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Complex Ethnic Identities and Language

> They would also never say that I am German, really German, because I am from Russia. Some also believe that I am Russian, although I am not Russian. I was born German. Or at least that's the way I see it. OK, I was born in Russia. I just can't help that. (27 year old Russian-German from Kazakhstan, has been living in North Hesse for over five years. Anis 1994: 89; my translation).

1. A first example

The subject of this article are "mixed" ethnic identities. First, the case of Russian Germans will be analyzed. The results can be applied to similar problems affecting Hispania and other countries.

The Russian-Germans are the descendents of German-speaking emigrants, who have migrated to Russia since 1763. At the same time, a large proportion of the German population emigrated to other large immigrant countries, such as Canada, USA, Latin America, and Australia. The Russian-Germans settled in newly acquired regions, which the Tsars had taken from their south eastern neighbors. They assimilated themselves much less to the host community than those who came to countries with a melting pot system. The Tsars, and later the Soviet Union, had a different conception of their state. They saw it as a multi-ethnic state, where each group held on tighter to its own identity. Under the Tsars and even under Stalin, one was able to remain Uzbek, Georgian, Estonian, Russian, Jewish, German etc. During the Second World War, and immediately after, the Germans were heavily persecuted. Almost all of them had to leave their original regions. Even after the war, they did not have the chance to return. Later, as a result of the Treaty of Helsinki, they received the opportunity to "return" to Germany. Millions came to Germany, especially from Kazakhstan. Those who had lived in rural areas had had partial success in preserving their language. As it was extremely problematic to talk German in the towns, because one was exposed to great hostility,

many gave up talking German. The German-Russians came to Germany with the strong conviction, that they were Germans, yet had the greatest of problems living up to this conviction.

After analyzing the ethnic identity of this German group, comments will be given on similar problems in the Americas.

1.1 An attempt do define "ethnic identity"

This article is not about individual, but about collective identity, which is endowed through belonging to a group.

Each individual is shaped considerably through his or her affiliation to certain groups, whose culture, values, behavioral norms, gestures and history he or she shares. Each person is perceived, assessed and respected as the member of a group by others in a number of ways, especially when interacting with one another. Individual behavior is also shaped through membership of this group: staff at a retirement home have an identity differing from that of school pupils at the local primary school as far as their perception by others and their self-definition is concerned; the uniform-wearing military is quite different to those wearing pin-striped suits. However, not all group identities are equally weighted. This article is concerned about an identity, transmitted via larger groups; about ethnic identity. How can one determine the complex relationship of ethnic identity and language amongst the Russian-Germans?

In order to discuss this complex issue adequately, five separate comments will be made. They can be applied generally, and are not restricted to the Russian-Germans, who serve merely as an example. Having presented these comments, the question of the relationship of ethnic identity and language will be discussed.

Comment 1: Identity is gradual, not absolute.

One's identity is more or less apparent. This graduation manifests itself through adverbs, such as: "x is *strictly* catholic; *typically* French; *deeply* rooted in the Spanish culture". In the interesting cases, the problem is not about possessing or not possessing a certain identity, but about ascertaining to what degree the individual has this identity. The individual acquires an ethnic identity gradually and owns it more or less. A young person from Mexico, brought up in the USA, can ascertain during his life that to a certain extent he has become an US-

American. When he returns to Mexico, he may experience the feeling of not belonging there anymore (or at least partially not belonging there), and that he has lost his Mexican identity to a certain degree. Consequently, the question "Are you Mexican?" that sometimes arises can be deemed inadequate or unfair, as it precludes a *yes/no* answer, thus forcing the person to make an unjustified choice.

Comment 2: Identity is not a permanent, static quality of a person, but an active, dynamic process

Identity, seen as a socially oriented form of behavior, is predominantly a dynamic phenomenon. To a great degree, it is an active process of self-assurance; it is the struggle for a self-image, analysis of oneself and the social surroundings. This leads to the further comment, that anybody, who lives in a – to him – foreign country and seriously attempts to accept the culture of this country (including the language, the most important and fundamental form of culture), also becomes a member of such a community to a certain degree. The claim is that an identity is adopted within a community, if efforts are made to accept and acquire the culture at the same time. Such efforts are experienced on the one hand individually, in order to become a member of an ethnic group. On the other hand, whole groups exert themselves, in order to secure their survival as a group and their self respect.[1]

Comment 3: Identity is not an exclusive, but an additive value

Differing identities are not in any way mutually exclusive.

a) This is evident for hierarchically organized identities linked by their hyponymy. It is thus for this reason, that one can be a Rhinelander, West German and European simultaneously. Although this is evident, it is not considered closely enough in empirical research, as questions such as "Do you see yourself as a Bavarian, German or European" show. Moreover, these questions are not precise enough, because they do not define the context the informer is supposed to be considering.

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1   An explanation of the terms which individuals advocate in order to retain their ethnic identity is attempted by Tajfel (1974). See also Giles/Bourrhis/Taylor (1977: 318ss.).

b) It is also clear for those identities which can serve as the basis for the formation of *we-groups*, which are logically independent of one another. One could imagine here for example identities such as women, linguists, doctors, catholics, war veterans, Romans, Bretons and rowers, which are perfectly compatible with one another. It is not contradictory to be woman and linguist at the same time.

c) The third comment aims at a further type of identity, that of paradigmatic relationships. Therefore, it is wrong to ask an individual with double socialization to answer the question, "Are you German or Russian?" ("…French or Spanish?"). This question often causes great unease. The reason, often unclear to the person being asked, is that the question is often asked wrongly. This leads the informer – rather than spurn the question or answer "both", – to allow himself to be forced into the wrong group and give an answer, that even he himself finds unsatisfactory. In reality, the bi-cultural individual has no alternative (even if he wanted to, it would not be possible for him to forgo his identity). On the contrary, his situation (and possibly his problem) consists of trying to unite both identities with one another, i.e. unite them consistently in one conscience. This difficult situation also shows that the bi-cultural person has a richer identity than the monocultural one.

As part of a study on the Sorb people, informants were asked to declare to what percentage they felt German and to what percentage they felt Sorb, by drawing a mark on a line which represented 100 percent. This task is misguiding, as it assumes that:

– identity is a zero-sum situation, and that
– the "normal" German has an identity of 100 percent, and thus Sorbs could not possibly have a complete German identity.

This is reminiscent of the mistrust that reigned against bilingual people, who were suspected of having no home country and were thus considered as unreliable.

However, there is one real danger. Bilingual people can in fact be diminished towards having restricted identities. Tove Skuttnab-Kangas (1984) talks of the *semi speaker*. This type is however not

situated between two full-blown cultures and languages; the semi-speaker instead participates in both, yet only partially.

Comment 4: Ethnic identity is completed through two processes:
description and ascription.

Ethnic identity is the result and synthesis of two images and perceptions which complement and influence one another. It is made up of the image forged by the individual of his own affiliation (Barth 1969: 199 calls it *description*) and from the allocation others make for him (Barth calls it *ascription*). Both can diverge and lead to differing results.

Comment 5: The awareness of individual ethnic identity is not a
fixed value and depends on the situation at hand.

In general, one only becomes aware of one's own identity, when one is confronted with individuals having other identities.

2. Pre-distinctions

A complex identity structure can be deduced for the Russian-Germans from these comments. In order to be precise, three distinctions – a to c – have to be made. They relate directly to Russian-Germans and have to be reformulated for other groups according to their characteristics.

2.1 German and Russian components

Comment 3 claims that one should not only consider the German components of identity, but also the Russian ones. The Russian-Germans have been living in Russia for over two hundred years; the majority are socialized as Russians, most of them having had a Russian school education, and they are native speakers of Russian.

Their identity can thus be analyzed along the scheme presented in table 1.

Table 1: Scheme for the analysis of the Russian-German identity

		Description	Ascription
neutral		"to see oneself as"	"to be perceived as"
active attitude		"to make sure of oneself"	"to assert oneself as"
negative attitude		("to accept oneself as")	("to reveal oneself")
prior to leaving Russia	German identity	**A**	**B**
	Russian identity	**C**	**D**
after arriving in Germany	German identity	**E**	**F**
	Russian identity	**G**	**H**

The German identity components are portrayed in fields A, B, E and F; the Russian identity components in fields C, D, G and H.

Let's assume that all biographical phases are contained in these two components. Further components will not be discussed here, although they surely play a role in other cases. Table 1 concentrates on the Russian identity component, because it is by far the most important for prototypical cases. This article retraces the co-existence of German and Russian identity, and abstracts from the co-existence of both (German and Russian) with Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz or another identities.

2.2 Ascription and description

As to the difference between *description* and *ascription*, and in order to highlight the dynamic and process-like character of both components, the active role of the individual, verbs which characterize the corresponding roles are chosen. In the field of description, "to see oneself as…" serves as a neutral term. In the field of ascription, one can use "to be perceived as…". More specific verbs characterize active efforts, which individuals have to achieve, in order to convince themselves ("to make sure of oneself") or others ("to assert") of their identity.

Ascription of identity can hurt and be very painful; this rings true, when the group to whom the person belongs has a negative image. In

this case, we speak of "accepting oneself as" *(description)* and "revealing oneself as" *(ascription)*.

Table 2: Analysis of Russian-German identity

		Description	Ascription
neutral		"to see oneself as"	"to be perceived as"
active attitude		"to make sure of oneself"	"to assert oneself as"
negative attitude		("to accept oneself as")	("to reveal oneself")
prior to leaving Russia	German identity	**A easy**	**B easy**
	Russian identity	**C unaware**	**D unaware**
after arriving in Germany	German identity	**E difficult**	**F very difficult**
	Russian identity	**G easy**	**H easy**

2.3 Biographic phases

A final distinction draws a line between the situation in the former Soviet Union and that in Germany. It separates the fields A, B, C and D from the fields E, F, G, and H. On immigrating to Germany, a new situation has come about, which almost completely reverses many previous classifications and evaluations and thus may entail a great emotional burden.

These comments were sent out in advance, in order to describe the relationship between language and ethnic identity with greater precision, or at least in order to pose questions more succinctly. It is thus possible to break down the question of Russian-German identity and the role language plays into further sub-questions.

3. Complex identities

The results can be ordered within an analysis grid, which in turn provides more sophisticated and precise descriptions of the ethnic identity of emigrants. Each of the ensuing eight fields allows a separate description, and these descriptions can, in a second step, be applied to the question of language.

Detailed empirical-based comments could be given for each of the eight boxes. Though each of these boxes deserves a much longer report, just a few key words can be offered at this point.

Box A: In the USSR, it was easy for Russian-Germans to see themselves as Germans, even if it demanded a great deal of courage to commit themselves to this, as it could be hurtfully remarked upon as being fascists. It was enough to have no or a very elementary knowledge of the language.

Box B: The soviet community accepted this also without difficulty.

Box C: Awareness in the Soviet Union of the Russian component of identity was slight, despite perfect language skills. Why was this so? Because we think and perceive in an oppositional nature – the fundamental idea of functional structuralism. It seems that the Russian-Germans are surprisingly unaware of how Russian they have become. This becomes especially apparent to those who come to the country as foreigners, and of course recognize the common Russian parts of an identity from their external perspective. But this is by no means surprising. If all inhabitants of a state were blue, and all objects in their world were blue, they would not be able to perceive their blueness. They would only be able to see they are blue, if they were to enter a green world.

Box D: The Russian parts of their identity are invisible for the surrounding Russians, too.

Boxes E-H: On emigrating to Germany, these features of identity reverse suddenly and shockingly. It is difficult for the arriving Russian-Germans to reclaim their German identity, or to enable others to do so. On the other hand, the Russian parts of identity become evident to everyone.

For linguists, the role of language and its constitutional role in each of the boxes is especially interesting. For this reason, it is necessary to construct and define a second corresponding grid, describing the role of language. As this would exceed the permitted space, just a few words can be said now.

The level of language proficiency and its components should not be the only indicator here, but also the choice of names – both forenames and surnames. Names that are seen to be typically German in

Russia are not necessarily regarded in the same way in Germany. This should also be especially interesting for speakers of Spanish. The level of command of both, languages and names, are important factors for both *ascription* and *description*.

It would be interesting to transfer this scheme to migrants in Hispanophone regions and accordingly investigate the role of language and proper names for each individual box. On the basis of general and specific observations, it is possible to establish hypotheses, which do of course require empirical verification.

Clearly, the return of *Latinos*, who sometimes speak *Spanglish,* offers a complex and highly interesting field for research. In this context, one should attempt, taking into account the theory of *culture shock* (first mentioned in Oberg 1960), to establish the regularities of the *return shock* (or *re-entry shock*) and its effects on the modification of identity.

Such research is required for all migrants, especially for Cubans in exile and so-called *Chicanos*.

I have attempted to paint a fair picture of ethnic identity. Identity is a complex issue. It can only be discussed adequately, if its complexity is taken into account. I have attempted to capture its components, thereby showing, that one can gain a better insight into the matter

– if one breaks down the general question of a person's ethnic identity into meaningful sub-questions,
– if one considers the dynamic active process of self assurance,
– if one takes into account the double perspective of each identity through description and ascription.

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