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Social Language Function and Identity Recognition in University Volunteer Service Education: A Case Study of China and Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of language as a social function and identity marker within the framework of volunteer service education at universities in China and Kazakhstan. Set against the backdrop of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), the research explores how sociolinguistic approaches can illuminate the intersection between language use and identity formation among university student volunteers. By employing comparative case study methodology and drawing on survey and interview data, the study identifies both convergences and divergences in how volunteer participants in China and Kazakhstan experience and negotiate their social roles through language. Language not only mediates communication but also serves as a means of identity building and

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intercultural comprehension embedded within the framework of global citizenry that falls within the SDG global citizenship agenda. In both countries, the use of multiple languages—especially English and national/local languages—played a pivotal role in shaping volunteers’ perceptions of themselves and others. The sociolinguistic analysis further reveals that the institutional context and national language policies significantly influence students’ linguistic behavior and their perceived identity in volunteer roles. The present study contributes to this debate through its argument for the application of a sociolinguistic approach in service learning programs offered in universities. It provides policy and pedagogical guidelines on creating more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and linguistically competent volunteer programs that meet the Sustainable Development Goals at the global level.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics; Volunteer Service Education; Sustainable development; Identity recognition; China; Kazakhstan

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale

Today, in our growing globalized multicultural world, language is more than a medium of communication; it is used as a prime means of identity, social role positioning, and cross-cultural understanding construction^[1]. No place is this more prominent than in university-based programs of volunteer service education, where engagement of students requires the navigation of culturally and linguistically diverse spaces. This status of language in such cases becomes even more pronounced when interpreted in terms of sociolinguistics, which views language as an element of and shaper of social structures, relationships, and identities^[2].

The education of volunteer service is one of the contributors to the idea of global competencies and intercultural communicative skills, which is in line with China’s commitment to the SDGs of the UN.

With relevant goals in the UN2030 Agenda identified (SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 10: Reduced Inequality, and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals), there is a focus on inclusive and equitable learning, global citizenship, and cross-border cooperation. One of the educational practices that has received broad adoption in universities, like volunteering, is compatible with these goals since it encourages proactive social engagement, empathy, and embracing responsibility in the world. Nevertheless, the success of the given programs is partially tacit through the linguistic competence and the adaptability to the culture of the participants. This development shows that educational language is not a mere skill poten-

tial but a form of social responsibility and identity building, especially within the context of a rapidly changing education system in China and Kazakhstan, where volunteer service education is primarily concerned with the internationalization of education^[3].

1.2. Conceptualizing Volunteer Service Education

Volunteer service education in colleges and universities is usually framed to equip individuals with the spirit of civic duty, social integration, and leadership. It can be related to active participation in community services, popular events, peer tutoring, nature-related projects, or international relief. These activities are both socially beneficial and provide transformational learning experiences to the students to make them empathetic, culturally sensitive, and globally competent^[4].

Both China and Kazakhstan have increasingly raised the profile of university volunteerism within institutional practices and national service campaigns (i.e., Chinese Youth Volunteer Association activities and the Kazakh Year of Volunteer). Such programs depend very much on person-to-person communication, foreign language contact, and even multilingual contact. Nonetheless, language policy, availability of language learning, and social-political contexts between the two countries are not similar and, therefore, form slightly different experiences and outcomes about identity formation as volunteers^[5].

Identity and its relational aspects depend on language; that is, language is essential in defining identity, gaining identity, losing identity, and acquiring identity, and on the relational aspects of identity^[6].

The study of the relationship between language and society is called sociolinguistics, which the current study will use to base its research. Founding theorists like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf acknowledged that language shapes the thought and worldview of a culture, the integrity of which is again postulated as linguistic relativity. Other, more recent researchers like Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu further elaborate on the role of language in creating an identity, and specify that this identity is performed or enacted within particular social situations. Differently put, language is one of the resources and limits of the perceived and self-perception of the individuals^[7].

In volunteer work environments, this dramatizing role of language is of utmost importance. Volunteers usually end up playing the role of helpers, cultural intermediaries, or agents of their institutions, and have to negotiate it. These are linguistically defined roles—greetings, formalities, narration, and even silence. Volunteers with multilingual skills tend to conduct these roles with ease and are seen as more compassionate, competent, and included within the communities they work in^[8].

1.3. Volunteer Service Education and the Sociolinguistic Theory

Sociolinguistics is the topic that provides us with the necessary apparatus to interpret the use of language not only as a communication tool, but also as a form of social action. Language indeed is not a source of communication of information but a semantic action that creates socialization^[9]. Within the framework of volunteer service education, this school of thought focuses on the use of language as performance in the creation of social identity, especially in a multilingual setting where uses of language may indicate hierarchies or reify them^[10].

The work by Hymes on the ethnography of communication (1972) is fundamental in understanding how a language may serve different societies, such as those related to volunteer programs. Hymes assumed that it is impossible to consider linguistic reality beyond social functions, as it helps to establish and mediate. His model invokes the who, what, when, where, and why of speech, questions which give an indication not only of what is said but of roles, relationships, and identities that it accomplishes. Such a framework is especially effective in the context of

analyzing language use and the roles of volunteers in an organization, as well as their perception by others^[11].

Further, research in the works of Gumperz (1982) and Bucholtz and Hall (2005) has tried to understand the use of language as a supplement to ideological alteration. Their perspective on language is that it is a resource that changes and is used by individuals to enact various, dynamic identities. People often switch between different identities according to social circumstances. In the volunteer context, it would imply that a volunteer can show us the professional modes of discourse in written, official situations but move to the more local or personal norms of discourse in oral, informal contexts^[12].

1.4. Language and Identity in Volunteerism

Volunteerism is a social construct, and, therefore, language plays a critical role in shaping the social roles and identities. The correlation between language and identity as a source of social placement, culture, and power has been extensively discussed in sociolinguistics, with scholars arguing that language plays a significant role in the recognition of social location, cultural affiliation, and power. And to a large extent, language in use in volunteer programs is not just about efficiency in communication but about marking membership and operating in various social hierarchies^[13].

According to the report of the study done by Makhmut et al on the sociolinguistic inspections of volunteerism in Kazakhstan, it was observed that the issue of language was core because it promoted empathy and enhanced communication skills among the volunteers^[14]. Nevertheless, the research concluded that language could impede effective communication and exclusion when the linguistic abilities of the volunteers were inadequate or when they became outcasts because they spoke local dialects.

In China's volunteer service sector, Mandarin serves as a common language that provides an essential foundation for nationwide collaboration and communication, while also fulfilling an important role in promoting institutional and national solidarity. It is worth noting that, alongside the promotion of a shared language, growing attention is being paid to the cultural value of various dialects and regional languages—such as Cantonese, Hokkien, and

Teochew. Recent research suggests that how to better integrating diverse linguistic backgrounds into volunteer programs and enhancing support and inclusion for speakers of non-Mandarin varieties has become a key issue in improving the inclusivity and representativeness of volunteer services. This highlights the need to both acknowledge Mandarin's role as a communicative bridge and actively explore multilingual collaborative mechanisms, enabling participants from different language backgrounds to contribute more effectively and collectively enrich the meaning of volunteer service ^[15].

The significance of language to the formulation of identity in the volunteer context was also examined in the context of linguistic capital. In the scene, based on Bourdieu, some languages or dialects are more powerful and symbolic than others, and speaking a specific language guarantees access to a privileged position and social prestige. This movement shows the unevenness of the linguistic resource distribution and the implication of language in the areas of social inequalities ^[16].

The fact that both China and Kazakhstan are multilingual presents a unique situation and poses challenges to volunteer programs. Although these nations differ significantly in their linguistic and cultural contexts, they share a multilingual historical background, having been countries of coexistence with multiple official and regional languages. The language serves as a means of communication in these two contexts, as well as social identities, political affiliations, and national identities.

The sociolinguistic situation in Kazakhstan can be described as a mixture of the two languages: Kazakh and Russian, the latter being more politically and socially powerful as it is tied to its Soviet legacy. Over the recent years, this has been an increasing concern to promote the use of the Kazakh language as a way to establish the national identity and sovereignty ^[17].

The conflicting issues of language choice in Kazakhstan arise from the dual pressures of using the Kazakh and Russian languages. Students must express their national pride and gain broader social and economic opportunities. Such tensions are especially acute in the context of volunteer programs, as a volunteer has to reconcile the cultural importance of learning Kazakh with the utility of the Russian language to communicate effectively with many peo-

ple ^[18].

The dilemma guiding volunteer programs has the need to create a unified image that fosters a nation based on the official language, while also raising awareness of individuals' cultural and linguistic diversity ^[19].

1.5. Research Gap and Purpose

Although the value of language learning as an aspect of volunteering has already been explored in the literature, little is known about the effect that language use might have on social identity and how the process of socialization through language can be viewed in volunteer contexts, more especially so with regard to the multiethnic and multicultural university environments in China and Kazakhstan. It is essential to recognize that language is crucial in establishing empathy and communication among the Kazakhstani volunteers. The sociolinguistic processes through which these identities are formed and acknowledged by the people involved in volunteering and receiving their services are, however, not well-researched.

This study, in one way, attempts to fulfill this gap by exploring:

- How language is used to perform and negotiate social identities in volunteer service education.
- The differences and similarities in these linguistic practices between Chinese and Kazakhstani university students;
- The implications of sociolinguistic patterns for designing inclusive and culturally responsive volunteer service education programs aligned with the SDGs.

1.6. Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do university student volunteers in China and Kazakhstan use language to construct and express their social identities?
2. In what ways does the sociolinguistic environment of each country influence volunteers' linguistic behavior and identity perception?
3. How can sociolinguistic analysis inform sustainable and inclusive volunteer service education practices in university settings?

1.7. Significance of the Study

By framing volunteer service education through a sociolinguistic lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language functions as a medium of identity, social positioning, and intercultural engagement. It responds to the growing need to develop educational strategies that are not only linguistically inclusive but also identity-affirming—especially in multilingual and multicultural settings. The comparative analysis between China and Kazakhstan offers broader implications for international education, civic engagement, and global volunteerism in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This piece of research is done through a comparative case study, which is buttressed by sociolinguistic analytical frameworks. It deals with the interpretation of the implementation of language by university student volunteers in China and Kazakhstan to develop social identities, negotiate interpersonal relations, and modify cultural participation in volunteer environments. The proposed study adopts a mixed-methods research design where both qualitative and quantitative data will be used and collected to explore the intricacies of linguistic behaviour and its social practices.

The theoretical background of this research is based on the work by Dell Hymes (1972) that focused on the ethnography of communication, and justified the concept of studying language in its social and cultural context^[20]. The framework of Hymes offers the terms to analyze not only the exercise of language in terms of the content, but also how, when, and why people apply language in a particular context.

Applying this theory allows for a richer understanding of how student volunteers use language as a resource for expressing identity, performing roles, and engaging with culturally diverse communities.

The comparative nature of the study enables a contextualized understanding of volunteer service education systems in two distinct yet increasingly globalized national contexts. Both China and Kazakhstan share a post-socialist educational legacy, strong national development goals,

and evolving volunteer initiatives, making them ideal for a cross-national analysis of sociolinguistic phenomena in volunteerism.

2.2. Research Sites and Participants

The study was conducted at four universities—two in China and two in Kazakhstan—chosen for their active engagement in international volunteer programs and multilingual student populations. All four universities are large, urban-based institutions with formalized volunteer service education frameworks and student volunteer associations affiliated with national youth or community service organizations.

Participants:

- **Total Sample Size:** 80 university students (40 per country)
- **Age Range:** 19–25 years
- **Gender Distribution:** Balanced across groups
- **Language Backgrounds:**
 - **China:** Mandarin Chinese (L1), English (L2), local dialects (e.g., Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew)
 - **Kazakhstan:** Kazakh (L1), Russian (L1/L2), English (L2)

The participants were recruited by using institutional mailing lists and referrals from volunteer associations. They had inclusion criteria of at least six months of continuous experience as a volunteer, and were striving to guarantee gender and linguistic diversity.

2.3. Data Collection Methods

Three main instruments were employed:

2.3.1. Structured Survey

All the participants were administered a 25-item sociolinguistic questionnaire, which was aimed at gathering demographic information, linguistic repertoire, and perceptions regarding the use and identity of language in terms of volunteering experience. The main points were:

- Language(s) used in volunteering
- Comfort levels in switching codes/languages

- Self-perception in different linguistic contexts
- A sense of social acceptance or alienation based on language use

Their responses were recorded on a 5-point scale that utilised the Likert scale and optional open-ended questions to provide further explanation.

2.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Follow-up interviews (Appendix A) were conducted with 20 selected participants (10 per country) to explore their narratives and reflections in more depth. These interviews focused on:

- Specific volunteer episodes where language impacted identity or interaction
- Instances of inclusion/exclusion based on language
- Feelings associated with speaking different languages in service roles

Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was conducted in the participant's preferred language, then translated and transcribed for thematic analysis.

2.3.3. Discourse Observation and Reflection Logs

For triangulation, a subset of participants ($n = 10$) provided short written logs describing their experience during volunteering events, with attention to:

- Code-switching episodes
- Language-related challenges
- Reactions from recipients of their service
- Emotional states tied to linguistic performance

These reflection logs offered insight into how students internalized and reflected upon their sociolinguistic identities.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in three stages:

2.4.1. Quantitative Analysis (Survey)

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and comparative t-tests

to identify significant differences in language-related perceptions and behaviors between the two groups. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS v27.

2.4.2. Thematic Coding (Interviews and Logs)

A grounded theory approach was used to code interview transcripts and reflection logs inductively. Emerging themes were organized under sociolinguistic categories:

- Identity Performance (e.g., “I felt more confident speaking English with foreigners”)
- Language Power Dynamics (e.g., perception of English as ‘prestigious’)
- Code-Switching Patterns
- Cultural Recognition or Misrecognition

NVivo 12 software supported the thematic coding process, ensuring consistency and traceability.

2.4.3. Cross-Cultural Comparison

Findings from both countries were then comparatively analyzed to highlight both convergences and divergences in language use, identity dynamics, and institutional context. Patterns were interpreted using sociolinguistic theory, particularly the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972) and language ideologies frameworks.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of each participating university. All participants signed informed consent forms, with assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were assigned to all personal data. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Translation accuracy and cross-cultural sensitivity were prioritized throughout data collection, especially during the interview phase. Local research assistants with linguistic competence in both the national and institutional languages facilitated interviews and data checks.

2.6. Limitations

While the study provides a rich sociolinguistic com-

parison, it is limited by:

- A relatively small sample size within each university
- Potential self-reporting bias in survey and interview responses
- Language translation issues affecting nuanced expressions of identity
- A time-bound snapshot rather than a longitudinal insight into identity evolution

Despite these limitations, the methodological triangulation and comparative depth lend robustness to the findings.

3. Results

This section presents the significant findings of the study, organized into three interrelated thematic domains: (1) Volunteer Language Practices, (2) Identity Construction Through Language, and (3) Perceived Sociolinguistic Impact on Volunteer Roles. Each subsection includes a comparative analysis between Chinese and Kazakhstani participants and draws from surveys, interviews, and reflection logs.

3.1. Volunteer Language Practices

The survey results showed that over 85% of participants from both countries used more than one language during their volunteering activities. However, the choice of language and the function it served differed significantly between the two contexts.

3.1.1. Language Preferences and Frequency

In China:

- **Mandarin Chinese** was used as the default communication language in nearly all volunteer contexts (90%).
- **English** was employed selectively, primarily during international events or when engaging with foreign students and tourists (34%).
- **Dialects** were occasionally used, particularly when communicating with middle-aged and elderly people in rural communities.

In Kazakhstan:

- **Kazakh and Russian** were used interchangeably, with participants shifting based on the interlocutor's preference.
- **Russian** was dominant in urban volunteering events (especially in Almaty and Astana), while **Kazakh** was more prevalent in northern, western regions, and rural initiatives.
- **English** use was less frequent (34%), often limited to formal translation roles or international volunteer forums.

Figure 1 shows that the Chinese use Mandarin as the main language, with English and other local forms of language being applied in limited areas. In Kazakhstan, Russian is spoken and Kazakh, in addition to moderate use of English in international volunteer contexts.

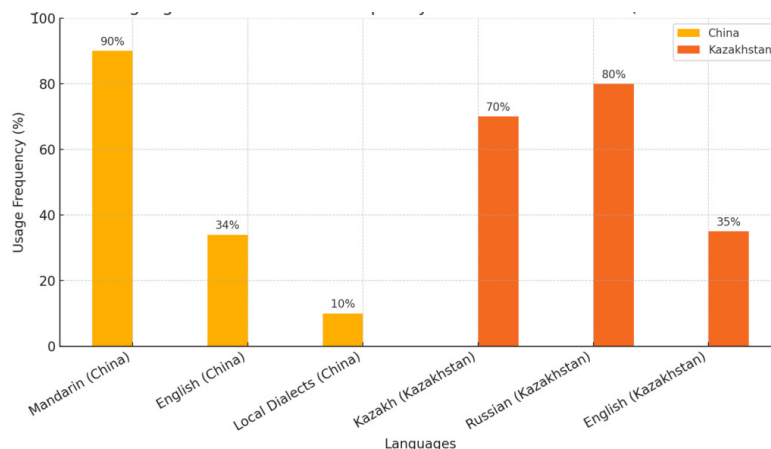


Figure 1. Language Preferences and Frequency in Volunteer Contexts (China vs Kazakhstan).

3.1.2. Code-Switching Patterns

Figure 2 indicates the variations in the behaviour of the code switching between the Chinese and Kazakhstani volunteers. The code-switching is more prevalent in Kazakhstan, and Chinese volunteers are more bound by institutional orientation.

Interviews indicated that a ubiquitous approach adopted was code-switching, particularly in Kazakhstan. One participant clarified that he was correctly hoping that the machine would be able to do this.

“In one of the health awareness meetings, I also could not speak the language that is used locally

(Kazakh), so I used Russian instead. It enabled me to quicken my relationships.”

The institutional prerequisites are more linguistically bound for students in China. One of the participants also mentioned that.

“I speak Cantonese, yet I was required to speak Mandarin, because Mandarin is the official language of activities in that university.”

This indicates that communicative behaviors of the student volunteers were influenced by language policies and the status quo, which variously supported national or global languages over other languages.

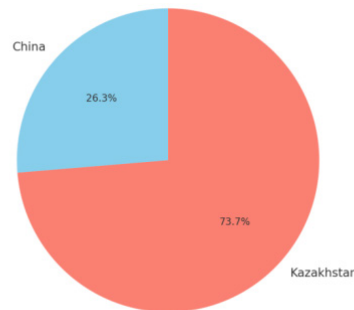


Figure 2. Code-Switching Behavior During Volunteering (China vs Kazakhstan).

3.2. Identity Construction Through Language

This theme examined how young people perceived their social and cultural identities being shaped through language during their volunteering experiences.

3.2.1. Language as a Symbol of Competence and Legitimacy

In both countries, volunteers reported that using English elevated their perceived competence. In China, 67% of participants associated speaking English during volunteer events with prestige and institutional trust. One student remarked:

“They always chose us to talk to international guests because we speak English. It made me feel important.”

In Kazakhstan, English also symbolized competence, but bilingualism in Kazakh-Russian was equally valued as a marker of national identity. A Kazakh student shared:

“Knowing Kazakh makes you feel rooted; Russian gives you access. Both are part of who I am as a volunteer.”

This illustrates that identity recognition was fluid, and volunteers often used language to project multiple identities: professional, national, and intercultural.

3.2.2. Emotional Connection and Belonging

Volunteers in Kazakhstan emphasized the emotional resonance of using their mother tongue during service. One log entry read:

“When I spoke Kazakh to an old woman in the village, she smiled. She said it felt like home. That made me proud.”

The study observed that in the Chinese context, emotional expression was frequently channeled through collective pride. Mandarin, as the lingua franca, was integral to fostering national identity. However, when students were required to use English in an institutional capacity,

their emotional expression often appeared more measured, potentially reflecting the challenges of navigating affective expression in a second language.

3.2.3. Representation and Language Culture

The language used by many students was perceived as their culture. The Chinese volunteers could see English as the means to represent China on a professional level, whereas the Kazakhstani students spoke of how code-mixing expressed their cultural hybridities. For instance:

We mix a lot of Russian with Kazakh. It does not matter whether it is wrong or right, but whether a person is heard and announces himself/herself.”

These results are evidence of how students employed language to situate themselves socially and culturally to denote affiliation, adaptability, and identity all at once.

3.3. Sociolinguistic Impact on Volunteer Roles

These dynamics bolster the ethnographic methodology embraced by Hymes (1992) that indicates that the language cannot be comprehended entirely without taking into account the social norms, power relations, and cultural prescriptions concerning its use^[21]. The acts of communication by the student volunteers were not random; they were embedded in speech events organized by social roles, institutional ranks, and cultural affiliations. Linguistic forms only acquire meaning when placed in their broader contexts, which are given meaning through their forms and not necessarily restricted to linguistic form. In these illus-

trations, their language choice, code-switching patterns, and their attitude to linguistic prestige are shown.

3.3.1. Empowerment Through Language Mastery

Figure 3 is used to compare the effect of multilingual proficiency on empowerment.

The confidence of the volunteer in both countries. Multilingual volunteers are more empowered and can play leadership roles. Multilingual proficiency, particularly of two local languages in addition to English, was the main issue that volunteers in these countries were labelled as having.

“languages—they felt more confident, and empowered. One of the Chinese students said: When I volunteered at an international fair, I translated. It provided me with leadership responsibility. I was not playing a supportive role; I was leading.”

Likewise, one of the Kazakhstani volunteers commented:

“The change of languages, from Kazakh and Russian to English, helped me feel useful. It provided me with the authority to bridge individuals.”

This can be supported by quantitative analysis since more than 70 percent of multilingual respondents concurred with the idea. The answer to the question is as follows: my language ability promotes my position and performance as a volunteer.

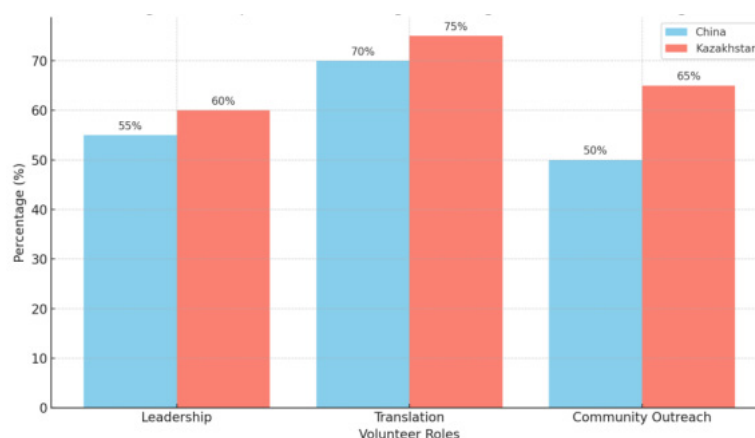


Figure 3. Empowerment Through Multilingualism in Volunteering.

3.3.2. Barriers to Inclusion

Figure 4 illustrates the integration barriers that multilingual volunteers may encounter due to differing language proficiencies. In rural Kazakhstan, volunteers with limited Russian worry about future prospects; in China, those whose first language is not Mandarin often find themselves implicitly expected to “catch up” before they can fully participate in public initiatives.

As one of the participants said (Chinese):

“Although I may be speaking in Mandarin, people think I am not well-educated because of my accent. They do not select me as the representative sometimes.”

The interplay between everyday interactions and dominant linguistic ideologies tends to reproduce pre-existing social hierarchies, even within volunteer settings.

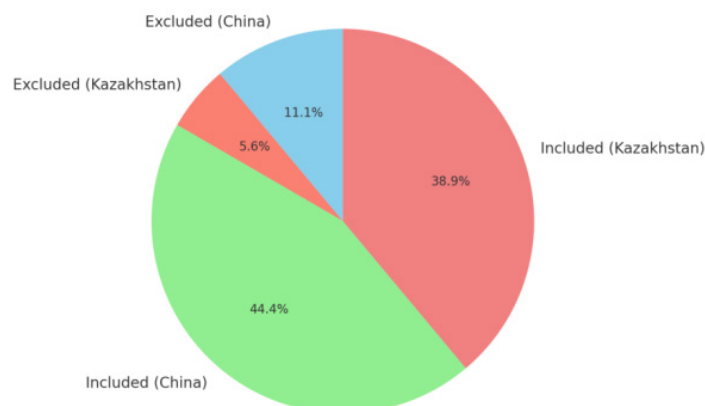


Figure 4. Barriers to Inclusion in Volunteer Roles Due to Language.

3.3.3. Social Bridge

If language is a social bridge, then it can be seen as a one-way conveyor belt.

The study subjects commonly referred to language as a medium to unite communities. The volunteers, especially in multilingual events, understood themselves as translators of cultures. One of the Kazakhstani students said:

“I did not just translate words. I contributed to an explanation of customs. That is what volunteering is all about—making people feel at home.”

This resonated with Chinese students, particularly those who were also taking part in cross-border volunteering partnerships with Central Asia:

“The ability to speak in Kazakh a few words assisted me in connecting with the visiting group. They also liked the challenge.”

This demonstrates how even at a minimal scale, linguistic accommodation can bring about goodwill and lead to improved intercultural communication.

4. Discussion

It is in this section that the findings of the study will be reflected through the established practices of sociolinguistic research, the educational system as it is in China and Kazakhstan, and the global scenario of sustainability initiatives. It provides clues on how language is also acted upon and not just used as a means to communicate, but also as a social identity builder and a volunteer structure feature. The use of languages, as witnessed in the two countries, shapes how the volunteers feel about themselves, other people, and their place in society. Hence, it is a very important factor in the process of inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and disempowerment.

4.1. Sociolinguistic Identity More Than Communication

The results of this research justify the postulates of the sociolinguistic theories, particularly the ethnography of communication developed by Hymes, that all language processes should be addressed through the prism of social roles, situational context, and overall socio-cultural

environment under which communication is taking place. These linguistic behaviors were not just spontaneous, like one might think; the linguistic behaviors of volunteers were based on other factors, such as the expectations of the institution, hierarchical relationships, and roles played during volunteer events. This aligns with Hymes' belief that language cannot be separated from the social aspect of all communicative engagement.

As Hymes predicted, the data showed that the use of language in the training of volunteers was not simply an information-sharing process; it was the performance of social identity. The use of language by volunteers sheds light on how those volunteers identified their affiliations, bargained their place in the hierarchy of volunteers, and demonstrated their belonging in a particular community. The research proves the idea that language can be seen as a kind of social action^[22], in which each uttering carries a meaning that not only identifies the intention of the speaker but also specifies his/her identity, status, and position in the larger society landscape.

As an illustration, English language proficiency has become a significant strength in China, indicating that English competency is a crucial component of the country's international talent development strategy. This proficiency is also important in international dialogue and enables students to effectively describe China to the rest of the world. Mandarin, however, was used as a means of national unity: it was based on the institutionalized norms and national identity. Kazakh language and Russian, in particular, code switching in Kazakhstan reinforced the intricacy of identity that prevailed in a multicultural community.

Linguistic resources and the idea of linguistic capital, in which some languages are more socially valuable than others, are especially true in Kazakhstan. One example is the case of English, which is highly needed in international engagement as well as being entangled with power structures, both in educational and volunteer situations. The flexibility of the Kazakh and Russian languages among volunteers demonstrates that these languages are also instrumental in cultural and social negotiation because students decide which language to use based on the social identity they want to have in a particular context^[23].

These findings indicate that identity performances among the volunteers are not fixed but situation-based and

layered. A student can convey a global identity when practicing English in both international and local environments, such as during rural and locally based volunteering work. Such construction of identity, though, is informed not only by the choice of language but also by the ideologies behind the language. In both China and Kazakhstan, standard varieties of English (or internationally recognized varieties of English) are usually approved in institutions and given more social acknowledgement, whereas the speakers of local varieties/less-prestigious types of English may face more subtle forms of exclusion or marginalization. Therefore, language is also a tool through which students are socially labelled and judged by others in addition to being a medium of self-expression^[24].

4.2. Volunteering and Language Ideologies

The study shows how beliefs about "standard" versus "local" language shape volunteers' experiences in China and Kazakhstan. In both countries, volunteers who command widely recognized varieties of English tend to receive greater approval, while speakers of less-valued varieties—such as regional dialects or less-fluent second languages—often face harsher judgments and occasional subtle exclusion.

In China, Putonghua (Modern Standard Mandarin) dominates public life and volunteer settings. While this policy facilitates nationwide communication, it also sidelines dialects such as Cantonese or Hokkien in formal contexts. Volunteers from dialect backgrounds frequently feel obliged to demonstrate an extra level of Putonghua proficiency before they are fully accepted, and their linguistic origins can become an unspoken criterion of evaluation^[25].

Kazakhstan's official Kazakh-Russian bilingualism appears to allow pluralism, yet it creates a nuanced web of language choices. Kazakh symbolizes national identity, whereas Russian retains practical authority in urban and professional spheres. Volunteers must constantly decide which language to use; each choice affects not only efficiency but also signals affiliation and cultural stance.

Despite these challenges, many volunteers highlight the unique advantages of multilingualism. They act as intermediaries between different language groups, translating not only words but also expectations and contextual cues. In this role, language shifts from a mere instrument to an

active resource for building cross-group understanding and collaboration^[26].

4.3. Language as Inclusion and Exclusion

On the one hand, multilingualism enabled the empowerment of a significant number of volunteers; on the other hand, it also showcased the impediments that language use may set in the way of a volunteer. Countries with rural or underrepresented linguistic groups frequently displayed reports of members of such communities feeling unwelcome or undermined due to their linguistic proficiencies, or lack thereof. An example of this was in China, where students with accented Mandarin (which would be perfectly understandable) would be commonly ostracized in subtle ways, with accented speakers somehow being less professional than standard Mandarin speakers. This is indicative of larger-scale trends in linguistic discrimination, in which regions and accents are commonly undermined in favor of a standardised, or so-called, neutral type of speech.

These interactions echo the sociolinguistic criticism whereby the aspect of power is established in the communicative hierarchy of language use. This establishes unseen obstacles to engagement, particularly in formal interviews, such as international volunteering activities or prestigious volunteer opportunities. Non-native speakers of the dominant languages, or those with an accent, were assigned non-leadership roles or tasks related to the foreign country, further creating linguistic privilege and homogenizing the perspectives on those positions.

Besides, not only were they perceived, but they were also institutionalized. The linguistic hierarchies were also maintained unwittingly by the volunteer coordinators, assigning students who were fluent in English or Mandarin the high-visibility work. These practices highlight the importance of more inclusive volunteer programs, which not only acknowledge the cultural worth of linguistic diversity but also ensure that every volunteer, regardless of their linguistic capabilities, has an equal chance to contribute and be a leader.

4.4. Future Research Implications

Although this study gives a sound insight into the

role of language in volunteer service education, there are possibilities for extending the exploration of this topic. The longitudinal studies may be involved in future research, following the changes in volunteer identities that can occur under the influence of the new challenges and opportunities that multilingualism implies. It is also possible to expand the scope of the research to cover rural or minority-serving institutions, where students may encounter various linguistic difficulties. Comparative analysis of Western multilingual universities could provide valuable insights into improving volunteer programs.

Though the sample size ($n = 80$) allowed extracting useful insights of qualitative and comparative nature, the generalizability of the results across the larger-scale populations in Chinese and Kazakhstani universities is inhibited. Subsequent research may increase the sample size and use the method of longitudinal research to document changing trends of sociolinguistic identity over a time period.

Future research can also be conducted to investigate the interplay between language competency and volunteer effectiveness in language skills, examining how well volunteers perform their tasks and the resulting community outcomes, using quantitative models.

Volunteering is all about creating connections in a cross-cultural, linguistic, and social sense. This study emphasizes that language is a pivotal element in these interactions, serving not merely as a communication tool but as a formidable force that bears history, identity, and cultural meaning. By understanding the way that language contributes to the construction of volunteer identities and experiences, educators and program designers have an opportunity to better serve students, not only in their service activities, but also in the formation of self-reflective and linguistically limber global world citizens. The vision of creating global citizens is at the core of the sustainable development agenda, and volunteer programs that can accommodate linguistic diversity can effectively support this vision.

5. Conclusions

This study explored sociolinguistic aspects of uni-

versity education among volunteers, examining the role of language as a communication and living process through which Chinese and Kazakh volunteer students recognized their identity. With the background of survey data, interviews, and thoughtful narratives, the study elucidated the most important factor of language in determining social inclusion and cultural belonging, and perceptions of success as a volunteer.

Universities should conduct multilingual training sessions with volunteers and consider incorporating other regional languages into program design. This approach helps cultivate inclusive environments that support SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality).

The results support the relevance of volunteer service education to contribute to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), and SDG 17 (Partnerships towards the Goals) by practicing an inclusive language.

It has indeed been proven that the use of language in the act of volunteering extends beyond operational skills to become a performative practice of identity. The students develop, bargain, and present various identities based on the numerous languages they use and the social and cultural situations they find themselves in. Both nations showed increased confidence among multilingual students as well as enhanced intercultural relations, together with a sense of self-awareness. It was language that helped them to relate to others and establish themselves in global, national, and local systems of significance.

These trends remind us that universities should follow sociolinguistically oriented approaches to the design of volunteer programs. These involve identifying and acknowledging multilingual backgrounds, preparing students for sensitive communication, and designing activities that allow individuals to volunteer and communicate in multiple languages while being culturally sensitive. The measures will be in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

In addition to the practical implications, the present study contributes to the general theoretical debate on language and identity by demonstrating that service-learning contexts represent micro-societies of sociolinguistic negotiation. Also, here is a notion of volunteerism, which is one way of framing this kind of civic engagement, but also as a space of linguistic agency, where students are shaping

and making themselves known based on what they frame themselves as (cultural ambassador, empathetic listeners, multilingual mediators).

The most effective way of realizing the potential of volunteer service education in the name of sustainable development is through institutions moving beyond seeing language as a neutral skill to being interested in language as a social resource, fundamentally rooted in power, culture, and the construction of personhood. Future programs should not only aim to produce skilled volunteers but also linguistically reflective and culturally agile global citizens.

This study affirms that a sociolinguistic lens is not a luxury but a necessity in understanding and enhancing volunteer service education. It is through this lens that we can recognize the full humanity of student volunteers—not just in what they do, but in how they speak, listen, belong, and become.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, T.W. and C.M.; methodology, B.A.; software, K.D.; validation, H.Z. and X.L.; investigation, T.W., K.D., I.S.; resources, C.M.; data curation, X.L.; writing—original draft preparation, T.W.; writing—review and editing, B.A.; visualization, K.D.; supervision, C.M.; funding acquisition, H.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (protocol code: IRB-A1046; approval date: [6th February 2025]).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected or published.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and institutional data protection policies, raw interview transcripts and surveys are not publicly archived.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Research Questionnaire

Participant Group: University student volunteers

Location: China & Kazakhstan

Estimated Time: 10–15 minutes

Section 1: Background Information

1. Age: _____
2. Gender:
 - ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other
 - ☐ Prefer not to say
3. Country:
 - ☐ China ☐ Kazakhstan
4. University Name: _____
5. Major / Field of Study: _____
6. Year of Study:
 - ☐ 1st ☐ 2nd ☐ 3rd ☐ 4th ☐ Graduate

7. What languages do you speak? (Mark all that apply)
 - ☐ Mandarin ☐ Kazakh ☐ Russian ☐ English
 - ☐ Other: _____
8. Which language do you use most often in your volunteering activities? _____

Section 2: Language Use in Volunteering (Likert scale: Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree)

9. I feel comfortable using my primary language in all volunteer contexts.
10. I switch between two or more languages when volunteering.
11. I use English during international volunteer events.
12. My language skills help me explain tasks better to others.
13. I adjust my speech to suit the person I am helping.
14. My accent or language style has affected how others perceive me in volunteer work.
15. I was chosen for volunteer tasks based on my language ability.

Section 3: Language and Identity

16. I feel that my language reflects who I am.
17. Speaking my native language helps me connect with people emotionally.
18. Using multiple languages helps me express different sides of my identity.
19. I feel more confident when volunteering in a language I am fluent in.
20. I have felt excluded or underestimated due to the way I speak.
21. I try to represent my culture when I speak in volunteer settings.
22. I use language to create trust with the people I serve.

Section 4: Sustainable Development & Volunteer Impact

23. I believe language plays a role in achieving inclusive and sustainable volunteer programs.
24. I have received no training on intercultural or multilingual communication.
25. I believe multilingual volunteers are more effective in diverse settings.
26. My volunteer work has made me more aware of linguistic diversity.

27. I believe volunteer service education should include language and identity reflection.
28. I feel more globally connected because of the languages I use in volunteering.

Section 5: Open-Ended Reflections (Optional)

29. Describe a situation where your language skills helped or hindered your volunteer work.
30. In your view, what role should language play in volunteer service education?

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