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THE RUSSIAN ACCENT AS A MARKER OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AMONG IMMIGRANTS IN GERMANY: BETWEEN EXPRESSION AND PERCEPTION

ABSTRACT

This article examines how a foreign accent serves as a marker of national identity among Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany. Drawing on a 2022 survey of 392 participants, it analyzes the Russian accent's role within broader identity indicators such as language, culture, and history. Using factor and correlation analysis, the study finds that the Russian accent is statistically significant, though a peripheral identity marker – most relevant among older immigrants, those with limited German proficiency, and frequent Russian language users. While most do not use their accent consciously to express identity, it functions as a yet recognizable signal of national belonging. The findings highlight the need to consider accent in discussions on integration, discrimination, and identity negotiation. Future research should explore post-2022 changes and the role of foreign accents in social categorization and integration.

KEYWORDS

national identity, foreign accent, Russian immigrants, integration, perception, Germany, migration linguistics, identity markers

Introduction

In contemporary migration studies, language is widely recognized as a key component of identity formation and integration (Berry, 2005). Yet within the broader linguistic landscape, accent remains an understudied phenomenon – especially as a potential marker of national identity (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Uzun, 2023). This study focuses on the case of Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany, examining the role their foreign accent plays in expressing national belonging.

Today, the study of foreign accents is relevant for migration linguistics not only from the perspective of the host community, but also in matters of the self-identification of immigrants. While existing research often centers on how host societies perceive accents – frequently linking them to discrimination or social stereotyping (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Prange

De Oliveira, 2019; Popova, 2021) – less is known about how immigrants themselves relate to their accents. Are accents simply linguistic traces of origin, or can they become meaningful expressions of identity, especially in environments where national affiliations are politicized or scrutinized (Brubaker, 2004; Grajzl, Eastwood & Dimitrova-Grajzl, 2018)?

The Russian accent holds particular relevance in this context. Amid ongoing geopolitical tensions and the presence of more than two million Russian speakers in Germany (Lübbe & Lokshin, 2020), it functions not only as a phonetic feature but potentially as a cultural signal – whether used consciously or not. This study draws on theories of national and hybrid identity (Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder, 2001; Gugenberger, 2010) to explore whether the Russian accent operates as an identity marker, how its relevance varies across demographic groups, and what this reveals about integration and self-identification processes.

Theoretical background

The methodology of the theoretical part of this study incorporates a wide range of scientific monographs and articles dedicated to the concepts of “identity” and “national identity”. Among the key sources are Smith (1991), Haller (1999), Gardt (2000), Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder (2001), Khrenov (2007), Broszinsky-Schwabe (2011), Kochetkov (2012), Drobisheva (2013) and Kneidiger (2013). The theoretical foundation also includes survey data collected in Russia, such as the 2018 representative population survey and the 2013 Valdai Discussion Club materials, which focused on the topic of Russian national identity. Furthermore, the study examines the role of foreign accents as a potential tool of expression of national identity, as discussed in Błaszczak and Żygis (2019).

National vs. ethnic identity

National and ethnic identities are key components of social identity, shaping how individuals define their belonging. National identity typically refers to a shared sense of cultural values, language, history, and political affiliation within a nation-state (Smith, 1991). In contrast, ethnic identity centers on common ancestry, cultural traditions, and historical narratives, often independent of political borders (Phinney, 1990). While national identity is closely tied to citizenship and institutional structures, ethnic identity is more fluid and can persist across generations – even in migration contexts (Anderson, 2006). Both are now viewed as dynamic, shaped by individual experience, historical change, and globalization (Brubaker, 2004). State policy, media, and formal education shape national identity, while ethnic identity is typically reinforced through family and community (Huntington, 2004; Verkuyten, 2018). A 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that 91% of respondents across more than 20 countries view speaking the national language as central to national identity. Accents – audible traces of linguistic origin – can reinforce community belonging or

lead to social exclusion. Foreign-accented individuals are often subject to bias, which can affect integration and identity development (Uzun, 2023).

Russian national identity presents unique complexities due to the country's multiethnic makeup and turbulent historical transitions. While events such as the 1917 Revolution and the fall of the Soviet Union disrupted political structures, researchers emphasize a strong sense of historical continuity and shared cultural traditions (Teshkov, 2019). The concept of national identity has become central to the Russian state's internal policy, with leaders like Vladimir Putin framing it as essential to national cohesion. Surveys show that Russians tend to identify most with their nationality, their countrymen, and Orthodox Christianity, with weaker identification toward European or narrower ethnic affiliations (Drobisheva, 2012, 2013). Core components of Russian national identity include language, historical pride (e.g., World War II, space exploration), cultural heritage, and religious affiliation (Arytnova, 2012; Pipiya, 2019). Within this context, language – particularly the Russian language – emerges as a unifying marker. In the context of the Russian Federation, national identity is often framed through language and state-centered cultural narratives rather than ethnic affiliation. While Russia is home to many ethnic groups, the dominant national identity promoted through institutions and media is tied to the Russian language and shared historical memory (Karaganov et al., 2014; Arytnova, 2012). This study therefore interprets the Russian accent as a marker of national, rather than ethnic, belonging.

Acculturation Strategies and Hybrid Identity

Psychological acculturation involves changes in identity, attitudes, and behavior as individuals adapt to a new cultural environment (Derwing, 2003; Kumagai, 2013). Contact with the host society leads to shifts in how immigrants perceive themselves and others, often producing hybrid forms of identity (Gugenberger, 2010).

Four acculturation strategies are commonly identified:

- **Integration:** maintaining the native language while acquiring proficiency in the host language (often involving code-mixing).
- **Assimilation:** full shift to the host society's language and norms, often resulting in identity and L1 attrition.
- **Separation:** minimal contact with host society, continued use of the native language.
- **Oscillation (Marginalization):** unstable switching between languages and norms, sometimes linked to identity insecurity.

Hybrid identity models challenge rigid binaries, recognizing that identity can reflect simultaneous affiliations with multiple nations or cultures (Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder, 2001). In contemporary Europe, debates around integration often center on whether immigrants should assimilate or preserve

their cultural norms. Studies show that perceptions of immigrants as cultural threats increase when national identity is perceived as long-standing and intrinsic (Grajzl, Eastwood & Dimitrova-Grajzl, 2018). In such environments, markers like accent gain prominence as cues in social categorization. As accent remains largely outside conscious control, it becomes a powerful – sometimes stigmatizing – signal of origin and belonging.

This study argues that among such “bright markers”, accent deserves more attention in the context of national identity, integration, and social perception.

Accent in Identity Studies

Accent refers to distinctive speech patterns shaped by phonological and prosodic features that vary across regions and social groups (Lippi-Green, 2012). Accents are universal – everyone speaks with one. What is considered a “foreign” accent typically depends on the listener’s own linguistic baseline. In multicultural contexts, accent plays a key role in social categorization, especially because it is largely outside the speaker’s conscious control and is shaped by neurolinguistic and sociolinguistic factors (Flege, 1995).

A foreign accent can manifest both as a voluntary and involuntary feature of speech, influenced by various sociolinguistic and neurocognitive factors. On the one hand, the involuntary nature of accent is primarily shaped by neurocognitive mechanisms, particularly the critical period hypothesis, which suggests that individuals who acquire a second language after early childhood often retain a foreign accent due to decreased neuroplasticity (Li, 2018; Best & Tyler, 2007). The strength of an accent can also be influenced by age of acquisition, frequency of exposure, and motivation to sound native-like, with younger individuals and those exposed to the second language at an early age showing greater success in achieving native-like pronunciation (Flege, 1995; Vanhove, 2013). However, complete elimination of a foreign accent is rare, particularly for those who acquire a second language later in life (Moyer, 2013).

In immigrant communities, accent is often overlooked as a barrier to integration, despite its real-world consequences: it affects job prospects, social trust, and perceptions of intelligence or credibility (Munro, 2003; Sergest et al., 2006; Prange De Oliveira, 2019; Nejari et al., 2020; Popova, 2021; Dollmann, Kogan & Weißmann, 2024). Recent research shows that individuals with stronger accents are often rated more negatively by native listeners across traits like education, intelligence, and success (Popova, 2021). As visual cues (e.g., appearance) become less central in social judgment, accent has taken on a more prominent role (Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, & Spelke, 2009; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Rakić, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2011). It is often seen as a more “authentic” indicator of background, particularly because it resists manipulation. Thus, accent can either help form a favorable impression or trigger social bias – depending on context. Notably, different accents carry different status implications. Western European accents (e.g., French, English, Italian) are often associated with prestige in Germany, while Eastern European, Turkish,

and Russian accents are more likely to be stigmatized (Reinke, 2008; Settineri, 2011; Dragojevic, Giles, Beck, & Tatum, 2017). In some contexts, accent discrimination can affect hiring, housing, or promotion prospects (Krings & Olivares, 2007; Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010; Prange De Oliveira, 2019).

On the one hand, individuals may intentionally retain their accent as a marker of cultural identity, pride, or resistance to full assimilation. For those who strongly identify with their home culture, the accent can serve as a marker of solidarity and authenticity. Gatabonton, Trofimovich, and Magid (2005) found that speakers who closely identify with their ethnic group may subconsciously resist adopting a native-like pronunciation. Other studies explore intentional retention of the accent. For instance, Błaszczak and Żygis (2014) found that 63% of Polish adolescents in Berlin reported speaking German with a deliberate Polish accent to express pride in their national identity. Similarly, McCrocklin and Link (2016) found that although most ESL students preferred to sound native, many were also proud that their accent revealed their origins. These findings suggest that accents are not merely passive traces of origin but can serve as active identity signals – sometimes even chosen as part of cultural positioning.

In this study, the Russian accent is examined as a potential identity marker within a German multicultural context. While other identity signals – language, religion, traditions – have been widely studied, the accent has received less attention as an expressive form of national belonging. This research seeks to fill that gap.

Goals and objectives

The present study examined Russian accent among factors of national identity expression. Despite the fact that there is a large number of studies devoted to accent as one of the most important factors of national and ethnic categorization, only a few studies consider accent among the ways of expressing national identity.

Thus, the main **goal** of the present study is to find out whether the Russian accent can be considered as a factor in expressing national identity in Germany and to determine what place it occupies in the hierarchy of expressive forms of Russian national identity.

In detail, the study aims to achieve the following **objectives**:

- to assess the strength of Russian national identity among Russian immigrants in Germany;
- to categorize and rank the different forms of national identity expression among Russian immigrants in Germany;
- to determine the significance and role of the Russian accent within the hierarchy of national identity factors;
- to investigate the emphasis of the Russian accent with other factors.

Materials and methods

Survey Design

Based on questionnaires from representative surveys of the Russian population on indicators of national identity (Drobizheva, 2012; Drobizheva, 2013; Pipiya, 2019), as well as on reports at the Valdai discussion forum 2013 (Karaganov et al., 2014), a six-part online questionnaire was developed that included closed-ended, semi-open-ended and open-ended questions.

Section 1 gathered demographic data: age, gender, nationality, birthplace, education level, current residence, and duration of stay in Germany. It also collected self-reported German language proficiency, prior phonetics training, and the frequency of Russian language use. To supplement subjective accent self-assessment, participants were asked whether native German speakers had ever noticed or commented on their accent. They were also asked to provide examples of such situations.

Sections 2 and 3 focused on self-identification as Russian and the personal significance of national identity.

Section 4 included 12 statements addressing identity and the role of accent (e.g., “It is important to me that people know I am Russian”, “I am not bothered if my accent reveals my background”). Participants responded using a 3-point scale (agree/disagree/neutral).

Section 5 presented 11 expressive markers of Russian national identity, each rated on a 5-point scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important). These included: celebration of Russian national holidays, Orthodoxy, Russian language, Russian culture, Russian history, birth in the Russian Federation/former Soviet Union, Russian accent, famous people from Russia, Russian cuisine, Russian traditions, Russian soul.

Section 6 allowed for open-ended comments to elaborate on identity perceptions and accent-related experiences.

Participant Criteria and Sampling

Participants were recruited through German universities (e.g., Humboldt University Berlin, FUB), Russian-speaking community organizations, and social media platforms such as Facebook groups for Russians in Germany.

To participate, individuals had to meet the following criteria:

- be of legal age;
- identify as Russian;
- speak Russian as a mother tongue;
- have lived in Germany for more than one year.

The final sample included 392 respondents:

- gender: 330 female, 62 male;
- age: 202 were aged 18–34; 181 aged 35–59; 9 were 60+;

- residence: Respondents lived across all 16 German federal states;
- education: 85% held higher education degrees;
- immigration profile: 88% arrived in Germany as adults;

Language proficiency varied:

- 56% reported a high proficiency in German (C1–C2);
- 35% rated themselves at B1–B2 level;
- 46% had never formally studied German phonetics;
- 52% reported using Russian “very often” or “often” in daily life.

These data suggest a significant portion of participants likely retained a noticeable Russian accent, making them relevant subjects for this study.

Methods

The data were analyzed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics 26.0. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was applied to assess sample adequacy ($p = <0.001$). Factor analysis was used to identify clusters of identity markers and their structural relationships. Correlation analyses explored links between national identity indicators and three variables:

- age group (18–34 vs. 35–59);
- german language proficiency (A1–A2, B1–B2, C1–C2);
- frequency of the Russian language use in everyday life.

All statistical results were adjusted for sampling weights where applicable.

5 Results

According to the survey results, 26% of respondents consider a foreign accent to be an indicator of nationality, despite the fact that the majority of respondents do not consciously use an accent to emphasize their nationality and cannot determine the degree of the accent (Fig. 1.). A larger number of respondents disagreed (38%) with the statement “Russian accent points out my national identity” and 19% of respondents believed that they would speak without a strong Russian accent. The other test subjects (17%) abstained.

In this regard, it should also be mentioned that the large number of respondents (63%) are not ashamed of their Russian accent (Fig. 2). Only 10% stated the opposite, and 17% believed that they would speak without a Russian accent. The rest, 10%, abstained.

Factor analysis showed that all markers of the national identity of Russian immigrants in Germany were clearly divided into two components – the core and the periphery. The core includes Russian culture, Russian language and Russian history (Table 1). The second component contains peripheral markers: celebration of Russian national holidays, Orthodoxy, birth in the Russian

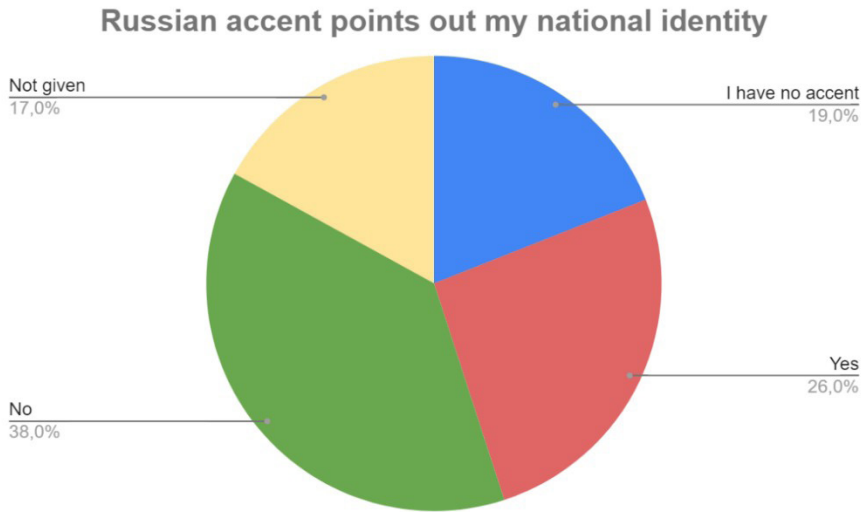


Fig. 1. Position on the foreign accent as a form of expression of national identity. Source: drawn by the author.

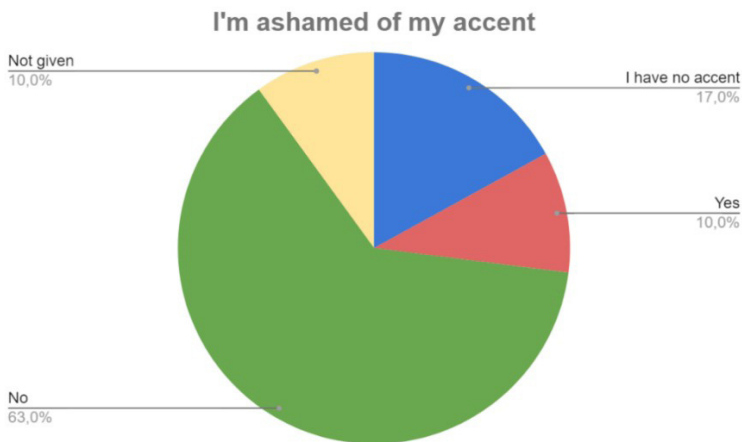


Fig. 2. Position on the statement regarding shame and accent. Source: drawn by the author.

Federation / former Soviet Union, Russian accent, famous personalities from Russia, Russian cuisine, Russian traditions, Russian soul. The KMO sampling adequacy index is $p = <0.001$, which indicates the adequacy of the analysis. According to the analysis, the Russian language and accent are indicators of Russian national identity. The division of all indicators of national identity into core and peripheral is significant not only for this study but also for future research in this area.

Table 1. Results of factor analysis of components of national identity expression of Russian immigrants (Varimax).

Rotated component matrix

	Components	
	1	2
Russian language	0.077	0.837
Russian culture	0.305	0.835
Russian history	0.3	0.685
Russian accent	0.734	-0.038
Russian traditions	0.688	0.321
Orthodoxy	0.676	0.231
Famous people from Russia	0.665	0.197
Russian soul	0.638	0.269
Celebration of Russian national holidays	0.617	0.461
Russian cuisine	0.506	0.387
Birth in the Russian Federation/former USSR	0.476	0.274

Source: drawn by the author.

Next, a correlation analysis was carried out between indicators of national identity and the age of immigrants (Table 2). All respondents were divided into two groups, namely Group A (aged 18-35) and Group B (aged 36-59). Looking at the correlation between the age and the importance of individual forms of expression of Russian national identity, it can be concluded that group B was primarily influenced by peripheral factors, namely Orthodoxy, being born on the territory of the Russian Federation or the former Soviet Union, the Russian accent, famous Russian people that prove to be more important in contrast to Group A. It should be emphasized that, with the exception of Russia's history, the core factors remain stable in significance in both groups. Russian history is the only core factor that is rated as more important by one group, in this case, Group B. The results are based on bilateral criteria assuming equality of variance. For each significant pair, the key from the smaller category appears in the category with the larger mean. Criteria were adjusted for all pairwise comparisons in the row of each further table using the Bonferroni correction.

When considering the correlation between the level of German language proficiency of respondents and indicators of national identity, it should be emphasized that Russian culture, Russian history, Russian accent, famous Russian personalities, Russian traditions are more significant for respondents with language level A1-A2 than for respondents with language level C1-C2 (Table 3). Despite the critical period hypothesis, constant use of the host society's language naturally weakens some of the accent, especially at early ages due to higher neuroplasticity (Vanhove, 2013), in case of having developed ear for music (Patel & Iversen, 2007; Sučić, 2021; Popova & Tokmakova, 2022) and/or if a person is highly motivated to reduce their accent and constantly works on it (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, Snow 2000), these factors are considered nowadays

Table 2. Results of correlation analysis of age and national identity indicators.

	Age	
	18-35 (mean)	36-59 (mean)
Russian history	3.7	4.0*
Birth in the Russian Federation/former USSR	3.2	3.6*
Orthodoxy	2.6	3.2*
Famous people from Russia	2.8	3.2*
Russian accent	2.0	2.3*
Russian language	4.5	4.5
Russian culture	4.1	4.3
Russian cuisine	3.8	3.9
Russian soul	3.9	3.9
Celebration of Russian national holidays	3.1	3.2
Russian traditions	2.8	3.0

* - statistically significant indicators ($p = 0.05$)

Source: drawn by the author.

more important than the age at which a person started learning a language. And, of course, as one masters the German language (provided for the assimilation acculturation strategy), they gradually lose their primary national: a high level of language proficiency allows one to actively participate in all spheres of life of the host culture. Russian accent is the only indicator that remains statistically more significant than others for respondents with language level B1-B2.

Table 3. Results of correlation analysis of the level of German language proficiency and national identity indicators.

	Level of German language proficiency			
	No skills (mean)	A1-A2 (mean)	B1-B2 (mean)	C1-C2 (mean)
Russian culture	4	4.7*	4.2	4.1
Russian history	3	4.5*	3.9*	3.7
Celebration of Russian national holidays	3	3.9*	3.2	3
Famous people from Russia	3	3.8*	3.1	2.9
Russian traditions	3	3.6*	2.9*	2.8
Russian accent	3	2.6*	2.3*	2
Russian language	5	4.5	4.5	4.5
Russian soul	3	4.3	3.9	3.8
Russian cuisine	5	4.2	3.9	3.8
Birth in the Russian Federation/former USSR	3	3.6	3.4	3.4
Orthodoxy	3	3.4	3.1	2.6

* - statistically significant indicators ($p = 0.05$)

Source: drawn by the author.

The results of a correlation analysis of national identity indicators and the frequency of use of the Russian language in everyday life (Table 4) allow us to conclude that the importance of the Russian language as an indicator of national identity does not depend on the frequency of use of the Russian language in everyday life. It should be emphasized that almost all indicators of national identity, core and peripheral, are important for the respondents who “speak Russian very often”.

Table 4. Results of correlation analysis of the frequency of use of the Russian language and national identity indicators.

	Frequency of use of the Russian language				
	Never (mean)	Very rarely (mean)	Rarely (mean)	Often (mean)	Very often (mean)
Russian language	3.2	4.1*	4.4*	4.6*	4.7*
Russian culture	3.2	4.1	4.1	4.2*	4.4*
Orthodoxy	2.1	2.7	2.4	3.1*	3.6*
Russian traditions	2.3	2.3	2.8	3.0*	3.5*
Russian soul	3.3	3.7	3.7	4.0	4.1
Russian history	3.2	3.7	3.7	3.9	4.1
Russian cuisine	3.1	3.4	3.8	3.9	4.1
Birth in the Russian Federation/former USSR	2.8	3.2	3.1	3.5	3.9*
Celebration of Russian national holidays	2.4	2.8	2.9	3.2	3.8*
Famous people from Russia	2.3	2.8	2.9	3.0	3.6*
Russian accent	1.8	1.9	1.9	2.3	2.6*

*- statistically significant indicators ($p = 0.05$)

Source: drawn by the author.

Discussion

The present findings – that a Russian accent serves as a peripheral yet statistically significant marker of national identity – are broadly consistent with recent research on immigrant identities. Like our respondents, Russian-speaking diaspora communities typically emphasize language and core cultural elements over accent when self-defining identity. For example, a 2024 Pew global survey found an overwhelming 91% consider speaking the national language central to national identity. This underscores why Russian immigrants in Germany view Russian language, culture, and history as “core” identity markers, with accent more marginal. Recent qualitative work by Nedelsky (2023) on everyday notions of Germanness likewise notes that native Germans perceive language proficiency as a key gauge of belonging – often flagging a foreign accent as an obvious sign of immigrant status (Nedelsky, 2023). Such external perceptions reinforce our finding that accent operates as an “audible” identity cue even

when immigrants themselves downplay its importance. In line with this, our previous study on the topic argues that pronunciation has become a reliable proxy for origin in diverse societies “since [accents] are practically impossible to control” and highlights that accents, more than visible traits, now function as involuntary identity signals in multicultural settings.

Notably, recent studies expand on the social consequences of foreign-accented speech, reinforcing our discussion of accent as a “relational signal.” The experiment in Germany found that a strong Russian accent triggered negative stereotypes about a speaker’s education, income, and success (Popova, 2021). This aligns with our participants’ concerns that a thick accent can invite bias or stigma. At the same time, it was reported no significant bias in perceived personal qualities (e.g., trustworthiness), suggesting that accent mainly influences perceived competence/status rather than likability. This nuance complements our finding that most Russian immigrants are *not ashamed* of their accent (63% felt no shame) and do not intentionally use it to express identity – yet they remain aware that others might draw conclusions from it. In fact, recent sociolinguistic research underscores that a foreign accent is a salient ethnic marker that often “trumps” other identity cues. Schmaus and Kristen (2021) describe foreign accent as a “strong cue for ethnic group membership” that can even outweigh visible appearance in how listeners categorize someone. This external salience helps explain why our respondents experience their Russian accent as an unintended emblem of origin – one that gains significance in social interaction rather than through deliberate expression (Schmaus & Kristen, 2021).

Encouragingly, our finding that accent’s relevance increases under specific conditions (older age, lower German proficiency, frequent Russian use) is also observed in recent literature. Older migrants and those less linguistically assimilated tend to retain stronger accents and attach more meaning to them. Lucchetti (2024), studying post-Soviet immigrants in Germany and Israel, notes that first-generation adults often stress heritage language maintenance as the key to identity, whereas youth adopting the host language lose the audible markers of origin (Lucchetti, 2024). This generational shift resonates with our data showing older Russians value accent and other peripheral markers more than youth. It also echoes the finding that as German proficiency rises, attachment to accent diminishes – consistent with assimilation theories and evidence that many immigrants try to reduce accents over time to improve integration. In some cases, however, immigrants may consciously balance between accents to construct hybrid identities. McCrocklin and Link (2016) documented that some ESL learners fear “losing” their native accent could mean losing a part of themselves, reflecting the complex interplay between accent and identity (McCrocklin & Link, 2016). While such conscious attachment to accent appears to be the exception, it highlights that for a minority, accent can symbolize personal history – even as most view it as an unintentional byproduct of bilingualism.

Importantly, the role of accent as an identity marker – peripheral in self-conception but potent in social perception – is not unique to Russian speakers.

Recent migration studies on other groups in Germany reveal striking parallels. A clear example is found in Schmaus and Kristen's (2021) field experiment on hiring discrimination: callers to German employers who spoke with a Turkish accent faced significantly lower callback rates, even when using identical German words. By contrast, callers with a Turkish name but no audible accent did not experience this penalty (Schmaus & Kristen, 2021). This experiment demonstrates that accent can activate ethnic bias more immediately than ethnic name cues, reinforcing the idea that accent "betrays" one's immigrant background in crucial interactions. Likewise, Dollmann et al. (2024) report that second-generation ethnic minority youth with noticeable foreign accents in Germany tend to be tracked into jobs with lower communication demands, limiting their upward mobility. In their longitudinal study, youths who spoke German with near-native pronunciation enjoyed broader opportunities, whereas strongly accented speakers were more often relegated to roles where language skills are "less essential" (Dollman et al., 2024). These findings expand on our discussion by showing how an accent, beyond signaling identity, can tangibly impact integration outcomes like education-to-work transitions. They also underscore a point of agreement across studies: to outsiders, an accent marks one as "other", often eliciting bias or exclusion regardless of the speaker's own identity intentions.

Comparative research in other multicultural contexts similarly supports and contextualizes our results. Studies in North America and Western Europe have long noted that immigrants' accents can be sources of prejudice (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Timming, 2017). Recent contributions detail how these dynamics play out in diverse communities. In Germany, the Russian accent is considered one of the most unpleasant along with Arabic and Turkish (Settineri, 2011). Such accounts mirror the stigma attached to Russian-accented German in our study's current and previous experiments (Popova, 2021). In Israel, by contrast, Russian immigrants form a large minority, and studies suggest that Slavic accents there have become a normalized part of the linguistic landscape (Remennick & Prashizky, 2018). This indicates that the significance of an accent can vary by host society – being more stigmatized in some contexts than others – yet the underlying theme of accent as an audible differentiator remains. Indeed, a recent literature review by Uzun (2023) confirms that across settings, foreign-accented individuals often experience a sense of "otherness," and accents serve as "markers of non-belonging" that can trigger identity negotiations (Uzun, 2023).

There are also nuanced contrasts in how immigrant groups engage with accent. Unlike many first-generation Russians who arrived as adults, some communities have a large second-generation that speaks the host language natively – effectively erasing accent as an identity marker for them. Germany's Turkish-origin population illustrates this: having been in the country for decades, most younger Turkish Germans are native speakers of German without a foreign accent, so their sense of identity hinges on cultural and religious factors more than on accent. In lieu of an inherited accent, a sociolect known as

“Kiezdeutsch” has emerged in multiethnic urban areas, blending Turkish and German slang. Linguists note that this sociolect – spoken playfully by some second-generation youth of various backgrounds – serves as a peer-group **identity code** rather than a sign of imperfect language acquisition (Kern, 2015). The Turkish German case highlights an interesting counterpoint: whereas our Russian participants did not consciously use their accent to assert identity, some immigrant-origin youths do adopt a stylized accent or dialect as a badge of group identity, which allies with Blaszcak & Zygis’s findings (2019) but contradicts the obtained results. For the youth it is a form of code-switching, distinct from the unintentional foreign accent retained by first-generation speakers. The common thread is that the language style (whether an involuntary accent or a chosen dialect) becomes entwined with identity negotiations in diaspora communities.

Overall, recent scholarship strongly converges with our study’s implications. Across immigrant groups, proficiency and accent are tightly linked to integration: as immigrants master the host language and potentially lose their accent, they often gain social acceptance (sometimes at the cost of downplaying their origin), whereas a heavy accent can perpetuate perceptions of foreignness. The consensus is that foreign accents “signal” identity in social interactions, often more than the speaker may wish, although there are exceptions. This can reinforce boundary-making – natives may subconsciously treat accented speakers as outsiders, while immigrants who notice such reactions may either strive to reduce their accent or, conversely, embrace their distinct speech as an identity anchor. Our findings of the Russian accent’s peripheral yet meaningful role are thus affirmed and elaborated by contemporary studies: they agree that accent is usually a secondary facet of one’s identity from the insider perspective, but they also show that accent gains primary importance in the outsider’s gaze, affecting experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

7 Conclusion

This study investigated the role of the Russian foreign accent as a potential expression of national identity among Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany. Based on a comprehensive survey of 392 participants conducted in early 2022, the findings confirm that while the accent is rarely used consciously to express identity, it functions as a statistically significant and socially recognizable marker – particularly for older individuals.

Factor analysis revealed a two-tier structure of national identity markers. The core markers of national identity – such as Russian language, culture, and history – retain their importance across all demographic groups. In contrast, peripheral markers, including the Russian accent, take on increased significance in specific contexts, such as among older individuals and those less integrated linguistically. The Russian accent, though less overt than language or cultural traditions, plays a crucial relational role in identity expression, especially within the complex social dynamics of integration. Along with other cultural

elements like the celebration of national holidays or cuisine, its significance increases among older individuals, those with lower German proficiency, and those who maintain Russian in daily communication. The accent, more than being a simple linguistic feature, emerges as a hybrid identity marker that reflects complex interactions between language, culture, and geopolitical context.

While the accent may not be a primary focus for most immigrants, it functions as a subtle yet powerful signal of belonging and heritage. Its significance is often amplified by the way it is perceived by others, influencing both social acceptance and potential biases. Thus, the accent acts as a key element in identity negotiation, both on a personal level and in the broader societal context. Its importance lies in its relational function – not just how immigrants speak, but how he or she wants to be heard and how that speech is interpreted by others. In a context where foreign accents can invite discrimination or social categorization, the accent becomes a powerful element in identity negotiation.

These insights have practical implications: integration strategies should recognize that identity is not only shaped by deliberate choices (like language use or acculturation strategy) but also by mostly involuntary features (like accent) that affect how immigrants are perceived and treated. Programs aiming to support immigrant inclusion must consider these subtler dimensions of identity expression.

Future research including longitudinal and comparative studies, particularly in light of post-2022 geopolitical developments, could shed light on how accents tied to national identity evolve in the face of shifting geopolitical contexts. Qualitative interviews and perceptual studies could provide a deeper understanding of how both immigrants and host society members interpret the role of accent in defining national identity. Looking ahead, future research could explore the evolving role of accent in the second generation of Russian-speaking immigrants, examining how changes in identity expression develop over time, particularly as immigrants adapt linguistically and socially to the host culture.

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Ruski akcenat kao marker nacionalnog identiteta među imigrantima u Nemačkoj: između izražavanja i percepcije

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad ispituje kako strani akcenat funkcionira kao marker nacionalnog identiteta među ruskojezičnim imigrantima u Nemačkoj. Oslanjajući se na anketu sprovedenu 2022. godine na uzorku od 392 ispitanika, analizira se uloga ruskog akcenta u okviru širih pokazatelja identiteta, kao što su jezik, kultura i istorija. Primenom faktorske i korelacione analize, rad pokazuje da je ruski akcenat statistički značajan, ali periferni marker identiteta – najrelevantniji među starijim imigrantima, osobama sa ograničenim znanjem nemačkog jezika i onima koji često koriste ruski jezik. Iako većina ispitanika svoj akcenat ne koristi svesno za izražavanje identiteta, on funkcionira kao prepoznatljiv signal nacionalne pripadnosti. Nalazi ukazuju na potrebu da se akcenat uključi u razmatranja integracije, diskriminacije i pregovaranja identiteta. Buduća istraživanja treba da ispituju promene nakon 2022. godine, kao i ulogu stranih akcenata u društvenoj kategorizaciji i procesima integracije.

Ključne reči: nacionalni identitet, strani akcenat, ruski imigranti, integracija, percepcija, Nemačka, migraciona lingvistika, markeri identiteta

