

*Language of Diaspora –
The Role of Language in Identity Preservation and Social Integration*

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Abstract

Kosovo is one of the countries that has been suffering for decades of massive migration. More than one third of the Kosovo population live abroad nowadays making it one of the countries with highest migration in the world. The main characteristic of the Kosovo Albanian diaspora living abroad is their strong tie with the homeland and their strong attachment to their identity. They face with constant struggle of identity preservation on one side and social and cultural integration in the host country on the other side. While they place a specific role and importance in the use of Albanian language in family settings and correspondence with other members of Kosovo Albanian diaspora, they make extraordinary efforts to integrate into a new living pattern which serves them in construction of new life pursuant to new circumstances of the host country. There is a constant battle between the generations' perception on identity – while the first generation does everything to retain the language of origin, the second generation embraces the language of the host country which plays a crucial role in social and cultural integration and their active involvement in the life of the host country.

Keywords: Kosovo Albanian, Language, Culture, Migration, Identity Preservation, Social Integration

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Introduction

This research is conducted through home visits and a questionnaire and as such aims to bring to light the role of the language in identity preservation and social integration of Kosovo Albanian diaspora in the Region of Rhone Alpes in France and the approach of the first and second generation to the language of origin. Discussion over the Kosovo Albanian diaspora is hampered due to the lack of exact points of reference and the lack of previous studies on the topic. Albanian ethnicity is an endless pit of wealth that the social sciences could dig infinitively. This article does not fill the gap on Kosovo Albanian people and their culture, however it does offer to the reader a piece of basic and factual information on the situation and some ideas about the culture of the Kosovo Albanian people.

Kosovo has a large diaspora in many countries of the world. The estimated number of inhabitants living abroad at the end of 2019 is over 883,986 or 49.6% of the population of Kosovo (Republic of Kosovo, 2019). *The Kosovo Albanian Diaspora has a long history and has played a very important role throughout the decades keeping the political, social and cultural life in Kosovo alive* (Institute for management and development (IMD), 2011). The term *diaspora* is used in academic and policy circles to refer to people (and often their descendants) from a specific country that are living abroad. Diasporas are composed of certain members of immigrant communities who maintain ties to the homeland with a strong sense of belonging, by actively participating in their host land's political or social spheres (Bahar, 2010). Earlier this term was less used and identified only some of the people who moved from specific groups such as Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Africans. However, this term has recently marked a far larger use and includes almost all the groups that have changed their settlements or arrived from other settlements and in academic works, as well as journalistic, nearly every migrant group is referred to as a diaspora (Bahar, 2010). One of the main characteristics of the Kosovo Albanian diaspora is its strong commitment to the homeland; this fact complicates the understanding of the contemporary mass emigration and increases the curiosity of those who dare to venture on such grounds.

To gain a full comprehension of Kosovo Albanian migration that could address several dimensions of the phenomenon would entail a challenging agenda. Indeed, for what and how a population historically attached to its territory may come to emigrate in a foreign country and to integrate into the host society? What should these factors be and what strength they had to have created such a movement? On the other hand, what could it be that the Kosovo Albanian diaspora retain their language and identity without denying a step in the integration of host society? There is a surprising dearth of research on the topic, because of its complexity. The Kosovo Albanian migration phenomenon is one that is unique and distinct from other countries, due to its indignant history (Sulemani, 2009). The migration of Kosovo Albanian people has been understudied by scholars of the field, especially the role of language as “a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity” (Spolsky, 1999) and symbols in relation to identity preservation. Why is it necessary to focus on the language of diaspora?

There is a full consent of scholars and researchers around the world about the strong tie or connection between language and identity. The language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home (Clifford, 1994). The language is considered to present the cultural and identity basis of a nation, for Albanians even more whose key determinant to identity is language, rather than religion or something else. It is part of a long-life history with which associate the most determining identity and specification elements of a country or a nation and the

distinguishing features which are inseparable from the people who speak the respective language. To talk about language means treating aspects which go beyond the general perception of the majority of people that identify it with communication. It is necessary at least to try to define or make the comparison of the use of language of the country of origin versus the language of the host country for the mere fact that this determines or indicates significantly the degree of integration of generations into the cultural or social system of the host country and the detachment to that of the country of origin.

There is often a particularly strong link between language and a sense of belonging to a national group, a sense of national identity (Byram, 2006). Language has a very specific feature to human identity and people are categorized by other people according to the language they speak. When we hear someone speak in a different language, the language of one country or another, our mind becomes active almost immediately by making guesses about gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin, thus bringing to us the elements of judgment we have for a specific country which the language belongs to and the approach we should have or the behavior we should make accordingly in response to the people of a specific country. Languages symbolize identities and are used to signal identities by those who speak them. There is no language which can be defined better in any kind of terms compared to other languages as all the languages share the common characteristics, and the language that the immigrant chooses to speak is not the language of his own choice, but rather a language that allows him to get through and the means that is served to him letting him no choice but to accept it for his own purposes and personal advancement.

Kosovo Albanian Diaspora in Rhone Alpes, France

One of the key determinants for choosing the Kosovo Albanian diaspora in Lyon for research is that it represents one of the most organized Kosovo Albanian diasporas comprising of around 20 thousand people in the Region of Rhone Alpes. On a survey done with the members of the first and second generation of Kosovo Albanian diaspora in Rhone Alpes in 2019, 60 people responded to the questionnaire which included questions on language use and their social status. Of them, 40 were male and 20 were female. This is for the reason that contact with men was easier. The settlement time varies from those who arrived as early as 1988 and those who have recently arrived, in 2017. The majority of those who have migrated to France at adult age have come for employment purposes and almost all of them have come with the intention to stay only temporary and someday return back to Kosovo. A number of them, mainly female have come for family reunification purposes, but a percentage of them who have arrived recently have come for study purposes with plans to come back upon the completion of their degrees. More than 90% of the respondents have claimed that in France they define themselves as “foreigners” despite their legal status and identify themselves as Albanians and the language they use in family settings is the Albanian language. Only a small percentage of them respond that they consider themselves as French citizens with equal rights to the other local people and consider themselves as both French and Albanian sharing a common feeling of belongingness without plans to come back, now that they feel integrated in France.

The Kosovo Albanian community is in constant battle between language, culture and identity preservation on the one hand and the emotional, social, economic and cultural integration into the host society on the other hand. While the traditional sources of family, homeland, ethnic belongingness, language and others are playing a significant role in their lives, their identity is being constantly challenged by the intervention of a different set of norms and values

associated with their perception of others' perception on them. There is a constant battle between the generations of diaspora groups in the use of the language and the dominance of either language of origin imposed by the first generation or the use of language of the host country by the second generation imposed by the environment and the daily use and interaction with the local people and education institutions. What the first generation wants and what the real situation is are two different things. They want to keep the substance of what makes them Albanian, to sustain this substance and protect it with fanaticism; however what is real is the fact of their existence both in the country of origin and the host country, but not the substance which undergoes an irresistible transformation. No matter how much they try to keep the matter or substance within themselves, it is the factors of time and space which determine or set new rules if we may call so, which through time achieve their goal.

Even though the first generation see the future of their children in France and most of them have already integrated into French society, it is still important for them to maintain their mother tongue and most of the people who have managed to integrate normally and have the right to go back and visit Kosovo, they do so every year especially during the summer time in order for their children to be in closer contact with the Albanian language and culture. Albanian language is spoken at home most of the time by parents and the children understand and are able to communicate in Albanian language (though they might lack the necessary vocabulary). In order to keep the Albanian language and sentiment alive, parents organized a school in Albanian language in voluntary basis which taught the Albanian children classes of Albanian language, culture and history which aimed to be the transmitter of the Albanian word between the Homeland and the Diaspora, with specific emphasis on keeping and maintaining the strong tie or connection between the two. Besides teaching Albanian to the children, consulting and supporting the Albanian-speaking community, they aimed to strengthen the cultivation of national culture and tradition in order to recreate and sustain a positive sense of 'ethnic' belonging while living abroad. The aim of these classes was to strengthen the basics of the first language and to increase the children's familiarity with Albanian culture and lifestyle. The supplementary Albanian native language and culture classes did not have any negative impact in the French language and the regular education in the French school. Since courses in Albanian language and culture have never been integrated into the regular school curriculum, they were held during the weekend.

Regardless of the efforts, the general practice shows that children in most cases communicate to each other in French. For them it is difficult to preserve all the characteristics of the Albanian language that their parents possessed back in Kosovo, for the fact that their physical presence is remote and Albanian language does not find any use outside the family setting. Although many young attribute to their parents' influence their pride in culture, and their wish to actively foster the representation of Albanian culture and language, they still find it very different to act as Albanian, they are in constant struggle to construct an identity facing all the time between the two different cultures, in one side, the Albanian culture and language at home and the other side, the French culture and language in everyday interactions at school or outside their homes. It is true that parents place explicit value on the ability to speak Albanian at a high, near-native level of competence by trying to engage their children in different activities of the Albanian community in Lyon such as celebrations organized by the associations or other diaspora groups. Children value their origin and are proud of it; however, there is still the dominance of the French culture which is influenced in school, and in the surrounding community, making them bicultural speakers. Their use of French language allows them to enter the cycle of the social field and makes them equal to their peers at school providing them with the necessary access to cultural and social relations. It

represents the mechanism which increases their chances for safer and successful social access and their future at the same time given that French language is the one that offers the grounds as the language necessary for life, communication, education and employment. From this, we can assume that the process of acquiring the language of the host country means weakening of the tie with the home language.

Talking in language terms, we should try to understand that we are talking about two different ways of development, especially in children. Those who came to the host country with a good degree of their mother language, they need to make transformation from that of the origin into that of the host country. It is a matter of degree to how much it is possible to save during the phase of transformation while acquiring and developing in a completely different manner. In making the choice of language among Kosovo Albanian diaspora, there are many factors that determine the use of French language over Albanian. The first generation's competence of language is limited because their activities involve mainly domestic and relative interactions in Albanian language which makes them become limited in the use of the French language. In this context Albanian language is more dominant because of the difficulties to acquire the new language and due to the lack of contact in their everyday life and everyday interactions outside the domestic settings. This situation is not the same for younger generations who attend schools and who are involved in any kind of activities which make their integration much easier.

Young generations adapt to the French language because it is necessary for them to interact in their daily life, but also because they believe that it is trendier or has a wider use than Albanian language. In this way they want to be in and they want to be considered a part of this society that surrounds them and where they want to develop themselves in the future. Also, there is no incentive to maintain it, partly because in public settings they can be identified as "foreigners" and may be subject to marginalization and discriminatory behavior. Although the majority of Kosovo Albanian families try to keep the breath of the Albanian language in their families, parents themselves often use French language (although it is not fluent) in the interaction with their children when trying to show a degree of belongingness in the eyes of their children who have good language skills acquired through daily interactions at school. A number of parents who do not have the opportunity to work on public sector or more prestigious jobs, working in the shadow with their rights being denied and vulnerable to discrimination, feel some sort of pressure in front of their children considering themselves as transmitting to them a poor cultural capital.

Regarding the language proficiency, most children are bilingual and can communicate Albanian that comes as a result of the parents' influence who speak and impose the Albanian language at home. Their level of proficiency depends from the family background, for example there are some families which did not develop any further in the aspect of the Albanian language and therefore the children might be more limited in their expressions in Albanian and this can be best evidenced in the interactions with them when they think in French and want to say something in Albanian and they hesitate. In this respect, they can speak the language of their parents, the language their parents spoke before arriving to France, so they remain within the framework of the past in terms of language if we consider the changes and advancements that languages undergo in time, without the enrichment of the vocabulary with new and trendy words of the country of origin.

The Selection of the Country for Migration

The selection of the country is not always an easy choice, however research suggests that when seeking out a destination country, key factors for Albanians (Kosovo Albanian as well) have been geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity, as well as legal accessibility (Sulemani, 2009). Previous waves of migration were more oriented towards far-off countries, resulting in assimilation of most of them and with symbolic numbers of Albanians who returned due to the distance, have played a key cultural role in the determination and selection of Albanians to lean towards more nearby destinations which would allow them to come back as soon as the situation either political or social would be favorable for them.

This seems to have played an important role in the Albanian collective psychology and led to the belief that proximity to their homeland was a way efficient to keep constant contact with it. In our interactions with people who arrived earlier in Lyon, we find out that many Kosovo Albanians chose France with the belief that their absence was only for a given period and believed deeply in a return to the country of origin. They were almost without exception optimistic that they were only having a bad period in their life which would soon end and they would be happy when they return back in their country. With the time passing this thinking will evolve and take a variety of forms over time. In current circumstances and situation in Kosovo, many people leave Kosovo with the belief to remain and become integrated into the host society, giving priority to the new identity which positions them as better and as soon as possible into the host society. For many people who chose Lyon as their destination, France is a symbol of freedom and people believe that admission criteria are easier and more favorable to settle forever in France.

Social Integration of the Kosovo Albanian Diaspora

While the Kosovo Albanian immigrants in the Region of Rhone Alpes try to integrate and be absorbed into a new environment, they go through a specific form of development that in itself entails elements of distinctiveness and self-appreciation from the others in terms of remaining faithful in what they believe to be their identity. What makes the issue of integration more complex is the degree of education back in Kosovo the older generations had and the majority of them coming from rural areas where big patriarchal families are assumed to lack the necessary education. The interaction with people reveals that they have not changed much in their mentality (traditional), and despite their improved family economy, their quality of life has not changed as much. In this respect, the degree of integration is related to the degree of education. Kosovo Albanian diaspora in Lyon is positioned as not well-educated or intellectual diaspora. Due to this, there is a lack of cultural advancement associated with a failure of climbing the social ladder into a well-deserved level. In home visits we have made, the majority of Kosovo Albanian diaspora, especially men, prefer subjects that are related to their homeland, speaking about political, economic and cultural situation. Many of them show high degree of pessimism in the developments back in Kosovo for which they blame the leadership of the country.

What is very evident nowadays among the earlier generations who have come to live in the Region of Rhone Alpes, is the degree of preservation of their culture which compared to people living nowadays back in Kosovo, is more profound and for many things they are more fanatic. This gives the impression that while they have made significant steps on their way towards integration, a part of them has remained faithful to the time when they left their homeland back with strong elements of patriarchal and traditional family structure within

their families. Kosovo Albanian immigrants of young generation are in constant struggle to construct an identity in their interactions with diverse and traditional characters in the time when there is so much effort of the older generations, their parents, in preserving their own culture and identity. Albanians are striving all the time to find their place among the other people of France. The children of immigrants whose parents are low-educated tend to have low educational outcomes, for the fact that they are not able to make such judgments about the real value of education in upgrading their personal social status. In such circumstances the unfavorable outcome of children is attributed to their parents due to the lack of priority of early childhood education at critical age.

Conclusion

We can sum up that Kosovo Albanian community in Rhone Alpes live in a world of confusion and they live an ambiguous life between two fairly different cultures. While the traditional sources of family, homeland, ethnic belongingness, language and others are playing a significant role in their lives, their identity is being constantly challenged by the intervention of a different set of norms. Their movement from a country where they lived socially and culturally as a majority where they had a home, a family and a sense of belongingness, into a country where they are regarded as a social and cultural minority, treated as a second class people at the edge of the French social system often without home, family and the psychic burden of “foreigner”, has a great impact in terms of identity. During this stage of life, under such pressure, it is evident how much their individual behavior changes and the impact on their social lives and relationships in order to comply with the surrounding social obligations and norms which are quite distinct from their previous ones and which very often cannot be met. The new identity of the majority of Kosovo Albanian immigrants has been constructed and changed as a response to others’ behavior and the consequence of both internal and external pressures. As they progressed in adopting a new identity, the born identity has faded little by little over time leaving less and less Albanian sentiment in them. From what is said above, we can come to conclusion that language of origin can find its use as long as the first generation lives weakening from generation to generation thus resulting in loss of identity and embrace of the new identity which responds better to the circumstances in which they live. Language of origin is not the language which opens the doors to advancement to the second generation making its use less frequent resulting in less and less interest of the generations to transfer it to their successors.

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