



## Identity, Language, and Cultural Integration: Studying Romanian From an Intercultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article studies the complex relationship between identity, language, and cultural integration in the context of Romanian language learning among speakers of other languages. Based on the premise that language is not just a communication tool but a vital vector of cultural and social identity, the study analyzes how the process of language acquisition intersects with the formation of personal and collective identity in the Romanian space. The article, by examining contemporary intercultural theories and the socio-linguistic realities of Romania, highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with studying the Romanian language in a globalized, multi-ethnic, and multicultural context. It examines the pragmatic, psychological, and social aspects of language learning as a two-dimensional process: on the one hand, the acquisition of language skills necessary for functional integration, and on the other hand, the formation of a cultural identity between one's own heritage and the new Romanian cultural reality. The conclusions highlight the need for a holistic approach to teaching Romanian as a foreign or second language, which integrates not only grammatical and lexical aspects, but also cultural, pragmatic, and identity dimensions of communication.

**Keywords:** learning Romanian; social integration; bilingualism; intercultural pedagogy; intercultural communication

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## **1. Introduction**

With the increase in global mobility and the demographic changes that Romania has undergone in recent decades, more and more non-native speakers are learning Romanian, and this phenomenon has become an important topic for both linguists and the educational and social fields. Contemporary Romania hosts diverse communities of migrants, refugees, international students, and foreign professionals who face the challenge of dual integration: linguistic and cultural (Barna, 2016). This reality calls into question not only technical aspects of language teaching but also profound dimensions related to identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation.

The mother tongue represents, for each individual, more than a simple code of communication. It is the repository of primordial experiences, of family and community values, of ways of perceiving and structuring reality (Zafiu, 2018). When a person learns a new language – especially in the context of a geographical and cultural relocation – they inevitably face fundamental questions about their own identity: How much of their previous “me” can they keep? How can they be “me” in another language? What does it mean to integrate without losing themselves?

The case of the Romanian language presents remarkable particularities in the European linguistic landscape. As the only Eastern Romance language, Romanian bears in its structure the traces of a complex history, being influenced both by the Dacian substratum and by the Slavic superstratums and by the contacts with the neighboring languages (Constantinescu, 2013). For those who learn it, the Romanian language may seem familiar through its Latin structure, but surprising through its Slavic elements and its phonetic and morphological peculiarities. This duality also reflects, in a way, the process of cultural integration in Romania: the familiarity of the surface (Romania as a modern, European country) and the subtle but significant differences that appear in everyday interactions.

From an intercultural pedagogical perspective, teaching Romanian must go beyond the traditional model that focuses exclusively on technical linguistic skills. Recent research in foreign language teaching emphasizes the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence, which includes not only linguistic knowledge but also the skills to navigate diverse cultural contexts, sensitivity to cultural differences, and the ability to mediate between cultures (Popa, 2015; Glava, 2012). In this framework, the teacher of Romanian as a foreign language becomes a cultural mediator, and the classroom is transformed into a space for intercultural dialogue.

This study aims to analyze this issue from multiple perspectives: linguistic, social, psychological, and pedagogical. The goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of how Romanian language learning intersects with identity construction and cultural integration processes, as well as to identify good practices for facilitating this complex process.

## **2. Language - A Factor of Identity and a Means of Integration Into Society**

The relationship between language and identity has been extensively researched in recent decades, with researchers converging towards the idea that language is not a simple neutral vehicle of thought, but a constitutive element of personal and collective identity (Munteanu, 2014). In the context of contemporary Romania, this relationship takes on particular nuances, reflecting both the linguistic specificity of the Romanian language and the social and cultural particularities of Romanian society.

For native speakers, the Romanian language functions as an implicit, rarely problematized element of identity. It is the natural environment in which thinking, emotions, and social relations unfold. However, for those who learn Romanian as a second or foreign language, every aspect of the language becomes a window to a new cultural world and, at the same time, an identity challenge. The grammatical structure of the language, with its cases (nominative-accusative, genitive-dative, vocative), with reflexive verbs, and with its complex system of conjugations, reflects not only linguistic particularities, but also specific ways of structuring social relations and of expressing politeness, distance, or closeness (Avram, 2017).

An essential aspect in understanding linguistic integration is the concept of “hybrid linguistic identity” or “transnational identity” (Barna & Coșciug, 2019). Many of those who learn Romanian do not abandon their mother tongue and identity, but develop a complex, layered identity in which elements of the culture of origin coexist and interact with elements of Romanian culture. This hybridity can generate tensions – the feeling of not completely belonging to any culture – but can also constitute a valuable resource, facilitating cultural mediation and the development of a cosmopolitan perspective.

Studies conducted in Romania on migrant communities highlight that the process of linguistic integration is strongly influenced by the social context and the opportunity

for authentic practice (Toth & Rus, 2016). Migrants who have access to diversified social networks, who work in predominantly Romanian environments, and who actively participate in community life tend to develop more advanced linguistic skills and build a more balanced identity. In contrast, isolation in ethnic enclaves, although offering psychological comfort by maintaining the connection with the culture of origin, can significantly slow down the process of language learning and social integration.

An often-neglected element in the discourse on integration is the emotional dimension of language learning. Research in psycholinguistics shows that emotions experienced in a second language can be perceived as less intense than those experienced in the mother tongue (Marian & Kaushanskaya, 2004, cited in Frâncu, 2018). This difference can profoundly affect the sense of authenticity in the new language and can generate frustration: “I can’t be myself in Romanian” is a statement frequently encountered among language learners. Overcoming this obstacle requires not only linguistic practice but also exploring the cultural and emotional dimensions of the language, understanding how native speakers express their emotions, humor, affection, or disagreement.

In the Romanian social context, there are certain implicit expectations regarding the linguistic competence of migrants. Sociological studies highlight that Romanians generally have positive attitudes towards foreigners who try to learn Romanian, perceiving this effort as a sign of respect and sincere intention to integrate (Stan, 2015). However, standards can be quite high: linguistic mistakes are often tolerated, but clear progression and a real investment in learning are expected. This dynamic can generate pressure on learners, especially in public or professional situations.

The Romanian language also presents regional varieties and diverse stylistic registers, from the standard literary language to dialectal varieties and even the urban colloquial register. For non-native speakers, navigating between these varieties represents an additional challenge. An immigrant who has learned standard Romanian in formal courses may be surprised to discover that in everyday interactions with colleagues or neighbors, colloquial expressions, regionalisms, or even massive borrowings from English, specific to young urban generations, are used (Dragomirescu, 2020). This linguistic diversity reflects the social complexity of contemporary Romania and requires constant adaptive flexibility from learners.

Another crucial aspect is language as a tool for civic and professional participation. Mastering the Romanian language at an advanced level opens up access to higher education, diverse professional careers, and active participation in the public sphere.

Studies show that migrants with solid language skills have significantly higher chances of upward social mobility and integration into the Romanian labor market (Lazăr, 2017). In this sense, language learning goes beyond the identity dimension and becomes a pragmatic matter of social and economic survival.

The process of linguistic integration is, in essence, a process of continuous negotiation between maintaining the identity of origin and adopting elements of the new culture. The most successful integration stories are those in which individuals manage to build a fluid identity, which organically integrates both dimensions. The Romanian language becomes, in these cases, not a substitute for the mother tongue, but an addition, a new dimension of one's own identity, which enriches and nuances the human experience.

### **3. Intercultural Education Applied in Romanian Language Teaching: Challenges and Strategies**

Teaching Romanian as a foreign or second language in an intercultural context involves much more than transmitting grammatical rules and vocabulary. It involves facilitating a complex process of language acquisition that takes into account the cultural identity of the learners, their previous learning experiences, and their specific integration objectives (Negreanu, 2016). Over the last two decades, a more nuanced pedagogical awareness of language teaching in an intercultural context has gradually developed in Romania, influenced both by international research and by direct experience with diverse groups of learners.

One of the fundamental principles of intercultural pedagogy is the recognition and valorisation of linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom. Learners learning Romanian come from extremely different backgrounds: they can be Erasmus students who want to get to know the local culture, expatriate professionals who will settle in Romania for several years, refugees seeking safety and a new life, or life partners of Romanian citizens. Each of these categories has different motivations, expectations, and needs, and an effective pedagogical approach must be flexible enough to respond to this diversity (Dumitraşcu, 2019).

The central concept in modern intercultural pedagogy is that of “intercultural communicative competence” – the ability not only to speak the language grammatically correct, but also to communicate effectively and appropriately in diverse cultural contexts, understanding the pragmatic subtleties, implicit social

norms, and cultural values that underlie communication (Popa, 2015). In the case of the Romanian language, this means, for example, understanding the complex system of politeness formulas, the way in which social distance is negotiated through the use of polite pronouns (*dumneavoastră* vs. *tu*), the importance of eye contact in communication, or the conventions regarding acceptable conversation topics in different contexts.

A major challenge in teaching Romanian is negative transfer from the mother tongue, a phenomenon whereby L1 structures and usages interfere with L2 learning (Jordan & Robu, 2014). For speakers of Slavic languages, for example, the Romanian case system may seem familiar, but even this familiarity can generate confusion, as the use of cases is not identical. Speakers of Western Romance languages (Italian, Spanish, French) may be surprised by the presence of the enclitic definite article and the peculiarities of the Romanian verbal system. Effective pedagogy anticipates these difficulties and develops specific strategies for each category of learners, depending on their mother tongue.

In recent years, Romania has developed increasingly sophisticated teaching materials for teaching Romanian as a foreign language, integrating elements of Romanian culture and civilization. Modern textbooks are no longer limited to vocabulary lists and grammar exercises, but include authentic texts, situational dialogues, information about Romanian social etiquette, holidays and traditions, the peculiarities of Romanian cuisine, and the educational and healthcare systems (Mihăescu, 2018). This holistic approach helps learners understand the language in its natural cultural context and develop not only linguistic competencies, but also cultural competencies.

Technology has also revolutionized Romanian language teaching. Online platforms, mobile applications, multimedia resources, and computer-assisted learning tools offer unprecedented opportunities for practicing the language outside the classroom (Moldovan, 2020). Learners can access Romanian films and series with subtitles, listen to contemporary Romanian music, read online press, and participate in forums or conversation groups. This authentic exposure to the living language significantly accelerates the learning process and helps to understand colloquial registers and the evolution of the contemporary language.

A key, but often underutilized, element is mentoring and direct cultural exchanges. Language tandem programs, in which a native Romanian speaker improves their skills in a foreign language in exchange for helping a learner learn Romanian, have proven to be extremely effective (Crișan, 2017). These authentic interactions

facilitate not only linguistic practice but also deep cultural understanding, the development of interpersonal relationships, and the combating of stereotypes. At the same time, volunteering and involvement in the local community provide natural contexts for language use and social integration.

The assessment of progress in learning Romanian in an intercultural context must be multidimensional. In addition to traditional language proficiency tests, which assess grammar, vocabulary, and reading and writing skills, it is important to also assess practical communicative competence, the ability to interact appropriately in various social contexts, understanding cultural aspects, and the development of a balanced bilingual identity (Guțu-Romalo, 2013). Language portfolios, which document the learner's progress and reflections on the learning process, are a valuable tool in this direction.

The training of teachers of Romanian as a foreign language is also a priority. They must not only be experts in Romanian but also cultural facilitators, able to mediate between cultures, identify and combat their own cultural prejudices, develop empathy for the challenges faced by learners, and create an inclusive and supportive learning environment (Păunescu, 2016). In-service teacher training programs, intercultural pedagogy workshops, and experience exchanges are essential for improving the quality of teaching.

Finally, it is important to recognize that learning Romanian is not a linear process, with a clearly defined endpoint. Even non-native speakers with very advanced skills continue to discover nuances of the language, new expressions, and different stylistic registers. This permanent learning should be understood not as a failure, but as a normal characteristic of bilingualism and life in an intercultural context. Intercultural pedagogy, in its essence, promotes an attitude of constant curiosity, openness to diversity, and recognition of the fact that in every intercultural interaction there is the opportunity for mutual learning.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Learning Romanian from an intercultural perspective is much more than a technical process of language acquisition – it is a complex journey of identity transformation, cultural negotiation, and building bridges between different worlds. This study has highlighted the multiple dimensions of this process: from formal linguistic aspects

to deep psychological dimensions of identity, from concrete pedagogical challenges to the broad social implications of integration.

The first major conclusion is that language and identity are inextricably linked, and learning a new language always involves a reconfiguration, to varying degrees, of personal identity. For those learning Romanian, this reconfiguration can be experienced either as a loss and a threat to their original identity, or as an enrichment and expansion of personal horizons. The decisive factor seems to be social support, access to communities of practice, and the development of a positive attitude towards bilingualism and biculturalism.

Secondly, the study highlights the crucial importance of a well-founded intercultural pedagogy in teaching Romanian. Traditional approaches, focused exclusively on grammar and vocabulary, are insufficient to prepare learners to function effectively in the Romanian social and cultural context. There is a need for an organic integration of the cultural dimension in all aspects of teaching, for the development of pragmatic and intercultural competences, and for the valorization of diversity as a pedagogical resource.

The Romanian context presents particularities that need to be taken into account. Romania is a rapidly changing society, increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse, but still in the process of developing effective policies and practices for the integration of migrants. There is significant potential for improvement in terms of the offer of Romanian language courses, their accessibility, the quality of teaching materials, and teacher training. At the same time, Romanian society as a whole would benefit from a better understanding of cultural integration processes and the development of a more inclusive attitude towards diversity.

For future research, multiple promising directions are open. Longitudinal studies that track Romanian language learning trajectories over long periods of time could provide deeper insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder linguistic integration. Comparative research that analyzes the experiences of different groups of migrants (refugees vs. professional expats, for example) could identify specific needs and differentiated pedagogical strategies. Studies on the emotional dimension of language learning, on identity construction processes in the context of bilingualism, and on the long-term impact of linguistic competence on social and professional integration would also be extremely valuable.

In conclusion, learning Romanian in an intercultural context is a dynamic, multidimensional process, which involves not only the learners but also the host community as a whole. The success of this process depends on a multitude of factors:

the quality of teaching, the motivation and resources of the learners, social attitudes towards diversity, institutional policies supporting integration, and, last but not least, the capacity of each individual to navigate with flexibility and creativity between cultures. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the competence to learn and function in multiple languages and cultures becomes not only a personal asset but a fundamental social necessity.

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