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The discourse and identity of bilinguals and multilinguals: a sociolinguistic perspective

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Abstract

In most countries of the world, including Austria, people with diverse cultural backgrounds live and communicate in more than one language. Such individuals often identify with biculturalism or multiculturalism. The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes of respondents originating from various countries of Europe and the USA living in Austria towards bilingualism, biculturalism, and individual identity. The central research question focuses on how the social environment influences the formation of identity among bilingual and multilingual individuals. To address this, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and ethnolinguistic observations to capture both statistical trends and in-depth personal narratives. These methods enabled the collection of data on language use in different social contexts, cultural practices, and perceptions of belonging. Findings indicate that multilingual speakers tend to adopt not only several languages but also multiple cultural affiliations and identities simultaneously, with their self-concept strongly shaped by everyday interactions in family, educational, and community environments.

1. Introduction

In today's global society, individuals using two or more languages across family, school, work, and social settings are common. The phenomenon of bilingualism or multilingualism affects not only linguistic competence but also identity formation and social engagement. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is a symbolic tool for negotiating social relations, cultural affiliation, and personal identity. Minority languages often signify family or ethnic identity, while majority languages provide access to institutions, education, and social status. Speakers navigate languages of differing prestige, and language choice can reflect identity.

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Perceptions of multilingualism vary from acceptance to rejection, shaped by speakers' racial, ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds and by contemporary migration patterns (Peréa et al., 2018).

When multiple languages come into contact, a range of additional **factors** must be considered. The **size** of the bilingual community together with its **degree** of sociocultural homogeneity or diversity play a central role: a large and cohesive group may foster stability in language use, whereas smaller or fragmented groups are more vulnerable to assimilation. Subgroup divisions based on different mother tongues, demographic patterns, and social and political relations between these groups further shape linguistic dynamics, often determining which language gains prominence in public and private life. The **prevalence** of bilingual individuals, each with distinct patterns of language behaviour, also influences the linguistic ecology of the community, as some alternate fluidly between languages while others maintain strict separation depending on context. **Stereotypical attitudes** toward the languages in use –especially perceptions of prestige – affect which languages are valued in domains such as education, employment, and media, while less prestigious languages may be confined to informal settings. Equally important are the attitudes toward the culture associated with each language community, since positive cultural identification may encourage language maintenance, whereas negative perceptions can hasten decline. Broader **views of bilingualism** as a social phenomenon also play a role: in some societies it is regarded as a valuable resource linked to intelligence and opportunity, while in others it is stigmatized as confusing or undesirable. In addition, **tolerance or intolerance of code-switching** and deviations from standard usage shape everyday interactions, either accepting bilingual practices or rejecting them and pressuring speakers to conform to rigid norms. Finally, the **relationship between minority bilingual groups and the majority population** is decisive: mutual respect and integration can support the preservation of linguistic diversity, while hostility and exclusion often lead to assimilation and language loss (Weinreich, 1979).

There are several **key concepts** related to bilingualism and multilingualism. Classical sociolinguistic studies (e.g., Fishman, 1972; Spolsky, 1998) distinguish between **individual bilingualism** (the competence of an individual) and **social or societal bilingualism** (the use of two languages within a community or nation). However, in both cases, these are dynamic processes in which languages are distributed according to functions and domains; that is, particular languages or varieties are chosen depending on the context, the participants, and the communicative goals. Functional allocation ensures that each language finds a place within specific social spheres, such as family, religion, or education (Fishman 1972). In practice, one language may dominate in institutional or formal settings such as government, schooling, and media, while another may be reserved for more intimate or community-based interactions (Spolsky, 1998). Importantly, this distribution is not fixed: it evolves in response to shifting political, social, and economic conditions, highlighting both collective language

practices at the societal level and the flexible, context-dependent repertoires of individual speakers (Edwards, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). Later authors (e.g., Grosjean, 2013) emphasize that a bilingual individual cannot be understood as "two monolinguals in one person" but rather as a user of a complex language repertoire that he activates according to needs. The concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, highlighted in the documents of the Council of Europe (CEFR), also fits into this framework. It perceives languages not as separate systems but as part of a single dynamic repertoire that the individual uses creatively and flexibly. This approach highlights the connection between language and culture, between communication and **intercultural understanding**.

The concept of **code-switching** or **translanguaging**, where speakers draw on and combine different linguistic resources in interaction, also deserves special attention. Beyond being a pragmatic strategy for ensuring effective communication, these practices carry strong symbolic and social meanings. Code-switching can serve as a marker of group membership, allowing speakers to signal solidarity with a particular community or to index shared cultural knowledge (Gumperz, 1982; Wei, 2018). It is considered a rule-governed system with social and grammatical constraints. The use of code-switching may vary depending on the context of elicitation. Zentella (1990) finds that bilingual speakers are more likely to code-switch when narrating (27 code-switches per hour) and telling jokes (14 per hour), as opposed to making purchases (1 per hour) or answering interview questions (2 per hour). In narrating a story, bilingual speakers may switch to the language that best represents or invokes language specific concepts (Pavlenko, 2003). Code-switching may also serve specific pragmatic functions within speech communities (Huerta, 1980; Zentella, 1982; Zentella, 1997; Popovič, 1983). Speakers may code-switch to facilitate expression and/or comprehension, avoid miscommunication, establish themselves as members of a particular group, change discourse to convey a certain effect or attitude, or alert listeners to a shift of emphasis, among other functions (Hughes, Shaunessy, Brice, Ratliff, & McHatton, 2006; Skiba, 1997; Popovič, 1983). In school settings, code-switching may also be used to facilitate comprehension, to establish and maintain solidarity or group membership, to give procedures and directions, or to clarify concepts (Hughes et al., 2006). Code-switching may be noticed in the following three ways (Poplack, 1980; Myers-Scotton, 1993): **a) intrasentential code-switching,** which occurs when speakers alternate between languages within a single sentence or clause, for example inserting a word or phrase from another language into the middle of a sentence; **b) intersentential code-switching** that takes place between sentences, when one sentence is spoken in one language and the next in another; and **c) extra-sentential code-switching** (also called tag-switching), which involves inserting single words, discourse markers, or short phrases (e.g., greetings, fillers, or tags) from another language without altering the overall grammatical structure of the sentence.

Similarly, translanguaging reinforces the fluid use of a speaker's entire linguistic repertoire, challenging rigid separations between languages and highlighting speaker agency in negotiating meaning (García, 2016; Wei, 2018). Switching between languages is both functional and identity-affirming, allowing speakers to position themselves within or across social groups, resist dominant linguistic ideologies, and express nuanced social attitudes (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Canagarajah, 2013). Language choices are closely tied to power, prestige, and access to social resources, shaping identity and investment in languages (Norton, 2013). Individuals negotiate identity through language, especially in multilingual contexts where some languages are valorized and others devalued (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Language policies reflect inclusion or exclusion ideologies and influence minority identities (Spolsky, 2004). Plurilingualism can empower participation in multiple cultural worlds (García & Wei, 2014) but marginalized languages risk loss, weakening cultural identity and cohesion (Edwards, 2009). Multilingual competence includes using distinct systems, code-switching by context, and translating across languages, illustrating its flexible and context-dependent nature as both communicative resource and tool for identity construction. Taken together, these capacities illustrate the flexible and context-dependent nature of multilingualism, which encompasses both everyday language use and more specialized skills (Etxebarria Arostegui, 2002; Weinreich, 1979; Ciprianová – Hornáčková Klapicová, 2024; Hornáčková Klapicová, 2024).

Multilingualism is shaped by sociolinguistic contexts and national policies. In Austria, language and integration policies emphasize German acquisition and shared civic values for social inclusion. The *National Minorities Act* defines national minorities as Austrian citizens with a mother tongue other than German and distinct traditions, granting them equal rights with some special provisions. Since 2010, the *National Action Plan for Integration* has prioritized language and education, supported by civil initiatives like ÖGB's Muttersprachliche Beratung. Austria is legally bound to protect minority languages such as Burgenland-Croatian, Hungarian, Czech, Romani, Slovak, and Slovenian, though regional disparities remain. The *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (2024) promotes minority language use and teaching without undermining official languages, framing this protection as vital for Europe's cultural diversity and democratic values. It encourages minority languages in education, media, public services, cultural events, and economic and social life. This is, however, an ideal situation. The portal *Minority Rights Group* states that here is strong pressure to assimilate, and naturalization increased from 2.2 per cent of the foreign population in 1992 to 4.2 per cent in 2001. The trend continues upwards. Nearly 30 per cent of those acquiring nationality in 2004 were born in Austria. Once minorities have Austrian citizenship, their minority origin is no longer recorded in national statistics, making indirect discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity hard to track.

2. Research aim and research questions

The research seeks to fill a gap with regard to minority groups in Austria that are not included in the official documents of the state or the EU. The discussion of The research results employs a descriptive and interpretative approach rather than an analytical-theoretical one due to the absence of previous studies in our context and the novelty of the contribution.

The aim of the research is to examine how bilingual and multilingual individuals in Austria construct and negotiate their identities across diverse social environments. Particular attention is given to the ways in which language use functions as both a communicative resource and a marker of belonging, enabling speakers to express concepts, attitudes, and affiliations in nuanced ways. It further explores how discourse practices, such as code choice, code-switching, or the adoption of particular registers may reflect and shape attitudes toward self and others, and how it influences broader sociocultural dynamics. In this way, the research aims to show how individual language practices are shaped by different social contexts, and how, in turn, these practices contribute to the ongoing formation and expression of identity in multilingual settings.

This study builds on previous research into the relationship between language, identity, and migration. For example, Ballestín-González, Rodríguez-García, and Solana-Solanathe (2025) examined the school experiences and identity formation of young people raised in mixed families, typically with one native Spanish parent and one foreign-born parent. Their findings highlight notable differences between students whose immigrant parent comes from a socially and culturally respected background (often associated with greater economic prosperity) and those whose immigrant parent's origin is racialized, leading to experiences of stigmatization and discrimination (Ballestín-González, Rodríguez-García, & Solana-Solanathe, 2025). By drawing on such insights, our research situates the Austrian context within broader debates on how family background, social perception, and linguistic resources intersect in shaping multilingual identities.

The research focuses on whether bilinguals and multilinguals have one or multiple identities. The question of two or more identities present in one person is a phenomenon that represents specific differences within each bilingual/multilingual individual. In relation to that question, several other questions can be asked, such as: What causes a bilingual/multilingual person to switch from one language to another? How does the social environment determine the processes of language acquisition and language production/discourse? Do bilinguals/multilinguals often feel part of two/more cultures? Out of these, three research questions were formulated:

RQ1 How does the social environment influence the identity formation of bilingual and multilingual individuals?

RQ2 What role do language policies and practices in different social environments play in shaping bilingual and multilingual identity?

RQ 3 How do bilinguals and multilinguals perceive and manage their linguistic performance in daily interactions?

3. Research methodology

Qualitative research will be used to examine the manifestations of identity of members of minority groups and factors influencing the integration of foreigners in the host culture. It enables the researchers to obtain a comprehensive picture of the researched issue as qualitative methods allow a deeper understanding of individual experience and the processes that lie behind these phenomena. The qualitative approach allows one to delve into complex social phenomena that cannot be adequately captured by statistical methods and to discover hidden connections between culture, language and identity (Švaříček & Šeďová, 2007).

Qualitative research captures the depth and complexity of social phenomena but is inherently subjective, time-consuming, and less generalizable. To enhance reliability and credibility, this study combined multiple methods (observation, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews) allowing methodological triangulation. Researcher reflexivity was ensured through reflective diaries, and an audit trail documented all steps for transparency. Clear planning, defined objectives, and team-based cross-checking further strengthened trustworthiness. Analytical generalization emphasized developing concepts applicable to similar sociolinguistic contexts rather than statistical generalization. These measures increased the rigor and scientific value of the study while acknowledging the limitations inherent to qualitative inquiry.

3.1 Data Collection Methods

To investigate how bilingual and multilingual individuals construct and negotiate their identities in Austria, the study employed a combination of complementary methods designed to capture both observable behaviour and personal perspectives. A central instrument was a **questionnaire** consisting of 15 items that combined multiple-choice, closed-ended, and open-ended questions. It gathered demographic and linguistic background (e.g., age, country of residence, mother tongue, other languages known, and levels of comprehension), as well as information on language acquisition and retention, contexts of learning (home, school, or community), and whether participants had forgotten previously known languages. Further items addressed language use in different environments (home, school, workplace, leisure), cultural and social identity (including national or multiple cultural affiliations), and perceptions of how others respond to one's language use. Finally, the questionnaire explored attitudes toward multilingualism, such as support for children's language learning, perceived benefits of multilingual knowledge, and feelings of belonging or foreignness in the country of residence. While adults provided written responses, children's answers were collected through

audio-recorded, face-to-face sessions and later transcribed, with parents providing consent for their participation.

For the **qualitative component**, semi-structured interviews and ethnolinguistic observations were conducted with 5–7 participants across multiple environments, including homes, schools, workplaces, sports centres, churches, parks, and town festivals. The interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each, spread over five sessions, and were designed to capture participants' personal narratives and lived experiences with multilingualism. They pursued four objectives: 1) to understand how language use contributes to identity construction, 2) to examine emotional and functional language preferences, 3) to explore perceptions of integration, social acceptance, and cultural belonging, and 4) to assess how multilingualism impacts cognition and self-perception. Structurally, the interviews comprised three thematic parts: Part I (personal and identity-oriented questions) explored self-descriptions, cultural values, and shifts in worldview after migration, as well as the role of different languages in self-presentation. Part II (language use in real-life situations) investigated language preferences in emotional and everyday contexts, highlighting how participants manage their linguistic repertoires. Part III (integration and perception of competence) examined experiences of social acceptance, discrimination, and feelings of belonging, as well as participants' confidence or insecurity when speaking the local language. Finally, **ethnographic observation** complemented these methods by documenting naturally occurring behaviours, interactions, and contextual details. Conducted across six to eight sessions in varied social environments, observations provided insight into how language use and social dynamics unfold in practice, thereby addressing the influence of social context on identity formation. Discourse materials, including recordings of spontaneous speech, as well as self-recordings and community artifacts, provided additional context regarding the community's history, values, and beliefs.

Together, the questionnaire, interviews, and observations integrated sociological and ethnolinguistic perspectives, allowing the study to examine both social patterns and individual experiences in bilingual and multilingual identity construction. This multi-method design directly reflects the three research questions: it investigates how social environments shape identity, how language policies and practices affect identity formation, and how bilinguals and multilinguals perceive and manage their linguistic performance in everyday life.

3.2 Data Analysis Methods

To analyse the collected data, the study employed a combination of complementary methods designed to capture both the content and form of language use, as well as the social and identity-related dimensions of participants' experiences. **Thematic analysis** was applied primarily to interview data (both semi-structured and in-depth) to identify patterns, recurring narratives, and overarching themes, such as strategies of identity negotiation. **Discourse**

analysis was used across interviews, observations, and other textual materials, focusing not only on what participants said but on how they expressed themselves; this method enabled the researchers to uncover underlying ideologies, participants' identities, and their positions within social and linguistic contexts. **Coding of ethnographic observation** involved categorizing fieldnotes and transcripts of naturally occurring interactions, providing systematic documentation of language use and social behaviour in everyday settings. Finally, **sociolinguistic profiling** offered a structured description of how individuals or groups employ language in different social contexts, allowing the study to track multilingual practices across environments. Together, these methods aligned with the theoretical framework by capturing both the observable and interpretive dimensions of bilingual and multilingual identity formation, providing a comprehensive understanding of how language and social context interact in shaping personal and social identities.

3.3 Sociological and ethnolinguistic research

The Research draws on both sociological and ethnolinguistic approaches to explore the relationship between language, identity, and social context. From a **sociological perspective**, it focuses on the study of social structures, relations, and processes that shape the identity and integration of minority groups, providing insight into broader social patterns and interactions. While this approach is valuable for understanding collective behaviour and structural influences, it can be limited in capturing the subjective meanings and personal experiences of individuals. Complementing this, the **ethnolinguistic perspective** examines the intricate relationship between language and culture, highlighting how language both reflects and shapes social identity. This approach allows for detailed mapping of language practices within cultural contexts and provides a nuanced understanding of multilingual environments, although it often involves complex and time-intensive data collection and analysis, particularly in ethnographic or longitudinal studies.

By combining structured prompts with flexible follow-up questions, the interview ensured both comparability across cases and the opportunity for participants to share individualized accounts. This method directly aligns with the theoretical framework, which considers whether bilinguals and multilinguals hold one or multiple identities, the causes and contexts of language switching, and the role of the social environment in shaping linguistic behaviour. In turn, the interview questions address the research questions by examining how social environments influence identity formation, how language practices and policies shape multilingual identity, and how individuals perceive and manage their daily linguistic performance.

Together, these methods combined sociological and ethnolinguistic approaches to offer a holistic understanding of bilingual and multilingual identity. The survey provided a broader overview of attitudes and experiences, while the qualitative data illuminated the ways

language use, social interactions, and cultural practices shape individual and collective identities within different contexts.

3.4 Participants

The research was carried out in Lower Austria. In total, 50 bilingual and multilingual respondents, including both adults and children participated in it. The subjects were chosen based on their cultural and linguistic background. They were members of several minority groups living in Austria, originally coming from Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the USA, Colombia, Ukraine, Germany, and Serbia. All of the participants were either bilingual (e.g., English/Spanish, English/German, English/Slovak, German/Czech, German/Romanian, German/Hungarian) or multilingual (e.g., English/German/Slovak, English/German/Czech, German/Romanian/Hungarian, English/Spanish/German, English /Hungarian/German, English/German/Ukrainian/Italian, English/German/Slovak/Spanish /Italian, English/Slovak/Czech). They had lived in Austria for several years while occupying different job positions, attending a school or being in retirement, and their experience(s) and perspectives regarding minority languages, culture, and identity were the focus of the study.

3.5 Access to the community

This research focuses on smaller, more locally meaningful groups. It was important for the reasearchers to identify bounded and internally cohesive groups of speakers and develop closer relationships with the individual members in order to gain their trust and respect. The frequency of interactions grew over the course of several years in professional, educational as well as informal settings. In such a way, the ground for research became soundly established. One of the researchers worked as a voluntary teacher of English in the local kindergarten for several years and gained access to the children, other teachers and parents. It was the desire of the children and their parents to meet also outside the kindergarten and spend time together. The researchers tried to reach out to their respondents in their mother tongue(s) (Slovak, Czech, English, Spanish, German) whenever possible. The “friend-of-a-friend” technique was used by the researchers to be introduced to a larger group of members of the same community. The researchers adopted the roles of a) a professor at the local university, b) a teacher of English in the local kidnergarten and c) a friend. This allowed for a multiple access ponts to different parts of the community. Native speakers assisted with the analysis of languages not spoken by the researchers to ensure accuracy.

The researchers tried to be aware of cultural and other sensitivities. For instance, respecting the boundary between the Czech and Slovak members of the community and the Serbian members of the community. This issue was mostly related to the mothers who used to meet or not meet on a regular basis perhaps due to some cultural or language differences. The Serbian members (speaking Hungarian) seemed to relate more easily to the Hungarian members, while the Slovaks and Czechs seemed to have a stronger bond between each other.

4. Findings

The questionnaire results revealed that 88% of respondents identified with multiple cultures and identities. All respondents (100%) supported multilingualism and the preservation of home culture within their families and for future generations. Eighty-four percent reported experiencing respect and acceptance from the host culture. Nonetheless, 56% expressed reservations, stating that they continued to perceive themselves as foreigners in the host society.

The semi-structured interviews provided further nuance, indicating that the sense of acceptance within the host culture was influenced by several factors: proficiency in the majority language, duration of residence, professional occupation, individual personality traits, willingness to integrate, age, and so forth. While 84% reported feeling accepted in the questionnaire, some respondents revealed uncertainty during interviews. Their doubts stemmed from the fact that interactions with native residents were largely limited to necessary contexts such as school, work, medical settings, or shopping. In private life, however, locals often showed little willingness to form closer social bonds with foreigners.

Identity affiliation was also shaped by the individual's value system and the degree to which these values aligned with those of the host culture. For instance, one respondent with partial Romanian heritage explicitly rejected identification with Romanian culture. He justified this stance by claiming that many Romanians, in his view, displayed dishonesty, superficiality, theft, distorted values, and a lack of respect for nature and laws. Instead, he identified solely with German culture, which also constituted part of his background.

Overall, respondents who demonstrated competence in the host culture's language were able to integrate more quickly, gaining acceptance and respect within the new society. This tendency appears to be consistent across various countries (Peréa et al., 2018).

4.1 Narrative of the findings

The research was conducted within two small minority communities located in Lower Austria. The first, referred to in this study as **Community 1**, is a community formed around an American Catholic university. The second, referred to as **Community 2**, is a distinct minority community situated in the same geographical area. Members of Community 1 were professors and staff members working at the university and their families (wives and children) from the USA, Colombia, Slovakia, Poland, Germany, Ukraine, and Hungary. Members of Community 2 were individual people and families from Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Romania, Ukraine and Germany who had lived and worked or attended school in Austria for several years. The adult members of Community 2 were employed in different types of businesses as workers in heavy industry, bakers, cleaners, professionals in administration, operation controllers, waiters, masons, painters, etc. The younger members of Community 2 attended schools in Austria.

4.2 Similarities between Community 1 and Community 2

Within the Austrian school system, academic grading plays a central role in shaping pupils' motivation and self-perception. Most children from Communities 1 and 2 were found to receive lower grades compared to their Austrian peers. This disparity was associated with reduced self-esteem, decreased motivation, experiences of disrespect from Austrian classmates, and, in some cases, social isolation within the classroom environment. It was essential for the members of both communities to preserve their mother tongue and their original culture. They sought to teach their native language to their children and would welcome if their mother tongue was also taught to their children in the local schools. None of the minority languages (except for English and Spanish) was taught in the local schools.

Both communities maintained their home traditions through communicating in their mother tongue(s) with their spouses, children, relatives, and friends; keeping the traditional cuisine in their homes; attending social events organized by local minority groups; watching TV and listening to radio and music in their mother tongue; visiting websites in their mother tongue; reading books, magazines, and newspaper in their mother tongue.

The individual members of both communities had created strong bonds among each other and participated in different types of activities and events together. They often shared meals together or helped each other in many ways (e. g. picking up children from school, taking a person to the hospital or to the airport, babysitting children, etc.). They spent free time together on a regular basis, even thought authentic friendships were established among those members of the communities who naturally leaned toward each other.

Code-mixing and code-switching occured mostly in situations when the participants in the converstation spoke two or several languages. Not all of the participants in the conversation always spoke all of the languages in question. Code-switching, natural interpreting or brokering often took place in order to include everyone in the conversation or to facilitate content to a particular person. The members of both communities practiced intrasentential, intersentential, and extra-sentential forms of code-switching (see definitions above). Several examples can be offered:

The social context, i.e., **the composition of interlocutors** seemed to determine code-switching as a communication strategy. It was the respected rule among children and adults to include everyone in conversation. For instance, if two siblings speaking the same mother tongue and some other individuals who did not speak the mother tongue of the siblings were participating in a conversation, the siblings naturally switched to the language of the other participant even when speaking to each other as in Examples 1–3.

Example 1

Máme hada v triede, ale non-venomous. (We have a snake in the classroom but not venomous.)

Example 2
Na telesnej sme hrali dodge ball. (We played dodge ball during PE.)

Example 3
Sme boli vo dvojiciach, a jeden bol king *alebo* queen *a jeden* knight. *A musel dávať pozor, aby tú* queen *nedali von. Takto je* field *a tu sú* kings or queens. *Tí* knights *sa snažia vytriafať tých ďalších* kings *alebo* queens. ('We were in pairs, one of us was the king or the queen and one was the knight. And he had to watch that the queen does not get out. This is the field and here are the kings or the queens. The knights are trying to shoot those other kings or the queens.')

Even when all the participants in the conversation spoke the same languages, they often switched between codes depending on the topic of conversation, or the intention of the speaker. In narrating a story, switches were most frequent between the mother tongue(s) of the participant(s) and **the context of the story they were telling**. If the speaker was referring to an event that took place in a different language, a lot of borrowing, intrasentential, intersentential and extrasentential code-switching occured between the mother tongue of the speaker and the target language, Example 4.

Example 4
Regina povedala wir müssen erst einräumen. (Regina said we have to clean up first. The first part of the sentence is in Slovak, the second one in German.)

Frequent code-switching occurred when **expressing emotions**. The individual speakers seemed to have their own personal preference for choosing expressions of excitement, anxiety, fear, joy, etc. in a specific language. For instance, native speakers of Romanian or Hungarian often used German expression such as *Oh, mein Gott! Scheiße!* or speakers of Slovak and Czech often used English expressions such as *Gosh! Shit! Ouch!* The speakers often switched to a different language when borrowing a vulgarism or a swear word. The reason for that may have been that it did not carry the same emotional value as if they used an equivalent of the same word or expression in their mother tongue and also perhaps because the speaker(s) believed that other participants in the conversation might not understand it, especially children. It was affirmed by speakers from both communities that code-switching often occurred when the topic of conversation changed or simply as a subconscious communication strategy.

4.3 Differences between Community 1 and Community 2

While all of the children in Community 2 attended schools in Austria, it was not the case with the children in Community 1. Some parents opted for home schooling.

4.4 Community 1

The most common **topics of conversation** were religion, faith, family, education, politics, philosophy, theology, psychology and history. The typical **places for meeting** were the university campus, the church, school, the store, outdoor swimming pool, park, offices, soccer field, ski resorts, and town festivals. Attending daily Mass and other religious practices was important for the community. Their religious beliefs were reflected in the way they behaved, talked, dressed and thought about different aspects of life. The members of Community 1 did not always send their children to Austrian schools. Some families **homeschooled** their children (in English). Some families who did send their children to Austrian schools tried to choose the best school for their children, even if it was remote from the place where they lived. Education was very important to them.

Not all the members of Community 1 considered it important to learn German. They lived in their enclosed community on campus and used English most of the time to communicate with each other. There was very limited interaction with the local people. Some of their colleagues were Austrian but English was the common language at work. The fact that not all members found it important to interact with the local people or learn the language of the host country, meant they often identified with one culture and language only, or perhaps two, depending on what nationality their spouse was. Members of Community 1 **hardly ever socialized with the local people**. They rarely visited each other at home.

4.5 Community 2

The most common **topics of converstation** were work, family, relationships, travelling, health, sports, cooking, clothes, nature, and education. The typical **places for meeting** were work place, homes, outdoor swimming pool, school, the store, park, offices, soccer field, ski resorts, nature, and town festivals. Religion was not crucial for this community. They believed in God but did not spend extensive time talking about their faith and religious beliefs. Education of their children was important to them but they usually sent their children to **local schools**. All of the members of Community 2 found it important to learn German. They all **took German lessons** in some form. The adult members of Community 2 worked in local businesses and institutions (as teachers, cleaners, workers, managers, construction workers, etc.) and had Austrian colleagues. In order to live in the community, they needed to learn German. The members of Community 2 had developed **active relationships and friendships with the local people**. They socialized on a regular basis, attended events outside their job together and even visited each other at home.

4.6 Observation, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews

While all members of Community 2 were in contact with the local citizens, not all of them felt free to socialize with the Austrians on all levels. For instance, while during the semi-structured

interviews all of the members from Community 2 responded that they interacted with Austrians on a regular basis and felt accepted and respected by them, it was only during the in-depth interviews that it emerged that not all of the members of Community 2 invited Austrian friends to their homes and vice-versa. The reason for that may have been that one of the respondents of the in-depth interviews was a man who spoke German fluently and held a high position in a large factory. However, his wife was not fluent in German and had only worked for a short period of time in a small local bakery. While the husband was very outgoing, talkative, and made friends easily, his wife was more introverted. The reason why this particular family had not been invited to an Austrian home may have been due to the fact that men did not frequently invite others to their homes, it was usually the women who initiated the mutual invitations to a home. Men often went out to have a beer or attend a soccer match together, while the women often prefered to visit each other at their homes. Other members of Community 2 had visited their Austrian friends at their homes but it was the experience of the female respondents of the in-depth interviews. As a result, visiting someone at home seemed to be considered the most authentic form of assimilation and acceptance in the receiving culture.

While the individual members of both communities felt accepted and respected by the receiving country, not all of them considered themselves multicultural or having multiple identities. Those members of Community 1 or Community 2 who had lived long enough in a foreign country (Austria, Germany or some other country) and found it important to learn the language of the receiving country and become acquainted with its culture and people expressed their affiliation to multiple nations and perception of themselves as having multiple identities. Those members who only had a limited knowledge of the local culture and language identified with one (their native) culture and language only.

During the in-depth interviews it was revealed that some of the members from Community 1 showed little interest in learning German or sending their children to an Austrian school. They homeschooled their children in English which, in some cases, could have been due to their short stay in Austria. On the other hand, there were individuals who made a lot of effort to learn German or supported their children in acquiring the language and being successful in an Austrian school. These individuals showed a great interest in learning about the Austrian culture and becoming acquainted with the local people and their traditions. This created a more prominent isolation of some members of Community 1 from the local community as well as further weakening of learning the majority language.

One of the most surprising findings from the in-depth interviews was that even though the majority of respondents considered themselves to be well accepted in the local culture and by the local community, the case of many of the immigrant children attending the local schools revealed some contradictory evidence. These children often lagged behind in German compared to their German-speaking peers and did not get enough support in German as

a second language in school. Consequently, they received lower grades and were often viewed as less intelligent by their classmates, which often resulted in their discrimination, isolation, discomfort, lower-self esteem and sometimes even bullying from the Austrian children.

5. Results and Discussion

The research focused on minority groups in Lower Austria that are not typically represented among the most widely recognized minorities in the country. As such, the findings contribute new insights to the fields of bilingualism, ethnic studies, anthropology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and cultural studies. The researchers interpreted the data in the context of community dynamics, conducting prolonged ethnolinguistic observations to account for the potential influence of participants' social positioning and their relationship with the researchers on the information they shared.

During ethnolinguistic observations, the researchers focused on multiple dimensions of social interactions, including the physical setting (location and timing), procedures and systems in place, participants' roles, practices and language use, and patterns of socially meaningful behaviour such as language choice or valorization. Field notes and recordings documented the type of events (formal meetings, informal gatherings, conversations, prayers), participant roles (parents, children, teachers, priests, friends, coaches), location (school, workplace, church, park, sports centre, grocery store), languages used (German, English, Spanish, Slovak, Czech, Bosnian, Hungarian, Turkish, Ukrainian), notable linguistic features (topics, expressions), and social characteristics (behaviour, clothing, emotional responses). The participants actively maintained connections to both their home and host cultures. They watched media and listened to music in their mother tongue(s) and in German, preserved home country traditions within their families, cooked national meals, and accessed websites from both Austria and their countries of origin. This engagement facilitated sustained cultural and linguistic continuity. Qualitative data analysis identified recurring patterns and themes in participants' experiences, perspectives on culture and identity, and linguistic behaviours. The study revealed that the multilingual identities of participants are fluid and context-dependent, often shaped by the level of support available in different social domains. Home environments reinforced heritage identities, while schools, workplaces, and peer interactions sometimes encouraged assimilation or selective language use. Participants frequently engaged in code-switching, language hiding, and translanguaging as strategies for belonging and self-expression. The choice of language in conversation was strongly influenced by the topic, the participants involved, and the emotional content being expressed (e.g., excitement, fear, joy, frustration).

Most respondents emphasized the importance of preserving their mother tongue and home culture through family practices, celebrations, music, and daily communication. Participants who developed closer relationships with local residents and were proficient in German often

identified as multicultural, aligning themselves with both their country of origin and the host country. They demonstrated their interest in Austrian culture by learning the language, enrolling their children in local schools, supporting multilingual education, and participating in educational, sports, and social events organized by the local community.

Factors affecting participants' responses included nationality, religion, gender, social class (e.g., parental occupation, work environment), personal traits, and individual values, beliefs, and interests. Those who mastered German and engaged with local communities reported greater acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging, while those with limited host-language proficiency often experienced social isolation or lower self-esteem.

5.1 Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1:

How does the social environment influence the identity formation of bilingual and multilingual individuals?

The social environment plays a decisive role in shaping identity. Supportive family environments reinforced heritage languages and cultural identity, whereas interactions in schools, workplaces, and peer groups influenced assimilation, selective language use, or the adoption of multiple cultural affiliations. Participants' identity formation was thus highly context-dependent, shaped by both inclusion in and exclusion from social spaces.

Research Question 2:

What role do language policies and practices in different social environments play in shaping bilingual and multilingual identity?

Language policies and practices in educational, professional, and community contexts significantly affected identity construction. Access to multilingual learning, encouragement of heritage language maintenance, and positive recognition of linguistic diversity promoted inclusive, identity-affirming practices. Conversely, environments that emphasized monolingual norms or undervalued minority languages often pressured individuals towards assimilation or selective language expression.

Research Question 3:

How do bilinguals and multilinguals perceive and manage their linguistic performance in daily interactions?

Participants actively managed their linguistic repertoires through code-switching, translanguaging, and selective language choice, guided by factors such as topic, interlocutors, emotional expression, and social inclusion. They used these strategies to communicate effectively, express emotions, and reinforce belonging within both heritage and host communities.

5.2 Implications for Practice

The findings of this research have clear practical significance for education, community work, and workplace policies. Supporting multilingualism and heritage language maintenance can foster positive identity development, enhance self-esteem, and promote social inclusion among minority children and adults. Recognizing the fluid and context-dependent nature of multilingual identities allows educators, employers, and policymakers to create environments in which individuals feel valued and understood, rather than pressured to assimilate.

Based on the study results, several practical recommendations can be made:

Education: schools could implement inclusive curricula that recognize and integrate students' heritage languages and cultures. Teachers can use bilingual materials, encourage translanguaging strategies in the classroom and provide opportunities for students to discuss cultural identity and experiences.

Community and cultural programmes: local community centres, sports clubs, and cultural institutions as inseparable parts of social life could offer programmes and organize events that celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity. Activities such as bilingual workshops, cultural festivals and family-oriented heritage language classes can strengthen identity and social cohesion.

Workplace practices: it would be appreciated if employers acknowledged and respected employees' multilingual skills, provided language support when necessary and created opportunities for cross-cultural communication and professional development. Recognizing multilingualism as a professional asset certainly promotes inclusion and motivation.

Parental and family support: it is important for parents to maintain heritage language use at home, share cultural traditions and support children's bilingual or multilingual education. Guidance on how to balance heritage and host language development can help children build strong, integrated identities.

Policy development: local and national policymakers should develop and implement identity-affirming language policies that validate minority languages, provide resources for multilingual education, and ensure that public services are accessible to multilingual populations.

6. Conclusion

Creating environments that value both heritage and host languages, along with promoting inclusive social practices, can strengthen self-esteem, foster belonging, and support the healthy development of bilingual and multilingual identities across social domains.The study demonstrates that while European and Austrian policies support minority language use, the actual maintenance of heritage languages depends largely on family and community practices. Schools, workplaces, and public institutions often prioritize German, shaping bilingual and multilingual identity in complex ways. Participants used strategies such as code-switching and

translanguaging to navigate these environments and preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage. The findings highlight the need for stronger institutional support, inclusive educational practices, and community programmes that validate multilingual identities, fostering social inclusion and sustainable language maintenance.

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