Creating Oneself through Narratives: Agency in first-semester university students' career plans

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In this paper I examine expressions of agency in autobiographical narratives by Finnish speaking university students of Swedish. Students who write about themselves, their decisions and their career plans are simultaneously involved in (re)constructing their identities. The narratives often include references to "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) that the students consider as significant, and whose membership they see as something worth dreaming of. These kinds of first-person stories can be regarded as important as far as identity formation is concerned (Sfard & Prusak 2005). The narratives can help in building a bridge between the narrator's past, the present and the future. While expressing continuity and stability, the narratives also allow and even welcome both serendipity and agency (Plunkett 2001). In this paper, agency and identity are seen as complex, temporal and contextual phenomena that are inextricably linked with each other. My focus is on the following two questions: How do narratives written by first-semester university students express agency as these students tell about their career plans? And secondly: How do narratives articulating explicit career plans differ from narratives expressing very vague or no professional plans at all? The results show e.g. that all these narratives contain several instances of agentive action and conscious planning. However, in texts conveying vague or unclear career plans, agency is often hidden or covered by expressions emphasizing the unforeseen and serendipitous.

Keywords: identity, agency, narratives, university students, career plans

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine first-person narratives of Finnish speaking university students of Swedish as a way of constructing identity and expressing agentive action. I am interested in how first-semester university students comment on their career plans as they write about their expectations and dreams for the future. I see the written reflections of these students as "situated activity, enabled by students' participation in particular discursive contexts" (Ovens &

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Tinning 2009: 1130). Research on how university students tell about, reflect on and make decisions concerning their future career can hopefully make it easier for their teachers to support students on their way towards linguistic expertise and a stronger professional identity.

In their interesting study on student teachers' reflective writing, Mena-Marcos et al. (2013) came to the conclusion that only seldom does deliberate reflection lead to construction of (better) professional knowledge; instead, the knowledge that is generated is mostly superficial and descriptive. This statement is probably true in most situations where university students are asked to reflect freely on their (professional) choices and expectations. However, this does not diminish the value of this kind of writing.

Reflective writing by student teachers (or university students in general) may not be as deep, analytic and problem-oriented as the reflection of professionals, and the level of knowledge produced can be mostly superficial and imprecise (Mena-Marcos et al. 2013). According to Mena-Marcos et al. (2013), student teachers make primarily positive evaluations when writing about their practice and use this kind of writing "apparently, in support of self-esteem". Nevertheless, it is possible to see this as a positive phenomenon as these students narratively construct their sense of agency and their identities as (future) professionals. Self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy can be regarded as important building blocks in any kind of professional identity. Besides, concerning research, students' reflective writing can be a source of valuable information on many aspects connected to professional development.

In this article, the focus will be on the following two questions: How do narratives written by first-semester university students express agency as these students tell about their career plans? And secondly: How do narratives articulating explicit career plans differ from narratives expressing very vague or no professional plans at all?

I use the word "narratives" when referring to autobiographical stories (essays) written by university students. In their stories, students are not only reporting on past experiences or telling about their present situation. On the contrary, they have a strong orientation towards the future. This definition of narrative is thereby wider than the traditional way of seeing narratives as accounts of past events (see Labov 1999: 225; Labov & Waletsky 1967).

2 On the concepts of identity and agency

2.1 Identity formation as a social and temporal process

As social beings, we interact with other people and our socio-cultural contexts all our lives. In this interaction we learn and change – learning can be seen as participation in different "communities of practice", as situated activity (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Sfard 1998; Säljö 2000). As Wenger (2000: 229) states, communities of practice can be characterized by joint enterprise, mutuality and a shared repertoire of resources, e.g. language, stories and routines, and the shared cultural practices of the community reflect the collective learning of its members.

As Kalaja et al. (2008) remark, learners are nowadays considered to be active agents in their own learning as they participate in and are gradually being socialized into specific communities of practice. Accordingly, learning and using a second language (L2) can be seen both as a contextual phenomenon and a process of personal meaning making, consisting of "*subjective* experiences, not universal ones, with [the L2 learner's] body, identities and emotions involved" (Kalaja et al. 2008: 3).

Learning is the medium by which identities develop and transform (Wenger 1998: 13), and the development of identity involves both continuity and change (van Lier 2007: 57–58; Roth et al. 2004: 49–50, 62). Identities are continually (re)constructed in social encounters; this entails that identity, as a process and a constant negotiation of the self, is flexible, fluid and complex. The self can be seen as "a process of becoming" (Rogoff 1995: 142) or "an ongoing project of establishing one's place in the world" (van Lier 2004: 115).

As a consequence, identity is inherently temporal; according to Wenger (1998: ch. 6) our socially negotiated identities situate our engagement in a temporal context (see also Rogoff 1995: 153–156) – as we negotiate the present, we include the past as well as the (imagined) future as building blocks of our identity. We change all the time, but experience ourselves as the same person; in that way we preserve a sense of continuity and stability despite the fact that our identities are in a state of constant flux. Narrating is a central ingredient in our lives as social beings, and the narratives we tell (re)construct our personal and social identities (Johansson 2005: 83; see also Menezes et al. 2008: 218–221). As McAdams (1996: 132–134) states, identity itself can be seen as a life story that integrates the past, the present and the future, thereby providing life with a sense of unity and purpose. Besides, it is possible to claim that even the most private narratives we tell about ourselves are collectively constructed, "products of a collective storytelling" (Sfard & Prusak 2005: 14–15); the stories that surround us shape our identity, and our personal stories merge into the stories of the community (see also Bruner 1987).

Social interaction is at the heart of being human; we communicate with each other and participate in various activities with each other, in that way taking part in a shared physical and mental world (see Enfield & Levinson 2006: 1–3; Zlatev et al. 2008; Trevarthen 2008). Sharing our stories can be seen as an expression of this wish and need to connect with others. Sinha and Rodríguez (2008: 374) write: "Through intersubjectively shared and constructed narrative, the world and the identity of the subject can simultaneously be explored, renewed and consolidated."

Students' stories often include references to "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) that they regard as important, either now or in the future. These kinds of stories can be seen as central for identity formation. As Sfard and Prusak (2005: 16–17) point out, our first-person narratives, i.e., "self-told identities", often affect our actions, and the most important stories are usually the ones that involve our belonging or not belonging to various communities. The idea of identity as socially and discursively constructed allows the researcher to examine identities as stories, as communicational practices. Identity is not a collection of experiences a person has gone through, but as Sfard and Prusak (2005: 17) write, "it is our *vision* of our own or other people's experiences".

Students telling about their L2 learning are at the same time narrating about themselves as L2 learners, thereby constructing their identities as L2 users (Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000; see also Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund 2010). They choose to tell certain things about their past experiences, their present situation and their plans for the future, at the same time omitting other things. These choices – both the ones that are made consciously and the ones that are unconscious – can be seen as significant as far as identity formation is concerned (see also Bruner 1987: 14). Any story told about one's life is only one version of the life story, and could be told differently to a different listener/reader, on a different day, in a different mood, etc. This has to do with the social nature of even our most private narratives and the flexible construction of our identity.

First-person narratives, as "a part of our ongoing conversation with ourselves" (Sfard & Prusak 2005: 17), can have a powerful influence on our actions. They help in building a bridge between our past, the present and the future. As our language – as well as our social reality – can be seen as a construction (see Berger & Luckmann 1966), it is under constant (re)formation: "we construe and construct it as we go along" (van Lier 2004: 90).

It is possible to look at the importance of first-person narratives also from a different angle, and link it to a discussion of grammatical categories in linguistic interaction. As Ahearn (2001: 123) states (with reference to Foley 1999: 210), the speaker, "I", is "the most salient person in a linguistic interaction", and the second most significant is "you", the addressee. In the essays belonging to my data, students write in first person about themselves, partly to the reader, i.e. the addressee, but also to themselves. This makes the narratives very powerful as far as identity construction is concerned.

Sfard and Prusak (2005) make a distinction between "actual identities" and "designated identities", which they regard as the two subsets of significant stories about a person. Actual identities are stories about how things are at the moment, whereas designated identities refer to how things are expected (wished, feared etc.) to be now or in the future.

2.2 The elusive concept of agency

A young person is expected to make several choices with long-term consequences concerning his or her life under more or less uncertain conditions (Eteläpelto et al. 2011b: 9, 22). Making choices has to do with "agency", a concept that is elusive and hard to pin down. Many theoreticians have been interested in the concept, and definitions given to it differ not only between disciplines, but also within disciplines (see e.g. a review of theories of agency in educational research by Malmberg 2002: 21–39).

Bakan (1966) worked on the concepts of "agency" and "communion", and characterized them as "two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms, agency for the existence of an organism as an individual, and communion for the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is a part" (ibid.: 14–15). According to McAdams (2001), Bakan's concepts of agency and communion can also be applied to life narratives, where they can be analyzed through two thematic clusterings. Agency is manifested e.g. in the themes of self-mastery and empowerment, whereas communion themes include e.g. dialogue and unity/togetherness. According to McAdams, a rhetoric

of agency is common especially in the individualistic Western societies that focus on the self more than on the community.

Hitlin and Elder (2007) stress the temporal nature of agency. In their model they combine the concepts of self, agency and time, and divide individual agency into four partly overlapping types depending on temporal factors. The first type, "existential agency", means the fundamental capacity or potentiality of individuals to exert free will. The second type, "identity agency", is the habitual way of acting in routine situations, guided by social roles and expectations. The third type, "pragmatic agency", is applied in new situations where the routines for some reason break down. The fourth type of agency, "life course agency", is the most relevant as far as my study is concerned. It refers to the long-term plans of an individual, "the ability of individuals to make choices at turning points in the life course" (ibid.: 183), during times of transition, e.g., during the transition to adulthood. The long-term consequences of these choices usually become visible only in retrospect, as an accumulation of decisions made during transitions (Hitlin & Elder 2007). Agency and identity are thereby inextricably linked with each other.

Hitlin and Elder (2007: 183) refer to the notion of "possible selves" by Markus and Nurius (1986) as a way of conceptualizing long-term agentic action. Also Sfard and Prusak's (2005) idea of "designated identities" has a certain resemblance to this concept (see also Higgins' (1987) definition of actual, ideal and ought selves). Our "possible selves" refer to the selves we can imagine as possible for ourselves in the future. These images can direct our actions when we make important decisions concerning our lives, like choosing a line of study and a future profession.

But agency is not a purely individual phenomenon: the choices an individual makes are affected – either promoted or constrained – by other people and by the social, economic and cultural resources that are available in the contexts where a person interacts with other people, in particular "contexts-for-action" (Biesta & Tedder 2007; see also Eteläpelto et al. 2011a: 364, 2011b: 11–12). Biesta and Tedder (2007) see agentic orientations as a combination of routine, purpose and judgement and point out that

> agency is not achieved in a vacuum but always depends on the interplay of agentic orientations, resources, and wider contextual and structural factors.

Agency can be seen as a temporal, contextual and dialogical phenomenon. As Ahearn (2001) writes in her critical review of many common conceptualizations of agency, agency should not be seen as a synonym of free will or resistance, void of all social influence. Ahearn states that theorists often ignore the sociocultural nature of agency; like meanings, also agency is socioculturally mediated and co-constructed (see also Lasky 2005).

Plunkett (2001) – who also uses Bakan's concept of agency in studying life narratives – contrasts agency with "serendipity", and regards these concepts as important in young adults', especially women's, stories. Agency refers to expressions of ambition, competence, achievement, clear goals and power, whereas serendipity refers to the positive things that can result from unplanned and unexpected occurrences, things that happen by chance. According to Plunkett, especially women tell about their lives in ways that emphasize the unexpected, the serendipitous, while at the same time showing agency, goal

orientation and ambition; serendipity helps to tolerate the uncertainty that is always a part of one's life, and makes room for experimentation and creativity. As stated by different theorists on career planning (see e.g. Mitchell et al. 1999), chance always plays a role in career planning, alongside planfulness; chance can never be avoided completely, but people can prepare themselves to react to and make use of unforeseen life events and opportunities (Cabral & Salomone 1990).

The coexistence of agency and serendipity in students' stories can be seen as natural. Making a coherent story about one's life can give the narrator a sense of continuity and security, at the same time welcoming change – expressed not only as agency, but also as serendipity (see Plunkett 2001). Instead of serendipity we could talk about luck or happenstance (Mitchell et al. 1999), or even fate.

According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998) agency entails engaging with other people in social contexts in the present, at the same time orienting towards the future and being informed by the past.

> Actors are always living simultaneously in the past, future, and present, and adjusting the various temporalities of their empirical existence to one another (and to their empirical circumstances) in more or less imaginative or reflective ways. They continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations. (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 1012.)

This is evident also in my data. Students telling about their studies and their plans for the future are simultaneously involved in the different temporal dimensions of their lives. They use the present as a backdrop on which they project their future (career) plans, using their past experiences as a filter.

In this article, agency is seen as a contextual and dialogical dimension of human life. Agency should not be seen as a private and individual way of reacting to external stimuli, but as a complex temporal phenomenon that is an integral part of all human learning and development. Joseph (2006: 238) states: "Agency is a paradox. We have it and we do not have it. Some of us have it more than others, but no one has it absolutely or lacks it absolutely."

In writing their first-person stories, L2 students of Swedish are involved in active identity work as they create and recreate their narrative identities as L2 users, future L2 professionals and human beings.

3 Data and method

The data used in this article consist of 31 autobiographical narratives written by Finnish university students of Swedish as a second language. The narratives were collected from students at the beginning of their first semester at the University of Helsinki, in September 2011. The students were simply asked to write a short essay in Swedish (length 1–1½ pages) on why they have chosen to study Swedish and what their expectations are concerning studies at the university. The instructions given were formulated openly and vaguely on purpose, to make it possible for the students to write about anything they saw as

relevant in their own life at that moment. It was interesting to notice that almost all students took up questions concerning career planning, despite the fact that they were not specifically asked to do so. All the students gave their written permission to use the narratives for research purposes.

The data are analyzed using a method that Polkinghorne (1995: 12–15) calls *analysis of narratives*; in this kind of analysis the "data are in the form of storied narratives" and the researcher can study the structure and form of the narratives in order to "locate common themes or conceptual manifestations". The narratives in my data are studied both thematically and linguistically, and the focus is on the personal experiences narrated by the students.

In the thematic analysis I concentrate on themes expressing life course agency and serendipity, in the light of theories presented in the theoretical background of this article. As Pavlenko (2007) concludes, the use of thematization as the only method in narrative analysis often leads to self-evident and even naïve results, as well as ignores the fact that content cannot be separated from form and context. Therefore – in order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon – thematization will be complemented with a context-sensitive linguistic analysis. The linguistic analysis draws on suggestions for recognizing designated identities in narratives made by Sfard and Prusak (2005: 18). According to them, designated identities "can be recognized by their use of the future tense or of words that express wish, commitment, obligation or necessity, such as *should, ought, have to, must, want, can/cannot* etc." In this article, the concept "designated identities" will be regarded as more or less synonymous with "possible selves" by Markus and Nurius (1986).

The examples taken from the essays are translated from Swedish to English by me, and the students' names have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. For ethical reasons, some details in the narratives have been omitted; these include specifics that have been interpreted as too private to be discussed in an article.

4 Findings

The results of the study are presented by comparing stories written by students having explicit career plans with stories written by students who tell about the lack of such plans. To be able to discuss the research questions in more detail, I have decided to focus mainly on nine of the 31 narratives: four essays expressing clear professional plans, four essays conveying indecision regarding the future, and one essay that presents an interesting combination of determination and indecisiveness. In these stories, specific focus will be on expressions of agency and serendipity.

4.1 Stories articulating explicit career plans

Many of the writers who have already chosen their future profession are teachers-to-be. It is typical of many students that the idea of becoming a teacher has been an important goal for them already in their childhood. Very often they tell about their decision in a way that is characterized by confidence and decisiveness.

> I have known from very early on that I *want* to become a teacher or work
> with animals in some way. A few years ago I found my "friendship book"
> where all my friends could write something about me. To the question
> "What will Mari become when she gets older?" almost everyone had
> answered that I *should* become a teacher. Then, at the latest, I decided that
> was something I *want* to do. (Mari; italics added)

It has been clear for Mari from very early on that teaching means something
special to her, and also her childhood friends have seen teaching as an obvious
choice for Mari. When Mari has made up her mind about becoming a teacher,
there is one big problem left: choosing between all possible subjects she could
teach. She discusses this problem with her boyfriend who then comes up with
the idea that Mari could start studying Swedish at the university and then
become a language teacher. According to Mari's own words, she has never been
good at languages, but she used to like Swedish at school. Gradually, becoming
a teacher of Swedish starts feeling like a good alternative, and Mari starts
studying for the entrance examination.

When analyzing the data, it could be noticed that many students – just like
Mari in the text fragment above – use the verb *want* rather frequently in their
essays. This can be seen as natural and understandable, as the students were
asked to write about their expectations for the studies. The verb *want* is one of
the words that according to Sfard and Prusak (2005: 18) signify designated
identities; wanting something is an expression of wish, hopefulness or
aspiration.

In her story, Mari uses the verb *want* when telling about her wish to become a
teacher. She also seems to seek – and get – back-up for her own decision by
referring to her friends' opinion that Mari "*should* become a teacher" (italics
added). Her choice of career was not only her own wish: it was also an
obligation, something she was expected to do; here the student uses her friends
– as well as her boyfriend – as "co-authors" of her designated identities. It is
obvious that neither agency nor identity is created privately, in a social vacuum;
on the contrary, they always affect and are affected by the multidimensional
context a person is a part of.

Also Peter tells about his choice of career by using the verb *want*. He writes
(italics added):

> I *want* to learn the [Swedish] language and get to know the society, and
> after graduation I'll give to others what I've learnt. I hope this will happen
> through my future job as a language teacher or perhaps as an instructor in
> teacher education. I either *want* to work with eager and interested young
> people, or try to share my thoughts with teachers-to-be. (…) The truth is
> that there is pain even in our Scandinavian society, but I *want* to do my
> duty and help those whose life is hard. It gives me indescribable joy if I see
> that someone gets his life in order due to something I have done. (Peter)

Peter seems to have an attitude towards teaching that could be described as a
"vocation" or a "calling", something that is almost predetermined or destined.
As Estola and Syrjälä (2002: 90) remark, a calling has to do with two things:
firstly, that a person wants to serve others, which entails that s/he sees his/her

work as important from the society's point of view; and secondly, that s/he gets personal satisfaction from his/her work. Both aspects are clearly noticeable in Peter's story.

Another student, Lisa, tells she feels like a lifelong student. She is already working as a teacher of two languages, but her present job is only temporary. In order to get a permanent job she feels she has to become a proficient teacher of three languages; two languages are not enough in the present labour market situation. That is why she has started studying Swedish: "*I'm in a situation where it may not be enough to have the competence to teach only two languages. In education, also a third language would be useful.*" Lisa's essay is written in a way that emphasizes the pragmatic aspects of language learning. Above all, she expects her studies to be practical, valuable, useful and relevant to teachers-to-be, i.e., directly applicable in teaching situations: "*If the education is motivating, effective and useful, I'll be satisfied.*"

Learning and using a foreign language can also be described as a love affair. Emma writes:

> I've always loved studying languages. (...) I fell in love with Swedish as I started working as a teacher a year ago and got a job as a teacher of three languages. (Emma)

Emma tells she wants to continue working as a teacher also in the future, and that it is therefore important for her to get the required qualifications in Swedish as well:

> And what do I expect of my studies? I expect to learn lots of things about the other Scandinavian countries and languages: Danish, in particular, sounds lovely, I think. I expect to be able to write and talk a lot, and to get to know Sweden better. And finally, I expect to finish my studies in two years' time (…), and to become a proper Swedish teacher someday. (Emma)

All these four students, Mari, Peter, Lisa and Emma, are determined to become teachers of Swedish in the future. In their narratives they see themselves as members of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) consisting of language teachers. Their "designated identities" (Sfard & Prusak 2005), expressed for example through the use of the verb *want* and the future tense in their narratives, seem to be in harmony both with their "actual identities" and with their past experiences. Mari, for example, has known from very early on that she wants to become a teacher. The "possible futures" (Wenger 2000) and "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius 1986) these students imagine for themselves appear clear and unproblematic: the goals they have set for themselves seem to be within relatively easy reach.

The stories of these students are characterized by explicit agentive expressions and a strong will to reach the goal they have set for themselves: becoming a teacher. The temporal dimensions of identity, as well as its flexible and fluid nature, are evident in these stories.

4.2 Stories expressing vague career plans

It seems that quite a few students of Swedish start studying their L2 with very unclear career plans. This is how one of the students, Anneli, tells about her situation:

> I don't know what I want to become or do in the future, but I keep thinking about different alternatives and hope that my plans for the future will get a bit clearer as time goes by, or that I will at least have some plans one day. (Anneli)

Anneli tells that she has no plans at all, but hopes to get some in the future. At the moment she has no expectations concerning her studies, and has not really had time to think about them. However, she expects everything to get a bit clearer in the future, so that she will be able to decide what she really wants. Knowing what she wants requires trying out new things, on the basis of which a decision can be made: *"I hope I'll have a chance to try different things at the university and in that way, finally, be able to decide what I want to do."*

Some students with no clear career plans for the future seem to be more or less surprised about the fact that they are actually studying Swedish at the university. It is as if everything had happened without them having had much to do with the matter.

> This autumn, I, together with many others, started studying Scandinavian languages, but to be honest, I am a bit surprised at finding myself here. (Jenny)

Jenny seems to be astonished and perhaps even disbelieving about how she actually became a student of Swedish in the first place. But immediately after the comment above, she tells that she has *always* been good at languages. At school *almost everybody* asked her if she would become a language teacher, but her answer was *always* a definite no. Gradually, however, she started thinking that she perhaps *should* start studying languages – maybe everybody else was right and she was wrong. She tells she would love to study English, but will never study it, because the requirements are so high. That is why Swedish is *the only alternative* for her. Now she wants to learn Swedish better in order to find out what she really wants to do.

Stories written by students whose career plans are still vague – or nonexistent – seem to contain many references to luck or chance. Jenny's essay is an interesting example of a story where the student's own agency and planfulness are covered or hidden by a rhetoric of chance; things seem to happen more or less haphazardly, without much control by the writer. But under this surface, important decisions are made concerning e.g. which language to study. And here again, other people's opinions (e.g. comments stating that Jenny *should* start studying languages) are used to confirm that the decision she made was justified. It is as if the writer would like to give some of the responsibility for her choices to the ones who recommended language studies to her.

The same applies to another student, Lea, who seems to be equally confused about being a student of Swedish. Besides, in spite of all her choices and actions

(like taking part and being successful in the entrance examination at the university) she writes about her studies in a way that diminishes her agency, e.g. by telling that she was *allowed* to start her studies at the university. She writes:

> I think I'm the first in our family who has chosen the academic road, but for me it isn't so very special, I just didn't know what else I should or could do. But I'm glad I was accepted and allowed to start, to be able to see what else there is in here. As a matter of fact I hadn't thought about what I would want to become through these studies; I hadn't thought of becoming a teacher or a researcher, I was just happy about being able to engage in languages for the following five years. (...) But perhaps it's enough just now that one is motivated in some way, before one finds out what one wants to do. By then she has perhaps more knowledge that allows her to see more options and possibilities. Besides, isn't it true that when we get older, we perhaps learn more about ourselves all the time? (Lea)

Lea writes that she has *"chosen the academic road"* and that she is motivated in her studies, but sees her own agency and her own decisions as somehow unimportant in this context. Lea has problems with making up her mind about her future career. At the beginning of her narrative, when she writes about her past experiences and decisions, she uses the pronoun *"I"*. However, when she starts writing about her future plans, she suddenly starts using non-personalized forms like *"one"*. It is as if she had difficulties in imagining her possible (future) selves (Markus & Nurius 1986); she seems to regard her future career options as something so distant that using the pronoun *"I"* would not feel appropriate, or could even cause anxiety. However, she expects things to get clearer as time goes by, and gradually in her text she moves through the pronoun *"she"/"her"* to the pronoun *"we"*: *"when we get older, we perhaps learn more about ourselves"*. Here she already sees herself as "one of us" – the pronoun *"we"* probably meaning young people, especially students who start their studies without any clear plans for the future.

In some way Lea has made a decision to postpone planning her future; this kind of rhetoric can be found also in other stories belonging to the data. Similar results were obtained already in the pilot study that was conducted in 2011; in the study, the focus was on what university students of Swedish tell about their plans for the future (Huhtala 2012).

Mia tells about her future in much the same way as Lea:

> The only thing I know is that I don't want to become a teacher. At the moment I'm just going to concentrate on my basic studies [in Swedish] and to enjoy life as a student. I think I'll start thinking more about my minors and my future next spring. (Mia)

There is only one thing concerning Mia's career plans that is certain: she will not become a teacher. It is interesting that she tells about her plans by excluding a certain profession, that of a teacher. This might have to do with the fact that many students of Swedish are teachers-to-be. Another typical choice of career could be e.g. working as a translator, but this alternative is not mentioned in Mia's narrative. Mia's comment could also be an answer to a question that someone has asked her on an earlier occasion. However, being able to exclude

something is a positive thing that allows her to look in other directions in order to find a future profession (see also Huhtala 2012).

Mia, like some other students with vague career plans, tells about her wish to concentrate on things that are either totally clear (like the compulsory basic studies in Swedish that are the same for all students of Scandinavian languages) or things that are fun (like different parties organized by students). Being able to postpone decisions that are experienced as difficult and concentrating on other things, give the writer energy to act – and probably a peace of mind.

Anneli, Jenny, Lea and Mia are all in a state of confusion concerning their future and their possible selves. The first-person narratives of all these writers can be seen as a way of negotiating a self that the writers themselves – as well as the readers of their stories – can regard as acceptable and understandable. Telling a story about oneself entails constant identity work, a negotiation of the self. As Sfard and Prusak (2005: 16–17) state, first-person narratives can be seen as "self-told identities". The students perhaps find it difficult to describe their designated professional identities at this stage of their studies. Another possibility is that they (more or less consciously) choose not to describe something that they have not made up their mind about, or that they have actually decided to postpone the decisions concerning their career until later. They seem to avoid admitting or telling more about the vague and blurred link between their actual and their designated identities, thereby trying to manage the uncertainty of this period of life and to preserve a sense of control over their lives. They often tell about their lives in ways that emphasize the unexpected and haphazard, at the same time being involved in different kinds of agentive action.

The students with vague career plans hardly ever mention any community of practice they dream of. This is of course easy to understand: identifying oneself with a community of practice of some kind and having concrete plans for the future are often interrelated.

However, there is an exception to this tendency in my data. One of the students, Meeri, writes that she has no idea about her future career, but tells eagerly about her decision to become a university student, a part of the academic community. This had been her dream for several years.

> After the matriculation exam last spring I had no specific plans for the future. I only knew that I was interested in many different things, but didn't know what I wanted to study in the future. I could say that my choice of a place of study was a twist of fate, but there was a certain reason that led me here. Already at the beginning of upper secondary school I knew that I wanted to study at the university sometime. My dream was to be part of the academic entity someday. (Meeri)

She took part in the entrance examination at the university to be able to study Swedish, her *"first love among languages"*. Yet she was surprised when she received a letter informing that she was admitted to the university. She spent the following two weeks considering what to do: start studying or take a sabbatical year. She continues: *"Anyway, I think I just pretended that it was a difficult decision. In fact I knew quite soon that I didn't want to miss this chance."*

In her essay, Meeri recognizes and admits the parallel existence of agency and luck. She is aware that "fate" and agency do not exclude each other. In her case

it would perhaps be possible to talk about "planned happenstance" (Mitchell et al. 1999), i.e. actively using the possibilities that fate (luck, chance) has thrown in her way.

5 Discussion

Students starting their studies at university are often young adults who can be said to be in the middle of a transition period from late adolescence to adulthood. In Western societies this period – also called "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 1998) – has become prolonged, and "can last from the late teens until at least the mid-20s" (Schwartz et al. 2005: 202). During this period students make numerous decisions regarding their future lives, which makes this period especially important as far as identity formation is concerned. As Plunkett (2001: 171) observes, this transition is "full of opportunity" and "fraught with uncertainty".

Choice of a future profession or career is one of the many critical choices that have to be made during this period. Choosing something instead of something else is always a potential risk factor. Meeri writes: *"It was a frightening thought to be accepted to a place that could prove to be wrong. How could I have chosen right if I didn't even know what to become in the future?"*

Our postmodern or late modern world offers a (seemingly) countless number of alternatives, but at the same time it entails insecurity and uncertainty (Giddens 1999), which on a personal level can lead to confusion and even anxiety. This is probably one reason for the kind of rhetoric that can be seen in the essays of many students in their early twenties, especially of those with vague career plans. They write about their choices in life and about their decisions in a way that explicitly emphasizes the unplanned and the haphazard. However, their stories often convey an implicit tone of conscious planning and intentionality, containing many references to deliberate decisions. It could even be possible to claim that agency in these cases is a result of serendipity: being able to act under uncertain conditions is made possible by the attitude that "anything can happen". By admitting that there are things outside of one's control and that unforeseen – also positive – things can happen, one is perhaps more prepared to welcome the unknown and unexpected.

In their first-person stories, the four students with clear and explicit career plans seem to have no real conflict between their actual identities and their designated identities. There appears to be a great deal of continuity and stability in their stories when they tell about their dreams and plans for the future: the temporal dimensions of identity, i.e., the past, the present and the future, form a continuum, a story expressing agency and a calm reliance on what the future may have in store for them. They see themselves as members of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) consisting of language teachers, and tell in an apparently self-evident way about their possible futures as teachers and L2 experts.

The four students with vague career plans tell about their plans in a very different way. They seem to avoid making decisions concerning their future career, and instead appear to postpone these decisions until later. In this way they probably try to avoid a possible conflict between their actual identities and

their designated identities. They write about their lives in ways that put emphasis on the unexpected and serendipitous, but at the same time their texts take up many instances of conscious planning and agentive action.

Quite often students' lack of career plans is seen as a problem that should be "solved" as soon as possible. This is naturally understandable in societies where efficiency and decisiveness are appreciated and regarded as merits. However, as we have seen, the lack of career plans is not the same thing as the lack of agency. Perhaps the term "indecision" is misleading in this context. What Mitchell et al. (1999: 117) point out is still worth considering:

> The term *open-mindedness* displaces *indecision* in planned happenstance theory. (...) An open-minded person is in the middle of what was and what will be. Being undecided means that all the data are not in.

Choosing a future career is an important aspect of every student's identity process, and it has consequences for many other dimensions of life. For some university students, it may be relatively easy to find a community of practice that they want to be a part of, for others the process may take longer. But for all of them, writing a first-person story about their life and their plans for the future can be seen as a good opportunity to reflect on "the data" that are in at that moment and how they see their possible selves in the light of those data.

Acknowledgements

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