



THE IMAGE OF A POLYGLOT THROUGH THE EYES OF MGIMO STUDENTS

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Abstract. *This paper presents a sociological study of the features that characterize students' perception of the phenomenon of polyglottery. The study aims to give a clearer description of the qualities, which are, according to students, associated with polyglots. The researchers used the focus group method and projective techniques (free and controlled associations, personalization, personification and object manipulation) in a discussion with actual MGIMO students to provide ground for a sincere, but instrumental talk. As a result, special characteristics were identified that are associated with polyglots in the minds of the students. It was revealed that polyglots are perceived in an exclusively positive light as educated, competent and tactful individuals who are an attractive role model. These associations are largely formed under the influence of the phenomenon of "unconscious polyglottery" due to the fact that multilingual competence is part of everyday life for this social group. MGIMO students have an unconscious habit of perceiving foreign languages not only during the classes but also in a less formal way and, therefore, are uniquely related to polyglottery. MGIMO was chosen as the object of study because of it being mentioned in the Guinness Book of Records as an academic institution with the largest number of languages in the world being taught (53). In addition, a review of existing literature aimed at the sociological study of polyglottery is also presented in the article (in particular, the works by Laia Herlevi and Alexander Arguelles). Analyzed are their goals, results and limitations. These works use a quantitative methodology of sociological research, while the present paper refers to a qualitative strategy, which seems to be particularly effective in examining the phenomenon of polyglots and polyglottery. The immediate perspective of this study is connected with describing sociological and psychological aspects of different foreign languages when selecting one as a study subject.*

Keywords: *polyglottery, qualitative study, sociological study, polyglot, psycholinguistics, focus group discussion*

For citation: Virolainen, A.V., Kovalenko N.S., Komarov D.S. (2022). The image of a polyglot through the eyes of MGIMO students. *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies*, 8(3), pp. 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2410-2423-2022-3-32-47-57>

ОБРАЗ ПОЛИГЛОТА ГЛАЗАМИ СТУДЕНТОВ МГИМО

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Аннотация. В настоящей статье представлено социологическое исследование по выявлению особенностей, характеризующих восприятие студентами феномена полиглотии. Целью исследования было дать более чёткое описание тех качеств, которые ассоциируются у студентов с полиглотами. Исследователи использовали метод фокус-группы и проектные техники (свободных и направленных ассоциаций, персонализации, персонификации и манипуляции с предметами) в дискуссии с участием студентов МГИМО для проведения более искренней, но одновременно и инструментальной беседы. В результате были выявлены особые характеристики, которые в сознании студентов ассоциируются с полиглотами. Обнаружено, что полиглоты воспринимаются в исключительно положительном свете как образованные, компетентные и тактичные люди, представляющие собой привлекательную модель для подражания. При этом данные ассоциации во многом сформированы под влиянием феномена «неосознанной полиглотии» – состояния, связанного с тем, что многоязычие является частью повседневной жизни для данной социальной группы. Студенты МГИМО обладают неосознанной привычкой воспринимать иностранные языки не только на занятиях, но и в менее формальной обстановке, поэтому уникальным образом связаны с явлением полиглотии. Данный университет был выбран в качестве объекта исследований из-за его упоминания в «Книге рекордов Гиннеса» как учебного заведения, где преподаётся наибольшее количество языков в мире (53). Кроме того, в статье представлен обзор литературы, посвящённой социологическому изучению полиглотии (в частности работы Л. Херлеви и А. Аргуэльеса). Анализируются их цели, результаты и ограничения. Данные работы используют количественную методiku социологических исследований, в то время как настоящая статья относится к качественной стратегии, которая представляется особенно эффективной для изучения феномена полиглотов и полиглотии. Ближайшая перспектива исследования связана с описанием социологических и психологических особенностей восприятия того или иного иностранного языка при выборе его в качестве предмета изучения.

Ключевые слова: полиглотия, качественное исследование, социологическое исследование, полиглот, психолингвистика, фокус-групповое исследование

Для цитирования: Виролайнен А.В., Коваленко Н.С., Комаров Д.С. (2022). Образ полиглота глазами студентов МГИМО. Филологические науки в МГИМО. 8(3), С. 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2410-2423-2022-3-32-47-57>

Until today, the scientific study of polyglots has been carried out mainly within the framework of psycholinguistics and methodology of teaching foreign languages [3], [10, p. 104–105]. However, in recent years, as the modern polyglot movement develops as a social phenomenon, it becomes necessary to use the methods of sociology and statistics as well.

This paper aims to be introductory as it is the first published qualitative study on polyglottery. This research was presented at the 2nd International Seminar on Linguistics & Polyglot Studies on April 26, 2022, and at the round table *Research on Polyglottery: Theoretical Analysis and Practice* as part of the 20th International Symposium on Psycholinguistics and Communication Theory on May 28, 2022. These two

events were devoted to discussing a huge variety of topics about polyglottery: polyglots' cognitive skills, self-monitoring instruments and learning strategies, the hyperintensive method, cognitive metaphors and social perception of polyglottery [4], [8]. The last subject was covered by the study presented in this paper.

Empirical basis of the study

Turning to the present research, it bridges sociological knowledge and the information that is currently known about polyglots. We have chosen qualitative methods, namely the focus group, as it provides a more personal insight into the issue. The focus group was conducted in April 2022 and involved five individuals, who are students of Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

As for our choice of the study object, we decided to analyze the perspective of MGIMO students. This was due to the fact that MGIMO University is known for profound language teaching and is mentioned in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most multilingual educational institution in the world in terms of the number of languages taught (53) [7]. All students study at least two foreign languages, one of which is often English. Many students also have experience of learning other languages apart from their academic studies. So, the probability of finding a polyglot among MGIMO students is higher than in the general population.

Moreover, it is interesting to examine this particular group as polyglots are mixed with ordinary students, thus forming a unique atmosphere of “unconscious polyglottery”. It means students and professors of the university are used to the fact that they can run into a person who speaks several languages, which is a common thing. Thus, polyglottery to some degree fits into their ordinary life and students face polyglots on a daily basis. This way, they unconsciously create the image of a polyglot, without even noticing it. That is what we are going to examine in this study: the image the students have while thinking of polyglots.

Review of existing studies

Before conducting our own survey, we reviewed existing sociological research literature. To date, only few sociological studies are known in the sphere of polyglottery. The first of them is **Laia Herlevi's** thesis *Polyglot Identities* [2]. Here, identity is understood as the information we associate with ourselves, other people, and things. Each person has his own set of identities (self-identities) that he shares with the world, depending on the context. For example, we present one identity to our friends and family, and another to our professional colleagues. At the root of it all, the cognitive process of identification assigns specific properties, characteristics, and intentions to things and beings we know or come in contact with. Cognitive identities are therefore the most basic cognitive constructs associated with all things that distinguish us, and this is what Laia Herlevi focuses on.

The background of her work is the intensification of transnational interactions through the “accelerated diffusion of information enabled by advancements in communication technologies” [ibid., p. 1]. This recent trend has given rise to various forms of digital media, thus bringing an abundance of languages within our reach. The influence of social networks and other technologies on the personality of a polyglot is ambiguous. While social media has undoubtedly helped raise awareness and recognition of linguistic diversity, it has also had a negative impact on the concept of language purity. For example, social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram allow for quick and easy communication between native speakers of different languages. This has led to the widespread use of hybrid forms and language mash-ups, which some consider a violation of linguistic purity.

The aim of Herlevi's work is to understand how polyglots – “a compelling socio-cultural phenomenon in the midst of globalization” – “construct their sense of self through linguistic pursuits and practices” [ibid.]. The data for her study consists of two surveys conducted in social media in early 2019. These questionnaires, which included such topics as language learning and usage, identity, belonging, self-image, and values, were distributed through several polyglot groups on Facebook, and gathered input from 58 and 40 respondents respectively. Both questionnaires are treated by Laia Herlevi as a single entity.

The corresponding diagrams are attached below (Fig. 1–3). They show the main socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, as well as the direct attitude of respondents to languages.

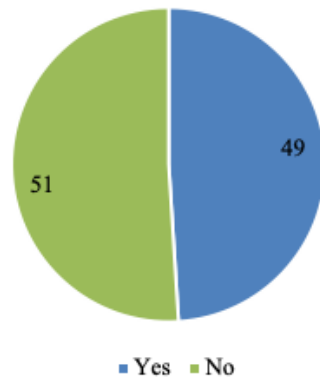


Figure 1. Respondents who work or study in a language-related sphere, %

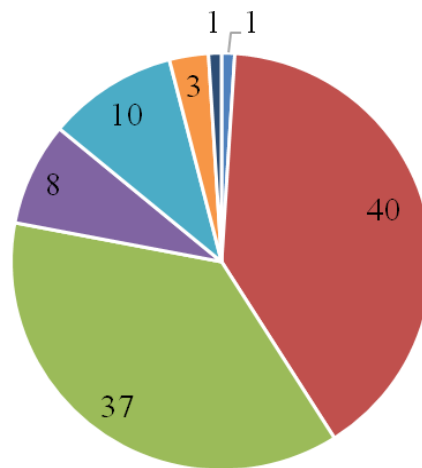


Figure 2. Age group of the respondents, %

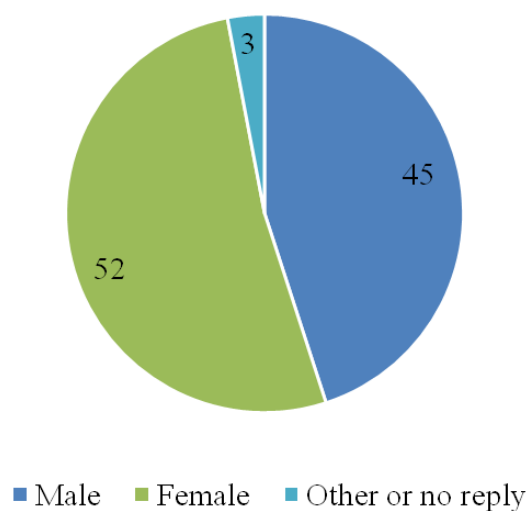


Figure 3. Gender of the respondents, %

Herlevi arrived at an interesting conclusion: the number of languages studied by a polyglot, as well as the regions to which these languages belong, can really influence how polyglots perceive their own “home”. It can be argued that the languages studied by polyglots form this very feeling of home. After all, polyglots in the course of learning a language not only encounter new grammatical constructions and unfamiliar words, but also are constantly forced to immerse themselves in a foreign culture. People internalize what used to be “alien” for them, so elements of a previously alien culture move from the zone of the “unknown and incomprehensible” to the zone of the “native and understandable”. Thus, the study of foreign languages can be considered as a socio-cultural phenomenon that lays the basis for the formation of a person’s identity. Even if it is not the foundation on which a person’s identity is built, at least it plays a very significant role in this process, which simply cannot be underestimated.

As for potential limitations of Laia Herlevi’s survey, there might be some concerns regarding data validity due to the author’s style of interpretation. This is basically one of the reasons why the qualitative strategy is more appropriate in our own study. Herlevi’s quantitative research allowed a limited level of validity because of the features used during the analysis. By contrast, in our study we had different requirements in this respect. We needed higher validity as we were focusing on interpretation using qualitative methods. This is essential for the research strategy even in combination with quantitative methods.

Another example of a quantitative study is the paper **“The character traits of polyglots”** by **Alexander Arguelles**, originally presented at the Polyglot Conference in Ljubljana in 2018 [1]. He conducted a survey aimed at describing the specific characteristics of polyglots. He used a computer programme popular among sociologists, SPSS, which is an effective tool when it comes to quantitative research. The main focus of such surveys is on the process of collecting and analyzing numerical data. So, it presents more generalized information and basically dismisses the individual’s story. Briefly speaking, it is more about rules rather than exceptions.

First of all, Arguelles crafted an online survey, which was completed by 640 respondents. As he says, it took 36 minutes for the respondents to answer all the questions. However, he points out that his study is just a starting point. Moreover, due to the peculiarities of the sample, he highlights that it is not a global study, but rather one of the Western civilization.

Arguelles groups all the respondents into three groups, according to the number of languages a person knows:

- 1) so-called beginning polyglots – ones who study three or fewer languages;
- 2) intermediate polyglots – who study from four to six languages;
- 3) advanced polyglots – speaking seven or more languages.

As for the motives for his study, Alexander Arguelles explains that it was the article published in *The New Yorker*, “The mystery of people who speak dozens of languages”, that encouraged – or even triggered him. The author of the article claimed that “an extreme language learner has a more-than-random chance of being a gay, left-handed male on the autism spectrum, with an autoimmune disorder, such as asthma or allergies” [12]. Yet, Arguelles points out that the article lacks evidence, so he decided to check whether the statement could possibly be true. He also highlights that the said publication focuses only on provocative possible traits of polyglots. Instead, it could be used for a better purpose – for example, to examine how polyglots can teach ordinary people or what unique traits polyglots have in terms of their self-discipline and learning schedule. However, the article does not take these beneficial traits into consideration.

In order to prove or disprove the above statement, Arguelles proposes to combine five factors mentioned and to see how many of his 640 respondents really have the following traits: gayness, left-handedness, male gender, suffering from autistic disorder and suffering from autoimmune disorder. As a result, none of the respondents had these characteristics all at once.

After that, Arguelles switches to examining the variables one by one. Thus, he finds out what features correlate with polyglot status, that is, what traits can be related to knowledge of numerous foreign languages. It turns out that advanced polyglots (speaking at least seven foreign languages) indeed have some of the traits mentioned, but not all of them. For example, he sees no correlation for left-handedness.

An interesting conclusion about male gender comes next. In North America and Europe, males make up 49% of the population, whereas among the 640 respondents there are 69,4% males – thus, the percent-

age is notably higher. It is also fair to say that the more languages a polyglot knows or studies, the higher the chance of this person being male. Some 75% of the advanced polyglots examined by Arguelles are male.

Below are other variables, both proven and unproven, examined by Alexander Arguelles (Table 1).

<i>Proven hypotheses</i>	<i>Unproven hypotheses</i>
homosexuality	left-handedness
male gender	high-functioning autism
excellent academic record	allergies
high language learning aspirations	asthma
polyglot genes/patterning	negative language experience

Table 1. List of proven or unproven hypotheses

However, Alexander Arguelles is not a professional sociologist, so his study is not flawless, as he points out himself. First of all, though the sample is numerous, its distribution is not ideally representative. It is very hard to reach the perfect ratio between various groups of representatives: between men and women, between different age categories, and between large cities and small towns, etc. Yet, a perfect survey meeting all the scientific requirements should aspire to have a representative sample, which consumes significant amounts of effort, money and time. (Looking ahead, we would like to mention that our own study does not possess such resources, and, thus, we were limited in this respect. On the other hand, our work is an example of qualitative research, where the requirements are looser than they are for quantitative studies, such as those of Arguelles and Herlevi). Moreover, Arguelles admits he was not quite familiar with the people who took part in the survey, so he could not control the dissemination of the online questionnaire. What is more important, many polyglots live in remote areas without stable internet connection or just do not use it, which means they were automatically dismissed by this type of the questionnaire.

Returning to the initial statement published in *The New Yorker*, Arguelles concludes that it would be more accurate to put it as follows: “The more his polyglottery advances, the more an enthusiastic language learner has a more-than-random chance of displaying each of the following three traits: male gender, homosexuality, Asperger’s Syndrome” [1, p. 300]. However, according to Arguelles, it would be even better to focus on specific traits that ordinary people can implement in their routine – for example, polyglot’s specific schedule or self-discipline – instead of focusing on the scandalous headline. Arguelles wanted to show that society, including major media outlets, often view polyglots in a distorted manner, not taking into consideration the qualities of these individuals that can be developed into a useful habit for the successful study of foreign languages.

Sociological study of the perception of polyglots by MGIMO students

According to the definition used by modern researchers, a polyglot is a person who speaks at least five foreign languages at the functional level as a result of studying them after puberty [11]. However, a vague definition of a polyglot as a person who speaks several foreign languages is more common in the mass consciousness. This factor should be taken into account in further studies of the image of a polyglot. However, as mentioned above, in this particular study, the respondents were already familiar with the language learning environment. This helped us to choose the direction of this study. If even the basic term of polyglottery needs additional explanation, how then is the image of a polyglot formed in the public consciousness? What features should a polyglot have?

In search of answers to these questions, we decided to turn to MGIMO students as representatives of a “transitional” group between ordinary people and polyglots. On the one hand, these are young people who are not directly related to linguistics issues, since MGIMO programs are primarily focused on applied specialties of an international profile, for which foreign languages are a means of professional activity, rather than an object of scientific study. On the other hand, as mentioned above, MGIMO is a

multilingual environment with both Russian students, who are studying at least two foreign languages, and foreign students who come to get an academic degree.

MGIMO is an academic institution which is well-known in terms of its language learning traditions. As the university prepares the overwhelming majority of Russian diplomats, who work both within the country and in embassies all over the world, it has the reputation of a fair leader in teaching foreign languages. Students have four or five classes per week of their major foreign language, and two or three classes per week of their second foreign language.

Moreover, starting from the second year, students can choose an additional foreign language for an extra fee. Classes of a third foreign language take place two or three times a week. If a student chooses an Asian language (which is quite common), he is expected to go to longer lengths due to the difficulty of the language, so the university offers three classes per week instead of the ordinary two (for European languages). Overall, students have from six to eleven classes of foreign languages every week.

Languages are, thus, an essential part of the curriculum. However, it is not only about the number of hours spent on classes but also about students' attitude and commitment to study. Almost everyone understands the importance of foreign languages and what benefits they have using them.

MGIMO also provides a choice of opportunities for students' social life. Many students are active participants in various language and discussion clubs. For example, there is a research circle under the management of Grigory Kazakov, which focuses on the study of linguistics and polyglottery. Every foreign language department offers a variety of opportunities for students not only to deepen their learning but also to get into the culture of the target country or region.

Moreover, many of the professors at the university are acting interpreters, translators and employees of international companies. There are also people who used to work as diplomats in foreign embassies or in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They share their experience with students and encourage them to study foreign languages.

Thus, MGIMO students are people who, in a way, feel the influence of foreign languages, which are actively involved in their study, but do not study linguistics structurally and academically. This is also characteristic of polyglots, for most of whom languages are not their profession. In this regard, we develop a hypothesis that students of MGIMO tend to have an image of a polyglot, i.e. a combination of specific traits, which are associated with polyglots. Our study aims to identify these features that characterize the perception of the concept of "polyglot" by MGIMO students by conducting a focus group.

Focus group discussion is a method often used in various spheres of marketing (economic, political, and social). The result of a focus group study should be a decision on how to improve a product or service based on the existing image [9]. Generally, this is a semi-standardized group interview based on a specifically designed scenario. Robert Merton, who is often called the father of focus groups, puts forward the following important conditions for the use of this method:

1. Interviewees must be participants in a certain situation.
2. The situation must be analyzed in advance by a sociologist.
3. Based on this analysis, the researcher must craft an interview plan.
4. The interview focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals about the situation under study [5].

During our survey, these principles were strictly followed. We selected five individuals from among MGIMO students and asked them questions. While conducting a focus group, questions are addressed to all the participants – thus, a group discussion is launched and group dynamics is achieved [6]. It is of utmost importance to prepare the questions in advance. We chose projective techniques: both verbal and nonverbal. Below we list the techniques we used, and then summarize the results.

The first technique is free and controlled associations when participants are asked to say the first thing that comes to their mind when they hear the name of an object or a person. Thus, we asked our respondents: "What do you recall when you hear the word 'polyglot'?" This technique is connected with the psychological basis, which can be interpreted with the help of the *verstehen* approach, i.e. by looking at the phenomenon in question through the eyes of the individual.

The next technique is personalization: the participant is asked to imagine that he or she is the object being discussed – in our case, a polyglot. So, we asked the following questions: “If you were a polyglot, what would you think of yourself? What languages would you be proficient in? What would your job be? What would you do in life?” This is the logical continuation of the usage of the *verstehen* in the first technique. These techniques and concepts cannot be isolated from each other.

Another technique is anthropomorphism or personification: the participants are to “revive” the object in question, to give it a human name and a physical description, to tell about its character, its positive and negative qualities, or, as in our case, vice versa – to compare a real person (for example, a politician) with something “inhuman”. We asked the questions: “What colour do you associate a polyglot with? What time of the year? Time of the day? What kind of animal?” This technique allows us to understand respondents in a deeper way. Moreover, it eliminates answers intentionally made up in a socially approved manner, because there are no specific expectations regarding this type of questions. Nevertheless, this technique may yield tangible results and provide the researchers with a different point of view on a particular issue.

We also turned to nonverbal projective techniques, such as interacting with different objects. The respondents were shown photos of different people, both polyglots and people unrelated to polyglottery, and were asked to select photos of people who are more likely to be polyglots, from their point of view. This provided us with a more profound interpretational basis.

Before sharing the results, let us note once again how this study fundamentally differs from the previously known works. The studies mentioned above (the ones by Alexander Arguelles and Laia Herlevi) are examples of quantitative sociological research. These studies are aimed at strict standardization and formalization of the process of collecting and processing information, which makes it possible to obtain accurate data about the target audience, expressed in absolute or relative values. We took a different, less firm path, to organize a qualitative study. This is an informal collection of data using field methods and a non-standardized form of analysis, which allows one to get detailed information about human psychology, values, stance, deep motives of behaviour, as well as details that respondents consciously or unconsciously cannot or do not want to share with the researcher. Consequently, the sample for qualitative studies, due to their high costs (in terms of time, energy and finance), can be smaller than for quantitative ones.

As we have mentioned, five students took part in our focus group. We gathered the interviewees in one of the university classrooms and placed them in a circle. That was not accidental: the entire organization of the discussion should ensure equality of participants, so that everyone has the opportunity and desire to speak out. This is the main principle of conducting a focus group, and the moderator should make sure that all interviewees take equal part in the discussion.

Finally, let us proceed to the results of the focus group. In the course of answering the first question about associations with the word “polyglot”, all participants showed unanimity saying that polyglots are intelligent, educated, polite and tactful people. This may be due to the fact that polyglots are constantly associated with images from films and books, where knowledge of several foreign languages at a decent level is constantly attributed to educated and intelligent people, and sometimes even geniuses. The respondents said that polyglots can look at things from another person’s perspective thanks to their ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. This allows polyglots to easily communicate with others on a personal and professional level.

As for the second question of hypothetical nature (“If you were a polyglot, what would you think of yourself?”), the answers were also identical. Three of the respondents noted that they would travel more, not only to popular tourist places, but also to little-known towns and areas, and would also communicate with the locals using their native language. The other two participants expressed a desire to bond their careers with languages, saying that they would choose the job of an interpreter or a teacher. In addition, all five participants highlighted that knowledge of several languages “broadens the horizons”. During the discussion, everyone agreed that knowledge of many foreign languages is freedom: freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom of ideas.

Then, the discussion began to develop in the light of the specific languages that the focus group participants would like to know at the functional level. Despite the fact that everyone expressed a desire to

“to know as many languages as possible”, some were still more specific and clarified that they wanted to study European languages or Asian ones. Thus, the respondents were divided into two groups: the ones who are more attracted to the European languages, and the ones who feel more enthusiastic about the languages of Asia.

The final set of questions was of particular interest for us. These are questions about the colour, animal, time of the year and time of the day that are associated with the image of a polyglot. As for the colours, all the participants in the focus group gave different answers: dark blue, light blue, green, light grey and yellow. However, almost all (four out of five) agreed that the most associable animal for a polyglot is an owl. Such an opinion can be explained by the fact that, in many cultures, a calm and reasonable owl is considered a symbol of wisdom. Therefore, a polyglot is also subconsciously endowed with this quality. Autumn also seems calm – a time of regularity and balance – and all respondents chose autumn out of other seasons when thinking about polyglots. Despite that, the interviewees named different times of the day when sharing their associations. Some said it was the middle of the day, some said it was the deep night – no unanimous answer was revealed.

Conclusions

The focus group we analyzed showed that MGIMO students have a particular idea of what polyglots are. This idea is basically positive. The students think of polyglots as very intelligent and decent people. Everyone noted their diligence, perseverance and the ability to achieve their goals. Becoming a polyglot is a complex and responsible process. It takes a lot of dedication and hard work to be fluent in several languages. However, the advantages of being a polyglot outweigh the difficulties. The influence of social networks and other technologies on the personality of a polyglot is ambiguous.

We can state with a high degree of confidence that MGIMO students perceive polyglots as a social group of educated and highly smart people. Many respondents even said that they would not mind if they were polyglots themselves. Moreover, all the respondents expressed their interest in learning foreign languages as they see many advantages in this. The dissimilarity of opinions within the focus group is clearly manifested in the participants’ preferences regarding the languages being studied.

These conclusions are not a surprise given the profile of the university itself. MGIMO, as an institution preparing qualified international specialists, is renowned for its language learning standards. Students not only focus on their majors (such as sociology, international relations, international law, economics, and many others) but also prioritize developing their language capacities. They study two or more foreign languages and are thus integrated into a multilingual atmosphere, which further increases their motivation.

In the future, it might be worth analyzing why a person values a particular language or even a set of languages more and why he or she is less interested in others. Why did he choose these particular languages? What is the reason for this choice? How does a person’s identity change while learning different languages? How are intersubjective cognitive perspectives connected with language choice? And what are the factors, which affect the dynamics of language prescription?

It seems that this is a productive way to continue the study of polyglots, which requires the qualitative approach. It is also important to mention the potential power of quantitative methods that can clarify the whole picture in this field. This is especially true if we speak about practical aspects of language knowledge. All this can hopefully be achieved in further research on polyglot perception.

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