IDENTITY AND NATIVE LANGUAGE USAGE IN GROUPS OF ROMANIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

The present article is set to analyze the identity of Romanian immigrants through the usage of their native language in their country of destination. Language is an important part of the cultural heritage of each person, defining the way we express our thoughts and emotions. Immigrants are faced with an impossible choice, between adopting the language of their adoptive country or hanging on to their tradition – a choice they have to make not when interfacing with society, but in their own homes. To understand the language usage of Romanian immigrants we have used two data sources: the American Community Survey, for both 2011 - 2013 and 2006 – 2010, and a survey personally applied to 634 Romanians living in the United States of America. To understand the native language usage, we will try to see the variables that could influence it – gender, the age of migration, attitude towards Romania and the United States, the number of children the respondent has. The present article is exploratory and can be improved upon by using multivariate analysis to determine the exact influences of language usage in our studied group.

Keywords: identity, Romanian immigrants, identity and language, immigrant language, Romanian Americans

The sample used for the present research was of 634 Romanian immigrants who live in the United States of America, 18 years or older. Because of the method through which the survey was applied, both CAPI and in person, the survey was started by 1439 persons, with a completion rate of 44%. The average completion time was 43 minutes and 32 seconds. The data was collected between August 2nd 2013 and October 13th 2013, both online and personally by the author in New York, Washington D.C and Illinois. The questionnaire contained 72 questions with pre-formulated responses, having 53 closed questions and 19 matrix questions. The surveys ware then downloaded to IBM SPSS Statistics 22 for analysis, having a total of 158 variables. To select the participants to our study, we used two

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screening questions – does the person have a permanent residence in the United States of America and if he or she is of Romanian origin. For the present article, I have chosen 10 variables to be correlated with language usage inside of the home of Romanian immigrants, variables which will be presented below.

Table 1. ***The gender and number of Romanians in the United States of America***

Total population	459,800
Male	48.7%
Female	51.3%

Source: 2011-2013 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, *S0201: SELECTED POPULATION PROFILE IN THE UNITED STATES*

The total number of immigrants of Romanian origin living in the United States of America is, according to the latest American Community Survey, 459,800. Out of that, 48.7% are male and 51.3% are female. This represents one of the larger Romanian communities in the diaspora, the third after Italy and Spain, making it a significant social community to study. Another aspect of importance and distinction for this community is that it has deep historical roots and is not composed only of modern migration – the Romanian migration to the USA has begun in the 1880s and, with the exception of the communist period, has maintained a steady outward flow from Romania to the new world.

Table 2. ***The age of Romanian immigrants in the United States of America***

Under 5 years	6.1%
5 to 17 years	14.3%
18 to 24 years	9.0%
25 to 34 years	14.2%
35 to 44 years	13.8%
45 to 54 years	12.8%
55 to 64 years	14.1%
65 to 74 years	8.5%
75 years and over	7.2%

Source: 2011-2013 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, *S0201: SELECTED POPULATION PROFILE IN THE UNITED STATES*

The fact that the immigration is not only recent, but a historic process is also validated by the age structure of Romanian immigrants – there are members of each age group, and the age pyramid is similar to that of the general United States population – 6.1% are under 5 years old, 14.3% are

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between 5 and 17 years old and 9.0% are 18 to 24 years old. The adult population is split into almost equal groups 14.2% of immigrants are between 25 and 34 years old, while 13.8% are in the 35 - 44 age group and 12.8% are between 45 – 54 years old, and 14.1% are 55 to 64 years old. The Romanian community is a youthful one, only 8.5% of them being between 65 to 74 years old and just 7.2% are 75 years and over. The explanation for the slight over-representation of the persons that are between 24 to 55 years old is the ongoing migration process – which through its selective nature is biased towards middle-age adults, while the very young and elderly are unable to either make that decision on their own or uproot their life and move so late in life.

Table 3. ***Language spoken at home and the ability to speak English – 2011 - 2013.***

	2011 - 2013	**2006 - 2010**
Population 5 years and over	431,665	440,719
English only	58.8%	61.1%
Language other than English	41.2%	38.9%
Speak English less than "very well"	14.7%	14.3%

Source: 2011-2013 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, *S0201: SELECTED POPULATION PROFILE IN THE UNITED STATES*

Communication is an important part of the way each individual expresses himself, being sometimes defined even as a cognitive bridge between the sky and the earth, between any two individuals (Vlăduțescu, 2008, p. 141), and language is an important part of how the individual expresses and relates to his identity.

According to the American Community Survey, English language proficiency is very high in our selected group – in the survey done between 2011 and 2013, only 14.7% of the 431,665 people that are 5 years or older said that they speak English less than "very well". When asked what language they usually speak at home, 58.8% declared that they speak only English, while 41.2% speak a language other than English. The statistics are not much different from the previously sampled period – 2006 – 2010, where 61.1% declared that they speak only English at home and 38.9% speak another language (in most cases, Romanian). 14.3% said they speak English less than "very well".

Table 4. ***What language do you normally speak at home?***

Response	**Percent**
English	*35.67%*
Romanian	*61.94%*
Another language	*2.39%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

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For a long time, there has been a common occurrence in immigrant families that parents can help their child more if they completely switch to their adoptive language in their household, hoping through this to improve their new language proficiency. While this might be true, it is not always a good thing – even if it does improve their language skills, it can somehow lead to a loss of their identity. In an era of multiculturalism, completely giving up on one of the most important defining factors of an immigrant's personal identity – his mother tongue – can lead to a strong loss of cultural heritage. Contact between a group of immigrants with people from other cultures, writes Stehl, causes changes in the linguistic repertoire. (Stehl, 2011, p. 34)

There are theories that say that assimilation can lead not only to the loss of cultural identity but also to a low self esteem, a poor self concept and the cultural alienation of the individual (Oliver, 2011, p. 22). 35.67% of our respondents declared that they usually speak English in their household, while 61.97% say they speak Romanian and only 2.39% speak another language. This is a positive proof that the cultural heritage is still strong in recent Romanian immigrants in the USA. An interesting concept is that of *bicultural competence* – "the ability to function successfully in both family (traditional) and school (mainstream) cultures" (McCarthy, n.d, p. 4), which can emerge as a result of immigrant children's conflict with their divergent identity.

Table 5. ***Cross tabulation. Age group * Language spoken at home.***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
18 - 25	*28.57%*	*66.07%*	*5.36%*
26 - 34	*45.45%*	*51.52%*	*3.03%*
35 - 45	*35.83%*	*63.33%*	*0.83%*
46 - 55	*30.00%*	*65.56%*	*4.44%*
56 - 64	*27.45%*	*70.59%*	*1.96%*
65+	*23.08%*	*76.92%*	*0.00%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

The relationship between the age of the respondents and the language they usually speak at home shows that Romanian is used more then English in all the groups, but its usage is significantly lower in the 26 – 34 age group and much higher in the 56+ groups. 66.1% of the respondents that are 18 to 25 years old use Romanian, while 28.6% use English at home. In the 26 – 34 age group, 45.45% use English in their household while only 51.52% use Romanian and 3.03% speak another language. In all groups of people of over 35, most respondents – over 63% - declared that they use the Romanian language with their family, the percentage rising as the respondents get older. "Immigrants to

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the United States often have to quickly adapt to a new environment, a new culture, and a new language. Frequently, the children of immigrants adapt quickly, becoming proficient in English and the new culture." (Weisskirch and Alva, 2002, p. 369)

Language proficiency is important and the worry for the learners' behavior often overlooks factors that affect them, such as how the dominant group behaves with learners of a specific linguistic and ethnic group as they try to learn the dominant language. (Perdue, 1984)

Table 6. ***Cross tabulation. Gender * Language spoken at home.***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
Male	*26.18%*	*71.64%*	*2.18%*
Female	*43.70%*	*53.67%*	*2.64%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

When cross comparing language spoken at home within different genders, we notice men are more likely to speak their home language – 71.64% speak Romanian while 26.18% use English at home and just 2.18% use another language. In the same time, just 53.67% of women use Romanian in their household, while 43.7% use English and 2.64% speak another language. We notice from this that women are more likely to adapt to the culture of their adoptive country, while men are more conservative with their culture. "Language loss has been considered by many to be part of the natural Americanization process" (Evans, 1996, p. 177), and it seems to be more prevalent in women then men.

Table 7. ***Cross tabulation. What language do you normally speak at home * How proud are you to live in the United States of America.***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
Very proud	*38.72%*	*58.30%*	*2.98%*
Quite proud	*35.62%*	*62.67%*	*1.71%*
Not very proud	*26.32%*	*71.05%*	*2.63%*
Not at all proud	*27.78%*	*66.67%*	*5.56%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

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Another variable that we analyzed in relation to the language spoken at home is the attitude of the immigrants to living in the United States of America, by asking them how proud they are to live in the USA. We noticed that people that are proud to live in the US speak English in a higher degree, even if most of them still choose to speak Romanian. 38.72% of those that said that they feel *Very proud* to live in the USA speak English at home, while 58.30% Romanian and 2.98% another language, and of those that are *Quite proud*, 35.62% speak English, 62.67% Romanian and 1.71% another language. Romanian is spoken more in the families of people that are *Not very proud* to live in America – 71.05%, while just 26.32% speak English and 2.63% another language. Still, we notice an important number of people speaking English even if they are *Not at all proud* - 27.78%, while 66.67% of the same group speak Romanian and 5.56% another language.

Table 8. ***Cross tabulation. What language do you normally speak at home * How proud are you to be Romanian or of Romanian descent.***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
Very proud	*29.31%*	*67.93%*	*2.76%*
Quite proud	*40.08%*	*57.85%*	*2.07%*
Not very proud	*48.65%*	*50.00%*	*1.35%*
Not at all proud	*28.57%*	*66.67%*	*4.76%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

When comparing language spoken at home to the attitude to Romania and their Romanian descent, we notice that there are small differences between people who are *very proud* of being Romanian and those who are *not at all proud*. If in the first group 29.31% speak English and 67.93% Romanian, in the second group 28.57% speak English and 66.67% Romanian. In the middle, we see that more of the people who are *quite proud* tend to speak English at home – 40.08%, while 57.8% speak Romanian and 2.07% another language. The group in which English is most spoken at home is, as expected, the one with immigrants that are *not very proud* of their origin – where 48.65% speak English at home, just 50% Romanian and 1.35% another language. According to some authors, as the fundamentals of national identity are language, history and culture, and in the environments of immigrants, national consciousness of belonging is stronger than among other citizens in the country. (Otovescu, 2012, p. 457)

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Table 9. ***Cross tabulation. What language do you normally speak at home * I see myself as a world citizen.***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
Strongly agree	*39.71%*	*57.43%*	*2.86%*
Agree	*32.43%*	*65.41%*	*2.16%*
Disagree	*33.85%*	*64.62%*	*1.54%*
Strongly disagree	*11.11%*	*88.89%*	*0.00%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

When crossing the results of the answer to a question asking the respondents to rate their supports on a 4 point scale to the following affirmation - *"I see myself as a world citizen"* with the language spoken at home, we notice that people that don't identify with the global community are more likely to speak Romanian in their homes. Such identifications reinforce group boundaries (Welzel, 2013, p. 201) and defy group divisions. Only 11.11% of those who *strongly disagree* with the previous statement speak English at home, while 88.89% speak Romanian, compared to those that *disagree* - 33.85% English, 64.62% Romanian and 1.54% another language. Of those who *agree* to the affirmation, 32.43% speak English, 65.41% Romanian and 2.16% another language in their household. As the identification to a global group rises, so does the assimilation of the language of the country of residence – of those that *strongly agree* to our statement, 39.71% speak English in their home, while only 57.43% speak Romanian and 2.86% another language.

Table 10. ***Cross tabulation. What language do you normally speak at home * I see myself as part of the Romanian nation.***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
Strongly agree	*29.95%*	*66.82%*	*3.23%*
Agree	*33.69%*	*63.80%*	*2.51%*
Disagree	*50.50%*	*48.51%*	*0.99%*
Strongly disagree	*52.17%*	*47.83%*	*0.00%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

Another variable we wanted to analyze is if there is an difference regarding the language spoken by the immigrants in respect to how they

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identify themselves with the Romanian nation, asking them again to rate their agreement with an affirmation: *"I see myself as part of the Romanian nation".* We found that there's a strong connection between how close an individual feels he is to his home country and the language he chooses to speak at home. If 66.82% of those that *strongly agree* to the affirmation speak Romanian at home, while 29.95% English and 3.23% another language and of those who *agree* 33.69% speak English and 63.80% use Romanian in their household, while 2.51% use another language, when we encounter respondents that don't identify themselves as part the Romanian nation the situation is very different. Of those who *disagree*, 50.50% speak English while just 48.51% use Romanian, and 0.99% another language, while those who *strongly disagree* normally use English at home even more – 52.17%, compared to Romanian – 47.83%.

Table 11. ***Cross tabulation. What language do you normally speak at home * Age at which immigration occurred***

Response	**English**	**Romanian**	**Another language**
Under 18	*48.65%*	*51.35%*	*0.00%*
18 - 25	*42.02%*	*53.19%*	*4.79%*
26 - 34	*30.81%*	*67.57%*	*1.62%*
35 - 45	*28.70%*	*71.30%*	*0.00%*
46 - 55	*22.58%*	*74.19%*	*3.23%*
56 - 64	*16.67%*	*75.00%*	*8.33%*

Source: Dan Voinea, *Questionnaire regarding the migration and identity of Romanians in the United States*, august 2nd – October 10th 2013.

We also notice a strong connection between the age at the moment of immigration and the language usually spoken at home – the older the individual was at the moment they left their home country, the more likely they are to use their mother tongue as their main language. If in the group of respondents that were under 18 when they settled in the USA only 51.4% speak Romanian at home, while 48.6% speak English, for the 18 – 25 years old the presence of Romanian rises at 53.2%, while 42% speak English and 4.8% another language. We can see a stronger difference for each higher age group - for the individuals that ware 26 – 34 at the time of migration, 67.6% use mostly Romanian in their household, while 30.81% use English and only 1.62% use another language. The usage of Romanian is also higher in the 46 – 55 year old group – 74.2% use it at home, while 3.2% used another language and 22.58% used English.

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In conclusion, we notice from both the analysis of both of our sources of data that Romanian language usage is very high in the Romanian immigrants in the United States of America, and, regardless of the variable we chose to cross tabulate with, even though we found significant differences, remained high in all groups. It is not the purpose of this article to determine the reasons behind this, but only to describe an unknown state of facts in the Romanian-American diaspora. The immigrants, although well adjusted to their new home, still consider their native country, language and identity very important.

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