LINGUISTIC IDENTITY OF ROMANIAN MIGRANTS IN BELGIUM

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Abstract:This study aims at identifying the extent to which moving to another country influences the identity of the Romanians who immigrated to Belgium in search of a better life. The migration phenomenon has been increasing constantly, the Romanians settled in Belgium representing a special category of immigrants: according to the statistics provided by Myria Federal Migration Centre in Belgium, Romania provided the largest number of immigrants in the country. The investigations conducted within the Romanian community in Belgium through the MIG Ro-Be project (Provocări socio-culturale ale fenomenului migraționist în EU. Cazul românilor din Belgia / Sociocultural challenges of the migration phenomenon in the EU. The case of Romanian immigrants in Belgium) aimed at assessing the impact of the migration phenomenon upon their linguistic and cultural identity, economic as well as religious status.

Keywords: migration, identity, globalization, Romanian migrants, Belgium

Introduction

A phenomena common to all historical periods, human migration continues its course, becoming a large-scale characteristic of the modern, post-humanistic world that provides states, societies and migrants with numerous opportunities. During the last decade, migration has turned into an ever-growing global social phenomenon (244 millions of international migrants in 2015 out of a global population of 7.3 billion (1 in every 30 people) (World Migration Report 2018)). Although initially associated with a negative connotation, migration has improved the lives of both those who decided to work abroad and their families back home, with whom they shared their earnings. Moreover, migration provided millions of people with the opportunity to live a meaningful life abroad.

The changes taking place in the contemporary Romanian society resulted in intensified migration of the work force in Western European countries, mostly due to the open borders, but also to the international changes that allowed our country to become part of major EU organizations and made it easier for Romanian citizens to access the international labour market.

Romanian migration was mostly caused by the economic factor (total liberalization of the access on the labour market in EU countries after the 1st of January 2007) and to a smaller degree by the education factor – many young people decided to continue their studies either in a European country or overseas; in the last decades the reunion of the family was another reason for migration.

The migrants' situation (their feelings and the challenges they face during their integration process) is accurately described by: *leaving their country of origin, migrants lose their social status, family, and social networks. In the receiving country, they find themselves without a history and without an image. Faced with an unknown universe of meanings, migrants*

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feel lost, alone, and with-out reference points. As much as they strive to become integrated, migrants remain strangers. Moreover, migrants face distrust and hostility. The harsh reality of exclusion differs from the idealized image of the receiving country as a place to better one's life that originally drives migrants to leave their country of origin. Disillusionment and nostalgia contribute to idealizing the country of origin, which is in turn beautified through memory. However, when the migrant returns home, the contrast between the ideal and the real reappears. To a certain extent, migrants live between idealization and disillusionment both in the receiving country and in the country of origin. Their new condition is in between, at the borderland, in transit. The process that begins when one leaves his/her own country never ends, and it generates an unfinished condition of not yet belonging "here" but no longer "there" (La Barbera, 2015).

The satisfaction of economic winning is shaded by the missing of their loved ones in Romania, even if it can offer a decent, material comfort, but not peace of mind (Banta, 2009).

Research methodology

Within the project *Sociocultural challenges of the migration phenomenon in the EU. The case of Romanian immigrants in Belgium* (project acronym MIG Ro-Be) we performed a qualitative research regarding the social and cultural challenges faced by the Romanian immigrants in Belgium. The research upon the community of Romanian immigrants in Belgium was motivated by the statistics indicating that Romania is on the first place in Belgium among the countries whose citizens immigrate into this Western European country (according to Myria, the Belgium Federal Migration Centre, in a study published in October 2018). Beginning with the year 2014, the number of Romanian immigrants has increased significantly, placing them ahead of the French, who had occupied the first place for many years. In 2017, over 18.000 Romanian immigrants were registered in Belgium, 5 times more than 2006, before Romania joined the EU.

What is the impact of migration upon the economic and cultural status and upon the linguistic and religious identity of Romanian immigrants in Belgium? Which are the defining features of Romanian immigrants with regard to their social and cultural identity? Which are the changes brought along by their new of residence in the adoptive country? These are just a few of the questions to which our research within the MIG Ro-Be project aims at providing answers.

With regard to the methodology, we applied an interview guide designed around four topics: the linguistic dimension, the spiritual dimension, the economic dimension and the quality of life. The interview contained open-ended questions, so that we could gather all the necessary information for our analysis.

The stages of the research project consisted of: the elaboration of the research tools; pre-testing the research tools; revising the constitutive questions of the guide; conducting the interviews proper; transcription of the interviews and data analysis.

In order to analyze the linguistic dimension, the following questions were used:

How well did you know French when you came to Belgium?
How did you learn the language of your host country?
Have you attended specialized courses to learn the language of your host country?
How are you coping with the official languages in Belgium?
Which difficulties do you face because of the fact that you do not know the language?
In which situations do you use Romanian and in which contexts do you use French? (e.g. in the family, at work, in the administration system, for cultural events, and others)
What other foreign languages do you speak?

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Please read carefully and translate the following phrase into Romanian:
„Quand tu trouves un diamant qui n'est à personne, il est à toi. Quand tu trouves une île qui n'est à personne, elle est à toi. Quand tu as une idée le premier, tu la fais breveter: elle est à toi. Et moi je possède les étoiles, puisque jamais personne avant moi n'a songé à les posséder". (Le Petit Prince, de Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1943)

Respondents

The respondents were selected according to the following criteria: they had to be over 18 years of age, born in Romania, they had to be Belgian residents for at least one year and own a residence card and finally they had to represent the social variables of age, gender and professional training/education.

The subject's consent was required for audio/video recording for the accuracy of the information/in order to avoid the distortion of information. For confidentiality reasons each respondent was given an identification code/index according to the three variables mentioned above:

	Age 25-35		Age 35-45		Over 50 years of age	
High-school studies (10-12 grades)	1 a	2 a	3 a	4 a	5 a	6 a
Higher education (Bachelor degree)	1 b	2b	3b	4b	5b	6b

Analysis of the linguistic data

Being an extremely dynamic and complex process, migration impacts upon the lives of millions of people worldwide, deeply influencing their national identity.

Multilingualism represents an essential component of our contemporary society, marked by rapid and continuous development. Being part of a new and complex cultural model, Europe represents a rich cultural area where open societies communicate, interact and interconnect, creating new identities while preserving and developing at the same time its own identity.The contact with multilingualism makes it possible for its citizens to acquire elements from many foreign languages, regardless of the difficulties they might have to overcome.

Due to their various jobs in Belgium, many of the Romanian respondents declared that they learned French quite well by speaking it at work, while others had to learn Flemish since they want a better job and have to know both the official languages most spoken in Belgium.

There are three official languages in Belgium: Dutch (Flemish Dutch), German and French, according to the regions where they are mainly spoken: the Flemish Region, Wallonia and the Brussels Region. The bilingual French-Dutch region is represented by the region around Brussels, while the Communities in the other regions have only one official language belonging to the respective Community.

Based on our questionnaire we identified the Romanian immigrants' needs and challenges related to their integration in the Belgian communities. Our analysis is described below.

How well did you know French when you came to Belgium?

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The linguistic competence of Romanian immigrants in Belgium differs according to the regions where they settled or work, as well as according to their age and professional training acquired both in Romania and in Belgium.

Being exposed to a multilingual environment motivated the Romanian immigrants to acquire new linguistic skills in order to be able to work in their adoptive country.

Language skills differ from one respondent to another according to their educational/professional background and age. Most Romanian immigrants speak French, some speak Dutch and few of them German.

Our analysis focuses on two languages frequently spoken in Belgium: Flemish Dutch and French. While some immigrants did not know any French at all when they first came to Belgium, others speak it fluently and a third category has acceptable language skills that allow them do deal with administrative issues whenever needed, without the help of an authorized translator. Thus, respondent 2a2 admits: *When I first came to Belgium I did not speak any French at all.* Another respondent, 3a2, provides a very short answer regarding his French language skills: *Zero. It was zero.*

Some of the answers point to average skills. Respondent 1a1, who has been living in Belgium for 13 years, states: *When I first came to Belgium, I did not know the language, except for very few words that I remembered from school, I had not bothered with languages, really.* Respondent 3a1 states: *I had pretty solid basic skills. I had learned French both in secondary school and in high-school and I'd done my best. I had pretty good basic skills, but when I started to communicate I found it very difficult to express my thoughts, I could understand a lot, but I couldn't really speak, and that got me thinking.*

Most respondents speak French fluently, as they are either university graduates in Romania or attended different schools in Belgium and they also live in Belgium: *I knew it very well* (s.n. *French*) *from college. I studied in France for a while.* (respondent 4b); *Perfectly!* (respondent 2b who went to kindergarten in Belgium, went back to Romania and then attended a university in Belgium); respondent 6b is proud of the linguistic competences acquired in Romania: *Romanian education during Ceaușescu's regime was really efficient as far as foreign languages were concerned. I studied French for just 8 years and English for 7 and I was basically able to speak the two languages fluently.*

Some of the respondents who studied French in Romanian universities also aspired towards getting a job in a francophone country: *...we were looking for a francophone country because we had both studied French and wanted our daughters to be able to adjust easily to their new schools. Unfortunately Spain and Italy were not the right options for us, because of our jobs, yet France and Belgium were on the top of our list.*

As for Flemish Dutch, it represents a real challenge for Romanian immigrants: since they settled in Flanders, it was the official language needed for every day communication, yet none of the respondents knew the language when they first came to Belgium. A substitute for the language was their ability to speak English, which helped them communicate and solve their job-related or administrative issues. However, immigrants living in Flanders want to learn the language because their subsequent development and professional life depend on it. Thus, respondent 2a2, being well aware of how important it is to know the language, states: *I really want to learn Flemish; now that I work in Flanders, I do hope I'll be able to learn it and hopefully I'll manage that in the next few years.* Respondent 1b4, who has been living in Belgium for 8 years, declares: *When I came to Belgium I did not speak any French at all, but I've managed to learn Flemish, I'd say about 60%.* The fact that Flemish is mandatory

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determined some of the Romanian immigrants to attend evening courses, especially as some were taught for free if one was employed: *Zero (s.n. Flemish); I went to school for 3 or 4 years, 4 years, I guess, every day, except for the holidays. I would go to work, come home and change and then go to school every evening, from 6 to 9:30.*

Those individuals who were included in the Belgian education system as early as primary or secondary schools (children who joined their families in Belgium) represent the exception, as they learned Flemish; however, they still find it difficult to use the language: *...I also studied Irish in school, but I don't know much.* (respondent 2a1, who attended school in Belgium starting with the 3rd grade); respondent 1a1, who also studied it in school, finds Flemish much more difficult than French: *I tried to learn Flemish, I took separate classes and attended evening courses, but I still am insecure. I can speak it a little bit, just the basics… I studied Flemish at school, as a second language, then I also tried to attend evening courses.*

A second category of respondents use none of the above-mentioned official languages; they prefer instead to communicate in English – provided that they know the language – or Romanian – in case they work in a team where there are other Romanians. There are cases when people use English because they do not particularly like French, as respondent 5b confessed: *If you don't mind, I don't speak Flemish, could we speak French? And they go: „French no!" And when they refuse to use French I ask: English maybe? And most of the times the answer is: „Yes. English no problem."* Respondent 1a2 also uses English at work: *I speak English. I used to work in a bank and in a store and I would use English to communicate. Nobody seemed to mind that I couldn't speak French of Flemish.*

The data analysis for this item leads to the conclusion that Romanian immigrants in Belgium are willing to learn the official languages provided that these languages ensure their integration into a multilingual society.

Another idea that results from the respondents' answers is the fact that their linguistic availability is quite consistent, due to the fact that many of them have good language skills and basic knowledge of other foreign languages that they either studied in school, without having the opportunity to practise them or they acquired in bilingual areas where they lived in Romania, or due to the nature of the jobs they had in various European countries: Italian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Serbian, Czech, etc.

How did you learn the language of your host country?

According to the nature of their job, Romanian immigrants in Belgium learned the official language of their new country by attending different (sometimes free) courses and by practicing their newly acquired language skills at work or interacting with other people. Since most of them had some basic knowledge of French, attending evening classes after work helped them learn the basic vocabulary for everyday communication situations. Respondent 5a did not attend any courses, yet he states: *I learned a lot from TV.* Respondent 3a1 also mentions: *First I learned from TV, I would listen a lot, read the French subtitles of movies, I also used to take notes* 3a1; respondent 3a2 adds: *At the beginning I used to learn the language by going to the shops*.

The direct interaction with the French language motivated the Romanian immigrants to acquire the necessary language skills. Respondent 2a2 says: *I did not attend courses, but I learned from my co-workers, I used to ask people who spoke French what a certain word meant, I would look words up in the dictionary or use Google translate,* while respondent 2a4 states that: *I partly studied it at school, mainly the grammar. I practised what I learned by reading or*

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because I had to write, otherwise it was the permanent contact with the French speakers that helped me.

Have you attended specialized courses to learn the language of your host country?

Most of the respondents attended either day or evening classes that took between 2-3.5 and 8 hours a day, for different periods of time, ranging from one month to 3-4 years, except for those who went to school in Belgium. Some of them gave up these classes when they considered they reached out a satisfactory level that allowed them to communicate well, and others simply gave up because they did not have the time to attend the classes or because of various events in their lives. Respondent 5b recollects: *For a whole year I studied for level 5 at Univerité Libre du Bruxelles …I learned grammar, I was pretty good... but I couldn't... well, to go through it again, I took up level 5, but then I found a job in an accountant's office and I couldn't afford to attend the morning classes besides 8 working hours a day, so that I joined an evening French class that I attended for two more years.*

Due to the fact that Flemish Dutch is quite a difficult language, basically impossible to learn just from TV or various computer programmes, evening courses represent the most effective learning method. Respondent 4a, for instance, took a few good years of evening classes to learn Flemish Dutch: *I think there were 4 full years, every day, except for holidays. I would go to work, come back home in the evening and change and then go to the evening class from 6 to 9:30.* Respondent 1b4 also recollects: *for three years I went to the evening classes twice a week. The class was around three hours long.* Respondent 2a3 also attended classes to acquire the basics of Flemish Dutch: *I went to school to learn Flemish for about two years, then I had to give up because of some personal issues.*

How are you coping with the official languages in Belgium?

Some of the respondents seemed to adjust better than others. For some, their previous knowledge of French was quite helpful during the process of adjusting to a new culture, whereas others felt discouraged, but motivated to learn French in order to be able to get a job. In this respect, respondent 1b4 confesses: *It was really hard, because when I first came here I did not know much, so my integration was really difficult. We were actually forced to learn, if I may say that. In order to look for a job, you have to learn the language, to take classes. You can't do anything if you don't speak the language.*

We noticed the Romanian immigrants' openness and willingness to learn Flemish Dutch, even if they do not speak it currently (and rather make use of their English), despite their being a little reluctant. Respondent 1a2 states: *I was thinking of taking Flemish classes, to learn the basics. For the time being, since I'm comfortable with English, I don't really intend to take up a new language.* Respondent 2a2 seems to be well aware of how important knowing this language is: *I really want to learn Flemish, especially now, that I'm working in Flanders. I really hope to do it in the next few years.*

Which difficulties do you face because of the fact that you do not know the language?

When it comes to the public administration, Romanian immigrants face various difficulties because of the fact that they do not know the language: at the town hall, at the bank, when looking for a place to stay, on the phone, when travelling, etc. Some of the respondents' confessions are quite eloquent: *for instance, if you come here without knowing the language spoken in the area, it's very difficult to find a job; if you receive a document or an invoice, you have to ask somebody for help, and thus you have to learn the language, otherwise you can't really manage.* (respondent 1b4).

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However, those who do not speak French resort to authorized translators (many Romanians actually made a living out of this), especially for administrative issues.

The greatest challenge for Romanian immigrants settled in Belgium is the fact that one must be bilingual in order to get a proper, well-paid job, appropriate for their professional background.

In which situations do you use Romanian and in which contexts do you use French? (e.g. in the family, at work, in the administration system, for cultural events, and others)

Romanian is used in all respondents' families. In other contexts, at work, with friends, they use the two official languages in Belgium and English. Respondent 1a1 states: *I use Romanian at home, with my friends, or when I go to Romania. I actually used Romanian at one of my jobs, and I also use French practically everywhere: on the street, at work, in shops, everywhere I go, at the hospital…*. Respondent 4b thinks that Romanian should not be forgotten, so he speaks it with his family: *at home, it's only Romanian, my daughters should not forget Romanian, at least the spoken language*. Respondent 2a2 adds that: *At work we speak either English or French*, yet at home he speaks only Romanian, as he has a Romanian flat-mate. Respondent 1b1 admits that Romanian is the language of the family, while at work and at the university or when socializing *everything revolves around French*. For respondent 3a1 the language spoken in the family is Romanian, while French is spoken at work and in the administration system: *I speak Romanian at home, with my friends. I home we only speak Romanian, we turn to French only when asking for information or about a word that we don't know the meaning of. Anyways, I always look up words in the dictionary, but conversation in French… not so much, really. At home it feels good to speak Romanian. It would be an extra effort to use both languages, it would make no sense. I think I have enough opportunities to practise my French, I don't need to use it at home.*

What other foreign languages do you speak? Do you ever have the opportunity to practise them here, in Belgium?

One should also take into account the fact that many of the respondents have language skills and basic knowledge of other foreign languages that they acquired either in school (yet did not have the opportunity to put into practice) or in the bilingual areas of Romania where they used to live, or due to the nature of the jobs they had in various European countries; these languages are: Italian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Serbian, Czech, etc. Respondent 4a knows *English and Spanish and a little Italian,* and still speaks Spanish, while respondent4b mentions: *French, English, some Dutch and some Spanish*, yet without opportunities to practise these languages.

Please read carefully and translate the following fragment into Romanian:

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University graduates as well as some of the high-school graduates prove good French language skills and consequently do not face special challenges at work or within their community. Some of the respondents are able to read and translate very well a short text from the interview: 211, 1b1, 3b, 4b, 5b, 3a1, 3a2, 1a1, 2a4; some others read quite well, except for some inadequacies when it comes to translating the text into Romanian: 1a2, 1b2; a few of the interviewed respondents have no knowledge of French whatsoever and consequently were not able to read the text: 1b4, 2a3, 4a, 6a.

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Conclusion

The overall finding of the study is that knowledge of the official languages of Belgium is very important for the integration process that the Romanian immigrants are involved in. Our study draw the conclusion that Romanians manage in their activities and jobs by learning the official languages in Belgium, and through this acceding to a better life and wellbeing. All the efforts concentrated to learn the languages of the adoptive country are rewarded with better salary, with the possibility to have an independent business, to send remittances in the origin country in order to help families left at home (although there are very rare situations in this sense).

Romanian immigrants in Belgium try to preserve their identity by participating to religious services as well as by keeping and cultivating Romanian traditions and customs; also, preserve their maternal language in the family, in the relation with conational people, even in the case when they work together, participate to the religious activities and ceremonies, perform different activities in the Romanian communities.

Among immigrants the feeling of national belonging is very strong, due the fact that being among strangers, in a foreign country, they are determined to learn the values, the norms, the thinking and the behaviour pattern of the foster country, that means to be aware of the difference. (Otovescu, 2012)

Affecting our daily lives in an increasingly interconnected world, the situation of the immigrants are not easy at all, and put a decisive mark on the people's lives that live such an experience. Caught between two worlds, two countries, Romanian immigrants have to face a continuous fight for the integration process, but, in the same time, they preserve their cultural, linguistic and religious identity.

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