



MEDIATED CONNECTEDNESS: PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MIGRANTS TO MELBOURNE

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RUSSIAN

IN THE WORLD TODAY

- Important national and regional lingua franca of 2nd major world power in Soviet era (1917- 1991)
- Role as a lingua franca diminishing; still a major world language – 170mill speakers globally
- Primary language of ethnically diverse peoples – allegiances to Russian based on coalescence of cultural & linguistic associations and needs; many live in what are now known as the “near abroad” (former Soviet republic) states (“beached” → radical identity crisis (Laitin))
- Growing “far abroad” diaspora of migrants; ethnoreligious and economic influences



VIRTUAL VS EMBODIED COMMUNICATION

- Declining geopolitical reach simultaneous with explosion in potential for ICTs to enhance diasporic global connectedness
- "in cyberspace the economies of interaction, communication and coordination are different than ...face-to-face" (Kollock & Smith, 1999:3)
- Potential for new forms of 'virtual communities' for dispersed people who share common interests or backgrounds (Rheingold, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999)
- Russian speakers in Victoria – many opportunities for embodied and virtual communication to maintain social and personal connection:
 - local print media
 - local radio
 - free to air TV
 - online media
 - pay TV
 - local community activities



Table 1: Russian Ancestry and Use of Russian at home – ABS 2006 Census

Russian Ancestry			Russian Spoken at Home		
Australia	Victoria*	Melbourne	Australia	Victoria*	Melbourne
67,054 Both parents Aust born = 9,658(14.4%) Either one parent born OS= 8,995 (13.4%) Both parents born OS = 47,102 (70.3%)	20,108 = 30.0% of Aust Both parents born in Aust 2200 (10.9%) Either one of parents born overseas = 2325 (11.6%) Both parents born overseas 15,183 (75.5%)	18,114 = 27.0% of Aust Both parents born in Aust = 1,759 (9.7%) Either one of parents born OS = 2,005 (11.1%) Both parents born OS = 14,003 (77.3%)	36,502	14,338 = 39.3% of Aust	13,746 = 37.7% of Aust
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

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How and to what extent do Russian speakers 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?
- How are language and communication practices in CMC affected by the technologies that are being used?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interviews, including information on:
social networks & community engagement
media usage
language practices and preferences
(changing) identity
migration history

Material reported on here collected from 6 in-depth interviews with first generation migrants about themselves and their families – all migrated within last 14 years from 'near' abroad states and continue to use Russian regularly in their daily lives. 2 men (Viktor, Andrei) and 4 women (Nina, Anna, Irina and Sveta), aged 19-50. 4/6 have Jewish ethnicity/heritage, although none practise.



Summary of Interviewees

Pseudo-nym	Age	Time in Aust	Place of Origin	Heritage Backgrnd	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); grandmother; uncles/aunts and cousins Divorced father and 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) Former husband, mother and sisters all in Kazakhstan	Russian	Local: 60% Homeland: 30% 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	Russian	Local: 80% Homeland: 0% Global: 20%



SUMMARY OF THEMES

:

Identity and Interest in Accessing
Russian Culture

Social Connectedness and the
Role of ICTs

Maintaining contacts online - the
electronic font barrier





THEME 1: Identity and Interest in Accessing Russian Culture

- 3 (youngest 2: Anna and Andrei, and Irina) embraced **'transcultural'** identities; rejected alignment with 'traditional' values of background --> **infrequently access media from homeland or Russia**; ongoing use of Russian associated with social ties to family and friends
- Nina - newest arrival; **in contrast**, identity very tied to homeland, a **localised** (ie homeland area specific, ie **Belarussian**) identity --> only media and online sites that directly connects her back to Belarus; doesn't strongly identify with broader community of Russian speakers
- Older generations (Viktor, Sveta etc - 40+) have strong identification and **attachment to pan-Russian traditions** and values, prefer mainstream Russian-oriented media to former homeland state media





THEME 2: Social Connectedness and the Role of ICTs

- Importance of **maintaining pre-migration social connections** **strongest motivator** for using ICTs – **pattern of dispersal** or continuing homeland location of family and friends strongly **influenced extent and nature of use of ICTs**, eg. Irina/Nina vs Viktor vs Anna
- active ongoing **electronically mediated interactions** to maintain this **primary network**; email and online chat being preferred by most for the regular maintenance of connections; voice telecommunications still preferred for closer, more informal social interaction
- Younger ones at time of migration **most quickly** lost homeland ties
- Very limited evidence of ICT-supported new relationships linked to diasporic consciousness (eg. Anna)





THEME 3:

Maintaining contacts online – the electronic font barrier

- **email** and **chat** feature highly in maintaining connections with primary network locally and globally
- online environment → scripting practices perceived best adapted to context, eg. none regularly wrote emails in Cyrillic script, preferring romanised Russian or Eng (eg. Viktor)
- **for these 6 speakers**, virtual environment – a social space promoting a shift to English, with romanised Russian as an intermediate stage





CONCLUSIONS

- **Ties that bind** most strongly - kin and personal embodied friendship
- **Russian** primary language for maintaining these connections - other than by younger gen for communication with other also Eng. Spkg peers
- Online connectedness – experienced as **less emotionally engaging**; valued instrumentally in maintaining connections when other means not available
- None preferred online to embodied interaction!
- Online and cable access to specific homeland origin state news and culture etc diminishes as personal ties to homeland lost
- Older gen, Soviet era socialised, maintain strong pan-Russian identification and interest/engagement with Russian 'centre'
- Younger immigrants negotiating in different ways "third space" consciousness (Bhabha, 1998); moved beyond simple boundaries grounded in ethnicity and linguistic heritage