‘What is my country to me?’
Identity construction by Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries

Anastassia Zabrodskaja

Abstract
Contributing to the research on interdependence between perceived ethnolinguistic vitality and identity construction patterns, the article takes a close look at the identities of Russian-speakers living in the Baltic countries. Combining quantitative and qualitative research, the purpose is to analyse ethnic, national, linguistic and imperial identity construction by respondents with different ethnolinguistic vitality profiles. The results show that linguistic environment and official language competence are very strong determinants of perceived ethnolinguistic vitality, which, in turn, affects identity construction. It is possible to distinguish up to five vitality clusters within each Russian-speaking community in the Baltic countries. The Russian-speaking groups are quite diverse in respect to the beliefs and ideologies connected with the host and heritage countries, languages, cultures and ethnic self-categorisations.

KEYWORDS: ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS, ESTONIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA
1 Introduction

The current study falls into the field of the sociolinguistics of identity, which focuses on the ways in which people position or construct themselves and are positioned or constructed by others in sociocultural situations through the instrumentality of language and with reference to all the variables that comprise identity markers for each community in the speech of its members (Omoniyi and White, 2006:1). In the current approach of the social sciences, there has been a trend towards deconstructing the understanding of nations and ethnicities as groups by providing evidence of massive variation in linguistic and cultural practices within populations that are claimed to form nations/ethnicities (Irvine and Gal, 2000; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007).

In connection with Anderson’s (1991:6) definition of a nation as ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ – ethnicity as well may be seen as ‘constructed and contingent’, ‘social, cultural and political forms of life – material ways of being in the modern world’ (May, 2001:12). Brady and Kaplan (2000:59) summarize some of the findings of studies on ethnic identity, and then comment that for some researchers ‘ethnic identity is the result of group interactions that evolve with changing contexts’. However, not all members of one ethnic community behave the same way (see Hazen, 2000). In a particular ethnic group there are certain sub-groups.

A number of authors have provided evidence and argumentation that ethnicity is a social category rather than it defining a group (Brubaker, 2004), and thus one should not assume that inter-ethnic processes are processes between groups as actors. This argumentation is supported by evidence for mixed, blurred, fluid and hybrid types of identities displayed in the context of immigration in large urban cosmopolitan centres (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck, 2005). Work in this direction has shown that ethnicity may be a label that individuals can choose to apply to categorize themselves, or they may actively construct new collective identity categories for themselves. This might also be true for Baltic Russian-speaking communities, who construct their common identity mainly by means of the Russian language, and therefore might be called Russian-speaking communities without distinguishing their different ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, their common identity is fragmented based on ethnolinguistic vitality, which, in turn, is one of the key factors influencing group identity construction, as it is the capability of one’s own group to behave as a distinctive collective entity in intergroup settings (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor, 1977:307).

As a social-psychological phenomenon, vitality is closely connected to one’s ethnic/linguistic identity. For example, the collective identity of the members of low vitality groups may contain a sense of collective inferiority and self-pity, with
an imminent perception of cultural hopelessness. There is also evidence that medium vitality groups construct their vitality as open yet clearly distinct from out-groups. The extremely high vitality groups may have incorporated the sense of superiority into their collective identity, which in some cases is accompanied by hostility or insensitivity towards weaker out-groups.

The results of our study showed that Russian-speakers living in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania do not form single unitary categories which have uniform value systems and attitudes (Ehala and Zabrodska, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Instead, the Russian-speaking community in each Baltic country is quite diverse in respect to vitality, ideologies and patterns of identity construction. Several different subgroups (vitality clusters) can be distinguished in the quantitative data: five in Estonia¹ and four each in Latvia and Lithuania. These clusters differ from each other in a number of parameters: the low vitality clusters have a sense of low self-esteem, but some of the high vitality clusters seem to be associated with imperial identity (see Section 5.4). To enrich the analysis of the ethnolinguistic vitality profiles with instances of interactions and experiences, qualitative in-group interviews were conducted. These findings will be discussed below.

The focus of the article is on identity construction by different groups of Russian-speakers through interview discourse. Section 2 introduces the particular ethnolinguistic vitality approach and V-model used in the Baltic setting to measure the ethnolinguistic vitality of the titular groups and Russian-speaking communities. I also focus on connections and relationships between the principles of the V-model and semi-structured interview frame used for qualitative study. This theoretical background situates the study. In Section 3, the methodology of data collection for the combined quantitative and qualitative sample is addressed in more detail. In Section 4, I describe the current sociolinguistic situation of Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries. This overview of their objective ethnolinguistic vitality is relevant for an understanding of Sections 4.1–4.3, in which I introduce the vitality clusters of Russian-speakers, i.e. the results of the quantitative analysis of large-scale data-sets. The clusters are the results of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality perceptions. Focus groups in the qualitative study were formed based on them. In Section 5, I illustrate how the representatives of different vitality clusters can be portrayed with the help of positioning on the following four levels: with respect to ethnic identity, national identity, linguistic identity and imperial identity. To do so, I group similar clusters found among Russian-speakers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Section 4.4 explains principles of grouping). Qualitative data is then discussed to gain insight into the process of identity construction by different ethnolinguistic vitality profiles.
2 V-model of ethnolinguistic vitality: Theoretical background for combined research on Russian-speakers’ profiles

According to the V-model, the driving force behind language shift is power differences between dominant and minority groups. Language and identity maintenance depends on the opportunities and rewards, real or symbolic (including more positive social identity), that the two groups can provide to their members. The sum of these factors can be called the perceived strength of the group. However, for vitality, the crucial factor is not the perceived strength itself, but the perceived strength differential (PSD) between the two groups. The reason is that the weaker one’s own group appears in relation to a prominent other group, the stronger the motivation to shift one’s language and identity to the stronger group: in the case of a small differential, the benefits from shifting one’s group membership do not outweigh the emotional and social costs.

There are other factors that can either intensify or reduce the impact of PSD. Intergroup discordance (D-factor) expresses the perceived illegitimacy of intergroup power relations and the distrust of the out-group. If the subordinate group members perceive their low status as legitimate and have favourable attitudes towards the prominent out-group, they have a stronger motivation to shift their language and identity than if they perceive their status to be unjust and have negative feelings towards the dominant group. In fact, strong intergroup discordance would largely prevent language and identity shift altogether, as strong negative feelings between groups make the intergroup boundary impermeable.

However, even in the case of low D, the shift to the dominant group may not be easy if the linguistic, cultural, religious and/or racial differences between the prototypes of the two groups are large. All of these factors can be summarised as the factor of intergroup distance (R, standing for radius). The larger the intergroup distance, the more emotional energy and time is needed to successfully acculturate into the other group. In cases where the groups differ significantly racially or linguistically, a full transition to the dominant group may be impossible because of the distinctive racial features and/or accent that remain. However in the case of a small R (as between a dialect subgroup and standard speakers group), the transition to the high status group is relatively easy.

The last significant social-psychological factor affecting language and identity shift is utilitarianism (U). Utilitarianism is a broad discursive mindset that justifies pragmatic and economically beneficial courses of action. Individuals who have a utilitarian mindset are more likely to opt for language and identity shift if this change is likely to bring economic gain and success. However, utilitarian
discourse is balanced by what can be called the 'traditionalist discourse', which expresses the group members' commitment to their cultural practices and values. People who have a traditionalist mindset are less likely to shift to the language and identity of the prominent group. For example, some religious groups (such as the Amish, or the Russian Old Believers in the Baltic countries) are so traditionalist that they practically do not assimilate at all, despite their supposedly large negative PSD with the mainstream society. This value configuration supports language and identity maintenance. If utilitarian values are highly salient and traditional values not at all, the group members are more predisposed to abandon heritage traditions, as maintaining them seems costly, meaningless and/or backward.

Altogether, the interaction of PSD, D, R and U leads to a wide range of possible vitality profiles, which in turn affect identity construction. The interview plan of this study was drafted on the principles of the V-model and included the following topics: (1) self-categorisation, (2) perceived cultural distance between groups (factor R), (3) possible identity trajectory in the future, (4) appreciation of traditions vs. utilitarianism (factor U), (5) perception of ethnocultural symbolic capital (factor PSD) and (6) perception of inter-ethnic discordance (factor D). The semi-structured interviews had open-ended questions, which allowed for differentiated, individual and subjective opinions to be given, but also provided a set of responses that could be related to the quantitative data, which is introduced next.

3 Overview of informants and data collection

The theoretical V-model outlined in Section 2 was operationalised in Ehala and Zabrodskaja (2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014) in the form of a quantitative survey questionnaire: 60 statements were built on the Likert scale principle. The statements formed 10-item sets that measured the above-described variables (PSD, D, R and U) in the V-model. By calculating the mean scores for each 10-item set, it was possible to get pseudo-continuous variables which could, to a certain extent, be used in parametric statistical tests. For data analysis, a two-step cluster analysis was calculated. This made it possible to explore the data for a best solution by not imposing the number of clusters arbitrarily beforehand. (For details, see Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014.)

Samples of the quantitative surveys were composed using a stratified sampling method so as to reflect the inter-ethnic composition of the population in five different regions in each country, and were compiled by well-known professional polling companies. In Estonia, the sample consisted of 460 Russian-speakers, in
Latvia 406 Russian-speakers and in Lithuania 230 Russian-speakers. The samples were structured by five strata (see Table 1): A: areas of overwhelmingly titular mono-ethnic populations, mostly rural and smaller settlements, but also the city of Kaunas in Lithuania; B: areas of 70–90% titular population, mostly medium-sized towns, but also the city of Klaipeda in Lithuania and the Latgale rural area in Latvia; C: areas of 50–70% titular populations, which included all three capital cities: Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius; D: areas with a prominent minority population (50–80%), which included the Russian-dominant industrial towns and the Polish-dominant rural area around Vilnius (Vilniaus rajonas); and E: areas with overwhelming Russian majorities, which included industrial towns from each Baltic country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settings</th>
<th>Percentage of titulars in the area</th>
<th>Estonia</th>
<th>Latvia</th>
<th>Lithuania</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>70–90</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>50–70</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>20–50</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative research was carried out in 2008–2011 through 10 focus-group oral interviews (see Table 2). Their goal was to elicit qualitative data that would lead to a deeper understanding of the discursive choices that underlie ideologies studied by the quantitative survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of interviews with Russian-speakers</th>
<th>Groups’ general description</th>
<th>Settings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Russians from Tartu; students from Tallinn; students from Narva; young specialists from Narva</td>
<td>C, E, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Retired or older working persons with higher education; working class middle-aged people; students from Riga</td>
<td>C, A, B, D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Older or retired people with average or low educational levels; people with higher education; students from Vilnius</td>
<td>C, E, A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each group was comprised of six respondents and can be considered a combined group because it was formed on the basis of the vitality differences among the clusters obtained from the analysis of the quantitative data. This method allowed for the elicitation of differences in ideologies across clusters. Each interview lasted approximately two and a half hours. All of the respondents were interviewed in Russian in cafes or university rooms by me and/or a local Russian-speaking community representative (whom I previously instructed on how to conduct the interviews), following Gans’s (1985:304) proposal that ethnic studies should be done by both insiders and outsiders to avoid possible conflicts of interest. In extracts given in Section 5, for reasons of confidentiality, all names have been changed.

In Section 4, sociolinguistic issues regarding Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries are presented to provide a relevant context for an understanding of the current language situation.

4 Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the language situation in the Baltic attracted a large number of researchers interested in language policy, societies in transition and post-communist studies (Hogan-Brun, 2005; Kolstø, 1999; Laitin, 1996, 1998, 2003; Ozolins, 1999; Pavlenko, 2008, 2011; Romanov, 2000; Ryazanova-Clarke, 2014; Smith, 1998, to name but a few). However, language policy and minority rights issues have continued to dominate research (Pavlenko, 2011, 2013 and references therein) since the point at which a number of laws, legislative acts and strategic documents were adopted by the parliaments of the three Baltic countries (the Riigikogu in Estonia, the Saeima in Latvia and the Seimas in Lithuania) concerning the status of titular and the other languages used in the republics: their status, teaching and use within the educational system, as well as in society at large.

As for citizenship issues, Lithuania chose the ‘zero option’, according to which Lithuanian citizenship was granted to all persons who on the day on which the law came into force were legal permanent residents of Lithuania, irrespective of the basis on which their residence rested; this was in contrast to Latvia and Estonia, where anyone having no ancestors living there before June 1940 must pass an official language test and have knowledge of the respective country’s constitution (see more in Zabrodskaja, 2009). This is an important difference in language legislation that has influenced the negotiation of identities among Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries. Thus, it is possible to claim that Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries are socially in a subordinate position as speakers of a language that is not the dominant language of the country in which they reside.
Generally, Russian-speakers did not learn titular languages in Soviet times because Russian was the language of inter-ethnic communication (язык межнационального общения). Thus, Russian became the dominant language of a number of different ethnic groups in the territory of the Soviet Union (not only Russians but also Belarusians, Ukrainians, Tatars and other ‘third ethnicities’) who settled in the Baltic countries during the Soviet period (1944–1990/1991). As their common identity is constructed mainly by means of the Russian language, these groups can be called Russian-speaking communities without distinguishing their different ethnic backgrounds.

Due to socio-historical factors, Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries cannot be considered a typical minority. Besides the already mentioned complication of different ethnicities united under the umbrella of ‘Russian-speaking communities’, there are other factors that make the Baltic countries a quite challenging case, where the varying situations between titulars and Russian-speakers cannot be simply described as a classical case of majority–minority, indigenous–immigrants or indigenous–colonizers. First, Russian minorities in the classical sense existed and still exist in the Baltic countries (i.e. Old Believers). Second, it has been suggested that, as the migration of Russian-speakers was part and parcel of the demographic and language policies of the Soviet authorities, the Soviet-era newcomers and their descendants are better described as colonizers (see Ozolins, 2002). However, Pavlenko (2011:38–39) argues against the usage of the term ‘colonizers’ in relation to Russians. She states that some space for the cultivation of national languages was provided in the USSR, and Russian-speakers were no more privileged than speakers of other languages. What is clear is that Russian has not retained as powerful a position in the Baltic countries as, for example, French and English have retained in much of present-day Africa, India and other typical post-colonial settings.

Table 3. General characteristics of Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries (summary from Ehala and Zabrodskaja 2013a:52–58).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estonia</th>
<th>Latvia</th>
<th>Lithuania</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population size</td>
<td>384,000</td>
<td>676,000</td>
<td>201,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of total</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role in economy</td>
<td>Modest</td>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Insignificant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional support</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material prosperity</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>Above average</td>
<td>Below average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politically</td>
<td>Poorly organized</td>
<td>Well-organized</td>
<td>Not organized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the Baltic Russian-speaking communities (see Table 3), the largest lives in Latvia and has considerable cultural, economic and linguistic influence in the country. The second largest Russian-speaking community lives in Estonia, but both economically and politically it is much weaker than in Latvia. At the same time, it is quite compactly settled, ensuring its sustainability. The number of Russian-speakers in Lithuania is lower, they are more dispersed across the country and they are considerably weaker than the Estonian Russian-speakers.

Previous large-scale quantitative studies used the V-model of ethnolinguistic vitality (Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014) as the basis for specifying the patterns of acculturation for Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries based on their ethnolinguistic vitality profile. The results have shown that, in general, in Estonia, the segregation of the Russian community is likely to continue. Latvian Russians have the highest vitality amongst the Russian-speaking communities in Baltic countries, which may lead to demands for higher status and more rights. For the Russian-speaking community of Lithuania, assimilation seems to be a satisfactory solution for both Russians and representatives of the titular nation.

Next, Sections 4.1–4.3 describe the vitality profiles of the clusters found in the Baltic countries among Russian-speakers in terms of the V-model of ethnolinguistic vitality, also highlighting the general background characteristics of the clusters’ representatives. These data constitute the framework and provide the context (explained in Section 4.4) within which ethnic, national, linguistic and imperial identity constructions by Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries were studied.

### 4.1 Four clusters of Russian-speakers in Lithuania

As Table 4 shows (for more, see Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2013c:57–59), among Lithuanian Russian-speakers four vitality clusters emerged; these ranged from the Pessimist Utilitarianists group, consisting of 29.2% of the respondents, to the Threatened Traditionalists group (16.7% of the respondents).

Pessimist Utilitarianists are characterised by a utilitarian attitude, accompanied by strong perception of weakness and out-group favouritism. Lithuanian is used excessively. This cluster has the lowest vitality index. Many public sector employees with higher education and students belong to this cluster.

Cultural Traditionalists are characterised by the strongest out-group favouritism and traditionalism. Russian is used less than Lithuanian in this cluster, but they see the Russian community as relatively less weak than do other clusters. Thus, cultural heritage is valued, but this does not lead to language maintenance.
This cluster has the second lowest vitality index. This cluster is dominated by males with low educational levels and high unemployment. Many students also fall into this cluster.

Practising Russian-speakers is the group which uses Russian the most amongst the Lithuanian Russian clusters. They are traditionalists and show out-group favouritism. This cluster is dominated by retired people with low educational levels.

Threatened Traditionalists have the highest vitality amongst the clusters. These people are very traditionalist and have a strong perception of Russian-speakers’ weakness compared to Lithuanians. It is the cluster which does not show out-group favouritism. This group is dominated by females, and higher education is common. The cluster includes people whose incomes are above average and people with very low incomes.

To conclude, two subgroups of Russian-speakers in Lithuania showed out-group favouritism and also progressive language shift from Russian to Lithuanian, although one subgroup (the Cultural Traditionalists cluster) valued Russian culture. One cluster, Practising Russian-speakers, maintained the Russian language and did not feel any discordance towards the titular group. What makes the four Lithuanian clusters unique is a lack of discordance towards the out-group.

4.2 Five clusters of Russian-speakers in Estonia

In Estonia, five clusters can be distinguished within the Estonian Russian-speaking community (for more, see Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2013c:52–55): (1) Medium Low Vitality, (2) Stable, but Low Self-Esteem, (3) Stable and Integrated, (4) Stable and Traditional and (5) Vital and Discordant (see Table 4).

The Medium Low Vitality cluster was characterized by a high perceived ethnic weakness of Russian-speakers compared to Estonian-speakers. The members of this cluster did not perceive any discordance in relations with Estonian-speakers; in fact, they even indicated a slight favouritism toward the out-group, i.e. a tendency to see Estonian-speakers in a very positive light. This cluster is dominated by males, and people over 40 years old, they have Estonian citizenship and higher education, work as private sector employees with above average incomes and live in Estonian-dominant towns or in the countryside.

The Stable Vitality Low Self-Esteem cluster had a considerably higher vitality value than the Medium Low Vitality group. This cluster’s vitality value indicates that the subgroup in general is maintaining their heritage. What makes this cluster special is that they have a clearly traditional value system and a fairly large
intergroup distance from Estonian-speakers. The representatives of this cluster are predominantly stateless, and over 60 years old or retired people; also they have higher education, slightly below average incomes and live in eastern Estonia.

The Stable Vitality Traditional cluster is characterized by the most traditional value system amongst the subgroups. This is accompanied by a distinct feeling of discordance towards Estonians and the largest intergroup distance from Estonians. This cluster is dominated by those who are in their forties–sixties, have Russian citizenship, have below average incomes and live in eastern Estonia.

The Stable Vitality Integrated cluster has a middle vitality value, indicating that the subgroup is stable in respect to vitality. This cluster has an even more traditional value system than the previous one, and a similarly neutral attitude towards Estonians, but it differs from other clusters in its small intergroup distance from Estonians. All of these factors indicate that this group is well integrated into Estonian society, but has positive self-esteem and is maintaining its cultural and linguistic heritage. This cluster includes people who are under 40 years old, have Estonian citizenship, are public sector employees or students, have average incomes and live in Estonian-dominant towns or in the countryside.

The Discordant cluster is distinct from the rest of the groups in several respects. First, members consider Estonians and Russian-speakers to be almost equal in esteem. Second, they have the highest perceived interethnic discordance and a high intergroup distance from Estonians. Their value system is well balanced between utilitarianism and traditionalism. The people in this group are under 40 years old and stateless, have significantly below average incomes and live in eastern Estonia.

To summarise, the results show that, in general, Russian-speakers in Estonia are quite vital, as three of the subgroups (the Stable Vitality Low Self-Esteem cluster, the Stable Vitality Traditional cluster and the Stable Vitality Integrated cluster) have a clear preference for heritage language maintenance. There are two extreme subgroups as well. One is the Medium Low Vitality cluster, which shows a tendency towards social mobility and linguistic and identity shift. Another is the smallest group in the sample – the Discordant cluster – which clearly distances itself from the out-group.

4.3 Four clusters of Russian-speakers in Latvia
Table 4 shows (for more, see Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2013c:55–57) that among Latvian Russian-speakers four vitality clusters emerged, ranging from the Trusting Utilitarianists group (38% of the respondents) to the Discordant Traditionalists group (7% of the respondents).
Trusting Utilitarianists are characterised by a notably utilitarian attitude accompanied by slight out-group favouritism and frequent usage of Latvian. Their vitality is the lowest amongst the clusters. The cluster members are predominantly male, students or unemployed.

Humble Traditionalists are characterised by very traditional attitudes accompanied by a distinct perception of the weakness of Russian-speakers in Latvia and very low discordance towards Latvians. This cluster is dominated by females with higher education; also many pensioners belong to this cluster.

Discordant Utilitarianists are characterised by a distinct feeling of discordance, accompanied by a slightly utilitarian attitude, strong perception of the weakness of Russian-speakers as compared to Latvians and low usage of the Latvian language. Many public sector employees belong to this cluster, as do people whose incomes are considerably below average.

Discordant Traditionalists have the highest feeling of discordance, accompanied by distinct traditionalism; usage of Latvian is low, and they perceive a relative equality of strength between Latvians and Russian-speakers. Many people with vocational secondary education belong to this group, as do people whose incomes are considerably below average.

In conclusion, the Latvian Russian-speakers have the highest vitality amongst the three communities, and there are no low vitality clusters, which means that language and identity are maintained well. Furthermore, the Latvian Russian-speakers have the highest level of discordance towards the mainstream, with two clusters making up almost one-third of the community.

4.4 A comparative look at the clusters of Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries

The general perceptual linkage between the clusters of Russian-speakers is given in Table 4, in which, together with the cluster name, their representativeness in the general sample in each country and vitality values are provided. For better understanding of the clusters, first we need to reorganize them based on vitality value from lowest to highest in the case of each country (according to the V-model, vitality value may range from -2.5 to 3.5; for more, see Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). We will start with Lithuania, although it has the smallest number of Russians-speakers.
Table 4. A comparative picture of the clusters among Baltic Russian-speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lithuanian Russian-speakers</th>
<th>Estonian Russian-speakers</th>
<th>Latvian Russian-speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discordant</td>
<td>Discordant</td>
<td>Discordant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilitarian</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discordant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable Traditional</td>
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<td></td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable Integrated</td>
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<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threatened Traditional</td>
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<td>16.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practising Russian-speakers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>28.8%</td>
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<td>Cultural Traditional</td>
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<td>22.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pessimist Utilitarianians</td>
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We begin reading Table 4 from the bottom left corner, where the Lithuanian clusters with the lowest vitality values are given. Then we follow a diagonal path and notice that the clusters in Estonia have similar low vitality values. When we look at the clusters of Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia, we notice strikingly parallel patterns among Stable Traditional and Stable Integrated groups in the former and Humble Traditionalists and Trusting Utilitarianists in the latter. If we shift our gaze to the upper right corner, we notice three discordant groups of Russian-speakers: one in Estonia and two in Latvia. The Latvian data provide the expected similar results to the Estonian clusters. A higher level of discordance is felt by Russian-speakers with low incomes: Discordant Utilitarianists and Discordant Traditionalists. These two subgroups of people use Latvian rarely. Thus, their situation is similar to the Discordant cluster found among Estonian Russian-speakers, except that the discordance level is higher in Latvian clusters.

In general, Russian-speakers in Latvia are noticeably more discordant than in Estonia. This result of subjective vitality perception is important as a link with information on their objective vitality (see Section 4), which showed that Russian-speakers in Latvia are considerably stronger in their cultural, economic and linguistic influence than Russian-speakers in the two neighbouring Baltic countries.

Lithuanian Russian-speakers have the lowest vitality amongst Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries, which is clearly reflected in the relatively extensive language and identity shift towards the Lithuanian mainstream. Even though the vitality of Russian-speakers in Estonia is higher, there is also one cluster which is characterised by language and identity shift. In Latvia, the Russian language and identity are better maintained, and the lowest vitality clusters integrate with the mainstream rather than assimilate into it.

5 Identity construction patterns among Russian-speakers

The negotiation of identities is defined by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004:20–21) as ‘an interplay between reflective positioning, i.e. self-representation, and interactive positioning, whereby others attempt to position or reposition particular individuals or groups’. Section 5 exemplifies how the identities of the representatives belonging to different vitality clusters outlined above have emerged and developed. This section will not fully report on each type of cluster found among Baltic Russian-speakers; rather, it will draw on overlapping identity themes to demonstrate how ethnic, national, linguistic and imperial identities are constructed by members of the different clusters.
5.1 Ethnic self-categorisation in identity construction

Edwards (1985) proposed a division of ethnic identity into objective, which encompasses linguistic, racial, geographical, historical, religious and ancestral characteristics (close to Fishman’s [1977] definition that ethnicity comes ‘with the blood’, where kinship is the basis of the felt bond with one’s own kind), and subjective, in which one can claim the ethnic identity one feels is closer to him/her on the affective level, irrespective of any religious, linguistic, racial or historical factors. Later Dorian (2010:89) argued that ‘ethnicity can feel very primal, but it rests fundamentally on social rather than on biological underpinnings – and socially constructed categories are subject to change’. In the following, it is shown how ethnicity is interpreted by typical representatives of the clusters.

The following extract is taken from an interview with a representative of the Estonian Medium Low Vitality cluster. Here she talks about the changes in her cultural behaviour due to the new identity and new ethnic status: Estonian Russian, a type of localized Russian identity:

*I am a Russian who lives in Estonia, and Estonian culture is very close to my heart; for example, we celebrate all of the Estonian holidays and we do not celebrate Christmas on 7 January but only on 24 December.*

The informant actually mentions the Lutheran and Orthodox Christmas, linking them with two local groups – Estonians and Russians – in compliance with celebration traditions (here I would mention that official holidays fall only during the Lutheran Christmas period and a lot of debate still arises in local media over whether the Orthodox Christmas period, which usually starts after the end of the school winter holidays, should be declared an official holiday).

Guardado and Becker (2013:57) discuss comparable cases when writing about ‘locally cultivated ethnic identity’, referring to Kouritzin’s (1999) study of language loss in Canada, where a participant positions Hungarian culture in Hungary as ‘theirs’ and Hungarian culture in Canada as ‘ours’. They add that similarly King and Gauza (2005:186) observe that in Sweden an informant described his ethnic identity as Chilean, ‘but from Stockholm’.

The discourse might be doing more than clearly following the ‘we–they’ division. Both local and mainland communities might be the groups with which one associates oneself. Such complexity is recognized not only by those clusters that tend to assimilate or successfully integrate into the majority but by those that do not manifest favouritism towards the local titulars. One Lithuanian Threatened Traditionalist gives an example in the following quote:
A [basketball] team came from Russia and played a team from Lithuania, and then a boy I know told me: ‘Ours play against ours’. In other words, he considered ‘ours’ both Lithuanians and Russians and did not know whom to support.

Estonian Russian-speaking informants belonging to the three in-between clusters somehow balance between two sides, unable to categorise themselves as ethnic Russians, Estonian Russians or Estonians. The following quote comes from a member of the Estonian Stable Vitality Integrated cluster:

Strangely enough, at times I feel I am a lost person [pause] and it turns out that I do not count myself in with them [Russians – A.Z.]. I do not count myself in with the representatives of the Estonian nation. I am located somewhere in the middle, and so I'm a type of lost person.

The next example comes from the Estonian Stable Vitality Traditional cluster, and again inner conflict is evident:

I am like a Russian. I feel like a Russian who lives in the Estonian republic. I cannot refer to myself as either part of Russian culture or of Estonian. I am stuck in the middle.

The next two extracts were elicited during interviews with Russian-speakers in Latvia and Lithuania. Despite the difference in country, it’s clear that the Latvian quote draws attention to the existence of the category Latvian Russian.

The Latvian Trusting Utilitarianists also have an awareness of a multi-layered identity because of being absorbed into the local mainstream but still attempting to preserve their heritage and cultural roots:

I feel I am a resident of Latvia with Russian as my main culture.

Interestingly, the Lithuanian example shows how the type of cluster that is close to the Estonian Medium Low Vitality in the sense of feeling out-group favouritism and aspiration for assimilation, as well as being close to the Latvian Trusting Utilitarianist in preserving cultural roots, describes ethnic identity based on knowledge of the local languages. The Lithuanian Cultural Traditionalist states that he is Lithuanian because of his multilingual background:

Simply I am Lithuanian, just Lithuanian. I simply know languages: I can communicate, and come to an agreement [pause]; like that.

To summarise, the ethnic identity constructed by the clusters’ representatives aiming to assimilate into the mainstream is a type of new emerging local identity that is a hybrid of Russian roots and accommodation to titular cultural patterns. It
might be useful for future research to determine how the identity trajectory of ‘lost’ Russian-speakers found among Estonian Russian clusters is formed: Do they prefer to blur ethnic boundaries or to maintain them rigidly? This might largely depend on the official constructed discourse and language policy (Russian-medium secondary schools that have been switched to Estonian, the language of instruction at the basic level in non-Estonian schools etc.).

5.2 National identity construction

The following representative of the Estonian Medium Low Vitality cluster not only has Estonian citizenship but clearly considers Estonia to be the motherland:

For me, Estonia is my homeland. Here I was born and here I live and above all she, Estonia, is associated with this: this is my homeland.

Among the members of this cluster, there are Russian-speaking students who have acquired Estonian, are studying in universities to become teachers of Estonian as a second language and see their agency as an opportunity to improve the situation of their ancestry group via teaching Estonian:

For me, Estonia is my motherland, my home; this is my home that brought me up and I want to give something of myself, to help Estonia as a teacher, as a pedagogue, and do something, do my part, so that life will become better and easier, and people will feel good here.

Discourses of discordant nationalism were constructed by the Discordant cluster among Russian-speakers in Estonia and Discordant Utilitarianists and Discordant Traditionalists among Russian-speakers in Latvia. The following quote shows the opinion of a Latvian Discordant Traditionalist, who talks about the social costs of being non-Latvian and not having a Latvian national passport:

There exists the notion ‘Latvian’. It means that you can work for the police, for customs, and everywhere in national structures; you always will be taken first. Latvians always have higher priority than Russians.

This example clearly reflects the discordant feelings caused by the change of status from being the dominant majority in one big country to that of the minority in contemporary Latvian/Estonian sociolinguistic conditions. In Estonia, there were similar examples with only one difference in titular ethnicity named: ‘there exists the occupation Estonian’. These attitudes are accompanied by poor titular language knowledge and the resulting limited career opportunities (see Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2014:182–183 for similar cases).
5.3 Linguistic identity construction

McEntee-Atalianis (2011:152) states: “identity” is not something we “have”..., but something we “do” and (co-)construct in social action and should therefore be analysed through an examination of “language in use” and textual analysis. Language is one of the aspects which can be used to determine a group’s identity. Language can be transferred and adopted, switched and shifted; language may even disappear because of powerful new rulers and cultures.

Among respondents who expressed language attitudes characteristic of the members of the Estonian Medium Low Vitality cluster, there was a belief that mainland Russians tried to distance themselves from diaspora Russians because of the language that the latter use:

> When I was in Russia, Russian people said me that I was not Russian because I had another accent; therefore, I also cannot completely relate myself to Russians.

This quote from a recent arrival from the Russian Federation also exemplifies the ‘they–we’ discourse I discussed in Section 5.1.

The maintenance of the Russian language and culture among the youngest generations of Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries is not assured at present. Ties to linguistic heritage are weak among the Medium Low Vitality and the Stable Vitality Integrated cluster of Russian-speakers in Estonia, the Trusting Utilitarianists and Humble Traditionalists in Latvia, and the Pessimist Utilitarianists and Cultural Traditionalists in Lithuania. In Lithuania, where the assimilation of Russian-speakers into the Lithuanian language environment is especially noticeable, ties to linguistic heritage are maintained by the Practising Russian-speakers and Threatened Traditionalists.

Although Lithuanian Threatened Traditionalists maintained ties to linguistic and cultural heritage, they were often unable to transmit it to the next generations, as revealed in this discourse among the cluster’s older representatives:

> My grandchildren now go to Lithuanian schools, and already I cannot understand my grandchildren. I say something in Russian and they [respond – A.Z.]: ‘You, močiutė [Lithuanian ‘močiutė’ = English ‘grandmother’, she code switched between Russian and Lithuanian – A.Z.], speak the way you should [speak Lithuanian – A.Z.]’.

Thus, there is no continuation across generations of the same linguistic patterns. Younger Russian-speakers who represent the Estonian Medium Low Vitality and Latvian Trusting Utilitarianists clusters see the heritage language as useless, both educationally and economically. In other words, it has no capital in the ‘linguistic markets’ of Estonia and Latvia. A female student belonging to the Latvian Trusting Utilitarianists cluster gives an example:
By name you can’t always understand who someone is, for example in our course. By name it seems that the course is Russian but among the students not so many spoke Russian and some were not even able to speak Russian.

It is easy to ascertain a link between language and education in the examples from these quite utilitarian young Russian-speakers, who tend to assimilate into the titular language and sometimes are hardly able to read Russian and do not tend to consider it their mother tongue:


She and her co-students see the heritage language – Russian – as a language for in-group oral communication only. Notably the informant herself stressed that she spoke in Latvian with her fellow Russians.

To conclude, an intergenerational shift has been observed in Estonia and Latvia: younger generations of Russian-speakers are shifting to the titular language as a route to education, jobs and successful careers. This shift in linguistic behaviour might also be the result of the influence of (pre-)schools’ language of instruction. In Lithuania, a language shift has long been in progress in the Russian-speaking community.

### 5.4 Imperial identity construction

Answers during the interview given by a Latvian Discordant Traditionalist indicated that heritage roots are highly valued:

*I am proud that I am Russian. Anyway, this is a great nation, good culture and traditions. Why should I be ashamed of it?*

Furthermore, he tried to generalize and, according to his view, the concepts of pride in one’s heritage nation and the heritage country’s well-being are interdependent:

*I think that Russians, as now Russia is recovering, are proud of their nation, of belonging to this nation.*

The imperial identity view is exemplified by the disagreement with official rhetoric:

*The Soviet time was not as bad as is now commonly assumed. There was a lot that was valuable and good but there was bad as well. I think that sometimes many feel nostalgia for Soviet times. That they were confident then in tomorrow, that there was work, and there was medicine.*
This is combined with a kind of nostalgia on the part of the interviewee, as later the interviewee expressed a sudden wistful yearning for the Soviet period when everything was better:

*I associate Latvia as it was in past times* [pause]. *The culture was always good in Latvia, production was at a high level, and certain brands were famous - recognized in the whole former Union - such as balsam, Dzintars [perfumery and cosmetics manufacturing company - A.Z.], and Jūrmala [a resort town, the Baltic’s version of the French Riviera - A.Z.].* As the saying goes, it was the gateway to Europe.

To sum up, the construction of an imperial identity is common for clusters showing discordance towards titulars. Language and citizenship policy are the first among a number of the factors that have influenced the imperial identity’s sustainability during the past decades, because adult citizenship was granted in Estonia and Latvia based on the principle of *ius sanguinis*. Russian-speakers faced the necessity of passing titular language exams after 1991. As this was a challenge to their comfortable linguistic behaviour and they were forced to change, the question of citizenship started to foster traditional ethnic borders and led to discordance, as well as creating a space for an imperial identity construction that made it possible to avoid self-pity because of the sense of collective inferiority.

### 6 Discussion and conclusions

This article has contributed to the field of group identity construction in a changed sociolinguistic situation by providing a detailed account of the striking heterogeneity of Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries. A range of ethnic, national, linguistic and imperial identities was revealed during the interviews, and these identities have been analysed with the help of the clusters that were defined through large-scale quantitative studies of the ethnolinguistic vitality of Russian-speaking communities. This enabled us to observe the dominant ideologies that are reflected in minority discourses in all three countries.

The results show that language seems to be the only unifying characteristic, although soon this last connection between different clusters might drastically disappear because the younger generations of Russian-speakers tend to assimilate into the titular languages. Their ideologies are similar to what Sallabank (2006) describes when talking about the island of Guernsey, whose sociolinguistic and cultural situation demonstrates that the indigenous language, Guernsey French, is used among older people, while younger people do not view it as being very important because of their desire to leave the island, which does not provide many opportunities for career, education and professional development.
This combined quantitative–qualitative comparative study clearly demonstrates that, on the one hand, there are clear subgroups with good titular language knowledge, who have good education and broader career opportunities, and who tend to assimilate linguistically, while sometimes valuing and maintaining their cultural roots. On the other hand, there are subgroups whose titular language skills do not allow them to receive higher education and because of this their career opportunities are quite limited. Such people spend their lives in a circle of deepening segregation as failure only sharpens discordant feelings toward the titulars. This, in turn, creates a fertile field for indifference and lack of interest in learning the titular language. In addition, in Estonia and Latvia there are predominantly Russian-speaking areas where such people may live out their lives without any contact with an Estonian-language environment. Such territorial segregation has worsened the situation, especially in light of the already mentioned official Latvian and Estonian policies on citizenship. Deprivation and segregation fuel imperial identities in an effort to raise status.

Figure 1. Negotiation of Russian-speakers’ identities in the Baltic countries.
These processes are shown schematically in Figure 1. I believe that they are to some extent true as, in Lithuania, where citizenship was granted to all Lithuanian legal permanent residents, there are no groups exemplifying discordance towards the titulars (although not all speak fluent Lithuanian): Lithuanian Russian-speakers show out-group favouritism to a greater or lesser extent. In addition, imperial discourse construction is absent.

Pavlenko and Blackledge’s (2004:18) observation that ‘identity becomes interesting when it is contested or in crisis’ suggests that it would be instructive to explore further the discursive construction of collective identities within the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic countries. The clusters and their discourses show that there are several emerging identities being constructed, all of them aiming to provide a particular set of values, symbols, narratives and collective emotions that enable Russian-speakers to structure their everyday experiences and provide an explanation for their position in between the titular (Western) and Russian-national identities, which at present are constructed as existential Others. As a continuation of this study, it would be particularly relevant to observe whether the recent imperial ambitions of the Russian Federation, as well as the events in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, will lead to a clearer fragmentation within the Russian-speaking clusters into subgroups with imperial, ethnic or symbolic ethnic, linguistic and national identities.

Notes

1. Lauristin et al. (2011) also showed that the picture of a strict division of the Estonian society along ethnolinguistic borders is a gross oversimplification.
2. The full semi-structured protocol for a focus group interview may be retrieved from http://kodu.ut.ee/~ehalam/Appendices.pdf.

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References


