

CULTURAL IDENTITY OF BILINGUAL ADULTS: A CASE STUDY

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A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

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MAY 2021

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

CULTURAL IDENTITY OF BILINGUAL ADULTS: A CASE STUDY

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is not only the product of my studies at the University of Missouri and my experiences as an international student in the US but also the result of contributions of many amazing people that I have met here. I am grateful to the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at MU for making my studying here possible.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my advisors, Drs. Dawn Heston and Martha Kelly. Thank you to Dr. Heston for opening a new world of language learning and research to me, for inspiring me, and for working with me every step of the way. Thank you to Dr. Martha Kelly for prompting me to think about identity, for the unwavering support and trust in me, enthusiasm, and interest in my work.

Thank you to the members of my thesis committee Dr. Tim Langen, Dr. Nicole Monnier, Dr. Elena Doludenko, Dr. Lisa Dorner for asking the right questions and making me think harder and dig deeper.

I am also grateful to my undergraduate college advisor, Dr. Sergey Say, who taught me to write, think, and not to be afraid to share my thoughts – I would never be here without his friendship and guidance.

To my friends and family – thank you for being there for me. Thank you to my family in Russia for rooting for me and thinking about me. To my wonderful colleague and friend – Marci Heidt – thank you for always be there to listen to me complain and whine whenever I need to.

Lastly, many thanks to my participants – Lena, Larisa, Natasha, Anya, Katya, Dina, Eva, and Andrey. Thank you for finding the time and for your willingness and eagerness to share your stories with me – I promise to take good care of them.

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## **Abstract**

This case study of the cultural identity of bilingual adults aims to discover the changes in the self-identification of sequential Russian-English bilingual adults that occur as a result of the immersion in the second language and culture. The study strives to answer the question of the change in self-identification of bilingual adults and the way they perceive those changes as well as the role that language plays in the transformation of identity. The participants of the study are Russian-born graduate students pursuing their graduate studies at the Universities in the United States. The data for this qualitative study were gathered through oral semi-structured interviews and samples of participants' writing and analyzed using the constant comparative method.

The research findings show that the participants of the study are situated on a various levels of the construction of hybrid identities. Among the factors that influenced that transformation of identity, the most were the loss of network and connections and the differences between American and Russian cultures. Additionally, language as a factor in the change of self-identification affects the identity when individuals temporarily lose the ability to communicate and then learn new communication strategies that involve a system of both languages based on the principles of efficient communication.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background and significance

“This language is beginning to invent another me”. This is how Eva Hoffman describes her experience of growing up in the USA after leaving Poland at a young age in her autobiographical work *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (50). The question of how language shapes our identity goes all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century when Benjamin Whorf, one of the authors of the language relativity hypothesis, wrote: “We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language” (Whorf 229). Together with his mentor Edward Sapir, he suggested that language influences the way people think and the way different cultures are organized (Whorf 230). Therefore, language plays an enormous role in determining our identities. Learning a new language in many cases means acquiring a new identity which may differ greatly from the one our native language gave us.

Because of a strong link between language and identity, children who grow up bilingual have the advantage of both languages and cultures shaping their sense of self in ways we are only now discovering. Acquiring two languages and two cultures places bilinguals into a unique position of being the carriers of different languages and cultures. Furthermore, language serves as a factor that allows a child to identify with different ethnic communities: their cultural identity is constructed through socialization (Hamers & Blanc 10).

The question which does not yet have a full answer is how a new language and culture influences the identity of sequential bilinguals who acquire a second language later in their lives and possess identity already formed under a different culture and language. If culture and language

have such a strong impact on self-identification, the question arises whether the identity of adults who learn a second language later in life or through their teenage years and adult life undergoes any changes when they find themselves living in the culture of their L2 (second language). Additionally, the complexity of identities and factors like culture, language, demographics, etc. that potentially affect their sense of self creates a large space for interpretation that depends on individuals' perception of themselves and their surroundings. This study is an attempt to answer the question of identity change in the second culture and the way bilingual adults immersed in their L2 see and understand those changes.

### *1.2. Objective and research questions*

The focus of this case study is the cultural identity and the role of language in its formation of native adult Russian speakers who learned the language in their teenage and adult years and later came to live in their L2 (American) culture. The objective of the study is to investigate the changes in cultural and linguistic identity and the ways the bilinguals themselves perceive those changes.

To examine changes in cultural identity, I will attempt to answer several research questions pertaining to a bilingual speaker's self-identification, language use, and life experiences.

1. How does the self-identification of bilingual adults change when they are immersed in the L2 culture?
2. How do bilingual adults perceive and describe those changes?
3. What influences the changes in how they see themselves and what does role language play in these changes?

This investigation takes the form of a case study of native Russian speakers who came to the USA to study in graduate school<sup>1</sup>. The data for the study has been acquired from oral interviews. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser 2), I have compiled the data in order to discover the implications that this case study can provide for the bigger picture of cultural and linguistic identity change.

This paper consists of 5 sections. In section 2, I describe the existing research on cultural and linguistic identity. Section 3 deals with the research design and methods. Section 4 provides research findings and section 5 provides a summary and further potential research questions. Appendix 1 contains the questionnaire for the interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> The study was approved by the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board as an Exempt study on 02/03/2021: IRB Project Number 2038682.

## **2. Theoretical background: cultural identity and the role of language**

In this section, I will outline the relevant research on cultural identities, factors that affect them, and the transformations that self-identification undergoes when influenced by other cultures and languages, as well as individual perceptions of those changes. In section 2.1., I will discuss approaches to defining identities. Section 2.2. deals with cultural and linguistic identity in multicultural and language learning contexts. In section 2.3., I will briefly explore the specific contexts of Russian immigrants in the US.

### *2.1. Approaches to the definition of identity*

In the past century, questions of identity have been widely discussed in social psychology, sociology, and philosophy (George Mead, Paul Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Henri Tajfel, Chris Weedon, Stuart Hall), and more recently in the field of second language acquisition (Bonny Norton, David Block). The discussion of identity in second language acquisition has been influenced by theories of identity in the post-structuralist framework, namely in the sociology of Weedon and Bourdieu.

Weedon's definition of identity is especially influential for the contemporary understanding of cultural and language identities. She suggests the term "subjectivity" to describe identity as "sense of self and understanding self in relation to the world" (32). Subjectivity consists of thoughts and emotions; it is being constructed and "reconstructed constantly in discourse every time we speak or think" (32). This definition is the starting point for any post-structuralist discussion of identity because it contains integral parts of identity as it is currently understood: how a person understands the self and its relationship to the world; "how that relationship is constructed across time and space" (Norton 5); the fluidity and changeability of identity; and the importance of environment and discourse in the construction of identity.

Chronologically, the first step in the development of identity is primary socialization in childhood. One of the important products of socialization is the realization of one's own difference from others: according to Delanty, discussion of identity only becomes meaningful when "the self is constituted in the recognition of the difference rather than sameness." (135) Therefore, for example, one becomes aware of their cultural or national identity when they learn that other cultures or nations exist. Block calls the exposure to differences "critical experiences that cause "constant struggle" to find one's own place in the world (Block 13). The progressing socialization results in the internalization of the similarities and differences and development of self-identification and self-perception (Hammers and Blanc 207).

The role self-consciousness plays in the internalization of identity and its subsequent development is not yet clear. The question whether identity is a reflexive entity, created, maintained, and chosen by individuals remains open. For some scholars, identity is an individual choice: Giddens, for example, argues that any life conditions in which people find themselves reflexively constitute their self (86). In another example, Matthews sees identity as something people can assume and develop. Individuals choose an identity from a "cultural supermarket" available through media and technology (201). Another question that is often discussed, however, is whether purposeful reflection results in one fixed idea of self or whether the self can change depending on context.

The "constant struggle" that Block references occurs in three areas of social activity: leisure (arts, music, literature, fashion, etc.), institutional (education, religion, social structure, etc.), human (race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) (Block 15) and is determined by one's participation in the discourse of all three areas. As Weedon's definition shows, the concept of discourse is crucial for

understanding the development of identity. The idea of discourses and their relation to identity has been further developed by Paul Gee.

Gee distinguishes between small “d” discourses (actual acts of speech) and big “D” Discourses that for him contain all the ways we interact with the world: actions, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, body language, behavior, etc. (Gee 127). Thus, every act on all sides of life contributes to the actor’s identity because every new context demands new actions and beliefs. The discussion of big D Discourses brings Gee to a slightly different view of identity. While the scholars discussed previously postulated that self-identification is based on the way people see themselves, Gee – considering his discussion of discourses – claims that identity relies more on outside perception. Identity is rooted in the way one is recognized as a certain kind of person and, therefore, is not an “internal state, but performance in society” (Gee 133). For example, he describes a case of an “institutional identity” that is constructed in the Discourse of someone’s official affiliation, so an individual does not control it; still, this affiliation determines a person’s actions, values, behavior, etc. For Gee, identity needs to be recognized in Discourses, and Discourses are built by people, institutions, etc. People’s individual experiences belong to a “core identity” that is reflected differently in different Discourses. In summary, Gee’s understanding of identity focuses on the way people perform in different social situations: identity consists of both the perception of others and the necessity to perceive and present yourself in a certain way depending on the Discourse. This theory opens up new possibilities in investigating identity as the way people see themselves and perform in different situations.

## *2.2. Factors that influence construction of identity*

Apart from self-perception and discourse, post-structuralists understand identity as a multilayered, complex system that is influenced by multiple internal and external factors. Apart

from self-perception, internal factors contain of two more flexible features: a sense of shared values and the feeling of belonging (Giles & Johnson 71). The external factors are much more extensive and mostly assigned at birth:

- social influences and sociohistorical factors, including shared beliefs, motivations, and values;
- various demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, gender;
- economic and political environment;
- language. (Block 27)

The variety of factors often results in a discussion of identities where one of the factors is considered to define identity, e.g., social identity, national identity, etc. For the present study, cultural, social, ethnic, language, and national identities are relevant. Table 1 lists such identities and their definitions.

**Table 1. Types of identity**

Identity	Source	Definition
Cultural identity	Hall 1996	Cultural identity results from how people position themselves against cultural narratives of the present and the past.
Social identity	Tajfel 1974 Le Page 1968	Social identity is the result of an awareness of group membership and partaking in the values that define it. Members of the group perceive themselves as similar to the other members of the group and as different from other groups and regulate their behavior according to the patterns of the desirable group.
Ethnic identity	Joseph 2004	Ethnic identity is the result of common descent and shared cultural values.
National identity	Wodak et al. 1999	A system of shared beliefs, opinions, and attitudes that is constructed through socialization and that regulate people's

		behavior in a group-nation. It is not fixed and can be regulated by symbols and activities.
Language, Linguistic or Ethnolinguistic identity	Rampton et al. 1990	Language identity results from language expertise (proficiency and the acceptance of other speakers), language inheritance (being born into the language community), and language affiliation (speaker's attitudes towards language).

As can be seen from the definitions in table 1, the commonality among all types of identity is group membership and the way groups and individuals perceive it. For the present study, two types of identity are important: cultural and linguistic identities.

Turning to the discussion of the various factors that constitute cultural and linguistic identity, it is important to note that whereas Gee's "core identity" represents one's personal experiences, the earlier tradition of defining cultural identity focuses more attention on "core values" that each group possesses. The characteristics previously listed in section 2.1. (social influences and sociohistorical factors, self-consciousness and individual performances, various demographic variables) do not have the same value in the formation of identity across different groups. The salience of each factor depends on the group in question and the groups that surround it. For instance, a characteristic that is important for the construction of identity in one group could be less so in another. However, Smolicz argues each group possesses a certain quantity of "core values." Core values are basic characteristics of the group responsible for the maintenance and transfer of the group's culture. Those characteristics would naturally vary depending on the group (Smolicz 78).

The question of language as a core value of the group is debatable. Smolicz insists that language can be a core value, but only in those communities where the language helps to distinguish between different groups, as it does in intercultural and interethnic communities

(Smolicz 79). Later research, however, has found that while language might not be a salient characteristic in the formation of group identity, it can be a powerful tool that influences members' self-perception. Salaberry suggests that the connection of language and identity can be described in four different categories:

- 1) Language as an essential property of the identity (in intercultural communities)
- 2) Language as a perceived essential property of the identity
- 3) Language as a symbol of cultural affiliation
- 4) Language as a fluid parameter in the social construction of identity (Salaberry 5).

From this list, it is clear that language plays a variable role in the formation of identity, and even if it is not a salient characteristic from a cultural point of view, it maintains symbolic or perceived power.

When looking at identity from the perspective of language, scholars use the terms *linguistic*, *language*, *sociolinguistic* or *ethnolinguistic* identity. One of the first theories about language identity belongs to Giles and Byrne, who developed "ethnolinguistic identity theory". Drawing on Tajfel's social identity theory, they state that when individuals categorize themselves as members of a social group, language plays an important role if it is a feature that distinguishes the group from others. Individuals strive for "ethnolinguistic belongingness" and consider three variables in the process:

- 1) ethnolinguistic vitality (status of the language, demographics, and its level of prestige);
- 2) perceived group boundaries (boundaries facilitate ethnic categorization and group interactions);
- 3) multiple group belonging (how many groups an individual considers themselves belonging to). (Giles & Byrne 71)

The most positive identification with the language is achieved when the vitality is perceived to be high, and the group has strong boundaries. Additionally, attachment to the language is stronger if the individual belongs to fewer groups (Giles & Byrne 73). Although this theory describes the way people might perceive their language and community and how it would motivate their choices and identification, it has been criticized for monolingual bias and oversimplification (see, for example, Pavlenko and Blackledge 2000).

A different perspective on language identity is connected to the discursive nature of identity. According to Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, every time we speak, we perform “acts of identity.” Each utterance is socially and linguistically marked, and the markedness forms a pattern of linguistic behavior that can be interpreted as socially relevant, especially in multilingual and multicultural communities. Thus, every instance of speaking confirms or denies different characteristics of identity. The social value of language in multilingual communities has also been studied from the point of view of power relations between its members. According to Myers-Scotton, members of these communities know that the language they choose symbolizes the rights and obligations they want to enforce upon the addressee.

### *2.3. Negotiation of identity in bilingual contexts*

In the previous section, I described the main approaches for interpreting cultural identity and its formation as taking place primarily within one cultural group. Although even within one cultural group identity is thought to be in a constant state of change, the “constant struggle” that Block describes intensifies in contexts where two cultures come together. In this section, I will concentrate on the “negotiation of identity” – a process of developing a sense of self and establishing identification with the rest of the world – in multilingual contexts where the factors

discussed in the previous section place even more weight on linguistic, cultural, national, ethnical, and social differences.

### 2.3.1. Language learner’s identity

Negotiation of identity starts with learning a language. Even if language learning happens without immersion into the second language (L2) culture, it becomes a more powerful factor in the negotiation than it was previously (Norton 5). A new language becomes a tool through which a learner looks for a sense of self in different settings and at different times (Heller 62). Moreover, learners explore new social and cultural dimensions that can give them more or fewer opportunities for this negotiation.

Over the last two decades, the study of the language learner’s identity has concentrated around a variety of characteristics within language and language learning that can potentially impact the language learner’s identity. In table 2, I list different factors that are widely discussed in connection with language learner’s identities.

**Table 2. Factors which influence the construction of language learners’ identity**

Author	Factor	Explanation
Hall 1996	Language acquisition	Cultural information is acquired with the language.
Norton 2013	Investment	Investment in learning and communicating in a language allows learners to facilitate assessment of the context. At each point of their lives, learners assess any situation from the point of view of communication and learning strategies. They invest in the language to acquire social and cultural capital and become members of the target community.
Koven 1998	Pragmatics of language	Pragmatically different communications make the speaker constantly change identity.
Block 2017	Language use	The domains in which a language is used influences a speaker’s cultural and language perception.
Noels et al. 1996	Language proficiency	

	Language self-confidence	If speakers are proficient and use the language confidently, it increases their chance of identification with the language and its culture.
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The factors listed in the table above affect the negotiation of a language learner’s identity in various ways. Hall concludes that cultural practices and cultural knowledge are acquired with the language. At every step of language acquisition, new cultural and linguistic practices change how individuals perceive themselves and the surrounding world (8).

In her longitudinal studies of English language learners, Norton demonstrates that a language learner should be considered a complex being whose identity depends on negotiation between themselves and the learning context (5). Norton replaces the traditional notion of language learner’s *motivation*, which, according to Gardner is either instrumental (i.e., brings material benefits, e.g., better employment) or integrative (permits communication in the target culture) with *investment* (48). Investment in learning is a constant process of assessing the learning context and seeking opportunities for language practice that can bring material benefits or acceptance into a community. By investing in language learning, an individual receives cultural knowledge and practices that the target language inherently possesses (67). The cultural knowledge and communicative practices help in the negotiation of identity since for a language learner they play the role of cultural background and socialization (19). However, the investment is not only a positive force; it can also negatively affect the identity formation. Striving to acquire cultural and social acceptance, language learners might choose not to communicate in certain situations because they are afraid it would hurt their cultural or social standing. For example, language learners might choose to be silent in front of a native speaker because they are afraid to be identified as immigrants (20).

Turning to the pragmatics of using a language, Koven suggest that when an individual functions in society, different social situations demand pragmatically different responses. Those

responses do not only differ within one language, but they vary across languages. Speakers constantly position themselves in different social acts, thereby allowing different social and linguistic identities to emerge (427).

Furthermore, identity depends on such factors as language proficiency and language self-confidence. Kimberley Noels, who has studied the cultural and linguistic adjustment of Chinese college students in Canada, claims that self-confidence is vital to forming a linguistic and cultural identity. She discovered that their self-identification as a part of the ethnic entity depends largely on how confident they are expressing themselves in English or Chinese; the more confident they are speaking one of the languages, the more they identify with its culture. Their linguistic self-confidence and, consequently, identity directly correlate to their language proficiency (260).

### **2.3.2. Acculturation and deculturation**

Acculturation is the process through which an individual undergoes changes in behavior and acquires culturally relevant attitudes and knowledge during contact with another culture. As with enculturation (the process of acquiring cultural competence in childhood), acculturation requires socialization and a certain level of participation in society (Graves 5). The more advanced the enculturation, the more difficult the acculturation process is for the individual. The ultimate results of the process are widely debated. Within a linear model of acculturation, it is supposed to lead to the deculturation of the native culture and language loss when an individual assimilates to a new society (Clement 14). However, a non-linear model suggests that the identity enters a hybrid state in which both cultures are integrated (Berry 18).

Hybridity might result in the coexistence of two cultural identities in one person. The ideal situation of hybridity occurs when both languages and cultures are equally represented within the identity of a balanced bicultural bilingual. Balanced bicultural bilinguals identify positively with

both cultures, and both languages are highly valorized. They are aware of their status in both groups and perceive no contradiction in double membership (Hamers & Blanc 221). The most common situation in which they find themselves occurs when the bicultural and bilingual individual shifts from one self-concept to another, depending on what the circumstances require. This shift enables them to adapt to diverse situation without losing a sense of identity (Ross & Wilson 90).

Turning to individual experiences of bilingual identities, it is important to say that the construction of a new identity depends on multiple factors. First, a question which is often raised is whether bilinguals identify as bicultural or monocultural bilinguals. For example, Martinez and Garcia point out that proficient English speakers in Europe do not identify with British culture, though they use language as a communication tool (309). They argue that the cultural integration in the speaker's identity depends on the frequency of language use: the more speakers are immersed in the language and culture, the more they become bicultural. However, immigrants immersed in another culture are in a different situation. The process of acculturation – change of behavior as a result of being in close contact with other cultures (Hamers & Blanc 364) – is more complex because adult immigrants already have fully formed cultural identities of their native culture. This fact makes cultural adjustment more difficult (Graves 8). For my research, therefore, it is especially interesting to see how adult bilinguals immerse themselves in the culture and how their identity changes.

Balanced bicultural and bilingual identities as well as bilingual monocultural identities, however, are less common. More common are so called “hybrid” or “third place” identities” (Hall 1996, Pastergisadis 2001) which are characterized by a constant struggle to fill in the gaps between two cultures and smooth over the contradictions between them (Block 25). Such hybridity allows

for alternative identities and shifts. This process often results in a feeling of ambivalence – “feeling a part and feeling apart” (Block 26) – which manifests as a constant tension between the self and the world (27). Ambivalence forces people to make choices and causes acute discomfort and can cause significant psychological distress (Pavlenko & Blackledge 81).

Since the feeling of ambivalence causes discomfort, people strive to overcome it and work towards coherent life narratives by starting to construct the story of their lives anew (and often in a new language). Such identity narratives serve a double purpose: individuals work towards overcoming shifting and fragmentation in the present and, at the same time, provide connections to their past and future (Pavlenko 18). Narrative construction is informed not only by the same factors that constitute identity construction (demographics, language, etc.), but also by individual abilities in storytelling: the role of imagination in the construction of the identity narrative cannot be overlooked. First, the connections that one creates might be imaginary without any evidence in real life (Hall 224). Second, imagination draws on the literary narratives, visual art, and pop culture of the surrounding group to help “create new practices of self-representation” (Pavlenko 16).

### **2.3.3. Coping with a new culture**

When an individual comes to live in a new culture, coping with it requires new skills as well as new cultural and social information. The difficulty of coping depends on multiple factors, primarily on the degree of difference between two cultures, in other words, how big the “gap” is between their native culture and their new one. The greater the disparity between the two cultures is (social and economic structure, language, technological advances, etc.), the more difficult it is to cover the distance and acclimatize oneself to the new life. To bridge the gap successfully, secondary socialization is required, or even resocialization (if the differences between the two cultures are so great that one must learn everything from the beginning). If the “gap” is significant,

at first people experience “culture shock”: if the knowledge people possess about the culture is not adequate, they experience mild to severe emotional discomfort that might prevent them from starting the adaptation process (Taft 139).

Socialization is vital for the adaptation process. There are cases when socialization is limited or not required. For example, such is the case with many international students who are not planning to stay in the country where they study. In such cases, adaptation may be only partial, no more than needed.

Taft concentrates on four aspects of adaptation to the new culture.

- 1) cultural adjustment (how personality functions in a new cultural environment);
- 2) identification (change in social identity);
- 3) cultural competence (acquiring new cultural knowledge and skills);
- 4) acculturation (adoption of new cultural roles). (Taft 146)

Taft recommends looking at these four aspects from both a subjective and objective points of view. The subjective point of view represents one’s perception of the adaptation process from the inside: how one experiences those changes. In contrast, the objective viewpoint consists of the observations of the members of the target culture. For example, when newcomers start to adjust to the new culture (step 1), they begin to experience less emotional discomfort in the new environment. From the point of view of the members of the target culture, cultural adjustment is considered to be complete when a newcomer starts exhibiting socially acceptable behavior.

The process of transformation described by Taft is, of course, simplified and generalized. In fact, some research suggests that the process is often met with resistance by the individual, especially in the early stages. For instance, Kim, who describes the transformation of the identity of a North Korean defector living in South Korea, shows that in the first 8 years of their living in

South Korea, the immigrant fought so hard to preserve her first culture identity that it prevented her from adjusting socially and culturally. It is interesting to note that for this immigrant, accepting a new culture meant giving up her native culture (Kim 25 – 30).

### 2.3.4. Reconstruction of self

Learning a new language often means becoming a member of the cultural or social group. Pavlenko and Lantolf use the term “self-translation” to describe the process of linguistic identity loss and reconstruction. According to them, the loss and reconstruction processes can overlap, and they consist of two main phases: loss, and recovery (Pavlenko & Lantolf 163). Table 3 outlines the stages of loss and recovery.

**Table 3. Language identity loss and recovery (Pavlenko & Lantolf 163 – 168)**

Loss	Recovery
<p>1. <b>Loss of language identification:</b> Immigrants often either change names purposefully to fit in, or the usual pronunciation of it changes. Transformation of the name (even phonological) brings a loss of agency in the language that results in the loss of identification with the language because individuals stop associating themselves with the agents (subjects) of sentences (164).</p>	<p>1. <b>Appropriation of other voices:</b> By listening to others speak, individuals appropriate their voices (phrases, words, intonation) in order to be able to communicate (168).</p>
<p>2. <b>Loss of the frame of reference:</b> The loss of agency in the language causes a reevaluation of the whole language reference system, such as personal pronouns, temporal and spatial expressions, cultural and social concepts (165).</p>	<p>2. <b>Emergence of a new inner voice:</b> Gradually, a new inner voice forms in the new language (168).</p>
<p>3. <b>Loss of the inner voice:</b> According to Vygotsky, inner speech plays a central part in the organization of thought and its development. Losing inner speech in the native language severs the connection with one’s inner world (165).</p>	<p>3. <b>Translation therapy:</b> Individuals reconstruct their past in the new language by telling stories, keeping a diary, etc. (169).</p>

<p>4. <b>1<sup>st</sup> language attrition:</b> Inability to deal linguistically with the world in the new language causes the first language to deteriorate as well (166).</p>	<p><b>4. Growth into the new frame of reference:</b> The inner voice allows on to internalize and organize new experiences and acquire a new linguistic and cultural frame of reference (169).</p>
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As can be seen from the table, individuals go through a process of language identity reconstruction in which the ultimate recovery depends on the agency of the speaker. If they are willing to put in work and, for instance, reconstruct their past in the new language, the new language identity will come more easily (Pavlenko & Lantolf 169). The left side of the table shows that the loss of language identification might result in the loss of the language entirely, and the step-by-step acquisition of a language identity requires construction of a new inner voice which will enable one to internalize the new identity. Certainly, the model presented in table 3 is not absolute, but it affords insight into the process of the negotiation of identity.

### **2.3.5. Linguistic means of negotiation of identity**

In addition to adapting to or resisting the adaptation to the new culture, the negotiation of identity can also have linguistic means and markers such as translanguaging, code-switching, and language choice. As discussed previously, in multilingual communities, language choice can be socially marked and can depend on the relative statuses of the languages in the community. Translanguaging and code-switching are widely discussed terms that are sometimes mutually replaceable. For my research, I will adopt Garcia’s understanding of translanguaging as using multiple languages within one fluid system of communication and code-switching as using multiple languages as separate codes (43). Employing both code-switching and translanguaging for negotiation of identity depends on how individuals perceive the relative status of both languages within their own worldview, the valorization of both languages in the community, and language vitality (Canarajah 41). The uses of translanguaging as the means of negotiation of

identity enables one not only to express their identity by assigning various meanings to various codes and to employ a wider range of communication tools, but also to develop a new “voice” that involves all the linguistic means they possess (Pavlenko 22).

### **2.3.6. Biliteracy and literacy repertoires**

The linguistic means of negotiation of identity include not only oral language skills but literacy practices as well. Adult bilinguals who acquire a second language in the context of second language education have a distinct advantage of being biliterate. Biliteracy – a dynamic and complex system of language interaction, often referred to as the “continua of biliteracy” (Hornberger 354) – allows them to use vast linguistic resources to their advantage on both an individual and societal level. In educational contexts, multilingual literacy repertoires allow students to activate them as a part of their learning style, which greatly broadens their ability to participate in the academic discourse (Lea & Street 501). For the target group of this study, being able to read and write in both Russian and English and using those skills in their professional and personal life gives participants powerful tools in educational and professional development. Research in biliteracy development shows that ignoring L1 skills takes away many of advantages and benefits (Rivera & Huertas-Macias 8).

For this study, I am interested in various literacy artifacts that adult Russian-English bilinguals use in their daily lives: lists, notes, papers, and homework assignments, reading material (books, magazines, receipts, etc.).

### *2.4. Russians in the US*

Experiences of Russian-English bilinguals described in scholarly literature are limited to psychological and social experiences (e.g., Hoffman 2006 on psychological problems of recent Russian immigrants). As for the Russian language in the US, a comprehensive description of

language interference and language change in émigré Russian speakers in the US was provided by Andrews (1999). The lack of research on sociolinguistic factors and bilingual language use and identities creates a certain gap in the studies on adult bilingualism and Russian presence in the US, including experiences of international students. This gap, however, can be explained by the status of the Russian language in the US and by the typical behavior of Russian immigrants.

The first reason lies in the status of Russian as a language in the US. Kim Potowski places Russian at 8<sup>th</sup> place among the most spoken languages in the US. Although more than 800,000 people speak Russian at home, Russian is not a language of ethnic communities (Potowski 184). A factor that contributes to the absence of ethnic Russian communities is the Russian attitude toward relationships with society. Russians maintain close friendships, but they are unlikely to socialize outside of their own social circle. This is the reason that “Russian immigrants are dispersed in the general population” (190). The lack of ethnic communities limits the opportunities of heritage speakers or immigrants to practice their native language, which leads to language shift and language loss.

Language shift can be considered the second reason: since Russian speakers only speak Russian at home (if they do at all), their language is full of borrowings (for example, for words that have no equivalent in Russian), and the prosodic contours begin to change (Andrews 18). Children of immigrants grow up speaking English and Russian, with English as their dominant language. In some cases, they stop speaking Russian by the age of eighteen. Additionally, heritage language maintenance programs are rare. Thus, the lack of Russian bilingual adults who use both languages is limited. This fact makes research on the social factors of language use very difficult.

The third reason also lies in Russian speakers since Russian speakers who come to the US primarily are already formed bilinguals. Thus, I will refer to the participants of the study as adult

bilinguals. The age of language acquisition often correlates with the context of acquisition, which leaves its own impact on identity and behavior as discussed in the previous section. From the point of view of social status, 75% of all Russian immigrants have an equivalent of a Bachelor's degree and are proficient in English to a degree that allows them to work and study (Potowski 187). Therefore, the situation of the Russian immigrants is often unique because they are able to transition to the same or approximately the same (or sometimes higher) socioeconomic status in the US, and that makes the acculturation process easier.

In this section, I have briefly described the current research on cultural identity in monolingual and multilingual communities. Regarding identity, it is important to be aware of the following points going forward:

- identity is constantly being constructed in the process of socialization;
- identity is complex, fluid, and multilayered, and influenced by various social and demographic categories;
- the construction of a new identity in the second language culture is an uncomfortable process that depends on the differences between the two cultures, socialization in the second culture, and various language related factors.

This study is an attempt to fill in the gap in the research of sociolinguistic factors in Russian speaking immigrants as well as add to the growing field of adult identity transformation by investigation the change of self-identification under the influence of the target language culture and the perceptions of such changes.

### **3. Methodology**

The study of linguistic and cultural identity involves in-depth analysis of bilingual individual experiences, most of all, their experiences involving language use and immersion in the target culture. This study takes the form of a case study of native Russian speakers who came to the US to study in graduate school. The case study format, and more specifically the collective case study format, since the study involves several subjects, was chosen for this research because it offers an opportunity to concentrate on a particular case. Focusing on one case and its variants allows to learn everything that is possible about this case in hope of understanding the bigger picture (Stake 4).

#### *3.1. Participants*

The participants of the study are Russian-national graduate students enrolled in PhD or Master's programs in the humanities in the universities in the United States (US). By focusing the study on individuals who are currently studying in various fields in humanities, I hope to narrow the field of potential cultural and language experiences. The first requirement for the participants is to have an undergraduate degree obtained in Russia. This requirement ensures that participants have similar language proficiency and experiences in both languages including academic language use as well as sufficient educational experiences in both countries. The second requirement for the participants limits the time they have spent in the US from 2 to 8 years. The time period was calculated based on an average time required to complete PhD or Master's programs.

The recruitment was carried out via two directions. First, I reached out to my personal contacts with a request to participate. Second, a call was sent to the SEELANGS (The Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures List) listserv. Before scheduling the interview, the participants were asked to read a consent form and agree to participation.

Table 4 contains the pseudonyms and the time they have spent in the US by March, 2021.

**Table 4. Participants2**

	Pseudonym	Time in the US
1	Larisa	2 years
2	Lena	2 years
3	Natasha	3 years
4	Andrey	3 years
5	Anya	5 years
6	Katya	7 years
7	Dina	6.5 years
8	Eva	8.5 years <sup>3</sup>

As can be seen from the table, the participants can be grouped into two groups based on the time they have lived in the US: the first group includes Larisa, Lena, Natasha, and Andrey, who are completing their Master's or are in the earlier stages of their PhDs; and the second group includes Anya, Katya, Dina, and Eva who are close to finishing their studies. Participants belong to such fields of study as Russian literature, comparative literature, Slavic studies, and second language acquisition.

### *3.2. Procedure*

Participation in the project involved two steps: first, the participants were asked to take part in an interview, and second, they were asked to share two writing samples. Interviews were chosen as a method because they are an efficient tool for obtaining narrative experiences and various interpretations of reality as well as multiple point of views of similar situations (Stake 64). By analyzing the examples of writing, I hoped to verify the information about language use and translanguaging received from the interviews. Unfortunately, only three participants agreed and

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<sup>2</sup> The disbalance in the gender identification of the participants who volunteered to take part in the project is difficult to explain. At least partially, it can be the consequence of the gender disbalance in the humanities departments in Russian universities where male students are extremely rare.

<sup>3</sup> Due to a misunderstanding, I found out that Eva has been in the US longer than the study required during the interview, but since the time difference was not significant and Eva's interview was very interesting, I decided to keep it.

actually provided writing samples, so the data I was able to gather from those samples is extremely limited. This analysis allows me to see the language use and attitudes first-hand and compare the information that I received from the interviews with a real-life example.

The interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are guided by an initial list of questions, and at the same time they allow the interviewer to be flexible and take the form of a less formal conversation (Merriam 89). The flexibility allows interviewees to explore their experiences more freely and without constraints of specific questions; it also reduces the influence of the interviewer on their perceptions and opinions.

The questions for the interviews consist of several different categories: English language learning experiences, everyday life experiences in the US, experiences of speaking English or Russian, the question of self-identification, literacy practices, and educational experiences.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were conducted in Russian, but the participants were informed before the interviews began that they could switch into English at any time. It is interesting to note that while all the participants used English words in their narrative, Eva was the only person who switched into English for longer periods of time. Russian was chosen as a language of the interviews to narrow down possible answers and reactions since existing research shows that sometimes bilinguals react differently at the same question in different languages (see, for example, Kwon & Schallert 201).

The interview process was completed in two parts. Three of the interviews were conducted in April 2020, in the pilot stage of the project as a part of a “Bilingualism and Language Contact” course. Some of the participants of those interviews were also contacted in March 2021 with follow-up questions. The second set of interviews was completed in February 2021. All interviews

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<sup>4</sup> The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix 1.

were conducted via Zoom and recorded. Then the interviews were transcribed using ELAN software.<sup>5</sup>

The data were analyzed using “constant comparative analysis” (Glaser 2). Constant comparative analysis involves the continual comparison of all new collected data with the previously collected data and initial supposition and consequent adjustment of the hypothesis. By comparing all pieces of data, I aimed to conceptualize the results and consider connections between different concepts.

At a second stage in the project, the participants were asked to share two samples of writing: first, an example of academic writing in any stage of completion, and second, a household literacy sample (notes, planning, grocery lists, etc.). Due to the limited number of samples that I received, I was not able to use the data from the discourse analysis I intended to perform by looking for patterns in the extensive examples.

The analysis of the data from the interviews and literacy samples was done in two stages. In the first stage, every newly transcribed interview or analyzed sample was coded according to the categories and patterns that were found in it in an Excel database. With every new interview, the categories were reevaluated and supplemented with new ones if it proved necessary. At the second stage, diagrams were created to see the patterns and connections within and outside each category.

In terms of researcher positionality, I am a Russian graduate student and I consider myself a bilingual with English as a second language. With my experience being very similar to the experiences of my informants, I have partly relied on those experiences to help me write the questionnaire and guide me through the interviews. However, for the most part, the questionnaire

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<sup>5</sup> ELAN (Version 6.0) [Computer software]. (2020). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>.

and the interviews were based on existing research in the field of second language and language learners' identities.

The text of the thesis contains quotes from the interviews. The longer quotes are provided both in Russian and in English translation. While translating the excerpts of the interviews, I aimed to convey the meaning and, at the same time, tried to preserve participants' word choice or phrasing as much as possible by searching for the best English equivalents.

## **4. Research findings**

### *4.1. Participants profiles*

In this section, I will briefly describe relevant parts of the participants' backgrounds: for each of them, I will list their overall language learning experiences, language use, motivations for coming to the US, connections to their home country, and some personality traits that were especially prominent during interviews. One of the common considerations that is important to mention is that all the participants were very happy to talk to me and share their experiences. I interpret their eagerness as a sign that even in the inclusive and diverse culture of American campuses, these experiences are underrepresented. Several of the participants confessed that they had been thinking about some of the questions I asked but never had an opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences with anyone.

Among other commonalities are the experiences of learning English and work experiences: all the participants started learning English in elementary or middle school and continued throughout their university years. Here in the US, all of them either taught or presently teach Russian as a second language.

**Larisa.** Larisa came to the US two years ago to do her graduate studies. She wanted to come to the US as an experience in living abroad, and also to improve her English. Later for personal reasons, she became motivated to stay here and maybe continue her studies. She does not speak or use Russian a lot in her everyday life because she is completely immersed in the English-speaking community, so Russian is primarily used to contact her Russian colleagues and relatives at home. Larisa is outgoing, and she shares her opinions easily, but most of the time she had trouble providing examples for the situations or phenomena we discussed.

**Lena.** Lena's interview was the longest interview I have conducted – it lasted more than two hours. Lena likes to talk about herself, about problems in Russia, about her life here – she

rarely needed prompts to elaborate on a point. At the same time, she is an avid language learner, and she provided a lot of insights into how her English developed over time. Initially, Lena intended to come to the US for personal reasons, but after receiving a Fulbright scholarship to study in the US two years ago, she decided to pursue an academic career here as well. She is uncertain if she wants to stay and live in the US, and she maintains strong connection to her friends and family in Russia. Using Russian while talking with her family is most often the only situation in which she uses Russian as she is surrounded by English speakers in her professional and personal life.

**Natasha.** Natasha is a person of decided opinions, including that she, after having lived here for three years and having spoken English since she was in middle school, is not a bilingual person. Originally, she was a recipient of a Fulbright scholarship for Teachers of Foreign languages (she did not have a clear motivation at a time, but she applied because her friends strongly encouraged her), but after spending a year in the US, she decided that she wanted to stay and find a job. Natasha does not have a lot of opportunities to speak or use Russian on daily basis, except when communicating with her Russian colleagues.

**Andrey.** Andrey wanted to come to the US because he felt like his career as an English teacher in Russia was going nowhere. He wanted to have more professional opportunities, and he applied to a PhD program in the US three years ago. Andrey is a highly intelligent and very well-educated person. He considered each question I asked carefully and almost always was able to provide examples and shared his opinion on how they should be interpreted. After three years in the US, he has a lot of American friends, he speaks Russian only to his Russian-speaking friends here and his family in Russia. He is not sure if he wants to stay in the US permanently.

**Anya.** Anya is a quiet and introspective Russian-Jewish girl. While talking to her, I had a feeling that she had considered most of my questions before, because her answers were coherent and thoughtful. She came to the US on a whim five years ago, and she feels her immigrant status keenly. Throughout the years, she has built a Russian speaking community around herself, so she speaks English mostly in her professional sphere. She does not know yet if she wants to return to Russia.

**Katya.** Katya is the most unusual situation among the participants. She and her family had to leave Russia for personal reasons, and the US was the first place where they could successfully settle. Despite the seven years that she has spent here and having obtained the US citizenship, she still struggles with some of the aspects of her life here, and she is not at all sure that she will stay after her studies are finished. Katya has a cynical attitude towards both countries, but she is determined to preserve her Russian identity. She speaks Russian at home with her family, but her friends and colleagues are mostly English speakers.

**Dina.** Dina came to the US with a strong determination to obtain a PhD degree – a process she considered impossible in Russia because of the way graduate studies are structured there. Dina is also Russian-Jewish, and she is engaging and open, but most of the time she wanted to hear clear definitions of the phenomena that we talked about (for example, she was determined to find out what I mean by culture and how I would define it). Dina’s family came here with her, so she speaks Russian at home, and she also has many Russian speaking friends. English is mostly her professional language. She does not know if she wants to stay in the US when she finishes her studies.

**Eva.** Eva is fully settled in her life here and intends to stay. She came here almost nine years ago for personal reasons, but she found herself in academia very shortly after her move. She

is a warm and thoughtful person; every answer she gave me she treated as a recommendation to me or other international students as if she wanted to provide guidance. She has an equal portion of Russian and English in her life in both her domestic and professional sphere, and she strives every day to find balance between the two cultures and languages.

Another point that is necessary to make is that while talking about American and Russian culture I am forced to generalize the ideas of both. It is certainly true that the participants' Russian and American experiences are very diverse both geographically and culturally, but for such a small-scale study highlighting the differences between various American and Russian cultures is impossible.

#### *4.2. Changes in identity and perception of self*

In this section, I will discuss changes in identity and the perception of the changes that participants described. Since the particular circumstances of the participants vary, I will describe the patterns that were present in most of their experiences.

##### **4.2.1. Identity and the loss of connections: being a stranger in a strange land**

One of the most important questions that my participants were asked to think about was the question about their cultural belongingness and the way they perceive it. None of the participants, except Eva, feel like they belong to the American culture for many reasons: they all still have strong family ties to Russia, and their status in the US is very uncertain (Katya who became a US citizen some years ago is the exception). By this parameter, Eva's self-identification stands out because she is the only one who identifies herself as an American. For Eva, the transformation of her identity was a long process, the first step of which was the loss of connections she was accustomed to in Russia:

Вот ты живешь в России, и ты там дочка того-то человека, сестра того человека, внучка того человека и подруга того человека. Здесь от тебя остается только то, что ты русская девочка. Все. То есть, очень многие части твоей идентичности как то, с кем ты дружишь, чем ты занимаешься, какой у тебя стиль – они стираются. Поначалу. Потому ты их находишь обратно. И они, конечно, немножечко под другим углом могут оказаться.

When you live in Russia, you are the daughter of this person, the sister of that person, the granddaughter of that person, the friend of that person. Here the only thing that is left of you is that you are a Russian girl. That is all. So, many parts of your identity like who you are, who you hang out with, what you do or like doing, your style – they get erased. At first. But then you find them again, after some time, they might be different.<sup>6</sup> (Int\_4)

As can be seen from this excerpt, Eva thinks that her identity was reconstructed with time because many things that constituted her identity before she came here were lost, and she had to find new ones. As discussed above, loss of the frame of reference, as Pavlenko and Blackledge call it, is one of the first steps that lead to the recreation of the linguistic self (163). Participants' experiences suggest, however, that this loss is not limited to the language means, but it permeates cultural aspects of one's life such as, in this case, group belongingness: people who find themselves outside of their usual group, feel the loss of the connections to it, and are forced to form new ones.

Eva is not the only person who talked about the loss of connection to her old life (or old self). Anya describes the loss of connections as a process that was both frightening and empowering:

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<sup>6</sup> All excerpts from the interviews are translated by me.

У меня, наверное, основной шок связан не с языком, и даже там не с одиночеством, а с тем, что за мной больше вообще ничего и никого нет. Как бы не в плане каком-то там бытовом, что типа мама не принесет поесть, а в том, что меня никто не знает, никто не знает тех, кого знаю я. И жизнь с чистого листа, я могу себя создать любой, вот, заработать любую репутацию. И это было с одной стороны очень такое empowering ощущение, но с другой, оно пугало, потому что так, всегда у меня было ощущение, что у меня есть.

I remember the main shock was not connected to language or loneliness<sup>7</sup> or the language, but mostly about the fact that there is no one behind me. Not in the sense that my mom would not bring me some food, but in the sense that nobody knows me, nobody knows anyone I know, and I can start my life again from a clean slate, I can recreate myself the way I want to, earn any kind of reputation. On one hand, it was a very empowering feeling, but on the other hand, it was frightening because I did not have anywhere to retreat. (Int\_1)

Anya's ideas about the recreation of self suggest that a certain degree of agency is present in this process, and one can choose who to be and the change is empowering and positive. Fear, however, is a factor that might prevent any development. As Kim states in her study of North Korean immigrants, some of them are afraid of losing their cultural identity and that prevents them from assimilating into the new culture (5).

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<sup>7</sup> Although none of the participants talked about loneliness or isolation in detail, even when prompted (I suppose it is too personal of a topic to cover in an initial interview with a person you have never met before), the words *loneliness* and *isolation* did come up on several occasions. I do not possess enough data to analyze its significance, but the reappearance of the concepts in several interviews makes me think that it plays a bigger role for international students than they are willing to admit.

Fear is not the only factor that influences the construction of the new identity. It seems that, to have a functioning hybrid identity that does result in discomfort, one needs consciously to work on its construction. Dina proposed a solution to the problem of fear when she talked about acculturation and assimilation to American culture. Since she came here, she has been trying to find a way to be herself in both cultures. She does not want to be completely assimilated, but she also does want to belong here. According to her, establishing herself in both cultures requires time and conscious effort that facilitates integration into the American culture and, at the same time, preservation of her Russian self.

Overall, the loss of connections to their surroundings forces the participants to find new connections, and in this process, identity is slowly reconstructed. To build a functioning hybrid identity and preserve the Russian part of it, one has to put effort into the process.

#### **4.2.2. Understanding “Russianness” and acting the part**

The loss of connections discussed in the previous section leads to the loss of many factors that the participants are used to associating with themselves, in Eva’s words “The only thing that is left of you is that you are a Russian girl.” Away from the home country, “Russianness” – Russian identity – has become the most prominent feature in identity. In particular, its prominence overshadows other ethnical identities they used to claim. Dina, for instance, described the loss of her Jewish identity that was a big part of her in Russia. In the US she stopped thinking of herself as Russian-Jewish and only thinks of herself as Russian. It seems that the immersion in the new culture influences identification in such a way that only relevant distinctive features for the situation remain, and the ones that do not serve to distinguish one from others fade away.

Another new development in their cultural identity has allowed them to distinguish between cultural traits in their behavior and their individual characteristics. That process facilitates a better understanding of what it means to be Russian. Anya says:

Когда я приехала в Америку, много из того, что мне казалось моим личным оказалось культурным – позы, интонации, ситуации, и очень многое, наоборот, из того, что мне казалось социальным, групповым, оказалось индивидуальным.

When I came to the US, I realized that many things that I thought were my individual traits turned out to be cultural, like body language, intonations, situations we find ourselves in, and vice versa, things I considered to be associated with society turned out to be individual. (Int\_1)

Immersion into a different culture allows one to look at one's native culture from a different point of view, and that external point of view facilitates better understanding not only of the culture overall, but about features that are used to construct the self.

How one understands Russian culture and Russian cultural identity often results in conscious or unconscious change of behavior. Anya confesses that here in the US she often purposefully presents herself as a Russian by performing as what she perceives to be the most obvious Russian traits in her own eyes and in the expectation of Americans. Even though among all the participants only Eva identifies with American culture, the situation changes for the participants when they visit Russia. Anya concludes that she feels herself the member of American (and more broadly, Western) culture only when she goes to Russia: "In Russia, I present myself as the romantic "other," (romanticheskogo drugogo) the one that carries Western culture and Western values with her and comes to visit Asian savages (dikikh aziatov)." (Int\_1) Anya's attitude

is partially based on the longstanding Russian intellectual tradition that discusses the belongingness of Russia to either Eastern (perceived as barbaric and savage) or Western (enlightened and refined) cultures, with the popular opinion that Russian belongs to neither (Edie et al. 143). Historically, however, Western culture has always been considered extremely prestigious and worthy of cultivating. Thus, Anya's attempt to represent herself as a member of the West underscores the importance and status of European values in Russia.

In summary, immersion into the new culture influences both the ways one sees one's native culture and the ways one behaves in both the native and second cultures.

#### **4.2.3. Being “the other”**

Anya's observation of representing a member of different culture when going to Russia is not the only occurrence in which participants experience being “the other.” In fact, most of them live with this status of being “the other” and not belonging every day. “Being the other” influences the way they see themselves and the way they behave in differently depending on their circumstances. Andrey says that he is acutely aware of his status as a foreigner at almost any point of his life here. While he does not describe it as a negative experience, it shapes his behavior in many ways. For instance, in his day-to-day interactions with his American colleagues, he feels the necessity to prove that he is as capable as they are in speaking English:

Например, я в целом довольно много шучу. Но я знаю, что по-английски я шучу больше. Я не знаю, почему. По-английски, наверное, из-за того, что мне нужно показать, что даже если это не мой родной язык, я могу наравне с вами всеми поддержать беседу.

For example, I make jokes a lot. But I know that I joke even more in English. I don't know why. I think that it is because in English I need to show people that

even though it's not my native language, I still can converse with everyone on equal grounds. (Int\_2)

In situations like this, participants try to overcome their “otherness” instead of establishing it. By trying to prove himself to the English speakers, he looks for ways to be a part of the community. I think, though, that the conscious effort they are making towards trying to fit in leaves an impact on identity because it stems from the fear of not belonging. In Norton's terminology, by modifying their behavior and trying to fit in, they are investing in the culture to receive more cultural capital from the members of American culture.

At the same time, other participants talk about purposefully trying not to blend in in any way. For Anya and Katya, not blending in and deliberately behaving or even dressing up is a matter of preserving their Russian cultural identity. As shown in the previous section, Anya is sure that in many situations she is trying to perform as she imagines a Russian would. Katya echoes this idea by describing the way she chose her clothes carefully to stand out on a typical American campus.

Я в этом плане выделялась на фоне остальных, потому что я всегда более или менее элегантно одевалась, и мне абсолютно не было стыдно – не спортивный же костюм одевать. И в плане акцента я считаю, что абсолютно нет ничего плохого в акценте, потому что это твоя особенность. Ты не скрываешь свою культурную идентичность, и я не собираюсь это прятать.

I was different from others in the ways I dressed up and I didn't feel embarrassed because of it, you can't just wear sweats to class. And in terms of accent, I don't see anything wrong with it because it is your specific feature. By not hiding it, you are presenting yourself as a member of your native culture. (Int\_3)

By choosing clothes to stand out, Katya does not only try to distinguish herself from the crowd, but also underscores differences between college cultures in Russian and the US. In Russia, one's appearance in professional settings, including universities, is an important part of university culture; the unofficial dress-code varies from neat casual to formal clothing. While it is possible to see students in sweats on a Russian campus, it is not commonplace and is usually frowned upon.

For Katya, accent is an important cultural factor that helps her preserve her cultural identity. It is interesting to note that most of the participants considered it to be a neutral factor in their American lives and never tried to work to eliminate it because they believe it to be an impossible task. Nevertheless, accent can be a source of negative experiences. What Natasha remembers from her first days in the US is that she tried to talk as little as possible because she perceived that her accent prevents Americans from fully understanding her. Besides, as Dina points out, accent does not only influence the efficiency of communication, but it also becomes one of the features that makes you visible and attracts attention of members of the target community in a way that is not always comfortable:

Ну есть такое, чтобы не слиться, а может быть выделяться, там где я хочу выделяться стратегически, чтобы по твоему виду, или по тому, как ты говоришь не сообщать о себе лишней информации. И это связано с тем, что часто люди говорят “А, ты из России”, и какие-нибудь скучные их ассоциации, ну, там, не медведи – балалайки, но что-то такое про Путина и НАТО. Ну и потому что да, есть како-то вот это вот ощущение, что немножко стыдно и что-то нужно мимикрировать.

I don't want to blend in completely, only when I need to, so people would not get too much information about me by the way I look or speak. It is all connected to

what people often say when they learn that you are from Russia: “Oh, you are from Russia!” They usually have some boring associations with it: if not about bears and balalaikas, then about Putin and NATO. And it is embarrassing to see that people associate you with those things, and in some way, you have to measure up to them.

(Int\_6)

The opinion of members of the target culture comes up here once again. It can not only influence the behavior of the participants, but also their emotional state and cultural identification. Eva, who, as previously noted, identifies as an American, admits that a contradiction exists in how she sees herself and how the world sees her: “I am more American at this point than Russian (ya bolshe russkaya chem amerikanka), but from an American point of view, I will always be Russian; it is often uncomfortable.” (Int\_4)

Another factor that is important to mention is the participants’ social experience and their relative status in both cultures. Although being an international student in the US comes with many restrictions (such as being highly restricted for employment, for example), many of the participants think that they experience more freedom from the pressures of society in the US than they did in Russia. Andrey, for instance, considers the distance between himself and his home country’s political upheavals as a positive development for him.

Я, наверное, еще ощущаю себя в каком-то смысле, чуть свободнее, потому что всегда, когда я там жил и сейчас, всегда есть какой-то супер активный политический фон, который по крайней мере мне всегда было очень сложно игнорировать. То есть едешь на утреннее занятие со студентами а в голове думаешь, что посадили каких-нибудь политзаключенных. И весь твой день, проходит на этом фоне. Мне проще от этого абстрагироваться, когда я там не

живу, они переносятся как что-то более удаленное, они переносятся как что-то менее личное.

I feel like I am freer here because when I lived there [in Russia], there had always been a very prominent political background that is very hard to ignore. So, when you, for example, are going to your morning class, and you can't help but think about some political activists being imprisoned, and your whole day is colored by this fact. Here I can compartmentalize better. And since I don't live there right now, I experience the problems as something distant, not as personal. (Int\_2)

As Andrey confesses that he feels not as burdened by the Russian political environment while living in the US, Anya agrees with him and confesses that even the recent situation in Russia<sup>8</sup> did not traumatize her as much as it would have if she were in Russia. She says that she would have felt like a victim and an enabler of the situation, and that would have certainly negatively impacted her mental health. So, the distance from the home country permits the participants to experience events at a distance and avoid the pressures connected with it. The feeling of freedom is heightened also by the fact that the American political and social pressures do not seem to have a similar effect on the participants. They consider themselves and feel like observers and not active members of society, therefore they are not affected by the events as much as the rest of the society. Thus, the distance from both their native country's society and their status as a foreigner in the society of the target culture affect participants identities by giving them the opportunities to reevaluate their behavior and opinions, but also by giving them space from social pressures so they can figure things out for themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> The interviews were conducted in February 2021 when a Russian opposition leader Aleksey Navalny was arrested and was being tried for a crime he allegedly committed.

Features such as behavioral patterns and accent that distinguish the participants from the member of target culture can be highlighted in different strategies participants use to establish their place in it. The process of establishing oneself in the target culture can include efforts in opposite directions for blending in and standing out. This process is complicated by members of the target culture whose attitudes and perceptions might not only evoke discomfort but also cause one to question one's identity. At the same time, the status of "the other" may alleviate social and political pressure.

#### **4.2.4. "What's in a name?"**

In the section on negotiation of identity, I discussed the importance of names for the reconstruction of identity described by Pavlenko and Lantolf. The change in the pronunciation of the name or the name itself leads to the temporary loss of self because from a linguistic point of view; one does not know who one is anymore since the name sounds and is written differently (165). For the participants of the study, names were one of the factors that signaled that the transformation of identity is underway. Even though the participants thought deeply about their names, I cannot reveal their actual names and nor subsequently their preferred nicknames. However, I have attempted to resolve this issue by providing names and nicknames as their pseudonyms that reflect the nuanced considerations of both phonology and identity to the best of my ability.

The struggle for the participants is in the pronunciation gap between names that historically have common Latin or Greek origins (like, for example, the name Anna that exists in both languages but is pronounced in completely different ways). Katya ['katʲə], who immediately became Kate /keɪt/ when she moved here, was irritated by the American inability to pronounce her name correctly. For Katya, the mispronunciation of the first vowel (from /a/ to /ei/) causes her

great discomfort and, more importantly, an inability to associate herself with that name. She had to find a way to teach people how to pronounce her name correctly, but in most situations, it is not sufficient, so she is considering changing her name to its full version (Katerina) which would alleviate the problem. For Dina /dinə/, the problem was similar because her name was often mispronounced as /dainə/. To resolve this problem, she started to write a double “n” in her name, to force people to pronounce it with an /i/. That was not the ideal solution: the name looked so different in writing that she stopped associating herself with it. She is still in search of a better solution.

Katya and Dina’s willingness to change their names in order to be able to identify themselves with the new name might be the indicative of the change they are experiencing because they feel that they need a new name in these new circumstances. Eva’s situation might be a supporting example of this process. Eva – pronounced /jeva/ in Russian and /ivə/ in English – has been thinking of herself as /ivə/ for several years now. The fact that her name has essentially changed and the fact that she identifies as an American could be factors in the same process of identity transformation that, in her case, is complete.

#### *4.3. Coping with the American Culture: American influences on Russian identity*

In this section, I will discuss the features of American culture that have influenced the participants – their identities, perceptions, and opinions – the most: the social justice system, and other especially significant cultural differences that create a gap between the two cultures that needs to be bridged.

##### **4.3.1. The influence of the social system**

At one point in each interview, I asked the participants to share cultural differences between Russia and the US that have proved to be the most difficult to adapt to and that have influenced

them the most. The most common answer concerns social justice and the perception of equality as a factor that affects people's opinions, identification, and self-esteem. Every one of the participants admitted that their beliefs about race, gender and LGBTQ rights, and minority rights underwent a complete reevaluation primarily because of the different ways the US and Russia approach cultural diversity. In Russia, multiculturalism and diversity are most often ignored, and, as a consequence, attitudes and behavior towards people of color and ethnic minorities border on hostility and direct expressions of racism, which due to the low social value of diversity and social justice is accepted as normal. For instance, Natasha said that she never noticed how racist Russia is, and that her own behavior was less than appropriate sometimes. The participants who have lived here longer describe not only a change of opinion, but also the development of an ability to notice inequality or injustice. Eva goes even further than just being able to notice it as she has started to model her behavior accordingly.

Больше стало понимание того, что люди бывают очень разными, и самое главное, это не обижать людей, реальных, с которыми ты сталкиваешься. И мне кажется, что когда я приехала сюда, я стала замечать, научилась замечать гораздо больше как людей можно обидеть, совершенно об этом не думая, и я работаю над тем, чтобы этого не делать.

I gained better knowledge of the fact that all people are different, and the most important thing is not to offend them, the real people you deal with. And I think that since I came here, I have learned that there are so many ways to insult and offend people without even thinking about it, and I am trying very hard not to do that. (Int\_4)

The differences between Russian and American attitudes towards human rights not only influence the change of opinion, but also influence a change in the way the participants see themselves. Katya, for instance, found that she started thinking about herself not as a woman first as she used to do in Russia, but as a *person* first, with all the equality that this term implies. Anya's change has been even more profound.

Теперь у меня есть ощущение, что я чего-то стою просто по умолчанию. Не за то, что я сделала, а просто за то, что я существую. Раньше у меня опять же этого не было. У меня было ощущение, что я стою столько, сколько я наработала: вот сегодня я хорошо поработала, поэтому меня можно похвалить, а завтра я плохо поработала, и меня можно растоптать.

Now I have a feeling that I am worth something by default. Not because I did something, but because I exist. Before, I didn't have that. I felt that I am only worthy if I have done something, and if I worked well today you can praise me, and if I didn't work hard enough, today you can walk all over me. (Int\_1)

When immersed in American culture, participants learned not only to recognize the ideals of social justice and human rights but were also profoundly influenced by their new environment to the point where they reevaluated their own identities. It is possible to suggest that the "gap" that exists between Russian and American social systems is the reason for such a profound change. Since the bigger difference is more noticeable, one would spend more time and effort trying to understand it, and, thus, facilitating the change.

#### **4.3.2. Coping with American culture: working through the differences**

Apart from the social system, when asked what aspect of their American lives are the most difficult to deal with, the participants gave very diverse answers. Among the common answers

were differences in weather, transportation and distances, food, different attitudes towards the law and authorities.<sup>9</sup> Those differences were mostly dependent on the unique situation of the participants. The more global difference that was difficult to cope with and was mentioned by all the participants, was small talk and politeness.

American politeness presents difficulties for the Russian-born participants because in their home country the rules of communication with strangers and passing acquaintances are different. They do not include open and friendly body language (e.g., smiling) or friendly questions; a curt greeting is usually enough. Communicating with people on a daily basis in the US, however, requires constant vigilance from the participants because they need to remember to say “Hi!,” “How are you?,” and “Have a good day!” It takes the participants considerable time (most commonly years), to be able automatically to produce both the smile and the utterances. Before acquiring this automatic skill, the participants feel that inability to react quickly to a greeting or forgetting to say, “How are you?” is uncomfortable in two ways. First, it distinguishes them from the crowd, and second, it makes them feel inadequate. Even though they are proficient in the language, they have to develop their communicative competence further. Their perceived lack of communicative skills negatively affects their self-confidence in the language and, thus, decreases their ability to associate themselves with both the language and the culture (Noels 34).

“Small talk” is an even bigger challenge. At first, it presents difficulty because the participants do not understand the purpose of exchanging seemingly meaningless utterances. Some of them even rebel against it and try to avoid at all costs situations in which it is required. For instance, Katya says that she tended to avoid any mixers or meet-and-greet gatherings because she

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<sup>9</sup> For more practical coping considerations (e.g., housing, driving, etc.), participants find that the university environment is very helpful because they are equipped to help with problems like this, and this make the transition easier.

did not want to force herself to participate. In time, the communicative ability to maintain small talk develops. I noticed two main strategies that participants use to facilitate its development. First, they come to an understanding that to fully engage in the process and react naturally to the people's inquiries and make their own, they need to understand why small talk is necessary and what it does in communication, such as making people more comfortable. Second, they just accept that they have to learn and follow the rules, including rules of communication, that exist in the society, even if they do not fully understand them.

The first strategy is more useful when it comes to identity change. According to Taft's stages of acculturation, it falls into the third step – acquiring new cultural knowledge – that would consequently lead to finding a position in the new society. The second strategy, however, is only suitable for the very first step in this process, when one learns the rule of how to function in the new environment (Taft 139)

#### *4.4. Linguistic negotiation of identity*

Identity, as was described before, can be also negotiated through the linguistic means such as language choice, translanguaging and / or code-switching (in oral and written communication). In this section, I will describe the linguistic factors that emerged as important for the transformation of identity: language choice and the experiences of speaking English or Russian and translanguaging practices. It is necessary to note that the change of language environment has affected the participants differently, and the present study does not cover all the nuances of those changes.

#### **4.4.1. Speaking English: loss of ability to communicate and fear of not being understood**

During the first several weeks of living in the US, Andrey had to remind himself constantly that he lives in English now. “I didn’t have difficulties speaking, but I had to constantly remind myself that I exist in English now, I had to stop myself and think – English, English, English” (Int\_2). The adjustment to the English-speaking environment was different for every participant, and the time required to overcome the difficulties varied for each of them.

During and after the adjustment period, the participants experienced a loss of their ability to communicate and express themselves that greatly affected their identities. Although they came to the US after passing language qualification exams and having experiences using and even teaching English, they all admit that they experienced discomfort and difficulties at the beginning in both producing and understanding English. Especially in the early days of their lives here, they preferred to stay silent or avoid any communication in which they could not guarantee a successful outcome. For instance, the most common problem in understanding English is navigation through various American accents (accents do not only cause trouble at the beginning: Dina and Katya admit that even after living here for more than five years they still sometimes have trouble understanding some accents). Inability to understand what native speakers are saying does not only impede communication but also affects participants’ language self-confidence, the lack of which prevents them from associating themselves with the English language.

Surprisingly, most participants report more emotional discomfort evoked by challenges in producing English than in understanding it. The challenge lies not so much in speaking English, but in the fear that native speakers will not understand what is being said. This fear is caused by several linguistic factors. First, participants’ accents cause misunderstandings. In Russia, English

language education is mostly based on the British variant of English, but popular culture brings in many sources of American English (music and TV shows are among the most popular). That combination leaves students of English with an accent that is neither British nor American. Therefore, it is unfamiliar sounding to Americans and sometimes difficult to understand. Participants need to understand how to improve their accent in the way that makes it more accessible for Americans. An improvement of accent does not mean that they can eliminate it completely: usually they just adjust the pronunciation that is very noticeable (for instance, they learn to pronounce a double “n” instead of “nt” in the words like *interview*).

Second, the degree of formulaic competence does not usually measure up to the English language environment. For example, such a simple task as ordering food in a restaurant can be a highly stressful experience. Stress results not from the lack of language proficiency, but from the not knowing what the employees of a restaurant or a shop *expect* to hear, the conventional ways of ordering food here. Katya talks about her struggles to become more competent in this area in great detail.

Плюс еще я заметила тогда, что когда ты говоришь какую-то непривычную формулировку, даже если идея совсем обычная. Например, в магазине, там прямо как скрипт у тебя всегда. Мы пытались сказать “нам не нужен пакет.” И если я говорила “I don't need a bag,” меня переспрашивали три раза. И я постепенно поняла, что чтобы меня не переспрашивали, надо говорить “no bag.” Окей.

I noticed that if you use some phrase that it is not typically used, people will not understand you, even if it is a very mundane idea. For example, in a store you must always have a script. You should always know what question you will be asked and

how to answer. For example, in a supermarket we tried to say that we don't need a bag. And when you say "I don't need a bag" they kept asking me again and again what I meant. And I gradually understood that I need to just say "no bag" to be understood. (Int\_3)

The stress that participants experience when they are asked to clarify what they mean does not only undermine their language self-confidence but also brings them face-to-face with their "otherness" and people's reactions to their language abilities. "People start treating me differently," says Larisa, "as if I can't speak English at all. It's annoying and frustrating."

In academic settings, that fear affects their performance as well. Dina describes the situation that she often found herself in during the first several years of living in the US:

Были какие-то сложности с опять-таки, в академическом контексте с выражением своих мыслей. Потому что ты говоришь какую-то идею и тебе говорят "да, очень интересно." Но следом за тобой человек говорит, и ты думаешь: "Да, я ж вот это и имела в виду!" и дальше начинается разговор. И ты понимаешь, что тебя совсем не поняли.

I also had difficulties in the academic context with expressing my thoughts. You express your ideas in class, and the professor says "oh, how interesting." But then someone repeats what you *wanted to say* and discussion ensues, and you realized that nobody got your meaning. (Int\_5)

This problem is even more prominent when it comes to academic writing in English. The reasons for the difficulties are both cultural and linguistic. Cultural differences stem from the fact that academic writing is a skill that is not widely practiced during undergraduate studies in Russia, even if it is required. Higher institutions do not pay much attention to its development. Writing

skills only come into play with papers students have to write once a year for their two or three final years of study. Even with this experience, writing skills are not developed – unless an advisor specifically works on it with a student – which is, regrettably, a rare situation. Thus, coming into the American system of education, where writing skills are highly valued and developed, is a shock. It is interesting in this case to consider that writing is the skill all of my informants found challenging in the American system of education. The limited experience of writing in Russian did not allow them to compare their experiences and project their L1 skills onto their L2.

Even if participants do possess some experience in academic writing in Russian, transitioning into English was damaging to their identity. As I described previously, to express one's thoughts during a classroom discussion can be very difficult due to the spontaneity of the communication; writing, at first, seems to be an ideal solution. But with writing skills underdeveloped, writing is not enough to satisfy their needs for self-expression.

The main challenge in writing academic texts for the participants lies in two areas: the difficulty of expressing one's thoughts coherently and grasping the rhetoric of academic texts. The first area, participants admit, is not something that can be improved quickly – and that is the most frustrating part. Participants who have lived here longer say that they did not find a way to improve the way they express their thoughts coherently apart from constant practice that one day facilitates the sudden understanding of how to do that properly. Learning how to build an academic text is a task that is easier because there are rules you can learn and follow.

But even after overcoming the linguistic barrier and employing their knowledge on the structure of academic writing, many participants do not feel free in their writing. They admit to a very dry and curt writing style that often consists of repeated use of ready-made constructions and formulas.

In both everyday and academic settings, the fear of not being understood leads to at least temporary loss of the ability to express oneself coherently and reticence in socializing. Additionally, the loss can be magnified by the disappointment and doubts participants experience in their own language abilities. The loss of one's ability to express oneself and the consequent withdrawal from socialization is detrimental to the development of identity. When one is not able to express one's thoughts and ideas without fear of judgement or misunderstanding, one cannot establish the new identity linguistically and culturally and may lose the sight of who one is.

#### **4.4.2. Russian: between losing and preserving**

While English fills the professional domain in the participants' lives, Russian acquires new positions depending on the particular situation of the participants. Almost all participants of the study have Russian speaking friends or a Russian-speaking community around them; moreover, for Katya, Eva, Dina, and Anya, Russian is the home language. The attitude towards speaking Russian and using it for different purposes varies between two extremes. On one side of it, participants consciously use Russian in their everyday lives, especially in domestic communications, to preserve their Russian identity and habits. Katya, for instance, prefers to speak only Russian with her family because she believes that it will help them maintain their Russian identities. On the other side of the scale, participants do not purposefully strive to preserve their Russian language use in the areas where it is possible but confess that Russian is more comfortable for them to use at home or with their Russian speaking friends or family, so they maintain their native language without realizing it. Additionally, all the participants teach or have taught Russian at some point of their lives here. With the requirements of 90% of teaching in the target language, Russian instructors have to be sure that their language is clear and correct if they want to serve as

a good example for their students. Thus, maintaining their Russian proficiency is crucial for their professional development.

The fact that most graduate students have close ties with their native country helps with language maintenance. They create a virtual ethnic and language community for themselves that allows them to use the language frequently and, on a more important note, feel like a part of the community – especially important if they do not feel like a part of the community in the US).

All the participants rejected the idea that they might someday lose their language and culture completely, and that fact is supported by the existing research. Nevertheless, participants who have lived here longer – Eva, Katya, and Dina – notice certain changes in their Russian and classify these changes as a partial loss. Apart from appropriation of syntactic, lexical, and prosodic items that usually accompanies language interference,<sup>10</sup> participants feel that their language intuition and creativity has lessened over the years. Katya says that she sometimes feels that she is losing the ability to speak beautifully, that is using complex structures and rare words. Apart from that, it has become more difficult for her to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate word choice in Russian and to use the larger spectrum of constructions and words – her Russian has become more “automatic.” “Some expressions that I used to feel were weird and incorrect (koryavye i nepravilnye), now sound okay to me.”

The gradual loss of language intuition, as well as language interference, directly affect the participants’ identity because it prevents them from expressing themselves with all the nuances they otherwise possessed. In addition to experiencing the constraints in English, they start experiencing them in Russian, and that feeling forces them not only to question their abilities, but also their sense of belonging to either culture.

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<sup>10</sup> For the comprehensive description of the linguistic features of émigré Russian see Andrews, 2001.

#### 4.4.3. Efficiency in communication: using both languages

In this section, I will describe the use of both languages as one way to promote efficient bilingual communication. In the interviews, three trends were observed that connect language use and translanguaging to identity. It is important to mention that some of the participants make a conscious choice to avoid translanguaging and use one language consistently, but some translanguaging is unavoidable because of the environment they live in.

The first trend concerns the verbalization of thoughts, “the inner voice,” in Pavlenko and Lantolf terms (163). For most participants, verbal thinking is a constantly changing flow of languages. “It can change word by word,” Dina says, describing her inner speech. With time, they start seeing patterns in the way they organize their thoughts using two languages instead of one, and this varies from person to person. For Katya, for instance, problem solving is easier in English, and any emotional renderings are conducted in Russian. For Eva, in contrast, structuring her emotions is easier in English because it has a wider and more nuanced psychological vocabulary. For instance, it is more difficult to express one’s general state of discomfort, offence, or emotional pain in Russian, and most of the vocabulary is borrowed from English. To say, for example, that something makes a person uncomfortable will require the use of the calque expression *ya ispytyvayu doskomfort* ‘I am experiencing discomfort’. Thus, whatever language is used to verbalize thinking, the choice most of the time depends on the most efficient way to express their thoughts or think.

In connection to participants’ emotions, using both English and Russian to think and talk about them are interestingly connected to the degrees of intimacy the language provides. In Anya’s case, English lacks the intimacy she requires to talk about her emotions:

Безусловно есть какой-то уровень интимности, дальше которого я не могу говорить на английском. Я не все могу выразить на английском. Ну, я не знаю, у меня никогда не было успешных романтических отношений на английском, ну, с носителем русского языка.

Of course, there is a certain level of intimacy I can't talk about in English; I don't know how to express some things in English. Maybe that's the reason I have never had successful relationship in English, with a non-Russian speaker. (Int\_1)

The participants, however, learn to use their inability to deal with intimate emotions in English to their advantage. Andrey states that it is easier to use English to talk about very personal matters because English allows him to distance himself from the situation and prevents him from feeling inadequate or embarrassed by his feelings. Similarly, Katya sometimes uses English with native Russian speakers to establish distance between them and herself:

У нас с ней очень напряженные отношения. Я заметила за собой, что я ней общаюсь очень часто на английском. Отвечаю на английском, если она отвечает по-русски. Для меня это дистанция. Я не хочу никакого с ней панибратства, поэтому я выстраиваю эту дистанцию.

With her, I have a tense relationship. And I notice that I communicate in English with her, and she might respond in Russian. It's because I don't want to be friends with her, so I am establishing that distance by not using Russian. (Int\_3)

The situation that Katya describes not only concerns the way she deals with her emotions in different situations, but the power of the language to determine people's relationship within their community and the way they feel in it. The participants perceive that language possesses a potential to influence their relationship with other people. In multilingual settings, this perceived

potential is the reason why the participants are always attuned to their interlocutors' choice of both language and words when it comes to choosing between English or Russian. If they feel that the interlocutor is more comfortable in a different language, they will prefer to switch to avoid problems, discomfort, or miscommunication on the part of their interlocutor, even if the language choice is not the most comfortable for themselves.

When it comes to using both languages, participants tend to use different strategies to employ their languages. Apart from the strategies that allow them to facilitate power relations with people around them, the other important factor in using languages is efficiency. Efficiency in language use can be expressed in several different forms. For instance, on the lexical level, efficiency is represented by the use of the words of the language that are more easily accessed, in other words, the word that first comes to mind. Natasha says that when writing a grocery list, she will use the word which pops first in her head. Another strategy is replacing a long Russian word with a shorter English word and vice versa. Moreover, for concepts which do not exist in Russian, English words are used. Their attempts at efficiency, however, comes with a cost.

То есть язык просто какой-то некрасивый, не знаю, ленивый какой-то. Мне кажется, чем дальше, тем больше какие-то вещи становятся уже не так важны в плане формы - как это звучит, насколько это правильно. Насколько это красиво. Чаще думаешь о функции - меня же поняли на русском, как бы я бы это ни сказал.

In time, the language becomes less beautiful and somewhat lazy. I think that the longer you live here the less important form is for you, how correct your language is, how beautiful it is. You start thinking more about the function of language – if they understand me, that is enough. (Int\_3)

The “beauty” of language, that Katya refers to is probably the consequence of the highly revered idea of “cultured” language in Russia. Traditionally, the ability to express oneself eloquently and coherently is valued as a skill; language is supposed to be art. The “form over function” strategy that Katya describes can impact the role of language in one’s identity. As mentioned above, language can be both an essential and symbolic factor for identity (Salaberry 5). In this situation, language – both Russian and English – lose their symbolism and their essential property of identity and is perceived only as a tool of communication and nothing else.

Another interesting translanguaging practice concerns intonation and pronunciation of English words or sentences in Russian discourse. The participants explain that most of the time they would insert an English word into their Russian speech, preserving the original pronunciation. Sometimes, however, they would adapt the English word grammatically (by adding Russian inflections) and phonetically (by pronouncing the word using Russian phonemes). This switch is always accompanied by assigning additional meaning to the words. Most of the participants use it as language play, which allows them to pronounce the words sarcastically or ironically. For instance, during the interview Andrey several times used the English verb *assume* in his Russian discourse and changed pronunciation of it to demonstrate the attitudes of his American colleagues who assume that they know various facts about Russia. Sometimes, the meaning is deeper. Anya, for example, notices that when she changes the pronunciation of the word, it means that she wants to show that even in Russian now she uses English words: “Look, who we have become – we don’t remember who we are or what our homeland is (*bezrodnye i rodstva ne pomnyashchie*).” (Int\_1).

By assigning the additional meaning to the pronunciation of words in a bilingual discourse, participants are exploiting both languages in their repertoire. This situation can be seen as another

way to convey meanings efficiently. It can also be seen as a process of establishing their hybrid identities where both languages are being assigned new symbolic and semantic meanings.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study is an attempt to fill in the gap in the research of sociolinguistic factors in Russian speakers in the US as well as add to the growing field of adult identity transformation by investigation the change of self-identification under the influence of the target language culture and the perceptions of such changes of adult bilinguals. This study aimed to answer the questions of the change in cultural identity in the situations when sequential bilinguals are immersed in the culture of their second language: how their self-identification changes; how they perceive those changes; and what role language plays in the transformation. Among the factors that influence the transformation of one's identity, the most important ones were found to be the following: the loss of connections, overcoming the gap between two cultures, and the role of language in the negotiation of identity.

The loss of network and connections that occurs in the new culture serves as a starting point in the transformation of identity because it allows one to acquire new connections, behavior, personal preferences, etc. Moreover, this loss does not affect the entirety of the participants' identity: it also highlights the traits of their Russian national identity and facilitates deeper understanding of it. The improved understanding of the Russian culture and the desire to preserve it as a part of their new selves forces the participants into the constant process of trying to stand out and preserve their "Russianness" while trying to fit into their new culture.

The largest gap between Russian and American cultures that participants must bridge lies in the areas of social justice and language behavior. The first factor impacts the identity of a Russian-born person in such a way that they realize their own worth and their status as a person entitled to certain rights. This realization might be facilitated by the fact that neither Russian social pressures nor American ones influence the participants and being in the position of the observers

to both political and social systems leaves them with the space and opportunity to decide who they want to be.

The role of language in the negotiation of identity is a prominent one. The temporary difficulties in speaking English in its natural environments result in lasting consequences for the ability to express oneself not only in English, but in their native language as well. In time, the challenges of the communication in the target language gradually disappear, and new forms of self-expression can be found. In the native language, however, the ability to self-express decreases and the native language loses its significant position in constituting one's identity by serving only as a tool in communication. The ability to speak both languages, however, creates an intricate system of communication where both languages have their own domains and functions. The system is based on the principles of efficient communication.

Overall, the participants are situated at different stages of the creation of a hybrid identity that includes and attempts to balance the parts of their initial Russian identity, the characteristics of it that underwent changes under the second culture's influence, and newly acquired cultural traits.

This research has made it possible to identify several directions of inquiry for potential further study. First of all, the influences of the target culture on the negotiation of identity should be examined further. Second, the insight into the role of language in identity transformation, including language use, translanguaging, language choice, and literacy practices, might prove fruitful for an understanding of how bilingual brains works. Third, this study can potentially be significant for the study acculturation in immigrant communities in general and experiences of international graduate students, in particular. These insights into their experiences might be helpful

for the faculty who work with graduate students to understand them and their work better and be better prepared to help the incoming students to overcome the difficulties.

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## **Appendix 1. Interview Questionnaire**

### 1. English learning experiences

- 1.1. When did you start learning English?
- 1.2. Did you have English in school? What was studying English in school like?
- 1.3. Did you take English at a university? What was studying English at the university like?
- 1.4. Did you enjoy studying? What did you do besides classes to learn English?
- 1.5. What did you like the most about learning it?
- 1.6. At which point of your English education were you able to speak fluently and you felt like you are really in the language?
- 1.7. Did you encounter American culture before coming here? How did you imagine it before you came? Did your expectations come true?

### 2. Living in the US

- 2.1. How long have you lived in the US?
- 2.2. When and why did you come here? What was your motivation for coming?
- 2.3. Tell me about the first time you came to the US.
- 2.4. How do you feel about the differences in living here and in Russia?
- 2.5. What was it like for you to speak English at the beginning?
- 2.6. Do you feel like you became more proficient since coming here? What difficulties do you still experience? What do you think helped to you to develop your language skills?
- 2.7. What skills or little rituals you developed to cope with the American culture you developed when first coming here?
- 2.8. Is it important for you to blend in here in some way? Clothes, language, etc.
- 2.9. What do you like / dislike about living here?

### 3. Speaking English/Russian

- 3.1. Tell me about situations – besides obvious – do you find yourself speaking Russian.
- 3.2. Are you a part of a Russian-speaking community here in the States? How often do you communicate with other members of the community? What languages do you use and for what?
- 3.3. If you talk to a bilingual person, how do you decide which language to use? Why?

- 3.4. What if you can't find a word in the language you are currently speaking. Can you give me an example of a situation? If you use the dictionary, what kind of dictionary do you prefer?
- 3.5. How do you feel about English words in Russian and vice versa? How do you pronounce English words in Russian and vice versa?
- 3.6. How do you feel when you speak Russian here? English in Russia?
- 3.7. Do you notice if you have an accent? Are you trying to work on it to blend in?
- 3.8. Do you notice any changes in your Russian? Do your relatives / friends in Russia point it out to you?
- 3.9. What is it like for you to speak English / Russian now?
- 3.10. What topics are easier for you to speak in English? In Russian?
- 3.11. What language do you use to verbally internalize your thoughts? What does it depend on?

#### 4. Self-identification

- 4.1. If you compared yourself with your American colleagues, which differences would you name?
- 4.2. When you come back to Russia, what differences on your behavior do you notice?
- 4.3. Do you feel like you treat / perceive things differently since coming here? What do you think have influenced those changes?
- 4.4. What culture do you associate yourself with the most? Or what aspects of Russian / American culture do you feel close to?
- 4.5. Do you see / perceive yourself differently here comparing to when you lived in Russia?
- 4.6. Do think your personality is different in English / Russian? What changes in your personality do you notice when you speak different languages?
- 4.7. What are the things about American culture you find difficult to accept? Why do you think you feel this way? What about Russian culture? How does it compare to the time before you lived here?
- 4.8. Describe the role of language in your self-perception. How does speaking languages you use in your everyday life influence the way you see yourself?
- 4.9. What other factors you think influence the way you identify yourself? Can you name any specific experiences that challenged your perception of yourself?

4.10. What do you think about the possibility of losing your first language and culture?

5. Literacy practices

5.1. When you read for pleasure what kind of books do you choose? What language? Do you think that language make a difference? What language do you prefer to read?

5.2. How much concentration does it require for you to read in English? In Russian?

5.3. What language do you prefer to use for writing in English or in Russian?

5.4. Do you read magazines / newspapers? Which do you prefer, Russian / American? What differences do you notice?

5.5. Do you read news? Which websites do you prefer? What language? Difference?

5.6. What language do you use for making notes: shopping lists, notes, planning? DO you think there any patterns in how you use your languages for writing / reading?

5.7. When you do homework do you make notes for yourself in English in Russian? What does it depend on?

5.8. Do you listen to music in English or in Russian?

5.9. Social media: when you post on social media which language do you choose? What influences your choice?

5.10. What sources of information you read, or watch influence the way you behave or see yourself in the US?

6. Education differences

6.1. What is the most significant difference between American and English system of post-secondary education for you?

6.2. Which of your language skills are challenged the most while studying? What do you think is the reason for that?

6.3. What new skills – language and others – did you have to acquire to be successful here?

6.4. Did you have a vast experience of writing academic papers in Russian? How does it compare with your English experience?

6.5. Tell me about a time when you had to write an academic paper in English.