

# Unraveling bilingual identity construction in different contexts

Esma Kot Artunc<sup>1</sup>, Seyma Kokcu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Istanbul Technical University, Turkiye

<sup>2</sup>Tokat Gaziosmanpasa University, Turkiye

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## Abstract

This study explores how bilingual speakers construct and negotiate their identities across different linguistic and cultural contexts. It addresses the following questions: How do bilingual individuals perceive their sense of self in each language, and what social or contextual factors shape these perceptions? Six bilingual participants with diverse language backgrounds participated in semi-structured interviews. The data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that bilingual identity is shaped by access to linguistic communities, patterns of language separation or integration, and attitudes of the second language community. The study highlights bilingual identity as a dynamic and evolving process influenced by both social interaction and personal experience.

Keywords: bilingual identity, code-switching, community attitudes, identity construction, integrated identities

## Introduction

Identity is not a fixed label but a dynamic and socially constructed process shaped through interaction and context (Block, 2007; Tajfel, 1978). While identity is often associated with social categories such as parent, teacher, or gender (Kanno, 2000), it is lived and linguistic experiences that play a central role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves. For bilinguals, identity construction becomes particularly complex due to their engagement with multiple languages and cultural environments.

One important site where bilingual identity becomes visible is code-switching. Beyond reflecting linguistic competence, code-switching functions as a means of negotiating belonging and social alignment (Auer, 2005). Previous studies suggest that bilinguals may experience either identity tension or integration when navigating different linguistic contexts (Fielding, 2016; Kanno, 2003). However, fewer studies focus on bilinguals' own perceptions of their identities across languages. This study aims to address this gap by examining how bilinguals understand and construct their sense of self.

## Literature review

Fielding (2016) conceptualizes identity through three interrelated components: socialization, interaction, and investment. Socialization refers to developing a sense of belonging to a linguistic and cultural group (Tajfel, 1978), while interaction emphasizes the importance of sustained engagement with the language community. Moreover, investment reflects the value individuals attach to participating in that community (Norton, 2000).

Research suggests that bilinguals often use their languages for different purposes across social domains (Baker, 1996), which may lead to the development of distinct identities associated with each language (Kanno, 2000). In some cases, these identities remain separate, while in others they blend into a more integrated sense of self (Kanno, 2003).

Code-switching has been widely examined as a key practice in bilingual identity negotiation. Speakers typically assess their interlocutor's linguistic background before switching languages (Gumperz, 1982). Minority languages often function as a "we-code," signaling intimacy and in-group membership, whereas majority languages function as a "they-code," associated with broader societal participation. This dynamic highlights how bilinguals may shift identity positions depending on context (Kanno, 2000).

Bilinguals may also experience identity conflict, particularly when their heritage language is stigmatized. Liebkind (1995) describes this as a "conflict of identification," which may lead individuals either to reject or later re-embrace their linguistic and cultural identities. Additionally, studies have shown that language choice can influence identity expression, reflecting cultural norms embedded in each language (Ervin-Tripp, 1968; Grosjean, 1982).

## Methodology

### Participants

In this qualitative study, six participants were selected through convenience sampling. All were sequential bilinguals with diverse linguistic backgrounds, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profiles.

Participant	Languages	Age	Type of bilingualism
P1	English-Turkish	20	Sequential
P2	English-Farsi	21	Sequential
P3	English-Arabic	27	Sequential
P4	Turkish-German	28	Sequential
P5	Turkish-French	28	Sequential
P6	Azeri-Russian-Turkish	27	Sequential

## Data collection and data analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on language history, community interaction, code-switching, and identity perceptions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Codes were cross-checked by both researchers to enhance reliability.

## Findings

Five themes emerged from the analysis:

1. *Community access* was central to identity construction. Participants emphasized that opportunities to use their languages in social networks, family, and cultural groups shaped how confidently they identified with each language. Access to minority-language communities offered spaces of belonging, while limited opportunities often led to weaker attachment.
2. *Separation versus integration* reflected participants' experiences of feeling either like different people in different languages or navigating mixed identities. Some participants described experiencing "two different identities in two different languages". For example, P2 and P3 reflected on having both "American" and "L1-L2" selves, sometimes mixed, sometimes separate. This sense of living "between cultures" illustrates the ongoing negotiation of identity, resonating with Kanno's (2003) observation that bilinguals may struggle to identify themselves as entirely belonging to one group or another.
3. *Attitudes of the L2 community* influenced identity positioning. While majority languages enabled societal participation, minority languages symbolized distinctiveness and pride (Kanno, 2000). For instance, P1 felt unique being able to speak Turkish and Armenian and highlighted pride in sharing Armenian with peers in a student club. Positive recognition encouraged stronger attachment, while dismissive or stigmatizing attitudes reinforced feelings of exclusion.
4. *Conflict and resolution* described participants' emotional trajectories from shame to acceptance, aligning with Liebkind's (1995) notion of identity conflict. As children, P1 and P2 felt ashamed of their heritage languages, with P1 avoiding identifying as Armenian. Over time, however, both came to revalue and embrace their L1, culture, and identity. This trajectory from shame to acceptance highlights the temporal dimension of bilingual identity - it is not static, but evolves with personal growth and shifting contexts.
5. Finally, *integrated identities* emerged among participants who viewed their bilingualism as a unified resource rather than a division. For some participants, bilingualism was not about maintaining separate spheres but about creating an integrated identity. Rather than feeling "half-and-half," P5 explained: "I don't feel like I am split; I feel like I am double."

This reflects a sense of wholeness in which both languages and cultural affiliations are complementary. Integration allowed bilinguals to see their dual background not as a problem to resolve but as a resource for shaping a fuller self.

## Discussion and conclusion

The findings support the view that bilingual identity is socially constructed and context-dependent. Community access, social attitudes, and code-switching practices shape how bilinguals perceive themselves. Importantly, participants moved toward integrated identities over time highlighting bilingualism as a resource rather than a challenge. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of bilingual identity construction and have implications for educational and social contexts that engage with multilingual populations.

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