

THE PORTRAIT OF THE ROMANIAN L2 USER AS A YOUNG [ROMANIAN!] MAN

Nicoleta NEȘU¹ 

Article history: Received 23 January 2025; Revised 18 March 2025; Accepted 7 April 2025;
Available online 10 June 2025; Available print 30 June 2025.

©2025 Studia UBB Philologia. Published by Babeș-Bolyai University.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

ABSTRACT. *The Portrait of the Romanian L2 User as a Young (Romanian!) Man.* The present study represents an attempt to sketch the portrait of a speaker of Romanian as a foreign language - a speaker, however, not at all ordinary, who does not fit into the categories already attested in the literature and who contains, in itself, a linguistic paradox: it refers to a less common, but increasingly numerous, category of young emigrant students of Romanian origin, native speakers of Romanian as an ethnic/heritage language, who have completed their entire pre-university school system in another country and in a language other than Romania/Romanian, and whom we meet as students enrolled in the specialization "Romanian language and literature" at universities abroad, therefore, by default, as a foreign language. Their profile is quite heterogeneous, even within the group, which makes it extremely interesting and challenging for who teaches. The process of creating a schematic, typical portrait of such a learner/speaker requires a necessarily interdisciplinary approach (linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics), and its completion in terms of teaching strategies and methodology is still an open chapter, still being drafted and constantly updated. I should mention that all the data and information on which

¹ **Nicoleta NEȘU**, PhD, Faculty of Letters, Department of Romanian Language and General Linguistics, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. PhD in Philology (2004), MA in European Studies (1995). Exchange lecturer by cultural agreement at Sapienza University of Rome, Italy, professor of Romanian as a foreign language at ICR Bucharest-Accademia di Romania in Rome, visiting professor at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Vatican between 2009-2013. Author of numerous studies and articles published in national and international journals, coordinator of the volumes *Romania culturale oggi* (Roma, Bagatto libri Ed. 2008) and *Il Romanzo romeno contemporaneo* (Roma, Bagatto libri Ed. 2010) as part of the Romanian Cultural Institute's programme *Publishing Romania*. Author of the monography *Textul politic - limite si deschideri semiotice* (Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Casa Cărții de Știință, 2005) and a co-author to *Grammatica d'uso della lingua romena* (Milano, Hoepli ed., 2014). Main fields of interest: philosophy of language, semiotics, linguistics, pragmatics and communication, traductology, Romanian as a foreign language, foreign language teaching. Email: nicoleta.nesu@uniroma1.it

our analysis will be based are drawn from the experience of teaching Romanian abroad, within the Romanian language lectureship at the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy, and from our own research on this subject carried out in recent years.

Keywords: *mother tongue, heritage language, migration, acquisition, learning, foreign language, teaching*

REZUMAT. *Portretul vorbitorului de RL2 ca tânăr român (în străinătate).*

Studiul de față reprezintă o încercare de creionare a portretului unui vorbitor de limbă română în varianta ei de limbă străină – un vorbitor, însă, deloc obișnuit, care nu intră în categoriile deja atestate în literatura de specialitate și care conține, în sine, un paradox lingvistic: este vorba despre o categorie de studenți mai puțin obișnuită, dar tot mai numeroasă, de tineri emigrați, de origine română, vorbitori nativi de limba română ca limbă etnică/moștenită, care au parcurs întregul sistem școlar pre-universitar într-o altă țară și într-o altă limbă decât România/limba română și pe care îi întâlnim ca studenți înscriși la specializarea „limba și literatura română” la universități din străinătate, deci, implicit, ca limbă străină. Profilul lor este un profil aparte, destul de eterogen chiar și în cadrul grupului, de aceea extrem de interesant și de provocator pentru cel de la catedră. Procesul de creionare a unui portret schematic, tip, al unui astfel de student/vorbitor presupune o abordare obligatoriu interdisciplinară (lingvistică, sociolingvistică, psiholingvistică), iar completarea lui, din punctul de vedere al strategiilor și al metodologiei didactice rămâne, încă, un capitol deschis, în curs de redactare și de actualizare continuă. Menționez că toate datele și informațiile pe care se va baza analiza noastră sunt extrase din experiența personală de predare a limbii române în străinătate, în cadrul lectoratului de limba română de la Universitatea Sapienza din Roma, Italia și din cercetările proprii pe acest subiect întreprinse în ultimii ani.

Cuvinte-cheie: *limbă maternă, heritage language, migrație, achiziție, învățare, limbă străină, predare*

Motto: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.” James Joyce,
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Premise

The aim of the present study is to synthesize and consolidate the data and analyses carried out in recent years, disseminated in a series of conferences and studies published in specialized journals. Throughout the text, references to these sources will be made, and particular sections will be included in the following pages (the most recent Neșu 2024, 177-193; Neșu 2023a, 477-491;

Neşu 2023b, 209-227; Neşu 2023c, 411-427; Neşu 2023d, 249-267; Neşu 2022a, 211-221; Neşu 2022b, 218-228; Neşu 2021, 91-99, Neşu 2020a, 11-19; Neşu 2020b, 243-253). We are thus nearing the conclusion of a comprehensive research initiative that has spanned several years and has focused on a less conventional didactic context for teaching Romanian as a foreign language in a university set outside Romania. As demonstrated in our previous articles, the distinctiveness of this project arises primarily from the structure and characteristics of the student body under examination, which consists of Romanian-origin students from families that have emigrated from Romania. These students pursue philological studies abroad, where Romanian is obviously approached from the outside, as a foreign language. As we have done at the outset of all our previous studies and research, we wish to provide some necessary clarifications: first and foremost, the foundation of this project is rooted in our personal experiences acquired during our tenure as a Romanian lecturer at Sapienza University in Rome. We do not aim to generalize or to speak on behalf of colleagues with whom, for objective reasons, we shared, up to a certain point, a similar teaching experience in a common geographical and cultural space, but with whom, despite similar administrative elements and the presence of students of Romanian origin, we happened to have different perceptions and/or propose different solutions. Second, it is essential to highlight the importance of an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to this phenomenon, particularly as we navigate the intersection of various fields, including the philosophy of language, sociology and sociolinguistics of migration, linguistics and psycholinguistics, and so on. And, thirdly, but perhaps most importantly, it is essential to highlight that the observations and conclusions we have drawn thus far are only partial and should not be regarded as a comprehensive and specialized investigation into the psychological, sociological, or sociolinguistic phenomena as such. Both the social phenomenon of migration and the sociolinguistic aspects of ethnic, inherited, or heritage languages were not treated as standalone subjects in this research. Rather, they served as a carefully curated and enhanced backdrop aimed at addressing a didactic challenge: to comprehend and delineate the underlying phenomena while continuously seeking suitable strategies, solutions, and methodologies tailored to the unique teaching circumstances that arise in this context.

Theoretical background and historical reality

Our research is grounded in two essential theoretical dimensions: on the one hand, the social phenomenon of migration and, on the other hand, the linguistic phenomenon of a slow and gradual dissolution of the Romanian

mother tongue into an ethnic, heritage language. Both levels were correlated with various issues related to the structural and perceptual transformations that accompany the significant shift in the centre-periphery dynamic resulting from migration. From a sociological standpoint, the context underlying the situation we have analysed reveals that migration and the migratory process are interrelated, closely linked to the concepts of habitation and otherness. From a philosophical perspective, the human experience of inhabiting a space, along with the identification and ownership of that space, is intrinsically connected to the experience of inhabiting language. However, it is not always the case that individuals find themselves in the optimal scenario of existing simultaneously in a physical space and a language whose geographical and temporal dimensions align harmoniously. This idyllic scenario, as we have referred to it in previous studies, involves residing within the borders of a state while also engaging with a historical language that rightfully belongs to that state and serves as the mother tongue of its inhabitants. The real situation of our analysis group is, on the contrary, far from representing such a happy overlap—specifically, in our case, the coordinates of living in the space do not coincide (anymore), do not overlap (anymore), neither geographically nor temporally, with those of linguistic living; they have changed as a result of the migratory act, and, consequently, the individual who finds himself in such a situation is forced to change his perspective. Humboldt considered that transitioning from the sphere of one's native language to that of a foreign language, through a process of education, introduces a transformative perspective. The individual is compelled to align with the norms and historical traditions of the new language, which involves generating new content that reflects its character. Simultaneously, there is an endeavour to preserve the individual's skills in the mother tongue, which slowly recedes from its dominant position and becomes increasingly marginal over time. Consequently, it is evident that, in addition to political, socio-economic, or demographic factors, the migration process significantly influences the socio-cultural aspects of individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Central to this influence is the linguistic factor, which is widely recognized for its crucial role in shaping an individual's identity and their affiliation with a specific linguistic community, thereby affecting how they are perceived by others. The sociolinguistics of migration, an increasingly prominent interdisciplinary field that has gained traction in recent years and that focuses on the dynamics of language contact and the interplay between language and migration, elucidates the very transformations and repercussions stemming from such interactions. From a linguistic perspective, shifts in the centre-periphery relationship and the outcomes of language and cultural interactions can manifest in various ways: the emergence of new

linguistic phenomena, instances of linguistic interference, the establishment of partial or complete bilingualism, the acquisition of a new language alongside the potential loss of the mother tongue, instances of linguistic abandonment, and so on. In the fortunate scenarios where the mother tongue is neither intentionally forsaken nor inadvertently lost, it may still experience a range of changes, primarily due to its diminished central status and the rise of a peripheral language within the new sociolinguistic environment. This “new” reality goes by different names in specialized literature—ethnic language, heritage language, family language, minority language, community language, and so on—multiple definitions that all acknowledge, among other aspects, the hybrid nature of a “variant” of the mother tongue and, at times, a variant of the L2 language, which is part of the bilingualism framework. Additionally, these languages share common characteristics, such as diatopic variety, influenced by geographical factors, and diastratic variety, shaped by socio-cultural strata. The significant role of family-type idiolects, which encompass the unique verbal traits of individuals or groups, is also recognized. We have also endeavoured to provide a definition through various studies referenced at the outset of this work, drawing from our own experiences. We aim to highlight some of its most significant characteristics as revealed in our analyses, and we present a description below, as articulated in a study conducted in 2020²: an ethnic language³ or heritage language (the term that is most often preferred in the

² For more details regarding this aspect, please see Neșu 2020a, 11 – 19.

³ The phrase “ethnic language” was introduced in Italian literature by Paolo Balboni in the late 1980s, specifically in a 1989 study, and it primarily pertains to the language utilized by the Italian immigrant community in the United States and Canada, highlighting the necessity for distinct materials and methodologies compared to those employed in teaching Italian as a foreign language in these nations. The ethnic language is defined as “the language spoken in the community of origin of a person who has not acquired it as a mother tongue but who nonetheless hears it spoken in the family and community environments. For example, the children of Italian immigrants often grow up as Italian speakers, yet they hear these languages spoken at home, by friends of the family or on radio or TV programmes” (Balboni 2015, 118; Balboni 2018, 14). From the outset of our research, we have linked the term “ethnic language” to the notion of ethnopragmatics as defined by A. Duranti. He describes it as “uno studio della comunicazione che, integrando metodi etnografici con metodi d’analisi del discorso, documenta i diversi modi in cui il linguaggio fa differenza tra le persone e rende possibile un particolare tipo di socialità, che caratterizza l’essere nel mondo dell’homo sapiens/a study of communication that, by integrating ethnographic methods with discourse analysis techniques, captures the various ways in which language serves to differentiate individuals and facilitates a particular form of social interaction that defines existence within the realm of homo sapiens” (Duranti 2007, 13, our translation). Duranti further clarifies that the prefix “ethno” in “ethnopragmatics” indicates an “impegno *etno*-logico verso le attività comunicative prese in esame, cioè un interesse per il rapporto tra azioni particolari e la loro collocazione all’interno dell’agire sociale di particolari gruppi (...) che implica la documentazione di specifiche pratiche culturali, come

context of English-language literature) is essentially a mother tongue that, for various objective reasons, becomes increasingly confined to a limited social environment, typically within the family. Its usage is predominantly informal, leading to a loss of its institutional significance. Consequently, it no longer serves as the medium for academic or professional pursuits, nor does it function as a language for broader social or institutional interactions. The vocabulary of a heritage language is often minimal, sometimes incorporating regional or dialectal features, and its grammatical structure—encompassing phonetics, syntax, and morphology—may not adhere strictly to normative standards. Furthermore, it frequently lacks the cultural, historical, and social contexts that are essential for a comprehensive understanding. Referring to Krashen's theory (Krashen 1981), it can be stated that this language remains in the initial phase of *acquisition*, which is characterized by an intuitive and unintentional process, failing to advance to the second phase, that of *learning*, that would include grammatical rules and cultural understanding, akin to the experiences of foreign language learners⁴. In addition to all these characteristics, it is clear that there are, as we have mentioned above, additional influences, some of which may be considered “negative,” that arise from interaction with the official language of the country of adoption—in this instance, Italian, a language that is particularly similar in form, which further enhances its impact. This can be observed through phenomena such as code-switching, the use of expressions from one language in another, alterations in intonation and accent, phoneme distortions, both deliberate and accidental mispronunciations, borrowings, linguistic adjustments at the phonetic, morphological, or syntactic levels, and so on.

The phenomenon of Romanian migration to Italy represents a significant socio-historical reality that warrants our attention. In recent years, this migration has resulted in a notable increase in the number of Romanian students enrolling and diligently attending courses in the “Romanian language and literature” specialization at the Faculty of Letters of Sapienza University. This program, which focuses on philological and humanistic studies, offers, as we have mentioned above, Romanian as a foreign language. According to the annual statistical data from the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and the

al esempio lo scambio dei saluti, la narrazione di esperienze vissute, la richiesta di un favore, l'offerta di cibo, e l'interpretazione che di tali pratiche danno i partecipanti in particolari situazioni/ethno-logical commitment to understanding the communicative activities under scrutiny, that is an interest in the connection between specific actions and their contextual placement within the social dynamics of particular groups (...) which further necessitates the documentation of distinct cultural practices, such as greeting exchanges, sharing personal narratives, requesting assistance, offering food, and the interpretations that participants assign to these practices in various contexts” (Duranti 2007, 14, our translation).

⁴ For more details, please see Neșu 2022a, 212-213.

Dossier Statistico dell'Immigrazione (IDOS), the Romanian community has been the largest immigrant group in Italy since the 2015-2016 academic year, with official figures indicating 1,168,552 residents, followed by 1,145,718 in 2019, 1,083,771 in 2021, and 1,073,196 as of January 1, 2024. Despite a slight decline in the number of Romanian citizens officially residing in Italy, this community remains the largest among foreign populations, significantly outnumbering those from Albania (416,829), Morocco (415,088), China (307,038), and Ukraine (249,613).⁵ As of January 1, 2024, Italy recorded a total of 5,307,598 foreign nationals living within its borders, placing it fourth in Europe, following Germany, Spain, and France.⁶ The Romanian community's demographic structure has seen only minor alterations over the years. As of the end of 2016, a pivotal year, as we have mentioned above, in which the Romanian community emerged as the predominant immigrant group in Italy, the official count of Romanian residents stood at 1,168,552. This number constituted 23.2% of the total foreign population in Italy, indicating that Romanians accounted for roughly one-third (33.8%) of all Romanians who have emigrated globally, with a 1.5% increase noted in 2016. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of individuals returning to Romania or migrating to other EU and non-EU countries. The foremost reason for immigration is providing for the family and family unity, followed only in second place by the pursuit of business opportunities. Romanians are spread throughout the peninsula, particularly in major urban centres in the central and northern regions, such as Rome, Turin, Milan, Bologna, Florence, and Venice, with 20% residing in Lazio and 15% in the "Province of Rome". The average age of immigrants is 34 years, and the community is predominantly family-based, typically consisting of at least two members. Women make up a significant portion, with 57.4% of Romanian immigrants being female. Mixed marriages are quite common, with 2,727 registrations, the majority of which involve Italian men and Romanian women. Regarding educational qualifications, most individuals possess secondary education, while a smaller percentage have completed high school; university and postgraduate education are less common. Consequently, labour market statistics for 2016 indicate that Romanians account for 20.4% of foreign workers with employment contracts, achieving an employment rate of 63% within the Romanian community. The primary sectors of employment for males include construction, transport, and agriculture, while females predominantly work in family services (such as caregiving and domestic work), hospitality, and

⁵ The data has been gathered after examining the materials available in the Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2024, released by the Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS in Rome, along with information accessed from the official ISTAT website, consulted at <https://demo.istat.it/app/?i=RCS&l=it>.

⁶ Idem.

retail. Of these workers, 96.6% are on fixed-term contracts, with only 3.4% holding indefinite contracts. Additionally, 2016 also saw a rise in self-employment among Romanian citizens in Italy, with 51,366 individuals managing private enterprises. The distribution of these activities shows that 61.9% are in construction, 12.5% in trade, and 5% in services. Unfortunately, during the analysed period, the Romanian community continues to be particularly vulnerable to undeclared work and illegal exploitation (Neșu 2020b, 243-253). The data available for the 2021-2022 period indicate that there have been no substantial changes: the Romanian community continues to be the largest foreign demographic, constituting 20.8% of the overall foreign population, with a total of 1,076,412 individuals, a decline from 1,145,718 in 2020. It is noteworthy that the number of Romanians acquiring Italian citizenship has been increasing annually; in 2020, for instance, 11,449 Romanians obtained citizenship, with women making up 57.9% of this figure. Furthermore, research reveals that more than 10,000 Romanian children are registered as born in Italy each year, in addition to those born to mixed couples; in 2019, for example, there were 16,335 newborns with at least one Romanian parent. According to Italian legislation, children from mixed couples (where one parent is Italian) are granted Italian citizenship at birth, while those born to two Romanian parents may only request Italian citizenship upon turning 18. The enrolment of Romanian children in Italian schools is also steadily increasing, with 156,715 students representing 17.9% of all foreign students in the 2019-2020 school year (Ricci 2022, 40-67).

Sociolinguistic integration, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and a portrait sketch

Migration should not be regarded as simply a biological event; it is, in fact, an existential political act that involves a complicated exchange of living spaces, a process that is deeply intertwined with the idea of hospitality and is often associated with trauma, loss, dislocation, and suffering. For this reason, it necessitates an ongoing process of identity renegotiation, both at the individual level and within the broader community⁷. The integration of immigrants into a new society is not limited to linguistic adaptation, which is an important initial phase aimed at dismantling language barriers. Instead, it fundamentally involves sociolinguistic integration, which requires an understanding of the sociolinguistic and communicative models, of pragmatic use, of the society in which one seeks to integrate, rather than just a comprehension of the language

⁷ We refer here to the extensive studies on this issue by Di Cesare, 2017 and Volkan, 2019.

at a theoretical level.⁸ As previously mentioned in the studies referenced at the outset, the successful integration of immigrants encompasses at least two essential components from a linguistic and cultural perspective. The first is basic *linguistic integration*, which involves overcoming language barriers and developing proficiency in the adopted language. The second is *sociolinguistic integration*, which necessitates an additional understanding of the communicative or pragmatic norms specific to the community in which the immigrant resides. It is evident that language serves as a significant marker of identity in the migration process, fundamentally shaping the identity of the migrant through the linguistic aspects of their experience. Specifically, this entails a “savoir-faire” in verbal interactions, which is crucial for establishing genuine communicative competence⁹. It is precisely from these needs that the English version of the

⁸ We would like to highlight here the relevant commentary by Florin Olariu, who notes that “în context migraționist eforturile de contextualizare influențează în mod profund procesele psihocognitive prin intermediul cărora fiecare individ își construiește și își definește propria structură identitară. Imigrantul, ca urmare a procesului de modificare a reperelor socioculturale în care este antrenat, ajunge în situația de a problematiza cu o și mai mare acuitate semnificația comportamentelor cotidiene pe care le observă – atât cele proprii, cât și ale membrilor societății gazdă sau chiar ale membrilor societății de origine (acestea din urmă fiind mult mai vizibile acum, în condițiile alterității date). El va trebui acum să-și reconfigureze noile grile de lectură a cotidianului care să-i permită să se plaseze cât mai bine în cadrul raporturilor comunitare de zi cu zi. Altfel spus, el va trebui să ia decizii în legătură cu propriile practici lingvistice (ce limbă, cu cine și în ce condiții poate să o vorbească?), sociale (cu cine să stabilească și să întrețină relații: cu persoane de aceeași origine ca și el? cu membri ai comunității gazdă?), cu atitudinile sau reprezentările sale – aceste decizii fiind de primă importanță pentru propria sa identitate socială” / “within the context of migration, the efforts of contextualization significantly impact the psychocognitive processes through which individuals construct and define their identity frameworks. Immigrants, as they navigate changes in the sociocultural landmarks surrounding them, find themselves compelled to critically reassess the meaning of their daily behaviours—both their own and those exhibited by members of the host society, as well as those from their society of origin (which become more pronounced in the face of otherness). Consequently, they must reconfigure their interpretative frameworks of daily life to better position themselves within the dynamics of community interactions. This necessitates making informed choices regarding their linguistic practices (which language to use, with whom, and under what circumstances?), social connections (whether to engage with individuals of similar backgrounds or to integrate with the host community?), and their attitudes or perceptions—decisions that are crucial for the formation of their social identity” (Olariu 2017, 147 our translation).

⁹ “Construcția interactivă a identității presupune din partea actorilor sociali apropierea unui ansamblu de norme și principii discursive conforme universului etno- și sociocultural în care aceștia își duc existența cotidiană.” / “The interactive construction of identity requires social actors to adopt a set of norms and discursive principles consistent with the ethno- and socio-cultural universe in which they navigate their daily lives” (Olariu 2017, 146 our translation). It is important to note that the same researcher has also introduced a novel method and emphasized its crucial significance in the study of migratory phenomena. This method, referred to as “migraphy,” was first presented in the aforementioned 2017 volume and has

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, was born in 2001, a document that delineates and defines various levels of language proficiency, grounded in specific competencies, serving as benchmarks for both the learning and instruction of foreign languages. This document emphasizes the necessity for individuals to have access to resources that enable them to enhance their language skills. Such skills are essential for fulfilling personal needs, including conducting daily activities in a foreign country, exchanging information and ideas with speakers of different languages, and gaining a deeper understanding of the customs and mindsets of diverse cultures. It is evident that this document challenges traditional methods and strategies of foreign language instruction, which have primarily focused on grammatical and lexical elements, often neglecting the communicative and interactive dimensions of a pragmatic nature. The framework also suggests the need for a change in methodological design, emphasizing that the act of learning, respectively teaching, must be oriented according to the needs, motivations, characteristics, and possibilities of those who study, must formulate valid and realistic objectives, must develop methods and materials appropriate to the needs and situations, and must eventually create and develop adequate methods for evaluating study programs.

On the other hand, it is equally important to outline a profile of the individual studying a foreign language, a profile that should encompass not only physiological and psychological attributes but also, as much as possible, a range of contextual, motivational, temporal, intentional, and subjective factors. In numerous studies, P. Balboni¹⁰ managed to bring together most of the theories and their results in terms of drawing such a “robot/pattern” portrait of individuals who aspire to learn a foreign language. In the following sections, we will endeavour to briefly outline this portrait, highlighting both its commonalities and unique characteristics. We may begin with a metaphor proposed by Balboni, who likens the human individual to a learning machine, where the brain functions as the hardware and the mind as the software. This is complemented by an exploration of the physiological mechanisms underlying the human brain’s learning processes, alongside a description of the human mind through Chomsky’s concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD),

since been further explored in subsequent research (Olariu & Olariu 2024, 121-140; Olariu 2024, 23-47). In the view of the author, migraphy, or migratory biography, functions as a research tool comparable to life history. This approach is predominantly centred on a compilation of linguistic biographies that are developed by individuals and then recorded and analysed by researchers, specifically within the context of migration, thereby distinguishing its particular focus.

¹⁰ We refer here only to P. Balboni, *Imparare le lingue straniere*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2008; P. Balboni, *Fare educazione linguistica. Insegnare italiano, lingue straniere e lingue classiche*, UTET, Torino, 2013; P. Balboni, *Le sfide di Babele. Insegnare le lingue nelle società complesse*, UTET, Torino, 2015.

which is a physiological feature shared by all humans. The first distinction arises when considering the various types of intelligence and learning styles, which are regarded as personal rather than universal. Here, we encounter several types of intelligences, referred to as multiple intelligences, that contribute to individual intelligence, each present in varying combinations and proportions across different individuals. These intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, kinaesthetic or procedural, as well as intra- and interpersonal intelligences, with later additions of naturalistic and philosophical-existential intelligence¹¹. It is crucial, as emphasized by Balboni, to avoid conflating these types of intelligence with the classifications of learning styles, including analytical versus globalizing, creative versus executor, and tolerant versus intolerant of ambiguity, or with personality traits such as introvert versus extrovert, cooperative versus competitive, and optimistic versus pessimistic. Furthermore, Balboni introduces the emotional or affective filter, which he describes as a psychodidactic metaphor that relates to a distinct organic reality that underpins the memorization process. This notion of “affective filter” first appeared in Krashen’s SLAT theory (Second Language Acquisition Theory)¹², as one of the three principles that indicate how “acquisition” occurs as distinct from “learning”: comprehensible input, natural order (interlanguage) and affective filter (in which an important role is played, again, by physiology, the balance between physiological chemical processes, adrenaline/noradrenaline which facilitates the memorization process). Additional elements that set apart the profiles of learners of foreign languages include variables such as age, which influence the distinct teaching and learning approaches suitable for children, adolescents, adults, and seniors. In relation to age, the social role of the learner and their motivation are also significant factors. Within Balboni’s perspective, motivation is likened to the energy that facilitates the interaction and movement between hardware and software, the

¹¹ Balboni resumes here Howard Gardner’s theory on multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983; Gardner 2006) emphasizing that, in Garner’s opinion, linguistic intelligence would account for the social and relational use of language, while formal and grammatical aspects would be managed by logical-mathematical intelligence.

¹² It is widely recognized that Professor Stephen Krashen, building upon Chomsky’s LAD theory, developed his own framework known as the Second Language Acquisition Theory (SLAT) in 1981. This theory fundamentally distinguishes between *acquisition* and *learning*, echoing Chomsky’s dichotomy of *knowing* versus *cognizing* (Krashen 1981). Subsequently, this theory became linked to J. Bruner’s Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) theory. Bruner, in opposition to the LAD theory and influenced by the ideas of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle, as well as Vygotsky, proposed a social-interactionist approach to language development, highlighting the critical role of social interaction in this process. Researchers have noted that children learn to speak primarily to communicate with others, a process that occurs within the context of parent-child interactions, which aligns with Krashen’s notion of “comprehensible input.”

essential elements of the learning process, and is seen as a vital subjective factor in this dynamic. Balboni discusses two key models for examining motivation: the ego dynamic model, proposed by Renzo Titone in the 1970s, which centres on the learner's ego and personal motivations that may contribute to larger life or career goals, and a motivational model inspired by marketing theories, which divides human motivations into three categories: duty, need, and pleasure. According to the Italian researcher, duty serves as the paramount "motivation" within the traditional educational framework. However, this motivation does not facilitate the retention of information over the long term, as emotional filters impede the transfer of knowledge into short- and medium-term memory. The necessity for learning is primarily associated with the left hemisphere of the brain, which governs reasoning and awareness. While this "motivation" is effective, it is constrained by the individual's recognition of this need and the subjective nature of evaluating its fulfilment. In contrast, pleasure, which is linked to the right hemisphere but can also engage the left hemisphere under certain conditions, emerges when those assisting the learning process, educators or parents, successfully stimulate interest and enjoyment in the learning process (this pleasure encompasses various aspects, such as the joy of discovery, the excitement of acquiring new knowledge, the appreciation for variety and diversity, the thrill of the unexpected, the satisfaction derived from overcoming challenges, the fulfilment of both needs and duties, including professional satisfaction, and so on).¹³

The profile of the Romanian L2 user as a young Romanian (abroad) – a portrait sketch

It is obvious that the profile of the student under investigation is influenced by the aforementioned series of general, common, characteristics. Nevertheless, its distinctiveness and uniqueness arise, as previously indicated in our study, from the fact that this individual is a speaker (primarily a native one) of Romanian who enrolls to learn this language as a foreign language, which carries various implications due to this atypical circumstance. The Romanian language, fundamentally a mother tongue, transitions into an ethnic or heritage language (LE/HL) and subsequently evolves into a variant of a foreign language (L2). We refer to it as a "subspecies" because, from a linguistic perspective, it does not constitute an "authentic" foreign language; rather, as discussed throughout this article, this classification applies only at specific levels, particularly concerning metalinguistic, normative, and, in many instances,

¹³ Especially Balboni 2015, 67 – 87.

cultural dimensions. We have previously provided a general overview of this student group on several occasions, and we will reiterate it here, citing a study conducted in 2023 (Neșu 2023c, 411-427). Therefore, the working group consists of students of Romanian descent, who were born in Romania and have both parents who speak Romanian as their first language. These individuals are children of immigrant families who relocated to Italy around the year 2000, arriving at a relatively young age, with more than 90% having done so during their preschool years. Consequently, their entire education has been undertaken in Italian. For these individuals, the Romanian language serves as their “home” language; however, it is frequently supplanted, even within familial settings, by Italian or a blend of both languages. The characteristics of the group pertinent to our analysis, derived from questionnaires administered at the conclusion of each academic year, are as follows: they have infrequent interactions with standard Romanian, primarily within a familial context rather than an institutional one. Romanian is not utilized as the medium of instruction in their education, nor is it the language for social or institutional interactions. Communication among themselves occurs predominantly in Italian, with Romanian being used rarely. They do not engage with Romanian newspapers or magazines, nor do they watch Romanian radio or television channels; they aren’t up to date and use Romanian social media in small numbers (Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok etc.) Consequently, they are disconnected from the political, social, and cultural developments in Romania, lacking awareness of even widely publicized issues. Their knowledge of Romanian history, geography, culture, and art is minimal, and they are unfamiliar with notable figures from both traditional and contemporary Romanian culture, including social media *influencers* popular among young Romanians. While they exhibit an interest in Romanian history and geography, this is often accompanied by an idealized perception of Romanian realities. Their friendships are primarily with other Romanian-origin youth, with whom they communicate in Italian, although they are also well integrated into Italian society. Their culinary preferences are mainly Romanian, largely influenced by their parents. Participation in the League of Romanian Students Abroad (LSRS) is minimal, with only one individual out of twenty-four involved in 2020, and they are not active in the Romanian community in Italy. However, they do participate more frequently in the Orthodox Church in Italy and some cultural events organized by it. Their attendance at the Romanian language, culture, and civilization course (LCCR), offered free of charge in Italian schools by the Romanian Ministry of Education, has been limited and sporadic (with only two individuals participating). There is a moderate interest in exploring educational prospects in Romania, yet there is no inclination to return to Romania after finishing their

studies. Regarding how they perceive themselves from the point of view of ethnic affiliation, we consider the evolution over the years to be interesting (Neșu 2024, 182-183): in response to the inquiry regarding the (ethnic) identity individuals identify with (with the available options being *Romanian*, *Italian*, or *other*), there has been a gradual emergence of a European identity since 2015. Initially, only two individuals selected this European option that was not included in the provided choices. By 2022, however, this response had gained significant traction, achieving an absolute majority that mirrored the percentage of respondents identifying as Romanian in 2015. The data compiled and formalized in the accompanying table reflects this trend, standardizing the number of student respondents while maintaining the original proportions:

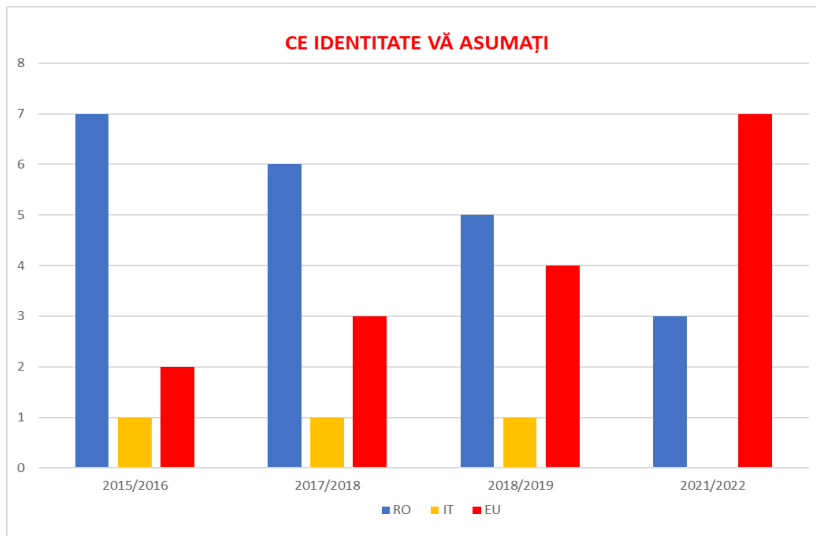


Figure 1. Students auto perception of ethnic identity

As can be easily observed, the *Italian* voice completely disappears in the 2021/2022 questionnaire and we would like to emphasize that this absence does not pertain to their citizenship from a political or administrative perspective, even if this remains a determining factor, but rather to their self-perception as belonging to a nation/nationality. As we showed throughout the studies cited above, the reasons behind this outcome are highly intricate and reveal a range of equally complex issues. It is obvious that their status as immigrants, particularly as second-generation individuals who have lived (and in some cases were born) in Italy and completed their education there, yet are not recognized as Italian citizens for various reasons that are beyond the scope of

this discussion, complicates matters. These individuals operate administratively under Romanian citizenship but no longer identify with that nationality for reasons that are both identifiable and understandable. Consequently, they “resort” to the solution of adopting a middle, intermediary, and neutral identity—namely, a European identity. Whether this identity genuinely exists and under what circumstances remains to be seen in the future. For the time being, in the context of these students, it serves as a mechanism for the ongoing renegotiation of their identity, a process ingrained in the experience of migration. It is important to note that it isn’t an inherent trait at all; rather, it is a constructed phenomenon¹⁴.

An additional element of the profile of this category of RLS students that we wish to highlight in this discussion pertains to the coordinates of the imaginary, a topic we explored in depth in a separate study published in 2023 (Neșu 2023d, 249-267) and from which we will extract some ideas. Following the completion of questionnaires and the analysis of letters addressed to a personified Romania on its National Day (December 1st) in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022, we sought to delineate certain dimensions of the collective imaginary of these students. This process, aimed at shaping the identity imaginary that these students construct regarding their homeland, consists of two key components: the first involves a requirement from the questionnaire that asks participants to associate a noun, an adjective, and a verb with Romania, while the second component comprises, as mentioned above, free, anonymous compositions in the form of open letters addressed to Romania, on the occasion of its National Day. The findings from the initial phase reveal the following associations: the noun category includes HOME (7 occurrences), LONGING [DOR] (5 occurrences), FAMILY (5 occurrences), CHILDHOOD (4 occurrences), GRANDPARENTS (4 occurrences), FOREST (3 occurrences), HOLIDAYS (1 occurrence), and VACATION (1 occurrence). The adjectives identified are BEAUTIFUL (10 occurrences), SLOW (5 occurrences), WILD (4 occurrences), BALKAN (3 occurrences), DEAR (3 occurrences), DELAYED (2 occurrences), FAR AWAY (1 occurrence), CHEERFUL (1 occurrence), and TOXIC (1 occurrence). The verbs listed are TO FIGHT (7 occurrences), TO RETURN (6 occurrences), TO DREAM (6 occurrences), TO HEAL (4 occurrences), TO CHANGE (3 occurrences), TO DEVELOP (2 occurrences), TO RECOVER (1 occurrence), and TO MOVE FORWARD (1 occurrence). It is noteworthy that the selection of these terms serves primarily to foreshadow the detailed descriptions found within the compositions. Indeed, some of these terms were utilized in the formulation of the principal conceptual metaphors, which we regard as fundamental to the construction of this imagery. We have identified four such metaphors:

¹⁴ For more details on this aspect, see Neșu 2023b, 209 – 227.

ROMANIA IS TRADITION (AND/OR CUSTOMS), ROMANIA IS HOME/FAMILY/GRANDPARENTS, ROMANIA IS VACATION/MEMORIES, and ROMANIA IS IDEAL/IDEALIZED. The conclusions drawn in the referenced study remain valid today and are further substantiated by two additional sets of materials (questionnaires and letters to Romania) from 2023 and 2024, which are yet to be analysed. The perspective of the imagery that arises from these textual fragments is strikingly contradictory to the assertions made by the same students in earlier questionnaires regarding their home language, their understanding of Romanian culture, their general perceptions of Romania, particularly in relation to the increasingly European identity they embrace, which seems to overshadow their national identity, and so on¹⁵. By removing the context, one might interpret these fragments as patriotic microtexts infused with a distinctly romantic ethos, characterized by a profound sense of national pride, occasionally bordering on nationalism. The idea of country/homeland/mother, which serves as the backbone of romanticism and patriotism, intersects with an identity perception that starkly contrasts, as we have mentioned, with the realities of daily life. This contradiction is evident in their apparent lack of awareness and interest in the current circumstances of Romania. From this perspective, it would be particularly enlightening to examine and compare the reactions of Romanian students living in Italy with those of their peers residing in Romania. The fundamental aspect that would underpin such a comparison—the explanatory, critical, and defining factor that emerges prominently—is emigration, and scholars who investigate this phenomenon from sociological and psychological angles are likely to provide valuable insights¹⁶. This greatly supports our efforts in identifying teaching strategies that are pertinent to the advancement of cultural competence.

Instead of a conclusion

The conclusion of this endeavour to articulate the current situation and to synthesize various research findings on this subject is centred on the recognition of several pressing needs. First of all, it is essential to acknowledge, at multiple levels, the existence of this “problem” and to recognize, where

¹⁵ Regarding the questionnaire item about the engagement with Romanian literature prior to university studies and outside the academic syllabus, the results indicated that all respondents reported no prior reading, except for one student in 2019 who referenced poems by Eminescu and tales by I. Creangă. In response to the inquiry about well-known personalities in Romanian culture, the answers predominantly included Dracula, Ceaușescu, Nadia Comăneci, Simona Halep, and David Popovici (particularly in the most recent surveys), with Eminescu being mentioned infrequently, akin to the responses from foreign students who are absolute beginners in this field.

¹⁶ We referenced and commented some of them in the previously mentioned study.

applicable, this category of RLS students as a distinct group, characterized by a unique profile, specific structure, and tailored objectives. Consequently, there arises a necessity for a dedicated pathway designed specifically for them. Secondly, there is a critical need to further investigate this issue from a range of theoretical and practical perspectives that can enhance the educational process. It is imperative to emphasize the requirement for an inter and/or transdisciplinary approach in this context. Thirdly, closely related to the previous observation, it is important to develop specialized textbooks that cater to the specific needs of this student demographic, taking into account their linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic attributes. Finally, it is crucial to identify effective teaching solutions that extend beyond the existing methods we have developed over the years and which we have termed “in the mirror”. This was investigated in previous studies (Neșu 2020b, Neșu 2021, Neșu 2023c, etc.), taking into account the fact that, in reality, these students must also be adequately prepared for the eventuality of becoming potential teachers of the Romanian language, a highly plausible outcome for students from the Faculties of Letters, philological, and humanistic fields, in Romania as well as abroad.

WORKS CITED

- Balboni, Paolo. 2008. *Imparare le lingue straniere*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Balboni, Paolo. 2013. *Fare educazione linguistica. Insegnare italiano, lingue straniere e lingue classiche*. Torino: UTET.
- Balboni, Paolo. 2015. *Le sfide di Babele. Insegnare le lingue nelle società complesse*. Torino: UTET.
- Balboni, Paolo, 2018. *A Theoretical Framework for Language Education and Teaching*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Di Cesare, Donatella. 2017. *Stranieri residenti. Una filosofia della migrazione*. Torino: Bolati Boringheri.
- Duranti, Alessandro. 2007. *Etnopragmatica. La forza nel parlare*. Roma: Carocci.
- Gardner, Howard. 1983. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gardner, Howard. 2006. *Five Minds for the Future*. Brighton: Harvard Business School Press.
- Krashen, Stephen. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2020a. „Aspecte ale predării limbii române ca limbă străină și limbă etnică în străinătate”. In *Predarea, receptarea și evaluarea limbii române ca limbă străină. Actualitate și perspectivă*, edited by I. Jieanu, L. Neteșu, P. Nanu, 11 – 19. Turku: University of Turku Press.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2020b. „Mutații în comportamentul lingvistic al emigranților. Raportul limbă maternă/limbă etnică (Studiu de caz: aspecte ale limbii române vorbite în comunitatea românească din Italia)”. *SCL*, no.2: 243-253.

- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2021. „Note de predare a limbii române ca limbă maternă/etnică în străinătate”. In *Limba și literatura română – perspective didactice*, edited by Fl. Sâmihăian, M. Spătaru-Prălea, 91 – 99. Bucharest: Editura Universității.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2022a. „Variație lingvistică și identitate culturală”. In *Identitate și ideologie. Limba și literatura română în paradigma culturală europeană*, edited by O. Ichim, 211 – 221. Iași: Institutul European.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2022b. „Metafore prin care (și) predăm – Metaphors We Teach By”. In *Predarea, receptarea și evaluarea limbii române ca limbă străină. Dinamică și varietate*, edited by L. Ispas, 218-228. Bucharest: Pro-Universitaria.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2023a. „Despre heritage language în contextul locuirilor multiple”. In *Limba, literatura și cultura română: provocări și perspective*, eds. Mirjana Ćorković, Monica Huțanu, Mariana Dan, Minerva Trajlović-Kondan, 477 – 491. Belgrade: Faculty of Philology.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2023b. „Multiculturalism și identitate europeană – o provocare”. In *Literaturi transnaționale în transmisiune directă: Transilvania, translații, transegresiuni*, eds. I. Bot, M. Agoston, 209 – 227. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2023c. „Aspecte specifice predării limbii române în străinătate studenților de origine română”, 2023. In *Collective Identity. National and Transnational Perspectives*. ed. Marius Miheș, 411 – 427. Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2023d. „Nuove costruzioni dell’immaginario identitario – studio di caso”. In *Studia Universitas Babes-Bolyai Philologia*, Volume 68 (LXVIII), 1/2023, 249 – 267.
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2024. „«Rădăcini la jumătate» – consecințe și conștientizări lingvistico-culturale”. In *Limbă, cultură și identitate românească*, coordinator O. Ichim, editors A.M. Bursuc, M. R. Clim, O. Ichim, V. Olariu, A. Prisacaru, D. Stroescu, 177 – 193: Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest.
- Olariu, Florin-Teodor. 2017. *Variație și varietăți în limba română. Studii de dialectologie și sociolingvistică*. Iași: Institutul European.
- Olariu, Florin-Teodor. 2024. „Homo migrans en tant qu’Homo narrans, ou le migraphie en tant que recit de vie”. In *Romania in migration context*, Studia philologia Monacensia, no. 16/2024, ed. Aurelia Merlan, 23-47.
- Olariu, Florin-Teodor, Olariu, Veronica. 2024. „Les corpus de langue roumaine parlée : des corpus dialectaux aux corpus de „migraphies linguistiques”. In *Randromania im Fokus. Gesprochenes Galicisch, Portugiesch und Rumanisch*, eds. Aurelia Merlan/Barbara Schäfer Prieß, 121 – 140. Laussane, Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Ricci, Antonio. 2022. „Odi et amo: l’inserimento della collettività romana in Italia”. In *Radici a metà. Trent’anni di immigrazione romana in Italia*, ed. M. Căjvăneanu, B. Coccia, A. Ricci, 40-67.
- Volkan, Vamik, 2019. *Immigrants and Refugees: Trauma, Perennial Mourning, Prejudice, and Border Psychology*. New York: Taylor& Francis Ltd.
- Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS. 2024. *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione*. Roma.
- Council of Europe. 2001. *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Strasbourg.
- <https://demo.istat.it/app/?i=RCS&l=it>.