

EVA HOFFMAN'S LOST IN TRANSLATION: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE CONDITIONED BY SEMANTIC REIFICATION¹**Merve ÖZMAN KAYA²****Abstract**

Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language (1989) is based on the experience of a Polish immigrant woman with an emphasis on her language acquisition process. Her memoir focuses on how fixed meanings of words in language affect collective perceptions and how these perceptions affect individual lives. Throughout her work, Eva's Polish-speaking and English-speaking selves contradict one another. She is confused because of the difficulty of translating one language into the other without losing the cultural meanings of the words. She has hard times trying to define who she is in the acquired language and is bothered by the fixed and determinate meanings attributed to the words in it. In other words, she is troubled with the reification in language. Making use of the points of view of various disciplines on language and reification such as sociology, history and philosophy, this work will show how semantic reification influences Hoffman's life as an immigrant in America and discuss whether she manages to overcome the negative influences of it.

Keywords: *Eva Hoffman, language acquisition, semantic reification, immigrant experience in America*

EVA HOFFMAN'IN LOST IN TRANSLATION ADLI ANI YAZISINDA ANLAMSAL ŞEYLEŞME İLE ŞEKİLLENEN AMERİKAN DENEYİMİ**Öz**

Eva Hoffman'ın Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language (Tercümede Kayboluş: Yeni Bir Dilde Yeni Bir Yaşam) adlı anı yazısı (1989) göçmen bir kadının deneyimlerini dil edinimi sürecine yaptığı vurguyla ele alır. Eser, dildeki kelimelere yüklenen sabit anlamların ortak algılarını nasıl şekillendirdiği ve bu algıların bireylerin hayatı üzerinde ne tür bir etkisi olduğu sorularına odaklanır. Eserde Eva'nın Lehçe konuşan benliği ve İngilizce konuşan benliği birbirine ters düşer. Yazar kelimelerin kültürel anlamlarını kaybetmeden bir dili diğerine çevirme çabaları esnasında bocalar. Edinilen dilde kendini

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tanımlamaya çalışırken zorlanır ve kelimelere atfedilen değişmez, sınırlı anlamlar onu rahatsız eder. Diğer bir deyişle, anlamsal şeyleşme ona hayatı zorlaştırır. Bu çalışma, sosyoloji, tarih ve felsefe gibi birçok farklı disiplinin bakış açılarından faydalanarak, anlamsal şeyleşmenin Hoffman'ın Amerikadaki göçmenlik deneyimi üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerini ve Hoffman'ın bunları aşmayı başarıp başaramadığını tartışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eva Hoffman, dil edinimi, anlamsal şeyleşme, Amerika'da göçmenlik deneyimi

Introduction

Eva Hoffman was born in 1945 in Cracow, Poland, to a Jewish family that survived the Holocaust. When she was thirteen, she immigrated to Vancouver, Canada with her parents. Later, she moved to Texas, this time alone, for her university education. She studied literature at Rice University and received her doctorate degree in English at Harvard. Her marriage to a fellow student did not last long. She moved to New York to be included in the intellectual circles of the city after her divorce. She has worked for *The New York Times* and taught literature and creative writing at many universities. Knowing this much of her life story would make one think that making her American Dream come true had been easy for her. Yet, her memoir titled *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989) reveals the difficulties she has had adopting the English language and how these difficulties make her question whether she can consider herself a success.

Although East European Jews came to America later than German Jews, they rapidly caught up with the success of the latter group. Eva Hoffman was one of them. As Hoffman's memoir looks at her experiences through an intellectual lens and displays the lingual challenges she has faced on the way to success, it also reveals the experience of many immigrants. Her early immigrant experience as an adolescent begins in Vancouver, Canada, where she feels nostalgic about home and fails to overcome the lingual challenge. It is followed by her adult life in the United States and her attempts at acculturation here. Her education in literature helps her question how language works in America. Throughout the work, Hoffman's Polish- and English-speaking selves contradict one another. She becomes a stranger to herself and her surroundings. Her attempts to

define herself fail as a result of the inadequateness of the acquired language to fully cover her particular traits, feelings and experiences. The way others define her, on the other hand, makes self-definition even more complicated for her, since fixed and objective patterns of meaning used by others typify, anonymize and categorize her. Her suggestion to break free of these patterns is to develop an "objective subjectivity." Whether or not she achieves this end is a question open to discussion. This article will make use of the idea of "semantic reification" to come to the conclusion that, Hoffman's insecurity about fitting in, which could still be observed in the end of the memoir, shows that adopting an objective-subjectivity has not been completely possible for her.

Semantic Reification

The Latin origin of the term reification is *res*, which can be translated into English in various ways such as "thing," "object," "matter," "concern," "affair," "property," etc. To reify is thus to "turn something into a *res*" (1987: 264). Another widely accepted definition for the term is that, it "converts the concrete into abstract" and "concretizes the abstract" (Berger and Pullberg, 1965: 208). Although the term is neutral in itself, it is often considered in terms of its negative effects. Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács is the one who introduced the idea for the first time, using the terms "objective" and "subjective" to make the distinction between the two types of reification. He maintains that, in the process of reification,

... objectively a world of objects and relations between things spring into being Subjectively ... a man's activity becomes estranged from itself, it turns into a commodity which must go its own way independently of man just like any other consumer article. (1971: 86)

A good example for Lukács's understanding of "objective reification" could be the American Dream which is often identified with owning a large house with its lawn perfectly mown. An example for the "subjective reification" is the situation of the immigrant laborers, who are considered as factory-hands. Their personal qualities, skills, emotions are ignored as they are considered to be replaceable commodities which the system may discard or renew whenever necessary.

José Medina, a Spanish Professor of philosophy, defines “objective reification,” as “the most natural form of reification,” referring to “think[ing] of meaning as a *thing out there* in an *objective* realm, whether this is the physical domain of natural entities or the notional domain of ideal identities” (2006: 7). For him, the function of this type of reification is “locat[ing] meanings in a *mind-independent* realm” (2006: 8). In the second category, “subjective reification,” on the other hand, meanings “are not *things out there* but *things in here*, mental things” (2006: 8). So, while the first category concretizes; fixes; limits things: the latter makes them abstract by robbing them of their individual characteristics. When applied to the examples given above, Medina’s definition explains the way the American Dream and immigrant laborers are reified. The American Dream has been made into a fixed and concrete ideal—a thing; while the immigrant laborer is viewed as an anonymous person who has no control over his life but is rather viewed as an object/a thing that has nothing peculiar to him/her. He has no potential to change his/her fate of being controlled by others and is, thus, fixed into being a “thing.”

In order to make his point, Medina refers to Wittgenstein’s “regress argument” in his *Investigations*, which suggests that every proposition requires justification. What Wittgenstein intends to problematize by this argument is the practice of defining something in terms of itself. For him, “interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning” (1953: 198). Dwelling on Wittgenstein’s argument, Medina maintains that subjective reification can not be taken for granted, since “there are no privileged mental representations (such as pictures, schemas, rule formulations, or interpretations) which by *themselves* can univocally determine the meaning of a word or its correct use” (2006: 11). For him, mental representations “can always be interpreted and applied in different ways; therefore, we’re led from one representation to another indefinitely when we attempt to fix the correct use of a word or the correct application of a rule by means of mental representations” (2006: 11). From this point of view, using meanings that are derived from prejudices, ideological assumptions or simply out of accepting given definitions is problematic.

Historian Bryan D. Palmer thinks such inheritance of meanings and their internalization is a result of a “descent into

discourse." For him, discourse is not a process "to be avoided because of some taint or contamination as [the existence of various discourses is] all to the good" (1990: 5). The problem, he maintains, is "all that is lost in the tendency to reify language, objectifying its unmediated discourse, placing it beyond social, economic and political relations and in the process displacing essential structures and formations to the historical sidelines" (1990: 5). For Palmer, as it is for Medina, reification in language is the result of the "fixation" of the meanings in language due to its "partial" and "selective" nature, "excavating and hence materializing the relations of economy and culture, necessity and agency, structure and process that language mediates incessantly" (1990: 5).

Semantic reification results from semantical fetishism, as the use of a reified language "insists on patterns and schemas of perceptions" (Demmerling, 1996: n.p). Jewish people in America have suffered from this insistence. Wittgenstein thinks that Jews are "always measured on scales which do not fit" them (Wittgenstein, 1992: 16e), which is partly due to semantic reification. He emphasizes the unfair approach toward them and relates this mistake to use of language:

Many people can see clearly enough that the Greek thinkers were neither philosophers in the western sense, nor scientists in the western sense, that the participants in the Olympian Games were not sportsmen and did not fit into any western occupation. But it is the same with Jews. And by taking the words of our "language" as the only possible standards we constantly fail to do them justice. So, at one time they are overestimated, at another underestimated. (1992: 16e)

As Wittgenstein points out, taking one language (and the cultural meanings attached to its words) as the standard would cause either "overestimation" or "underestimation" of people and things. The problem arises from the employment of socially accepted "words," in the form of adjectives, definitive nouns, metaphors and models as a result of which everything apart from the essential, the general or the accepted is denied. Language itself is often convicted for its denial, with the justification that it is inadequate to express "everything" (1953: 72).

The dominant language, which the immigrants have to adopt, also contains reified semantic forms in it. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the “borrowed language” becomes a “deranged language,” which is “unable to express anything true, real or felt” (1984: 462). Such a language “dispossesses the speaker of the very experience it is supposed to express,” and the “fine words” are there just to show “the dignity of the expressive intention” (1984: 462). The employment of such a language is kind of an act on a stage or theatre, according to him, where there is despair, lack of feelings, lack of trust to the words uttered and anonymous rules to be followed (1984: 462). East European Jews, who first arrived in America, like all other immigrants to all other countries, found themselves exactly on such a state trying to speak English, a borrowed language, to use Bourdieu’s words. They had two choices: either “to give in completely, to play the game for all its word,” or “to renounce desire [American Dream] completely” (1984: 138). Many immigrants, like Hoffman herself, have chosen the first. Still, conquering the language to achieve the American Dream has never been easy. They had to deal with the negative influences of semantic reification, which are addressed in Hoffman’s memoir.

Semantic Reification in Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*

Hoffman complains about the inadequateness of language throughout her memoir, even during her childhood in Cracow, Poland. Little Ewa believes that only the language of music is capable of telling *everything* (1990: 72). Adorno explains the reason of such a potential in music with its lack of intentions. He thinks music, “bereft of all intentionality” is “an acoustic parallel to a kaleidoscope,” as it gives the listener nothing more than what s/he hears (1956: 3). Dissatisfied with the intentional and thus inadequate language at hand, she makes up her own in an attempt to express herself:

“Bramaramaszerymery, rotumotu pulimeli,” I say in a storytelling voice, as if I were starting out a long tale, even though I know perfectly well that what I’m making up are nonsense syllables. “What are you talking about?” my mother asks. “Everything,” I say and then start again: “Bramaramaszerymery . . .” I want to tell A Story, every Story, everything all at once, not anything in particular that might make a Mobius strip of language, in which everything,

everything is contained. There is a hidden rule even in this game, though—that the sounds have to resemble real syllables, that they can't disintegrate into brute noise, for then I wouldn't be talking at all. I want articulation—but articulation that says the whole world at once. (1990: 11)

Communists allowed Jews to leave Poland in the fifties and many families migrated because of the worsening economic and political conditions in the country. Hoffman emigrates to Vancouver, Canada with her parents in 1958, at the age of thirteen. In Canada, her complaints about “wordlessness” grow, now that she has to speak the language of a culture she has not grown up into. What she means by “wordlessness,” in Canada, is not the limited number of words in English spoken here but that the language is incapable as a medium of expression, since words are semantically reified, leading the speaker to patterns and schemas of perceptions. The result of this is embodied in the words she hears on the street: “Do not do this to me, man, you fucking bastard, I'll fucking kill you” (1990: 124). In them, she hears “not the pleasures of macho toughness but an infuriated beating against wordlessness, against the incapacity to make oneself understood, seen” (1990: 124). Hoffman thinks such lack of words is “a sufficient motive for violence,” since the outcome of “linguistic dispossession” is close to “the dispossession of one's self” (1990: 124). She goes even further to claim that “all neurosis is speech disease” (1990: 124). Hoffman explains the hidden unhappiness of the newly-rich Jewish women from Poland with the same wordlessness. She thinks they are not content at all with what they have, although they act as if they were:

I often find myself with them in the stuffy big bubbles of their cars, crisscrossing Vancouver's relentlessly symmetrical roads, from home to shopping center to an endless round for liquorless parties—women who have gotten everything they have ever wanted and who have so little to stave off boredom or private grief, so little to sustain them. (1990: 142)

Hoffman is obsessed with the way these women behave because the possibility of becoming one of them terrifies her. She can see the lack of satisfaction behind their “I'm fine” refrain (1990: 143). These women act as if they are content just because they are supposed to be so, as the wives of well-to-do immigrants, who have

everything they have dreamed of. The situation of these women is reminiscent of Betty Friedan's description of "a problem with no name" in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan writes about post-World War II middle-class women who suffered from a false belief system which made them look for the meaning of their lives only through their roles as wives and mothers (1990: 15). The women Hoffman talks about belong to a similar group. It took their husbands two years to achieve the success that took their Jewish predecessors on the Lower East Side two generations (1990: 143). These women look "contended, satisfied" and live an orderly life of "middle-class convention"—a life of "perfect propriety"—despite the fact that all they do is to shop (1990: 140). Hoffman depicts them as women "sheathed in stiff dresses," combined with "totally matching accessories" and "meticulously" put on make up (1990: 140). She observes that they do not work for salary, since this could taint their husbands' success and that they have "mighty little connection with the world outside their houses" (1990: 142). They have no hopes of living an independent life or making a career. Their husbands do not care to make them happy nor do they refrain from insulting and mistreating them. However, these women never engage in self-defense, since they are not supposed to "cross their husbands," a rule they have internalized back in Poland (1990: 142). Now that they are in Canada—war, poverty and religious pressure being out of the way—life is better for them. Yet, the satisfaction these women express does not convince Hoffman. She thinks they suffer from a tragedy of wordlessness in their lives and explains what she means in these words:

But perhaps, if they had the words to say, just what they feel, something different might pour out, an elusive complaint of an elusive ailment. For in so far as meaning is interhuman and comes from the thickness of human connections and how richly you are known, these successful immigrants have lost some of their meaning. In their separateness, silence, their wisdom—what they used to know in an intimate way, on their skin—is stifled and it dries up a little [T]hey say to each other "I'm fine, everything's fine" and they almost believe that they are. (1990: 143)

In the Polish circles in Vancouver, if you have the comforts these women had you are "fine." The word "fine" is semantically reified here by the Polish immigrants. The cultural meaning of the

word is concretized, fixed and limited; ignoring the individual necessities of these women to actually feel fine. Therefore Hoffman can not consider the word adequate for self-expression. Her approach on words and their meanings echoes Wittgenstein's. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein says a "proposition can only say *how* a thing is, not *what* it is" (1922: 3.221). For the two psychologists, Philip Brian Bell and Philip James Staines, when the proposition says what "the thing" is reification takes place (1981: 110). Yet, the inadequacy of language can not be seen as an excuse for reification, because language is the only medium of communication between individuals and groups. Wittgenstein clarifies his premise, by saying that if a person asks him; "How am I to know what [one] means, I see nothing but the signs he gives?" then he would say: "how is he to know what he means when he has nothing but the signs either?" (1953: 504). He thinks people should use the existent language and at the same time avoid semantic reification, which positions language as a means of communication that is not perfect. Yet, it is not always possible. Speaking the newly acquired language in Vancouver, Hoffman can not ascribe the intended, abstract or visual meanings to words which she could to the words she used in Polish.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach offers a way out of semantic reification. He criticizes the way meanings are reduced to determinate ones and how such meanings become supplements for the actual meanings of the words. He views deconstruction as a political practice "an action against the use of binary oppositions which would lead to essentialism. For Derrida, the "sign," as it is used in Saussurean terminology, is "always a supplement for the thing itself" (1976: 145). Yet, the "scandal" for him is that, the sign as an "image," a "representer," turns out to "make the world move" (1976: 147). Therefore, he finds it proper to use the adjective "dangerous" to qualify the sign, as "it threatens us with death" (1992: 96-97). In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman complains about the same problem. She states that "the signifier has become severed from the signified" (1990: 106), which would, in Wittgenstein's words, make "everything look the same" (1992: 22e). In other words, language typifies, categorizes, anonymizes people, robbing them of their individual characteristics; fixing them into being a type or a "thing"; rendering them unable to express their

actual feelings, when experiences are fixed by the words that refer to them.

In order to explain this potential of language, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann present their readers an example from daily life; a quarrel with one's mother-in-law. Before one explains about his "concrete and subjectively unique" experience with his mother-in-law, people would have already typified it under the title "mother-in-law trouble," which would suggest an "anonymous" quality in the unique experience. In such a tendency, individual, biographical experiences are "subsumed under general orders of meaning that are both subjectively and objectively real" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 38-39) and such anonymization points to nothing other than semantic reification, as in the case of the Polish women Hoffman talks about.

Hoffman witnesses a similar practice as soon as she arrives Canada. She is called "Eva" instead of "Ewa" and her sister is called "Elaine" instead of "Alina" (1990: 105). Such distortion of their names can be taken as semantic reification, too, as their Polish identities are fixed into Canadian ones through language. This "careless baptism" (1990: 105), anonymizes them, causing the signifier be "severed from the signified" (1990: 106). Hoffman thinks their names are reduced to "identification tags" people assign to them (1990: 105). These names do not refer to them anymore. They make them "strangers" to themselves, while, in the past, "they were as surely [them] as [their] eyes and hands" (1990: 105). The language makes Hoffman a stranger to her surroundings as well. She feels like she has to question the meaning of each word she learns. The word "river," for instance, has a vitality, energy in its connotations in Polish, whereas it is "cold" and "without an aura" in English (1990: 106). In this new language, the river, for her, "remains a 'thing' absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of [her] mind," now that the "picture-and-word-show" is gone (1990: 107). She can not use the word "river" to emphasize the movement and vitality connoted by it, and thus fails to make her intended meaning obvious to her English-speaking audience. Words she uses to articulate her thoughts and feelings are, thus, doomed to be one-dimensional, potent to reveal only a general meaning which excludes the subjective meaning she intends to ascribe to them. As a result, things begin to "crush" her with their "thinghood"—their "inorganic

proliferation, with their meaninglessness" (1990: 136). The same problem is observed when feelings are considered:

When my friend Penny tells me that she is envious or happy, or disappointed, I try laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs. Already, in that moment of strain, spontaneity of response is lost, and anyway, that translation doesn't work. I do not know how Penny feels when she talks about envy. The world hangs in a Platonic stratosphere, a vague prototype of all envy, so large, so all-encompassing that it might crush me—as might disappointment or happiness . . . words are just themselves . . . It is the loss of a living connection. (1990: 107)

As a result of the "loss of a living connection with reality," Hoffman feels that she is not "filled with language anymore" and that her existence is being threatened (1990:108). She does not only have to translate the language but also the culture according to the values and norms of which meanings of the words are shaped and internalized. Polish does not apply to her new experiences, whereas, English words do not "penetrate to [the] layers of [her] psyche from which a private conversation could proceed" (1990: 107). Unable to have a private conversation in English, she decides to keep a journal and wonders which language she should use. Eventually, she picks English over Polish as she comes to the conclusion that Polish is a "dead language, the language of the untranslatable past" (1990: 120). However, when the time comes for her to write in English, she realizes that she can express only the thoughts that are "oddly objective" (1990: 121). "[S]entimental effusions of a rejected love" or "eruptions of familial anger" or "consoling broodings about death" can not be truly captured in English (1990: 121). The words she uses do not refer to her thoughts and feelings. She finds herself writing about the ugliness of wrestling and the elegance of Mozart and Dostoyevsky because she thinks she should avoid being reduced into a fixed, limited being through her own writing. In other words, she has given up on the content for the sake of the form. She is also unable to use the word "I" in her journal to refer to herself. She uses the pronoun "you" instead (1990: 107). It would be easier to refer to herself as "I" if only she could define herself, which would not be possible until she becomes an independent professional in the United

States. Here, she wins more than one scholarship to Ivy League Universities; earns a Harvard Ph.D; becomes a professor of literature and a literary journalist for *The New York Times*, and later an American writer. Still, she calls the United States an “unworded world” in the beginning of her life there (1990: 184).

In the United States identity has always been idealized to be more than a sum of one’s national roots, religion, etc. Among the steps believed to make one an American is the decision made by the person to embrace American identity with all the nation’s cultural and ideological norms and values often listed as individualism, equality, progress and change, competition, mobility etc. Ideal language, for Hoffman, is “the shape that language takes when it’s not held down by codes of class, of rules of mannerliness, or a common repertory of inherited phrases” (1990: 219)—in short, one that is not semantically reified. She thinks the closest language to this definition is that of her Texan husband’s.

Hoffman depicts the language her Texan husband speaks as a “solo” (1990: 218), a musical term, which she, thus, thinks, has a potential of “telling everything” (1990: 72). She feels “this bebop speech” has the potential to carry her “right into the heart of America” (1990: 219). She also calls it a “riff”; an “all-American” form of language; “a story that spins itself out of itself, propelled by nothing but the imagination” (1990: 219). His language can tell stories that can “go any place and take off into the stratosphere without anyone minding” (1990: 219). It is a “pre-performance” which makes her “dizzy” (1990: 219). She thinks it is no different than jazz or action-painting, being purely American and a matter of improvisation (1990: 219). Hoffman thinks embracing the culture and the language is easier when she loves a person and “the world surrounding him” (1990: 245). Still, it is difficult even if she is willing to do it:

I want to speak some kind of American, but which kind to hit? “Gee,” I say, “what a trip, in every sense of the word.” Tom is perfectly satisfied with this response. I sound natural enough, I sound like anybody else. But I can’t bear the artifice, and for a moment, I clutch. My throat tightens. Paralysis threatens. Speechlessness used to be one of the common symptoms of classic hysteria. I feel as though in

me, hysteria is brought on by tongue-tied speechlessness. (1990: 219)

Hoffman knows she has to adopt the language and that this would mean she could not “return to the point of origin,” and regain her “childhood unity” ever again (1990: 273). Julia Kristeva also talks about not speaking one’s mother tongue (1991: 16). For her, “living with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body’s nocturnal memory form the bittersweet slumber of childhood,” which would render the child “handicapped” (1991: 16). The language of the past “withers without ever leaving [the person]”. S/he has to “improve [her/his] ability with another instrument, as one expresses oneself with algebra or the violin,” becoming a “virtuoso” gaining “a new body, just as artificial and sublimed,” yet the illusion will not escape her/him (1991: 16).

Hoffman does not share Kristeva’s pessimism, hoping her experiences would “create style” and that style would create “a new woman” (1990: 273). It is a risky adoption, because the signifier—the words of the acquired language—have the potential to typify, categorize, anonymize the Polish Jewish woman she is. The meanings carried by words are not taken for granted out of a sudden though. Personal definitions have credibility only when they are collectively-confirmed. And even the false assignments attributed to the words can be confirmed and legitimized this way. Hoffman does not call herself a Polish woman, being critical of many Polish women she has met. She does not call herself a Jew because she does not fit in the stereotypical definition of the word. In other words, she is irritated by the possibility of being viewed in stereotypical terms as a result of the reification in language. She thinks, in America, she has become a “hybrid creature,” “a partial American,” “sort of a resident alien” and definitions cease to have positive connotations (1990: 221). Her two selves speak different languages and they totally contradict one another due to the semantic reification available in each of them. Semantic reification, here, stems from the the cultural peculiarities in each language, shared by the society the language is originally spoken by.

A linguist and expert on cultural psychology, Edward Sapir, thinks people have “cultural loyalties” (1993: 175). This loyalty to the culture they are products of “makes [them] a little insensitive to the meanings in different cultures” because they “do not fit into the old

scheme of things” (1993: 175). They are “sensitive to some things and obtuse to others,” and can not help but compare the two cultures they have been in contact with (1993: 176). When Hoffman tries to decide whether she really wants to marry “[her] Texan” (1990: 189), her two speaking selves disagree, highlighting the influence of cultural differences Sapir talks about on Hoffman’s decision:

Should you marry him? The question comes in English.
Yes.
Should you marry him? The question echoes in Polish.
No. But I love him; I’m in love with him.
Really? Really? Do you love him as you understand love?
....
Why should I listen to you? You do not necessarily know the truth about me just because you speak in that language [Polish]. Just because you seem to come from deeper within . . . I do not need you anymore. I want you to be silent.
Shuddup. (1990: 199)

Hoffman thinks she can not retain a sense of separate reality forever, because, for her, the only reality is the “shared” one (1990: 195). She knows she has to attain, what Wittgenstein would call, a “harmony in the practice of judging” (1953: 241). Yet doing this, she has to be immune to “being assimilated” (Hoffman, 1990: 210). She has to avoid the reification prevalent in ordinary speech, where subjective meanings of adjectives such as “good” and “bad” are fixed, making distinguishing between evaluation, interpretation and description impossible (Bell and Staines, 1981: 77).

Her studies in the field of literary theory make things even more complicated. In 1964, when she begins studying literature at Rice University, New Criticism is about to fade away. Having been developed from the roots of Russian Formalism of the 1910s and followed by the American Formalist movement which came up in the 40s, New Criticism had some qualities in common with both approaches. It values only the language properties in the text. Any other information extrinsic to the text, such as the life and ideas of the author, his/her intentions or the reader’s interaction with the text—named “intentional fallacy” and “affective fallacy respectively—did not matter and was simply insignificant (Tyson, 1994: 136-137). The qualities of this approach makes Hoffman see it

as a “laboratory method” (1990: 182), as it totally ignores the existence of individual meanings and embraced rather fixed ones in the critical process. New Critical approach evaluates characters as symbolic constructions, thereby anonymizes them without paying attention to whether or not they are actually symbolic. Similar linguistic applications can also be observed in formalism. A Russian Formalist, Boris Tomashevsky, talks about adopting a word economy, which requires using as few words as possible to refer to a certain object or idea (1996: 247-287). Such an approach could cause ignoring individual qualities of people and things. For Hoffman, this approach “prizes detachment” and has nothing to do with life (1990: 182). Since the approach supports the idea that “form is content,” which comes to mean that “there is no such thing as content”; characters in literary works have no individual characteristics (1990: 182). The approach renders the subject anonymous, lacking individuality and thus, reality. Meanwhile, in real life, the words available for her to define herself make her feel that her individuality is being threatened:

I am a Jew, an immigrant, half Pole, half American I suffer from certain syndromes because I was fed on stories of war I haven't escaped my past or my circumstances, they constrain me like a corset, making me stiffer, smaller. I have not bloomed to that fullness of human condition in which only my particular traits—the good mold of my neck, say, or the crispiness of my ironies—matter. (1990: 197)

Although she finds it “trite and tedious,” she eventually manages to define herself (1990: 197). Yet, as her definition reveals, her attempt to avoid categorizations such as being a Jew and a Pole and an American is obvious. She ponders on her multiple selves for a long time and finally decides that she belongs to more than one category determined by language: “a professional New York woman,” “a member of a postwar international new class,” “someone who feels at ease in the world as many of the women [in America],” “one of a new breed, born of the jet age and the counterculture and middle-class ambitions and American grit” (1990: 170).

Back in Canada, she could not help but feel as if she is “being stuffed into ... some clumsy and overblown astronaut suit” (1990: 119)—into categories alien to her. She was enraged at her friends because they fail to “see through the guise”—that she is both more

and less than the categories used to define her—and to “recognize the light-footed dancer” she really is (1990: 119). She felt she was constantly overestimated and underestimated. Not much has changed in the United States:

My American Friends ... share so many assumptions that are quite invisible to them, precisely because they are shared. These are assumptions about the most fundamental human transactions, subcutaneous beliefs, which lie just below the stratum of political opinion or overt ideology: about how much "space," physical or psychological, we need to give each other, about how much "control" is desirable, about what is private and what is public ... about what we're allowed to poke fun at and what we have to revere, about how much we need to hide in order to reveal ourselves (1990: 210-211).

Following the cultural assumptions mentioned, her American friends categorize people and things engaging in reification. Being aware of this fact, Hoffman still calls America her “goddamn” home “all the issues and all the codes” of which she now knows (1990: 170). She claims being “as alert as a bat to all the subliminal signals sent by word, look, gesture” and knows “who is likely to think what about feminism and Nicaragua and psychoanalysis and Woody Allen” (1990: 170). She claims success, saying: “I fit, and my surroundings fit me” (1990: 170). Still, she confesses that she thinks about herself in cultural categories (1990: 170). When she begins to teach literature, conquering the language no longer serves as a challenge for her to overcome. She has now “crack[ed] the last barrier between [her]self and language” (1990: 186). Explicating to a class of freshman “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” an “an aural door” opens “of its own accord” and she hears “modulations and their quite undertones,” being “attuned, through some mysterious faculty of the mental ear, to their inner sense” (1990: 186). She finally feels she is “back within the music of language,” now that words “become, as they were in childhood, beautiful things—except this is better, because they’re now crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with sonorities felt, sensuous thought” (1990: 186).

Now that she has conquered the language as the recipient, the next challenge would be conquering it as a speaker. In order to

achieve it, she needs to have a voice of her own. Her strategy is to adopt it from the Americans:

All around me, the Babel of American voices, hardy midwestern voices, sassy New York voices, quick youthful voices, voices arching under the pressure of various crosscurrents Since I lack a voice of my own, the voice of others invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist. They ricochet within me, carrying on conversations, lending me their modulations, intonations, rhythms. I do not yet possess them; they possess me. But some of them satisfy a need; some of them stick to my ribs Eventually, the voices enter me, by assuming them, I gradually make them mine (1990: 219-220).

By the end of the memoir, Hoffman sees herself as a “mechanism,” a word that connotes a perfect functioning as well as a lack of potential to have real feelings (1990: 279). These coexisting connotations contribute to Hoffman’s explanation of her problem with the acquired language she has mentioned earlier in her work. When she feels she has succeeded in fulfilling her American Dream, she pays a visit to her parents in Poland. Throughout this journey, she realizes that the problems of translation from Polish to English and vice versa still exist. Her “professional, self-confident American identity recedes like an insubstantial mirage” leaving her with worries over being called by someone from work to hear her “supplicating, intimidated, pleading” tone, which would be considered to be “all wrong” by the caller (1990: 248). She confesses that “the Polish ties straining against the American ones hurt,” yet, she celebrates the pain for making her know that she is alive (1990: 273).

At the very end of the book, Hoffman expresses her peaceful state of mind with the sentence “Time pulses through my blood like *river*” (1990: 280). She seems to have used the word “river” on purpose in this sentence, with reference to the beginning of the book, where she had problems with the meanings of the word “river.” Here, she seems to have solved the problem of translation through her partial adoption of collective meanings as a result of her “objective subjectivity”—“a laser beam that concentrates [her] energy, and uses the collected light to illuminate and reflect the World” (1990: 213). She intends to adopt it as a solution to her problems with language.

Her suggestion of developing an “objective subjectivity” offers a midway between embracing a language to the words of which she can attribute her individual meanings, beside the fixed cultural meanings attributed to them. No longer unable to refer to herself as “I” in her writing, Hoffman says she has managed to regain some of the words she has lost. In other words, she has found a way to be “Ewa” and “Eva” at the same time. Although the memoir ends leaving the reader with almost a happy ending with Hoffman’s declaration of her command in “all the issues and all the codes” in America, her contradicting feelings about the role of language in her life make determining whether or not her suggestion of an “objective subjectivity” would work for her, difficult.

Conclusion

Eva Hoffman’s immigrant experience, in her memoir *Lost in Translation*, exemplifies how semantic reification works for immigrants. Her dissatisfaction with language in Canada and America are explicated through examples throughout this article. A comparison between the semantic reification experienced by Hoffman in each country, shows that such reification seems to have larger influence on daily life in the United States. In Canada, what disturbs Hoffman is the reified words Polish people internalize as a result of the value judgements back in Poland (such as the “I’m fine” refrain women stick up with) and Hoffman’s own difficulties in finding the proper pronoun to refer to herself and to write about her feelings and thoughts (her use of the pronoun “you” and avoidance to write about her real feelings and thoughts in fear of being unable to truly express them). In Canada, her challenge is to understand English and express herself in it. In the United States, however, she begins to contradict with herself in defining who she is and who she wants to be as a result of the meanings attributed to the words “American,” “Polish,” “New York professional” etc. Each of these labels are idealized, making Hoffman try to “fit” in them for the sake of being accepted by Americans. In other words, although she knows that she does not want to be defined in categories which would reduce and fix her identity, she nevertheless can not help viewing herself in them.

The reason why she can not avoid using these semantically reified labels to define herself is that, American identity has always been idealized; conceived to be more than a sum of one's national roots, traditions, religion, etc. Among the steps believed to make one an American is the decision made by the person to embrace American identity with all the nation's cultural and ideological norms and values often listed as individualism, equality, progress and change, competition, mobility etc. These widely embraced norms and values are complimentary to Hoffman's definition of ideal language. For Hoffman, ideal language is "the shape that language takes when it's not held down by codes of class, of rules of mannerliness, or a common repertory of inherited phrases" (1990: 219)—in short, one that is not semantically reified. Therefore, embracing values like individualism and equality is something Hoffman already has inclined toward. As an immigrant woman who knows what discrimination is; who has heard about Communism from her family; who has a family that viewed mobility as the only way to a new start in life; and who believes in hard work and progress; embracing the idealized American identity and its values is something she would do willingly. The next step, mastering the language, would make her progress complete and once it is mastered, she views herself as a successful New York professional—the embodiment of the American Dream come true. Still, she confesses viewing herself in categories. She "chooses" to embrace the language the way it is used by her American friends in order to truly "fit in" (1990: 170). Her choice makes her compromise her "subjectivity." Her suggestion of an "objective subjectivity," thus, leans more toward the objective meanings in the United States than the subjective ones, which in turn makes her feel uncomfortable.

The fact that she lacks a voice of her own, and that she gains one by letting others' voices "invade" and "possess" her, shows that she is not really "immune to assimilation" (1990: 219-220). Her worries over receiving phone calls from her colleagues when she is in Poland also demonstrate that she has not really internalized the "objective subjectivity" she intends to have. The reason for her failure in this, is her belief that one "can not retain a sense of separate reality forever, because, after all, the only reality is the 'shared' one" (1990: 195). Risking self-contradiction, she complains about the fact her American friends "share so many assumptions" (1990: 210-211). Eliminating the influence of these assumptions on their language

would not be easy for them, since they are unable to tell what is an assumption and what is not. Therefore, engaging in the political practice of “deconstruction” to get rid of these assumptions could not take place too soon.

Hoffman’s declaration of satisfaction with language by the end of the novel (1990: 280) is slightly reminiscent of the Jewish American women who simply say they are “fine” in the face of their dissatisfaction with their lives. Having achieved her American Dream, like the wives of Polish men who have achieved their dreams in Canada, Hoffman says, she is “fine,” conceiving the pain she feels as a result of “the Polish ties straining against the American ones” in optimistic terms, as the “proof of being alive” (1990: 273). Although the memoir is read as an immigrant success story by many, Hoffman’s insecurity about fitting in, which could still be observed in the end of the memoir when she visits her parents in Poland, shows that adopting an objective-subjectivity has not been completely possible for her.

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