



# Traces of mother tongue in the language of the other in the discourses of translators in training: some gestures of identification

## Rastros da língua materna na língua do outro em discursos de tradutores em formação: alguns gestos de identificação

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines possible traces of the mother tongue that remain in the language of the other and influence translators in training to identify with a foreign language. For this purpose, we analyzed a sample of questionnaire responses by students from the undergraduate Language and Literature with emphasis on Translation course at São Paulo State University in São José do Rio Preto. Considering a discursive-deconstructivist approach (CORACINI, 2019), this study discusses issues of descent, proximity, familiarity, and affection as subjective elements associated with identification. The analysis indicated the mother tongue influences the process of identification with a foreign language.

**KEYWORDS:** Mother/foreign language. Traces. Identification. Translator.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo tem por objetivo investigar possíveis rastros da língua materna que subsistem na língua do outro e influenciam tradutores em formação a se identificarem com uma língua estrangeira. Para tanto, este texto utilizou parte de um *corpus* obtido com as respostas de ex-alunos do curso de Bacharelado em Letras com Habilitação de Tradutor, da Unesp, campus de São José do Rio Preto, a um questionário aplicado em pesquisa concluída recentemente. Levando em consideração uma abordagem discursivo-desconstrutivista (CORACINI, 2019), este trabalho trata da questão da descendência, da proximidade, da familiaridade e da afetividade como elementos subjetivos que estão atrelados à tal identificação. A partir da análise desses elementos, depreende-se que a língua materna exerce certa influência no processo de identificação de sujeitos com uma língua estrangeira.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Língua materna-estrangeira. Rastros. Identificação. Tradutor(a).

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*Não sinto o mesmo gosto nas palavras:  
oiseau e pássaro.  
Embora elas tenham o mesmo sentido.  
Será pelo gosto que vem de mãe? de língua mãe?  
Seria porque eu não tenha amor pela língua  
de Flaubert?  
Mas eu tenho.  
[...]  
(Manoel de Barros)*

## 1 Introduction

Debate on the issue of identity is gaining space in both the academy and the everyday world, in which identity is used as a synonym for personality, gender identity, ethnic origin, or even personal identification, in contrast to preconceptions propagated through stereotypes or moral values. One of the most discussed aspects of this topic is the identity of a people or a nation, and such discussions become even more relevant during wars and other political disputes, in which conceptions of national identity contribute to polarization. The imminent loss of territory, the need to go into exile, the loss of national symbols, and hatred of others are some factors that undermine feelings of nation belonging and lead people to question their own identity (Bauman, 2005).

Another factor that leads people to question their identity is the inescapable engagement with foreign language. This occurs in different contexts, such as colonization, immigration, and exile, in addition to globalization, which has raised considerable discussion about identity, given that the (apparent) dismantling of borders between countries impels more and more people to learn a foreign language, displacing them as subjects. Comfort in one's mother tongue can be shaken for several reasons, such as learning difficulties, the unconscious fear of losing one's identity, frustration due to the inability to achieve mastery of the foreign language, etc.

One profession that has always required knowledge of at least one foreign language is translation, whose daily practice involves handling the language of the other, which may cause discomfort. This can arise from the disorientation and

distancing involved in using a foreign language. In such cases, the “mother tongue” may occupy an illusory place of stability and security, giving native speakers a feeling of complete freedom to express themselves. This apparent stability may be related to elements that are consciously or unconsciously part of our subjectivity, such as familiarity and affection. Thus, we are led to investigate the role of the mother tongue in how individuals identify with a foreign language.

Bearing these issues in mind, this article will explore how the mother tongue of translators interferes in identification with a foreign language during the training process, examining the identities they attribute to these languages. Thus, we will examine the subjective language-identity relationship of translators in training. To this end, from a primarily theoretical perspective, we will review the identity issue and its relationship with issues of language, discourse, and psychoanalysis through the work of Bauman (2005), Coracini (2007), Revuz (1998), Gasparini (2010), and Da Rosa, Rondelli & Peixoto (2015).

Considering the theoretical foundation and the translator training context to which we refer, we will analyze, from a discursive-deconstructivist approach (Coracini, 2019), discourses by students of São Paulo State University’s (Unesp) erstwhile BA in Language and Literature with emphasis on Translation regarding the foreign language with which they most identify and the reasons for this identification. Hence, we intend to verify what characteristics of the mother tongue are transferred to the language of the other and how they interact in identification with a foreign language.

## 2 Theoretical assumptions

The issue of identity has been investigated in several fields, ranging from Sociology and Philosophy to Literature and Linguistics. One important theorist regarding these questions was sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. In *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (2005), Bauman describes his relationship with the issue of

identity and links it to the concept of belonging. After losing his Polish citizenship and the right to teach in his own country, Bauman went into exile in Great Britain, where he went on to receive an honorary doctorate. However, he was asked to choose a national anthem for the ceremony, which made him question the limits and meaning of belonging and identity, since having lost his Polish citizenship, he could not use the Polish national anthem, but he also felt like a foreigner in Britain. He decided instead to use the anthem of the European Union.

Regarding this report, he adds:

One becomes aware that 'belonging' and 'identity' are not cut in rock, that they are not secured by a lifelong guarantee, that they are eminently negotiable and revocable; and that one's own decisions, the steps one takes, the way one acts - and the determination to stick by all that - are crucial factors of both. In other words, the thought of 'having an identity' will not occur to people as long as 'belonging' remains their fate, a condition with no alternative. They will begin to entertain such a thought only in the form of a task to be performed, and to be performed over and over again rather than in a one-off fashion (Bauman, 2004, p. 11-12).

To demonstrate the frailty of the concepts of belonging and identity, Bauman turns to a phenomenon that has led to instability in nations, markets, cultures, and peoples: globalization. According to the sociologist, globalization, or “liquid modernity”, shook institutions and transformed the solidity and stability of the past into a liquid and vulnerable state.

In addition to discussing the impact of the liquid modern world, Bauman addresses another contributing factor to the identity crisis: constant exposure to multiple “communities of ideas and principles” (p. 19). In exposure to such communities, we are confronted with different identities that engender a certain discomfort, a feeling of incompleteness and displacement.

We will begin to address this issue from a postmodern point of view<sup>1</sup>, which considers identity as an element that undergoes transformations over time through ideological and sociocultural changes, psychological and subjective issues, etc. In this light, identity is not inherent to the subject, but is formed and transformed through the gaze of the other.

The other is also present in our identity through identification with the native and foreign language(s) we speak. In *A celebração do outro: arquivo, memória e identidade – línguas (materna e estrangeira), plurilinguismo e tradução* (The celebration of the other: archive, memory, and identity – languages (mother and foreign), plurilingualism and translation) (2007), Coracini addresses the difference between the mother tongue and foreign language, arguing that the way we deal with languages is a consequence of the relationships we do or do not maintain with them. From this perspective, feelings of stability or completeness, which are normally linked to the mother tongue, and feelings of strangeness or distance, which are often associated with foreign language, become objects of inquiry.

Unlike the common sense view, in which the mother tongue is a space of comfort and security and foreign language is a place of discomfort and threat, Coracini lists several examples in which foreign language is a space of self-expression despite/due to its strangeness. She also reports cases in which learning the mother tongue involves trauma, leading subjects to use another language or a variant of their mother tongue to express themselves.

In addition to questioning popular notions of mother tongue and foreign language, Coracini (2007), based on Derrida (1996), opposes the commonly presumed

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, we use the concept of postmodernity as developed by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1979) to question metanarratives (e.g., the Enlightenment, idealism, and Marxism) and absolutist views of history. Thus, postmodernity can be understood as a set of cultural, social, and philosophical changes that shook the notion of absolute truth, the belief in an objective reality, the stability of identity, in short, the traditional norms and values of society, recognizing the need to address difference. The deconstruction of such dogmas is due to the expansion of postcolonial and feminist movements.

polarization between them. She considers there to be no “mother tongue vs foreign language” but a “mother-foreign tongue”, i.e. every language can be both familiar and unfamiliar, or *Unheimliche*, as suggested by Freud (1919/2021). She states that

every language is foreign, insofar as it causes strangeness in us, and every language is maternal, insofar as we subscribe to it, in which it becomes a nest, a home, a place of rest and comfort; or rather, every language is simultaneously mother tongue and foreign language (Coracini, 2007, p. 48; translated by the authors).

In the same study, Coracini (2007) describes foreign language learning as a process that goes far beyond what is suggested in advertising discourse. According to the author, this process acts on the identity of learners, modifying perceptions of the self and of the others, given that learning languages entails contact with the voices of others, including their culture and worldview.

It is these distinctions between self and other that sometimes disturb the language learning process, since they cause strangeness and discomfort for learners or, alternatively, they become so attractive that the foreign language becomes an object of desire, desire of the other or a desire to be the other's desire. She explains:

There are strong hypotheses that explain unconscious resistance to learning a foreign language through the fear of loss of identity or self that may be implicit in the other language (Melman, *op. cit.*, p. 33), fear of the strange, of the unknown, fear of questioning one's own beliefs, habits, one's way of seeing oneself and the world, of seeing others, fear of anything that can cause displacement or change [...] Cases in which learning a foreign language is a strong attraction for the subject can be explained, in general, as desire of the other, an other to whom our access is barred and who could, even if illusorily, complete us (Coracini, 2007, p. 153, translated by the authors).

Christine Revuz (1998) considers these different types of foreign language learners in *A língua estrangeira entre o desejo de um outro lugar e o risco do exílio* (Foreign language between the desire for another place and the risk of exile), discussing

linguistic and subjective elements in the mother tongue that persist in the psyche of adults learners of a foreign language and can prevent learning. She states that the “encounter with a foreign language brings to consciousness something of the very specific bond we maintain with *our* language” (p. 215, original emphasis). The bond we maintain with our mother tongue reveals an affection that often may not be perceived in the language of the other.

Revuz (1998) also refers to a certain discomfort caused by the foreign language during the learning process. This discomfort may be linked to the fact that the second language always questions our beliefs, our way of seeing the world, in short, everything inscribed in our minds until that point. The foreign language provokes our perceptions and presents new and different ways of understanding reality. However, learning this language does not separate the former from the latter because, as she proposes, subjects carry their history with the mother tongue with them as foreign language learners. Thus, a new language can further reinforce the learner’s relationship with the mother tongue.

To demonstrate how this occurs, Revuz (1998) describes two points during foreign language learning: the point at which we perceive the phonetic differences between the two languages and the point at which we become aware of their divergence in meaning. Regarding the first point, the author reports that learners of a new language are often exposed to sounds they have never pronounced before, which in some cases is arduous. In such situations, students reproduce the sounds of the new language similarly to those of their mother tongue, which is an attempt at comfort. This can be interpreted as a means of protecting themselves from the “transgression” implicit in the language of the other.

This symbolic violation is also experienced when the subject is faced with signification differences in the foreign language. Different languages construct reality in different ways, attributing different meanings to certain linguistic elements. According to Revuz (1998), this occurs because the delineation of reality in a foreign

language differs from that of the mother tongue. She emphasizes that in addition to this “displacement” of reality, the affect of meanings is lost in a foreign language (p. 223).

She concludes that the way we see the world is not the only way that exists, despite the fact that we often cling to this illusion. However, this illusion is dispelled upon learning the language of the other, since “learning a language is always, in a small way, becoming someone else” (p. 227; translated by the authors).

According to Revuz (1998), these phenomena generally repel learning and can cause a separation between the subject and the new language, leading to a certain resistance to learning. On the other hand, she also describes students for whom learning a second language is enjoyable. She, along with Coracini (2007), considers the latter to desire being other, to speak the language of the other, to belong to another place, even at the risk of exiling themselves from their own community.

Whether the subject feels discomfort or pleasure, the experience of learning another language and the entire cultural apparatus to which the learner is exposed can always trigger an identity crisis, since, on the one hand, the discomfort of learning a foreign language can lead to fear of losing one's identity, while “the desire for another place” can also cause feelings of “exile”.

These issues are also addressed by Gasparini (2010) in an article entitled *Como a língua materna afeta o sujeito na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras?* (How does the mother tongue affect the subject when learning foreign languages?). In this study, she explores the relationships between the subject and the mother tongue and their implications for foreign language learning.

Considering the subject as a being influenced by the unconscious and that the unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan, 1985), Gasparini (2010) reports that traits of the mother tongue remain entrenched in its speakers, influencing the relationships they do or do not maintain with foreign languages throughout their lives. She points out that the existence of these traits is linked to the fact that the mother



tongue is the first language to expose the subject to the symbolic field, a language “charged with predicates and affects” (p. 4).

Therefore, let us move on to observing how these traits can act on the subject. Gasparini describes two situations. The first occurs when the mother tongue acquires a special affective condition linked to feelings of security. In this context, the language represents a place of comfort in which native speakers see themselves as free and capable of expressing themselves through it. “It symbolizes for him a safe haven of terms, expressions, meanings, and affections, offering the subject the illusion of being able to say anything about his desire, with authority, in the first person.” (Gasparini, 2010, p. 6, translated by the authors) As she maintains, it is an illusion of completeness. In such cases, subjects generally have difficulty in “moving away” from their mother tongue, which she interprets as a “struggle to avoid” distancing (p. 8).

On the other hand, there are also circumstances in which subjects do not have a tight connection with their mother tongue, ie, self-expression in this language creates a certain discomfort, and these native speakers feel prevented from speaking about their desires freely. Such subjects do not consider themselves “lords of their words” in their own language (p. 7). According to Gasparini (2010):

The possibility of speaking in another language seems to promise such subjects with the imaginary completeness denied to them by the language of their childhood. They need to distance themselves from their mother tongue to find a place to express their true meanings. Each new language they intend to learn appears as a new promise to speak of their desires, as subjects who did not find space for their expressiveness in their mother tongue, given that their discourse in their mother tongue could not assert their subjective freedom (Gasparini, 2010, p. 7, translated by the authors).

In view of these problematics, our intention is to analyze the discourse of subjects familiar with a foreign language, cases in which the affectivity generally attributed to the mother tongue has been displaced to the foreign language, revealing

their search for completeness and the “promise” of expressing their desires in the language of the other (p. 7).

The relationship between subject and language always occurs through discourse, since language and discourse are inseparable. In the present study, issues related to discourse have been based on an article by Da Rosa, Rondelli, and Peixoto (2015) entitled *Discurso, Desconstrução e Psicanálise no campo da Linguística Aplicada: (du)elos e (des)caminhos* (Discourse, Deconstruction, and Psychoanalysis in Applied Linguistics: (im)possible duels and paths). In this article, the authors review the thoughts of Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan on notions of language, subjectivity, and discourse.

Regarding the notion of discourse, the researchers seek to verify how the presence-consciousness binary is put to the test by the discursive conception of these three thinkers. The first theorist they focus on is psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. According to the authors, Lacan (1992; 1998) promotes a rupture with this binarism in dealing with the flawed act as the production of the “mistake of the one and in the one who enunciates and/or understands” (2015, p. 262). Thus, to the psychoanalyst, discourse is what “precedes and exceeds” speech, “what is silenced”, and “what is repeated in symptoms” (2015, p. 263).

The second theorist, historian Michel Foucault (2001; 2009) understands discourse as “modes of coercion” marked by power games (2015, p. 263). To Foucault, discourse consists of “discontinuity”, “disorder”, and “unchaining”, indicating an absence of a self (2015, p. 264).

The final thinker, philosopher Jacques Derrida (1991; 2001) considers discourse not as the only possible meanings, but rather an effect of *différance*, that is, an eternal postponement of meanings spatially and temporally.

Based on these considerations, the authors maintain that these concepts of discourse displace the primacy of presence and the Cartesian ideal of a rational subject. Therefore, it is necessary to think of discourse, according to Foucault (2009, p. 61), as a

“dispersion of the subject” and a “discontinuity” in relation to itself, “which goes back to Derrida's reflection on the term 'bundle', as well as the Lacanian reformulation 'I am where I do not exist', through which this division, this discontinuity of the subject, can be seen” (Da Rosa; Rondelli; Peixoto, 2015, p. 267, translated by the authors).

Based on the above, we propose to verify elements of the mother tongue that echo in acquired foreign language: traces of conscious or unconscious order that lead students to identify with a language or not. An outline of the study's context and methodology follows below.

### 3 Methodology

To address the questions listed so far, we analyzed part of a corpus of responses to questionnaires administered to former students of Unesp - São José do Rio Preto's erstwhile<sup>2</sup> BA in Language and Literature with emphasis on Translation during recently completed research<sup>3</sup>. The present article investigates a single item from this questionnaire: the foreign language with which the students most identify and the reasons for this identification.

This study can be classified as abductive<sup>4</sup> and is supported by the evidentiary paradigm of historian Carlo Ginzburg (1980), which considers the existence of signs, traces, and clues to be uncovered during the investigation. To explain how analyses are formulated in this paradigm, author Márcia B. F. Rodrigues (2005) uses a metaphor of Ginzburg's (1989) in which he compares the researcher's work to that of a weaver:

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<sup>2</sup> The course has recently been redesignated as a BA in Translation due to the excessive length of the previous name, the need to reflect the name of the profession rather than the professional, and, in Portuguese, the old name referred only to males. (Information taken from the Political-Pedagogical Project in force since 2023).

<sup>3</sup> The research project and informed consent form were approved by the Unesp – Institute of Biosciences, Letters and Exact Sciences/Campus of São José do Rio Preto/Ibilce Research Ethics Committee (number 99305518.0.0000.5466).

<sup>4</sup> According to Chauí (2000, p. 83), abductive reasoning is a type of intuition that “does not happen all at once [but proceeds] step by step to reach a conclusion” (Translated by the authors). Returning to Pierce, the author states that an example of abduction is the work of detectives in detective stories, who collect evidence and form a theory based on the connections such elements present.

Having defined the field in which the investigation is carried out, the researcher/weaver searches for signs of a pattern that [re]unites the information in an interpretation that finds its meaning in the theoretical context supported by the warp of the threads. The consistency of the web, revealed in the work of the researcher/weaver, can be verified by 'tracing the tapestry with one's eyes in various directions' (Ginzburg, 1989:170). The tapestry would be the paradigm that, each time it is used and depending on the context, is called cynegetic, divinatory, indicative, or semiotic (Rodrigues, 2005, p. 216, translated by the authors).

Before moving on to the analyses, we will briefly describe the course based on its pedagogical project<sup>5</sup>. The BA in Language and Literature with emphasis on Translation was recognized by Ministry of Education Ordinance 77 (18/02/1983) and by State Educational Ordinance 429 (11/11/2002). With Unesp Resolution 33 (03/18/2005), some modifications were made in the course structure. The full-time course required a minimum of 4 years to complete and offered 32 openings each year. The course goals were to train professionals to work as translators of technical, scientific, literary, and commercial texts.

This course offered students the opportunity to learn 2 foreign languages: Language A (English or French) and Language B (Spanish or Italian). The choice of language pair depended primarily on how well students scored on the entrance exam: the highest placing students had an advantage when making this decision.

We will qualitatively analyze some of the responses<sup>6</sup> to the above-mentioned question using a discursive-deconstructivist approach as an investigative methodology, according to which the linguistic elements used by former students are considered part of their subjectivity. These procedures are based on Coracini's *A*

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<sup>5</sup> The data presented here refer to the course's 2005 to 2022 pedagogical project. Although the new course has been redesigned, we used the old information since the research to which this study is linked was completed in 2021.

<sup>6</sup> The original spelling in the questionnaire responses was maintained.

*perspectiva discursivo-desconstrutiva na pesquisa em Linguística Aplicada* (The discursive-deconstructive perspective in research in Applied Linguistics, 2019).

In this text, the author proposes a more philosophical scientific approach, emphasizing issues of discourse, the deconstructivist character of language, and the psychoanalytic conception of the subject based on the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan.

According to Coracini (2019), research using this approach is based on notions of discourse, discursive formation, power relations, and treatment of the concept of truth, issues approached in Foucauldian philosophy. Such studies are also guided by the Derridean concept of deconstruction, which opposes the binary ideals of logocentrism and the concept of a rational subject. Finally, such studies also use a Lacanian perspective, in which the subject is influenced by the unconscious, and language is the space of equivocation.

These questions confront us with the idea that researchers cannot distance themselves from their data in an attempt to avoid compromising them, since in the act of interpreting them, even if unconsciously, the researchers' subjectivity is mingled with the text. It should be pointed out, as the author reminds us, that such data do not pre-exist the research, but are constructed through in-depth reading and interpretation:

nothing is a given in research, everything is extracted, produced, and worked on by and in the process of interpretation: the results are always the result of a discerning and hardworking eye – which sees what the eyes cannot see, which reads what is not found on the surface – and with ears open to what is (not) said or to what is said without saying (Coracini, 2019, p. 100, translated by the authors).

Thus, in analysis from a discursive-deconstructivist perspective, researchers must go far beyond the surface of a text: the data must be problematized, questioning the words and their meanings in an attempt to discover, to reveal, to “unweave the tapestry” (see Derrida, 2005) covering that which lies hidden in the unconscious.

Based on this theoretical foundation, methodology, and the corpus, we will now present an analysis of the data.

## 4 Results

We qualitatively analyzed a selection of responses to the question “Which language, of the pair you study, do you most identify with?” Why? What are your impressions of the culture conveyed by this language?”, reflecting on the influence of the students’ mother tongue when identifying with a foreign language. To do so, we determined subjective elements in the students’ discourse that may be linked to such influence and which identities are attributed to languages/cultures.

To facilitate the analysis, the questionnaires were listed as S1 (subject 1) to S97, and, as mentioned, we selected only a few excerpts from the 97 responses. To guarantee anonymity, the students did not identify themselves in any way on the questionnaires.

Thus, the aim of the series of fragments that follow is to demonstrate that traces of the mother tongue remain in the foreign language, facilitating identification with the language of the other. These traces converged into the following themes: descent, proximity/familiarity, and affection.

### 4.1 Descent

Some of the excerpts<sup>7</sup>, which are presented in the following section, indicate that descent is determinant in identification with a language.

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<sup>7</sup> We used the Caldas Aulete and Michaelis online dictionaries in the analyses.

### Fragment 1

*me identifico mais com a língua italiana, por conta da minha descendência.*

*É a cultura dos meus antepassados, me sinto voltando às raízes, e, para mim, é um idioma alegre, forte como os próprios italianos. (S3)*

I identify more with Italian because of my descent.

It's the culture of my ancestors, I feel like I'm going back to my roots, and, for me, it's a happy language, strong like the Italians themselves. (S3)

Considering descent as the main factor that led S3 to identify more with Italian than French, the subject demonstrates a certain kinship and emotional connection with Italians, revealing a possible belief in belonging to that culture. Thus, S3 seems to reinforce the false perception that identity and belonging are synonymous, leading us to the conclusion that belonging to Italian culture is fundamental in this student's identity (see Bauman, 2005). This response indicates the familiarity the subject wants to achieve with that language and the possibility of being able to speak through it (see Coracini, 2007).

Another issue raised in this report is the relation between a language and the identity attributed to its people. By defining them as "cheerful" and "strong", S3 is propagating stereotypes about Italians, adopting a generalized view of what it means to be Italian. Such characteristics denote expansiveness, vigor, affection, warmth, and intensity, qualities that could generally be applied to Brazilian culture, which make Italian culture and language familiar to the subject, resulting in identification.

### Fragment 2

*Me identifico mais com o italiano, pois já tive descendentes italianos [...]*

*As impressões culturais que tenho é que os italianos são bem receptivos e acolhedores e, às vezes, é possível notar isso por algumas expressões.*

*Também acredito que seja um povo igualmente feliz [...] E isso pode ser visto na forma de falar, sempre alta e bem expressiva. (S46)*

I identify more with Italian, since I am of Italian descent [...]

The cultural impressions I have is that Italians are very receptive and welcoming, and this can sometimes be seen in certain expressions.

I also believe that they are an equally happy people [...] And this can be seen in the way they speak, always loud and very expressive. (S46)

S46 also addresses the issue of descent. Like S3, this student refers to stereotypes. Italians are described as receptive, welcoming and happy: characteristics that indicate the student's beliefs about them. S46's narrative describes a connection between Italians and Brazilians, suggesting that both peoples are happy. This occurs through use of the adverb "equally" in "I also believe that they are and equally happy people". Again, qualities are attributed to Italian people that are similar to those generally used to describe Brazilians, eg, welcoming, understanding, hospitable, cheerful, and positive. Thus, through discourse, a certain cultural proximity and familiarity between peoples is established, a point that will become clearer below.

### Fragment 3

*Eu me identifico mais com a língua italiana, pela sua sonoridade, fonética e léxico. Com relação à cultura eu me identifico bastante com e vejo muita semelhança com a cultura em que cresci inserida.*

*Por ser descendente de italianos e com família que se estabeleceu na cidade de São Paulo, a língua italiana bem como seus hábitos, costumes, vivência são mais próximos da minha realidade e tem (sic) mais "jeito de casa". (S18)*

I identify more with the Italian language, due to its sound, phonetics, and lexicon.

Regarding culture, I greatly identify with and see many similarities with the culture I grew up in.

Since I am of Italian descent and have relatives who settled in the city of São Paulo, the Italian language, as well as its habits, customs, and experiences are closer to my context and make me feel "at home". (S18)

Regarding descent, the discourse of S18 adds a new explanatory element in identification: the linguistic proximity between Italian and Brazilian Portuguese, which are associated through their phonetic and lexical similarity. The student also mentions the cultural proximity of these peoples, associating proximity with the maternal and familiar.



At the end of the response, the following passage stands out: “the Italian language, as well as its habits, customs, and experiences are closer to my context and make me feel ‘at home’”. Thus, S18 reports feeling “at home” even in the foreign language, which again highlights the issue of being able to express oneself through the language of the other, which, in this case, the student considered more as distant kin than foreign.

#### Fragment 4

*Gosto muito da cultura italiana, me identifico por ser de família italiana, é uma cultura muito rica, aberta e acolhedora. (S76)*

I really like Italian culture, I identify with it since I am from an Italian family; it is a very rich, open, and welcoming culture. (S76)

S76 also referred to descent, describing a certain affection for Italian culture, which is valued for being “welcoming” and “open”. The significance of “open” should be considered in this context: open can refer to anything that is accessible without hindrance, as well as to something receptive, or someone who is “easy to deal with”. Thus, S76 may feel that Italian culture and people are more “accessible” than others.

In this excerpt, the verb “like” can be related to a feeling of well-being, which would confirm Coracini’s (2007) argument that one can find a home, a place of rest and welcome, in a foreign language. *Gosto*, the first-person singular present tense of the Portuguese verb *gostar* (to like), also serves as the noun “flavor” or “taste” (common root in “degustation” in English). Thus, on a certain level, the student is also alluding to the act of appreciating a new and semi-exotic flavor through the tongue, whose double function in digestion and language is a basic human experience.

However, in the present corpus the issue of descent was only mentioned by students of Italian, which aligns with the intense Italian immigration to Brazil. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, between 1870 and 1920, 42% of the people who immigrated to the country were Italian. Among

the cities in which they settled, São Paulo stands out, earning the nickname of “the Italian city”.

Another aspect of these responses is the issue of belonging. When reporting their belief about belonging to the Italian people and culture, they are attributing a positive characteristic to themselves. Thus, it can be said that such belonging is related to the desire to preserve an idealized memory of an essentially good and happy origin, glossing over the reasons behind the waves of immigration.

#### 4.2 Proximity and familiarity

In addition to descent, there are certain linguistic and cultural, as well as political and economic, elements that seem to contribute to identification with one language over another. In some cases, such elements include proximity to the mother tongue, which may be of a linguistic, cultural, or geographic nature, indicating a certain familiarity between the mother tongue and the language of the other. In certain situations, constant contact explains greater identification. These issues will be analyzed in the fragments below.

#### Fragment 5

*Eu reconheço muitos dados culturais angloamericanos (sic) por ter tido um contato constante com o inglês desde a infância.*

*Mesmo assim, não me identifico com a língua. Apenas sou bem familiarizada. Eu aprecio a cultura dos países anglófonos (e reconheço os defeitos) sem esquecer da minha própria.*

*Eu não sei quase nada da cultura italiana, mas me sinto um pouco confortável com a forma como se expressam. Me lembra mais da minha própria, em português. (S75)*

I recognize many Anglo-American cultural data (sic), having had constant contact with English since childhood.

Even so, I don't identify with the language. I'm just very familiar with it. I appreciate the culture of English-speaking countries (and recognize the flaws) without forgetting those of my own.

I know almost nothing about Italian culture, but I feel somewhat comfortable with the way they express themselves. It reminds me more of my own idiom, Portuguese. (S75)

The paradoxical nature of this student's relationships and identification with English and Italian should be pointed out. Despite having had "constant contact with English since childhood", which is sufficient grounds for identification among the vast majority of English students<sup>8</sup>, S75 still did not identify with the language.

Several contradictions in this student's response raise issues related to familiarity without identification. First, is it possible to be familiar with a language and yet not identify with it? According to Coracini (2007), there are cases in which the mother tongue, despite being familiar, can cause strangeness and distancing. Second, the student reports knowing almost nothing about Italian culture, and yet identifies with it. This suggests that the linguistic/cultural proximity between "us" and "them" allows this student a certain amount of enjoyment and freedom of expression. Third,

by stating "I appreciate the culture of English-speaking countries (and I know the defects) without forgetting those of my own", the student expresses a restrained esteem for the culture of English-speaking countries, but resistance to their power. Thus, nationalism prevents self-effacement in favor of another culture.

### Fragment 6

*eu sinto mais proximidade cultural com o idioma italiano. Pela expressão, tom, lógica de pensamento na formulação de orações, eu encontro maior relação entre a minha variante de língua (meu traço cultural pessoal) e o italiano: sons mais abertos, construções gramaticais mais simples e herança linguística próxima ao latim. [...] é uma cultura que encontra maneiras de permanecer tradicional e sofisticada sem perder o traço popular na maneira de falar. A questão do apego às artes e história na cultura italiana é algo que admiro bastante [...]. Para mim, italiano é arte, história, expressão e, mesmo assim, uma comunicação simples e familiar. (S77)*

I feel more cultural proximity to Italian. Due to the expression, tone, and logic of thought when forming sentences, I find a greater relationship between my language variant (my personal cultural trait) and Italian: more open sounds, simpler grammatical constructions and a linguistic heritage close to Latin. [...] it is a culture that finds ways to remain traditional and

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<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is based on recently completed research.

sophisticated without losing the popular aspect in the way of speaking. The issue of attachment to arts and history in Italian culture is something that I greatly admire [...] To me, Italian is art, history, and expression, and yet simple and familiar communication. (S77)

The most significant point in S77's response is the issue of cultural proximity. Due to this proximity, the subject identifies more with Italian than French, feeling "at home" in Italian, closer to the subject's linguistic "variant" such that it provides enjoyment and the ability for self-expression, as discussed by Coracini (2007).

S77 also identifies with Italian due to cultural characteristics, such as the Italian people's attachment to their art and history. Although the student attributes a complex identity to this culture, unlike French, Italian is described as "simple" and "familiar", thus returning to the issue of proximity to Brazilian culture and distance from French language and culture. Another point is the student's apparent affection for Italian culture, which will be further addressed in the following section.

### Fragment 7

*Eu entrei no curso para estudar inglês, mas desde o primeiro ano acabei me identificando mais com o espanhol, o principal fator pode ser a proximidade cultural, especialmente com os países (sic) latinos, que se reflete no léxico e na gramática.*

*Creio que existam muitos fatores culturais comuns, especialmente entre o Brasil e os países (sic) latinoamericanos (sic) que causam esta identificação, como o calor, a solidariedade, a alegria, a musicalidade... (S44)*

I entered the course to study English, but since the first year I have identified more with Spanish. The main factor in this may be the cultural proximity, especially with Latin (sic) countries, which is reflected in the lexicon and grammar.

I believe that there are many common cultural factors, especially between Brazil and Latin American countries (sic) that cause this identification, such as warmth, solidarity, joy, musicality... (S44)

At the beginning of this excerpt, a break is reported in S44's identification with English. Upon entering the course, the student expected to identify with English but

ended up establishing a greater bond with Spanish, the second language. The motives for this included the cultural proximity between Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and Brazil, which is reflected in the materiality of the language, indicating a certain linguistic proximity. At this point, the argument of S44s resembles that of S46 (Fragment 2).

The cultural factors included the “warmth” and “musicality” generally present in Latin American culture, in addition to “joy” and “solidarity”, which can be interpreted as stereotypical of Latin Americans, although such would be difficult to prove in light of the xenophobia and rivalries between these peoples. Nevertheless, the discourse ascribes such cultural traits as common to these countries, depicting a certain familiarity between Brazilians and other Latin Americans.

### Fragment 8

*Vejo a cultura hispanohablante como muito rica e diversificada. Os diversos países produzem bens materiais e culturais fascinantes. Os povos se mostram alegres e prestativos, com muita história pra (sic) contar. Acredito que a proximidade com muitos países cause um sentimento de pertencimento coletivo: somos todos latinos. (S69)*

I see Spanish-speaking culture as very rich and diverse. Different countries produce fascinating products and cultural goods. The people are happy and helpful, with a lot of stories to tell. I believe that proximity to many countries causes a feeling of collective belonging: we are all Latinos. (S69)

According to this student, cultural and geographic proximity are the main factors in identification with Spanish. By describing Spanish-speaking culture as “rich” and “diverse”, the subject’s affection for it is revealed. S69 also describes the people of these cultures as “cheerful” and “helpful”, subscribing to the stereotypical view that Spanish-speakers are happy, expansive, communicative, and helpful.

S69 also mentions that geographic proximity contributes to a feeling of belonging to Spanish-speaking countries, which resonates with Bauman's postulate that “the idea of 'having an identity' will not occur to people as long as 'belonging'”

continues to be their destiny, a condition with no alternative” (2005, p. 17-18). By saying that “we are all Latinos”, S69 also endorses the perspective that identity is fixed and stable, without transformation over time, in addition to equating heterogeneous peoples. Thus, through belief in a feeling of belonging, this student asserts that Latin American people have a single identity, glossing over any conflicts of identity among them.

### Fragment 9

*Acho que não me identifico com um (sic) das línguas mais que a outra. Porém, talvez o francês me desperte mais interesse devido ao distanciamento em relação ao português tanto em aspectos lexicais como aspectos sintáticos. Por outro lado, a proximidade do espanhol também chama minha atenção devido ao grande perigo de incorrer em erro. (S31)*

I don't think I identify with one of the languages more than the other. Perhaps French arouses greater interest due to its distance from Portuguese in both lexical and syntactic aspects. However, the proximity of Spanish also attracts my attention due to the great danger of making a mistake. (S31)

In this fragment, S31 claims to identify with both French and Spanish despite the fact that they are described very differently within the distance-proximity dyad.

In explaining what leads to identification with French, S31 uses the word “interest”, ie, what makes the language attractive is its linguistic distance. The French language appears to take the form of the other, the different, the foreign, which the subject finds desirable.

However, the student uses proximity to express a form of identification with Spanish. Unlike what we have seen so far, proximity does not produce enjoyment and freedom of expression in this case, but a certain fear arising from the “great danger of making a mistake”. This risk could be related to the broad similarity between Portuguese and Spanish, such that the subject has trouble determining where one language begins and the other ends.

**Fragment 10**

*Me identifico mais com o francês, porque sinto que tenho mais afinidade com a língua, que me esforço mais para aprendê-la. (S43)*

I identify more with French, because I feel that I have more affinity with the language, that I try harder to learn it. (S43)

Several points can be observed in this excerpt. First, despite studying Spanish as a second language, whose linguistic and cultural proximity could facilitate identification, S43 preferred French. In an attempt to explain this decision, the student describes greater “affinity” with the language. “Affinity”, meaning a kinship bond based on similarity or conformity of tastes, feelings, and points of view, indicates that the student recognizes a certain familiarity with French culture. In saying “I try harder to learn it”, the student paradoxically evokes foreignness and, implicitly, difficulty with the language in comparison to the relative ease of Spanish. Moreover, the heterogeneous nature of the discourse indicates that the subject has greater affection for French than Spanish due to the greater effort expended in learning it.

**Fragment 11**

*Eu me identifico mais com a língua inglesa porque tenho um contato muito mais longo com ela do que a italiana (que só comecei a estudar em 2014). Esse contato, desde os 2 anos, é por causa do predomínio americano sobre tudo que eu consumia. Me sinto quase tão familiarizada com a cultura americana tanto quanto a brasileira, mas ainda acho eles uns loucos. (S52)*

I identify more with English because I have had contact with it longer than Italian (which I only began studying in 2014). This contact, since I was 2 years old, is because of American predominance over everything I consumed. I feel almost as familiar with American culture as I do with Brazilian culture, but I still think they're crazy. (S52)

Unlike other responses in this section, S52 identifies with a more distant language. Here, identification is based on greater contact with English than Italian. It is worth noting that the word “contact” refers to relationships of frequency, proximity, or influence. Such a relationship is clear when the subject claims to have been in contact

with English since 2 years of age. Thus, from a very young age, the student has been influenced by English and American culture, especially in light of the American “predominance” over everything the student “consumed”. Such issues are linked to American cultural hegemony, a major factor in identification with the English language.

Due to early contact and the predominance of English in cultural and consumer products, the student equates American and Brazilian culture, considering the former to be “almost” as familiar as the latter. However, use of the adverb “almost” and the phrase “but I still think they’re crazy” reveals something strange in this familiarity, something of the other, the foreign, which, despite being familiar, still causes a certain dissociation in the subject (Freud, 1919/2021). Furthermore, in describing Americans as “crazy”, the student is indicating that they are somehow out of touch with reality, which, in this context, is to say that they disturb familiarity and the status quo of the mother tongue and culture.

### Fragment 12

*Creio que me identifico mais com o inglês. [...] dentre as duas línguas estrangeiras que estudo, é a que (sic) possui um maior contato e por muito mais tempo. [...] Creio que de maneira geral, devido ao domínio da língua inglesa no mundo inteiro, a maior parte da cultura ocidental se assimila com a norte-americana, apesar de que nem sempre nos damos conta disso. (S50)*

I think I identify more with English. [...] of the 2 foreign languages I study, it is the one I have had the greatest contact with and for much longer. [...] I believe that, in general, due to the dominance of the English language throughout the world, most Western culture has assimilated with American culture, although we don't always realize it. (S50)

The responses of S50 and S52 are similar regarding the issue of proximity through contact with a foreign language, ie, via American cultural hegemony. By declaring “due to the dominance of the English language throughout the world, most Western culture has assimilated with American culture, although we don’t always



realize this”, the student reinforces the “risk of exile” (REVUZ, 1998) entailed in the predominance of a certain culture and “monolanguage” over the others. Nevertheless, the meanings that “assimilate” can take in this context should be pointed out. “Assimilate” means “incorporate”, “transform something into something else”, “absorb”, “become similar to something”, as if being “phagocytosed” by this culture, a process that tends to silence the assimilated, “erasing” them in a practical sense.

As we have seen at this point, whether due to linguistic, cultural, or geographic factors or to contact, proximity and familiarity can be attributed to different languages depending on the relationship between the subjects and the language/s they study.

### 4.3 Affectivity

Another issue that leads to identification with a language is affection. Below we will present some fragments referring to this issue.

#### Fragment 13

*Me identifico mais com o italiano, porque tenho mais facilidade e gosto do fato de ser uma língua mais “musical”. A cultura italiano (sic) me cativa muito, desde sempre, mas foi após entrar no curso e conhecê-la melhor que passei a me identificar mais ainda. (S21)*

I identify more with Italian, because it’s easier for me and I like the fact that it is a more “musical” language. Italian culture has always captivated me, but it was after starting the course and getting to know it better that I began to identify with it even more. (S21)

In this statement, three arguments support S21’s identification with Italian: aptitude, musicality, which is savored and which in this context may suggest a certain similarity with the student’s mother tongue, and the character of Italian culture. In this context, “captivate” could take on a figurative meaning, referring to an affective bond with the culture of the other. This same word may also suggest that S21 is attracted or seduced by Italian culture, making it an object of pleasure. It should also be pointed out that this affection has “always” been present and has gradually increased with

greater exposure. Thus, the student seems to reveal a “desire for another place” (REVUZ, 1998).

#### Fragment 14

*Desde criança, gosto muito do Italiano, pela afinidade com a música e por questões pessoais familiares, sempre me interessei por tudo que vem da Itália, e isso não mudou. (S93)*

Since I was a child, I've really liked Italian due to my affinity with music and for personal family reasons I've always been interested in everything that comes from Italy, and that hasn't changed. (S93)

This response indicates an affective relationship between S93 and a language to which the subject has been exposed since childhood. By stating “I've really liked Italian”, the student demonstrates affection for the language, leading to dedication and pleasure in learning it, appreciating and approving it. Reference is also made to childhood. From a psychoanalytic point of view, affection for the language of the other represents a desire to fill a need, a need caused by the Father's interdiction of the mother-child relationship (Gasparini, 2010).

Two linguistic aspects of these responses should also be pointed out. As discussed previously in Fragment 4 the use of *gosto* (“I like”, as well as “taste”) adds a further shade of meaning to the learning process of Italian, a culture renowned for its cuisine. Second, contrary to Portuguese grammatical convention, S93 also capitalizes Italian, ascribing a special prominence to the language.

#### Fragment 15

*Me identifico com o espanhol, pois já o estudei no CEL da minha escola e o “jeito latino” me encanta.*

*Amo a cultura espanhola pois já tive contato com uma intercambiária mexicana e amei conhecer tudo sobre sua vida e cultura. (S12)*

I identify with Spanish, because I studied it at my school's language center and I find the “Latin way” enchanting.

I love Spanish culture because I previously had contact with a Mexican exchange student and I loved learning everything about her life and culture.  
(S12)

S12 cites studying Spanish before entering the university as a reason for identifying with the language. However, the issue of affectivity also stands out through the use of verbs such as “enchant” and “love”. By stating “the ‘Latin way’ enchants me”, the subject refers to a felt set of characteristics in Latin American culture that cause admiration and fascination. In stating “I love Spanish culture” the student reinforces appreciation, deep affection, and devotion to this culture.

Another point here is the apparent homogenization of all Hispanic American cultures. The student associates “Spanish culture” with Mexico, apparently considering it a single indistinguishable unit, revealing the preconceived notion that all Spanish-speaking cultures are the same.

### Fragment 16

*o espanhol [...] é uma língua adorável que me encanta desde criança.* (S35)  
Spanish [...] is an adorable language that has enchanted me since childhood.  
(S35)

By calling Spanish “adorable”, S35 shows affection for it, describing it as worthy of adoration due to the pleasant feelings it arouses. The word “adorable” connotes a certain personification of the language, since this adjective is generally attributed to beings, such as people or animals, rather than abstract constructs like languages.

Furthermore, the fact that Spanish “has enchanted” the student since childhood may indicate something of a maternal nature in the language of the other. According to Gasparini (2010), such a statement would suggest a longstanding malaise in the relationship between subject and mother tongue. Discomfort with the mother tongue blocks the subject's full expression, leading to a search for it in other languages in an attempt to achieve completeness and authority. In this context, the foreign language

reveals the subject's satisfied desire, which could be a replacement for the Mother (who has been removed by the Father). This could be why the subject has attributed the quality of “adorable” to Spanish.

### Fragment 17

*Eu me identifico mais com o francês, porque gosto mais da língua francesa que da espanhola. Por ser mais parecido com o português, o espanhol me parece menos interessante. Gosto muito das estruturas e dos sons diferentes do francês. Gosto da cultura francesa, admiro sua importância para o mundo, principalmente sua história. (S87)*

I identify more with French, because I like French more than Spanish. Because it is more similar to Portuguese, Spanish seems less interesting to me. I really like the different structures and sounds of French. I like French culture; I admire its importance in the world, especially its history. (S87)

The issue of affectivity is very present in S87's speech, as shown by frequent repetition of “like”. In stating that “Because it is more similar to Portuguese, Spanish seems less interesting to me”, the subject emphasizes an interest in alterity. Use of “admire” highlights the student's esteem, consideration, and appreciation for French culture.

Interest in French, which is characterized as more distant than Spanish from the mother tongue, could indicate the search for a language that allows greater authority and freedom to express desires. Again, such phrasing may indicate the student's discomfort with the mother tongue (Gasparini, 2010).

There are 3 points of similarity in reports related to this theme. First, identification with a language is related to contact since childhood, which engenders a certain sense of familiarity. Second, affect ranges on a scale from simple connection to liking, loving, and even adoring. Third, identification with a foreign language that is more or less similar to the students' native language may indicate greater comfort or discomfort, respectively, with the mother tongue.

## 5 Final considerations

Considering the foregoing analyses, it can be inferred that the mother tongue influences the process of identification with a foreign language. As we have seen, this influence is due to signs, traces, and clues from the mother tongue explicitly or implicitly manifested in the language of the other, leading learners to identify with it. These fragments of discourse revealed issues relating to descent, familiarity, linguistic, cultural, and geographic proximity, and affection for linguistic materiality. However, beyond a bare examination of the discourse, we have attempted to unveil implicit elements, ie, to “unweave the tapestry” (Derrida 2005) covering the subjects’ unconscious motives.

Thus, regarding the issues raised by Bauman (2005), it can be said that some of the students favor “belonging” as their destiny, that is, as a definer of their identity. Furthermore, in resonance with Coracini (2007), some students feel liberated to speak and be spoken of through foreign language. As discussed by Revuz (1998), the “desire for another place” and the “risk of exile” were also observed. Some narratives highlighted the effects of the mother tongue on the students, who interpreted the foreign languages as either a safe haven or a source of turmoil (Gasparini, 2010, p. 6).

A final point to be considered is that the majority of these students identified more with Italian or Spanish than with English or French. This may imply that French, despite sharing similar linguistic characteristics with Portuguese, and English, despite the frequent contact, may unconsciously represent a certain “risk of exile”.

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