

**Resisting the anti-migrant narrative:  
the perspective of Polish-born teenagers living in the UK**

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European Migrants in the UK in the Brexit Era: Discursive Approaches

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**Abstract:** While much of the literature on European Union (EU) migration, especially that from Eastern Europe, has focused on the viewpoints of adult migrants, there is a growing recognition that narratives of children offer another perspective on the experience of migration in the time of Brexit. Unlike adults, children are rarely agentive in the decision to migrate, but find themselves obliged to adapt to a new environment, a new language and also education system. However, their discourses may be those of resistance, challenging the dominant discourses to which they are exposed. Like adults, children who have migrated with their families are also subjected to anti-migrant hostility, but here often coming via the school playground or even within the classroom. Research I conducted in 2016 on the brink of the Referendum focused on a group of Polish-born young teenagers (aged 11-16) living in the UK. Aiming to explore their ethno-linguistic identity construction in the light of the Brexit Referendum, the study consisted primarily of narrative interviews, where the children were invited to discuss their experiences of migrating to the UK. The stories they constructed highlighted multiple instances of overt anti-EU migrant hostility, encountered both at school and in the wider environment. While the incidents were upsetting to the participants, within the narratives they constructed, the children provided a counter to such anti-migrant discourses, with stories that showed them challenging the prevalent discourses of Poles coming to ‘steal jobs’, or having no right to be in the UK. This was reflected partly through the discursive practices through which the children positioned themselves within their narratives as agentive in their movements. The children’s agentive positioning was also reflected in their language practices. Language has often been used as a proxy for more overt forms of racism; linguistic xenophobia against Poles, amongst others, had become especially prevalent at that time. In the way they used Polish to make themselves visible, refusing to be silenced when talking in Polish, and resisting efforts – including by their parents – to be positioned as ‘English’, the children can be seen as subverting the dominant discourse, asserting their right to be seen as Polish as much as British. They thereby presented themselves as Poles who were proud of their birth identity, but with a legitimate right to be in the UK, asserting their heritage background alongside constructing new lives for themselves in the new country. The children’s attitude contrasts sharply with the more passive-victim approach that had previously been observed amongst adult Polish communities. Moreover, while scholarship on the experiences of Eastern European migrants to the UK during the Brexit era reported on what was seen as the explosion of anti-migrant hostility that emerged post-Referendum, this study shows that it was very much in evidence prior to the Referendum, as experienced by children. By highlighting this, and focusing on an under-researched group of participants, demonstrating the agentive way in which they strive to present themselves, this paper therefore offers a significant contribution to work in migration in the Brexit era.

# Overview

- What children can tell us, and why their perspective matters.
- The extent to which they are aware of discourses of anti-migrant hostility, and how this is manifested.
- Their reaction to such hostility.
- Silenced victims or assertive agents?
- Wider implications.

# Changing Climate in the UK



**2004:** Polish Accession to the EU [20 years]

**2015:** Election | **June 2016:** Brexit Referendum

EU migration: emotive topic in the UK.

- **Post-Brexit:** increase in visible anti-Polish sentiment. However: suggest that this was actually very much in evidence before the Referendum (Drozdowicz, cited 2016).

# Why focus on children?

**Brexit** has primarily been seen in terms of trade, free movement, youth mobility, Erasmus etc. Accordingly, much of the earlier literature on European Union (EU) migration from Eastern Europe focuses on adult migrants. Although this is changing, with a greater focus on children in the past 10 years (e.g. Moskal 2014; Slany and Strzemecka 2016; Pustułka and Trąbka 2019), the focus often remains on those with the **agency** to migrate.



# Children's perspectives differ

Unlike adults, **children are rarely agentive in the decision to migrate.**

However: they are obliged to adapt to:

- a new environment | a new language | a new education system

Also, they often take on responsibilities such as **language brokering** for parents, which positions them as less passive in the migration process.

In the Polish context, adults' decisions have increasingly been driven by family concerns (e.g. Ryan 2009, White 2017) – so what of the children?

# Hostility and anti-EU migrant sentiment

- Children are also subjected to the hostility faced by adults. This may be in the street, but also in the school playground or even within the classroom.

## Racist and anti-immigration views held by children revealed in schools study

Survey of 6,000 schoolchildren finds many have a wildly distorted view of the number of immigrants in Britain. The study, believed to be the largest of its kind to be carried out in the UK, found that **60% of the children questioned believed it was true that “asylum seekers and immigrants are stealing our jobs”.**

*(The Guardian 19-05-2015)*

# Questions discussed during the interviews

- How do you think people in this country, think about Polish people living in the UK?
- Have you had any experiences of anti-Polish sentiment?





# Study

- Research conducted in 2016 focused on a group of Polish-born young teenagers living in the UK: aged 11-16, secondary school students.
- **Aim:** to explore the ethno-linguistic identity construction of these teenagers in the light of the Brexit Referendum.
- **Method:** a series of narrative interviews, held in English, in groups, pairs and individually, where the children were invited to discuss their experiences of migrating to the UK.

## Examples of bullying

**Filip (13):** Um, before I went to this school, I was in a different school. And people there were just terrible. I was getting bullied. [...] They were telling me to go back to Poland. Like, they don't want me here. And um they just bullied me physically.

**Marek (14):** 'I have been bullied in primary school. [...] It's just people – I just came, and people just didn't like me.'

**Sylwia (11):** I had two primary schools because the first one I didn't like. I don't know why. I don't remember now, but – I just didn't like the people there.

## Stereotype of the 'Polish plumber'

**Krystyna (14):** '[My Dad is] kind of working as an electrician and – but then he kind of helps to like do stuff around like – when you like make houses, or like do stuff around. Sometimes, I guess, when I'm at school, people are a bit insulting when they talk about how Polish people are builders and stuff [...]. The teacher asked, so are any of your parents builders? [...] And I said, yeah, my Dad kind of is. And I could just hear them [classmates] giggling in the background.'

# Acknowledging and re-framing the discourse

The stories the children reported described **multiple instances of overt anti-EU migrant hostility**, encountered both at school and in the wider environment.

However: they attempt to reframe the discourse, e.g. Krystyna (father: not just electrician – later emphasising that he was a skilled worker; mother working in a factory, but actually a beautician).

This suggests that the children recognise not only the language used, but also the underlying discourse. In their reframing of this, they attempt to **challenge the discourse**, and in doing so, **(re)claim agency**.

# Language as a proxy for racism



Another discourse is through **language as a proxy for racism**: comments that could be seen as xenophobic and unacceptable are given a veil of respectability through being cast as issues of language, whereby language is substituted for race or nationality (Simpson & Cooke 2009).

Explicit **linguistic xenophobia** part of the political discourse, e.g. 2015 Conservative Party Election Manifesto: '[b]eing able to speak English is a fundamental part of integrating into our society' (Conservative Party 2015, p.31). Thereby indicating that non-English speakers are not welcome.

# Resistance through language: Krystyna

There were two ways in which the children resisted this linguistic discourse:

**Krystyna:** you find some people like staring at you and like talk like you can just – you just know they're talking about you and it's – I'm just standing there thinking 'do you really have to be talking about it?' [...] I can kind of like make out what they're saying and stuff. And like sometimes they laugh and – yeah.

**Sara:** Ok, so do you find it difficult if you're talking Polish in the street?

**Krystyna:** Um, I don't know. [...] it's just I have English friends so I talk English anyway but when I'm on the streets with my Mum I speak Polish fine – I don't – I don't really care what other people think. It doesn't bother me.

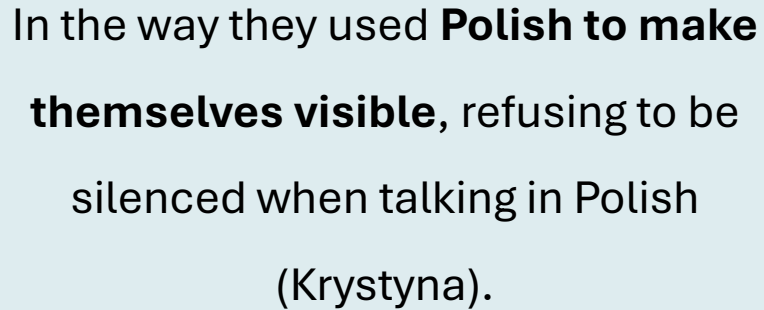
# Resistance through language: Tomasz

Tomasz (13, in the UK from the age of 7) is uncomfortable about the way he feels his parents ['they'] expect him to have acquired proficient English:

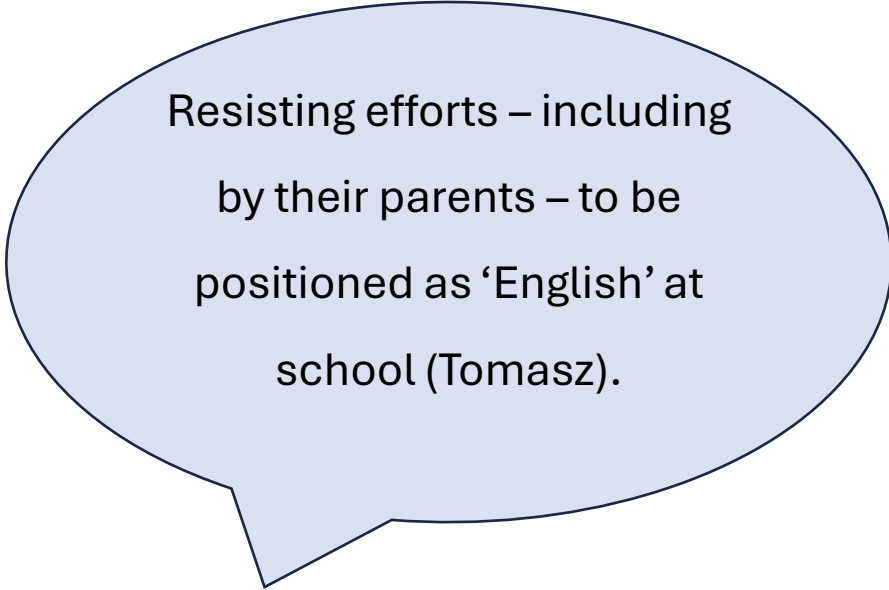
Tomasz: See, me – it's like, if I don't know something, they just have a go at me. That I'm a good English guy, I should know this, cos I go to a school here and all that. And it's like, well, I'm Polish as well. So I don't know everything, cos teachers don't teach everything. Every word, every sentence, so it's like that. And it's like, for me, it's hard to just like, there's a sentence, to translate it.'

# Children's linguistic practices

Their children's agentic positioning was therefore also reflected in their **language practices**.



In the way they used **Polish to make themselves visible**, refusing to be silenced when talking in Polish (Krystyna).



Resisting efforts – including by their parents – to be positioned as 'English' at school (Tomasz).

Through these practices, the children can be seen as **subverting the dominant discourse**, asserting their right to be seen as Polish as much as British. Self-reported, but this also suggests they want to present themselves as agentic rather than passive.



- The children can be seen as subverting the dominant discourse, asserting their right to be seen as Polish as much as British (Young 2018).
- They present themselves as Poles who are proud of their birth identity, but with a legitimate right to be in the UK, asserting their heritage background, while constructing new lives for themselves in the host country.
- This attitude contrasts with the more passive-victim approach previously observed amongst adult Polish communities (Kempney 2011).

## Key points



# Implications

- Much has been made of the explosion of anti-migrant hostility post-Referendum, but: it was very much in evidence **prior to the Referendum.**
- Example of migrants (vulnerable as children) who strive to present themselves as **agentive.**
- Discourses are both explicit and implicit, but can be challenged through resistance, e.g. linguistic practices.

# References | image credits

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Slide 3: photo: Outside Polling Station at Royal Holloway, University of London, Sara Young | Slide 4: [pngtree.com](https://www.pngtree.com/)

Slide 7: Image from 'I Am An Immigrant' poster campaign 2015 | Slide 11: [freepik](https://www.freepik.com/) | Slide 13: [emerging Europe](https://www.emerging-europe.eu/)