Autonomy, language learning diversity and uses of space: Mapping out individual learning environments
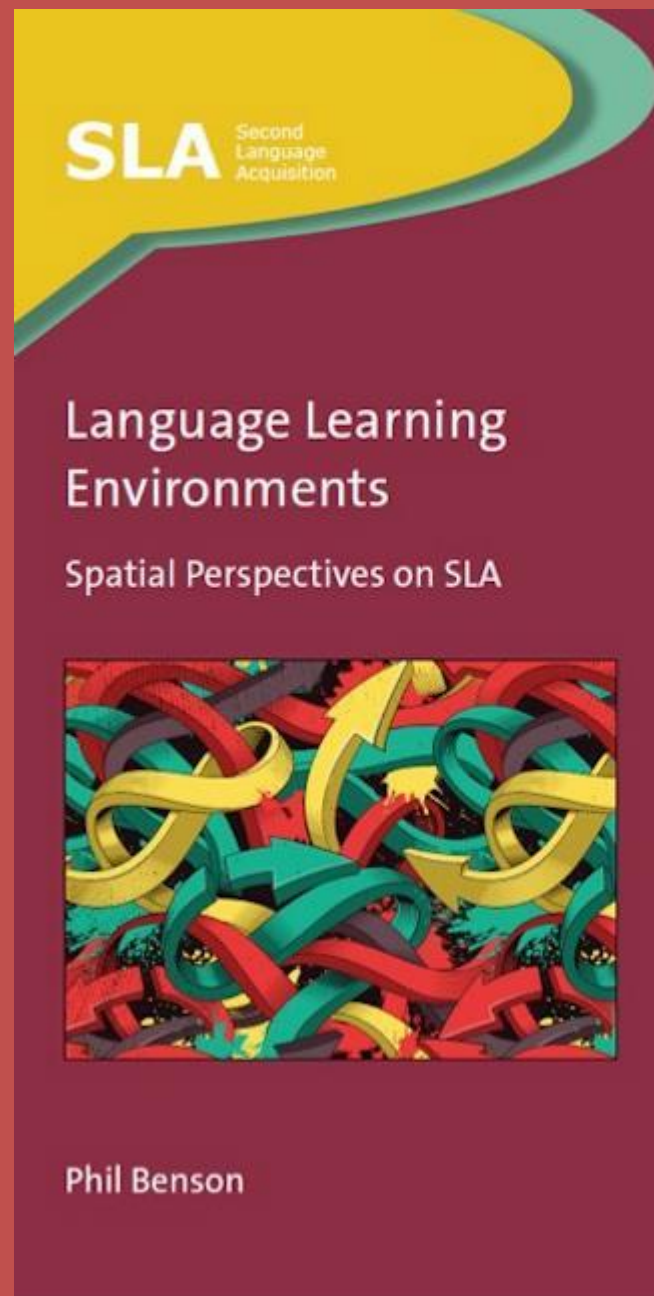
Phil Benson
Macquarie University

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- **Why space?**
- **Language learning environments**
- **Autonomy, language learning and urban space**
- **Autonomy from a spatial perspective**

SLA Second Language Acquisition

Language Learning Environments

Spatial Perspectives on SLA

Phil Benson

Why space?

Why space?

- Recent emphasis on social, historical and contextual dimensions of agency

- Autonomy has an important spatial dimension

- Everything happens somewhere

- Languages are learned within everyday spatial routines

- Autonomy in SLL is spatially constrained and begins with choices in the uses of space

Why space? Why now?

- Acceleration and uneveness of global mobilities

- Proliferation of spaces for language learning in- and out-of-class

- Globalization of SLA research - local understandings

SLL theory and space

- SLL theory must be adequate to any person, learning any language, anywhere, and on the move
- Spatial distribution of contextual and individual differences - globally and locally
- Second language learning is shaped by:
  - Geographical location(s) of the learner,
  - Accelerated, uneven flows in the global mobility of people, goods, information and language
  - Complexity of local language learning environments (individual agency comes into play)

Language learning environments

A language learner is…

- A person (and part of spaces he/she enters)
- A construct of language repertoire, skills, knowledge, beliefs, biography, etc.
- Engaged in language learning within everyday spatio-temporal routines
- Mobile and endowed with a capacity to 'act otherwise' – i.e. agentive

A language learning environment is...

- A configuration of settings – assemblages of people, things and information – in geographical space
- Shaped by availability and accessibility of mobile language learning resources
- Shaped by the learner's agency and resourcefulness within the spatio-temporal constraints of an everyday life
- A discontinuous and dynamic space: physical (local) and digital (global), changes and evolves over local and biographical time

Autonomy, language learning and urban space

Urban individualities

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'. A conception of individual freedom, based on the particularity that comes from 'the working out of a way of life'.

Simmel, G. (1997) The metropolis and mental life (First published in German, 1903). In D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (pp. 174-185). Sage. pp. 183-4

Urban individualities

Socialisation is not the acquisition of 'a common stock of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and customs'. Because children occupy only a fraction of the space of their cities, socialisation is 'negotiation to find a viable and unique set of social contexts to be used and lived in by the individuals', a process that 'makes children not alike as it makes them alike'

White, S. H. and Siegel, A. W. (1984) Cognitive development in time and space. In B. Rogoff and J. Lave (eds.) *Everyday Cognition: Its Development and Social Context* (pp. 238--277). Harvard University Press. (p.239)

J, an English language student in Sydney

J has come to Sydney from Vietnam to study English in order to enrol on a Masters degree. Her long-term goal is to get a job in Australia and bring her parents over to join her. At present, she studies five days a week at a language college in the CBD and commutes from a shared house in the suburbs.

J's parents support her financially, but rent and transport are expensive, so she works weekends at a local shopping mall to make ends meet. In her job, she interacts with customers in English and Vietnamese, though using English can be stressful.

She speaks English with her Chinese and Indian housemates, but the three women are often tired when they get home and do not have much to say. J uses her time at home to do homework and to watch TV (the housemates enjoy watching lifestyle shows together).

At school she makes opportunities to talk to teachers out of class. To save money, she cooks Vietnamese dishes at home, and brings them to school to share with other students and a teacher who eats lunch in the classroom.

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The international student experience
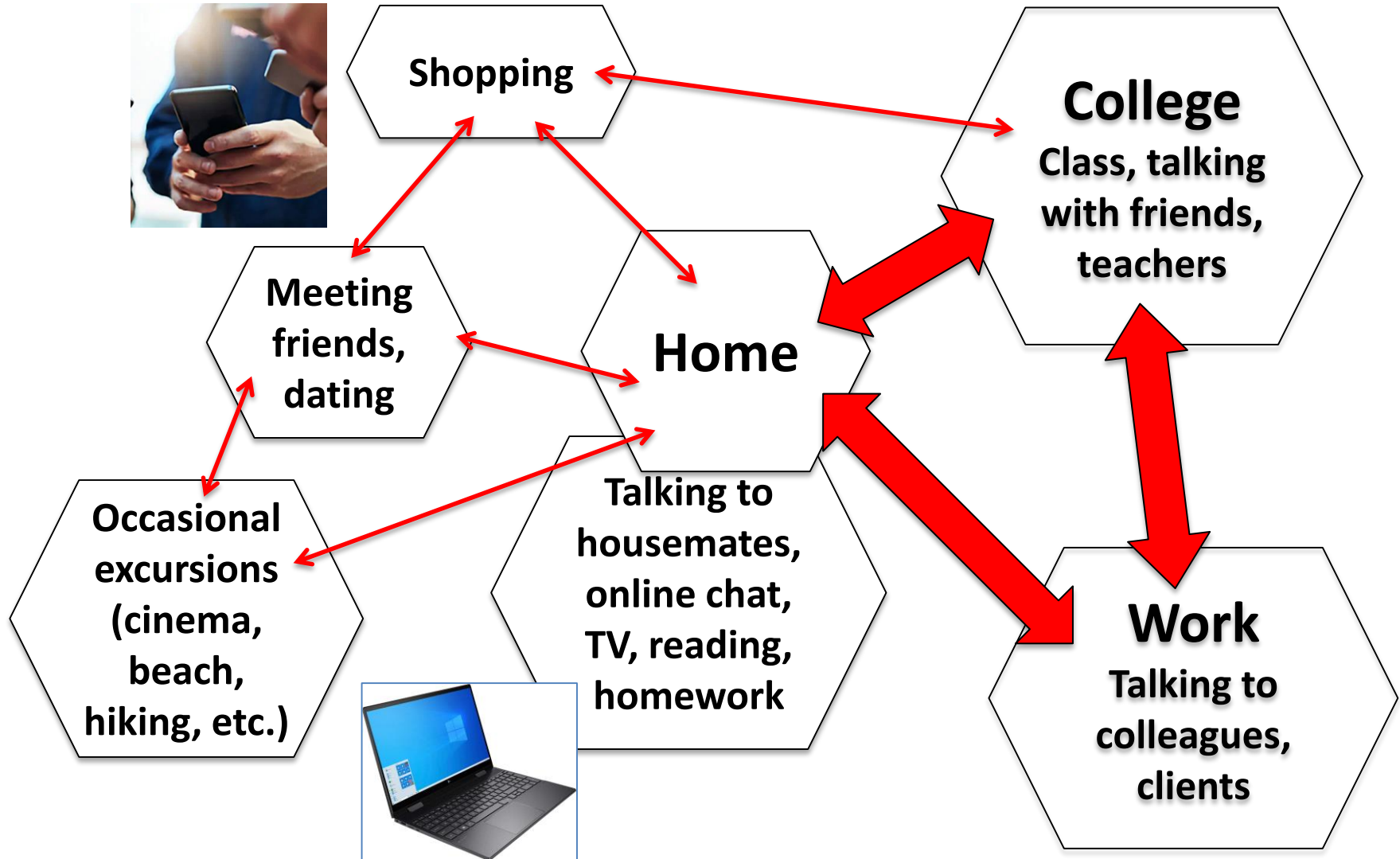
Sonja: agency and space

- Serbian – six years work on cruise ships – good spoken English
- Lives on Northern Beaches with South African family – am/pm job in child care at local school (3 days); studies in CBD (2 days); weekend job in play centre (3 days/fortnightly)
- Leisure: online dating, meeting friends, hiking, gym, beach
- Home: watches an English movie/TV show every night; reads English books on the bus
- Interacts with English-speakers at work (colleagues and children) and in leisure activities; rarely uses Serbian.
- *'Luckily I I have only one Serbian family that I'm in touch with here in Sydney, I see them like every couple months… I don't want to be one of those people who stay in their own community and don't learn language at all.'*
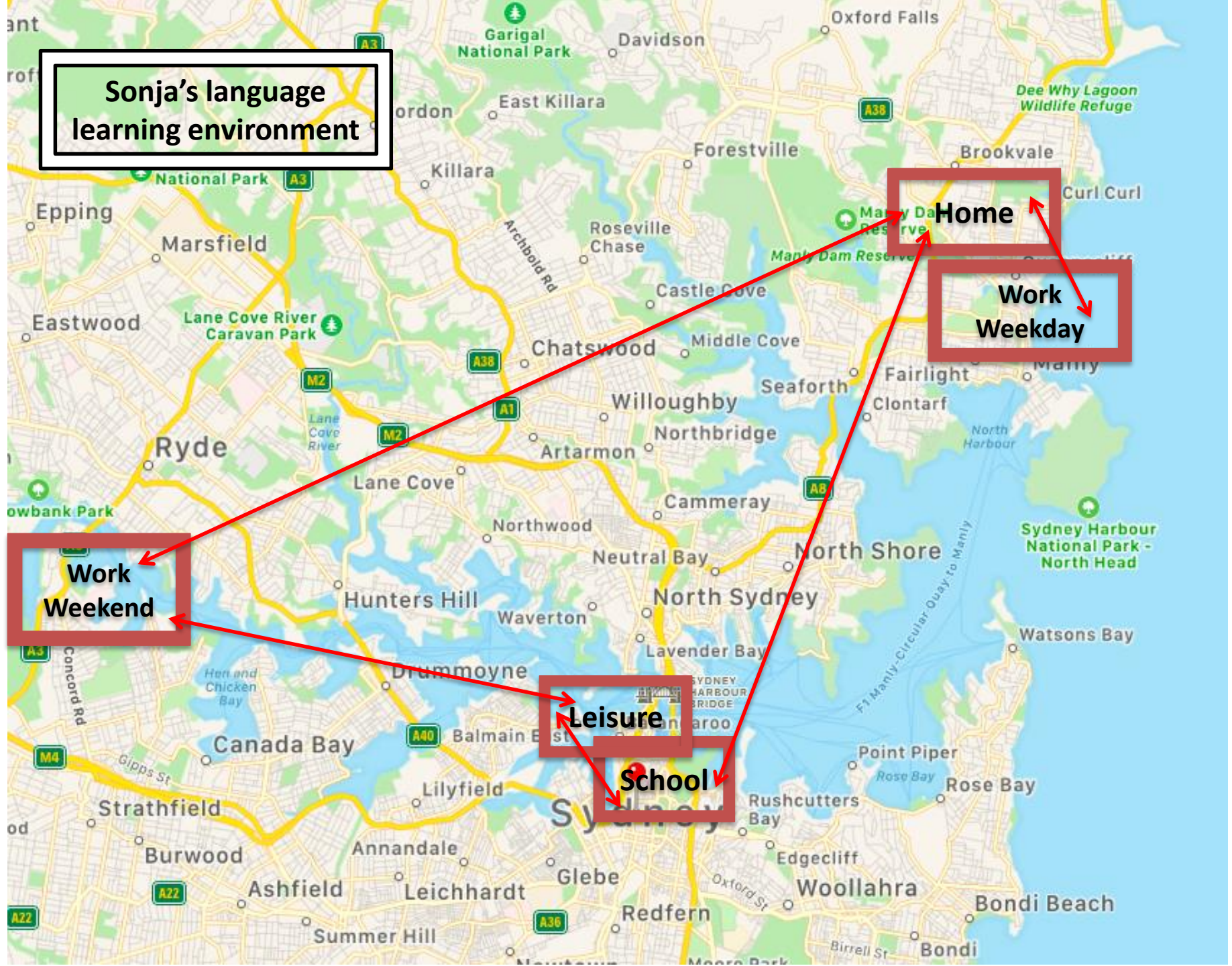
Sonja's language learning environment

Home

Work Weekday

Work Weekend

Leisure

School

Odval

- Mongolian – 4 years in Australia – intermediate spoken English – higher level in other skills
- Lives in Waterloo, shares room with Mongolian friend
- PT job in Waterloo; studies in CBD; has day-care job with Mongolian friend's child
- Leisure: Cinema in Newtown once a week, meets Mongolian friends; shopping, gym and swimming pool
- Home: watches movies, reads, sleeps; reads books (7 Harry Potter books in a month); chats online with a friend in China
- Uses Mongolian frequently, speaks little English outside school, but making more effort to engage in casual talk
- *'Ah yeah, yeah, I thought I'm just going to Sydney, to speak English every day every time, is not really.'*

Odval's language learning environment

The international student experience

- Wanting to engage with language resources in the environment

- Experiencing tensions between use of English and the pull of the first language

- Living within specific spatial 'triangles' of home-study-work, with limited time for leisure

- Exercising autonomy in uses of space to access and engage with English within the spatial constraints of everyday routines

- Mapping out dynamic individual environments in the wider, potential environment of the city

Autonomy from a spatial perspective

Autonomy from a spatial perspective

- Diversity of languages in urban environments
- Diversity of urban individualities
- Fitting language learning into diverse daily routines
- Awareness of the language environment; knowledge of its affordances for learning
- Creativity in uses of urban space for the purposes of language learning

References

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