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EXPLORING HOW MULTILINGUALISM INTERACTS WITH EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION, IDENTITY, AND PERSONALITY: A THEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

Multilingual speakers often feel or behave differently depending on the language they use. Emerging psychological research suggests that multilingualism is not just a communication tool but a dynamic framework that shapes emotion, identity, and personality. This review aims to integrate key findings on how language choice affects emotional processing and personality trait expression. It also explores gaps in empirical work and proposes future directions for research in the social, cognitive, and affective dimensions of multilingual experience.

Keywords: *multilingualism, emotional expression, identity, personality, psychology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language carries cultural values, emotional nuance, and social norms. For multilingual individuals, switching between languages may trigger different emotional registers or activate distinct identities. Psycholinguistic and sociocultural frameworks, especially Pavlenko's post-structuralist perspective, highlight that language choice links directly to affect regulation, role adoption, and self-expression.

Many people have witnessed or personally experienced how language switching seems to align with emotional states. Some individuals, for instance, instinctively revert to their native language (L1) when angry or distressed, not merely due to fluency, but because that language evokes deeper emotional ties and autobiographical memories. Others might express affection in a language they associate with warmth or romance, such as French, or use a more structured language like German when seeking clarity or asserting control. These shifts aren't random, but are contextually driven and emotionally encoded.

Research supports this idea. Dewaele (2004) and Pavlenko (2006) documented how emotional expression and intensity vary by language, depending on personal and cultural associations. Drawing on psychophysiological evidence, Harris, Gleason, and Ayçiçeği-Dinn (2006) reported stronger autonomic responses to emotional language in L1, consistent with L1 advantages in autobiographical memory reported by Marian & Kaushanskaya (2008). In a study by Ferré et al. (2010), bilinguals participants displayed heightened emotional reactivity

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to negative words in L1, supported by faster response times and stronger physiological reactions.

Anecdotal and clinical observations confirm these tendencies. Therapists have noted that patients switch to their mother tongue when approaching traumatic memories or expressing strong emotions, highlighting how L1 can offer both emotional immediacy and expressive depth. These patterns suggest that emotional language use is not merely a function of vocabulary or grammar, but an extension of how individuals encode and retrieve emotional meaning through language.

2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. OBJECTIVE

This review aims to integrate key findings on how language choice affects emotional processing and personality trait expression. It also explores gaps in empirical work and proposes future directions for research in the social, cognitive, and affective dimensions of multilingual experience.

3. METHOD

This article is a thematic literature review synthesizing empirical and theoretical research on multilingualism and its relationship to emotional expression, identity, and personality. The literature search was conducted between January 2022 and July 2025 using electronic databases including PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of multilingualism, bilingualism, emotional expression, identity, personality, affective processing, and language choice.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical studies published in English, (b) studies directly addressing emotional, identity-related, or personality aspects of multilingualism, and (c) works providing psycholinguistic, sociocultural, or neuroscientific perspectives relevant to the topic. Exclusion criteria included studies focusing exclusively on second-language acquisition without emotional or identity components, purely pedagogical research without psychological focus, and non-peer-reviewed sources unless cited for historical or conceptual relevance.

Articles were screened for relevance through title and abstract review, followed by full-text reading when necessary. Reference lists of included articles were manually checked to identify additional relevant publications. The final selection integrates studies spanning diverse methodologies, including self-report surveys, experimental designs, qualitative interviews, and physiological or neuroimaging measures. Emphasis was placed on cross-referencing findings across disciplines to identify recurring themes, theoretical gaps, and directions for future research.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Language and Emotional Resonance

Native language (L1) often has stronger emotional resonance, deeper autobiographical retrieval, and is frequently used for expressing anger or grief.

In contrast, a second language (L2) can serve as an emotional buffer. Keysar et al. (2012) showed that people using a foreign language make more utilitarian decisions, likely due to reduced emotional arousal. Two meta-analyses show that the foreign-language effect on moral and risk decisions is real but small-to-moderate and moderated by factors like proficiency and emotional intensity, rather than universal across contexts (Circi et al., 2021; Del Maschio et al., 2022). Emotional detachment in L2 has also been observed in trauma narratives, where bilinguals reported feeling more comfortable disclosing painful experiences in their non-native language.

Further supporting this distinction, studies have found that taboo words and emotionally charged content elicit stronger physiological reactions in L1 than in L2, highlighting the deeply ingrained emotional ties to one's first language. Older research, such as the work by Bond and Lai (1986), suggested that emotionality in speech decreased when using a foreign language, pointing to an attenuated affective connection. These findings underscore how emotional resonance is shaped by both linguistic proficiency and personal history.

4.2. Identity Across Languages

Language activates cultural schemas that influence identity. Chen and Bond (2010) showed that bilinguals' self-perceptions shift depending on the language used. Grosjean (1982) emphasized that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one person but form a merged and adaptive linguistic identity. Panayiotou (2004) introduced the concept of "code-switching identity," where language choice reflects alternate roles or selves. Identity modulation is context-driven and shaped by social and emotional cues tied to each language.

These shifts raise important questions: Do bilinguals construct distinct self-concepts depending on the language in use? How does language influence our perception of cultural belonging or self-efficacy?

Some researchers suggest that these shifts are not superficial but deeply embedded in cognitive and emotional processing. Ramírez-Esparza et al. (2006) found that bilinguals often describe themselves differently depending on the language of assessment, hinting that self-concept is not fixed but malleable. Dewaele and Nakano (2013) observed that multilinguals often report feeling like a "different person" when switching languages, suggesting a link between language and perceived selfhood. This perspective invites further inquiry into whether language serves as a scaffold for identity or a lens through which it is continuously negotiated.

4.3. Personality Expression and Perceived Shifts

Multilingual individuals frequently report perceiving shifts in their personality when switching languages, a phenomenon supported by both qualitative reports and quantitative studies. Ramírez-Esparza et al. (2006) found that Spanish-English bilinguals consistently rated themselves as more extroverted, agreeable, and conscientious when responding in English compared to Spanish. These self-assessments suggest that language context may modulate not only behavior but internal self-perception.

In another study, Dewaele and Nakano (2013) observed that multilinguals often feel more humorous, assertive, or spontaneous in certain languages. This effect may be influenced by the environments in which these languages were learned, such as home versus school, and the roles typically played in each setting. For example, a person who learned French in a romantic or artistic context may feel more emotionally expressive when using French, whereas German acquired in an academic setting may elicit a more structured, formal demeanor.

These reports make me ask if these personality shifts are genuine reflections of inner states or socially conditioned role performances. Is personality multilingual, or is it a stable core filtered through linguistic and cultural lenses?

While some critics argue that these shifts merely reflect context-dependent behavior, emerging research in bilingual cognition suggests that language does influence emotional regulation, social risk-taking, and even moral reasoning. Pavlenko (2005) proposed the terms “emotional fluency” and “affective repertoire” to describe the capacity to express and experience emotion across languages, concepts that remain underexplored but rich in potential for further study.

4.4. Methodological and Theoretical Gaps

Most existing studies on multilingualism rely heavily on self-report data or structured yet ecologically limited environments that may not accurately reflect real-life language use. This methodological limitation restricts the broader applicability of findings. Many studies also fail to capture longitudinal shifts in language-emotion interactions across the lifespan, instead focusing on isolated snapshots of bilingual behavior.

Neuroscientific research remains limited. While studies such as those by Ayçiçeği and Harris (2003) provide initial evidence of differing physiological responses between L1 and L2, more work is needed to understand the neurobiological underpinnings of bilingual emotional processing. Use of technologies like fMRI, EEG, and biometric sensors remains underutilized in this area.

Theoretical models also tend to lack integration. Psychological, linguistic, and cultural theories often operate in silos, without synthesizing their insights into a cohesive framework. The affective dimension of multilingualism, how emotions are felt, expressed, and regulated, remains conceptually underdeveloped in comparison to cognitive or grammatical aspects of bilingualism.

There is a pronounced geographic and cultural skew in current research, with most studies focusing on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations. This bias sidelines the multilingual realities of non-Western societies, leaving heritage speakers, immigrant communities, and speakers of indigenous or minority languages notably underrepresented.

This prompts several critical questions: How do emotional expression and identity modulation differ for multilinguals outside the WEIRD paradigm? Are language-based personality shifts culturally contingent or universal across multilingual populations? Could certain emotional associations with languages emerge due to sociopolitical hierarchies, linguistic stigmas, or historical trauma?

Preliminary hypotheses suggest that emotional resonance in language may vary based on the social status of the language within a given context. For example, a minority language might evoke stronger in-group solidarity and emotional intimacy, while a dominant language may carry connotations of authority or detachment. These nuances highlight the necessity for comparative studies that explore how cultural, historical, and geopolitical factors shape the emotional and psychological experience of multilingualism.

4.5. Extended Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

4.5.1. Neural and Physiological Correlates

Early studies suggest bilinguals experience lower autonomic responses when using L2 in emotionally charged contexts. Psychophysiological work shows greater autonomic arousal to taboo words and childhood reprimands in L1 than L2 (Harris, Ayçiçeği, & Berko Gleason, 2003), consistent with reduced emotional reactivity in a foreign language. This finding indicates emotional detachment may be neurologically embedded and measurable. Future work should employ neuroimaging techniques (e.g., fMRI) to map language-emotion neural pathways.

4.5.2. Developmental Dynamics in Childhood

The emotional weight of a language often depends on the context in which it is acquired. Simultaneous bilinguals, those who learn two languages from birth, may not associate one language more closely with emotion than the other. In contrast, sequential bilinguals, who learn L2 later in life, may experience reduced emotional depth in L2. Longitudinal designs tracking children over time could clarify how emotional resonance evolves with age, context, and language proficiency.

4.5.3. Cultural and Contextual Influences

Most bilingual research is grounded in English-Spanish or English-French bilinguals in Western contexts. Broader inclusion of multilingual populations from non-Western societies (e.g., Arabic–French, Mandarin–English, Swahili–German) would shed light on

cultural norms and affective experiences embedded in less-studied language combinations. Theories of multilingualism must move beyond Eurocentric samples.

4.5.4. Translational and Clinical Applications

Understanding the emotional effects of language choice has practical implications in therapy and clinical settings. Therapists working with multilingual clients should explore language preferences during emotional disclosure. For trauma work, clients may find it easier to express distressing experiences in L2 due to emotional buffering. Conversely, using L1 might be necessary to access core autobiographical emotions. These dynamics can inform language selection in multilingual therapy. Clinically, matching encoding and retrieval language can intensify access to traumatic memories, whereas using L2 may dampen affective load in some clients (Schwanberg, 2010).

4.5.5. Methodological Innovations

Researchers should adopt mixed-method approaches combining biometric measures (e.g., heart rate variability, galvanic skin response) with self-report and qualitative interviews. Real-time emotion tracking and narrative analysis in multilingual settings can illuminate the affective nuances of language use. Also, experience sampling methods can capture how emotional expression varies across contexts such as home, work, and social media.

4.6. Future Research Directions

1. Real-time emotion recognition latency across languages: Understanding how quickly emotions are identified in different languages may reveal underlying cognitive-affective mechanisms. How does latency vary with language proficiency or emotional intensity?
2. Physiological and neural markers during switching: Examining brain and autonomic responses during language switches could uncover biomarkers of emotional engagement. Can shifts in language use trigger measurable physiological arousal or suppression?
3. Longitudinal emotional development in multilingual children: Tracking emotional expression across developmental stages in multilingual children helps illuminate how emotional depth forms. Do early bilinguals develop more nuanced emotional awareness than monolingual peers?
4. Impact of language context (e.g., home vs. work) on affective expression: Context shapes how and when emotions are expressed in different languages. Does switching to a formal or professional language constrain emotional range?
5. Clinical implications of language preference in therapy and trauma narratives: Language choice can shape therapeutic rapport and emotional accessibility. Are clients more vulnerable or more protected when disclosing trauma in L2?

6. Non-Western bilingual samples and underrepresented languages: Including diverse linguistic populations broadens the validity of multilingualism theories. Do collectivist cultures show different language-emotion dynamics than individualist ones?

5. CONCLUSIONS

Multilingualism reshapes more than communication, it recalibrates emotional tone, self-concept, and personality expression. Across the reviewed literature, we see consistent evidence that language choice can amplify or blunt emotional experience, trigger identity shifts, and modulate perceived personality traits. From psychophysiological studies to self-perception surveys, the pattern is clear: language is not neutral. It is emotionally and socially charged.

These dynamics carry significant implications for psychology, education, clinical practice, and cross-cultural communication. Understanding how language shapes emotion and identity equips therapists to choose the right language in trauma work, helps educators support multilingual learners more sensitively, and encourages societies to value linguistic diversity as a resource, not a barrier.

At the same time, major empirical gaps remain. The field lacks cohesive theoretical integration, robust cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal insights into emotional development. Methodologically, there's a need to bridge subjective and biometric approaches, and to expand the scope of research to include underrepresented populations. Future studies will benefit from asking sharper questions like: Are personality traits stable across languages, or fluid? How do social hierarchies of language influence emotional accessibility? What neural mechanisms underlie emotional shifts across languages?

This review invites researchers to not only observe but also experience the richness of multilingual life. As someone who speaks multiple languages, I've often felt these shifts firsthand, sometimes more assertive in one language, more reflective in another. These moments, while personal, are not isolated. They are part of a broader, complex interplay between language, mind, and emotion. By embracing this complexity, we deepen both our scientific understanding and our human empathy.

Effects are not uniform, they attenuate with high L2 proficiency and in simultaneous bilinguals, and vary by task and stimulus valence. This asymmetry is well explained by the emotional contexts-of-learning account: L1 is typically acquired in affect-rich settings that strengthen emotion–word associations, whereas L2 learned in more formal contexts carries weaker autonomic links. Taken together, these dynamics help clarify when language will amplify or blunt emotion and why.

5.1. Proposed Integrative Framework

The synthesis of reviewed literature supports a dynamic, multi-layered framework for understanding multilingualism's impact on the self. At the core, language choice functions as a context-sensitive switch that modulates:

Emotional resonance - the depth and immediacy of emotional processing tied to autobiographical memory.

Identity salience - activation of cultural schemas, roles, and self-concepts.

Personality expression - shifts in perceived and enacted traits depending on linguistic and situational context.

These elements are reciprocally influenced by linguistic history (age of acquisition, context of learning), cultural context (dominant vs. minority language status), and situational demands (social, professional, or intimate settings). Feedback loops occur when repeated language–emotion–identity interactions reinforce certain self-perceptions or behavioral tendencies over time.

This framework underscores the need for interdisciplinary research that considers multilingualism not as a fixed trait but as an adaptive system embedded in social, cultural, and neurobiological contexts.

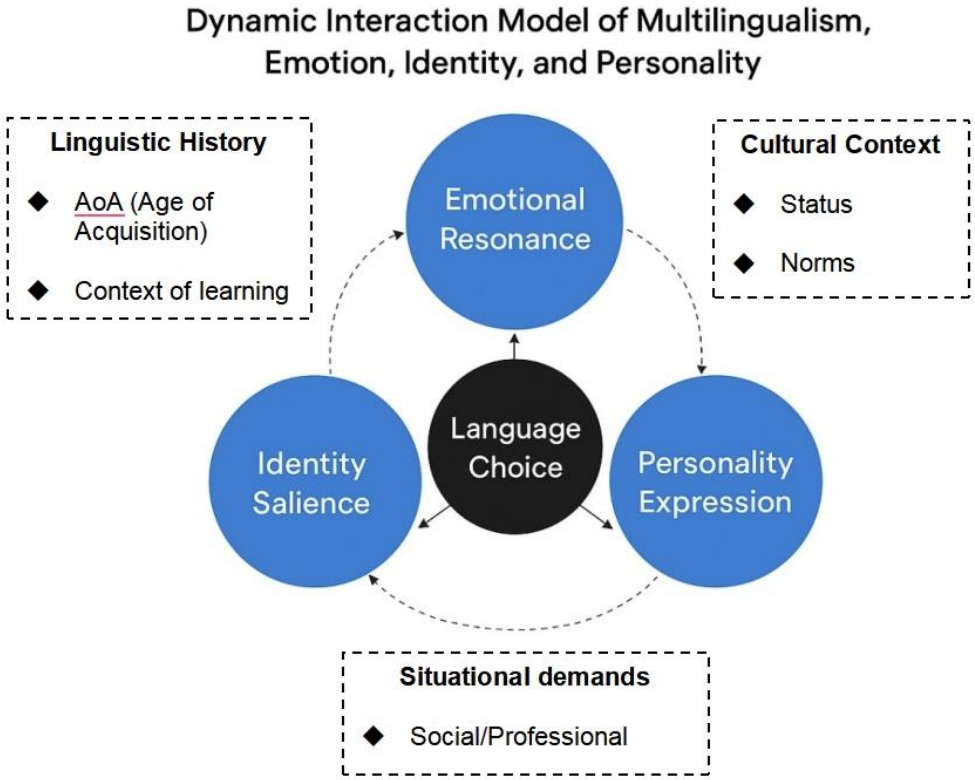

Figure 1. Dynamic interaction model linking language choice to emotion, identity, and personality. Solid arrows indicate direct, ongoing influence among the three inner components; dashed arrows indicate contextual influences from Linguistic History (AoA—Age of Acquisition; context of learning), Cultural Context (status, norms), and Situational Demands (social/professional)

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