

Helen Borland
School of Communication, Culture and Languages,
Victoria University, Melbourne, AUSTRALIA
Helen.Borland@vu.edu.au
+61 3 9919 4166

Title:

Mediated Connectedness: Practices and Strategies of Russian-speaking migrants to Melbourne

Preferred length: 30 minute paper presentation

Abstract

Migration of Russian speaking people around the globe has accelerated in the past 30 years creating a complex diaspora of Russian speakers extending even to 'far abroad' countries, such as Australia. In Australia, especially in the past 25 years, traditional local ethnic media, ranging from print to public and community broadcast media, have been an important resource in supporting linguistic and cultural maintenance and diasporic connectedness for immigrant communities. In the past decade, in particular, advances in communication technologies have generated the capacity to access media worldwide and also to create new mediated social spaces, and virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000), which dramatically extend the capacity for global diasporic engagement and connectedness. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with Russian speakers who have migrated from former Soviet republics to Melbourne since 1990, this presentation will discuss the attitudes and experiences of the interviewees and their families in engaging with both traditional and online media, and computer-mediated communication in their daily lives. The paper will focus on how they are choosing to utilise the potential various media and how their preferences and strategies reflect their evolving diasporic identities and their valuing of different forms of social and cultural connectedness.

Introduction

Russian served as the national and regional lingua franca of one of the twentieth century's two major world powers, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), from 1917 until the disintegration of the Soviet empire in the 1990s. During the Soviet period Russian was widely spoken not just in the Soviet states, where it was promulgated as the unifying national language, but also within the broader coalition of economically and politically dependent communist states in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Since the 1990s the role of Russian as a lingua franca has been diminishing. Nevertheless, it remains one of the major world languages, spoken globally by approximately 170 million speakers as their first or main language. Today Russian continues to be the primary language of ethnically diverse peoples, whose allegiances to the language have arisen from a coalescence of cultural as well as linguistic associations and needs. Many of these speakers live in what are now known as the "near abroad" states of the former Soviet Empire or have dispersed from there and from the Russian Federation itself around the world to form a global Diaspora of Russian speakers that stretches to distant places, such as Australia.

Ironically, simultaneous with the shrinking of the geopolitical reach of Russian, the opportunity for Russian speakers to connect to others in their language community locally in Australia, in their former heritage homelands and in the global Diaspora of Russian speakers have escalated markedly as traditional media have been either replaced or supplemented with new media and new forms of computer mediated communication. Using the internet and associated tools for accessing materials in different forms (video, audio, texts) as well as synchronous and asynchronous

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

communication techniques of increasingly sophisticated capacity (discussion groups, social networking, chat rooms), there are now countless opportunities to easily access Russian language speakers and materials, and to engage in social contact other than through face to face or traditional print and 'old' media.

Virtual vs. Embodied Communities

As a starting point in considering how language communities may be able to adopt ICTs to develop and maintain community, let us briefly consider some perspectives that provide insight into the potential of virtual communities. Kollock and Smith (1999, 3) have argued that "in cyberspace the economies of interaction, communication and coordination are different than when people meet face-to-face". Rheingold (2000) and Wellman and Gulia (1999) suggest that this enables the creation of new electronically mediated social spaces, meaning that people who are dispersed or unable to participate in face to face interactions, but who share common interests or backgrounds, can form new types of 'virtual communities'.

Whilst some have been pessimistic about the potential of virtual communities, seeing them as creating "new opportunities for surveillance and social control" (Roszak, 1986, xii, cited in Kollock and Smith, 1999, 4) or as 'pseudocommunities' based on "impersonal associations integrated by mass means" (Beniger, 1987, cited in Rheingold, 2000, 349), others, such as Rheingold (2000), Gurak (1999) and Gomez-Pena (2001) have taken a more positive view. They see virtual communities as transformative and liberating, providing opportunity to build new forms of community for many who would otherwise be disempowered by virtue of their social or geographic isolation.

Virtual communities differ from embodied communities in the factors that generate a sense of closeness and cohesion. Wellman and Gulia (1999, 186) argue that "shared interests" are the basis of the formation of such communities, meaning that they can be more heterogeneous in demographic characteristics, such as age and socioeconomic status. Shared ethnic heritage can provide a shared interest that is the basis of a virtual community. For example, Morris and McCombe (2002) highlight how ethnic communities in Australia have been using the internet to develop virtual networks and access information and participate in interactions framed by ethnic heritage and identity. There are numerous examples of the virtual presence of communities, for example, <http://www.ozeukes.com>, <http://www.thezaurus.com> . Most significantly, the internet as a medium enables a shift in paradigm from 'ethnic broadcasting' to 'ethnic participation' (Debski, 2003). Yet, when visiting such sites and reviewing the postings and membership of virtual communities established on the basis of shared heritage and associated cultural and social interests, it is noticeable that many sites appear to have generated a rush of interest and input for a period of time, but have then languished. The dynamics of computer mediated communication and virtual social connectivity are not necessarily the same as those that generate and maintain face to face interpersonal communication and social connectedness. These observations generated my curiosity to understand in greater depth how members of a large geolinguistic community of Russian speakers, but who are living in Melbourne in the 00s, make choices about their language and communication practices and priorities as they seek to make their lives as settlers in Australia, but with possibilities that were not available to previous generations of migrants to maintain their diasporic connections actively and easily using ICTs.

Research Focus and Questions

With both embodied and virtual opportunities for connectedness it is possible for those who wish to maintain a very strong level of engagement and participation in a Russian language milieu and to continue to be strongly connected to aspects of their Russian culture and heritage. Anna, one of the informants whose experiences are discussed in this paper, gave the example of her aunts who came to Australia in their early 40s about 15 years ago and who rarely speak English and whose knowledge of English is “very, very basic”.

Theoretically, what is worthy of consideration is the nature of the practices and preferences that individuals adopt in maintaining a connection to language, culture and heritage. To what extent do these reflect a diasporic consciousness as opposed to an attachment to localised practices of heritage maintenance? Associated with this, how is diasporic consciousness impacted on by the migrants’ changing senses of identity and attachment as Russian speakers from different former Soviet states?

So the questions that this paper focuses on are:

- How and to what extent do Russian speaking migrants use ICTs to facilitate and enhance their social connectivity and to engage with their linguistic and cultural heritage?
- What factors impact on the choices that the most recent wave of Russian speaking migrants to Melbourne make about their communication practices and priorities in engaging with other Russian speakers locally, in their former homeland and in the global Diaspora?

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

- How are language and communication practices in CMC affected by the technologies that are being used?

Russian Speakers in Australia and Victoria

There is a long history of Russian speakers in Australia. Kouzmin (1988) categorises those migrating up to the mid-1980s into 3 waves: 1st post - 1917, 2nd post WWII, and 3rd – post-1974. In comparing 2nd and 3rd waves, she identifies them as sharing high levels of attachment to the language and dominance of its use in main informal domains of personal contact (family, friends) and formal community/cultural interactions (community events, religious, cultural activities), but in terms of language attitudes she contrasts the 'instrumental orientation' of more newly arrived 3rd wave mainly Jewish Russian migrants with the more 'symbolic attachment' of the 2nd wave to the language and culture.

To these 3 waves now can be added a 4th wave – from 1989 onwards (particularly post 1991). 4th wave can be characterised as being more diverse in heritage backgrounds in relation to religious affiliation and extent of religious observance (Jewish, Russian orthodox, other religions, non-religious), and their source states. Some of these people are ethnic Russians and others are what Kolstoe (1995) has referred to as 'linguistically Russified non-Russians', people who are not ethnically Russian, but who primarily identify themselves with the Russian language and culture (including those of Jewish origin who had no formal connection to Jewish culture and heritage in their homeland, despite being identified as Jewish in their passports).

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

In gaining an overview of the numbers of people claiming Russian ancestry and use of Russian, the most recently available government census (2006) is helpful (see Table 1). However, this data only provides a macro level picture of ancestry and language use. Russian ancestry is determined by self-definition and is not able to be cross tabulated with place of birth of self and/or ancestors. The response to the language question provides a partial picture of language use as it refers only to languages spoken at home, so does not reveal anything about patterns of language use outside the home (for example, adult children using the language when they visit their parents). It also tells us nothing at a micro level about how and with whom the language is used at home. Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (2003, p.32), found that approximately two thirds of Russian speakers in Australia (based on 2001 Census) were born outside the Russian Federation, including 17.6% being born in Ukraine, 15.4% in Australia, 9.7% in China, 2.1% in Belarus, 1.0% in each of Kazakhstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan and Latvia and a substantial 18.3% in a range of other countries.

Table 1: Russian Ancestry and Use of Russian at home – Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census

Russian Ancestry			Russian Spoken at Home		
Australia	Victoria*	Melbourne	Australia	Victoria*	Melbourne
67,054	20,108 = 30.0% of Aust	18,114 = 27.0% of Aust	36,502	14,338 = 39.3% of Aust	13,746 = 37.7% of Aust
Both parents Aust born = 9,658(14.4%)	Both parents born in Aust 2200 (10.9%)	Both parents born in Aust = 1,759 (9.7%)			
Either one parent born OS= 8,995 (13.4%)	Either one of parents born overseas = 2325 (11.6%)	Either one of parents born OS = 2,005 (11.1%)			
Both parents born OS = 47,102 (70.3%)	Both parents born overseas 15,183 (75.5%)	Both parents born OS = 14,003 (77.3%)			
TOTAL POP 19,855,292 mill	TOTAL POP 4,932,425 mill	TOTAL POP 3,592,588 mill	15,581,333m speak only English at home	3,668,283m speak only English at home	2,447,490m speak only English at home

* Victoria is the second largest Australian state with Melbourne being the state's capital.

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

Whilst Russian is only 28th in the order of claimed ancestry in Australia, and represent only a tiny proportion of the total Australian population (2006 Census), it is an ancestry group characterised by a high proportion of claimants who are 1st or second generation migrants. Only 14% in Australia have heritage that goes back more than 2 generations, and in Melbourne just under 10%. Whilst there is not a necessary link between claiming Russian ancestry and the speaking of Russian, given that such a large proportion of those claiming ancestry are 1st or 2nd generation migrants, it seems likely that there is a close relationship between speaking Russian at home and a claimed Russian ancestry. From available statistics we can infer that those of Russian ancestry living in Victoria, and in Melbourne, are a little more likely than the national average to be 1st or 2nd generation immigrants (90% vs. 86% for Australia overall), and have a higher level of ongoing use of Russian in the home (only 30% with Russian ancestry, but 39% of Russian speakers at home are Victorians).¹ A number of factors may contribute to this, such as relative length of residence, size and concentration of the community of speakers and the level of external support infrastructure, such as language schools, community organisations and ethnic media.

Russian speakers in Victoria live in an environment that provides substantial opportunities for interacting in Russian and for accessing media and other institutions and services in Russian. For example, they have access to the following:

Local print media – 4 Australian-produced newspapers or magazines in Russian or a mixture of Russian and English (Horizon, Unification, Menorah, Vestnik) produced by different local organisations as well as at least two locally (re)produced and sold versions of diasporic press (Reklama and Panorama), both incorporating local advertising.

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

Local radio – Russian language and culture programs geared to the interests of local Russian speakers are broadcast weekly on 5 different public and community radio stations (total of approximately 10 hours programming).

Free to Air TV – The publicly subsidised Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television channel rebroadcasts MTV Moscow News daily (without subtitles) and also regularly screens other Russian language programming, such as films and documentaries (with subtitles). In addition, the local community TV consortium broadcasts 3 weekly community-made programs by Russian community TV production groups, including one by Shalom TV.

Online media – A burgeoning amount of Russian language content is available via the internet, including newspapers, books, web-streamed radio and TV/video, informational sites, chat sites and blogs, originating from Australia and Victoria, from Russia, the 'near abroad' states and the broader Russian speaking global Diaspora.

Pay TV – A range of Russian language programming is available through 2 separate companies providing pay TV services. One service offers predominantly Russian Federation origin programming, whereas the other includes stations from 'near abroad' states and the global Diaspora (eg. an Israeli Russian language station).

Local community functions and activities – A strong network of community organizations and activities make it possible to be embedded in a strongly Russian milieu and to access a wide range of social and religious events and support services and networks in Russian. Some support initiatives are innovative in responding to perceived needs of different subgroups in the community. For example, the Russian Ethnic Representative Council of Victoria has received support to develop online special interest groups and facilitate the use of online communications within the community and was also involved in auspicing a weekly

teleconference discussion for elderly Russian speakers who are incapacitated and living alone and wish to participate in regular interaction with others in their native language.

Research Methodology

An initial exploratory qualitative investigation was undertaken to identify concepts, trends and breadth of experiences in relation to the research questions with a sample of interviewees representing a cross-section of young and older, more recently arrived and longer settled migrants from the 4th wave of Russian speaking migrants to Melbourne. All informants are from 'near abroad' states of the USSR. The interviews were conducted during 2005, prior to new social networking sites (eg. Facebook) becoming widely accessible. An important criterion for inclusion was that each informant had to be actively using Russian regularly in some aspect of their daily lives. Table 2 summarises the backgrounds of the interviewees. In each interview the experiences and practices not only of the interviewee, but also of their extended family in Australia and beyond were explored.

The identity crisis of Russian speakers from former Soviet states and uncertainties about their status and opportunities in the newly independent nations that resulted from the disintegration of the Soviet Empire appear to be a strong motivation in the decision to migrate of the six families discussed in this paper. In the case of the three families who have a Jewish heritage, the ongoing changes have further reinforced their marginality in the emergent nation. There are four primary sites of identity that are potentially influential for these families – Russia through their language and the culture that it embodies, their heritage homeland state (now emergent nation), their ethno religious background and Australia. Not atypically for Jewish background Russian speaking

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

migrants, one informant, Andrei, had arrived in Australia via Israel, so an additional site of identity for him was that associated with his affiliation to Israeli Jewish culture and the Hebrew language.

The nature of the sample means that the focus has been on identifying themes and exploring the range and nature of responses, rather than on drawing generalisations about how common each of these may be in the broader community of Russian speakers in Australia. The remainder of the paper will focus on three key themes that emerged as pivotal to making sense of how the informants and their families are using ICTs in their lives.

Summary of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Time in Aust	Place of Origin	Heritage Background	Family Location	Main Home Lang.	Location of Primary Network (%)
Viktor	52	14 yrs	Ukraine	Russian Jewish	Australia: wife, 2 children; parents and parents-in-law Extended family in US, Israel	Russian	Local: 100% Homeland: 0% Global: 0%
Nina	29	5 mths	Belarus	Belarussian	Australia: Husband All other immediate family in Byelarus	Russian	Local: 30% Homeland: 60% Global: 10%
Anna	19	5 yrs	Ukraine	Russian Jewish	Australia: Mother, stepfather (Russian background); grandmother; uncles/aunts and cousins Divorced father and his family in US	Russian	Local: 90% Homeland: 0% Global: 10%
Svetlana	50	13 yrs	Belarus	Russian	Australia: husband, son, mother-in-law Brother, nephews, cousins in Canada and US	Russian	Local: 70% Homeland: 0% Global: 30%
Irina	38	8 yrs	Kazakhstan	Russian and Kazakh	Australia: daughter; 2 nd husband (non-Russian)	Russian	Local: 60% Homeland: 30%

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

					Former husband, mother and sisters all in Kazakhstan		Global: 10%
Andrei	25	2 yrs	Ukraine	Russian Jewish	Australia: None Extended family on father's side still in Ukraine; parents and family on his mother's side in Israel and parents wanting to migrate to Australia	Russian	Local: 80% Homeland: 0% Global: 20%

Identity and Interest in Accessing Russian Culture

The interviewees and their families have struggled in different ways to locate themselves and resolve issues of their changing identities in Australia. Three of the interviewees, including the two youngest, Anna and Andrei, have to greater or lesser extent rejected an identity grounded strongly in their identification with their specific background group. They have chosen instead to define their sense of self and social group in ways that reject tightly defined group affiliation based on ethnicity or religion and deliberately adopt a self-styled 'imagined' community of people wanting to make a new life where values and choices are based on shared interests, and mutual respect. For them settling in Australia is associated with the deliberate decision to leave behind the tight boundaries, for some, also discrimination, of being part of communities defined by ethnicity and/or heritage background. For Anna her evolving sense of a new multicultural identity does not involve turning her back on her Russian/Jewish heritage, but rather an integration of this into a broader sense of acceptance of her individuality as something of value to 'share' as she explains:

"I can't say I have a large identity crisis but when I'm with my Russian friends I feel Aussie and when I'm with my Australian friends or Italian friends I still feel Russian. It's a bit of a mix and match but to me it's natural. You always gonna feel different and its good thing I think, you can talk to people about so many things, like you can share."

Through her interactions with others of Russian background she has actually rejected other constructions of self that involved her alignment with a more essentialising 'traditional' values and behaviours associated with her heritage. She reports that despite her being active in attending Russian discos and using Russian when socialising, one of her former boyfriends, who she had met initially through internet dating, had said to her "I can't date you because you are not Russian enough". She is now dating a Russian background person who has been in Australia longer, does not speak Russian very well, but also does not impose expectations of

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

behaviour that are so strongly grounded in aspects of a more traditional understanding of Russian culture.

The other younger adult, Andrei, who had left Ukraine with his family as a child and then had spent 13 years in Israel, has a less tolerant attitude to aspects of his heritage culture and the societies of Ukraine and Israel. He has largely rejected a strong connection into the Russian and broader Jewish community in Melbourne, preferring to develop a culturally diverse social network centred on his places of study and living. As his parents and extended family continue to live in Israel, his main networks in Australia are peer ones and largely involve him in rejecting Russian/Ukrainian/Jewish and/or Israeli grounded identities. This rejection is reflected in his primary local social networks where none of the locals in his top 10 are Russian speakers.

Whilst considerably older when she left her homeland of Kazakhstan, Irina has also incorporated into her identity an alignment with multiculturalism and cultural sharing, although at the same time she maintains a close sense of identification with all Russian speaking states of the former Soviet Union, explaining how

I went to the Sydney Olympicand that was interesting because I had the Russian flag, I had the Kazakhstan flag, Ukrainian flag, and the Australian flag. When I arrived I totally confused everyone, "Which country are you from?" and every time [someone won] from Georgia, from Ukraine, you feel like it's one country.

Yet, whilst proud of her Russian/Kazakh heritage and feeling a close affiliation to other regions of the former Soviet Union, Irina has strongly embraced Australia's cultural diversity to the extent of marrying outside her group (to a Brazilian background person) and having many friends and acquaintances from a range of different backgrounds. As she explains:

"I'm very Australian in the way I live, the way I communicate with people, though the [Russian] cultural heritage is of course very strong I think I

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

started to change when I was little, because I was surrounded by so many people, from different countries and cultures,we always had people coming aroundso I had [contact with] so many cultures”.

These three interviewees only infrequently choose to access Russian language media, from their homeland, the Russian Federation, or the Russian language Diaspora or locally. Their ongoing use of Russian and valuing of the language and heritage is largely associated with their family ties both in Australia, in their homeland and the global Diaspora.

The fairly newly arrived Nina provides a clearly contrasting identity re(construction). She continues to be very much tied to her homeland local context as a Russian speaking Belarussian. Thus, at this stage in her settlement, her primary identity remains a localised Russified one, associated with her sense of attachment to Belarus and her home town of Minsk and those she knows from there, even if they are now living outside Belarus. Whilst she regularly monitors Belarussian-originated sites on the internet, including news services and is in virtually daily contact with Belarus via email, she reports very little interest in events or culture of the Russian 'centre' itself (eg. via TV, internet), and does not seem to have any sense of identification with a broader geolinguistic diaspora of Russian speakers. Whilst she has only just started to make some local friends, she expresses an initial attraction to the culturally diverse nature of Melbourne society.

In contrast, Viktor's identity is strongly centred on his identification and attachment to pan-Russian traditions, culture and values. 80% of his TV viewing comprises mainstream Russian television programming from the Russian Federation, with him explaining that the remaining 20% of his viewing time comprises Australian news and current affairs programming. His interest and engagement with Russian culture extends also to his regular accessing of Russian literature, music, and news, both through online means and locally (eg. through the local

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

library). Furthermore, he has deliberately de-emphasised aspects of his identity associated with his Ukrainian homeland and his Jewish heritage, choosing not to access the satellite TV service that would provide him with the option of Ukrainian and Israeli-based Russian language programming. In fact, the only aspect of Ukrainian life that he maintains an active interest in is the success of Ukrainian football teams.

This pattern of strong ethno linguistic identification with the pan-Russian 'centre' is also evident in the reported preferences and allegiances of others of Viktor's age and (older) generation/s, such as Anna's stepfather (who came from Russia), Anna's grandmother and Svetlana and her husband. Svetlana explains that for her there is no difference between being Belarussian and Russian and she feels an automatic sense of connection to those with a Russian-speaking heritage irrespective of their homeland. All these older generation migrants maintain a high level of engagement with mainstream, Russian Federation originated media, films and literature, and chose to live in Australia within a largely Russian linguistic and cultural milieu, but one that represents a diversity of Russian speakers in terms of their homeland backgrounds and religious affiliations and levels of religious practice. Whilst some are reported to have little desire to participate in and embrace aspects of Australian culture and language, Svetlana and Anna's mother, both deliberately force themselves to also engage with English at home, by watching some English/Australian TV and making an effort to read at least part of the time in English. Despite these efforts, Svetlana explains how it is difficult to develop strong personal bonds with non-Russian Australians and her sense of her ongoing status as an outsider and onlooker:

"I respect Australian people and they respect me but they are from different background and they have their own life and we have our own, maybe we have something in common but I'm not so young to have new friends."

Social Connectedness and the Role of ICTs

The importance of maintaining pre-migration social connections emerges as being the strongest motivator for using technology for communication. A priority in their personal relationships for all interviewees was maintaining contact with family and those they perceived as close friends wherever these people are currently living. Each interviewee was asked to nominate in order of closeness the 10 people who formed their primary social network (defined as people with whom they exchanged information with on a regular basis and upon whom they depended for ongoing material and moral support (Wei, Milroy and Pong, 2000; Stoessel, 2002)). Table 2 indicates for each the proportion of that primary network living locally in Melbourne, in the former homeland and in other parts of the Diaspora globally. Those whose family and friends have all or virtually all dispersed from the homeland have only minimal, if any, ongoing personal contact with that country. For example, Viktor explains how all his close friends and still living family have by this time left Ukraine with his parents and his wife's parents having comparatively recently been sponsored to join his family in Melbourne. As a result he no longer has any regular personal contact with Odessa and no desire for such contact or even to keep abreast of affairs there. However, whilst he primarily spends his time interacting with family and a network of Russian friends living locally in Melbourne, he also is quite active in maintaining connections to old friends from Odessa now living in France, Germany, US and Canada, and has infrequent but regular phone and some email contact with extended family in North America and Israel. Svetlana, who migrated from Belarus at a similar time to Viktor and whose extended family has also dispersed to various places around the world, only has limited continuing links with her homeland through a couple of friends, although she was planning a trip back there to visit them at the time of the interview. The younger immigrants, Anna and Andrei, have even more rapidly lost the direct personal connectedness

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

to homeland, with their younger age at departure seeming to have meant that links were more tenuous. In contrast, both Nina and Irina had migrated leaving most of their extended family still living in their homeland. They have contact at least several times per week and often daily back to their homeland, most commonly by phone (including over the internet) and email, and valued and expected to have ongoing contact into the future.

The dispersal of family and friends around the globe has led to the development of quite active ongoing electronically mediated interactions to maintain this primary network, with email and online chat being preferred by many for the regular maintenance of connections, whereas voice telecommunications are seen as being preferable for closer and more informal social interaction, including for communication with older family members, and to share enjoyment of special occasions, such as birthdays. Older people and middle aged women (eg. Svetlana, Viktor's wife etc) are reported as preferring telephone over email, and also maintain some contact through exchange of letters.

The experiences of Nina and Anna provide an instructive contrast in the location and engagement with those who are closest family and friends. Nina has the fewest family and friends currently living outside her homeland, whereas Anna has all her immediate family living nearby in Melbourne. Nina actively uses online communication as her preferred choice for maintaining connection with peer family members and friends (both email and chat), but prefers to use phone or audio link for contact with her parents in Minsk. Virtually all these interactions are in Russian. After an initial flirtation with online media for connectedness, discussed in greater detail below, Anna, who has spent her teenage years growing up in Melbourne, has focussed her connections primarily around those of Russian background living locally. All in her primary network are Russian speakers with differences in their proficiency in English and

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

Russian depending on factors such as their age and time in Australia, but all but one are living locally in Melbourne. In line with patterns observed elsewhere in other migrant families and communities (see for eg. Bettoni, 1991; Borland, 2006), Anna mainly uses Russian with older family members (both immediate and extended), but with peers, such as cousins and friends, she mainly uses English with some Russian (estimated by her as up to 30%). Now that she is well established in Melbourne, she also has a strong preference for face to face and telephone-based interactions.

The experiences and practices of this group and their families provide only limited evidence of new technological opportunities leading to the development and maintenance of new relationships that reflect a diasporic consciousness and desire to be part of a virtual community defined by a shared heritage. Anna explains how she used an internet-based real-time chat facility to make contacts with Russian speakers virtually in the first year after her arrival in Melbourne when she was making the transition to her new life in Australia. Two new friendships resulted, both of which had been initiated entirely online – one with a young Russian background person living in Canada and the other with a Russian speaker from Georgia now living in Adelaide. The Canadian Russian is now one of the top 10 people Anna nominates in her social network and has visited her in Australia. Five years since their first contact they continue to email and chat 4 to 5 times per week. She has also regularly used online dating sites as a way of connecting with Russian speakers socially and initiating embodied relationships with them. Interestingly though, now that she is well settled in Melbourne and has a local social network, she no longer participates in online interactive means for initiating new relationships based on her Russian heritage.

Maintaining Contacts Online - The Electronic Font Barrier

Online modes of interaction, particularly email and chat, feature highly in the practices of many of the interviewees as means of maintaining connections both locally, and more particularly, globally, with friends and family. As in Warschauer et al's (2002) research on Egyptian professionals, the nature of the online environment appears to be leading participants to adopt language preferences and practices that they perceive as best adapted to the online context. Whilst the principal interviewees all used email, none regularly wrote emails using Cyrillic script, preferring to use romanised Russian or English. However, there were differences within the group about how confident and comfortable they felt about romanisation. Even though she was a librarian by training Svetlana explained that her lack of confidence about and sense of unnaturalness of romanisation led her to prefer to write letters or to seek her adult son's help in transliterating if she needed to write an email. Viktor, an avid computer user, who had started using email to communicate with friends and family abroad soon after his arrival in Australia in the early 1990s, explained that he had got into the habit very early on (before Russian fonts were easily available for use online) of emailing with his friends/family living in other English speaking countries only in English (despite phone and face to face contact with these people always being in Russian), reserving the use of Russian with romanised font for those living in Europe who do not know English.

Based on these experiences it appears that despite the now wide availability of Cyrillic font and its use on webpages, and in interactive media sites and email, at least for those living in the Diaspora, the virtual environment is a social space that appears to be promoting a shift to English, but with romanised Russian as an intermediate stage in this process in personal computer mediated communication.

Conclusion

The experiences and practices for social and diasporic connectedness of the six families suggest that the ties that bind most strongly are those of kin and established personal embodied friendship. Russian is an important language in maintaining these connections and is used predominantly in such interactions other than when the younger interviewees are interacting with peers who are also English speaking and in some email interactions, where romanisation is preferred by all and appears foster a shift towards English, when it is a language also shared by both parties. Online connectedness is experienced as being less emotionally engaging and tends to serve an instrumental purpose in maintaining a connection when other means are not accessible. However, none of the participants in this study preferred online connectedness to embodied interaction. Irrespective of their differences in age and experience in the homeland and in Australia, all interviewees place the highest value on direct person to person contact either face to face or by phone.

For the families in this study as the personal ties to homeland diminish, whether through dispersal or death of family members, the interest in and sense of connection to their homeland state have also diminished. When personal and family connections to the broader global Russian Diaspora exist, these tend to be valued and maintained, but there is little evidence among these families of the initiation of new social connections as part of an emerging global diasporic consciousness despite the opportunities for connectedness that now abound.

Older migrants within the families, who had migrated in their late 30s and 40s in the 1990s, all have maintained a strong pan-Russified identification as part of their identity and maintain their

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

ties and an engagement in embodied and virtual activities and programming that connect them to the language and culture of the Russian centre and its heritage, perhaps reflecting the fact that their primary socialization, schooling and a significant part of their adulthood had been spent within the former Soviet Union. Such identification with a pan-Russified heritage was far less evident in those who had migrated more recently and at a younger age, even though the Russian language had an important and continuing role in their daily language practices. The younger immigrants through the process of their settlement appear to be negotiating in different ways and with different emphases identities that reflect what might be considered to be “third space” (Bhabha, 1998) consciousness in which they have moved beyond simple boundaries grounded in ethnicity, linguistic heritage or birth country.

The findings of this study, whilst necessarily tentative, provide a basis for further exploration by extending the research to a larger sample in order to evaluate how representative the insights gained are across a broader cross-section of speakers. In particular, it will be valuable to explore the extent to which the status and location of the homeland (Russian Federation vs. former Soviet state vs. another country), ethno religious background and age and time of migration are reflected in how people in the larger community of Australian speakers of Russian are (re)negotiating their identities and associated daily language practices and adopt the power of ICTs to support them in maintaining and developing culture and relationships.

References

- Bettoni, C.: 1991, 'Language variety among Italians: anglicisation, attrition and attitudes', in Romaine, S. (ed.), *Language in Australia*, Cambridge:, pp. 263–269.
- Bhabha, H. : 1998, 'Culture's in between', in Bennett, D. (ed.), *Multicultural states: Rethinking difference and identity*, London, pp. 29-36.

Open Road 2008: Mediated Connectedness

Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs: 2003, *The People of Australia: Statistics from the 2001 Census*, Commonwealth of Australia.

Debski, R.: 2003, 'Use of the internet in the maintenance of Polish', paper presented at the 'Community languages in practice' workshop, University of Melbourne.

Gandel, N.: 2006, 'Native language and internet usage', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 182, pp. 25-40.

Gomez-Pena, G.: 2001, 'The virtual barrio @ the other frontier (or the Chicago interneta)', in Trend, D. (ed.), *Reading Digital Culture*, Maldon, Mass., pp. 281-286.

Gurak, L. J.: 1999, 'The promise and the peril of social action in cyberspace: *ethos*, delivery, and the protests over MarketPlace and the Clipper chip', in Kollock, P. and Smith, M.A. (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*, London, pp. 243-263.

Kipp, S. and Clyne, M.: 2003, 'Trends in the shift from community languages: Insights from the 2001 Census', *People and Place*, 11(1), pp. 33-41.

Kollock, P. and Smith, M. A.: 1999, *Communities in Cyberspace*, London.

Kolstoe, P.: 1995, *Russians in the Former Soviet Republics*, Bloomington.

Kouzmin, L.: 1988, 'Language use and language maintenance in two Russian communities in Australia', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 72, pp. 51-65.

Li Wei, Milroy, L. and Pong, S.C.: 2000, 'A two-step sociolinguistic analysis of code-switching and language choice: the example of a bilingual Chinese community in Britain', in Li Wei (ed.), *The Bilingualism Reader*, London, pp. 188-209.

Morris, M. and McCombe, C.: 2002, *Report on Victorian NESB Communities and the Internet*. Vicnet and ECCV, Melbourne.

Rheingold, H.: 2000, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, (Revised Edition), Cambridge Mass.

Stoessel, S.:2002, 'Investigating the role of social networks in language maintenance and shift', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 153, pp. 93-131.

Warschauer, M., El Said, G. R. and Zohry, A.: 2002, 'Language choice online: globalization and identity in Egypt', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 7/4, pp. 1-16.

Wellman, B. and Gulia, M.: 1999, 'Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don't ride alone', in Kollock, P. and Smith, M.A. (eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace*, London, pp. 167-194.

¹ Higher levels of language maintenance in Victoria than other states have similarly been documented for other language groups (Kipp and Clyne 2003).