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"I Feel Like I'm a Different Person": Exploring Undergraduate Students' Imagined L2 Selves

Abstract

Identity has a prominent place in language education. It can be manifested by the imagined L2 self, understood as a realization of how L2 learners imagine, perceive and talk about their experience of being an L2 user. It might be argued that undergraduate students of foreign languages should exhibit more complex language identities, as their imagined L2 selves are shaped by their rich language repertoires. The major aim of the study was to examine undergraduate students' imagined L1 and L2 selves, by investigating two dimensions of their complex language identity, namely: how they view these languages and how they feel using these languages. A total of 200 students (88 English major, 67 German major and 45 Swedish major students) completed a questionnaire designed to explore their specific perception of the languages they speak and the way they feel using them. The results offer an interesting insight into the complex language identity profiles of the participants and their imagined selves. Overall, the students seem to show high language awareness; they are sensitive to the differences in language systems, including the sounds and the pragmatics of a given language. The students also exhibit very positive attitudes towards their imagined L2 selves. It is, thus, suggested that language teachers provide a platform for the students to express their complex identities by incorporating language journals, or language biographies, in order to allow the students to explore their identities in more depth. It can also be argued that the teachers could capitalize on the affective dimension of the students' L2 identity, by fostering the students' intrinsic motivation and supporting their investment in learning.

Keywords: language identity, imagined identity, imagined L2 self, language education

Reflecting on the words of Bonny Norton (1997), who observed that "every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense

of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (p. 410), it can be argued that language learners should have a more complex understanding of who they are and how they identify themselves as language users. The exploration of identity has a long tradition in language education (see, e.g., Norton, 2006; Douglas Fir Group, 2016), with self-concept playing an important role in a variety of processes that are essential in language education research, such as motivation, investment in learning, agency, autonomy, self-esteem and self-efficacy, to name only a few (e.g., Huang & Benson, 2013; Darvin & Norton, 2015; De Costa & Norton, 2016). A substantial proportion of language identity research focuses on language learners and their teachers, yet relatively few studies have been conducted that investigate the identities of university students majoring in foreign languages. Assuming that language users indeed think and feel differently when expressing themselves in different languages, the language identities of students majoring in foreign languages is an intriguing area of research.

Thus, university students who chose foreign languages as their major constitute an interesting group of L2 learners. Studying a language major could mean much more than the mere study of a language system itself; philology programmes in Poland, which typically involve 3–5 years of study, offer a full immersion in the language, literature and culture of the subject. It might be assumed that the university students would exhibit high levels of language and cultural awareness, which might consequently result in complex and dynamic language identities. This aspect of identity research has yet to be fully addressed, and the study presented in this paper aims at bridging this gap.

The main objective of the text is to, firstly, briefly discuss the existing research on language identity in general terms, and the concept of an imagined L2 self in particular, and secondly, to explore the language identities of students majoring in three different languages: English, German and Swedish. The way their imagined L1/L2 self is perceived and manifested is the focal point of the study.

The Concept of Identity in Language Education – Literature Review

Identity may be defined as a reflection of "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (Norton, 1997, p. 410). In other words, identity represents the struggle of making sense of who we are with relation to each other (Darvin & Norton, 2014). In the context of language education, the concept of identity is deeply embedded

within the sociocultural perspective and, more specifically the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Within this framework social identity is formed by a group of individuals who share many common traits and qualities in the cognitive, behavioural, and affective domains. Thus, it is assumed that identity is a sociocultural construct that allows for creating and defining "the individual's place in society" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 283). The subjectivity of identity within this relation is bidirectional – a person can be both "subject of […] and subject *to* a set of relationships" (Norton, 2013, p. 4). Thus, a constant tension is observed between who one sees oneself as and how one is seen by others, as identity is both relational and comparative (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Additionally, within the framework of the post-structuralist and transmodern paradigm, identity is seen as dynamic, diverse, context-dependent, complex and sometimes also contradictory (Darvin & Norton, 2014, p. 57).

Identity often stands in close proximity to the concept of *self*, which also emphasizes the relational dimension with the other (for an overview of different types of self, see Komorowska, 2019). It is, however, often argued that there is a substantial difference between the two, as identity embraces the continuity of who we are across time and space, and *self* represents a temporary, embodied sense of who we are and who we want to be (Komorowska, 2019, p. 17). It could be, therefore, argued that a particular expression of self is a manifestation of the all-embracing identity, which might be in dialogue with different types and dimensions of self.

The importance of imagination in discussing language identity and its role in identity formation has been strongly emphasized by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004). Also, the concept of *imagined identity*, as defined by Norton (2013), closely corresponds with the concept of *imagined community* (Anderson, 1991), with the latter operating within the symbolic dimension of group identity and group cohesiveness. The impact of imagined communities on the learning trajectories of L2 learners has been recently explored in more depth (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019). From this perspective, *an imagined L2 self* can be understood as a realization of being part of an imagined community of L2 users, and this manifests itself in how language learners imagine, perceive and talk about themselves as L2 users.

Much emphasis is placed on the symbolic power of language use inside and outside an L2 classroom (for an overview see Kramsch, 2021). As Claire Kramsch (2021) correctly points out, "language educators have an additional responsibility to teach something about the symbolic power of language as discourse – how it works, how it affects people, how they can harness it to represent themselves and the reality that surrounds them, to act upon it, and to create future possible selves" (p. 201). The language learning objectives have, thus, changed and shifted, from the mere mastery of the language system, towards a more complex understanding of how much power is gained by learning and using a given language.

This interrelationship between language, power, identity and education has also impacted the way the L2 learners' willingness to learn is understood and defined. Ushioda (2011) critically examines the relevance of integrative motivation, with reference to the complexity and ambiguity of what constitutes the target language community. Assuming that language communities are indeed imagined communities, the core motivation to learn a language is not to communicate with representatives of a given country or region – the learner's motivation is propelled by the inner need to become part of an imagined, global community and is measured by the level of *investment* in which a student wishes to engage (McKinney & Norton, 2008). In fact, L2 learning has become more deterritorialised and more context dependent, where learners "invest in learning because they know that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, and these social and economic gains in turn enhance the range of identities they can claim in a particular community" (Darvin & Norton, 2014, p. 57).

In this sense, imagined identity is very much dependent on the complex and dynamic intricacies of the imagined language communities. From the perspective of L2 education, it seems important to seek the answer to the question of how the process of language learning is affected by the liminal and dialogic nature of the imagined communities (Norton, 2013, p. 8). It is, thus, of interest to explore L2 learners' manifestation of their imagined identity – their *imagined L2 self*, that is how they see, perceive and imagine themselves as L2 users.

There is a substantial body of research on language identity, which predominantly revolves around three key themes: focusing on L2 teachers' identities (see, e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997; Varghese et al., 2005; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Gabryś-Barker, 2012; Mercer et al., 2016), exploring the identities of bi/multilingual minority language speakers (see, e.g., Khilkhanova & Khilkhanov, 2004; King & Ganuza, 2005; Mazak, 2012; Dołowy-Rybińska, 2016), and investigating migrant children's transnational identities (see, e.g., Darvin & Norton, 2014; Evans & Liu, 2018). When it comes to the language identities of university students in their academic contexts, the vast majority of researchers investigate the writer's identity formation and expression specifically in the process of producing academic texts (see, e.g., Canagarajah, 2004, 2015; Lehman, 2014; Hryniuk, 2018; Furman & Aleksandrzak, 2023). However, there are relatively few research studies on L2 learners' imagined identities in formal settings, particularly those of L2 students majoring in foreign languages, with the notable exception of Yamamoto (2017) and Gabryś-Barker (2019).

Yamamoto (2017) adopted an ethnographic approach and designed a narrative inquiry involving a series of interviews, spanning the course of two years, which looked for possible dimensions of the L2 imagined identity. The author presents a case study of one participant, a Japanese student majoring in English,

who described in detail the complex and dynamic process of identity formation. The study shows that the participant's imagined L2 self evolved during interactions with other members of the imagined community; but more importantly, the process also affected her L1 identity (Japanese) – the participant adopted a more critical and reserved attitude towards her L1. Additionally, her level of investment changed and appeared to be more socially oriented (Yamamoto, 2017).

Another study that aimed at investigating university students' L2 identity was designed by Gabryś-Barker (2019), who invited 28 multilingual English major students to answer questions and reflect on their language identity. All the participants were pre-service teachers and all spoke at least three languages: Polish (L1), English (L2), and German (L3). The results demonstrate that the participants saw their mother tongue as the most emotionally loaded and internalized; their second language identity was predominantly connected to personal and intellectual growth; finally, their third language was often seen as a challenge and their L3 identity as still growing and evolving, without any clearly defined qualities.

These two studies offer an interesting insight into how language identities are manifested by university students. Nevertheless, there seems to be a need for more data that might support the tendencies observed. The research project introduced and discussed below aims at further exploring the L2 imagined selves of undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages and bridging the research gap.

Research Design

The main research assumption that underpins the present research project was that the students majoring in foreign languages, due to the fact that they are immersed in the language and culture of their subject, can be considered multilingual or even translingual, as they fluently move in and out of different codes and meanings. They are also expected to be more sensitive to and aware of the subtleties of language use. In this sense there is a need to navigate a more complex language identity.

The major aim of the study was to learn more about the undergraduate students' imagined L1 and L2 selves, by investigating two dimensions of their complex language identity, that is, the participants' perspective on and their emotional response to the languages they speak. In other words, the main objective was to explore how the students view the languages and how they feel expressing themselves in those languages, as well as how they imagine themselves as L1 and L2 users. Secondly, as the study was addressed to university students

majoring in three different languages, a secondary aim would be to look for possible differences in the way they consider a particular language.

This study aims at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the university students imagine themselves when using their L1 and L2s?

   RQ1a: How do the undergraduate students perceive their L1 and L2s?
   RQ1b: How do they feel when speaking those languages?
RQ2: What are the major differences between the imagined selves described by the English, German and Swedish major students?

Purposive sampling was used for the purposes of the study (see Rallis & Rossman, 2009). The participants had to meet specific criteria to fill in the questionnaire: they had to be full-time undergraduate students of foreign language programmes at Polish universities, majoring in either English, German or Swedish. A link to a questionnaire was sent to three major universities in Poland. The participation in the study was voluntary. In the end, a total of 200 undergraduate students of foreign languages participated in the project, with 88 students majoring in English, 67 students majoring in German and 45 students majoring in Swedish. The participants were approximately the same age: the average age was 22 in the English major group, 21 in the German major group, and 20 in the Swedish group. In terms of the participants' language repertoire, Table 1 illustrates the number of languages spoken by the students. As can be seen, the group of Swedish major students seem to exhibit rich language repertoires, with the vast majority of students reported speaking three foreign languages or more—in some cases speaking six languages.

Table 1

The Participants' Linguistic Repertoire

	ENG major students (N = 88)	GER major students (N = 67)	SWE major students (N = 45)
One L2	33% (N = 29)	12% (N = 8)	0% (N = 0)
Two L2s	47% (N = 41)	63% (N = 42)	18% (N = 8)
Three L2s or more	20% (N = 18)	25% (N = 17)	82% (N = 37)

All the participants were enrolled on 3-year BA programmes in foreign languages, programmes that are specific to language studies in Poland. A student majoring in a foreign language at a Polish university is obliged to attend courses that introduce elements of literature, linguistics, as well as the history and culture of the region, in addition to developing practical language skills. Most

of the courses are predominantly conducted in the target language. The foreign language students typically write their diploma papers in the target language, exploring different areas of the language. In this way, the intention is that the students are immersed in the language and culture of the language.

The data was collected by means of three almost identical questionnaires, designed for English major students (inquiring about Polish and English), for German major students (inquiring about Polish and German), and for Swedish major students (inquiring about Polish and Swedish). The instrument consisted of two sections: (a) close-ended questions targeting the students' beliefs about their language identity in general terms, together with selected demographic data (a total of nine questionnaire items), and (b) four open-ended questions focusing on the participants' perception of the languages they speak and the way they feel about them. The theoretical framework behind the design of the open-ended items was based on the premises outlined in Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), who emphasized the subjectivity of the process of identity formation, which is grounded in "an attempt to self-name, to self-characterize, and to claim social spaces" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 19). The design of the tool was informed by the research strategies put forward by Block (2010); hence, the open and subject-oriented nature of the open-response items offered the participants a platform to freely express their own ideas connected to their imagined selves (Brown, 2009). For the purposes of this paper, the analysis and findings will relate only to the students' answers to the open-ended items, which allowed for the collection of qualitative data.

Thus, a qualitative approach was adopted to consider and analyse the collected data using a thematic analysis. Based on the literature review (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2013; Darvin & Norton, 2014; Norton & Pavlenko, 2019), key identity markers were identified and organized into categories. As a result, a framework was designed, consisting of four distinctive thematic groups:

a) linguistic (i.e., those referring to the students' knowledge of language as a complex system);
b) pragmatic (i.e., those referring to language learning and language use);
c) affective (i.e., those referring to the students' attitudes and emotions);
d) symbolic (i.e., those referring to concepts such as group identity, community, power dynamics and status).

Before the data analysis was undertaken, the respondents' answers were organized into categories, informed by the language of their major and the questions to which they responded, and were later transferred into dedicated files. The students' answers were first categorised as positive, negative or neutral. If an answer was more complex or ambiguous, a note was made next to the item, and a separate category was created. The final list was subsequently organized according to their frequency of occurrence. Finally, each item was coded

and assigned to a given theme. The codes that emerged in the process of data analysis were later visually presented in the squared graphs, where the size of the squares corresponds with the frequency of appearance of a given code. Throughout the process of designing, collecting and analysing the data, the guidelines found in Brown (2009) were followed.

Exploring the Imagined Selves of Undergraduate L2 Students in Poland—Results

English Major Students' Perception of L1 and L2

When considering the perception of their L1 and L2, the English major students highlighted many specific details in the description of their L1 (Polish), including the sound and melody of the language (see Table 2). The vast majority of the students recognized its complexity and emphasized the difficulty of learning and speaking the language. In the affective category, positive adjectives dominated, emphasizing its beauty and poetic potential, although there were also instances of more critical comments and attitudes. With regard to the overall character of the codes, out of the total of 188 code occurrences, 51% were classified as negative, 27% as positive and 22% as neutral.

Table 2

English Major Students' Perception of L1 (PL)

LINGUISTIC	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	SYMBOLIC
complicated: 22 stiff/hermetic: 5 grammar: 2 diverse: 2 precise: 2 complex: 2 rules/exceptions: 2 codes occurring once: *descriptive, fast, flowery, gender-based* codes relating to sound: melodic/rhythmic: 5 crisp: 4 harsh (sound): 3 codes occurring once: *monotonous*	difficult/demand-ing/hard: 53 flexible/creative: 4 expressive: 2 codes occurring once: *inflexible, good to know*	beautiful: 10 poetic: 6 exceptional: 5 interesting: 5 emotional: 4 rich: 3 pride: 3 unusual: 2 unique: 2 conservative: 2 less interesting/boring: 2 serious: 2 distinguished/elegant: 2 codes occurring once: *important, rudimental, mundane, poor, inelegant, strange, mean, charmful, potential, square, senti-mental*	national/national-ity: 4 mother tongue: 4 codes occurring once: *identity, tradition, unpopular, less useful, natural, official*

As regards the perception of the foreign language studied, the English major students were even more specific in expressing how they saw the language (see Table 3). The symbolic category dominated in terms of code occurrences—the students recognized the global status of the language and considered its positive influence. They perceived English to be an easy language to learn and communicate, which sounds nice and opens doors with respect to their future. They also appreciated its simplicity and their ability to express themselves easily in English. It could be even stated that in some cases the students expressed more positive attitudes toward the language, as compared to their L1—out of the total of 192 code occurrences, the general perception of English was undeniably more positive (47%) than negative (5%).

Table 3

English Major Students' Perception of L2 (ENG)

LINGUISTIC	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	SYMBOLIC
simple/less complicated: 6	easy/easier: 17	beautiful: 6	universal: 17
complicated: 4	flexible/creative: 6	interesting: 6	useful: 10
dynamic: 3	difficult/demanding: 5	rich: 4	international/ Lingua Franca: 9
unlimited/free: 3	communicative: 3	fluid: 4	popular: 8
structured/organized: 2	almost native: 3	dignified/distin-guished/ elegant: 3	omnipresent: 6
diverse/diversified: 2	straightforward/direct: 2	serious/official/ stiff: 2	necessary: 5
codes occurring once: *focused on I, unemotional, illogical, humour, impersonal, precise, adaptive*	learning/knowledge: 2	codes occurring once: *fashionable, pragmatic, expressive, concrete, light, wonderful, friendly, overrated*	global: 4
	codes occurring once: *scientific, intuitive*		opens the door/ gives possibilities/ future: 4
codes relating to sound: melodic: 8			important: 2
pleasant: 6			codes occurring once: *known*
sounds better/great/ nice: 5			
rhythmic: 3			
soft: 3			
codes occurring once: *delicate*			

English Major Students' Imagined L1 and L2 Selves

Having collected and analysed the answers to the question about how they felt in a given language, two profiles of imagined selves could be identified. As it can be seen in Figure 1[1], the students felt predominantly positive when speaking their native language, which comes as little surprise. The results, however, are more interesting when juxtaposed with the profile of the students' imagined L2 self (see Figure 2).

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[1] The size of the square corresponds with the number of code occurrences.

Figure 1

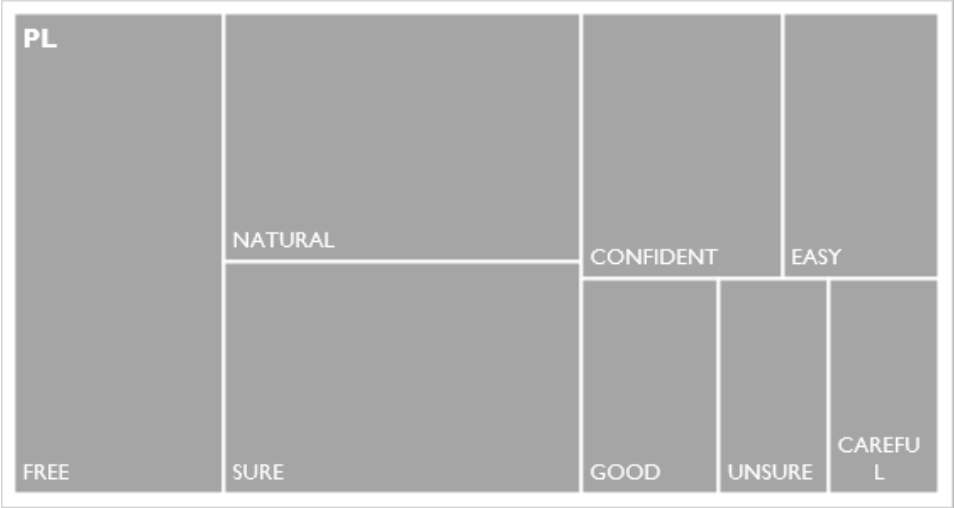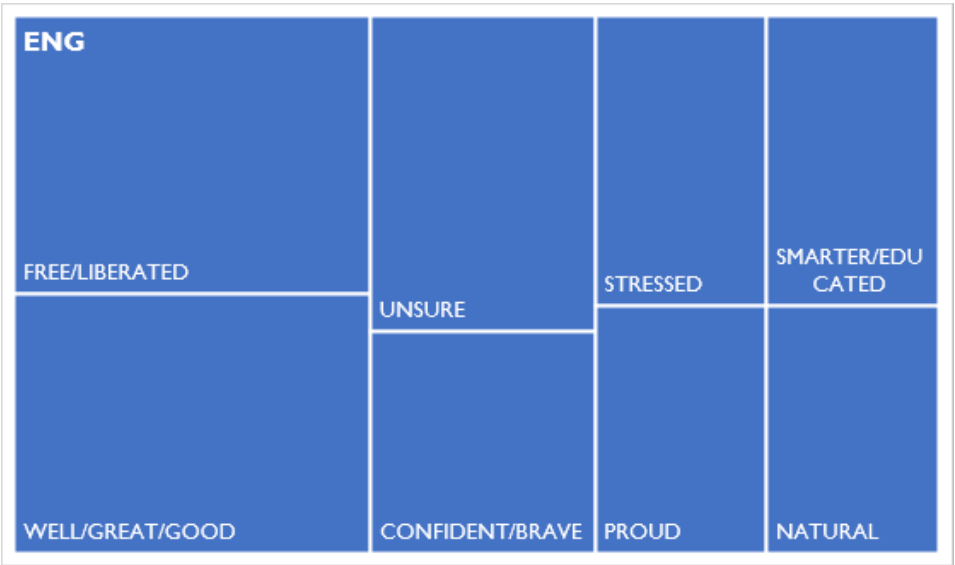*English Major Students' Imagined L1 Self—A Profile*

Figure 2

English Major Students' Imagined L2 Self—A Profile

In their imagined L2 selves, the English major students expressed themselves with the use of more positive and more emotionally loaded adjectives. As compared to the profile of their L1 imagined self, speaking English made them feel smarter and educated, confident and brave, as well as proud. They emphasized being fluent—not only free, but also liberated to express how they think and feel—as an important element of their L2 identity. In the analysis of their responses there were nine instances of positive comparative adjectives, such as *more*, *better*, *smarter*, *closer*, *funnier*. Their imagined L2 self reflected their positive attitude to the studied language and also corresponded with its symbolic dimension, that is, English being the language of possibilities and "open doors."

German Major Students' Perception of L1 and L2

The German major students focused predominantly on the linguistic aspects of their L1 (see Table 4). They offered a very detailed analysis of the language in terms of its grammar, lexis and phonology. Similarly to the English major students, they agreed that Polish is complicated, difficult to master and use to communicate. Its lower status was also recognized by the participants. In general, the students were rather critical about their native language, as out of the total of 125 code occurrences, 38% were classified as negative, only 8% as positive and 54% as neutral.

Table 4

German Major Students' Perception of L1 (PL)

LINGUISTIC	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	SYMBOLIC
complicated: 28 exceptions: 4 simple: 2 diverse: 2 illogical: 2 codes occurring once: *wordy, complex, dynamic, conjunction, rich in vocab, cases, specific, unpredictable*	difficult: 39 codes occurring once: *easy*	interesting: 3 unique: 2 codes occurring once: *poetic, uninteresting, obvious, no sympathy, free, unimportant, problematic, conservative*	native: 9 less useful/useless: 2 home: 2 codes occurring once: *less known, culture, traditional, natural, developing, historically heavy*
codes relating to sound: crisp: 3 codes occurring once: *sounds nice, hard sounds, sound, loud*			

When considering the German major students' perception of the studied language, it could be observed that they were much more positive about German, as compared to Polish (see Table 5), with 22% positive, 61% neutral and 17% negative codes. Although they considered it a difficult language, they pointed to a number of positive aspects, admitting it was logical, well-organized, interesting and even useful. Similarly to their L1, the students concentrated on the linguistic features of the German language, going into much detail about its syntax. Interestingly, despite the fact that the German major students were asked about their L1 and L2 (i.e., German) only, they frequently compared German to English.

Table 5

German Major Students' Perception of L2 (GER)

LINGUISTIC	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	SYMBOLIC
logical: 15 order/orderly/organized: 11 concrete/precise: 6 simple: 6 dynamic: 5 rules: 3 schematic: 3 complex: 3 transparent: 3 specific: 3 codes occurring once: *direct*, *word formation* codes relating to sound: heavy (sound): 5 nice sound: 4 codes occurring once: *ugly*, *aggressive sound*, *less melodic*	difficult/demanding: 16 easy/*easier: 11 [*easier than English] codes occurring once: *business language*, *intuitive*, *creative*, *learning*, *almost na- tive*, *easier to make a mistake*	interesting: 10 pleasant/nice: 3 strong: 2 beautiful: 2 complicated: 2 codes occurring once: *original*, *characteristic*, *character*, *ugly*, *rich*, *wonderful*, *diverse*	useful: 4 opens possibilities/ future: 3 important: 2 codes occurring once: *unpopular*, *domi- nated by English*, *part of great*, *culture*, *traditional*, *foreign*, *recogniz- able*

German Major Students' Imagined L1 and L2 Selves

The imagined L1 selves of German major students are comparable to the English major students. They reported feeling free, natural, confident and able to express themselves well (see Figure 3). Their imagined L2 self, in contrast, could be described as a mixture of negative and positive feelings. On the one hand, the students admitted to feeling anxious, particularly about making mistakes and being accurate, unsure and limited. At the same time, however, they felt good, happy, wise and free (see Figure 4).

Figure 3

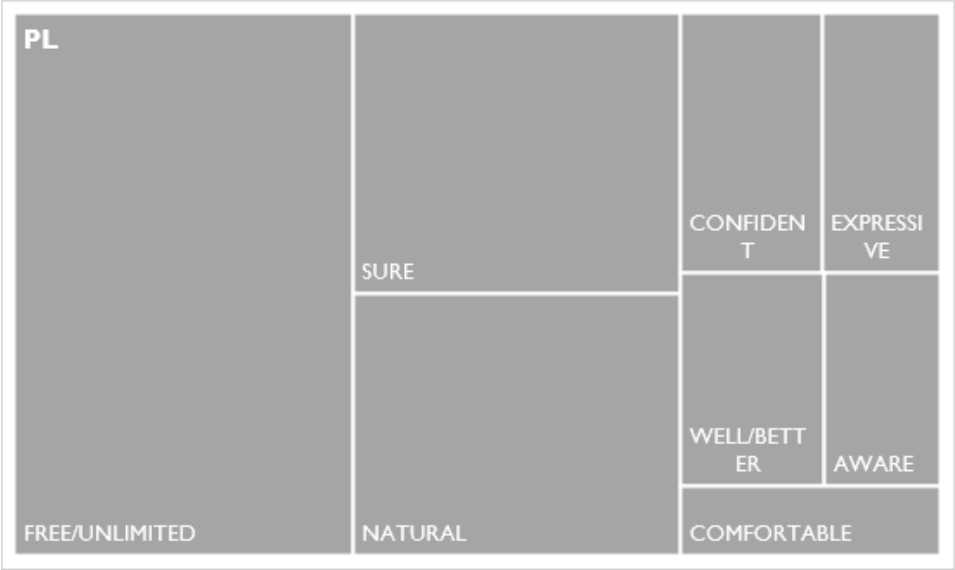*German Major Students' Imagined L1 Self—A Profile*

Figure 4

German Major Students' Imagined L2 Self—A Profile

What should be noted here is that while analysing their responses, there were a number of instances where the students expressed having mixed feelings when speaking German. For example, they reported to have felt "different, but good," or "less sure, but well." Six such instances were coded collectively as a form of ambivalence.

Swedish Major Students' Perception of L1 and L2

The Swedish major students described their L1 as complicated and difficult, yet beautiful and interesting. What should be highlighted is that they considered speaking and knowing Polish to be beneficial and conducive to learning other languages. Overall, the characteristics of the total number of 88 code occurrences were spread almost evenly, with 34% of the codes labelled as positive, 35% neutral and 31% negative.

Table 6

Swedish Major Students' Perception of L1 (PL)

LINGUISTIC	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	SYMBOLIC
complicated: 13 rich: 6 complex: 5 irregular: 2 codes occurring once: *non-inclusive*, *descriptive*, *synthetic*, *diverse*, *exceptions* codes relating to sound: sounds nice: 2 heavy sounds: 2 *sound*, *monotonous (sound)*	difficult: 20 good foundation for learning: 3 expressive: 2 codes occurring once: *flexible*	beautiful: 8 interesting: 6 different: 2 codes occurring once: *pretentious*, *emotional*, *unique*	familiar/natural: 3 codes occurring once: *traditional*, *taboo*, *less relevant*

In contrast, their perception of their L2 could be easily viewed as enthusiastic (see Table 7). Swedish was perceived as not only simple and easy to learn, but also as interesting and beautiful. Out of the total of 101 code occurrences, 24% referred to sound—how melodic and nice to the ear the language was. The students expressed solely positive feelings about Swedish, as can be seen in the affective category of the codes. Interestingly, there were four instances in which Swedish was compared to other languages (including Polish, English and German). It was apparent that the students felt excited to be asked about Swedish—84% of the code occurrences were positive, with only 3% negative. Compared to the previous two groups of students, they seemed the most passionate about their chosen language.

Table 7

Swedish Major Students' Perception of L2 (SWE)

LINGUISTIC	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	SYMBOLIC
simple (simpler than Polish or German ×3): 9 logical: 7 grammatical: 2 specific: 2 regular: 2 codes occurring once: *analytical, a mix of PL/ENG/GER* codes relating to sound: melodic: 17 sounds interesting: 4 nice for the ear: 3	easy (to learn): 11 difficult: 3 codes occurring once: *methodic, practical, precise, straight-forward*	interesting: 12 nice: 5 beautiful: 3 funny: 3 unique: 3 codes occurring once: *exotic, joyful, rich, unusual, the best*	universal and useful (in Scandinavia): 2 codes occurring once: *self-development, nature*

Swedish Major Students' Imagined L1 and L2 Selves

The Swedish major students' profile of their imagined L1 self (see Figure 5) is very similar to the profiles of the German and English major students. In general, they felt natural, free, proud and confident in speaking Polish. Yet, looking at the profile of their imagined L2 self (see Figure 6), it is clear that their excitement observed in the previous section was transferred to this profile. They explicitly stated that they felt happy and excited speaking Swedish—pride also seemed to be an important component. What is interesting is the fact that the Swedish profile represents a mix of the elements present in the English and German profiles; for example, the Swedish major students observed that they feel more intelligent or wise speaking Swedish (see the L2 imagined self of the students of English). Comparing this profile to the German major students, the Swedish group admitted to sometimes feeling ambivalent in speaking Swedish (e.g., *unsure yet open*, *good yet unsure*, *unsure but happy*) as well as feeling anxious about committing mistakes in their target language.

Figure 5

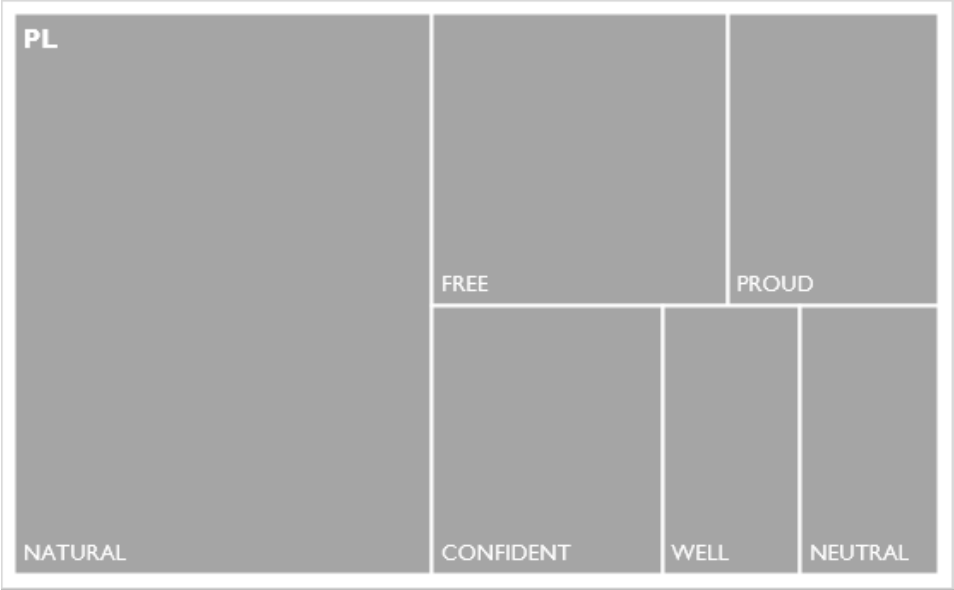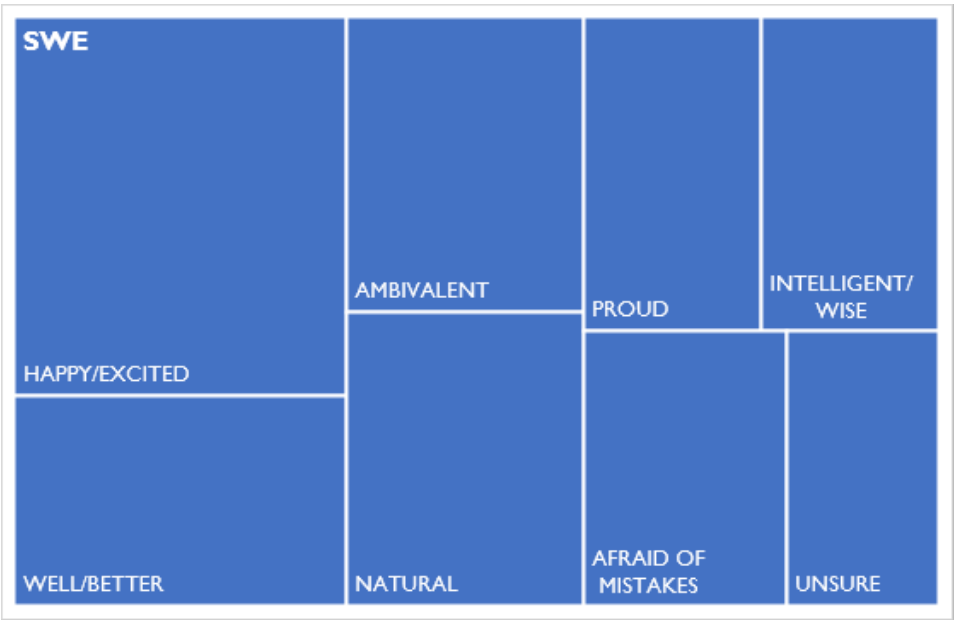*Swedish Major Students' Imagined L1 Self—A Profile*

Figure 6

Swedish Major Students' Imagined L2 Self—A Profile

Discussion

The research findings offer an interesting insight into the language identity and the imagined L1 and L2 selves of undergraduate students of three language majors: English, German and Swedish. Addressing the first part of the first research question (RQ1a), which enquired about the students' perception of their languages in question, it can be stated that they were aware language users, who often referred to the complex nature of the language systems and their structures. They seemed to be very sensitive to the way the languages sound (a total of 88 code occurrences in all three groups) and how the languages are used and learned (see the pragmatic category). The English major students generally considered their L2 to be a universal language which makes international communication easier. The German major students saw their L2 as demanding, yet logical and well-organised. The Swedish major students perceived their L2 as simple, easy and interesting. In the affective category, it can be observed that the students were much more positive about their target languages, as compared to their perception of their L1, about which they seemed undoubtedly more critical (see Pavlenko, 2013).

In terms of the second part of the first research question (RQ1b), which focused on the participants' feelings both experienced and expressed in using their L2s, it could be observed that the students felt, in general terms, better speaking their languages of choice, as compared to their L1 profiles. There were many instances of positive comparative adjectives, like *better*, *more intelligent*, *smarter*, *funnier*, *happier*, in the analysis of the profiles, with the Swedish group in particular feeling enthusiastic about Swedish. In addition, more students mentioned a sense of pride when speaking their L2s; in fact, only the Swedish group admitted to feeling proud in their L1.

It is interesting that the German major students seemed more emotional about their language of study, which stands in contrast with the findings in Gabryś-Barker (2019). Yet, their emotions describing their experience in speaking their L2 were not always simply positive or negative. Both the German and Swedish students exhibited instances of ambivalence (see Block, 2010; Darvin & Norton, 2014), where they expressed often contradictory emotions about their target languages.

Finally, concerning the differences in the way the students imagined themselves in their foreign languages (see RQ2), based on their L2 profiles, the English major students were much more focused on fluency—the possibility to express themselves freely and without any limitations; whereas the German and Swedish students concentrated more on accuracy and their fear of making mistakes. It would be interesting to further explore the potential influence of their perception of the imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) on the way

they express their imagined L2 selves. In other words, it could be argued that their language identity might be to some extent affected by the stereotypical images of the target language communities.

As the symbolic dimension of the language learners' L2 identity was highlighted (McKinney & Norton, 2008; Kramsch, 2021), it should also be emphasized that the students in all three categories recognized the higher status of English. The English major students explicitly addressed this issue by referring to English as a global language, which is not only popular but also necessary. Still, the symbolic status of English was also recognized by the other two groups. Although the German and Swedish students were only asked about their L1 and L2 languages, they often compared German and Swedish to English, for example, by observing that German is dominated by English. This might be accounted for by the fact that both German and Swedish major students were more multilingual and exhibited more sensitivity to the differences between languages and language use, with the Swedish students speaking, on average, more than three foreign languages. Despite the fact that English occupies the position of a *lingua franca*, the participants were also clear about the "social and economic gains" (Darvin & Norton, 2014, p. 57) that speaking foreign languages other than English could offer.

It can also be observed that the way the English and German major students perceived their languages of study overlapped with the common stereotypes about these languages and their L2 users, with English being connected to liberation, freedom and fluency, and German being associated with order, logic and accuracy. Only the participants studying Swedish did not attribute their language identity with commonly associated stereotypical traits, focusing only on the positive aspects of learning and speaking the language. They were, among these three groups, definitely the most excited about their L2s.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the students of foreign language majors in Poland exhibited very positive imagined L2 selves and seemed passionate and excited about their languages of choice, even though their study might be challenging and demanding. What is surprising is that the students were rather critical about their L1, in contrast to their perception of their L2s. However, in general, the participants could be considered aware language users, recognizing the symbolic power behind the language use. The English and German major students' imagined L2 selves to some extent reflect the common stereotypes of the languages and

L2 users, but it would be interesting to explore some of the threads and patterns that emerged in the analysis in more detail.

When considering the research findings, there are three major teaching implications that could be drawn from this study. First, since the students exhibited highly positive attitudes towards their imagined L2 selves, there is, for example, a need for fostering the students' intrinsic, integrative motivation and supporting their investment in learning by offering them opportunities to participate more actively in the imagined communities of practice. Second, it is important to further explore to what extent the stereotypes language learners have about the languages they study affect their imagined L2 selves. It would be, thus, necessary to raise the students' (inter)cultural awareness and challenge the stereotypical views of the languages and the L2 users. Third, considering the complexity of the students' imagined L2 self profiles, it might be worthwhile to give them platform for expressing and exploring their multilingual identities by encouraging language journals or language biographies.

The present study is, however, not without certain limitations. First of all, it offers merely a snapshot of the issue under discussion—with only a single tool, there was limited amount of data that could be gathered, which resulted in rather simplified profiles and limited contexts. Due to the exploratory nature of the open-ended questions (Brown, 2009), the findings of the study should be treated more as the groundwork for future projects. What is more, the tool allowed the students' spontaneous associations with their languages to be captured at a specific moment in time—their language biography and prior experience was not taken into account. Finally, as the collected data captures a static "moment" in their complex language identities, it should be borne in mind that it is necessary to treat the results as guidelines for future research questions in an ethnographic project.

Since one of the primary aims of the study was to establish a foundation for future studies, some of the issues that emerged from the analysis of the gathered material could be further investigated by means of ethnographic projects or narratives, for instance, to explore the students' profiles in context and to observe how their language identities evolve over time. In particular, it would be interesting to learn about the role of the L2 teachers in the process of shaping students' imagined L2 selves, as well as the correlation between the students' language identity and their L2 motivation. Another intriguing aspect to explore would be the cultural dimension that emerged in the findings—in other words, to what extent the profiles are affected by the stereotypical thinking about the imagined communities of the languages under investigation, and to what extent this simplified image of a target language user is fostered within formal education in Poland. Finally, the results should be enriched by collecting data about languages from other language families.

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