

**CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC  
IDENTITY AMONG  
UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN  
ITALY:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
TEENAGERS AND ADULTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores how Ukrainian refugees in Italy balance learning Italian with preserving their cultural and linguistic identity. Using semi-structured interviews and language portraits, it compares teenagers and adults, revealing shared efforts to maintain Ukrainian and differing adaptations to integration, highlighting how age and context shape identity negotiation and language use.

**KEYWORDS**

language identity, refugees, Ukraine, integration, adaptation

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## 1. Introduction

This study explores how language learning transcends mere skill to become a vital tool for survival, belonging, and identity reconstruction among Ukrainian refugees in Italy. Displaced after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, these refugees must acquire Italian while preserving their Ukrainian heritage, with marked age differences between adults and adolescents in processes of language acquisition and identity maintenance.

Heritage language maintenance entails active use of an ancestral language despite dominant-language pressure (Fishman, 1991). Second language acquisition (SLA) is the process of learning a non-native language (Ellis, 2015). Modern SLA scholarship views language learning as deeply contextual, shaped by cultural, political, and social forces (Norton, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Learners continually reshape identity through social participation, access to practice, hierarchical positioning, and power relations within host societies.

For refugees, SLA intersects with forced migration, age, and institutional constraints, turning language learning into identity negotiation and a political act (Norton, 2000). Since 2022, approximately 172,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Italy under the EU Temporary Protection Directive (ISTAT, 2024). Fewer than 20% live in public facilities and only 19% are employed, sharply restricting access to formal Italian classes and integration pathways.

By investigating how refugees balance Italian proficiency with Ukrainian retention, this study advances SLA and identity research while offering policy-relevant insights for language education, social inclusion, and support strategies in refugee-hosting countries.

## 2. Literature review

This study examines second language acquisition (SLA) and heritage language maintenance as intertwined processes shaping the linguistic trajectories and identity negotiations of Ukrainian refugees in Italy. Mastering Italian is essential for survival and social participation, yet it can threaten the active preservation of Ukrainian and its cultural heritage. These dynamics are shaped by affective experiences, social positioning, and structural inequalities beyond classrooms or formal policies.

The research is both academically and socially significant. Despite extensive studies on migration, SLA, and identity (Warriner, 2007; Piller, 2002), Ukrainian refugees remain underexplored, particularly in Southern European contexts like Italy. As of mid-2024, ISTAT reports approximately 172,000 Ukrainian refugees in Italy, mostly women and minors, with fewer than 20% in public facilities and only 19% employed. These conditions limit access to formal Italian instruction, forcing reliance on informal, inconsistent language learning.

Recent scholarship highlights the emotional, symbolic, and political dimensions of refugee language learning. Scolaro and Tomasi (2023) show that formal Italian courses foster autonomy and identity renegotiation among adults, while also generating anxiety about losing Ukrainian roots. Pivorienė, Merfeldaitė, and Palomo-Domínguez (2023) find similar patterns in Lithuania, where adult women framed language learning as rebuilding agency and social inclusion. This study extends these insights by including adolescents, revealing intergenerational differences in motivation, emotional stakes, and adaptive flexibility.

Warriner's (2007) ethnography of Sudanese refugee women emphasizes how institutional expectations often devalue learners' multilingual repertoires, highlighting the subtle pressures of assimilation. Morali and Manoli (2024) illustrate the value of language portraits for young refugees, showing heritage languages in emotionally central zones and host languages in functional zones. This approach inspired the current study's use of semi-structured interviews and language portraits to capture affective and symbolic dimensions often missed by traditional methods.

Theoretically, this research draws on Berry's (1997) acculturation model, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) on adolescent identity development, Piller (2002) on the social and political dimensions of language learning, Lanza (2004) on the home as a site of heritage-language maintenance, and Fishman (1991) on intergenerational transmission. Together, these frameworks underscore the complexity of refugee

language learning and identity negotiation, justify the use of visual and narrative methods, and highlight the importance of generational and context-specific analysis.

By centering Ukrainian refugees in Italy and comparing adult and adolescent experiences, this study fills a clear empirical gap while advancing broader discussions in SLA, migration, and identity research.

### 3. Methods section

Two main data collection methods were used to investigate the findings: semi-structured interviews and Language Portraits (Busch, 2012). These methods were selected for their capacity to capture not only the participants' linguistic practices, but also their emotional relationships with language, identity, and belonging.

#### 3.1 Data collection method

Semi-structured interviews follow a flexible guide with core questions while allowing spontaneous follow-ups, enabling participants to speak freely in their own words (Karatsareas, 2020). This format is ideal for sociolinguistic research with migrants because it captures nuanced personal experiences that rigid scripts cannot. Karatsareas emphasises its strength in multilingual contexts, as it invites open-ended reflection within thematic boundaries. In practice, the approach allowed participants to move beyond surface-level descriptions of Italian learning and delve into emotional attachments to Ukrainian and Russian, shifting identity since displacement, daily language choices, cultural adaptation struggles, and Italian's symbolic role in education or work.

Language portraits (Figure 1) complement interviews through a visual technique where participants colour a body-silhouette to map their languages spatially (Göksel & Cullen, 2023). Following their study with refugee youth in Ireland, participants assigned colours and positions to each language according to felt emotional weight. Heritage languages typically occupied the heart or head, signalling deep identity; Italian and English appeared in the hands for practical communication and survival; aspirational or peripheral languages emerged on the feet, suggesting future growth. Each portrait was accompanied by a brief explanation, adding interpretive layers that verbal data alone could not convey. This non-verbal method proved especially powerful with adolescents, revealing subconscious associations and generational contrasts.

Combining semi-structured interviews with language portraits generated multi-layered, complementary data. The narrative depth of interviews paired with the symbolic immediacy of visual maps offers a richer understanding of how Ukrainian refugees in Italy negotiate belonging, agency, and identity across adult and teenage cohorts.

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#### 3.2. Process of data collection and analysis

From July 1 to July 15, 2025, I conducted semi-structured interviews, with the additional help of language portraits, with six Ukrainian refugees, three teenagers (aged 17–19) and three adults (aged 35–50), recruited through personal networks, NGOs, and educational institutions. Participants and their background information are presented in *Table 1*.

The interviews, held either in-person in Rome or via Zoom for those in other cities, were conducted in Russian, Ukrainian, or Italian, based on the participants' preferences. Prior to the interviews, templates of empty language portraits (LPs) were distributed either online or in person, and participants filled them in with their language varieties; Moreover, all participants were asked to choose their own pseudonym. After the interviews, I filled out interview protocols to capture all relevant data

FIGURE 1:  
Example of  
a language portrait  
within the study



points, listened to the audio recordings multiple times for deeper understanding and accuracy, and transcribed the recordings verbatim. This allowed for thematic analysis, where I identified key themes and patterns related to language acquisition and identity. To ensure the integrity of the participants' voices, I personally translated the direct quotes and excerpts from the interviews into English, taking care to preserve the emotional and cultural nuances of their responses.

Table 1 : Overview of study participants

<i>Participants' pseudonyms</i>	Danylo	Polyphemus	Daria	Oksana	Ulixes	Melitta
<i>Current age</i>	17	19	17	39	44	35
<i>Age of arrival</i>	14	16	15	36	43	32
<i>Years in Italy</i>	3	3	2	3	1	3
<i>Gender</i>	M	M	F	F	M	F
<i>Self-reported lang. proficiency levels, ranging from 1 (very basic) to 5 (very high command).</i>	Ukrainian (5) N Russian (4) Italian (4) English (3) Spanish (1)	Russian (5) N English (5) Ukrainian (4) Italian (4) French (3) Polish (2)	Ukrainian (5) N Russian (5) N Italian (3)	Ukrainian (5) N Russian (5) N English (2) Italian (2) Polish (1)	Russian (5) N Ukrainian (5) N English (5) Polish (2) Latin (3) Italian (1)	Ukrainian (5) N Russian (5) N English (5) Latin (4) Italian (3) Anc. Greek (2) Chinese (1) Spanish (1)

### 3.3. Ethical considerations

Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. In-person sessions were recorded via phone, while online interviews used software to capture audio only. Prior to participation, all individuals signed an authorization form and were informed of their right to skip any questions. Ensuring comfort and trust was a key priority given the sensitivity of their refugee experiences. Although some participants were initially hesitant to discuss emotional topics, reassurance of confidentiality helped foster openness and honesty throughout the interviews.

## 4. Analysis & results

### 4.1. Commonalities among participants' experiences

The experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Italy highlight several shared challenges and adaptations that reflect the intricate balance between integrating into Italian society and preserving their Ukrainian cultural identity. Through the interviews with both teenagers and adults, three key commonalities emerge: recognition of cultural conflict, awareness of personal and cultural change, and the effort to maintain the Ukrainian language at home. These experiences manifest in different ways, as the examples that follow will demonstrate.

#### 4.1.1. Key commonality 1: Recognition of cultural conflict

The recognition of cultural conflict is central to Ukrainian refugees' experiences in Italy. Teenagers and adults both navigate the tension between integrating into Italian society and preserving their Ukrainian identity, though it appears differently. Teenagers feel this conflict acutely in social settings, where peer acceptance pressures them to suppress aspects of their heritage while striving to fit in. Polyphemus reflects: «Yes, there's definitely a conflict. How do I deal with it? I try to understand what I want to change in myself and what I don't. What I want to keep and what I want to let go of. It's a very difficult, existential question, a complicated one; and it's also an inner conflict that's hard to manage».

Many teens merge Ukrainian and Italian traits selectively, shedding elements shaped by scarcity while keeping values they cherish. Polyphemus notes: «I've lost the typical Ukrainian way of handling money because in our culture... at least in my city (Kherson), I don't know about others... life was very precarious, you didn't know if you'd have food the next day. So in the culture I grew up in, you treat money like it's the last you'll ever have, because anything could happen tomorrow. That behavior wouldn't make sense here in Italy; I just don't see it. Here I've also lost the habit of not helping others».

He retains what he values most: «The good and beautiful things I love about my culture I've tried to keep, like for example, 'being truthful,' in the sense of 'telling the truth,' whether it's pleasant or not.<sup>1</sup> I've always tried to keep that close to me».

Adults reflect more deeply on cultural integration, feeling the pressure to adapt but fearing erasure of their language, customs, and identity. Oksana explains: «There's a silent pressure to 'fit in.' I understand it. We are guests here, and people expect us to adapt. But sometimes adapting feels like erasing ourselves, our language, our customs, our pain».

They negotiate balance by blending both cultures in daily life: «I try to find a balance. I learn Italian, I follow the rules, I respect the culture. But I also cook Ukrainian food, speak our language at home, and mark our holidays»<sup>2</sup>.

Despite generational differences, both teenagers and adults recognize the challenge of living between cultures. The experience of cultural conflict is a defining aspect of life as a Ukrainian refugee in Italy, where integration must coexist with cultural preservation.

#### 4.1.2. Key commonality 2: Awareness of personal and cultural change

A second key commonality among Ukrainian refugees in Italy is awareness of personal and cultural change after migration. Both teenagers and adults reflect on how their lives, emotions, and identities have evolved, noting shifts in language, emotional responses, and cultural perceptions.

For teenagers, change is often tied to their evolving self-understanding in a new environment. They recognize shifts in how they perceive both Ukrainian and Italian culture. Living in Italy pushes them to reevaluate their identity, moving from feeling deeply connected to Ukraine to navigating life as an "outsider." Danylo shared: «When I was still living in Ukraine, I never really thought about my culture; it was just a normal life. Now that I'm away from it, I feel like I've become more Ukrainian in some weird way.<sup>3</sup> I care more. I notice little things like holidays or music or food that I used to take for granted. I even started listening to Ukrainian folk music and reading about our history, which I honestly never did before».

Distance from home often strengthens their cultural connection. Daria reflected: «I think it's because when you're far from something, you either forget it or cling to it harder. For me, it's the second. I want to hold on to it. Some of my Ukrainian friends here say the same. We feel like we're representing our country now, even in small ways. Like, we have to show people that Ukraine is more than just war and sadness».

Adults approach cultural adaptation with a more established identity and awareness of long-term implications. Integration brings practical, emotional, and existential challenges, gradually reshaping cultural belonging. Language plays a central role: relying more on Italian in daily life elicits both loss and growth. Melitta described this: «I feel like Ukrainian, both the language and texts in Ukrainian, has become a much smaller space for me than it was before. I barely read Ukrainian books now; I feel like Ukrainian occupies a smaller part of my brain and heart than it did before. But I don't experience it as a loss. I don't feel like it became smaller; I just added other things. And by adding them, I've opened up the world for myself».

1 Le cose buone e belle che amo della mia cultura ho cercato di mantenerle, come per esempio «essere sinceri», nel senso di «dire la verità», che sia piacevole o no.

2 Добрі й прекрасні речі, які я люблю в своїй культурі, я намагався зберегти, наприклад, «бути правдивим», у сенсі «говорити правду», подобається вона чи ні.

3 Коли я був в Україні, я ніколи особливо не замислювався про свою культуру — це було просто нормальне життя. А тепер, коли я далеко від неї, мені здається, що я якимось дивним чином став ще більшим українцем.

She also noted a growing disconnect from those in Ukraine: «I feel like I've become less comprehensible to people who stayed in Ukraine. I can't share this experience with them, obviously. But I also think maybe it's my way of turning everything into a story with a happy ending... I tell stories to myself to feel better. And it's working, I find the good side in everything».

Encountering Italian cultural institutions prompted further reflection: «I see so many books in the libraries, in the bookshops... And I realize how few similar resources we have; how much work there is still to do, and how small our cultural space is compared to Italy's».

Despite the emotional weight, both teenagers and adults accept these changes as part of migration. Their reflections show that cultural identity remains resilient, evolving alongside new experiences and challenges.

#### 4.1.3. Key commonality 3: Speaking their native language(s) at home

A third shared effort among Ukrainian refugees in Italy is the commitment to speaking their native language at home. Whether with family, peers, or other refugees, maintaining Ukrainian or Russian supports cultural continuity and provides emotional comfort in an Italian-dominated environment.

Teenagers often use Ukrainian, Russian, or both at home to preserve a connection to their roots. Speaking their native language offers continuity amidst the linguistic demands of school and public life, though limited opportunities outside the home can foster isolation. Polyphemus reflected: «Having friends who speak my mother tongue, like you (Morganti), would definitely help to feel more connected to my cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> But yeah, here where I live, I only speak Russian with my grandmother; there's nothing here that helps me, you know?».

He emphasized the importance of peer connections: «That's the most important thing. Because in that way, I can both stay connected to the culture and keep that way of being inside me and also not forget the language».

For adults, native language use similarly preserves culture and identity. Within the home and close relationships, Ukrainian and Russian serve as emotional and cultural anchors. Adults often tie language use to specific people and roles, shaped by generational and political contexts. Ulixes explained: «I speak Russian with my dad and daughter, and I speak Ukrainian with my girlfriend. That's it. It's not even something I think about; it just happens naturally»<sup>5</sup>.

Preserving language reflects relationships rather than resistance to assimilation. He noted the emotional nuances of Russian use: «He's very old... he's spoken Russian all his life. It wouldn't feel natural to him».

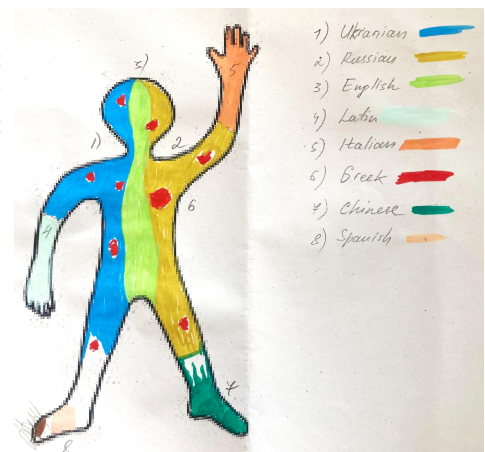
This illustrates how language maintenance among refugees is a deeply personal act of cultural preservation, intertwined with familial bonds and emotional continuity.

The collaborative effort of both adults and adolescents to preserve heritage languages at home is further illustrated by two Language Portraits (LPs): LP1, by adolescent Daria (Figure 2), and LP2, by adult Melitta (Figure 3).

FIGURE 2.  
Language Portrait  
(LP1) created by  
adolescent  
participant "Daria."



FIGURE 3.  
Language Portrait  
(LP2) created by  
adult participant  
"Melitta."



4 Avere amici che parlano la mia lingua madre, come te (Morganti), mi aiuterebbe sicuramente a sentirmi più connesso alla mia eredità culturale.

5 С папой и дочкой я говорю по-русски, а с девушкой — по-украински. И всё. Я даже не задумываюсь об этом, оно само собой получается.

Daria's LP shows Ukrainian (red) dominating the heart, torso, and much of the body, anchoring emotional identity and daily home communication. Russian (green) appears in the face and torso, reflecting its role in intimate family exchanges. Italian (purple) occupies functional areas such as the mouth, hands, and feet, representing its use in school and practical contexts without replacing heritage languages.

Melitta's LP similarly emphasizes Ukrainian (blue) and Russian (light green) in the torso and head, signaling emotional attachment, while Italian (red) and other languages appear peripherally, serving primarily functional purposes.

These portraits demonstrate that maintaining Ukrainian or Russian at home is a shared practice across generations. Heritage language use provides continuity, reinforces emotional ties to the homeland, and offers stability amid the challenges of migration.

## 4.2. Differences among participants' experiences

The interviews with Ukrainian refugees in Italy reveal a series of differences between adults and teenagers regarding their adaptation to Italian society, language acquisition, and cultural preservation. These differences underscore how age, life experiences, and social circumstances shape the refugee experience. Three major differences emerge across the interviews: language maintenance and integration, motivation and learning process and attitude toward cultural identity.

### 4.2.1. Key difference 1: Language maintenance and integration

A primary difference between adults and teenagers in language maintenance lies in the depth of their emotional and historical relationship with language. Adults often emphasize preserving their native languages not only as communication tools but as deeply personal and cultural imperatives. Ulixes explained: «During the war, a lot of people switched to Ukrainian, even if they had always spoken Russian before. It's a very complex and emotional issue. The decision to switch isn't really rational; it comes more from a feeling.»<sup>6</sup>

For many adults socialized under Soviet-era Russian dominance, maintaining or reembracing Ukrainian represents cultural reclaiming. Ulixes recalled: «Even if 70% of people spoke Ukrainian, 70% of the schools taught in Russian... Ukrainian was looked down upon, and Russian was seen as the 'prestigious' language».

Preserving language in Italy becomes both an act of continuity and, at times, resistance. Ulixes noted: «If you stop speaking a language for too long, it doesn't disappear, but it stops being a real part of your everyday life».

Teenagers, in contrast, worry about losing their native language as they adopt Italian for daily communication. Danylo observed: «Teenagers are different. We pick it up faster, especially if we're in school and we have to speak every day... But the downside is that some teenagers start to lose their native language because they don't use it much anymore».

Many teenagers make conscious efforts to maintain Ukrainian at home. Daria said: «I don't want to lose my language. That would feel like losing one more piece of home. I know we have to adapt here, but Ukrainian is how I think, how I feel. Even if I don't always speak it perfectly, it's mine».

The emotional connection is further emphasized by Danylo: «I think it's because when you're far from something, you either forget it or cling to it harder. For me, it's the second. I want to hold on to it»<sup>7</sup>.

These generational differences show that teenagers adapt rapidly to Italian but face greater challenges in maintaining cultural and linguistic roots. The contrast is also illustrated by two Language Portraits: LP1 by adult Ulixes (Figure 4) and LP2 by adolescent Polyphemus (Figure 5).

<sup>6</sup> Во время войны очень многие перешли на украинский, даже если раньше всегда говорили по-русски. Это очень сложная и эмоциональная тема. Решение перейти не совсем рациональное; оно больше идёт от чувства.

<sup>7</sup> Я думаю, це тому, що коли ти далеко від чогось, то або забуваєш це, або чіпляєшся за це ще сильніше. У мене — друге. Я хочу триматися за це.

FIGURE 4.  
Language Portrait  
(LP1) created by  
adult participant  
“Ulixes.”



FIGURE 5.  
Language Portrait  
(LP2) created by  
adolescent participant  
“Polyphemus.”



The adult’s Language Portrait shows heritage languages dominating emotional and functional domains. Ukrainian (green) fills the heart, reflecting its centrality to identity, while Russian (purple) remains embedded, signaling its role in intimate family relationships. Italian (red) is limited to the mouth and wrists, used for practical communication but not competing emotionally.

The teenager’s portrait reveals a generational shift. Russian (blue) and Ukrainian (light green) occupy peripheral zones, while Italian (red) covers the torso, reflecting its growing centrality through school and peer interactions. Although the teen values heritage languages, Italian increasingly shapes daily life.

In summary, adults actively preserve their native languages to maintain cultural continuity, while teenagers risk losing theirs due to immersion in Italian. Adults’ commitment reflects a deeper understanding of language’s role in identity, whereas teenagers balance integration with cultural preservation.

#### 4.2.2. Key difference 2: Motivation and learning process

The motivation and learning of Italian differ markedly between adults and teenagers. Adults often face greater challenges due to external responsibilities and limited opportunities for consistent practice. Oksana explained: «For adults, it’s harder. We have more fear, more responsibilities. Our brains are full of worry, trauma, and survival. And we don’t have as much time to practice»<sup>8</sup>.

For adults, language learning is largely survival-driven, balanced with work and family care. Many rely on passive acquisition through casual interactions. Oksana described: «I learned a bit of Italian through this Telegram channel. It helped a little, but what helped the most was practice: talking to other parents at school, asking for things at the market, speaking with my children’s teachers».

Teenagers, in contrast, benefit from consistent exposure in school, with both everyday and academic language immersion. Polyphemus reflected: «Going to school also helped me a lot... studying philosophy, math, history, and even Italian literature itself... School helped me a lot, because you always hear Italian... teachers... can explain everything to you».

Technological devices also support learning. Polyphemus noted: «The most important thing of all, for me, is listening... I set my phone to Italian, watched only Italian content on YouTube... that alone... was already a good starting point».

Teenagers’ willingness to make mistakes further accelerates learning: «You learn by making mistakes... people who don’t make mistakes don’t learn».<sup>9</sup>

However, intensive Italian exposure can affect their connection to heritage languages. Danylo reflected: «By speaking and listening to Italian every day, I’ve picked up habits that were unthinkable to me before... I feel like I’m losing something from my culture».

In sum, adults’ language learning is slowed by responsibilities and limited practice, while teenagers gain fluency through immersion, school, technology, and experimentation. This difference highlights the tension teenagers face between integration and preserving their cultural identity.

<sup>8</sup> Для дорослих це важче. У нас більше страху, більше відповідальності. Наші мізки переповнені тривогами, травмами й виживанням. І в нас не так багато часу на практику.

<sup>9</sup> Si impara facendo errori... chi non fa errori non impara.

### 4.2.3. Key difference 3: Attitude towards cultural identity

Adults and teenagers differ in their attitudes toward cultural identity, shaped by life experience and developmental stage. Adults often reflect on how migration transforms their sense of self. Oksana recalled: «I still remember how lost I felt in the first months. Everything was different. New country, new language, new rules... and no idea how long we would stay».

Many adults accept these changes as part of adapting to life in Italy, while actively maintaining cultural practices. Oksana explained: «I try to keep them alive here, even in small ways».

Language plays a key role: «At home, we speak Ukrainian. Sometimes Russian too, but now I try to speak Ukrainian more intentionally; it feels more important, even political».

Her Language Portrait reflects this attachment: «Ukrainian is in my heart and my chest. It's where my emotions live».

Italian, in contrast, occupies practical spaces like the mouth and hands, used for daily communication and survival.

Teenagers experience more immediate conflict, balancing Ukrainian heritage with the pressures of fitting into Italian society. Daria described: «Sometimes I feel like I have to choose between being Italian and being Ukrainian. When I'm at school, I feel like I have to fit in... but when I'm at home or with Ukrainian friends, I feel like I can be myself».

They actively maintain their roots: «I still try to keep those things alive by talking to my family, watching Ukrainian shows, and cooking the food we used to eat».<sup>10</sup>

Danylo noted the tension between integration and heritage: «We might want to fit in more and speak Italian, but we also have to deal with not feeling fully Italian, especially when it comes to culture».

Daria's Language Portrait captures this duality: «Ukrainian was the biggest in my drawing because it's the most important to me. It represents who I am and where I come from».<sup>11</sup>

Italian, although smaller, remains significant: «Italian is smaller, but it's growing. I know it's important to my future... it is going to have a big role».

In essence, adults accept the evolving nature of identity and reflect on these changes, while teenagers navigate a more immediate and emotional struggle to balance heritage preservation with integration into Italian society.

## 4.3. Summary of results

The interviews highlight key commonalities, such as the recognition of cultural conflict, where both groups acknowledge the tension between integration into Italian society and the preservation of Ukrainian heritage. Both teenagers and adults are aware of the personal and cultural changes they undergo after migration, with a shared effort to maintain their native language at home as a form of cultural continuity.

However, there are notable differences: adults emphasize the preservation of their native language as a core aspect of identity, whereas teenagers are more at risk of losing it due to their immersion in Italian. Additionally, adults find learning Italian more challenging, primarily due to work and family commitments, while teenagers benefit from more exposure through school and peer interaction. Finally, while adults reflect on long-term changes in their cultural identity, teenagers feel conflicted about balancing their Ukrainian roots with the desire to integrate.

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<sup>10</sup> Я все одно намагаюся тримати ці речі живими: розмовляю з родиною, дивлюся українські серіали й готую ту їжу, яку ми їли раніше.

<sup>11</sup> Українська була найбільшою на моєму малюнку, бо вона найважливіша для мене. Вона символізує, хто я є і звідки я родом.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

### 5.1. Implications

The findings reveal how language acquisition and heritage maintenance shape identity and belonging for Ukrainian refugees in Italy, with clear intergenerational differences that enrich acculturation theory.

A core theme is cultural conflict: both adults and adolescents experience tension between Italian integration and Ukrainian preservation. This aligns with Berry's (1997) acculturation model, where participants predominantly pursue integration, retaining heritage language and culture while adopting Italian practices. Adults consciously resist assimilation, viewing Ukrainian as non-negotiable for identity continuity. Teenagers, however, display more fluid identities, feeling increasingly disconnected from Ukraine yet still seeking cultural anchors (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Language maintenance emerges as emotional resistance to erasure. Following Piller (2002) and Lanza (2004), participants treat Ukrainian/Russian as a cultural lifeline, especially at home. Adults actively transmit it to children, countering institutional pressure toward Italian monolingualism. Yet teenagers report growing difficulty speaking Ukrainian fluently, confirming Fishman's (1991) warnings about intergenerational language shift under dominant-language dominance.

Italian, conversely, symbolises agency and future possibility. Adolescents locate it in "hands" and "mouth" in language portraits, signalling practical empowerment, whereas Ukrainian remains rooted in "heart" and "head." Adults show similar patterns but with stronger heritage-language centrality, underlining generational divergence in symbolic weighting.

Overall, the study affirms that language learning is never neutral: it is an identity battlefield where power, emotion, and social positioning intersect. By capturing age-specific trajectories among Ukrainian refugees in Italy, these findings refine existing theories and highlight the need for integration policies that value multilingualism rather than enforce assimilation.

### 5.2. Limitations and future directions

This study, while offering valuable insights, has several methodological limitations that warrant discussion.

The small sample (six participants: three adults, three adolescents) restricts generalizability. A larger, more diverse cohort in future work would strengthen claims about intergenerational patterns and broader refugee experiences.

Geographical variation poses another constraint. Participants resided in different Italian cities, where access to language courses, Ukrainian communities, and integration support differs markedly between urban centres (Rome, Milan) and southern/smaller towns. Future research should systematically compare regional contexts to capture how local policies and networks shape outcomes.

Language proficiency during interviews also limited depth for some participants (self-reported score  $\leq 4$  in the interview language). This likely curtailed nuanced expression of complex emotions and identity shifts. Providing professional interpreters or conducting interviews in participants' strongest language would yield richer data.

Two adolescents were enrolled at Accademia Vivarium Novum, a Latin-immersion academy with minimal daily Italian exposure. Their linguistic environment deviates sharply from typical refugee settings, potentially skewing results on Italian acquisition and everyday integration. Excluding or separately analysing such atypical cases would improve comparability.

Finally, the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot. Longitudinal studies tracking the same individuals over years would reveal trajectories of language shift, heritage retention, and identity reconfiguration. Comparative work across nationalities (e.g., Syrian, Afghan) and host countries (Germany, Poland) would further illuminate context-specific dynamics.

Addressing these limitations in future research will produce more robust, generalisable understandings of forced migrants' linguistic and cultural journeys.

### 5.3. Conclusion and contribution

In conclusion, this research contributes valuable insights into the intersection of language, cultural identity, and belonging for Ukrainian refugees in Italy. Through interviews and language portraits, this study provides a unique perspective on the emotional and practical challenges refugees face as they integrate into a new society while striving to maintain their cultural roots. The findings confirm existing theories on language retention and acculturation, showing how language serves as both a practical tool for social integration and an emotional anchor for cultural continuity.

The study's methodological approach, utilizing qualitative interviews and language portraits, offers a rich understanding of how identity is negotiated in the face of migration. It highlights the generational differences in language use, with adults taking a more reflective view of their cultural evolution, while teenagers focus on immediate integration challenges. Despite its limitations, such as a small sample size and geographic diversity, this study offers an important contribution to the field of refugee studies, particularly concerning how language acquisition and cultural identity interact in the context of forced migration.

This research also emphasizes the importance of support systems and community engagement in helping refugees maintain their native languages and cultural identities. Policymakers, educators, and community organizations working with refugees should consider these findings to develop programs that support cultural continuity while promoting social integration. Further research in this area will continue to enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics refugees face as they build new lives in host countries, providing essential insights for future migration policies and integration strategies.

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