

A Phenomenological Approach to Uncovering Multilingual Identities:

A Navigation of Ukrainian, Japanese, and English through Crisis Management

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Introduction

Growing up in Ontario, Canada, it was second nature to use English as a common language in public settings, including school. However, up to the 4th grade, I had attended a public elementary school that catered to families of the Ukrainian diaspora. Everyone around me was of Ukrainian descent, including the homeroom teachers, the principal and even the French teachers; Ms. Tymchyshyn, Ms. Twerdochlyb, Ms. Olenka and Mr. Sweleba, just to name a few. Then, on the first day of the 5th grade at my new school, St. Jerome Elementary School, I first realized that not only was I the only one in my class who could speak Ukrainian, but that I was not the only one who could speak another language. I have a vivid memory of the delight I felt in being surrounded by people who had their own culture on that day, and how much pleasure I took in sharing that feeling with my mother. This memory has stayed with me over the years, but not without its challenges. In order to truly appreciate my identity, I would come to learn that navigating my way around my language skills would be the only way I could find true happiness and purpose in my life. This personal reflection will be applicable for everyone who seeks to understand how to appreciate their language skills, and understand how language plays a pivotal role in one's identity and enrichment to life.

My turning point

The connection I have with my Ukrainian heritage has spanned decades, but I was never as impacted as I was on February 24th, 2022 when Russian forces invaded Ukrainian territory. There is no questioning that this event has significantly altered people's livelihoods, their safety, and their well-being. I must admit that in no way can I fully grasp the pain of the people who called Ukraine home, or their experiences throughout the war, however, for me, this was a turning point in my own identity. From day one I was reminded of my Ukrainian heritage, most notably through messages from friends. Many of these messages came from close connections, family members, and classmates, but others came from individuals who I have had very little interaction with. The common thread was that despite their closeness, physically and emotionally, they all knew the association I have with my Ukrainian heritage-I wear it on my sleeve.

The navigation of language

After being approached by the Fukui Prefectural Government to work as a translator-interpreter for displaced persons from Ukraine, for the first time, I had a conversation about my identity as it related to my Ukrainian heritage. What I wanted to gain from this experience was a clear idea of how I have come to associate with my Ukrainian heritage as it relates to my identity, by deconstructing the influences in my life that have led me to this point. The focal point would be to know how language manifests itself in the identity that I hold onto; a combination of various identities formed by language. By doing so, I could make sense of my work as a language teacher, being more aware of the way my students themselves navigate their own identities as it relates to language in their lives.

The dialogic inquiry is complemented by a language landscape of myself, answering existential questions through a chronological plot of the language in my life. For the analysis, I used a

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phenomenological approach; the idea of a unique construction of the human experience, which states that individuals do not experience life as isolated events; rather they are active in creating cohesion and connections between the events to create a meaningful life story (Barkhuizen, 2011). To make sense of my experience, I applied an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which allowed me to categorize my findings into three basic classifications: Time, Space and Body. (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999.)

Time

My prior experiences

Canada has the second largest diaspora of Ukrainians outside of Ukraine, where more than 1 million people identify as ethnic Ukrainians. The foundations I have with Ukrainian culture were instilled by my parents and grandparents, who were proud of their culture and ancestry, passing down traditions, including the language. I am very grateful to them for raising me bilingually and for encouraging me to take an interest in my heritage. From an early age, I learned about Ukraine, its language, the history, and culture. Not only did I attend heritage language school, but I also created bonds with others in the diaspora. I was proud of my heritage and often spoke about it. I even had the chance to visit Ukraine once, which further strengthened my relationship with Ukraine.

Me, now

Until recently, I didn't know how to express my identity effectively in social settings. In Canada, conversations often started with, "Oh, I was wondering how to pronounce your last name.", or "That's a unique last name. Where is it from?". These opportunities gave me a chance to talk about my language skills and the experiences I had as a child. However, unlike in Canada, most people in Japan were surprised by my heritage, my family's story, and the fact that I could speak an additional language. It came with curiosity, but a sense of unfamiliarity because while Canada was a familiar place to the Japanese, Ukraine was not.

After February 24th, people started to take an interest in Ukraine, its people, its geography, and importantly, its language. Suddenly, Ukraine was on everyone's mind. I personally took it upon myself to begin a charity drive at my workplace, collecting money for an NPO. Soon after, I heard that Japan would be accepting displaced persons from Ukraine and that some of them would be arriving in Fukui. After the realization of my uniqueness, I took it upon myself to represent Ukrainians and engage with the Ukrainian language. For instance, I gave a presentation at the Other Language Educators (OLS) SIG Multilingual Café, introducing the Ukrainian language, including information about its syntax, history and current usage. As mentioned earlier, I also accepted a position to work as a translator-interpreter with the local government to assist Ukrainian families coming to Fukui. This was very coincidental given that I had only recently begun studying Ukrainian formally again through a podcast, "Ukrainian Lessons".

Finally, the Michael who never got the chance to speak, was able to use his skills in crisis management. After entering this new realm, I finally found the purpose and meaning for my heritage and language. One day I could be helping with visa applications, while the next I may be translating for junior high school students eager to learn about the impacts of war and the need for peace. In Ukrainian, I could talk about things so basic, but it brings me such happiness to express it in a way that I cannot in Japanese or English.

The future

The work I do will continue so long as there are people seeking Ukrainian language assistance in Fukui. With more people being interested in the Ukrainian language, I am sure that I will find myself helping others, not only through translation and interpreting, but also through teaching opportunities. I can speak

for all teachers when I say that the best students are the ones who have the inner motivation to learn a language. Aside from language teaching, I hope to enhance my translation and interpreting skills more formally from experts in the field.

Through the work I am doing I have realized that I enjoy working with people on an intimate level. I want to hear their stories, listen carefully, and also tell their stories to others. Perhaps one day I can become a counsellor who can help people overcome their difficulties and I hope to do so not only through a trusting relationship but with the gift that language brings. It would be a dream to publish my writing on this topic and assist in a more global arena of crisis management where mental health and language coexist.

Space

Space has always been vital to the way I navigate my identity. The best way to describe space is through outlets. There are times when I feel I don't have to constantly be reminded by others of the person I am. I can simply be me. However, I have never been good at being the same person consistently in all spaces in my life. When I am an instructor at work, I am an English teacher and when I am at home, I am a partner, and a homemaker. When I am working with the Ukrainian family, I take on another part of my identity. One thing I struggle with is the ability to combine these spaces into one fluid person, who can draw from various experiences that represent who I am without feeling there are any consequences. These spaces are comfortable for me; I tend to avoid discomfort.

More than before, I am surrounding myself with reminders of my identity and the way that I have accepted it. I feel compelled more than ever to discuss linguistic landscapes with students in my daily work, not only making friends with those who have an interest in languages, but also encouraging them to take steps to build upon their language skills, most recently for example, coupling two students who share an interest in Portuguese. While I find myself busier these days, I manage my work much better and more positively because of the experiences I have had.

Support networks are another outlet that I have depended on greatly recently. My family and friends are aware of the work that I do, and they support it wholly. Equally, the organizers of the work have been pivotal in supporting me emotionally. Therapy has also been a very engaging part of my identity process. It has helped me to understand that I do not have to be perfect in the work that I do, which plays an important role in how I view my language skills. At the same time, I have learned that the work I do and the conscious time that I put towards using my language skills can be selfish. If truth be told, being selfish is completely about perspective. I am doing good for someone and in turn I feel good about it as well. I have become a witness not only to my language skills, but also more broadly aware of myself, which I can better control through my body, physically and emotionally. Therefore, I feel better equipped with the chances of growth occurring because I have let myself be vulnerable to these outlets and situations I didn't find myself in before.

Body

If I were asked to describe myself physically, I would say I am a white, cis-gender Canadian man. I've never been entirely comfortable with that because it only describes part of who I am. I feel my body moves with language. I think as language learners we need validation for who we are outside of what others see. When our abilities are embraced by others, we tend to showcase it through our actions tangibly. This has been an important learning process for me because only through validation do I gain a sense of aspiration. This manifests itself spiritually and mentally just as much as physically.

I tend to spend a lot of time alone, which makes it easy for me to hide my physical identity. I cherish the time that I have alone, which allows me the opportunity to process my thoughts and engage with my body and mind. I created this life I live, which allows me to think about possibility, and intuition.

While I define myself as an introvert, I find I can also be a social person. At the same time, I feel a visceral experience when I have fruitful and engaging conversations with like-minded people. Thus, I tend to gravitate to those who are involved in altruistic projects that involve language skills. I feel most disengaged when I am in a group setting, where I spend more time stacking myself up to others rather than feeling proud of my skills. The key fact is that I had been waiting to be seen. I never had the chance to embody the identity that I now embrace. And I finally have realized that moment.

Final thoughts

The conversations I have about my identity have changed for the better. Nowadays, people show concern for my extended family in Ukraine, and they see me as someone who has a strong connection with a culture and language that is unfamiliar and distant from their own. I feel fuller than ever, despite feeling that I've yet to find my life purpose. I've never embraced attainment of my goals in life as possible, which has felt disorienting up to this point. However, I'm much closer to finding my purpose than before. My ambition is to find myself in situations that make me feel vulnerable and I think the best way to do that is to continue to meet new people, motivating others to continue their journey of language identity, and be the best instructor I can. In summary, I hope to strengthen my resolve to overcome any shortcomings and face adversity head on.

References

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