Autonomisation, individualisation and uses of space: Mapping out individual language learning environments

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**Abstract**  
We are increasingly thinking of language learning in a global context as a matter of multiple diversities: diversities of learner biography, background and target languages, purposes, and settings for learning in and out of the classroom. This paper suggests that the common thread within these multiple diversities is that of learners mapping out individual language learning environments within the multilingual spaces in which they live, work, study and play. The question raised by this view is how we may begin to conceptualize autonomy in terms of learners’ agentive uses of urban space.

**Keywords**  
Autonomy, language learning, time and space, urban space

**Introduction**  
Over the years, I have pursued three main ideas in my work on autonomy. First, the growth of autonomy (the phrase that, in my view, best translates the French word *autonomisation*) is not a short-term matter; autonomy grows over the course of lifetimes and, in so far as we are concerned with autonomy in language learning, in the wider context of language learners’ lives. Second, experiences of language learning outside the classroom are crucial to the growth of autonomy; it is a fallacy to think that autonomy can be taught or grow in the context of classroom experience alone. Third, autonomy and individuality are mutually constitutive. These ideas have not always been the most popular, especially in the period around the turn of the century that Block (2003) called the ‘social turn’ in second language acquisition research, in which a ‘social’ view of
autonomy took hold and we were encouraged to think of the language classroom, not as a force that inhibited autonomy, but as the social context in which it could best develop, often over a matter of months or weeks.

In recent years, however, the pressure to think ‘socially’ has abated somewhat. There has been renewed interest both in language learning beyond the classroom (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Dressman & Sadler, 2020; Nunan & Richards, 2015; Reinders, Lai & Sundqvist, in press; Sackett, 2014) and in relationships between second language learning and individuality (Benson & Cooker, 2013; Benson, 2019; Gregerson & McIntyre, 2014; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This individual has also remerged in the field of autonomy, albeit in the guise of the relationship between autonomy and ‘agency’, and not as a core notion within autonomy itself (Peters et al., 2015). A way has opened up, in other words, to rethink autonomy as a long-term process of growth, that is grounded in life experience and entails the development of individuality. Rather than abandoning the idea of the ‘social’, however, the aim of this paper is to offer a spatial perspective on autonomy in language learning in which social interaction is recast as interaction with the wider environment of people, things and information.

1. After the social turn

The social turn of the late 1990s and early 2000s involved the application to second language learning of a raft of approaches from what was sometimes called ‘social theory’ (Norton Peirce, 1995). Vygotsky’s (1978) insight that learning emerged from social interaction was probably the most influential idea, in its suggestion that second language learning would be most effective if it was based on verbal interaction with adults or more competent peers. At the same time, the notion of linguistic capital, derived from Bourdieu (1991), situated success and failure in second language learning within often inequitable social structures and relations. The social turn had a particular impact on the field of autonomy, because for many socially-oriented researchers the concept of autonomy symbolized, on the one hand, an individualistic approach to language learning in isolation from others and, on the other hand, a socially unconstrained freedom of action. To escape the apparently individualistic connotations of the term ‘autonomy’, socially-oriented researchers replaced it with ‘agency’. Laura Ahearn’s (2001) article on language and agency was particularly influential. She commented that scholars were ‘moving away from approaches that treat agency as a synonym for free will as exercised by completely autonomous individuals’ (Ahearn, 2001, p. 115) and defined agency as ‘the socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (ibid., p. 112). This definition has subsequently become the standard definition of agency for second language learning, although one might legitimately ask whether, in a world in which more or less everything is ‘socioculturally mediated’, this is not a relatively weak definition which amounts to no more than the ‘capacity to act’.

The force of the social turn, especially its requirement that all key terms be defined as socioculturally mediated, has now somewhat abated in favour of what I have called a ‘person-centred’ turn in which more value is attached to individuality (Benson, 2019). However, it has left a certain legacy, first, in the idea that autonomy implies interdependence and social responsibility, and, second, in the notion that the forms that autonomy takes are shaped by social processes and social contexts. At the same time, many people now prefer to talk about agency rather than autonomy, and the difference between these two terms has become somewhat obscure. One of the problems with the sociocultural notion of agency is that the capacity to act, whether it is socioculturally mediated or not, ultimately rests with the individual. Thus, agency has come to be associated with individual actions that are somehow unpredictable, or go against the grain of what
might be expected given a certain social conditioning. In second language learning, we tend to think that language learners display agency when they are creative or take the initiative to do something unexpected. Used in this way, the term agency does not allow for a more coherent or comprehensive capacity for learners to direct their own learning activities, which we have long understood as the key characteristic of autonomy.

The potential replacement of the term autonomy with the, essentially weaker, term agency is one problem that we face as we move out of the social turn. The problem that I want to address in this paper, however, is that we have also inherited what I see as an excessively humanistic conception of the social. The social turn in second language acquisition research reacted to a view of language learning in which the human mind was viewed as a learning ‘machine’ (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Building on ideas from communicative language learning, which posed the first challenge to this view, the social turn resituated language learning in a world of interaction among fleshed out human beings. This was an important move (Benson, 2019). But at a time when the threat of environmental disaster is telling us that the world does not exist for the benefit of humans alone, and that we need to view humans as just one kind of object in the world, a wider perspective on the ‘social’ is needed.

2. A spatial view of interaction in language learning

My main argument, here, is that we need to see autonomisation as a process that involves not only relations to other people, but relations to objects of many kinds. There are two ways to do this. Latour’s (2005) actor network theory argues for an expanded view of social interaction that involves networks of human and non-human ‘actors’, in which much interaction takes place among non-human actors without the intervention of human agency. However, this approach means a redefinition of the word ‘social’ that defies everyday usage. A second approach is to abandon the word ‘social’ altogether and to think of language learning as a matter of interaction with ‘environments’ composed of many kinds of objects, among which the most important from the point of view of language learning are ‘language-bearing’ people, things and information. The term ‘environment’ suggests an ecological approach to language learning of the kind proposed by van Lier (2004). However, important as his contribution to an environmental view of language learning has been, I argue that van Lier also tends to construe the language learning environment as an environment of other people. In contrast, I propose a view of the language learning environment as a space and everything of relevance to language learning that it contains, both human and non-human. This argument, and the view of the language learning environment that follows, is outlined in more detail in Benson (2021a). Here, I want to focus on the implications of a spatial view of language learning environments for our understanding of autonomy.

3. Language learning and space

Two important consequences follow from a spatial view of language learning environments. First, attention is shifted to the question of where language learning takes place, which can have a great impact on how language learning proceeds. Does it take place, for example, in an environment that is rich in target language resources, or in an environment in which the target language is a scarce resource? If I were learning French in Sydney, Australia, I would be in an environment of the second kind; although there are many resources for learning French in Sydney, they are relatively scarce and I would, at least, have to spend some effort to go out and find them. If I were learning French in Lyon, France, I would be in an environment of the first kind, in which resources for learning French are abundant, although I would have to expend some effort to access them. Second,
a spatial view of language learning environments shifts attention away from any particular kind of target language resource (such as friendly native speakers) and leads, instead, to a more comprehensive view of the spatiality of the environment and all of the resources that it makes available.

This view of environmental resources is based, in part, on Latour’s (2005) notion of ‘flat ontology’, which has been developed in Harman’s (2018) object-oriented ontology and DeLanda’s (2016) assemblage theory. In flat ontology all objects exist equally and independently of dualistic distinctions such as human and non human, animate and inanimate, material and nonmaterial. From this perspective, human beings, books and magazines, CDs and MP3 music files, movies and television programmes, Facebook posts and TikTok videos – all of which are capable of serving as language learning resources – are all equally objects and all deserving of attention. This view is also, in part, based on emerging research that highlights the roles of interaction with material nonhuman objects in language learning and multilingualism (Aronin, Hornsby & Kiliańska-Przybyło, 2018; Toohey et al., 2015). This research is a valuable counterweight to several decades of work on second language learning that has privileged verbal interaction with people as the source. It is also consonant with a world in which printed and digital texts, and broadcast multimodal textual assemblages of many kinds are increasingly implicated in mediated interactions with other people and the world around us and the use of mobile devices complexifies relationships between language use and space (Diaz Cardona, 2016). Drawing on assemblage theory, I use the term ‘language-bearing assemblage’ to refer to physical objects of all kinds to which language is attached. These include speaking people, machines that speak, labelled objects, materials on which texts are printed or displayed, and the microscopic bits of physical matter that convey digital information. Lastly, I draw on mobilities theory to understand how language-bearing objects circulate in global space and are differentially distributed among language environments around the world. Clearly, Lyon is rich in resources for learning French because it is in France, but put another way it is a space in which there is a particularly intense circulation of French language-bearing assemblages. The global mobilities of language, however, mean that there is also some circulation of French language-bearing assemblages in Sydney, although this circulation is much less intense than it is in Lyon. Virtually all languages now circulate globally to some degree, both through their attachment to mobile people and commodities, and, especially, in digital forms, although some languages circulate more widely and more intensely than others.

4. **Autonomisation and urban space**

As I understand it, the French word *autonomisation* indicates a process involving autonomy. There is no ready English equivalent for this word, which has to be translated by a phrase such as growth of autonomy or development of autonomy. Autonomy is also conceptualized as something a person either has or does not have, or perhaps, has more or less of. The idea of *autonomisation* appeals to me, therefore, as pointing to a more fluid process, in which, from an environmental perspective autonomy is situated in the relationship between the learner and the learning situation. Levels of autonomy may fluctuate according to the situations learners find themselves in, but there is also something that the learner takes away from each situated experience. It is in this sense that learners become more autonomous overall, provided that their experiences of learning are varied and provide opportunities for self-direction. Or rather than autonomy growing in the longer term, we might think of autonomy becoming more differentiated, more complex, as the learner gains experience of self-direction across a range of settings.
My thinking on this issue has also been inspired by two quotations on urban space and the individual, that I first cited in the introduction to Benson & Cooker (2013), a volume concerned with relations between the social and the individual in applied linguistics research. Urbanization has been one of the great spatial processes of the past two centuries, which in conjunction with recent tendencies in globalization is producing increasingly multilingual, superdiverse cities (Duarte & Gogolin, 2013; King & Carson, 2016). These multilingual cities have rapidly become the major site for advanced second language learning, providing rich resources for language learning beyond the classroom, while becoming, somewhat paradoxically, more multilingual due to the presence of large numbers of international students who are learning the dominant languages of these cities.

The first quotation is from Georg Simmel, a pioneering early 20th century German sociologist, who had much to say about ‘individuality’ as a sociological concept. Rejecting the 18th-century notion of individuality as ‘full freedom of movement in all social and intellectual relationships’, Simmel articulated a modernist conception of individuality as it is shaped by the experience of urban life. The quotation that I am particularly interested in first appeared in a book published in 1903 called The Metropolis and Mental Life (Simmel, 1997, pp. 183-184). The most significant characteristic of the modern city, or metropolis, Simmel argued is its ‘functional extension beyond its physical boundaries’ through trade and social interactions with other towns and cities. Correspondingly, the metropolitan citizen ‘does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity’, but is constituted ‘by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially’. From this derives a conception of individual freedom, based on the particularity that comes from ‘the working out of a way of life’. Undoubtedly ahead of his times, Simmel saw individuals not as self-contained entities, but as spreading out into the urban spaces in which they live. The spaces in which people live are incorporated into their individual identities over time, such that we might, just as Ushioda (2011) talks about the ‘person-in-context’, think of the urban individual as the ‘individual-in-urban-space’. I am also attracted by the idea that individuality emerges from what Simmel calls ‘the working out of a way of life’ in urban space. This is an idea that can be quite readily apply to language learning as an activity that is increasingly a matter of working out ways of learning in complex multilingual urban spaces.

The second quotation comes from Sheldon White and Alexander Siegal, two developmental psychologists working in the field of everyday cognition. The quotation is from an article on cognitive development in time and space and echoes Simmel’s thoughts (White and Siegal, 1984, p. 239). White and Siegal criticized the superficial idea that socialization is a ‘universal process through which all children in a society acquire a common stock of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and customs’. Because children occupy only a fractional part of the contexts of the towns and cities in which they live, they argue, socialization is also ‘negotiation to find a viable and unique set of social contexts to be used and lived in by the individuals’. This is, moreover, a process that ‘makes children not alike as it makes them alike’. Here, then, we have the idea that urban experience is an individualizing experience, which we might say in the context of language learning, makes learners not alike as it makes them alike. Each learner of, say, French in Lyon, learns the same language, but the ways in which they learn are individually differentiated by the complexity of the urban experience of language and language learning.

This notion of individualization as an outcome of the experience of urban space is, I think, a key link between autonomy and language learning as interaction with target language resources in the environment. Individualization and autonomisation are, in this context, so closely connected as to be almost the same thing. The experience of language learning in urban space, differentiates and
individualizes at the same time as it provides grounds for self-directed learning that enhances the learner’s autonomy. As White and Siegal (1984) explain, people have particular interests and dispositions that are supported and fostered as individual interests and dispositions by the varied resources that are distributed across the complex spaces of modern cities. In addition, 21st-century language learners have access to vast arrays of online resources that are both parallel to and integrated with the local space of the urban environment. These local and online resources constitute the language learning environment, which may be rich or impoverished in regard to target language resources depending on the location of the learner and the language they are learning.

But there is more to autonomy in language learning, especially language learning beyond the classroom, than this. Whether resources are abundant or scarce, the selection and use of resources presents itself a problem for the learner that can only be solved by self-direction and autonomy. Individualization is not, in other words, an automatic consequence of urban experience for every individual. It is, instead, a consequence of the individual’s active, or agentive, engagement with environmental resources. Through initiative, informed selection of resources and a capacity to create and exploit learning situations learners map out their own individualized language learning environments. It is in this mapping out of language learning environments that individualization and autonomisation go hand in hand. Autonomous learners are those who have the capacity to control their learning, but in the present-day they are, more particularly, those who are able to bend urban and digital space to the purpose of their learning.

5. Mapping out individual language learning environments

In research on adult English language learners in Sydney, we have shown how this mapping out of individual language learners works out in practice (Benson 2021b; Benson, forthcoming a/b; Benson, Chappell & Yates, 2018; Chappell, Benson & Yates, 2018). The individuality of language learning environments is shaped by a number of factors. I tend to see individual difference as an outcome of experience, rather than fixed variables of identity, and in this sense the learners’ experiences prior to arriving in Australia certainly play a role in their approaches to mapping out learning environments after they arrive (Kashiwa & Benson, 2018). Equally important are the constraints imposed by everyday spatiotemporal routines. The shape of an individual language learning environments depends to a degree on the locations of settings for learning (in and out-of-class), their availability at different times of day and their accessibility from the location of the learner at any point in the day. In this respect, there is more flexibility in the use of online resources than in the use of resources on the ground in the city (one reason why they are often preferred), but there are locations and times at which even online resources are difficult to access. The shape of an individual language learning environments also depends on the shape of individual days, which are in turn shaped by, for example, the location of housing and household arrangements, the location and conditions of paid employment, and opportunities for and preferences in leisure activities.

Most of the English language students who participated in our studies came to Australia in order to study English, usually with the longer-term goal of obtaining a higher educational qualification. Their visa conditions meant that they were required to study for at least 12 hours per week and that they could also work part time, which most of the students were obliged to do in order to pay for their studies. Due to the high cost of accommodation most of the students lived in shared houses with other international students, and in parts of the city with large international student and migrant populations. A similar situation in paid employment often restricted the degree to which
they came in contact with speakers of English, other than each other, in the course of their everyday lives. In fact, these students were surprisingly constrained in their opportunities to use English in the city, considering that they had often come to Sydney in the expectation that they would be living in an English-speaking city. These constraints on students’ attempts to map out language learning environments that would be conducive to their learning of English are, of course, specific to Sydney, or more generally to the circumstances of students and migrants learning the dominant languages of the countries in which they are living. However, few language learners are free to spend their time, money and energies on language learning as they might wish. The principle that the process of mapping out language learning environments is constrained by the spatiotemporal routines of everyday lives is probably a universal one. The same may be true of the role of autonomy in working around these constraints.

It is important at this point to note that, for the students in our studies, constraints on language learning beyond the classroom were both shared (due their shared status as international English language students) and individualized (due a variety of spatial and experiential factors). Individualization is in this sense inherent to their circumstances. Beyond this autonomy comes into play mainly in the form of initiative and creativity in the use of time and space for the purposes of language learning. At one end of the continuum, there were students whose everyday routines left them little time or energy for activities involving English outside their English language colleges. At the other end of the continuum were students who exercised considerable autonomy in creating opportunities for activities involving English despite the circumstances of their lives. Typically, the students were aware of the potential for part-time work to involve either communication with co-nationals only, limited service-type communication with English speakers, or more substantive opportunities for use of English. Some had shown considerable initiative in turning part-time work into an occasion for language learning beyond the classroom. Something similar was observed in housing arrangements: some students preferred, or had no option but to share accommodation with co-nationals, while others took pains to live with speakers of other languages.

Because these students’ everyday routines were dominated by the classroom, part-time work and homework, they left little time for leisure activities. Nevertheless, autonomy again came into play in creative uses of leisure time and activities for the purpose of language learning and, in many cases, this meant overcoming a certain inertia that encouraged them spend leisure time either relaxing with co-nationals or simply resting. Some students, for example, used commuting time to read or listen to English; others made a point of watching an hour or so of English-language television at night. Some students made the most of opportunities to use English in break times at college, or to go out with teachers and other students in the evenings. In general, online activities using English were confined to late nights and weekends, which were also a time when some students used online tools to maintain transnational connections with family and friends overseas. Some female students also told us about how they used online dating applications to meet English-speakers for casual conversation at weekends. Benson, Chappell and Yates (2018), which tracks one female student’s language learning activities over a week, includes an example of this kind of use of online dating, but more generally illustrates the degree of autonomy that some students exercise in seeking out resources and mapping out environments that are conducive to their learning in urban and digital space.

**Conclusion**

The main conclusion that I want to draw in this paper is that we need, perhaps, to reconceptualize autonomy for the times in which language learners now live. Individualism has been an unpopular
idea in academia because of its associations with neo-liberal economic and political agendas which are breaking down collectivities and placing burdens which were formerly accepted as the province of state institutions onto individuals (Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012). In this sense, individualization undermines the democratic practices and values that underpin the idea of a society of interdependent, socially responsible autonomous individuals. Yet at the same time, we may also need to recognise how, in the domain of language learning in particular, autonomisation is a process by which individuals get to grips with and gain some degree of control the individualization that is a long-term consequence of urbanization and globalization. As we observe young adult learners, in particular, autonomously mapping out language learning environments, under often difficult conditions, with the ultimate goal of improving their lives, are we not observing a kind of resistance to the forces of individualization that are so prevalent in the world in which we now live?

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