Implications

In this study, I have used autobiography to identify a number of beliefs the writers have used to construct their identity. For many of these teachers, the French language is a signifier of power and class. The French tradition of linguistic prescriptivism is used as a tool to assert control, to include or exclude, to valorize or denigrate. These beliefs and linguistic mythologies are transmitted to students by teacher behaviors and expectations, materials and activities.

I have demonstrated that in creating their personas, a number of these teachers have selected a subset of cultural "input"—their cultural "intake"—based on perceived social flaws or a desire for personal transformation. Others have engaged in a more critical examination of their assumptions regarding language learning and identity, and have questioned or rejected their initial behaviors and expectations. They have "recovered."

I would argue that the notion of recovery—in the sense of recovering a critical distance toward the French language and culture—is the most important pedagogical implication of these autobiographies. To initiate the process of recovery, we as teachers need to make explicit our assumptions about language and culture.

A useful first step would be the construction and critical examination of our "career story" (cf. Klechtermans, 1993). What factors have contributed to the formation of our professional self? What persona have we created? What sort of (idealized) native speaker/culture bearer are we emulating?

We also must elucidate our subjective educational theory. This step requires critical reflection on our classroom practices. Do we focus on form to the exclusion of more interactive activities? When and how do we correct? Do we proscribe *t'as* [d'ya have] or *je sais pas* [dunno] or allow for linguistic variation? Are we transmitting a unitary and static culture, or do we acknowledge cultural difference and evolution?

Finally, we need to examine our expected outcomes. Are we asking students to transform their personal or social identities, or are we giving them both an insider's and outsider's perspectives on the second culture (cf. Kramsch, 1993). Like Madame Nelson, do we try to create a French aura in everything we say and do? Or are we enabling students to distinguish knowledge about the culture (cultural competence) and experience of the culture (cultural performance), as suggested by Nostrand (1989) and Valdman (1992)?¹⁹

At a sentimental level, we may be reluctant to abandon our "alchemist" role, sensing perhaps some disloyalty to the past, both to the pattern of teaching that we experienced as students and to past teaching patterns. We may also desire to conform to prevailing patterns of teacher behavior, a conformity that provides comfort and security (Prabhu, 1987). But by enabling students to develop a critical understanding of linguistic and cultural difference, we can, as Finnegan noted, create an alloy that is stronger and more beautiful.²⁰

Notes

1. My title alludes to Irving Berlin's 1950 musical *Call Me Madam*, starring Ethel Merman as Sally, a brash ambassador to the fictional country of Lichtenburg. In one exchange, her chargé d'affaires, Maxwell, chastises her: "As Chargé d'Affaires, you will take advice from me. The embassy must not suffer from your ignorance, Mrs. Adams." To which Sally responds icily: "Call me Madam!" My title also references a reflection made by a language teacher, who likewise played the role of ambassador: "I was a French ambassador in and out my classroom. I was Madame."
2. The term of *le français correct* signifies more than the literal translation "correct French." It conveys the notion of adhering to the rules of the normative language.
3. This formulation, with the deletion of the indefinite article, is unusual. The indefinite article is usually deleted only before a noun indicating profession, nationality, or religion. One would therefore expect *Je ne suis pas un dictionnaire*. Is Kaplan assimilating the notion of dictionary to that of a profession? Or in the "worst" possible interpretation, is Kaplan committing a French mistake, perhaps in a playful way to illustrate her "happy difference"?
4. See Allen (2002) and Magnan and Tochon (2001) for additional discussion and references to this expanding field of research.
5. Cf. Sarup, 1996: "We know that the past always marks the present, but often the past consists of a selectively appropriated set of memories and discourses" (p. 40).
6. This sampling, albeit small, represents all but four of the resources produced by a WorldCat search using the key words "French teachers, United States, biography." Robert Greer Cohn's *Buttercups, and So Forth* (1992) was consulted but yielded little in the way of beliefs about language learning. *The Philosopher's Demise/Learning French* (2003), a humorous look at an American's efforts to master French, took place in a mostly French context. The book offers fascinating glimpses of French pedagogical techniques, cross-cultural differences in educational philosophy, and musings about the feminine nature of French. James H. Grew's *Wasp Without a Sting* (1979) and *W. T. Bandy: Tributes and Reminiscences*, edited by Khama-Bassili Tolo (1990), are unavailable.
7. It is tempting to add a Freudian reading to this episode: "The ego-ideal is what one would like to be. In many forms of love-choice, the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego-ideal of our own" (Sarup, 1996, p. 33).
8. Interestingly, Bourdieu (1982) uses the example of the uvular ("standard") "r" instead of the rolled "r" as a sign of symbolic domination, emblematic of the dominance of the *langue d'oïl*

[medieval northern Gallo-Roman dialects and their modern-day varieties] at the expense of the *langue d'oc* [dialects of southern French from the medieval times to the present].

9. Ingham (1996), in a paraphrase of Freud, observes: "Mismatches between real and ideal selves produce shame and guilt, whereas elation results when the person approximates the ideal in reality, fantasy, or delusion" (p. 98). See below where Miller uses the term *jouissance* [pleasure] to describe her emotional/physical state when producing correct French.
10. The use of the term Madame (or Monsieur) by American teachers of French is emblematic of the argument I make in this article, i.e., that the persona created by some French teachers transmits a discourse of power and privilege. This practice is discussed on the blog <http://walisabeth.blogspot.com>, whose posts I reproduce below. All posts were created on June 14, 2006, and retrieved on September 11, 2006.

I personally really do not like two French teaching traditions:

- calling a female French teacher "Madame" or a male French teacher "Monsieur."
 - giving French names to students.
- But it's my personal opinion, and I do respect those who like doing those two things. (Elisabeth)

I think the American tradition of calling the French teacher "Madame" is kinda cute, and that is why I keep it up. When we're at big tourist spots, however, there are so many American kids yelling "Madame!" to so many French teachers that we're all looking around to see who wants what All The Time. "Who Madame'd me?" is a question that is often on my lips. (Michèle)

And this folks, leads me today to a brief discussion on that most wonderful experience that befalls many

a language teacher at the high school or university level: That of taking groups of students to a foreign country. . . . Let me tell you about the chaperones—well, at least two of them who still stick in my mind. One of them was your typically obnoxious French teacher whom the kids called "Madame" . . . and who thought that she was more French than the French. . . . This woman was a royal pain in the ass, because she constantly behaved like a prima-dona. (Elisabeth)

11. Following Ingham (1996), we may reframe this episode in psychosocial terms:

Social impressions are staged through dress, manners, tastes, speech, habits, and expertise. People may affirm social status by dropping names or alluding to their occupations, pastimes, and other activities. The notion of "defense mechanism" ordinarily refers to the way in which individuals manage impulses and self-representations. But the functions of defense mechanisms are not merely subjective or intrapsychic. The control of disturbing impulses, thoughts, and feelings figure in discursive practices oriented toward influencing social others. The use of defense mechanisms informs discourse about self and other. Thus it can play a role in persuasive characterizations of self and other. (pp. 95–96)

12. Both stories occur in the same edited volume.
13. Coincidentally, Lortie (1975) also uses the image of metal. In his words, Finnegan's and Gergerias's purpose would be to "solder the student . . . to a particular subject" (p. 114).
14. Cf. Jorden (1992) for an example from the Japanese language classroom.
15. I am not suggesting that these terms have the same theoretical scope of their counterparts in second language acquisition (SLA). Cultural acquisition can-

not be modeled after SLA, although I would claim that cultural contrasts “drilled” in the classroom or in study abroad experiences often represent a type of “structured intake”: “When I took a group of students to Paris for the first time in June of 1988, I wanted to control their experience. Obligatory walks. A scavenger hunt. Look what I saw! Love what I loved!” (Kaplan, 1993, p. 208)

16. The Loi Toubon [Toubon Law] (1994), which seeks to privilege French in a variety of domains, begins with the declaration:

Langue de la République en vertu de la Constitution, la langue française est un élément fondamental de la personnalité et du patrimoine de la France.

Elle est la langue de l'enseignement, du travail, des échanges et des services publics.

Elle est le lien privilégié des Etats constituant la communauté de la francophonie.

[Language of the Republic by virtue of the Constitution, the French language is a fundamental element of France's personality and patrimony.

It is the language of instruction, work, exchanges, and public services.

It is the privileged link among the States that constitute the francophone community.]

17. Cf. the famous observation of the revolutionary Bertrand Barère, excerpted from his *Rapport du Comité de Salut Public sur les Idiomes* (8 pluviôse an 2) [Report of the Committee of Public Welfare on Languages (8th day of the month of pluviôse, year 2 of the Revolutionary Calendar)] and cited in Hagège, 2006: “le fédéralisme et la superstition parlent bas-breton, l'émigration et la haine de la République parlent allemand” (il voulait dire “alsacien”), “la contre-révolution parle italien” (entendre “corse”), et “le fanatisme parle basque” (pp. 212–213). [Federalism and superstition speak

Breton, emigration and hatred for the Republic speak German (he meant Alsatian), the counter-revolution speaks Italian (i.e., Corsican), and fanaticism speaks Basque.]

18. Does she mean mere enjoyment or sexual pleasure? Undoubtedly both. In an earlier passage, Miller (1991) describes “the fatal connection between French and sex (or at least French professors and American girls)” (p. 54). One might add American boys to this formulation. Oxenhandler (1996), in his quest for transcendence through French, altered his sexual identity: “I was willing to make myself over, to become a gay man, if it meant that the treasure of French culture would be mine” (p. 86).

19. It is worthwhile to consider whether American teachers of French who take on a French identity create an antipathy among students and cause a negative impact on enrollment. The following post appeared on the Web on July 22, 2006:

I never have been a fan of France (I blame all those horrible French language teachers I had . . . the only one who was any good was from Provence, the rest were those *annoying Americans who think they are more French than the French*... [italics added].

Hagège (2006) likewise recognizes the negative outcomes of an overinsistence on “correct” French for the future of French language teaching:

Les témoignages sont nombreux d'étrangers ayant du français une connaissance très satisfaisante et qui, pourtant, hésitent à s'en servir, car ils redoutent les écarts par rapport à la grammaire ou les prononciations repérées comme étrangères, . . . Les anglophones n'ont pas, en matière de langue, le perfectionnisme que l'on considère parfois comme un trait de la personnalité française. Afin de conjurer le péril de désaffection de la

part des étrangers, qui est une réelle menace pour le français, il importe de mettre beaucoup de discernement dans la manière de les aider à utiliser le français, ce qui ne signifie en aucune façon qu'il faille leur enseigner un français fautif, ni, moins encore, l'encourager. (p. 178)

[Many are the tales of foreigners who have a very satisfactory knowledge of French and yet who hesitate to use it, because they fear slips in grammar and pronunciation that will mark them as foreigners . . . English speakers do not display the linguistic perfectionism that is sometimes considered characteristic of the French personality. In order to avoid the peril of disaffection among foreigners, which is a real threat for French, it is important that we take great care in the way we help them use French, which is not at all to say that we should teach them incorrect French, much less encourage it.]

20. Lavenne (1987) has formulated a "test" to determine a teacher's pedagogical style and goals. Although dated, this test would nevertheless be a useful tool in elaborating subjective educational theories. Here are some representative questions:

Quand un étudiant commet une faute, le professeur doit:

- (a) *corriger cette faute immédiatement.*
- (b) *demander aux autres étudiants ce qu'ils en pensent.*
- (c) *donner la règle correcte.*

L'objectif d'un cours de français, c'est:

- (a) *parler un français correct.*
- (b) *se débrouiller dans diverses situations de communication.*
- (c) *ne pas faire de fautes d'orthographe.*

Il ne faut pas enseigner des mots familiers comme "sympa", "chouette", "bag-nole", "flic", "mec", "nana" . . .

- (a) *oui.*
- (b) *non.*

Laquelle de ces deux phrases ("je ne sais pas" et "je sais pas" faut-il enseigner?

- (a) *je ne sais pas.*
- (b) *je sais pas.*
- (c) *les deux.* (pp. 211-213)

[When a student makes a mistake, the teacher must:

- (a) *correct this mistake immediately.*
- (b) *ask other students what they think of it.*
- (c) *give the correct rule.*

The goal of a French course is to:

- (a) *speak correct French.*
- (b) *get through a variety of communicative situation.*
- (c) *not to make spelling errors.*

One should not teach familiar words such as "sweet," "awesome," "ride," "cop," "guy," "chick" . . .

- (a) *yes.*
- (b) *no.*

Which of these two sentences ("I don't know" and "I dunno") should one teach?

- (a) *I don't know.*
- (b) *I dunno.*
- (c) *both.*]

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