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Language and Identity in the Postcolonial Space: A Study of Bilingualism and “Self-Intersection”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Vietnamese-English bilinguals construct, perform, and negotiate their personal identity through language in both digital and everyday interactions. Adopting a qualitative methodology that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis with poststructuralist theory, linguistic ethnography, and the concept of symbolic competence, the research investigates bilingual practices such as code-switching, metalinguistic awareness, and cross-linguistic emotional expression. Findings indicate that bilingual speakers navigate multilayered forms of subjectivity, deploying language not only as a communicative resource but also as a tool for emotional modulation, performative identity work, and reflexive self-positioning. English, in particular, frequently serves as a psychological refuge, providing emotional distance, enabling nuanced affective articulation, and preserving discursive agency in contexts of vulnerability or ambivalence. These practices reveal the fluid and dynamic nature of bilingual identity, continually shaped by linguistic choice, cultural ideology, and shifting emotional registers. The study advances a view of bilingualism as an embodied, multidimensional process situated at the intersection of language, affect, and cultural meaning-making. Practical implications underscore the need for language education to adopt identity-responsive pedagogies—approaches that empower learners to engage with language not only as a technical skill but as a symbolic resource for self-expression, negotiation, and emotional resilience.

Keywords: Bilingualism; Identity Negotiation; Metalinguistic Awareness; Code-Switching; Emotional Expression; Psychological Refuge

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, language no longer functions solely as a medium for communication—it has become a vehicle for self-expression, a means of reconstructing memory, and a foundation for individuals to situate themselves within global cultural currents. In Vietnam, the forces of globalization and the growing prevalence of Vietnamese-English bilingualism are reshaping everyday linguistic practices while simultaneously raising profound questions about the relationship between language and identity. Bilingual speakers do not simply alternate between two languages; instead, they inhabit two semantic systems, two cultural frameworks, and, at times, two distinct states of being that do not fully align.

Within this lived bilingual reality, language becomes a multidimensional space for negotiating identity. Code-switching ceases to be a mere linguistic operation and emerges as a form of hybrid expression. Lexical choices are not only grammatical decisions but ontological ones. Expressions such as “*mình đang vibe quá*” (I’m really vibing right now), “*em hơi anxious*” (I’m feeling a bit anxious), or “*chill thôi anh ơi*” (Just chill, babe) are not superficial mimics of English; they are linguistic artifacts of cultural convergence, traceable to a “third linguistic space”—a fluid, in-between realm where the self is continuously shaped beyond monolingual norms.

While bilingualism has been extensively examined in global scholarship^[1], its affective and psycholinguistic dimensions remain underexplored in the Vietnamese context. As English becomes increasingly embedded in informal communication—on social media platforms, in private messaging, vlogs, and podcasts—how bilingual speakers use and experience their languages require closer scrutiny. This inquiry extends beyond questions of pedagogy and proficiency; it engages issues of internal hybridity, emotional articulation, and the evolving need for symbolic agency in an age of cultural intersection.

This study aims to investigate how Vietnamese speakers utilize Vietnamese-English bilingualism as a means of self-expression and identity negotiation in contemporary society. Through an analysis of personal discourse, digital interactions, and reflective narratives, the research aims to illuminate how the “hybrid linguistic space” facilitates the emergence of a flexible, multilayered self, one shaped by

cultural fluidity, emotional nuance, and discursive transformation.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Language and Identity: From Competence to Existence

Since the late 20th century, linguistic research has shifted from viewing language as a cognitive skill to understanding it as an existential and cultural medium for identity construction. Norton was among the first to argue that language learners are not merely acquiring communicative competence but actively repositioning themselves within fluid sociocultural landscapes^[2]. Language identity, from this perspective, is not fixed but is continually reshaped through interaction, discourse, and affective positioning.

This dynamic conception of identity aligns with Hall’s assertion that identity is “never complete, always in process,” where language functions simultaneously as a mirror and a medium of becoming^[3]. Pavlenko and Blackledge further argue that bilingual individuals inhabit a continuous space of “identity negotiation,” where languages intersect and interact to construct their sense of belonging^[4]. Language, in this framework, is not merely expressive—it is constitutive of the self.

2.1.2. Bilingualism and the Hybrid Space

In an era of accelerating globalization, bilingualism has become increasingly normalized. Grosjean’s concept of “language mode” posits that bilinguals operate within a dynamic communicative space, activating linguistic repertoires contextually^[1]. This enables fluid phenomena such as code-switching, lexical innovation, and syntactic blending, which reflect not only linguistic creativity but also emotional and cognitive complexity.

Poststructuralist theorist Bhabha introduced the notion of the “Third Space”—a liminal site where identity is no longer bound by essentialism but constantly negotiated through symbolic practice^[5]. García and Wei expand this through the concept of “translanguaging,” in which bilinguals deploy their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning grounded in embodied and affective experience^[6].

2.1.3. Bilingualism as Expression and the State of In-Betweenness

Contemporary research increasingly attends to the affective and existential condition of “in-betweenness,” often experienced by bilinguals. Anzaldúa refers to this state as a “borderland identity,” where individuals reside between cultural and linguistic frontiers^[7]. Butler’s theory of performativity offers a complementary lens, viewing identity not as essence but as a performative series of acts constituted through discourse^[8].

Canagarajah and Wei argue that bilingual code-switching and lexical hybridity are not solely pragmatic strategies, but affectively charged performances of identity^[9, 10]. Particularly in digital spaces, users “write themselves into being” through linguistic choices, enacting self-narratives that reflect shifting affiliations. Rampton’s concept of “crossing” describes this as a socially meaningful act of traversing linguistic boundaries to mark evolving roles and stances^[11].

2.1.4. Digital Multilingualism in Asian Contexts

Recent Asian scholarship reveals how bilingualism functions as a symbolic resource for digital self-expression. Dovchin demonstrated that Mongolian Facebook users incorporate English not as a foreign intrusion, but as a stylistic strategy for indexing cosmopolitanism and emotional control^[12]. Sultana documents “transglossic” practices among Bangladeshi youth, wherein language mixing constructs nuanced identities across cultural boundaries^[13]. Tanaka’s study of Japanese Instagram users demonstrates how English is used to perform aspirational, globally oriented personas shaped by prestige ideologies^[14]. Lee offers a broader framework, emphasizing how online multilingualism is not simply reflective but constitutive of symbolic selfhood^[15].

2.1.5. Research Gaps in the Vietnamese Context

Despite rich theoretical developments globally, Vietnamese bilingualism remains under-theorized, especially in its affective, symbolic, and psychosocial dimensions. Much local research centers on formal education or translation studies, with limited attention to bilingualism as a lived, emotional, and reflexive experience. This neglect is particularly problematic given the increasing use of English in informal

domains, such as social media, podcasts, and messaging platforms.

Vietnam’s linguistic history—from Sino-Nôm and French to English—complicates present-day bilingual practices. These are not merely symptoms of globalization but extensions of a long history of cultural negotiation. As Kramsch argues, language carries symbolic power—it mediates memory, identity, and projected futures^[16]. Accordingly, this study reframes bilingualism in Vietnam as a process of “self-narration,” in which speakers construct the self by migrating between expressive and affective linguistic codes.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three major theoretical approaches: Third Space Theory^[5], the Performativity of Identity^[8], and Critical Discourse Analysis^[17, 18]. Together, these frameworks construct a multidimensional analytical lens that allows bilingualism to be examined not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as a deeply cultural, ontological, and affective practice. Additional insights are drawn from Kramsch^[16] and Weedon^[19], who highlight the pivotal role of language in shaping an individual’s sense of self and social positioning.

2.2.1. The Third Space: From Cultural Intersection to Identity Creation

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha conceptualizes the “Third Space” as a transformative site for rethinking identity within conditions of cultural hybridity^[5]. For Bhabha, identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic outcome of intersection, displacement, and dialogue between competing linguistic and cultural regimes. The Third Space thus becomes a zone of negotiation, where rigid boundaries dissolve and hybrid subjectivities emerge—simultaneously embedded in and divergent from multiple cultural domains.

In this study, the Third Space is understood as an intermediary zone actively constructed by Vietnamese-English bilingual speakers through their everyday linguistic practices. Acts such as code-switching, syntactic borrowing, and deliberately ambiguous discourse are not linguistic deficiencies but symbolic gestures of identity construction under hybrid conditions. This space allows individuals to resist fixed identity categories and to articulate new, fluid, and creative forms

of subjectivity. As García and Wei argue through the notion of translanguaging^[6], the bilingual speaker's ability to move fluidly across linguistic boundaries constitutes an act of identity agency, enabling subjectivity to emerge precisely through linguistic multiplicity.

2.2.2. Performativity of Identity: Language as Expressive Practice

Judith Butler's theory of performativity redefines identity not as an inherent attribute but as something constituted through repeated social and discursive acts^[8]. In this framework, individuals "perform" identity through language, gesture, and social positioning in relation to others. Language, then, is not merely a medium of communication—it is the very stage on which subjectivity is enacted, contested, and recognized.

For bilingual individuals, each instance of language choice, code-switching, or stylistic blending becomes a performative act of identity. Consider, for instance, a social media post such as "*Hôm nay em feel overwhelmed, nhưng cũng kinda proud of myself*"—a syntactically hybrid expression that fuses Vietnamese and English to convey emotion and self-reflection. This is more than bilingual code-mixing; it is the performance of a hybrid selfhood in which affect, language, and culture interweave. Wei refers to this phenomenon as *pragmatic creativity*—a context-sensitive, intentional deployment of linguistic resources to express complex subject positions^[19]. From this perspective, bilingual discourse is not a deviation from linguistic norms but a deliberate, embodied act of subject formation in response to evolving communicative contexts.

2.2.3. Language as a Form of Existence

Discourse analysis, as conceptualized by Fairclough and further developed by Pennycook, asserts that language is inherently ideological—it encodes and reproduces relations of power, knowledge, and identity^[17]. Although traditionally applied to political or institutional discourse, this study employs discourse analysis to investigate bilingual language use as a site of affective and narrative self-expression. Within this framework, language is not merely a representational tool but a lived, ontological space where subjectivity is performed and negotiated.

In digitally mediated bilingual environments—particularly on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Insta-

gram—language serves as a dynamic medium through which individuals construct and project multifaceted identities. Practices such as code-switching, lexical borrowing, and syntactic hybridity function as deliberate rhetorical strategies of self-presentation. These are not linguistic anomalies, but rather expressive acts through which speakers negotiate their belonging, affect, and cultural position. Pennycook emphasizes that in "non-normative" or informal digital contexts, speakers are especially empowered to manipulate language in inventive, resistant, and emotionally charged ways^[20]. This discursive flexibility reinforces the notion that identity in bilingual settings is not fixed but emergent, context-dependent, and semiotically layered.

Together, these three theoretical trajectories—Third Space Theory, Performativity, and discourse analysis—reposition bilingualism not as a problem of interference or mere translation, but as an ontological and cultural condition. Language is thus not simply a vehicle of communication; it is the very terrain upon which identity is imagined, enacted, and continually reshaped in everyday life.

3. Research Methodology and Data

3.1. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, integrating discourse analysis within post-structuralist and psycholinguistic frameworks. Rather than quantifying bilingual language use, the study focuses on interpreting linguistic behavior as a mode of identity performance, affective expression, and ontological enactment. In this perspective, language is not treated as a neutral medium of communication, but rather as a cultural, expressive, and existential act^[8, 21].

Two core analytical strategies are employed:

(1) Qualitative content analysis of social media discourse:

Data were drawn from platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, with particular attention to posts that feature autobiographical reflection, code-switching, and affective lexical borrowings. The objective is to explore how bilingual users deploy hybrid language practices to articulate emotion, construct self-image, and calibrate interpersonal tone in digi-

tally mediated contexts.

(2) Interpretive discourse analysis of reflective writings and semi-structured interviews:

The second dataset consists of reflective essays and transcribed interviews, examined through an interpretive discourse-analytic lens. Unlike critical discourse analysis, which foregrounds macro-structural power dynamics, this method focuses on how individuals construct meaning through lexical choices, syntactic patterns, metaphorical framing, and tonal registers. It highlights how bilingual speakers perform identity by fluidly negotiating linguistic boundaries in contextually situated discourse.

3.2. Research Data

This study draws on three primary sources of qualitative data: semi-structured interviews, social media content, and reflective writing. Each source offers a distinct yet complementary lens through which to examine the lived experiences of Vietnamese-English bilingual speakers and the discursive construction of their identities.

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The first dataset comprises in-depth interviews conducted with 12 to 15 Vietnamese-English bilinguals aged between 18 and 35. Participants were purposively selected based on their academic or professional engagement in English-dominant environments and their regular use of code-switching in interpersonal communication. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of bilingual identity, emotional modulation through language use, and the affective significance of lexical choices in highly personal contexts. All interviews were conducted by institutional ethical protocols, including informed consent and strict confidentiality procedures^[22].

3.2.2. Social Media Content Analysis

The second dataset consists of digital content collected from Facebook posts, Instagram captions, TikTok stories, and blog entries authored by bilingual users. Selection criteria emphasized introspective and emotionally expressive content, particularly those containing code-switching, metaphorical language, and stylistic hybridity. The analysis focuses on how bilingual individuals use hybrid language practices

to perform emotion, shape self-representation, and negotiate communicative stance in public digital spaces. This aligns with Butler's theory of performativity, which conceptualizes identity as enacted through repeated discursive practices [8], and Pennycook's view of language as a situated, creative social act^[20].

3.2.3. Reflective Writing

The third data source comprises short reflective essays (500–700 words) voluntarily submitted by 75 participants. Each essay explores the theme of “living between two languages,” providing rich autobiographical accounts of bilingual identity formation. These texts were analyzed for metaphorical expressions, hybrid syntactic structures, and stylistic variation. The findings reveal that bilingualism is not merely a functional communicative ability, but a symbolic and affective condition—deeply entangled with the speaker's sense of self and emotional positioning^[20, 21].

4. Results

4.1. The State of “In-Betweenness” and the Construction of the Third Space

A defining feature of the Vietnamese-English bilingual experience is the condition of *in-betweenness*—a state in which speakers feel suspended between two linguistic and cultural systems, fully belonging to neither. This existential tension is most clearly manifested through code-switching and hybridized expressions, where lexical choices are not merely functional but index evolving, multifaceted identities. As Bhabha contends, such experiences give rise to what he terms the *Third Space*—a site of negotiation, ambiguity, and hybridity, where identity is continuously reconstructed rather than pre-given^[5].

This dynamic is poignantly illustrated in the reflective writing of H.N., 24, a Vietnamese media graduate from Singapore, currently residing in Ho Chi Minh City. In her January 2025 reflection, she describes the emotional complexities of bilingual self-expression:

“There are times I don't know which word to use. Like when I'm really stressed—I want to express it, but Vietnamese doesn't sound quite right, and English somehow dulls the emotion.

It's like... being lost between two streams—not that I don't have words, but that no language fully holds me."

This testimony exemplifies a form of linguistic dislocation in which the speaker experiences language not as a stable medium of self-representation, but as a fractured terrain. H.N.'s inability to find the "right" word is not a symptom of lexical deficiency, but rather a manifestation of affective misalignment, where neither language can fully articulate her emotional state. As Canagarajah argues, such fragmentation should not be interpreted as communicative breakdown, but as a form of *translingual negotiation*—a strategic reworking of expressive resources across linguistic boundaries [9].

The affective tension H.N. describes points to a deeper ontological condition within the Third Space. It is not a site of harmonious synthesis, but of creative rupture—where subjectivity emerges precisely through instability. In this liminal zone, the bilingual speaker is compelled to refigure language itself in order to make space for emotional truth. Identity, in this context, is not performed through linguistic mastery, but through an ongoing, unsettled process of semiotic improvisation.

This phenomenon becomes even more apparent on social media platforms. In February 2025, L., a 22-year-old final-year communications student based in Hanoi, posted the following Facebook status:

"Cuối tuần này em super overwhelmed, định unplug but then... life keeps calling. Không biết nên 'be productive' hay just cry it out."

(This weekend I'm super overwhelmed. I was planning to unplug, but then... life keeps calling. Not sure if I should be productive or just cry it out.)

This excerpt exemplifies a deliberate hybrid structure, where Vietnamese provides the grammatical base, while English is selectively integrated to convey emotional intensity and stylistic nuance. The act of code-switching here is not casual nor ornamental—it reflects a complex linguistic subjectivity in which each language is mobilized for affective precision. Lexical items such as "*overwhelmed*," "*unplug*," and "*be productive*" resist direct translation into Vietnamese without losing their emotional immediacy and cultural res-

onance. As Kramsch notes, these insertions function not merely as lexical borrowings but as symbolic acts—strategies through which speakers "carve out subjective spaces" in the transnational linguistic landscape^[16].

From Bhabha's theoretical standpoint, such hybrid utterances are not indicative of deficiency or inconsistency. Instead, they represent a productive tension within the *Third Space*—a site where identity is not expressed through linguistic purity, but constructed through negotiation and fragmentation^[5]. In this space, language ceases to be a stable communicative code. It becomes instead a creative, agentive tool for articulating a self that is multiple, affectively layered, and continually in flux.

Anzaldúa's notion of *borderland identity* further contextualizes this condition as more than a linguistic challenge. It embodies a postmodern subjectivity marked by contradiction, transition, and hybridity^[7]. The bilingual *Third Space* is not simply a zone of translation; it is a terrain of invention, where language must be actively reconfigured to accommodate the emotional and ontological realities of living between worlds.

Thus, *in-betweenness* should not be reduced to a linguistic phenomenon; it is a key conceptual lens through which postmodern identity can be understood. The bilingual subject does not merely operate between two codes, but creates an emergent idiom—an expressive repertoire shaped by emotional necessity, cultural fluidity, and symbolic reterritorialization.

4.2. Language as a Stage for Performing the Self

In contemporary society, where individuals operate simultaneously as communicators and curators of their own identities, language functions as the principal stage upon which the self is performed. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, identity is not a stable or inherent attribute, but an ongoing enactment—brought into being through the repetition of socially situated discursive acts^[8]. For bilingual speakers, the act of choosing a language—what is said in Vietnamese and what is expressed in English—is not arbitrary. Instead, it reflects intentional identity work. Each moment of code-switching does not merely signal a change in linguistic code but marks a shift in subject position, emotional stance, or social role.

Goffman's dramaturgical model of self-presentation further elucidates this process by conceptualizing social interaction as performance, wherein individuals adopt varying roles depending on audience and context^[23]. Within this theatrical metaphor, language becomes a tool of staging—directing the tone, posture, and symbolic alignment of the speaker with each shift in linguistic repertoire. Bilingualism, in this light, is not simply a communicative capacity but a dramaturgical resource.

A vivid illustration of this dynamic comes from T.T., a 22-year-old marketing student from Ho Chi Minh City, who frequently alternates between Vietnamese and English in everyday contexts. In a reflection from February 2025, she remarked:

"Sometimes I speak Vietnamese to sound 'genuine,' to soften my tone. But when I need to be more 'sharp' or 'cool,' English does the job better. I feel like... a different version of myself depending on the language I use."

This reflection articulates the affective specificity of language choice. Vietnamese emerges as a medium for emotional sincerity and interpersonal connection, while English is used to project confidence, detachment, or cultural modernity. Language, in this instance, becomes both a mirror that reflects inner states and a mask that enables strategic self-fashioning.

As Pennycook argues, bilingual expression is inherently performative, enabling speakers to construct affective alignments, navigate social hierarchies, and project nuanced identities across varying contexts^[24]. Each linguistic shift can be understood as a directorial act in the staging of the self, where the bilingual subject simultaneously inhabits the roles of author, actor, and audience in the unfolding drama of identity.

On social media platforms, the performative nature of bilingual identity becomes especially salient due to the self-curated, public-facing logic of digital expression. In January 2025, N.T.L., a 21-year-old fashion design student based in Hanoi, posted an Instagram story articulating her affective and stylistic identity through bilingual phrasing:

"Mood for the week: productivity + lowkey self-sabotage. Nhưng overall thì vẫn là kiểu 'em chill theo style burnt out'."

(Mood for the week: productivity + lowkey self-sabotage. But overall, it's still kinda like 'I'm chillin' in a burnt-out kinda way.'")

This is not a casual blend of languages, but a calculated act of discursive self-styling. Through the layering of English and Vietnamese, the speaker constructs a persona that is both self-aware and affectively distanced, transforming emotional fatigue into a stylized, almost aestheticized expression of identity. The code-switching is not indicative of linguistic deficiency; rather, it reflects a semiotic strategy—one that communicates mood, stance, and self-positioning within contemporary youth culture.

This performance exemplifies Butler's theory of iterative identity, wherein subjectivity emerges through the stylized repetition of gestures, tones, and discursive forms shaped by social context^[25]. Simultaneously, it reflects Bourdieu's notion of habitus—the internalized dispositions and communicative reflexes structured by one's position within the social field^[26]. Here, language choice is not simply about clarity or comprehension; it is about indexing affect, cultural fluency, and emotional stance.

In such bilingual articulations, Vietnamese often carries intimacy and vulnerability, while English provides tonal detachment, irony, or performative control. The speaker becomes a linguistic choreographer, orchestrating how they are perceived across different emotional registers and semiotic frames.

Ultimately, bilingualism in the digital age is not merely a communicative tool—it is a platform for the expression of performative subjectivity. Each shift in code, register, or lexical tone becomes a move in the dramaturgy of self-construction. Language, in this sense, is no longer a transparent conduit for thought; it is a textured stage for identity, where the self is both represented and reinvented in real time.

4.3. Bilingualism and Inner Expression: The Language of Complex Emotion

When emotion transcends the boundaries of logic, language no longer functions merely as a descriptive tool—it becomes a refuge, or even an escape, for that which cannot be directly named. For bilingual speakers, the choice of language in emotional expression is not a technical decision but a deeply psychological act: an external manifestation of an internal, often ambiguous, state of being. Frequently,

speakers opt to use English as a “safe space” to articulate vulnerability, fear, or confusion, precisely because the relative unfamiliarity of the second language offers emotional distance. As Dewaele notes, bilinguals often report experiencing different emotional intensities depending on the language used, with the second language providing what Pavlenko calls a “buffering function”^[27].

In January 2025, V.N., a 26-year-old professional in Hà Nội who had studied in Australia for four years, shared:

“I couldn’t write ‘mình buồn’ in Vietnamese. It felt... too real, too heavy. But if I write ‘I’m a little off these days,’ it somehow feels... less suffocating. Not because English is better, but because it’s like there’s a glass shield between me and the feeling.”

V.N.’s account does not suggest emotional Westernization, but rather a form of *affective migration*—a strategic shift into the second language as a form of emotional self-preservation. In psycholinguistic terms, this is known as *affective distancing*: the emotional buffer created when the expressive language is cognitively distinct from the speaker’s “emotional mother tongue.” Within this buffer zone, the second language becomes what Koven calls a “symbolic environment,” allowing emotion to be reframed or softened without triggering the deeper cultural resonances of the first language^[28].

Similarly, in February 2025, Quang Nam, a 22-year-old sociology student at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, wrote in his reflection:

“Sometimes I don’t know what I’m feeling. It’s like a fog, và mình không thể chạm vào nó bằng tiếng Việt. But in English, I can say: ‘I’m numb.’ And that word... it just fits.”

This statement is not a simple translation—it is a purposeful act of *word-finding*, a search for linguistic form to name an otherwise ungraspable affective state. When the speaker says “numb” fits, they are engaging in what Lakoff and Johnson term *experiential metaphoricality*: the process through which abstract emotions are understood and shaped via metaphor^[29]. In this way, English is not just a language but a perceptual lens—one that makes emotion visible and, in doing so, more manageable.

Language choice is also shaped by social and discursive

context. On social media platforms, particularly in emotionally sensitive or stigmatized situations, bilingual speakers often shift to English to shield their expression from local scrutiny. One anonymous Facebook post, shared by a 20-year-old university student during exam season (January 15, 2025), reads:

“No one knows how loud it gets inside my head. Em vẫn cười ngoài mặt, nhưng trong lòng thì... không còn gì rõ ràng.”

(No one knows how loud it gets inside my head. I still smile on the outside, but on the inside... nothing feels clear anymore.)

This instance exemplifies a dual-layered emotional strategy. English is used for direct emotional articulation, while Vietnamese trails as a soft, evocative fragment. This arrangement creates what might be termed a “soft rupture”: a subtle linguistic break that reveals emotion while simultaneously preserving the speaker’s psychological integrity. Here, language becomes not only a communicative tool but a protective veil. As Rampton argues, crossing between languages can serve powerful identity and affective functions, especially in socially complex or emotionally fraught contexts^[30].

In sum, bilingual expression does more than facilitate communication—it offers a semiotic architecture for emotional regulation. Speakers do not merely find words to speak; they choose languages to survive. In the liminal space between tongues, a new emotional identity is forged—one that is at once expressive, strategic, and deeply human.

4.4. Bilingualism and Metalinguistic Awareness

One of the most salient cognitive capacities of bilingual speakers is their ability to “see themselves through language”—a form of metalinguistic awareness in which individuals not only produce language but also reflect on, regulate, and reframe their linguistic behavior. In the Vietnamese–English bilingual context, this awareness often surfaces in moments of hesitation, deliberate lexical selection, or when speakers articulate why a particular expression “feels more authentic” or “fits better” in one language over the other. Vygotsky argued that it is precisely through the interplay of multiple linguistic systems that thought becomes exter-

nalized and subject to reflection, thereby fostering deeper self-awareness^[31].

As Q.T., a 23-year-old final-year communication student in Ho Chi Minh City, shared during a semi-structured interview conducted in February 2025:

“Sometimes I speak in Vietnamese, but in my head I’m thinking: ‘Wait, this sounds more emotionally right in English.’ It’s like having two filters, and I choose depending on how I want to hear myself.”

In this instance, Q.T. is not merely a speaker but an *affective editor*—someone who assesses the emotional tone of language before utterance. This self-monitoring exemplifies what Busch terms *linguistic awareness as identity work*: language choice becomes both an expressive act and a form of self-positioning within a multilingual landscape^[32].

From a psycholinguistic perspective, Dewaele suggests that bilinguals tend to develop heightened metalinguistic sensitivity, especially when navigating emotionally nuanced or socially complex interactions^[27]. These speakers are aware not only of *what* they say, but of *how* their linguistic choices affect interpersonal dynamics and self-perception. Rampton captures a similar phenomenon in his concept of *crossing*, in which shifts in language use reflect subtle reorientations in identity, affect, and social stance—even when these are not explicitly articulated^[30].

This capacity for internal linguistic calibration is vividly illustrated in data from semi-structured interviews and reflective writings collected in early 2025. Lan H., 21, an International Relations major at a university in Hanoi, shared the following:

“I don’t know how to name this feeling in Vietnamese. But in English, there’s the word ‘numb’—and it captures what I mean.”

“I switched to English just to sound less vulnerable. Saying it in Vietnamese would’ve made me feel too exposed.”

These reflections reveal a form of existential reflexivity—a layered process in which the speaker not only communicates but also evaluates, mediates, and narrates the emotional self through language. As Bakhtin observed, language is inherently dialogic—not only directed toward others but

also shaped by inner dialogue with the self^[33]. In this context, language functions not as a linear conduit of meaning but as a folded mirror—simultaneously reflecting and producing the subject.

Kramsch conceptualizes this as *symbolic competence*—the ability to use language not only grammatically but semiotically, in ways that respond to affective nuance, social position, and self-construction^[16]. Koven similarly argues that bilinguals often inhabit distinct subjectivities in each language, as each linguistic system carries with it a unique emotional and cultural logic^[28]. Thus, the bilingual individual does not simply toggle between two linguistic codes but actively navigates two semiotic terrains, two emotional cadences, and two interwoven identity narratives—constructing a voice that belongs wholly to neither language, but instead emerges from their dynamic interplay.

Tomasello reinforces this perspective, arguing that language is a primary tool for self-reflection and the development of social cognition^[34]. In bilingual contexts, this tool becomes more flexible, layered, and responsive. Metalinguistic awareness, therefore, is not a by-product of bilingualism—it is a constitutive mechanism for constructing an adaptive, fluid self in shifting cultural environments.

In sum, metalinguistic awareness highlights the bilingual speaker’s agency not only in language use but in self-formation. It involves more than “knowing about language”; it is the capacity to *read the self through language*—a recursive act of linguistic introspection in which the speaker continuously edits, repositions, and redefines the self with every utterance.

4.5. The Second Language as a Psychological Refuge

For many bilingual speakers, the second language—particularly English within the Vietnamese context—functions not only as a communicative medium, but also as a psychological refuge: a symbolic space through which unnameable emotions, ambivalent inner states, or painful memories can be processed, reframed, or safely held at a distance. This phenomenon extends beyond linguistic preference; it operates as a form of affective self-regulation, activated within the emotional and cultural in-between of bilingual existence.

Thảo N., 22, a psychology student at a university in

Ho Chi Minh City, offered a poignant reflection during a semi-structured interview in February 2025:

“When I write in Vietnamese, every word feels too close. But when I use English, it’s like putting my emotions on another level—I can see them, but I don’t get drawn in.”

In this moment, English operates not as a more precise or expressive code, but as an emotional buffer. The speaker creates symbolic distance from raw affect, allowing emotional content to be observed without becoming overwhelming. Pavlenko conceptualizes this process as *emotional detachment through L2*, where the second language serves both expressive and protective functions, enabling speakers to articulate distress while maintaining psychological control^[35].

Julia Kristeva, in her theory of abjection, notes that during moments of psychic pain or internal fragmentation, individuals instinctively resist what is “too real, too close” by substituting it with symbolic forms^[36]. The second language, stripped of early familial memories and intimate emotional resonance, becomes such a form—a neutralized symbolic medium through which pain is rendered more abstract, more narratable, and thus more manageable.

Reflective data further support this emotional function. Linh T., 25, a communications graduate who studied in Canada and currently works in Da Nang, wrote in February 2025:

“There are days when I talk to myself only in English—not because I’ve forgotten Vietnamese, but because I’m too tired to feel in Vietnamese.”

This statement reveals a subtle yet powerful reality: each language carries its emotional gravity. For many bilinguals, language choice is not a matter of linguistic fluency, but of affective load. As Dewaele observes, emotional intensity varies across languages depending on early exposure, emotional conditioning, and sociolinguistic environments^[27]. In situations of emotional fatigue, L1 (the mother tongue) may become too saturated, too close to past wounds, cultural expectations, or unresolved tensions. In contrast, L2 (the second language) offers a cooler emotional climate, within which the speaker may retreat, recalibrate,

or repair.

Research in language embodiment affirms this dynamic. Pavlenko and Caldwell-Harris argue that L1 tends to be emotionally charged due to its connection to childhood, intimacy, and early-life trauma. At the same time, L2 is often acquired in structured, emotionally neutral contexts, such as school or work^[37, 38]. This “affective coolness” enables bilingual speakers to use their second language not only to express emotion, but also to regulate its impact, effectively transforming L2 into a psychological shield.

In such contexts, language becomes more than a tool—it becomes a symbolic architecture for survival. Kramsch describes this as the *symbolic function of language*: a capacity through which language enables speakers not simply to convey experience, but to shape and survive it^[16]. Within bilingual realities, this shaping process takes on a distinct affective dimension. When the mother tongue feels too emotionally immediate, the second language becomes a silken veil—a gentle, protective medium through which the self can speak without breaking.

Ultimately, English is not chosen because it is more precise or expressive. However, because it is more bearable—light enough to carry pain without collapse, distanced enough to hold vulnerability without exposure. It becomes a strategic mask, one worn not to conceal the self, but to preserve it. Through the second language, the speaker can endure, reconfigure, and continue—linguistically and emotionally (**Table 1**).

Collectively, these dimensions reveal that bilingual identity is not a fixed construct, but rather a fluid, continuously evolving process shaped through discursive interactions, internal negotiations, and affective calibrations. Each linguistic act functions as a semiotic trace of the speaker’s emotional positioning, cultural alignment, and performative stance.

Rather than switching between two discrete linguistic systems, bilingual individuals inhabit a transitional, interstitial space in which language becomes a site of both expression and concealment, of distance and intimacy. Through this dynamic, bilingualism emerges not merely as a communicative competence but as a lived epistemology of identity—a recursive act of becoming that refracts cultural experience through symbolic form.

Table 1. Summary of identity expressions in the Vietnamese–English bilingual space.

Section	Empirical Expression	Linguistic Strategy and Relevant Theoretical Framework
4.1. The “In-Between” State	A sense of not fully belonging to either language	Emotion-driven code-switching; syntactic blending Bhabha (1994) – Third Space ^[5]
4.2. Language as a Stage for the Self	Shifts in self-image when switching between languages	Role-based code-switching shaped by social context Butler (1990) – Performativity ^[8]
4.3. Bilingualism and Emotional Expression	Using different languages to express complex or ambiguous emotions	Deploying English for affective nuance not easily articulated in Vietnamese Dewaele (2010) ^[27] ; Koven (2007) ^[28]
4.4. Metalinguistic Awareness	Monitoring and regulating expressive behavior during speech	Lexical precision; intentional syntax manipulation Busch (2012) ^[33] ; Kramsch (2009) ^[16] ; Vygotsky (1986) ^[32]
4.5. L2 as Psychological Refuge	Turning to English to manage emotionally intense or overwhelming content	Shifting to L2 to create emotional distance and preserve the self Pavlenko (2006) ^[31] ; Kristeva (1982) ^[36] ; Kramsch (2009) ^[16]

5. Discussion

The findings across the five analytical dimensions reveal that, within Vietnamese-English bilingual practice, language no longer operates as a static conduit of meaning but emerges as a dynamic site of identity construction. The bilingual speaker is simultaneously a user, performer, and observer of their linguistic behavior. Each analytical section delineates a distinct facet of identity negotiation—from liminality and performance to emotional navigation and reflexive self-monitoring—underscoring the view that bilingualism is not the sum of two linguistic systems, but a fluid, ontological process shaped by affect, agency, and social context.

5.1. From “In-Between” to “Within”: Constructing Identity in a Transmodal Space

Section 4.1 foregrounds the concept of *in-betweenness* as a lived experience among bilinguals who navigate the tension of not being fully anchored in either Vietnamese or English. As Bhabha articulates in his notion of the “Third Space,” this in-between zone is not a deficit but a generative terrain where identity is constantly negotiated and reconfigured^[5]. Here, language functions as both boundary and bridge, enabling bilinguals to mediate cultural frameworks and affective states through symbolic improvisation.

This transitional mode extends into Section 4.2, which illustrates how language becomes a performative stage.

Drawing from Butler’s theory of performativity, identity is seen not as an essence but as a series of enacted positions shaped through discourse and context^[8]. In bilingual contexts, switching languages is not simply pragmatic but expressive—it signals a shift in tone, stance, and even perceived selfhood. Especially in digital spaces, bilingual speakers consciously curate their linguistic personas, selecting language forms that best align with emotional tone or social audience.

5.2. Language as Affective Body: From Self-Narration to Self-Healing

In Section 4.3, bilingual language use is further reframed as an *affective instrument*. For many Vietnamese speakers, English provides a lexical and emotional buffer allowing them to articulate complex or ambiguous feelings with greater control. Phrases such as “I’m numb” or “I feel off” carry emotional registers that are simultaneously expressive and distanced. As Dewaele notes, the second language often provides emotional shielding, offering speakers a way to disclose affective states without being overwhelmed by them^[27].

Section 4.4 builds on this by highlighting metalinguistic awareness as a central faculty of bilingual self-construction. Bilinguals are not only using language but also observing how they use it—modulating tone, adjusting syntax, and selecting vocabulary based on their anticipated effect. This capacity aligns with Busch’s view of language as *identity work*^[32] and Kramsch’s concept of *symbolic compe-*

tence—the ability to strategically deploy language in ways that reflect social positioning and emotional resonance^[16]. In this sense, language becomes a tool of both reflection and revision.

5.3. Symbolic Refuge: The Second Language as a Strategy for Self-Preservation

Section 4.5 examines how English may function as a psychological refuge—a symbolic space where emotional burdens can be temporarily displaced or reframed. In moments of vulnerability, many bilingual speakers opt for English not out of preference, but necessity. Kristeva’s theory of abjection offers insight into this dynamic: when emotional experience threatens to become overwhelming, the individual may turn to an abstract or “less intimate” code to process what feels unbearable^[36]. Pavlenko similarly describes this as a strategy of symbolic distancing, in which L2 is not simply expressive, but protective^[35].

This mechanism of modulation does not signify emotional repression but rather a nuanced strategy of self-regulation. Language here is not a transparent medium but a semiotic architecture—constructed to balance clarity with concealment, proximity with distance. In such cases, English is less about global prestige and more about emotional manageability. As Kramsch argues, bilingualism entails the symbolic use of language to navigate, not just express, the self^[16].

Viewed holistically, the five analytical strands converge on a central insight: bilingualism is not a mechanical alternation between codes, but a lived epistemology of identity. It is an ongoing process of becoming—mediated by affect, shaped through discourse, and marked by strategic linguistic choices. Vietnamese–English bilinguals do not simply inhabit two linguistic worlds; they construct a third, personalized space in which language, culture, and subjectivity are continuously realigned.

5.4. Bilingualism as Ontological Phenomenon: A Balanced View of Agency and Structure

Vietnamese–English bilingualism does not merely reflect linguistic proficiency but signals a complex mode of being, one shaped through emotional memory, sociocultural constraints, and discursive negotiation. Rather than positioning bilingual speakers as fully autonomous agents, this study

advances a more nuanced view: they are semi-agentive individuals, whose language choices are simultaneously strategic and situated within existing structures of power, affect, and ideology.

Bilinguals navigate a symbolic terrain that is neither neutral nor unbounded. Their linguistic expressions are often mediated by social expectations, shaped by affective needs, and conditioned by the discursive frameworks of education, family, and digital interaction. Within this context, language functions not merely as a conduit for communication but as a mechanism of identity regulation and self-fashioning. It both enables and constrains—the very act of speaking is always already implicated in broader networks of meaning and control.

Crucially, this perspective reframes bilingualism not as a technical skill or additive competence, but as an ontological condition—a space in which the subject is constantly negotiating their presence through language. Each utterance thus becomes a double act: an assertion of agency and a response to structure. The speaker is both author and product of discourse, navigating a linguistic environment in which freedom and constraint are dialectically intertwined.

This approach resonates with post-structuralist views of subjectivity, particularly those proposed by Butler^[8] and Weedon^[19], where identity is conceived not as fixed essence but as discursively constructed, contextually performed, and constantly in flux. Within such a paradigm, bilingualism becomes a lived epistemology—a recursive process of self-making in which language is not only a tool of expression, but also a terrain of existential articulation.

In sum, bilingual individuals are not merely choosing between Vietnamese and English. They are continually reshaping themselves through acts of expression that straddle languages, emotional registers, and cultural ideologies. Bilingualism, in this view, is not just a linguistic state, but an ontological practice of becoming—marked by reflexivity, negotiation, and the persistent balancing of inner voice and social demand.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1. Conclusion – Bilingualism as a Lived Epistemology of Becoming

In an era shaped by transnational mobility and digital

connectivity, identity no longer follows a linear path from cultural origin to assimilation. Instead, it unfolds as a dynamic process of affective negotiation, memory reconstruction, and symbolic reinvention. Within this fluid terrain, Vietnamese-English bilingualism transcends its communicative function and becomes an ontological and symbolic space of becoming. Bilingual individuals do not merely alternate between two language systems—they inhabit, traverse, and actively reshape two intertwined semiotic worlds, each carrying distinct emotional cadences and narrative possibilities.

This study has demonstrated that bilingualism operates as a multi-layered architecture of selfhood. Practices such as code-switching, syntactic blending, and lexical borrowing are not signs of linguistic inadequacy but symbolic strategies for constructing coherence within fragmented expressive conditions. Drawing on the framework of translanguaging, bilingual speakers deploy their full linguistic repertoires as tools for identity negotiation, emotional calibration, and discursive presence^[10].

Theoretical frameworks such as Bhabha's "Third Space"^[5], Butler's performativity^[8], Kristeva's abjection^[36], and Kramsch's symbolic competence^[16] emphasize that bilingualism is not a binary linguistic structure, but a semiotic ecology—a lived space where language becomes embodied, affect-laden, and ideologically textured^[31]. Each switch between Vietnamese and English represents more than code-shifting; it signals a movement between emotional proximity and distance, personal memory and reinvention, visibility and self-protection^[28, 39].

In this view, language functions not only as a medium for communication but as a scaffolding for emotional survival and cognitive self-construction. Different languages activate different selves, not by substitution but through the creative layering of experience, position, and voice. Bilingualism thus emerges as a lived epistemology—a way of knowing, feeling, and narrating the self through symbolic multiplicity.

This conclusion, therefore, is not an endpoint but an invitation to approach bilingualism not merely as a linguistic competency, but as a dynamic site of subjectivity, where identity is continually performed, negotiated, and reimagined.

6.2. Recommendation – Toward Critical Pedagogies and Inclusive Methodologies

To extend both the theoretical and practical implications of this research, three strategic directions are proposed:

(1) Reframing Language Education as Identity Formation

In contemporary Vietnam, English has evolved beyond a utilitarian skill to become a symbolic resource for articulating identity, emotion, and social positioning. Accordingly, language education—especially at the tertiary and professional levels—should shift from error-focused paradigms toward identity-centered pedagogies. Integrating reflective writing, hybrid text production, and affective discourse analysis enables learners to inhabit the language, rather than merely mastering it.

Curricula should incorporate themes such as gender, memory, belonging, and marginality. These themes promote cognitive-affective agility, enabling students to develop not only linguistic competence but also self-reflexivity, thereby fostering their ability to engage with language as a tool for constructing subjectivity.

(2) Broadening Research across Generations and Communities

While this study focused on urban Gen Z speakers, the lived experience of bilingualism extends far beyond this demographic. Future research should explore diasporic Vietnamese communities, late bilinguals, transnational migrants, and marginalized speakers, including those with neurodiverse profiles, LGBTQ+ identities, or migratory precarity. These perspectives reveal complex intersections between language, power, trauma, and survival.

Cross-generational and cross-cultural investigations are also essential for capturing the temporal evolution of bilingual identity. Such research would deepen our understanding of how bilingual selves are shaped not only by present contexts but also by historical memory, affective residues, and shifting cultural scripts.

(3) Advancing Interdisciplinary and Reflexive Methodologies

To fully capture the emotional, symbolic, and performative dimensions of bilingual identity, scholars should adopt interdisciplinary methods that bridge linguistics, affect theory, discourse analysis, and phenomenology. Reflexive tools such as language diaries, narrative interviews, visual ethnography, and autobiographical writing offer a more embodied

and agentive view of bilingual speakers as narrators of their own linguistic lives.

The works of Busch^[33], Koven^[28], and Wei^[10] offer valuable methodological models that can be localized and extended within the Vietnamese context, where bilingualism increasingly reflects not only globalization but also emotio and symbolic negotiation in everyday life.

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Data Availability Statement

The data is not available due to privacy restrictions.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest.

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