

The Pragmatics of Negotiating the Language Used in Social Interaction

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Abstract

As a former Soviet republic, Moldova has been reclaiming its ethnic and linguistic identity since it gained statehood (1991). The latest census (2024) in the Republic of Moldova shows that, by ethnicity, Moldovans rank first (77.2%), Romanians second (7.9%), Ukrainians third (4.9%), Gagauz fourth (4.2%), and Russians fifth (3.2%). However, a characteristic feature of the linguistic area in the Republic of Moldova is the discrepancy between the percentages representing the respondents' self-identified ethnicity and their declared native language: "Moldovan"—49.2%, Romanian—31.3%, Russian—11.1%, Gagauz—3.8%, and Ukrainian—2.9%. It is easy to observe a reversal in the rankings because many of the speakers confuse the concepts of "native language" and "L1," since Russian is the only language they know or the language they use most easily, even though they cannot provide genealogical evidence of their belonging to the Russian ethnic group or the Russian linguistic descent. What's even more surprising is that, when it comes to the language of social interaction, Russian is the clear winner, even though more than 35 years have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which led to the abandonment of the Cyrillic alphabet and the declaration of Romanian as the official language; consequently, Russian has lost its status as a *lingua franca*, and one would have expected it to lose its hegemony among speakers as well.

Our main objective in this study is to identify the causes and contexts in which speakers of all ethnic groups still rely on Russian as a language of interethnic communication at the expense of the official state language (i.e., Romanian) or their native languages, in the case of representatives of linguistic minorities, as long as it has already become a national pattern and a subject of self-deprecating humor that Romanian speakers embrace and spread: Whenever, no matter private or public context, several speakers initiate and maintain a conversation in Romanian and a single Russian-speaking person interjects, then by tacit convention, all speakers switch to Russian. The subsequent objective is to help speakers identify the linguistic resources they can draw upon to develop their communication skills in Romanian. To collect data, we relied on a questionnaire administered to students at Comrat State University, UTA Gagauzia in the Republic of Moldova, to demonstrate how politeness is negotiated and how social interaction is established among multilingual speakers, in an effort to debunk one of the myths that speakers use to justify their limited proficiency in Romanian and their preference for Russian—namely, that they lack contexts for communication in Romanian, hence their need to resort to Russian. All of this is set against the backdrop that many of these students demonstrate superior communication skills in English or German (although their exposure to these languages is, of course, much more limited than their exposure to Romanian).