

## **Minds Underground Languages Essay Competition 2025**

### **How does multilingualism shape identity in a globalised world?**

**Kam Yuet Ching Gabrielle**

#### **Introduction**

In an increasingly globalised world, multilingualism has become more than a skill - it is a defining feature of identity. Language is integral to identity as it is the primary means by which we think, define ourselves and present ourselves to others (University of Reading, 2023). Beyond serving as a tool for communication, it also reflects the values, beliefs and traditions of the culture that it represents. An individual's multilingual profile has the power to shape their identity and, therefore, affects both personal and cultural self-perception and identity. Having the ability to speak in different languages, multilingual individuals are able to have more opportunities to be involved in various cultural settings, which offers them insight into unique perspectives and to view the world using different points-of-view. In addition to enhancing one's ability to communicate with others from different backgrounds, it also helps individuals to foster a more open-minded and empathetic mindset, and promotes the appreciation of cultural diversity, thus making it an integral and defining element of personal identity.

#### **The Role of Language in Cultural Identity**

Apart from being a means of communication, language acts as a gateway to culture. Quoting what Khaled Hosseini, an -Afghan-American novelist said, "If culture was a house, then language was the key to the front door, to all the rooms inside". Language and culture share a homologous relationship (Guessabi, 2017), evolving together as interconnected factors that influence one another. Being the primary means through which individuals communicate a cultural group's values, beliefs and customs, language is one of the most important aspects of culture. It allows individuals to establish a sense of belonging and a shared group identity, and to delve deeper into the traditions and values that they share with others. The concept of language being inherently tied to culture is also reflected in the Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes. In the Spanish novel, Cervantes shows how language is not only used to communicate but as an entrance into Spanish culture, tradition, and custom. The use of idiomatic expressions, proverbs as well as regional dialects reflects the richness of Spanish culture. While the book itself is an example of Spain's linguistic heritage, the interactions between the characters provide insight into the values and social norms of the early 17th century Don Quixote was written and set in.

Furthermore, language plays a crucial role when it comes to preserving cultural heritage. When individuals communicate in a particular language, they bring with them the knowledge, traditions and shared experiences of their cultural background that are passed down throughout generations, allowing individuals to connect to their heritage. For multilingual individuals, they are able to preserve their own cultural heritage while also embracing new identities. Especially in our modern society, multilingualism allows people to stay in touch with their roots and, at the same time, adjust to a world that is becoming more globalised. The idea of heritage being preserved through language is especially evident in the work of Thomas Mann, a German novelist and short story writer. Particularly in Buddenbrooks, Mann illustrates how language is used as a means of cultural continuity in the way his characters have to learn to deal with the challenges brought about by changing social norms.

## Multilingualism and Self-Perception

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, refers to the proposal that the particular language one speaks influences the way one thinks about reality (Lucy, 2015). For multilingual individuals, the ability to switch between different cultural frameworks based on the language they speak is a vital part of their identity. Each language carries with it its own cultural norms, values and traditions which influences the speaker's perspective and interactions. This can be illustrated by the term "code-switching", a phenomenon which occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages during a conversation, sentence or situation (Zanini, 2023). Depending on the language they are using, a person may express humour, emotion, or politeness in different ways. Multilingualism and its influence on self-perception can be distinctly seen in the Neapolitan Novels by Italian author Elena Ferrante. One of the main characters, Lila, navigates her identity through the Neapolitan dialect and Italian, with the tension between the two languages being a recurring motif that reflects the character's struggles with self-perception. As such, in the novels, language is portrayed as a powerful medium that serves as a tool of empowerment and self-definition.

Moreover, for a multilingual individual, their multilingual profile has a significant impact on their identity and personal self-perception. Being multilingual leads to an occurrence called "frame-switching", in which there are changes in an individual's self perception and identity when speaking in different languages (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2006). For example, speaking one's mother tongue may evoke a stronger sense of authenticity than speaking in a non-native language, whereas speaking a second or third language may bring them closer to the values and cultural norms associated with that language. Drawing from my own personal experience, as someone who spent their childhood in Hong Kong but moved to the UK, I have experienced firsthand how multilingualism shapes self-perception. When speaking in Cantonese, my native language, I feel a greater sense of belonging and attachment as compared to speaking in English. Moreover, I become more polite, as respect and formality are values that are emphasised in Chinese culture, and cantonese is the language I use to communicate with my parents and elders at home. In contrast, speaking in English reshapes my self-perception in a different way. It is the language I use with friends in the UK, which makes me become more casual and relaxed.

## Multilingualism in a Globalised World

Particularly in an increasingly globalised world, being multilingual enables individuals to have greater social mobility and adaptability (Kroll and Dussias, 2017). Being able to speak multiple languages enables multilingual people to adapt to different social settings, both locally and internationally. This linguistic flexibility allows them to be capable of communicating with others from different cultural backgrounds, therefore enhancing their opportunities for personal and professional development. Beyond practical benefits, multilingual individuals, while switching from one language to another, can also develop a more multidimensional identity through continuously changing and adapting their self-perception based on their surrounding environments. Moreover, they may see themselves as bridges across cultural boundaries, which strengthens their sense of agency and belonging. By allowing them to assume various roles and perspectives, multilingualism helps individuals's personal development as well as their ability to connect with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Apart from playing a vital role in influencing the identity of individuals, multilingualism holds the power to foster understanding and inclusion by encouraging the creation of more culturally-diverse societies where linguistic diversity is valued and celebrated. In a globalised and interconnected world, multilingualism is an essential skill to ensure effective communication across language barriers, understanding of other cultures, and the development of global citizenship values (Stein-Smith, 2016). In addition to being part of a global personal cultural identity and an important means of communication, multilingualism is also associated with creativity and problem-solving, which are skills that are necessary for individuals to learn to deal with the challenges of society, especially in the modern era. Allowing individuals to think in different linguistic frameworks, multilingualism develops a person's perspective and equips them with an open-minded and adaptive mindset. This attitude allows them to develop a more innovative and creative way of problem-solving, which is a very important tool in today's interconnected and rapidly changing world. For example, multilingual individuals are often better equipped to consider a diverse range of viewpoints and to come up with creative solutions that take into account varying perspectives.

### Conclusion

Nonetheless, beyond the more practical benefits, multilingualism is a powerful force that shapes both the personal and cultural identities of individuals. By allowing people to communicate and connect with others across linguistic barriers, languages give individuals the opportunity to engage and interact meaningfully with people from different backgrounds, and to develop a more open-minded mindset along the way. It also enables individuals to understand, value and appreciate the cultural identities that are integrated within each distinctive language. By doing so, multilingualism facilitates mutual understanding and promotes important values such as empathy, which are elements that are crucial in building a society based on inclusiveness and diversity.

Furthermore, speaking multiple languages allows individuals to develop an awareness and appreciation of the traditions and values of other cultures, contributing to a sense of shared humanity. Thus, multilingualism holds the power to develop the global citizenship values of individuals, such as respect, empathy, diversity and inclusion. This empowers them to feel a sense of belonging as part of a larger, more interconnected global community, and promotes diplomacy, peacebuilding, and cross-cultural dialogue (Lee, 2024). By nurturing values that are vital for addressing global challenges and resolving conflicts, multilingual individuals are better equipped to work across cultural divides. Thus, beyond serving as a means of communication, multilingualism fosters respect and understanding, acting as a driving force toward the creation of inclusive societies that are culturally and linguistically diverse. It therefore enriches not only the lives of individuals but also contributes to progress toward the creation of a more harmonious world in which diversity is valued and celebrated.

## Bibliography

- Berlitz. (2023). *How Does Knowing More than One Language Impact Your identity? - Berlitz*. [online] Available at: <https://berlitzca.com/how-does-knowing-more-than-one-language-impact-your-identity/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Canales, A.B. and Mar, M. (2024). *Your Personality Changes When You Speak Another language, but That's Not Always a Bad Thing*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/your-personality-changes-when-you-speak-another-language-but-thats-not-always-a-bad-thing-245079> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Day Translations (2022). *The Relationship between Language and Culture Defined*. [online] Day Translations Blog. Available at: <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/relationship-between-language-and-culture/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Guessabi, F. (2017). *Blurring the Line between Language and Culture - Language Magazine*. [online] Language Magazine. Available at: <https://www.languagemagazine.com/blurring-the-line-between-language-and-culture/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Holmes, K. (2015). *Language: the Essence of Culture | Greenheart International*. [online] Greenheart.org. Available at: <https://greenheart.org/blog/greenheart-international/language-the-essence-of-culture/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Kroll, J.F. and Dussias, P.E. (2017). The Benefits of Multilingualism to the Personal and Professional Development of Residents of the US. *Foreign Language Annals*, [online] 50(2), pp.248–259. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12271>.
- Lee, M. (2024). *The Importance of Global Citizenship and How It Shapes Our World*. [online] Global Citizens. Available at: <https://www.globalcitizenshipstudies.com/post/the-importance-of-global-citizenship-and-how-it-shapes-our-world> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Lucy, J.A. (2015). *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*. [online] Sciencedirect.com. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/sapir-whorf-hypothesis> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Matveeva, E. (2024). *LinkedIn*. [online] LinkedIn.com. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-personal-experiences-connected-multilingual-brain-ekaterina-o8tec/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].
- Novakid (2022). *Why Do We Feel like 'A Different Person' When Switching to Another language?* [online] Novakid Blog. Available at: <https://www.novakidschool.com/blog/bilingual-minds-why-do-we-feel-like-a-different-person-when-speaking-in-a-foreign-language/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].

Oluwaseun (2023). *Language and Identity: How Multilingualism Shapes Cultures*. [online] Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@zoeoluwaseun/language-and-identity-how-multilingualism-shapes-cultures-87bcee1a32cc> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].

Ramírez-Esparza, N., Gosling, S.D., Benet-Martínez, V., Potter, J.P. and Pennebaker, J.W. (2006). Do Bilinguals Have Two personalities? a Special Case of Cultural Frame Switching. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(2), pp.99–120. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2004.09.001>.

Stein-Smith, K. (2016). The Role of Multilingualism in Effectively Addressing Global Issues: the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6(12), p.2254. doi:<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0612.03>.

University of Reading (2023). *Multilingualism and Identity*. [online] FutureLearn. Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-multilingual-childrens-language-development/0/steps/352141> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].

Zanini, A. (2023). *What Code-Switching Is and How It Works*. [online] Medium. Available at: <https://antozanini.medium.com/what-code-switching-is-and-how-it-works-5ea53f23f5da> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2025].