"Could I have spoken in my own tongue": negotiating identity through second language performance in Villette

Ana Carolina Tavares Meira Lima*

Abstract: This article examines how the character Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* perform a role similarly to actors on stage, when speaking in a foreign language, consequently reconstructing her social role and identity throughout the novel. Furthermore, I argue that some performances in second language oppose certain personal traits displayed by the character when speaking in her mother tongue. The findings of this research are based on an interdisciplinary approach, in which language theories are coupled with Victorian fiction studies, in order to analyse the discourse of the character, paying close attention to how it shapes her identities.

Keywords: Second language identity. Theatricality. Victorian literature.

Who are you, Miss Snowe? Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise (BRONTË, 1984, p. 307).

his question, posed by Ginevra Fanshawe, permeates *Villette*, intriguing the inhabitants of the town along with contemporary critics pursuing Lucy's elusive identity. Who is Lucy Snowe? Is she a working Englishwoman, a school teacher or perhaps an actress? Can she perform all these roles at once? Fascinated by this mysterious character, Ginevra questions Lucy about her identity, however, her reply to Ginevra's inquiry leaves her unsatisfied. Instead of clarifying who she is, Lucy adopts an identity that remains undefined. This quote functions as an epigraph to Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Lucy Snowe reveals here a fundamental characteristic that many contemporary critics found unbearable: the lack of coherent identity Lucy expresses throughout the novel. The Oxford English Dictionary (2012) defines "personage" as

^{*} Universidade do Porto – Porto – Portugal. *E-mail*: carol_tavaresml@hotmail.com

"a character adopted or impersonated, esp. in a play; a guise; an assumed role or office". Lucy's statement that she is a "personage in disguise" raises several points for discussion regarding her social role, and her self-awareness. By naming herself a "personage", Lucy demonstrates that she is consciously playing a role instead of acting as her "true self", or performing in accordance to social rules. This, in turn, raises a further question: to what extent can any individual claim to have a "true" identity? According to Blair Wilson (2011, p. 8), "Lucy is a character and narrator who evades identification", and, for this reason, she becomes a troublesome personage for interpretation. While Lucy's reluctance or inability to present a cohesive identity has been highly criticized, it also represents a critical part of the novel's primary theme and, as such, cannot be dismissed. For instance, Lucy's unstable character deconstructs the notion that a unified identity is necessary.

The main concern of this chapter will be to analyse how Lucy gradually constructs a new identity for herself while performing in a second language, as she builds a life in *Villette*. In order to illustrate the argument, two scenes will be discussed: Lucy's first lecture in Madame Beck's school, and her role in the amateur play organized by M. Paul. These two scenes were chosen because Lucy performs a role rather different from her usual character of governess. The theatricality found within these performances will be closely analyzed, bearing in mind Auerbach's (1990, p. 189) comment that in *Villette*, "performances are as central to [the] story as secrets". In doing so, the new identities Lucy Snowe constructs through these roles will be demonstrated.

When attempting to analyse Lucy Snowe, it will also be crucial to bear in mind the concept of identity as varied and constantly changing according to social and cultural constructions, human interaction and other factors. As Gerard Duveen and Barbara Lloyd (1990, p. 22) have summarized, "Identities can be defined as positions in relation to social representations since people make sense of themselves and their experiences by drawing on and reconstructing social representations". These social representations are normally expressed through discourse, which characterizes the concept of language as central to the analysis proposed in this dissertation. Language as a social interactive activity plays an essential role in constructing one's identity¹. As a relevant cognitive tool that improves communicative performance, language enables the individual to express their thoughts. However, language does not exist only in the inner realm, but it is influenced by the context and environment in which the speaker is active. This constant influence upon language will, consequently, be reflected in the individual's perception of his/her own self; therefore, multiple identities will appear when individuals speak in different languages. Chris Weedon (1997, p. 32) has argued that identities, which she calls subjectivities, are "constantly reconstituted" through discourse. This notion has a strong connection to David Block's (2009, p. 2) statement that subjects "position themselves and are positioned by others depending on where they are, who they are with and what they are doing", which reinforces the understanding that social context will influence their self-fashioning. Considering these linguistic concepts, this dissertation will take as a premise the perception of identity as multiple, and constantly reshaped

¹ The term has been used by Luiz Antônio Marcuschi (2008).

by the individual through their experiences, both influenced by external factors but also by internal subjectivity. Block's work (2009, p. 5) represents a key critical text in the analysis proposed here, as his interest in "individuals who must make a new life mediated by a new culture and language", applies exactly to Lucy Snowe's characterisation in *Villette*. Lucy Snowe moves to a city where her first language is not spoken. There, she finds herself searching for work, and faces the need to adapt to Labassecourian culture, as well as the French language. According to Block (2009, p. 5), in this situation "individuals must reconstruct and redefine themselves if they are to adapt to their new circumstances".

A useful example of how critics have observed this multiplicity in her character can be found in Nina Auerbach's (1990, p. 189) statement that Lucy "has no ordered self to bestow on her reader; instead, she erupts fitfully and multiply in a succession of disjointed performances". Reflecting on this statement, I will examine to what extent Brontë's protagonist's performance as a second language speaker contributes to the multiplicity in perceived in her identity. I will argue that Lucy negotiates her identity and engages in self-fashioning when she speaks in French. In addition, it is important to consider how the performance of different social roles affects her intrinsic character, defined by Voskuil (1995, p. 410) as an "originary self and essential identity". Given that, my argument examines the development of identities specifically when the character is performing in French, without reflecting on other factors, I will use the terms L1 and L2 "selves" to refer to Lucy's identities when speaking in her mother tongue and in a second language, as these are central to my overall argument. Aside from the intrinsic social performance of her gender, Lucy also plays distinct parts as a teacher and an actress, both in French language. In these moments, she behaves in a manner dissimilar to her L1 self. In the construction of her L2 self, Lucy creates a protective boundary from the society of spectacle that surrounds her. Furthermore, I will discuss the theatricality within these performances, using Voskuil's (1995, p. 410) premise that "theatricality often functions to disrupt conceptions of an originary self and essential identity that ostensibly exist apart from the discourses and practices of specific cultures". In a way, arguing that an L2 self is constructed while speaking in a foreign language also implies a disruption of the "originary" self. Instead, what I propose is that what Brontë explores in Lucy's character is the existence of multiple selves, each continually fashioned according to the individuals' experiences.

The scene in which Lucy makes the statement, "Could I but have spoken in my own tongue, I felt as if I might have gained a hearing" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 80), represents one of the first moments of the novel in which language plays a role in negotiating a character's identity. Brontë presents Lucy as aware that she can express herself most truthfully and eloquently in her mother tongue. The ability to communicate thoughts in a non-native language is significant, especially if we consider the fact that speakers re-negotiate their identity if they have difficulties in expressing their desires accurately. Struggling to fit into the new environment of *Villette*, Lucy learns to speak French. While working as a governess for Madame Beck, Lucy is placed in a classroom and required to give a lecture without any previous notice. Unable to express herself accurately in French, Lucy faces a challenging situation, which requires both a reconstruction and redefinition of her identity for adaption purposes (BLOCK, 2009, p. 8). In the scene from which the previous quote is taken, it is clear that Lucy's inability to express her will in

a foreign language represents a drawback for her. Not being allowed to communicate in her mother tongue automatically places her in a position where she does not have a voice. As expressed by Lucy, it is her "own tongue", therefore it represents an inner part of her being, and consequently, not making use of it requires a reshaping of who she is. Understanding that Lucy's mother tongue is a fundamental expression of her national and cultural identity reinforces the idea that Lucy's L1 self is to a certain extent compromised, thus implying that her L2 self cannot completely translate her thoughts in an equivalent manner.

According to Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 82), speakers of foreign languages will begin to feel safe and secure when expressing themselves once they have constructed a new identity. I argue here that a similar cognitive process happens to Lucy Snowe within Villette. The reshaping of an L1 self into an L2 occurs as a response to external demands, such as other subjects and the surroundings. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter enlightens the reader to Lucy's feelings of insecurity that are a direct result of her incapability to express herself as she wishes to. Since she now lives where, "it was French, and French only, the whole world seemed now gabbling" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 61), Lucy must adapt herself to the new environment and position in different perspectives, consequently reshaping her identity. At first, however, Lucy feels unable to relate to what seems to be incoherent and unintelligible sounds uttered by the people in Villette. Lucy's insecurity and inability to communicate in French reflects her status as an outsider in Villette, which given her current circumstances - unemployed and having no relatives there - represents the "whole world".

As linguistic identity can reflect a sense of belonging to a community, so can identities more broadly be understood "as positions in relation to social representations since people make sense of themselves and their experiences by drawing on and reconstructing social representations" (ANDREOULI, 2010, p. 14.3). Lucy's position in society shifts as her L2 identity grows, and she is portrayed as "a rising character". As Lucy herself describes, she was "once an old lady's companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 309), concluding the novel as the director of a boarding school. However, Lucy's capacity to position herself within her surroundings is not limited to her profession, but can also be perceived in the way she fashions herself to adequately assume the roles imposed upon her. When unwillingly persuaded to teach by Madame Beck, Lucy confronts her reluctance to impose her will upon other people. In this scene and as an educator, Lucy is responsible for an entire class of French girls who are not eager to listen to her demands. According to Julia Kent (2010, p. 335), "The first time that Lucy's speech is rendered in French is also the first occasion on which she is given the opportunity to do a kind of theater". From the reader's perspective, given her previous performances in the novel, and description by other characters and herself, Lucy seems rather "quiet", an "inoffensive shadow" of a character (BRONTË, 1984, p. 317). However, when she finds herself in an unknown environment, she resolves to behave in an entirely new manner so that she can cope. Assuming "to the outside world" the role of "an independent, confident teacher" (FORSYTH, 1997, p. 17), Lucy Snowe gives the first steps towards building an opposing L2 self. Through close reading of this episode, the process of transformation can be more clearly examined. Most importantly, the text reveals that Lucy is self-aware; she observes

how her attitude contradicts her L1 identity, and she is capable of acknowledging that her performance would have been quite different in other circumstances:

I could, in English, have rolled out readily phrases stigmatizing their proceedings as such proceedings deserved to be stigmatized; and then with some sarcasm, flavoured with contemptuous bitterness, for the ringleaders, and relieved with easy banter for the weaker, but less knavish followers, it seemed that one might possibly get command over this wild herb and bring them into training at last (BRONTË, 1984, p. 80).

However, in this linguistic context, Lucy is not secure enough in her second language to behave as she wishes. Acknowledging that her current situation does not allow her to communicate in her mother tongue, Lucy Snowe realizes the necessity of adopting strategies in order to reduce the effects of not speaking in her native tongue. Not being able to speak in English prevents her from expressing clearly her ideas, and consequently, she cannot define her sense of self in a second language. Instead, by making use of body language and "looking as cold and careless" as she "possibly could" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 80), Lucy assumed a position that dramatically contrasted to that she would naturally assume. Lucy is not naturally "cold and careless", but by assuming this mask she can express what words cannot: "All [she] could do now was to walk up to Blanche [...] and in the face of the whole school, tear the blotted page in two" (BRONTE, 1984, p. 80). Without recourse to her natural sarcasm, not only does Lucy act in a forceful, almost harsh manner at odds with her earlier self-portrayal as "calm", but she also claims that she has no other option (BRONTË, 1984, p. 22). The character feels trapped to such an extent that an instinctive self-fashioning process takes place. The cognitive process here is neither unconscious nor optional. Lucy realizes she is performing a character who does not exactly match her personality, but she does not seem to have an alternative other than to leave the classroom. It is crucial to consider that even though her reaction is not orally expressed through a second language performance, it is the incapacity of using her mother tongue that triggers it. An L2 self is not only constructed while the individual communicates in a second language, but instead it is the identity assumed when dealing with situations in a second language.

As examined in the previous paragraph, Lucy Snowe presents what can be considered a second identity, when assuming the role of teacher. To use Robyn R. Warhol's (1996, p. 857) term, "doubleness" is a recurrent trope associated with both feminine and feminist perspectives. Considered a strategy for negotiating difference, such as "male and female, center and margin, inside and outside, public and private", doubleness can be defined as a resistance to "categorization as one thing or the other; to invoke 'doubleness' is to address binary oppositions without resting comfortably in either of the two terms being opposed" (WARHOL, 1996, p. 857). Recalling Blair Wilson's (2011, p. 8) argument that Lucy Snowe is a character that avoids categorization, this concept can be clearly applied when analyzing her performances. In *Villette*, doubleness is perceived within Lucy Snowe's characterization in her contrasting performances in different languages. The main binary opposition here is related to the L1 and L2 self Lucy presents throughout the novel. However, observing the moments where this dissonance comes to the surface of the text suggests that more than a

double perspective might be at work in this novel. In the episode where Lucy gives a lecture, the L1 and L2 selves present the following oppositions: the "calm" Lucy Snowe in opposition to a harsh, "aggressive" one who tears up pupil's work because of blotted pages; a "shadowy" personality against an "educator" who is placed in the center of a classroom; a "reasonable" Englishwoman and an "instinctive" one who voicelessly reacts to control her students. In effect, in *Villette*, doubleness grows to become multiplicity, and binary oppositions are instead presented as an inter-connected web.

A second passage of the novel in which it is possible to notice a similar process is in chapter 14, when Lucy Snowe becomes an actress in an amateur school play. Before analyzing this episode, it is crucial to consider the novel's context, in particular the anti-theatrical instincts associated with Victorianism; this undoubtedly influenced Brontë's construction of Lucy's perception of acting. Observing how Lucy understands stage performances allows us to notice the alterations in her identity when she has to perform in a play speaking in French. Although the nineteenth century is famously known as the performing era, there was widespread prejudice against theatrical acting. According to Nina Auerbach (1990, p. 185):

The Victorian theater evoked fears of theatrical specters invading daily life. If the impulses, the needs, and the development of the self were products of nature [...] that self could guide the growth of others; but theatricality, artificial, protean, teasing, and disturbingly female, made the self, a demonic antagonist of the soul.

The ability to pretend emotions and artificially perform daily activities represented to society the fear of not knowing when the other was being true to his/ her self. The belief that the artist was capable of replacing his/her consciousness with the character's had an alarming parallel with spiritual possession, reinforcing the notion of theatricality as the "antagonist of the soul". In Villette, when invited by Dr. John to accompany him to a theatre presentation to watch the performance of a well-known actress named Vashti, Lucy offers glimpses of a similar demoniac view of natural acting. Interestingly, the phrase Lucy uses to describe the theatrical artist presented in the novel is "disturbingly female". Auerbach (1990, p. 189) considered this novel a "murky achievement because it embraces rather than repudiates the theatrical specter that haunted its age", and Lucy's lexical choice here reflects the anti-theatricality sentiment of Brontë's social context. In an attempt to express the affective power of Vashti's acting skills, Lucy states that "in each of her eyes sat a devil" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 257). Her linguistic association of the actress' ability with "evil forces" is a clear moral judgment on the entire profession.

It is ironic, therefore, that Lucy ends up joining the school's amateur play. Although she is reluctant to perform, M. Paul's insistence makes her feel obliged to take part. Her acceptance surprises the other participants, who do not expect this from an Englishwoman, not only due to the stereotype, but also because of her shy personality. The scene in which Lucy plays the part of a "fop" has been widely analysed from varied perspectives, but the presence of cross-dressing and the transformation of gender identity has attracted particular attention. For Nicole Bush (2010),

Lucy's narrative of self-determination reflects this construction of gender through dress and costume, and through the continually changing (changing in both senses of the word: changing vogues, and literally the taking on and off of clothing) fashions of dress which Lucy employs to play with and construct a definition of the self.

Without contradicting previous interpretations of the passage, I wish to point that acting in a second language enables Lucy to positively embrace the theatricality within the play, and perform the role naturally. Julia Kent (2010, p. 327) has argued that in *Villette*, "The Englishwoman's character tends to be constrained within the home, the nation, and the discourses that underwrite them, yet theatricality can lead to a self-fashioning that breaks through these constraints".

When acting in the play using a second language, Lucy overcomes her constraints, and consequently constructs a new definition of her self. In this scene, the stage suppresses the theatricality within her Englishwoman's character and enables her to expand it to a real theatrical experience, as a result of the comfort zone provided by the mask of the L2 self. As summarized by Kent (2010, p. 336), "It is the French language that marks the particular transgressions that Lucy performs". Once again, Lucy faces an uncomfortable situation in which "the foreign language, the limited time [and] the public display" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 134) represent barriers for her. In the first moment, Lucy finds it "impossible to perform" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 135) and her confusion "is of such greatness that she could hardly tell how [she] felt" (BRONTE, 1984, p. 141). In this scene, Lucy not only assumes the identity of a fop, but also finds herself able to act through her second language speech: "I knew myself but a fop, but where he was outcast I could please" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 137). This context, plus the presence of a second language identity, encourages Lucy to become aware of a multiple identity. As Lucy states: "I put my idea into the part I performed", and "I played it with relish" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 137). Lucy's ability to "[draw] out of it a history" makes her performance less amateur and superficial, and demonstrates how her own identity as a performer becomes blended with the character. As Voskuil (1995, p. 410) has described, Brontë regulates her heroine's inherent theatricality by using theatricality to enhance "women's capacities to elude naturalized sexual and gender roles in the theatre and to construct their own identities on stage". As such, Lucy Snowe is capable of constructing her identity as a natural actress.

In Lucy's role in the play, language represents a drawback for her performance, and she is partly able to overcome this lack of voice with the use of body language. In the same scene, language plays an opposing role. Instead of constraining the character, it acts as a tool to release her artistic skills. In the following passage, it becomes evident that "her own voice", once found, is what enables her to embrace her role:

That first speech was the difficulty; it revealed to me that, it was not the crowd I feared, so much as my own voice [...] When my tongue got free, and my voice took its true pitch, and found its natural tone, I thought of nothing but the personage (BRONTË, 1984, p. 140).

Here, the cognitive process stated by Diane Larsen Freeman takes place, and once Lucy assumes her L2 self and "frees her tongue" in a foreign language, she

feels safer and more secure as a second language speaker. As any language learner, Lucy fears her own voice when uttering words in a tongue which is not her own. Again, Lucy has to make use of an L2 identity in order to face a situation in which she is completely exposed and surrounded by spectators. In a manner similar to the reactions found in the passage, in which she teaches for the first time, Lucy presents conflicting emotions about the situation she has to face. Soon after her performance, Lucy once again finds herself displeased with the idea of theatricality:

Yet the next day, when I thought it over, I quite disapproved of these amateur performances; and though glad that I had obliged M. Paul, and tried my own strength for once, I took a firm resolution never to be drawn into a similar affair (BRONTË, 1984, p. 141).

However, this reveals that Lucy acknowledges her behavior when performing the roles of actress and teacher are different to how she would normally speak and perform orally in her mother tongue. The inability to fully express herself in French is replaced by the mask that is provided by a foreign language. Auerbach (1990, p. 189) argues that in this episode Lucy "finds her forbidden courage and imagination when she plays a man in a school play". More than that, Lucy presents the reader with an unknown side of her identity, which is further developed in her L2 self. In both situations, Lucy deconstructs the identity, from which we can conclude the influence of L2 language in contributing to the reconstruction of her L1 self. The way Lucy positions herself in relation to the situations she needs to face also reinforces the presence of acting as crucial to the construction of a new identity. In both scenes, Lucy enacts a performance. Although only the second situation is literally theatrical, the first "act" has a similar interaction between actor and spectator. As a teacher, Lucy is positioned in front of an audience of students, and her theatricality is presented in the shape of self--fashioning herself to the identity demanded by the situation. It is also possible to observe that Lucy's L2 self embraces the actress within her nature, which enables her to present a stricter and more direct manner for dealing with the students. The presence of an L2 self is clearly perceived through the "masks" that Lucy creates in both scenes analyzed in this chapter. In the first, she wears the mask of a "cold and careless" teacher, while in the second scene, Lucy replaces her natural attitude with the creative identity of the "fop" (BRONTË, 1984, p. 80).

The main conclusion which can be drawn from the discussion of these scenes is that Lucy Snowe presents an L2 self which is ambiguously connected to her essential identity, and is active not only while she speaks in her mother tongue, but also when incapable of using her mother tongue. This opposing characterization can be clearly noticed. In the first episode discussed, her calm and passive nature is replaced by an aggressive and forward person who deals strictly with her students. In the second scene, anti-theatrical Lucy not only performs the role of a male character, but also one whose personality completely opposes hers. It is important to notice that her disjointed narration already causes her character to be hard to define (WILSON, 2011, p. 8). However, the argument here does not aim to deconstruct the criticism regarding Lucy's capacity to evade identification, but rather to state that the multiplicity in her identity is reinforced by her performances in a second language. Speaking in French is another narrative resource that allows Brontë to develop the transformation in Lucy's character.

"SE EU PUDESSE FALAR EM MINHA LÍNGUA": NEGOCIAÇÃO DE IDENTIDADE ATRAVÉS DE PERFORMANCE EM UMA SEGUNDA LÍNGUA NA OBRA VILLETTE

Resumo: O presente artigo examina como a personagem Lucy Snowe, protagonista da obra *Villette*, da escritora Charlotte Brontë, assume um papel semelhante aos atores em um palco, ao comunicar-se em língua estrangeira. Tal processo tem por consequência uma reconstrução de seu papel social e identidade ao longo da narrativa. Além disso, argumenta-se que algumas de suas performances em segunda língua opõem-se às características apresentadas pela personagem, ao falar em língua materna. Os resultados desta pesquisa foram obtidos através de um estudo interdisciplinar, onde teorias linguísticas foram utilizadas em conjunto com estudos acerca da ficção Vitoriana, a fim de analisar o discurso da personagem, com foco na forma como língua molda identidade.

Palavras-chave: Identidade em segunda língua. Teatricalidade. Literatura vitoriana.

REFERENCES

ANDREOULI, E. Identity, positioning and self-other relations. *Papers on Social Representations*, v. 19, p. 14.1-14.13, 2010.

AUERBACH, N. *Private theatricals*: the lives of the Victorians. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

BRONTË, C. Villette. Edited by Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1984.

BUSH, N. "I would keep my own dress": self-determination and the roles of power dressing in *Villette. The Luminary*, issue 2, Summer 2010. Disponível em: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/luminary/issue2/issue2article5.html>. Acesso em: 1 maio 2014.

BLOCK, D. Second language identities. London: Continuum, 2009.

DUVEEN, G.; LLOYD, B. B. Social representations and the development of knowledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

FORSYTH, B. The two faces of Lucy Snowe: a study in deviant behaviour. *Studies in the Novel*, v. 29, n. 1, p. 17-25, Spring 1997.

KENT, J. D. "Making the prude" in Charlotte Brontë's Villette. *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, v. 8, n. 2, p. 325-339, June 2010.

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Disponível em: http://www.oed.com> Acesso em: 31 ago. 2013.

LARSEN-FREEMAN, D. *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

MARCUSCHI, L. A. *Produção textual, análise de gêneros e compreensão.* São Paulo: Parábola, 2008.

VOSKUIL, L. M. Acting naturally: Brontë, Lewes, and the problem of gender performance. *ELH*, v. 62, n. 2, p. 409-442, Summer 1995.

LITER*AT*URA

WARHOL, R. R. Double gender, double genre in Jane Eyre and *Villette. Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900, v. 36, n. 4, p. 857-875, Autumn 1996.

WEEDON, C. Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

WILSON, B. F. *A perverse mood of the mind*: subversive realism in Charlotte Brontë's "Villette". Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2011.

Recebido em agosto de 2014. Aprovado em julho de 2015.