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# A Narrative Inquiry into Language Accent Trauma in a Master's Thesis Supervision Relationship

## 修士論文指導中に起こった言語アクセントによるトラウマのナラティブ的探究

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This is a retrospective on the relationship between Sumire, a Japanese who wrote her Master's thesis, and Ken as her thesis supervisor. This study employs narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) which involves not only delving into storied memories, but seeks to get its participants to become vulnerable to each other. It is the latter purpose that helped uncover Sumire's trauma - her self-perception of needing to be perfect due to people's reactions to her American English accent.

This study centers on a portion of an interview-conversation between Sumire and Ken which took place six months after she had graduated from the Master's degree program, for the purpose of writing this paper. She spoke about her lifelong trauma with her English language accent and how she released herself from it. The process involved protracted struggles with how others perceived her but resulted in Sumire becoming a different person in thought and action. This paper closes with future directions for thesis supervision and narrative inquiry.

本稿では、元修士学生の日本人すみれと、彼女の元論文指導教員であるケンとの関係を回顧した。この研究で使用されたナラティブ的探求手法では (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) 単に記憶を掘り下げるだけでなく、参加者がお互いの弱点、または欠点をさらけ出すことが求められている。本稿ではこの手法を導入することにより、すみれが他者から受けてきたアメリカ英語のアクセントへの反応から、「完璧な英語話者でいなければならない」という自己への義務感に起因するトラウマを表層化することができた。

この研究は、すみれが修士課程を卒業してから半年後に執筆作業が開始され、論文執筆中交わされたすみれとケンとのインタビューの一部に焦点を当てる。この中で、すみれが幼少期に習得したアメリカ英語のアクセントが生涯のトラウマとなり、そこからどのようにして自分自身を解放したかについて探求する。さらにその過程で、他者からの見立てに対するすみれ自身の葛藤、そして結果的に思考と行動を通じて新たなアイデンティティを獲得することに成功したエピソードを紹介する。この論文の締めくくりに、今後の修士論文指導とナラティブ的探求の指針を提供する。

### Keywords

narrative inquiry, language accent trauma, kikokushijo, teaching assistant (TA), co-authorship

ナラティブ的探求、言語アクセントによるトラウマ、帰国子女、ティーチング・アシスタント、共著

**O**ur paper is a storied narrative of our Master's thesis supervision relationship which was affected by Sumire's trauma with her English language accent. I learned the importance of this language accent trauma through narrative inquiry which enabled me to confront my microaggressions with my identity. We close our paper with calls for developing trauma sensitivity in thesis supervision, co-authorship, and other future directions.

## Part 1: Setting the Stage

This part presents (1) a brief explanation of the background to our study; (2) the rationale to use the three-dimensional inquiry space in narrative inquiry, and (3) the field texts used in this paper.

### *The Background to this Study*

This paper is an attempt to delineate how trauma served as a barrier but later turned into impetus in this three-year thesis supervision relationship culminating in Sumire's graduation. The context was in a private women's university in Tokyo, where Sumire was a native Japanese female student and I an American-born professor. In December 2015, Sumire expressed her interest to enter both the Master's degree program in my graduate school and a teaching credential program so that she could be a licensed instructor of English at the secondary school level. I have supervised many undergraduate theses, but Sumire was my first Master's student. She successfully passed the exam to qualify to teach in public secondary schools in Tokyo and has been teaching at a junior high school in the city from April 2019.

I regarded Sumire's sojourn in graduate school as closely resembling my own three years' experience which resulted in earning an academic Master's degree in Japanese history and a professional degree in library science that qualified me as a university library subject specialist. During my second year, the history professor who served as my thesis supervisor went on an overseas sabbatical. During his absence, I could concentrate on completing my library science course requirements. In Sumire's case, my university had already permitted me to spend a sabbatical year abroad which coincided with Sumire's second year, so I assumed a similar study trajectory for her. After I returned from abroad, I supervised Sumire's thesis until she submitted it in February 2019.

### *Narrative Inquiry as Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space*

Narrative inquiry, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, is "a process of learning to think narratively, to attend to lives as lived narratively" (p. 120). Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, and Vinz (2007) regard narrative inquiry as an "interpretive and situated research activity, and the story exists as data or artifact of this engagement" (p. 327). For them, narrative inquiry is conducted by "(engaging) in dialogue with ourselves and others and the dialogic becomes an opportunity to keep learning and questioning" (p. 349). What distinguishes narrative inquiry from other forms of narrative is its emphasis on "thinking *with* rather than *about* stories" (Estefan, Caine, Clandinin 2016, p.16). As they put it, "thinking *about* stories" separates readers from the stories, which turns the focus toward "knowledge for practice", whereas "thinking *with* stories" invites readers to insert themselves into the stories so that they are acted upon and come to see how other stories are "lived, told, retold, and relived" (p. 16).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) encourage researchers to engage in a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space", using these terms to help inquirers to look at their selves in three dimensions: temporal (moving inward and outward of memories, backward and forward), relational (moving between the personal and social), and place (with a sense of location) (pp. 54-55). Mkhabela and Frick (2016) also recognize these three dimensions in narrative inquiry as consisting of their experiences interacting in the course of the doctoral journey, their stories' timing in the past and future; and the locality of their stories, which were used to help bring out the complexity of the student-supervisor relationship. Operating within these dimensions helps researchers to delve into their storied memories through these various avenues, unearthing revelations and further insights, leading to more investigations. Clandinin

and Connelly state that narrative inquiry helps researchers to become aware of being vulnerable and finding puzzles to help flesh out storied memories which connect with larger social concerns (p. 121–123).

Narrative inquiry has been used to study the storied and lived experiences between supervisors and students in graduate thesis programs. Hussain and Ali (2019) used narrative inquiry to learn how six international doctoral graduates in China viewed their experiences, especially how they remained motivated to pursue their degrees in a country foreign to them. They found their supervisors were able to perceive their needs both socially and academically. These doctoral graduates categorized their supervisors' efforts to keep students motivated in their content and research areas, lab work and toward publication (p. 154). For Mkhabela and Frick (2016), though their backgrounds were dissimilar (Mkhabela as a male Black African student and Frick as his white female supervisor with a freshly minted PhD), narrative inquiry enabled them to discern their shared space which did not only consist of their South African nationality but more importantly revealed their "mutual academic curiosity" (p. 25) that helped them understand how their lived stories became a mutual enterprise of learning.

The promise of unearthing rich and penetrating insights through narrative inquiry attracted the both of us to probe our thesis relationship. Little could we realize how transformative this analytic process would be for us.

### ***Field Texts***

This paper is primarily based on an extended interview–conversation which took place in my office at the end of October 2019, six months after Sumire had graduated from her Master's degree program. It is important to state that our conversation took place to address lingering questions in my mind related to understanding her story after (a) both of us studied 74 email threads written between January 2016 and March 2019 which we deemed significant, which were from the end of Sumire's undergraduate studies to the end of her Master's studies, and (b) after Sumire had written some retrospective essays about her three years in graduate school. Sumire seemed to be aware that these were reconstructions as she called them "essays", rather than reports. Excerpts from her essays are given to support her interview answers. The emails, essays and the interview–conversations aided in the writing of this paper.

The interview portions are presented here in a linear time–order style from her childhood to the present but it must be noted that they did not actually occur in this order in the interview.

## **Part 2: Our Stories**

This section centers on Sumire's two stories about herself: as a thesis writer and her traumatic preoccupation as a not–quite perfect speaker of English. I do much of the telling, in reply to Sumire's words taken from her essays and an extended monologue in a conversation between us. But I view my position here as story–teller and respondent, in the spirit of "thinking *with* stories" (Estefan, Caine, & Clandinin 2016, p. 16) to situate my storied memories in reflection to hers.

### ***Sumire as Thesis Writer***

Sumire's essays largely focused on her thesis work, which thesis supervisors tend to view as the main purpose of students' graduate work. Here I tell how her thesis developed.

Her Master's thesis (Shiba, 2019) was a mixed–methods study examining changes in Japanese women's university students' motivation by comparing their 3rd year in high school

and after entering university. She carried out a questionnaire which was conducted with 131 Japanese female university students in a department of English language and literature at a women's private university in Tokyo. From this pool she interviewed five students concerning their survey results. In the quantitative results, she found a two-way repeated ANOVA analysis indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation between high school and university. From the interviews, she learned students' prioritizing job-hunting as their exit aim could lead them to be more goal-oriented which meant they would focus more on a score or certification than enjoying the English language. The job-hunting could have more influence on students' motivation than university entrance exams. The insights she gleaned from her study were: 1) a change in students' realization of English learning, which was related to students' sense of joy in English learning, 2) a difference between continuously improving English as a main tool and not doing so, showed the influence of job-hunting on students' motivation and their awareness of English, and 3) possible recognition of status and grades for learners which revealed their possible feelings regarding their classmates and perceived self through the status and grading. Evaluation and the students' sense of hating to lose to others were discussed to explore actual impacts of those two elements.

### *Sumire's Struggle with Her Accent as Specter of Perfection*

In Sumire's emails and essays, she wrote about her struggles with the idea of perfection – how others regarded her as well as how she regarded herself. This was expressed very vividly in one part of the conversation we had at the end of October 2019:

Sumire: The students had an image of me being perfect...

Ken: You told me this in several emails.

Sumire: And I was not perfect.

Ken: How do you know they thought this about you?

Sumire: They said it to me directly "You're perfect, you never had any failure, your English is very good", but I did not fit in their image. But as a TA, I need to keep their image, I thought I need to protect it, so I tried to be perfect as possible in the beginning, but I couldn't and I started to blame myself, why couldn't I do this.

As a graduate student, Sumire was allowed to serve as a teaching assistant, or TA, in a number of undergraduate speaking classes which were taught by instructors whose first language was English.

It seemed to me that she had good memories of herself speaking in English.

Sumire: I was just a cute little baby. My mother hired a babysitter to take care of me while she went to language school for 2 months. When I look back at the pictures, I was with a friend from the local school. My brothers hung out with their friends at the local elementary school. I remembered I hated going to nursery school. I cried a lot. My middle brother took me to the bus and we rode on the bus together. I think it was because I didn't have that many friends from Japan. My parents say that "You always spoke English to your friends!" but I don't remember that. But when I look back at the videos, I see me talking in English. I don't recognize this little girl.

It must have seemed strange to be told by her parents she was always speaking in English at that age. During our interview, Sumire told me she had lived in Westchester, a suburb on the north of New York City where many Japanese expatriates reside. Her mother took her there from Japan within weeks after her birth until she was five years old. The fact that Sumire lived her life in an English-speaking country from such an early age with a duration of more than a few years confirms what Long (1990) writes concerning the native tongue being set in young speakers by the time they reach the age of five.

I could see myself in her with regard to my own history with the Japanese language. Though I was born in Los Angeles, my Japan-born mother told me that I grew up speaking in Japanese. My wife, who is a Japanese native, remarks that my pronunciation doesn't have the tell-tale pronunciation markers of a person who has learned it as a second language.

Sumire's halcyon memories of her English-speaking childhood were rudely ended:

Sumire: When I was in junior high school, I hated it. That is my first time to hate my pronunciation. Because whenever I spoke in English in front of my classmates, they said, "You're like copying the CD sound!" So, I kinda cheated. Yeah. I didn't speak properly. But every year, once a year, they have the speech contest. They chose a representative from the junior high school, one from each year, each grade. Of course, I wasn't chosen. I cheated.

Of course, (the teachers) knew I have two older brothers. And (my brothers) are really good. They are like native speakers. We have this section of choosing at least one student from one school who have been abroad, so like returnees! They needed one returnee. And when I was in junior high, in this school, there are no other returnees, only me. So, they asked me, "You can be *kikokushijo*? So, can we choose you?" "Okay." And I told this to my mom, who said, "Oh, you are going to do the same thing as your brothers!" That is what I most hated.

But I did. I made one promise with my teacher, that is, I do not want to do it in front of my friends. I remember that my brothers did, they did the speech in front of all students in the school. But I told the teachers, "I don't want to do it! I can participate in the contest outside of the school okay, but in the school, I don't want to do anything." Then they said okay. I only need to attend the contest. After that, even when I entered the high school, I still hesitated to speak in English. I think that kind of stopped myself speaking in English. My score was not that good. I was just good at grammar and vocabulary for university entrance exams.

She spoke animatedly about this episode which occurred in the beginning of her study at secondary school. At the time when she entered her municipal junior high school, students typically start to take lessons in English language in their first year. Teachers teach with a textbook and use the audio CD provided with it as teaching material. I did not have to ask Sumire to explain her classmates' reactions when her teacher required everyone to repeat after the CD. The pain of being identified and stigmatized was likely too visceral.

She accepted her teacher's suggestion to be present at the speech contest as an observer, albeit as a *kikokushijo* observer. *Kikokushijo* are younger Japanese natives who have lived abroad for a number of years in a foreign country and return to Japan (Kanno, 2000). Interestingly, what she most hated was not the embarrassment of being found out by her classmates to speak English so much like the voice on the teacher's CD, but to be told by her mother that

she was following her brothers' actions, when she thought she had decided by herself not to enter the speech contest except as an observer.

I recall having interviewed many years ago a Japanese student at another university in Tokyo. She told me her father spent his one-year sabbatical in Scotland and took his family. She was then a child but her American teacher criticized her for having the “wrong” accent. She told me she then concealed her overseas accent by speaking in *katakana* (Japanese-accented) English in order to fit in with her classmates. Sumire felt the same pressure to speak in *katakana* and “cheated” others by pretending not to be good at speaking in English.

Sumire is not alone in experiencing the trauma of speaking in English. I experienced language trauma early in my childhood. My period of speaking Japanese in America abruptly ended when I was in the second grade of elementary school. At that time my parents had a conference with the teacher. My teacher had told them that I was mixing my English speech at school with my heritage language. The teacher thought the best way to solve this problem was to forbid us the use of the foreign tongue at home. I was told by my mother that they could only speak in English with me from that time.

This teacher's decision had two disastrous consequences. Although I quickly mastered English, I just as quickly lost the ability to converse in Japanese, which dismayed my mother so much that she enrolled me in a Japanese conversation school. What destroyed our family fabric was that my father stopped speaking to me altogether. He hadn't learned the English language due to growing up in a time when Japan was at war with the United States. When he emigrated to the U.S., he worked all day in the strawberry fields in central California and told me in his last years he was too exhausted from working to attend English conversation lessons in the evenings. Through the years, he kept silent. I joked with my friends that he lived up to his name Shizuo, which transliterates as “quiet husband”. I felt I did not have the ability to converse with my father in Japanese. Later, I understood that his decision was due to a self-sacrificing idea to do it “for the sake of the children”. Tragically, this silence between my father and I lasted for forty years, only broken after my mother had passed away when my wife then coaxed me to talk with him in Japanese.

Sumire went on to tell me about her speaking experiences after entering this university:

Sumire: In the beginning, I didn't feel good to speak English with my classmates. ... in the other classes, in the pronunciation lesson, they never hear what I say, they have their headphones on, but they kind of listen to the others. They ask, “Why is your pronunciation like blah blah blah?” (Sighs) Still it was stuck with me. I hated it.

The setting was in a language lab, but this episode she recounted showed how people hear more than what their ears are supposed to listen to. She was already sensitized to what Japanese people said about her accent, so she could not help but pick up on such remarks. When the undergraduate students she assisted as a TA said, “You're perfect, you never had any failure, your English is very good”, they attributed her sense of perfection, to the seemingly beautiful clarity of her English accent. But it was unfair to her to conclude her native-sounding accent as perfect. People regarded her speaking as a god-given gift or a blessing, but for Sumire, this was a curse.

Sumire wrote about the stress she endured as a TA in more depth during her first year in the Master's degree program:

Sumire: However, both as the helper and the TA, “her English was great”, “I wanted to be like her” or “her life was like perfect” pressured me lots. Because of those phrases, I started being sensitive with how I was looked by others. It also led me to get lost of myself. I cared about reputation too much and got afraid of going outside. What other people said about me was not actually me, I thought. These struggles caused me to be too sensitive and I started taking appointments with school counselor (emails 2016/10/12, 10/31). I remembered that I always mentioned “I don’t know who I am” or “I am not a perfect person that my students said”. At the same time, whenever I made a mistake or felt sick, I blame myself. This negative routine lasted until the end of the first year in graduate school and my health condition got worse and worse like getting fever, having stomachache and staying (in) my room.

Sumire was tormented by the comments, which were spoken behind her back. Hearing them made her physically ill to the point of not being able to leave her bed. She sought the help of a university counselor. She was able to express her conflicted feelings in an email (1/18/2017). I asked her about it in our conversation, which went like this:

Ken: “A tree in my heart is losing leaves and getting poorer and poorer” How did you learn it?

Sumire: I think I was losing energy. I think I was still taking the counselor. I could not stand by myself. I still needed the support.

Ken: So where does this come from?

Sumire: I think I was trying to explain this with my vocabulary. I didn’t take it from anywhere.

I was sure she had translated “A tree in my heart is losing leaves and getting poorer and poorer” from a Japanese proverb, but it came from within her and illustrated the gradual disintegration inside herself. I had assumed that she was not capable of generating her own metaphor which could be interpreted as a proverb which shows how rare it is to come across such comments from a L2 user’s perspective and acknowledge their originality. Typically, the focus is on learners’ poor language skills obstructing getting their meaning across as well as struggling to display their full set of skills and identity (S. Little, personal communication, 5/29/2020).

Sumire heard the same sort of flattering comments about her English accent from professors as well. As she pointed out in another essay describing her second year in the MA program,

...other professors from different departments never give me any corrections but good comments which were “your English was really good.” It was not compliment for me at all because I knew that people with this phrase did not actually listen to contents but my English.

I am also guilty of having complimented Japanese students on their language accents. I recall having remarked to a Japanese student at another women’s university marveling at her “posh” British English accent, I recall she reacted sourly, saying she wished she could lose it, since it marked her as set apart from others.



I myself only became aware of this glowing reaction Sumire would receive from Japanese professors about her English accent during her third year of graduate studies. Both occasions were in front of the entire graduate school community: her thesis proposal, and a precis of her thesis, both conducted in English.

Sumire explains: Otsuma's graduate school asks all Master's students to give presentations to professors in other departments. It has to be presented publicly since the accountability has to be shown to all professors. There will be better discussion and arguments if the Master's thesis is just presented in a department where a student belongs. However, Otsuma's graduate school wants to prove that a thesis is admitted by all professors. And then, Master's students are officially done with their thesis. I have done it twice in June and February. In June, the presentation is done with explanations about a thesis and ways of research. In February, the presentation includes the results and discussion sections of the thesis and future perspectives. At this time, more professors ask questions and they are more likely related to the discussions.

As I had been away during her second year, I actually was very nervous for her to present her thesis proposal publicly in front of professors and students. I wondered if she would have to deal with unexpected and possibly strict questions (and for myself, since I thought I would have to moderate her presentation in Japanese). Professor X, who served as the secondary thesis supervisor, thought of the same dire possibility and sought to dissuade her from laying out her thesis proposal to the entire audience.

When Sumire presented her thesis proposal, when it came to the question time, one professor raised his hand and commented that her English was so beautiful to listen to. At the final thesis presentation, no one asked questions or gave comments, but I heard people around me whispering the same sort of admiring remarks.

But this was not the reaction of a Japanese professor Y who served as faculty reader of Sumire's Master's thesis. When I asked her in our conversation if that professor ever commented on her English speaking, she had this to say about the time when she was enrolled in one of his courses:

Ken: What did Professor Y say about your speaking English?

Sumire: He didn't say anything.

Ken: So, he's not the kind of person that says that kind of thing.

Sumire: Yes, so if other students say that, he said "Yes, her English is good, but what we need to do is to focus on contents. Let's focus on the topic." He is more interested in what I say. He never mentions about my pronunciation. When I said I worry if my English is going lower, he said, "Don't worry about it." That's it.

When I heard Professor Y speaking in English for the first time, I guessed that he also had been a *kikokushijo* in the U.S. Sumire told me that he had spent many years growing up in the U.S. and returned to Japan during high school. I think he knew what it was like to be judged by one's accent and would be sensitized.

I was reminded of a recurring misidentification with my own English-speaking ability. I have been told by white speakers in Japan that I "speak English very well" but I know that is because I have a Japanese face and name, so I know they view me as a native Japanese. I have patiently explained that I lived my first 25 years in the U.S., but there always are a few people that do not fully understand, as they then go on to say, "When did you return to Japan?"

which shows they have not listened to me. I again heard this familiar refrain at the university where I spent my overseas sabbatical, where I was frequently asked by students and staff about my English (Ikeda 2018). Even if those who asked me did it unintentionally and without malice, yet as an American-born Asian, I was sensitive about it and could only feel slighted. Both Sumire and I experienced such microaggressions (Sue 2010) toward language accents that were out of our control. That they were embodied in these flattering remarks made us feel respectively marginalized.

But how much was Sumire's pronunciation in English simply an obsession? Thankfully, her pronunciation could be verified, due to a project that I carried out during my sabbatical when I audited a Master's program in Teaching English as a Second Language (MATESL) course in teaching English pronunciation to foreign speakers. The project (which Sumire called "Ken's phonics project") required recording a nonnative speaker of English and conducting a phonological analysis on a transcription of the recorded language. The course instructor who was also the chair of the MATESL program kindly gave me permission to record her speech. Sumire quickly agreed to participate in the project. I felt her keen interest in it when she emailed me two weeks later and expressed her worry about my lack of reply, wondering if I had found someone else. My recording of her speech using the text on the Speech Accent Archive (2010, online) was conducted over Skype two weeks later. The phonological analysis revealed that Sumire had native-like English fluency in her segmentals (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmentals (word stress and intonation).

Soon after the phonological project, Sumire received her test results on an English proficiency exam, which she wrote about in an essay concerning her second year in graduate school:

I decided to take Eiken grade pre-1, which is English proficiency test in Japan to see how my level would be located. Its result provided me lots of confidence because it was official certification showing my proficiency level with concrete comments. Moreover, in Ken's phonics project, I received a result showing how my speaking was. These results with accountability led me to feel relieved and motivated to improve my English more and more.

The *Eiken* is a Japan-based English proficiency exam and its pre-1<sup>st</sup> level is equivalent to a B2 on the CEFR. Sumire again referred to this official English test result in her essay about her 3<sup>rd</sup> year, after achieving her career goal to be a licensed English teacher:

When I found that I passed the exam and could be a full-time English teacher, I felt that there was nothing useless that I did in my MA years. Also, (as) I mentioned in a report of my 2nd MA year, an official result with accountability encouraged me and gave me confidence.

I found it intriguing that she considered the attainment of this proficiency exam level of more importance than the phonological result. When I asked her why she gave more credence to this, she explained that the exam is assessed by a team of paid professional examiners who judge on fluency, speaking skills, attitude and pronunciation, whereas my phonological assessment was only checked by the pronunciation professor on my assessment. So in this case, many heads are better than a few.

Sumire felt that she matured a lot as a result of struggling with her own image of perfection with both students' and Japanese professors' perception of her accent. The official *Eiken* test score and my phonological analysis boosted her self-confidence. The extent her perspective

changed is evident in this amazing recollection with her junior high school students:

Sumire: So, I'm telling students, now that I'm working for junior high that I also have something I don't understand as well, so, don't think like I'm perfect. Students are like, why, 'Teachers are always perfect.' But I tell them that some of your elementary school teachers also made mistakes, right? They say yeah, that's true. So, I don't hesitate to look for vocabulary in front of the students. I search it through the iPad and tell them we learned this together. The students tell me 'You don't know the pride in yourself'. I tell them that searching for something is not throwing my pride away. If I stop teaching and run away, that is throwing my pride away.

I recall how her tone brightened as she spoke about how she brushed aside students' notions of her as perfect, pointing out to them the fallacy of that thinking, having them recall their elementary school teachers. She demonstrated to them how she learned new vocabulary together with them. Her students found Sumire's vulnerability disturbing and irregular. They told her that she was throwing away her pride, but she pointed out that teachers are also learners. This showed to me how much she has embraced her new self and wants to impart that thinking to others.

Along with her self-acceptance, she also possessed a healthy perspective of what it means to be a teacher:

Sumire: So, the TA experience was good to do it but also learn that I am also a learner. Maybe I was trying to be perfect. I was forgetting that I am also a learner.

Ken: Could you explain what it means to be a learner?

Sumire: To be a learner means teaching English doesn't mean knowing everything. Through teaching, I found what I didn't understand fully but to find what about students need to know, also the teachers' side. I'm also learning at the same time.

Ken: Sounds so wise.

Sumire: Really? Yay.

Sumire realized a teacher is a learner, which she stated without my explicit suggestion, and it was wonderful to hear her how she was instilling this insight into her learners.

### Part 3: Moving Forward

This part explains (1) the major finding in this narrative inquiry-centered paper, which is recognizing language accent trauma and calling for an expanded understanding of the thesis supervisor as a trauma-sensitive resource person, (2) Sumire as a co-author (3) future directions, and (4) concluding thoughts.

#### *Language Trauma and Trauma Sensitivity*

Reid (2020) explains how the concept of trauma has evolved from its ancient Greek roots focusing on the physical wound into embracing the "psychological and emotional realities associated with difficult and painful experiences" (p. 34). Sumire expressed her fears through

her essays and the interview-conversation. She became candid to me about how our thesis relationship was progressing. I have depicted Sumire's struggles with people's perceptions of her accent as a kind of language trauma. In the later stages of writing this paper when I informed Sumire about how I was shifting this paper to focus on the language trauma aspect, she shared with me how scared she became of herself during her first two years in graduate school as she grappled with the specter of perfection. Sumire's trauma of dealing with her accent which made her stand out like a native English speaker caused me to reflect on my own experiences with language trauma as a kind of microaggression and join her in spirit.

There is a finding here about how the role of thesis supervisor extends far beyond that of "dissertation commentator" (S. Little, personal communication, 5/29/2020). It is easy to regard the thesis supervisor as a task-bound role, which excludes discussion of painful personal memories that academicians (Bochner 1997, Ellis 2007) and practitioners (Reid 2020) keep and live with.

Reid argues for a case for trauma sensitivity in narrative inquiry, as it is "more experiential, less clinical, and open(s) the possibility of...moving away from a diagnostic, definable, categorizable entity, and moving toward openness to the multiplicity and the complexity of experience" (pp. 38-39). Thesis supervisors could very well fill this role as trauma-sensitive care persons. Mkhabela and Frick (2016) point out that "mutual kindness is one of the core aspects that defined our student-supervisor relationship, and that kindness built mutual trust that facilitated our eventual progress. A mutual show of kindness provided a strong foundation for the otherwise rigorous and sometimes harsh academic critique that characterises doctoral supervisory discourses" (p. 34). Along with kindness comes care. Hussain and Ali (2019) reported that "supervisors were caring which provided satisfaction of work and life. They were found to care in multiple dimensions: academic care, social care, counseling, close interaction, financial care, and lowering acculturative stress. The results showed that supervisors empowered the students in many areas including: research area choice, time management, scheduling research activities, research methods, and course selection" (p. 153).

Viewed in this regard with the need for thesis supervisors to provide trauma sensitivity, it is short-sighted for supervisors to insist that their students address only the thesis-writing aspect of their relationship, which amputates this from other intertwined aspects of their lives. As Dysthe (2002) points out, "(graduate) supervisors today have very few role models, and the ones they have are often poor because their own supervisors were either authoritarian or negligent" (p. 535). This paper does not go so far as to advocate that thesis supervisors become professionally trained counselors, rather, it calls for supervisors and students to engage in mutual kindness and mutual trust as Mkhabela and Frick (2016) have stated that would help both to get through the rigors of the thesis journey.

### ***Sumire as Co-Author***

Initially I naively thought Sumire could join me as a co-author when we responded to the call for papers by Sabine and Michelle for this Learner Development Journal issue. Negotiating our collaboration as this paper developed has been difficult. Sumire was hired as a full-time junior high school teacher which made it difficult for her to be a co-writer in the orthodox sense. Thanks to the avenue provided by narrative inquiry to contribute storied memories, Sumire has responded generously, through her essays and through speaking at length about her experiences.

Although I have produced the bulk of the meta-writing, Sumire's imprint on this paper cannot be denied. Her lengthy oral reminiscences constitute the meat of this paper, which included her stories of trauma with her American English accent that clouded her relationships

with students and professors. These reminiscences which emerged from her essays which were in turn embedded in her emails with me show that this paper constitutes her work and not just her words. Recently, scholarly authorship revolves around whether “someone has given comments that are indispensable to getting the paper published” (Singh, 2015). Narrative inquiry with its emphasis on the storied memories of all participants in dialogue has enabled Sumire to work as co-author and thanks to her, I have been able to grapple with my own stories of language trauma.

## Future Directions

One thread stemming from Sumire’s stories that invites exploration is the interplay of roles that graduate students perform outside of their thesis writing situation. Sumire was a student in a Master’s degree program and was also concurrently enrolled in a teaching license program in which most of her cohort members were years younger than her. She was also the youngest child and only daughter in a Japanese household and had to endure comparisons with her older brothers. Our paper refrains from exploring the conflicting images between her and her parents as to the “proper” role she was to assume as a female.

Her service as a TA for a number of undergraduate classes not only brought her into contact with students and instructors but also gave her the forum to carry out her data collection of her thesis work. Although Sumire smarted from students’ offhand remarks about her so-called “perfect” image, she enjoyed rapport with them. She recounted that initially students were not enthused about completing questionnaires about their language learning motivation (“their faces were like, ‘I don’t want to do this’”). But when they were informed by their instructor this came from her, “then they were like ‘Oh, Sumire-san’ and they did it”) She received back 150 completed forms, which she said “a professor (commented) it was remarkable to get (these) many answers”.

Although not in the narrative inquiry paradigm, Bhabha’s third space theory could provide insights on how the literature looks at overcoming these so-called walls between Sumire’s roles as graduate student, teaching assistant, and being a daughter. Williams (2012) writing as a teacher-educator, states “learning in that (third) space is as much about personal and professional identities as it is about teaching practice” (p. 295). Another way to regard identities and the worlds they inhabit can be found in Lemke’s (2010) proposal to view identity as more as a mercenary and “loose collection of elements” (p. 36) which people use to fulfill roles and interact with others in community (p. 20). Identity, for Lemke, is subjected to “hybridity” which represents the compromises that individuals make with their institutions (each with its own ideas about how the person should be), while dealing with desires, fears, and the vulnerabilities of our bodies (p. 18). This understanding of identity viewed as a collection of elements and hybridity might help bring out more richly the complexity of stories in these interactions.

A prominent thread stemming from Sumire’s stories that invites further exploration is the blessing/curse of having a native-speaker accent in one’s L2. I would argue that such positively or negatively discriminatory treatment occurs especially among people who do not have the physical features characteristic of native speakers of European-based languages, in this study, English speakers of Asian ethnicity. *Kikokushijo* who form the basis of Kanno’s 2000 study are treated as “by far the best speakers of English around” in Japan, summed up by one who stated, “here (in Japan) it’s so nice ... they look at you with admiration. You feel recognized” (p. 11). Yet for Sumire, such favorable reactions to the way she spoke was opposite of what she desired because too often those who complimented her on her accent did not listen to what she said. Her remark about how Professor Y was “more interested in *what*” (italics

mine) she said is revealing of his stance. As Professor Y was a *kikokushijo* himself, he understood her situation and diverted the other students' laudatory attention into focusing on the contents of the lesson. It would be worth investigating the breadth of experience among *kikokushijo* concerning how the Japanese perception of their native English accents has resulted in them being 'heard' for their accent, rather than being accepted for what they say.

Alerting home culture speakers of their held assumptions to Japanese and other speakers of English and how these can be regarded as microaggressions is another line of inquiry. Shim (2017) carried out a study with four white American pre-service teachers on their self-identified microaggressions toward people of various origins speaking English. She found her participants expressed positive or respectful attitudes toward those from L1 English-speaking countries as indicated in their comments about their accents, but harbored negative attitudes to speakers of other languages. These pre-service teachers expressed surprise when those other-language speakers exhibited behaviors they felt were contrary to their held expectations of those language groups. Her participants realized that "engaging in self-identifications of linguistics microaggression on (a) daily basis is uncomfortable but necessary if they are to become more effective teachers" (p. 13).

## Conclusion

This paper has used narrative inquiry to tell Sumire's and my stories which reveal how various aspects of her self-image were intricately woven with her thesis work, roles and life experience. These stories centered on her protracted trauma over her American English accent which pained her as she could not respond to students' and professors' perceptions as a 'perfect' person. But her passing a high-level English proficiency exam, coupled with my phonological assessment of her accent encouraged her to accept herself as a different person in thought and action.

These stories show healing, growth and transformation, especially for Sumire in her response to comments about her perceived perfection, which has resulted in demonstrating to her students that teachers are learners too. I hope these stories with their connections to memories point to connections to our experiences and personal makeup.

I am glad that I could witness her healing while serving as her thesis supervisor and provide encouragement as well as be a sounding board. Thesis supervisors working in cross-linguistic and/or cross-cultural settings should try to establish not only a working relationship of communication, but also care. They should be on the alert to help their students be open and forthcoming. For students who either lack the communication skills and the willingness to convey their apprehensions in a second or foreign language, having them write language learning histories (Murphey, Chen, & Chen 2005) can help them to present their memories in the form of stories, which can show agency and autonomy (Carpenter & Murphey 2007).

Narrative inquiry serves as an analytic approach that helps all participants to grapple with serious underlying issues through sharing their stories and confer with each other to help make sense of their experiences, especially when they are vulnerable. Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, and Vinz (2007) found their sense of victory in publishing incarcerated youths' accounts recognizing the enormity of their crimes was upended when their key protagonist delighted in retelling his criminal acts in a revelatory context. They write, "(Do) we allow spaces for multiple truths?" (p. 348). We have to admit that even with the use of narrative inquiry, we may still "get it all wrong" (p. 348).

Narrative allows scholars to recognize their own frailties and show the blur between the personal and professional spheres. Using the narrative inquiry approach to review Sumire's sojourn in graduate school through inquiry spaces in time, relations, and place has been an

illuminating reflective adventure for me. The more I ponder and reflect, the more interconnections and puzzles I encounter that I must investigate.

I close this paper with a quote from Alan Bochner (1997): “This is the work of self-narration: to make a life that seems to be falling apart come together again, be retelling and ‘restorying’ the events of one’s life” (p. 429). The life worth living is the life expressed in narrative.

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