Study: Language – not religion or birthplace – defines national identity

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What makes someone an American? What makes up any country’s particular identity? The parts that make up a country’s sense of self are varied and change over time. Surprisingly, though, many different countries use similar characteristics to decide who is “one of us” and who is not.

On February 1, the Pew Research Center released a study about national identity. At the beginning of last year, they surveyed people across 14 countries about what defines their nation. The results are especially interesting given the ongoing debate about immigration in pretty much every part of the world.

One surprising example is that most Americans do not believe that where someone is born determines whether or not they are American. In fact, only a handful of the countries Pew surveyed thought where people were born was important. Another surprising fact is that most Americans do not think that customs and religion are really important, despite the fact that America is known for its talk of God and values. Neither, in fact, do most other countries.
It's Language That Defines A Country's Identity

Instead, Pew's study found that language was what really defined a country's identity. The highest result was found in the Netherlands, where more than 84 percent of the population believes it is important to speak Dutch if you want to truly be Dutch. In all countries, a majority said it was "very important" to speak the national language.

The idea that language binds a nation together is not surprising. Two people will struggle to find anything in common if they cannot exchange information easily. British historian Eric Hobsbawm, looking at language, culture and national identities, stated that as countries gradually became democracies, a shared language became a necessity. "The original case for a standard language was entirely democratic, not cultural," Hobsbawm wrote in 1996.

Many modern states developed around a common language, such as Germany, which is made up of multiple ancient German-speaking states. In the modern age, some languages have become symbols for independence movements, such as the Basque language in Spain.

Most Countries In The Study Use A Mostly Unique Language

Pew’s study does not include countries where many different languages are widely spoken, like India or Switzerland. Instead, most of the countries listed in the research use mostly one language that was unique to the country.

The most obvious countries where that is not true are both in North America. Canada is a country where there are two national languages, French and English. Both languages originated not in Canada but in Europe. This might be why it has one of the lowest percentages of people who think language is "very important" to national identity. It also has the highest percentage for those who think that language is "not at all important," at 5 percent.

However, Italy, a nation with deep ties to its language, has similar results to Canada. This shows that the importance of language to national identity might be more complicated. Also worth considering is the fact that the United States, another country whose main language is from Europe, seems to view the importance of language more strongly than some European nations.

In The U.S., Politics Affects Beliefs About National Identity

Pew's study shows that beliefs about national identity are divided by political parties in the United States. Eighty-three percent of Republicans say that being able to speak English is very important to being truly American. Only 61 percent of Democrats say the same thing.
More Republicans also think American customs and Christianity are important, too, though both Republicans and Democrats attach relatively low importance to being born in the United States.

The connection to political parties is also important across Europe. In Europe, respondents with positive views of conservative, anti-establishment parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and France’s National Front thought national customs had a higher level of importance in defining identity. These right-wing parties are typically opposed to immigration and are focused on bringing back what they see as traditional values.

**Citizenship Tests Have Gotten Tougher**

In most of the countries surveyed, there is already some kind of language requirement for citizenship. In fact, citizenship tests have been becoming harsher over recent years as increasingly difficult cultural questions have begun appearing. For example, potential British citizens are even quizzed about Rudyard Kipling, a British writer who published more than a hundred years ago. Some academics say the shifting tests are often a response to conservative political pressure and serve little practical purpose.

The importance of language, however, might change. For one thing, immigration also influences language. Germany has developed an informal, conversational language, “Kiezdeutsch,” which is primarily used by German speakers whose native tongue is Turkish or Arabic. Additionally, Pew’s study suggests there is a big generational divide on whether language is very important for identity in most countries. In America, that shift is especially pronounced. While 81 percent of those age 50 or older say language is very important to national identity, only 58 percent of those age 18 to 34 agree.
Quiz

1  Which sentence would be MOST appropriate to include in an accurate and objective summary of the article?

(A) The recent Pew study revealed increasingly difficult cultural questions on citizenship tests, though many people say they are unimportant to national identity.

(B) The recent Pew study is interesting but flawed, because it does not include countries where many different languages are widely spoken.

(C) The recent Pew study results are very surprising, because many people might expect traditions to be the most important factor to national identity.

(D) The recent Pew study found that, in all countries studied, a majority of people thought it was very important for people to speak a national language.

2  A reader of the article suggested that the author included the section "Most Countries In The Study Use A Mostly Unique Language" to suggest that multiple factors influence the way a country views the relationship between language and national identity.

Is this accurate? Which line from the article supports your answer?

(A) No; Pew's study does not include countries where many different languages are widely spoken, like India or Switzerland.

(B) Yes; Instead, most of the countries listed in the research use mostly one language that was unique to the country.

(C) No; However, Italy, a nation with deep ties to its language, has similar results to Canada.

(D) Yes; This shows that the importance of language to national identity might be more complicated.
Read the following paragraph.

Pew’s study shows that beliefs about national identity are divided by political parties in the United States. Eighty-three percent of Republicans say that being able to speak English is very important to being truly American. Only 61 percent of Democrats say the same thing. More Republicans also think American customs and Christianity are important, too, though both Republicans and Democrats attach relatively low importance to being born in the United States.

Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?

(A) to describe groups within America that have contrasting beliefs about the importance of language

(B) to compare the beliefs about national identity in the United States with the beliefs of other nations

(C) to give statistics on the number of Americans who believe customs and place of birth are important to national identity

(D) to contrast the political beliefs of the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States

What is the relationship between the following selections?

British historian Eric Hobsbawm, looking at language, culture and national identities, stated that as countries gradually became democracies, a shared language became a necessity.

In the modern age, some languages have become symbols for independence movements, such as the Basque language in Spain.

Additionally, Pew’s study suggests there is a big generational divide on whether language is very important for identity in most countries.

(A) They all develop the idea that democracies view language as more important to national identity than other countries.

(B) They all develop the idea that what defines national identity is often different for countries with multiple languages.

(C) They all develop the idea that the emphasis placed on language’s role in national identity has changed over time.

(D) They all develop the idea that language is and has always been an essential factor in defining a nation’s identity.