E ISSN 1512-3146 (online)
ISSN 1987-9601 (print)
International Journal of Multilingual Education
https://multilingualeducation.openjournals.ge/

Ekaterina Protassova[1]
University of Helsinki, Finland,
Maria Yelenevskaya
Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel

Indexicality and Identity: Understanding Russian Cultural Practices in a Global Context

ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of indexicality as it pertains to linguistic and cultural practices among Russian-speaking migrants. Indexicality is understood as the way linguistic forms and cultural behaviors signify social identities, relationships, and contextual meanings beyond their literal interpretations. Through an analysis of online discussions, interviews, and a survey of Russophones living abroad, the study reveals how everyday habits, grooming practices, and cultural norms serve as markers of Russianness in diverse contexts. Drawing from digital, oral and written resources, it highlights the dynamic interplay between individual identity, cultural memory, and material possessions, illustrating how migrants negotiate their cultural identities through a blend of inherited traditions and local influences. Russophones usually identify each other by the way they dress up, how they speak, and what they are interested in. The findings underscore the complexity of Russian identity in a globalized world, challenging essentialist stereotypes and emphasizing the importance of context in understanding cultural practices.

Keywords: *Russian identity, migration, cultural practices, linguistic forms, cultural hybridity, social meaning, heritage language.*

.

Introduction

Indexicality refers to the ways linguistic and cultural forms point beyond their literal meaning to social identities, stances, relationships, and contextual frames. In research on multilingual and migrant communities, this perspective helps illuminate how speakers use particular linguistic features—accent, code-switching, lexical choice, forms of address, or conversational routines—not merely to transmit messages but to position themselves within families, peer groups, and broader cultural environments. In the sociolinguistic and anthropological tradition, indexicality describes how linguistic and semiotic forms point beyond their literal meanings to evoke social identities, stances, and relationships.

Beyond language use, indexicality also illuminates how people relate to material objects. Certain possessions—heirlooms, souvenirs, photographs, books, or everyday items—attain a special status because they serve as physical traces of personal history or evidence of lived experience. Their value lies not in material rarity but in their capacity to connect individuals to moments, relationships, and

[1] Corresponding author: Ekaterina Protassova, ekaterina.protassova@helsinki.fi

identities, offering a tangible link to the past. Even mass-produced objects can become deeply meaningful when they anchor memory, authenticity, or emotional attachment. The interplay of materiality, memory, and identity becomes especially significant in migrant contexts, where objects often serve as bridges between places, cultures, and life stages.

In our study, indexicality operates as a vital mechanism through which Russian-speaking migrants articulate their identities and navigate cultural landscapes in host countries. The findings reveal that everyday habits, grooming practices, and material possessions serve as significant markers of Russianness, enabling individuals to maintain connections to their heritage while adapting to new environments. The analysis underscores the importance of context in shaping perceptions of identity, challenging essentialist stereotypes that often reduce Russian identity to simplistic traits. Language thus not only communicates information but also performs social work, signaling who speakers are, how they align with others, and how they understand the situation they inhabit.

The study highlights the dynamic nature of cultural memory and emotional attachment to objects as critical components of identity formation among migrants and continues our previous research (Protassova & Yelenevskaya, 2024; Yelenevskaya & Protassova, 2023). As individuals negotiate their cultural identities, they blend inherited traditions with local influences, creating a specific hybrid cultural expression that reflects both personal and collective histories. The experiences shared by participants indicate that identity is not a static construct but rather a fluid and relational process shaped by interactions, memories, and the material culture that surrounds them. Speakers' repertoires are fluid collections of mobile, historically shaped resources that may be deployed strategically or habitually.

Our research questions are:

- How do linguistic forms and cultural practices among Russian-speaking migrants index social identities and relationships?
- In what ways do everyday habits and grooming practices serve as markers of Russianness in diverse cultural contexts?
- How do Russian-speaking migrants negotiate their cultural identities through material possessions and domestic spaces?
- What role does cultural memory play in shaping the identities of Russian-speaking migrants living abroad?
- How do perceptions of typical Russian behavior differ among migrants and locals in host countries?

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The materials include: (1) Analysis of comments and narratives from various

online platforms regarding perceptions of Russian identity and cultural practices. (2) An online survey, focusing on the Russophone experiences related to clothing styles, social norms, and cultural practices. (3) Conducting group discussions with Finnish-Russian bilinguals to explore their experiences of cultural negotiation and identity formation in a new context. (4) Examination of historical documents and guidelines related to the identification of non-Russian individuals speaking a perfect Russian, particularly during the Soviet era, to understand the ideological constructions surrounding Russian identity. Data from these sources are analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and insights regarding the role of indexicality in the construction of identity among Russian-speaking migrants.

Theoretical Background

Indexicality can be understood very broadly, ranging from mathematical models to semiotics and from phonological features to choices of goods in a store. Indexicality describes how linguistic forms point to social meanings, identities, and relationships beyond their literal content (Silverstein, 2003; Ochs, 1993). In other words, language not only says things—it does social work by signaling who speakers are, how they align with others, and what kind of situation they believe they are in. In heritage language research, it helps explain how speakers use language not only to communicate but also to position themselves within family, community, and broader sociocultural contexts. According to Lehtonen (2016: 69), people's linguistic repertoires are not made up of whole, bounded "languages," but of smaller, mobile linguistic resources—"bits of language" (here, she is quoting Blommaert, 2010), and this is an ideological and historical process. Linguistic features index specific cultural practices, social personae, relationships, or stances (Agha, 2007). Humans use pointing and linguistic deixis to coordinate shared attention and cooperation—key capacities that define our species (McElvenny, 2026). Bucholtz & Hall (2005) outline a framework for analyzing identity as something created through linguistic interaction, emphasizing that identity emerges from linguistic and semiotic practices and is fundamentally social and cultural; identities range from broad demographic categories to momentary stances, roles, and locally meaningful positions; they are indexed through labels, implicatures, stances, styles, and linguistic forms; they are relationally constructed through contrasts such as similarity versus difference or legitimacy versus delegitimacy; and they arise through a mix of intentional choices, habitual behaviors, interactional negotiation, others' interpretations, and broader ideological forces, as demonstrated through diverse examples of interaction.

Linguistic forms acquire social meaning in social contexts and refer to specific social identities and typical social contexts (Chernyavskaya & Nefedov, 2021). Relativism develops out of classic semantic theories of indexicals—challenging them much like a rebellious successor—while sharing

the basic view that indexical expressions can only be interpreted relative to appropriate contextual parameters. Relativist semantics, unlike classic non-relativistic approaches, offer a better framework for understanding how meaning relates to truth-conditions by treating context and parameters of interpretation in a way that more accurately reflects their role in determining truth (Predelli, 2012). Natural language creates person indexicals in several distinct ways, as shown by imposter constructions and their pronoun patterns, which reveal that person indexicals cannot be treated as a single uniform category, or by temporal indexicality (Podobryaev, 2017; Yanovich, 2011). Corazza (2004) argues that indexical and quasi-indexical expressions are fundamental, irreducible tools for representing perspectives in thought, language, and social cognition, showing that quasi-indexicality plays a cognitively primary role in how we understand others' self-referential states and thus revealing both notions as complementary aspects of a theory of direct reference. Davies (2024) thinks that truth in every context does not entail knowledge of the fact expressed, and descriptive analyses already predict that statements. Wassink & Dyer (2004) demonstrate that phonological variants in both Corby and Kingston carry changing indexical meanings, with younger speakers adopting features of historically stigmatized varieties to signal local identity and pride, highlighting how language ideology shapes socially embedded interpretations of variation.

Stereotypical images of what constitutes "typical" national communication—such as ideas about directness, emotionality, or conversational behavior—often simplify a far more diverse reality. Stereotypes about what counts as "typically Russian" are continually reproduced in textbooks and in research on the communicative behavior of Russian speakers (e.g., Larina et al., 2017; Morozova, 2019; Prokhorov & Sternin, 2011). These representations often rely on simplified cultural generalizations—such as assumptions about directness, emotional expressiveness, or particular conversational norms—which are then transmitted to new generations of learners and scholars. As a result, complex, heterogeneous linguistic practices become reduced to stable cultural "traits," even though actual communicative behavior among Russian-speaking populations is highly diverse, context-dependent, and shaped by factors such as age, region, social class, mobility, and multilingual experience. Moreover, once these stereotypes enter pedagogical materials, they gain additional authority: students encounter them as facts, and teachers may reproduce them uncritically. Academic studies can unintentionally reinforce this process when they rely on essentialized notions of national communication styles or overlook internal variation within Russian-speaking communities. Thus, what is presented as "typical Russian behavior" often reflects ideological constructions rather than empirical social reality. A more nuanced, critical approach would recognize the plurality of Russian-speaking identities and communicative repertoires, and examine how so-called "typical" features emerge,

circulate, and become socially meaningful in specific historical and interactional contexts.

Indexicality also plays a central role in how people interpret gestures, emblems, and other nonverbal cues, especially in encounters where participants have to negotiate differing expectations or alien forms of expression. Militello (2023) examines how people interpret and respond to unfamiliar or differently indexed social signals (emblems) in encounters, showing that tracking these processes—through interviews or real-time negotiation—reveals how language shapes social meaning and identity in interactions. The study by Storm et al. (2022) shows how youth use indexical cues in classroom discourse to build and navigate hybrid interpretive communities, revealing how affect, navigation, and evaluation shape their literary reasoning; it argues that analyzing youths' deictic markers helps educators understand and better support students as they move across and transform different interpretive communities. Bochmann (2023) argues that translation in ethnographic and multilingual research is always context-dependent, open to interpretation, and shaped by social and institutional factors; because meanings shift through indexicality, translations inevitably remain approximations influenced by researchers, participants, writing practices, and audiences, making translation an interactive, indexical process that continually creates a "third space" of difference rather than a faithful reproduction of an original. According to Doreleijers & Swanenberg (2023), media content, like music videos and TikTok spinoffs, gains new meanings as it is recontextualized across different social and digital settings, showing that meaning is dynamic and context-dependent. Remixing and the strategic use of local dialects allow users—especially young people—to express identity, social stance, and local belonging while engaging creatively with media. These practices exemplify glocalization, combining local cultural elements with global digital forms, and illustrate how online media circulation enables ongoing meaning-making and community signaling.

Kupske and Perozzo (2023) argue that language conveys social cues and that social indexicality significantly shapes L1 and L2 development, including speech acquisition. While sociolinguistics and sociophonetics have long incorporated social factors, psycholinguistics and SLA research have lagged, leaving a gap in theoretical approaches. They propose using Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) to integrate cognitive, social, and contextual influences on language learning, emphasizing that L2 speech is shaped not only by cognitive abilities but also by social identities, interactions, and environmental factors. Recognizing these dynamics allows for a more nuanced understanding of bilingualism and the interplay of cognitive and social processes in language acquisition. Grammon (2024) examines how an L2 learner developed sociolinguistic perception and interpretive abilities regarding dialectal Spanish forms and social indexicality during her study abroad experience in Peru. Findings suggest that her sociolinguistic development was a social process influenced by language

ideologies, leading her to connect specific dialectal features with social traits and moral values, highlighting the need for critical pedagogies in L2 education to enhance learners' understanding of language's social implications. It seems that L2 learners in a study abroad context develop sociolinguistic competence by linking target language variation to social meanings, initially through perceptual categorization and indexical associations, and later via language ideologies that interpret and justify these links, highlighting the role of indexicality in understanding social attributes and supporting targeted pedagogical approaches. Friedrich (2024) discusses the relationship between skills and language, particularly focusing on the concept of deixis, which is inherently context-dependent and practical, much like skills themselves. She argues against the notion of "tacit knowledge" as an underlying factor behind skills, instead emphasizing that skills should be understood as concrete acts performed under specific conditions, because indexicality is a fundamental characteristic of all linguistic signs, not just deixis, while also highlighting the challenges of analyzing these concepts due to their inherently non-observable nature. Yip & Catedral (2021) show that new immigrants' Cantonese in Hong Kong carries complex, multi-scalar indexical meanings that reflect both local and national affiliations, illustrate socially constructed notions of standardness, and highlight how immigrants' personhood intersects with language ideologies. This suggests a fractally recursive model for analyzing fluid, context-dependent sociolinguistic and indexical dynamics of language varieties.

Because indexicality links linguistic form to social interpretation, it also shapes language learning. Fabricius (2020) acknowledges that the global presence of English is shaped by local sociolinguistic and semiotic contexts, and calls for moving beyond the term "Global English" to recognize the indexical and culturally grounded meanings of English in diverse settings. Nagy (2024: 192–205) indicates that heritage speakers using a minority language alongside a dominant one, may consider elements such as accent, code-switching, word choice, and conversational patterns as communicating feelings of belonging, authenticity, nostalgia, or detachment. They can play with traditional forms of address, and their "foreignized" accent suggests assimilation into a different culture. Indexicality operates on several levels: first-order indexicality connects linguistic forms to social patterns, second-order links these patterns to social judgments or ideologies, and third-order involves speakers intentionally using language to negotiate their identity. Through these indexical cues, heritage speakers manage the conflicting expectations of family, community, and society, shaping their hybrid and transnational identities while employing language as a means of identity construction. Kroo (2024) mentions that speaking styles in conversation reveal how broader social and gendered ideologies shape perceptions of "good" and "bad" speech even as these linguistic styles are reinterpreted.

Day (2021) suggests that rather than viewing documents as faithful representations of experience, documentality should be understood through an indexical epistemology, emphasizing the performative links between text and world and showing that attempts to produce "living documents" reflect misconceptions of representation rather than actual gaps between experience and documentation. Grayson & Shulman (2000) show that consumers perceive irreplaceable possessions as distinct due to their indexicality, linking them to factual reality and providing a sense of authenticity and verification, regardless of age or life stage. Even mass-produced objects can serve as indexical anchors, allowing individuals to connect experiences and identity to the real world, countering trends of hyperreality and commoditization. Some possessions are more indexically meaningful than others, and different types of signs (indices, icons, symbols) interact; these sign functions influence memory, nostalgia, and consumer evaluation. Grayson & Martinec (2004) explore the nuanced concept of authenticity in consumer behavior, distinguishing between two types: indexical and iconic authenticity. They identify the cues that inform consumer assessments of authenticity at two tourist attractions, revealing that these cues influence not only perceptions of authenticity but also the benefits derived from authentic experiences, such as a sense of connection to the past or perceived evidence of truthfulness. The study highlights the importance of understanding how consumers deal with the complex interplay between reality and fantasy in their consumption of authentic market offerings.

In sum, indexicality provides a powerful lens for examining how linguistic forms, communicative practices, and material objects come to signal identities and relationships in everyday life. It highlights the fluid, dynamic nature of meaning-making and identity formation, especially among migrants and multilingual speakers whose lives unfold across multiple cultural and linguistic worlds. This perspective informs the present study, which investigates how Russian-speaking migrants understand and negotiate cultural identity through language, behavior, and material practices, and how these indexical processes shape their sense of belonging in new sociocultural environments.

Attitudes toward a "Typical" and "Untypical" Russian on the Internet

1. The internet article "7 Signs That Give Away a Russian Tourist Instantly Anywhere in the World" (Adme 2021) names subtle features in Russophones' appearances, remarking that Russia is home to representatives from over 190 ethnic groups, each possessing distinct facial features and body types. Despite this diversity, foreigners often manage to identify Russians by subtle characteristics that set them apart from others. For instance, light-colored eyes are more common among Russians than Europeans, and in 75% of cases, Russians have a straight facial profile. One traveler notes, "I have been to Russia at least 10 times. Many Russian women really look like models. They are lucky with

their genetics: they have fuller lips, pronounced cheekbones, and a chin line that many would envy. Beauty is very important here, and they know how to emphasize it. Cosmetics are sold everywhere, even at airports. I know a Russian woman who usually spends a whole 2 hours buying cosmetics; she has over 200 makeup products at home."

Another individual living in China shares their experience: "I have lived in China for many years. I look very different from the local population: light hair, fair skin, huge green eyes. Throughout these years, one local feature has really annoyed and baffled me. As soon as they see me, the Chinese people loudly discuss: 'Oh, look, a foreigner,' 'White skin,' 'Definitely Russian.' Can't they even consider that I might understand everything they are saying?! I hear everything in the elevator!" An Italian traveler reflects on their experience: "In Italy, they immediately recognized me as Russian. I was surprised: why, how? I asked Italians. They said they didn't know how they could tell. It kept baffling me until I asked our Russian tour guide. She said: 'Look in the mirror and look at the local men.' I see myself all the time: height — 194 cm, weight — 120 kg, light hair. I looked closely at the locals: short brunettes. The question was resolved."

The author of the post notes that "Russian women may have attractive facial features that seem exotic to Westerners, such as round faces and light eyes." Moreover, they observes that "most young Russian women really look like models. I have seen many women with perfect posture, beautiful facial features, and confident walk. They tend to possess this incredible beauty: healthy, almost innocent. Moreover, they masterfully wield the art of makeup."

This post has 104 comments, and the discussion shows readers' disagreement and irony toward the idea that Russians are so easily recognizable abroad. Many commenters reject the article as a "greeting from the 80s–90s", calling it outdated and based on stereotypes. Others argue that Europeans are often more "well-groomed and stylish," and that appearance depends less on "the amount of makeup and perfume" than on "neat hair and tasteful clothing." Several participants remark that they are often mistaken for locals in southern or northern Europe — "I'm taken for a Spaniard, Greek, or Portuguese," one writes; another says, "I look Russian (I hope!), but in the Maldives, a German couple was surprised when they found out." Many emphasize that behavior, not looks, reveals nationality: "In 90% of cases, you can tell by behavior, not by clothes," or "only Russians have that uptight, anxious face abroad." What these commenters overlook is that self-confidence or its lack is not so much a question of nationality but of socio-economic status, experience of crossing borders and proficiency in English and other languages.

Some authors share humorous or ironic experiences of being mistaken for Italians, Poles, or even Latin Americans and emphasize how diverse Russian appearances have become: "We're anyone but

Russian — maybe we've become too Canadian", one discussant jokes. Some point out generational change: young travelers, "speaking two or three languages and dressing appropriately," are no longer distinguishable from Europeans. Overall, the commenters ridicule the idea of a "typical Russian tourist," viewing it as an outdated generalization. As one sums up: "There is no 'average representative' of any country, stop spreading this nonsense."

Many countries are known for their culinary traditions, and what seems ordinary in Russia may look unusual elsewhere. For example, in much of Europe, soups familiar to Russians are rarely found on everyday menus. Travelers often notice how even global chains vary: Russians abroad are surprised when cheese sauce is unavailable in McDonald's, something Europeans recognize as a distinctly Russian preference. Even gestures of politeness can reveal origins: Russians tend to check both directions when crossing one-way streets, enter cafés without greeting the staff, or travel with cash "just in case." Many shopkeepers and hoteliers appreciate this last habit, as Russian clients often pay in cash and in advance.

Tourists also notice, that warning signs in Russian appear in unexpected places—from hotel restaurants to thermal baths—because certain behaviors (taking food out, jumping into pools) are assumed to be "special Russian habits." In fact, vendors in popular tourist destinations often switch to Russian instantly, having learned to recognize Russian customers long before they speak.

Adme (2020) describes several everyday Russian habits that often surprise foreigners. These include saying "С лёгким паром!" after bathing, fearing drafts, eating almost any food with bread, and sitting down and stayin silent for a moment before a trip. Other surprising customs are addressing strangers as "young girl" or "young man", using brackets as smiley faces online, bringing large amounts of food on train rides, drinking birch sap, and celebrating the "Old New Year", according to the Julian calendar. Although these practices may seem unusual to outsiders, they are deeply rooted in Russia's history, climate, and cultural traditions.Commenters point out that fears of drafts stem from precautions taken by people living in a cold climate. Others note cultural contrasts, for example: "In France, it was surprising how much time people devote to eating. I could finish the amount of food served at lunch in about 20 minutes, while they stretched the meal to an hour and a half or even two." Many emphasize that "every nation has its own quirks and customs." Additional observations highlight that many foreigners rarely use indoor slippers and often move around their homes in shoes used outdoors. Some comments frame traditions such as wishing "*S legkim parom*" after bathing or sitting briefly before a trip as symbolic practices that preserve intergenerational continuity. Others recall childhood experiences of being encouraged to eat everything with bread, or criticize excessive concern about drafts and overbundling children. A contributor from Kazakhstan adds that some customs are

tied to climate or local history—for instance, draft avoidance in sharply continental regions. They also comment on habits such as using brackets instead of emoticons, eating certain foods with bread, drinking birch sap, or observing the Old New Year, noting that these traditions vary widely across post-Soviet cultures.

2. On the Finnish websites, participants discuss various perceptions of Russian identity and cultural interactions, particularly in the context of living in Finland or other foreign countries. One author notes that Russians often take care of their appearance and dress elegantly. For example, men are described as gentlemen who exhibit courteous behavior, such as offering a handshake or opening doors for women, while women are portrayed as stylish and well-groomed. One participant emphasizes the importance of beauty in Russian culture; however, others contrast these observations with the notion that stereotypes about Russians are often outdated and overly simplistic. They reflect on personal experiences, noting that in southern countries like Spain and Greece, they are often mistaken for locals due to their appearances. This highlights the variability in how Russians are perceived abroad, suggesting that assumptions based on stereotypes do not always hold true. The comments also address the impact of socio-economic changes in Russia, noting that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, class disparities have become pronounced. This shift has led to a complex interplay between nostalgia for the past and present realities. The author mentions that Russians abroad are often recognized by their behavior rather than their appearances, with specific traits such as "the peculiar way they carry themselves" being telltale signs. Additionally, some commenters reflect on the challenges of cultural integration and the lingering effects of historical trauma. They discuss that some Russians carry a burden of shared past grievances which may affect their interactions with others. They conclude with a recognition that while there are negative heterostereotypes of Russians, there are also many positive experiences and interactions that challenge these perceptions.

Comparing these auto- and heterostereotypes, it is evident that they are extremely similar, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of Russian identity shaped by a variety of personal experiences and broader socio-cultural dynamics, and suggesting that understanding this complexity requires moving beyond simplistic stereotypes. Clearly, this is a healthy approach, although it may be challenged by the political events that may create new stereotypes affecting popular perceptions.

The analysis of online discussions surrounding the image of a "typical Russian" uncovers a complex interplay between identity, appearance, and public perception. Respondents' narratives illustrate the diversity of Russophone experiences, informed by personal histories, migration trajectories, and socio-economic changes. While some continue to value traditional ideals of beauty

and elegance, others resist such norms, prioritizing natural and sincere behavior, openness, and adaptability over external markers. Clothing choices, in this context, serve as tangible expressions of cultural negotiation — a balance between nostalgia, self-assertion, and the desire to integrate but not to assimilate. Perceptions of "Russianness" are increasingly plural and situational. Instead of being defined by appearance alone, they are negotiated through everyday practices, language use, and interactions that blend local influences with inherited traditions.

3. On Facebook, SZ (originally from Moscow, now living in Yerevan) reflects on material things indicating the former life in Russia, their meaning and value.The following thread revolves around memory, nostalgia, and the emotional weight of possessions left behind after emigration. The author describes receiving an old Indian vase from Moscow but realizing he cannot remember where it came from—"but I forgot about the vase"—which leads him to list many antique items still scattered "across storage units and friends' homes," each linked to a personal history. Commenters share similar experiences: one has been paying for a storage unit for years because "for some reason we hold on to these things," another notes that old furniture and heirlooms now belong to a "different new life," while others mourn the loss of cherished items—"it's all so heartbreaking!" One participant says, "the only thing I truly miss is my library," especially art books that cannot be transported, and another one recalls sorting through a home "with someone else's hands," grieving over possessions that no longer fit any future space. Some cling to warm winter clothes for imagined returns—"what if someday Russia becomes free and we come back?" Collectively, these voices reflect how displaced people remain tied to belongings that hold memories, identity, and the hope for "another life," even when preserving them becomes emotionally or practically impossible.

This publication prompts a broader meditation on furniture and antiques still scattered across storage spaces in Moscow—each item carrying individual history and nostalgia. Commenters share similar experiences: paying for long-term storage of inherited objects, losing treasured belongings during moves, grieving over furniture, books, and heirlooms left behind, or struggling with the difficulty and cost of transporting antiques abroad. Others describe letting go of their past possessions without regret, or holding on to symbolic items in hope of a future return. Overall, the discussion becomes a mosaic reflection on migration, memory, emotional attachment to objects, and the complex mix of nostalgia, loss, and practicality that accompanies leaving one's former life.

4. On the internet, one can encounter a document called "Signs characteristic of a hostile clandestine agent due to his prolonged stay abroad. KGB instruction for identifying foreign spies in

the USSR." It reads: Knowledge of a foreign language. (Explained by various reasons: studied at a university, traveled abroad, etc.) Use of maxims, expressions, or phrases not typical for residents of our country. Pronunciation of foreign city names, firms, surnames of well-known foreign figures with a foreign accent (not "*Bradvei*," but "Broadway," etc.). Incorrect pronunciation of Russian words, especially consonants that sound similar to foreign ones (telegram, telephone), a lack of Russian dialectal features. Mistakes in writing Russian letters when filling out documents, writing (*m–t, в –w, y–u, u–i,* etc.). Unusual awareness of details of life abroad and a lack of knowledge, or weak knowledge, of current realities and local customs. Knowledge of the state structure of the USSR, activities of Soviet authorities, our laws to such an extent as no ordinary Soviet citizen would know, and at the same time misunderstanding common Soviet everyday expressions (e.g., common abbreviations, words like "zhirovka," "sharashka," etc.). Appearances: always neat, well-groomed; displays qualities of a cultured, unusually polite, courteous person especially in relation to women (he consistently rises when a woman enters, tips his hat as a greeting, and seldom extends his hand for a handshake). Ability to make cocktails and a manner of drinking them with "mixers." Tendency to avoid medical help, self-treatment, or a wish to pay a doctor for the visit. Preference for certain foods unusual for this area and ability to prepare them correctly. Search for rare types of meat and sea food (lamb, lamprays, oysters, etc.). Rare use of bread with food, diluting alcoholic drinks with ice or water, and drinking them in small sips, as if savoring them. When using the telephone, the person may demonstrate unfamiliarity with local dialing conventions, as telephone systems abroad often work differently. They might even offer to pay for using the phone, following common practice in some other countries. In social situations, such an individual may rest their feet on elevated surfaces or chew gum when visiting someone's home. They may also smoke in places such as buses, cinemas, or shops, reflecting norms that are customary in many countries but unacceptable in the USSR.

This document seems to represent a typical internal KGB guideline from the Soviet era, designed to help security officers identify so-called "enemy illegals"—individuals suspected of being foreign intelligence operatives who lived abroad for extended periods. Such manuals circulated within the Soviet security apparatus from the late Stalinist period through the Cold War and reflected ideological anxieties about "foreign influence." The list of indicators included linguistic, behavioral, and cultural traits believed to reveal foreign exposure or training. Linguistically, the document treats knowledge of foreign languages, the use of idioms not typical of Soviet Russian, and "foreign-sounding" pronunciation as suspicious. This reflects the Soviet association of linguistic deviation with political unreliability. Even orthographic mistakes—such as writing Russian letters incorrectly—were interpreted as potential traces of non-native or foreign-affected literacy practices.

Culturally, the text assumes that long-term exposure to life abroad inevitably reshapes everyday habits: familiarity with foreign brands, table manners, clothes, or social etiquette is framed as evidence of espionage rather than normal cosmopolitan experience. Such features were "indexical"—they were understood to point to underlying social identities (e.g., a foreigner, a returnee, a spy), regardless of the speaker's actual intentions. Anyway, the document thus illustrates how Soviet security services institutionalized a semiotic ideology in which language, behavior, and appearances were treated as diagnostic signs of political loyalty. It offers a revealing artifact of Cold War surveillance culture, where even mundane habits—ordering cocktails, avoiding doctors, or recognizing foreign company names—could be reinterpreted as markers of espionage.

In Brezhnev's time, there were also questionnaires that Soviet Intourist guides had to fill out reporting on the tourists' behavior. They were worded in such a way as to reveal possible ideological influence on the guide, fear that foreign tourists would make acquaintance with Soviet citizens and in this way undermine security of the country. Courses training professional guides included lectures dictating how to behave and how to dress in order not to let down the image of a "Soviet personality."

Findings from a Survey

Results of our online survey conducted in 2025 include 90 answers of the Russophones living abroad in 27 countries.The differences between Russophones living abroad and people in Russia, as well as the locals in their current countries, are quite pronounced, particularly in terms of clothing style, social norms, and attitudes towards appearance. Many Russophones noted that clothing styles in their host countries tend to be more relaxed and practical compared to Russia. For instance, one individual stated, "In Israel, it is much more convenient and simpler." This reflects a preference for comfort and practicality in daily wear, contrasting with the more formal and sometimes extravagant styles seen in Russia.

In Finland, the style is described as "more practical and sporty," with an emphasis on comfort over formality: "Finns wear more relaxed, less formal clothing." This contrasts sharply with the Russian norm, where there is a societal expectation to dress stylishly and elegantly, as one person mentioned, "In Russia, women pay much more attention to their appearance and dress stylishly." In Russia, there is a strong societal pressure to look presentable, with expectations that one should be well-dressed even in casual settings. A respondent highlighted this by saying, "In Russia, there is a social norm for women to 'look respectable.' If not stylish and expensive, then at least clean, well-pressed, with makeup and preferably a proper hairstyle. In Finland, one is expected to look this way only if required by one's professional position or economic class. Many people there do not worry

much about their appearance, and there are also 'city eccentrics' dressed in retro, quirky, handmade, or all-at-once outfits. I like this." This contrasts with the more relaxed attitudes found in many Western countries, where there is less scrutiny regarding everyday attire. For example, people do not iron their clothes.

The perception of how others dress can also differ significantly. One person noted, "In Russia, people pay much more attention to how others are dressed and may make negative remarks," indicating a culture of judgment that is less prevalent in their host countries. The influence of local culture on clothing choices is significant. For instance, in Spain, one individual noted, "you can wear whatever you like, and no one will pay attention," highlighting a sense of freedom in personal expression through clothing that may be less common in Russia. In contrast, a Russophone who moved from Moscow to a remote area in the USA observed that people dress more freely, "without looking back at what people will say," indicating a cultural shift towards individual comfort over societal expectations.

Gender norms around clothing also appear to vary. For example, in the Nordic countries, women reportedly wear less formal attire, with "girls almost never wearing dresses, only for very formal occasions." This contrasts with the more feminine and often elaborate styles observed in Russia, where "Russian women are noticeable even in language classes: grooming, style, shoes (more daring, interesting looks)." In some institutions (like schools), it is even forbidden to wear trousers. Many Russophones mentioned a change in their personal style since moving abroad. One respondent reflected, "I have become more relaxed and simpler in how I dress," suggesting that living in a less formal environment has influenced their fashion choices towards comfort and simplicity.

In summary, the experiences of Russophones living abroad reveal a significant shift in clothing style, social expectations, and personal expression when compared to both their homeland and the local cultures they are now part of. The overall trend points towards a preference for practicality and comfort in their current environments, contrasting sharply with the more formal and scrutinized fashion culture of Russia.

Findings from the Group Discussions

When analyzing the linguistic and cultural behavior of bilinguals who speak Russian at home, we can observe that for them time flows primarily according to the calendar of the country in which they live. This applies to habits, traditions, gestures, and intonation. However, if a person has not fully mastered the surrounding language and seeks communication in Russian, earlier habits may persist. Here are some results of the group discussions with Finnish-Russian bilinguals (about 10 meetings with 3 to 10 people).

The discussion reflects how Russian-speaking families abroad negotiate cultural identity at home, balancing Russian traditions with local Finnish minimalism. Many participants describe interiors filled with books—"A friend's child once came in and said: your home feels Russian—probably because of all the books". Others emphasize the absence of stereotypical symbols: "No matryoshkas or Zhostovo trays… only one Gzhel teapot, and it's for real tea, not decoration". A common theme is a shift toward functional, Nordic aesthetics: "Our home is basically typical Finnish housing—minimalism in moderation".

At the same time, small objects and habits still carry emotional weight, such as homemade ceramics or old samovars restored as a hobby: "When you see a restored 150-year-old Tula samovar… there is something special about it". Food culture also emerges as a subtle identity marker—"Guests have to be shown the fridge with ryazhenka and the cupboard with buckwheat".

Participants describe their homes as repositories of memory, where objects associated with childhood, family history, and early migration stages acquire profound emotional significance. These objects often transcend utilitarian function, becoming mnemonic devices and carriers of identity. One speaker emphasizes that "the most cherished things in the house are my children's creations—drawings and crafts… family photographs, and dishes associated with stories and memories of places I have been." Others highlight heirlooms: "Some items have accompanied me throughout my life, like my baptismal cross." Books are particularly central, symbolizing intellectual continuity and emotional grounding: "Books, of course, move with me from place to place, and I remember each one… I cannot let these books go—they were part of my life and my growing up." Objects from family elders—postcards, letters, or suitcases—carry intergenerational memory. One participant reflects: "My grandfather wrote me a card for every holiday… I have kept all of them; not one is thrown away." "I still have my grandfather's suitcase… with a satin-lined interior. It seemed extraordinary—almost like something from Mars." These objects serve not only as sentimental keepsakes but as material anchors of cultural continuity.

Homes are described as transitional spaces where Russian and Finnish cultural aesthetics mix, producing what one speaker calls "neither fully Finnish nor fully Russian." Domestic style becomes an arena for negotiating cultural identity. Participants describe the tension between Russian abundance and Finnish minimalism: "On the one hand, I want many things; on the other, I long for minimalism. I recognize this contradiction in myself." "I feel most comfortable when surrounded by many colorful objects—that is the Russian part of me. The Finnish part is the light, uncluttered space with everything stored away." Material elements reflect this hybridity: Gzhel and Khokhloma coexist with Finnish furniture inherited from local relatives. Yet, participants often reject the idea that material culture alone

defines a "Russian home": "My home cannot be called a typical Russian home… But when guests arrive, then it becomes unmistakably Russian: a laid table, hospitality, doors open to all." Here, cultural identity is performed relationally and socially, rather than through objects themselves.

Migration and traumatic experiences such as theft lead participants to re-evaluate what they consider valuable. One participant recounts a burglary that transformed her understanding of possessions: "After the burglary my sense of value changed. I realized I can live without many things; what matters is that the family is safe." "They stole all the jewelry… Before I could have listed many precious items, but now I cannot." This shift underscores how attachments are dynamic and responsive to life events. Even so, certain irreplaceable objects remain deeply symbolic: "I would be devastated to lose what remains from my grandmother, and two soft toys belonging to my children. I want to preserve them as long as possible." Such objects, often fragile or valueless in monetary terms, represent emotional continuity and familial lineage.

Across narratives, domestic objects emerge as key symbolic resources through which Russian-speaking migrants in Finland articulate belonging, continuity, and cultural identity. While material culture expresses a hybrid aesthetic shaped by both Russian abundance and Finnish minimalism, emotional attachments remain centered on memory, family, and intergenerational transmission. The interviewees' reflections demonstrate how home is constructed not simply through "things," but through relations, memories, and culturally informed practices of hosting, keeping, and caring for objects.

Conclusions

Foreigners claim they can often identify Russians by subtle features—light eyes, certain facial proportions, or height differences. Comments from travelers describe Russian women as especially striking, with expressive features and careful grooming. Others note cultural habits: discussing strangers aloud (like in China), wearing distinctive winter hats (noticed in Italy and Western Europe), or keeping children carefully protected from the sun (as observed in Bulgaria). Small practices—bringing slippers to a friend's house or asking for a toilet brush in hotels—also stand out as recognizably Russian. Beauty routines are another marker. Russians abroad are said to be well-groomed from morning on, make use of affordable cosmetic services at home, and favor particular hair colors that locals quickly identify.

Because humans rely heavily on pointing, deixis, and shared contextual cues to coordinate interaction, indexicality is central not only to linguistic meaning but to cooperative social life. Taken together, these anecdotes illustrate how everyday habits—from grooming and clothing to manners and

small domestic preferences—become cultural signals. What feels natural to Russians may stand out abroad, making them unexpectedly easy to recognize. “Russianness” at home is less about obvious symbols and more about books, memories, everyday practices, and personal objects that quietly sustain cultural continuity across borders. In multilingual settings, these essentialized notions of national style become particularly limiting, obscuring the plurality of identities, experiences, and linguistic repertoires that characterize diasporic and migrant communities. A more nuanced view recognizes that “typical” features are not inherent properties of cultural groups but ideological constructs that emerge and circulate through specific historical, pedagogical, and interactional processes.

Social meanings attached to linguistic forms are always context-dependent. The survey and group interview data offers insight into how Russian-speaking migrants construct belonging, memory, and identity through domestic objects and home environments. Three major themes emerge: (1) material memory and emotional value, (2) cultural hybridity in domestic space, and (3) shifting attachments and the re-evaluation of possessions after migration and loss.

Linguistic forms and cultural practices among Russian-speaking migrants index social identities and relationships by serving as markers of cultural affiliation and belonging. For instance, specific phrases, accents, and dialectal features can signal a speaker's heritage and community ties, while cultural practices—such as grooming habits and social etiquette—reflect shared values and norms that connect individuals to their Russian identity. These elements become social signals that convey not just individual identity but also relational dynamics within migrant communities and their interactions with locals.

Everyday habits and grooming practices serve as markers of Russianness through distinctive behaviors that are recognized by both migrants and locals. For example, the emphasis on personal grooming and fashion among Russian women can be perceived as a cultural trait that stands out in less formal settings abroad. These practices become visible cues that not only signify the individual’s background but also foster a sense of community among Russian speakers in foreign environments. Russophone migrants negotiate their cultural identities through material possessions and domestic spaces by curating environments that reflect both their Russian heritage and the influences of their host culture. Items such as books, heirlooms, and traditional decorative objects serve as tangible connections to their past, while the overall aesthetic of their homes often blends Russian and local styles. This negotiation is evident in the emotional significance attached to these objects, which act as mnemonic devices that preserve cultural memories and familial connections, allowing individuals to assert their identity in a new context.

Cultural memory plays a crucial role in shaping the identities of Russian-speaking migrants by

providing a framework through which they understand their past and present. The memories associated with specific objects, family traditions, and cultural practices help individuals maintain a sense of continuity and belonging, even in the face of displacement. These memories are often tied to personal narratives and collective histories, enabling migrants to connect their experiences with broader cultural narratives. As they navigate new environments, these memories inform their identity construction and influence their interactions with both fellow migrants and the local population.

Perceptions of "typical" Russian behavior differ significantly among migrants and locals in host countries, often reflecting a mix of stereotypes and lived experiences. Migrants may feel that the stereotypes about Russian behavior—such as notions of directness or emotional expressiveness—are outdated or overly simplistic, particularly as they adapt to diverse cultural contexts. Locals, on the other hand, may rely on these stereotypes to interpret Russian behavior, sometimes overlooking the nuances and variations that exist within the Russian-speaking community. This disparity highlights the complexity of identity and the need for a more nuanced understanding of how behaviors are contextualized and interpreted across different cultural settings.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how indexicality informs the social meanings of language and cultural practices in a globalized world. It calls for a more nuanced approach to the study of identity, one that recognizes the complexities and diversities of Russian-speaking experiences and acknowledges the interplay between individual agency and broader sociocultural dynamics. By doing so, we can better appreciate the rich tapestry of identities that emerge from the intersection of language, culture, and migration.

References

Adme (2020). *9 privychek, kotorye ne na shutku obeskurazhivayut inostrantsev. A dlya nas eto obychnoye delo* [9 habits that seriously bewilder foreigners — but for us, they are completely normal]. adme.media/articles/9-privychek-kotorye-ne-na-shutku-obeskurazhivayut-inostrancev-a-dlya-eto-nas-obychnoe-delo-2432815

Adme (2021). *7 priznakov, po kotorym nashego turista v sekundu vychislaiut v liuboi tochke planety* [7 signs by which our tourist can be instantly recognized anywhere in the world] adme.ru/svoboda-puteshestviya/7-prichin-po-kotorym-inostrancy-bezoshibochno-vychislyayut-nashih-turistov-2509944/?utm_source=tsp_pages&utm_medium=fb_organic&utm_campaign=fb_gr_adme&fb

clid=IwAR2bbxVbOIB-w6F5BA1N8H7FxkTOJOJLti95FiXykpzAVw6Xy_69gubbtrE

Agha, A. (2007). Language and Social Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blommaert, J. (2010). *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bochmann, A. (2023). The sociology and practice of translation: interaction, indexicality, and power. *Qualitative Research*, 23(6), 1781–1799. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221124736

Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5), 585–614. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407

Chernyavskaya, V., & Nefedov, S. (2021). Towards social indexicality: From "kollektiv" to "team". And back via coronavirus pandemic? *Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 46, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.26650/sdsl2021-990815

Corazza, E. (2004). *Reflecting the Mind: Indexicality and Quasi-Indexicality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davis, W. A. (2024). Actuality, indexicality, and knowledge. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 21(3), 277–306.

Day, R. E. (2021) "Living document": From documents to documentality, from mimesis to performative indexicality. *Proceedings from the Document Academy*, 8(2), Article 15. https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/8/2/15

Doreleijers, K., & Swanenberg, J. (2023). Putting local dialect in the mix: Indexicality and stylization in a TikTok challenge. *Language & Communication*, 92, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2023.06.002

Fabricius, A. (2020). Sociolinguistics, indexicality and "global English." *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 19(S3), 179. https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.588

Friedrich, J. (2024). Skills, language and indexicality – Determining a relationship. Language Sciences (Oxford), 105, Article 101658. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2024.101658

Grammon, D. (2024). Ideology, indexicality, and the L2 development of sociolinguistic perception during study abroad. *L2 Journal*, 16(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.5070/L2.6573

Grayson, K., & Shulman, D. (2000). Indexicality and the verification function of irreplaceable possessions: A semiotic analysis. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(1), 17–30. https://doi.org/10.1086/314306

Grayson, K., & Martinec, R. (2004). Consumer perceptions of iconicity and indexicality and their influence on assessments of authentic market offerings. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(2), 296–312. https://doi.org/10.1086/422109

Hirschkop, K. (2023). Inference and indexicality, or how to solve Bakhtin's problem with

heteroglossia. *Language Sciences*, 97, 101544, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2023.101544

Kroo, J. (2024). What is a dialect? What is a standard?: Shifting indexicality and persistent ideological norms. *Multilingua*, 43(5), 695–722. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2024-0034

Kupske, F. F., & Perozzo, R. V. (2023). Social indexicality and L2 speech development: Underexplored dynamic routes in psycholinguistics. *Letrônica*, 16(1), e44429. https://doi.org/10.15448/1984-4301.2023.1.44429

Larina, T., Mustajoki, A., & Protassova, E. (2017). Dimensions of Russian culture and mind. In *Philosophical and Cultural Interpretations of Russian Modernisation*, edited by A. Mustajoki & K. Lehtisaari. New York: Routledge, 7–19.

Lehtonen, H. (2016). What's up Helsinki?: Linguistic diversity among suburban adolescents. In *Linguistic Genocide or Superdiversity?*, edited by J. Saarikivi & R. Toivanen. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 65–90.

McElvenny, J. (2026). Language, skills, deixis and indexicality – their roles and interactions. *Language Sciences*, 113, Article 101775. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2025.101775

Militello, J. (2023). Perceiving in networking interactions: emblems, indexicality, and their mapping through reflexivity. *Multilingua*, 42(6), 809–830. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2022-0101

Morozova, T. V. (2019). National communicative behavior: The dominant features of the Russian culture of communication. *Humanitarian Paradigm*, 1, 120–126.

Nagy, N. (2024). *Heritage Languages: Extending Variationist Approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nielsen, P. J., & Sansiñena, M. S. (2024). *Indexicality: The Role of Indexing in Language Structure and Language Change.* Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Ochs, E. (1993) Constructing social identity: A language socialization perspective. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 26(3), 287–306. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327973rlsi2603_3

Podobryaev, A. (2017). Three routes to person indexicality. *Natural Language Semantics*, 25(4), 329–354. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11050-017-9138-7

Predelli, S. (2012). Indexicality, intensionality, and relativist post-semantics. *Synthese*, 184(2), 121–136. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-010-9728-0

Prokhorov, Y. E., & Sternin, I. A. (2011) *Russkie: kommunikativnoe povedenie* [Russians: Communicative behaviour]. Moscow: Flinta.

Protassova, E., Yelenevskaya, M. (2024) *Everyday Linguistic and Cultural Practices of the Russophone Diaspora.* Lanham: Lexington.

Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language and*

Communication 23, 193–229.

Storm, S., Jones, K., & Beck, S. W. (2022). Designing interpretive communities toward justice: Indexicality in classroom discourse. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 21(1), 2–15. https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-06-2021-0073

Wassink, A. B., & Dyer, J. (2004). Language ideology and the transmission of phonological change changing indexicality in two situations of language contact. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 32(1), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424203261799

Yanovich, I. (2011). How much expressive power is needed for natural language temporal indexicality? In *Logic, Language, Information and Computation*, edited by L. D. Beklemishev & R. de Queiroz. Berlin: Springer, 293–309. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-20920-8_27

Yelenevskaya, M. & Protassova, E. (Eds.) (2023). *Homemaking in the Russian-speaking Diaspora: Material Culture, Language and Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Yip, V., & Catedral, L. (2021). Perceiving (non)standardness and the indexicality of new immigrant Cantonese in Hong Kong. *Language & Communication*, 79, 81–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2021.04.004