

How learners of German in Jordan about to depart to study abroad in Germany construct and subvert ethnic identity through knowledge displays

I examine how pre-departure study abroad students of German at a university in Jordan display knowledge about Germany and the German language, and thereby position themselves vis-à-vis German identity. Language learners are frequently assumed to desire some degree of target culture membership, but that is often neither true nor feasible. I investigate this by examining the strategies students use to express their knowledge of Germany and the German language, when and how they position themselves as novices or experts, if and how they draw lines between categories such as “German” and “Jordanian”. Previous research on learner identities in study abroad contexts has primarily focused on white and typically American learners, or learners in white and Global North contexts (cf. Anya, 2017, Craig, 2010). My study therefore contributes to the diversification of perspectives in study abroad research. Drawing on a constructivist understanding of identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010), and using an analytic framework that integrates Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz 2018), Membership Categorization Analysis (Schegloff, 2007), and Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), I examine interviews with five architecture and design students in Jordan who are about to depart to Germany. I show that the participants make a clear “us” vs. “them” distinction and locate themselves outside of the category “German”. However, their increasing proficiency in German and knowledge of Germany allows them to claim expertise regarding Germany, which enables them to subvert the otherwise strict distinction between “us” and “them”. This has implications on how we prepare students for studying abroad - how we position ourselves and students in the classroom, what we can watch out for in our educational material, if we can deliberately use strategies to invite learners to share their knowledge and claim their becoming-an-expert status, and if that is beneficial.

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