



# Bilingualism's Influence on Individual's Cultural Perceptions

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## *Abstract*

This study aims to investigate the link between bilingualism, identity development, and language development is examined in this research study. It underlines the contrast between bilingualism and language acquisition and defines bilingualism as the usage of two languages within a linguistic community. The investigation of early and late bilingualism looks at how culture affects bilingualism. Additionally, it explores the idea of identity, taking linguistic and cultural ties into account. The study uses a case study design and a qualitative methodology with bilingual subjects. To collect data on language origins and cultural impressions, surveys and interviews are used. The study focuses on language development, responsibilities in the household and at school, and the cultural and linguistic identities of the participants. The purpose of the study is to comprehend how culture affects identity development, language learning, and bilingualism. In general, it advances knowledge of the complexity of bilingualism and its effects on both persons and societies.

*Keywords:* bilingualism, cultural perception, individual, identity development, language development.

## 1. Introduction

Talking about bilinguals, we use to relate the image of this person just to the linguistic features that are a person who is able of developing in two languages. Is not usual to see the connection between culture and language when an individual develops more than one language. If this linguistic aspect influences an individual's self-perception of their culture and how they will identify themselves.

This paper will analyze the aspects that involve the perception of an individual according to the identity they feel more related to, based on the experiences and the context that these individuals have on the development of two languages and two cultures. The individuals will be compared according to their linguistic development. This paper will use a case study to analyze. The data through a micro and macro analysis of the themes and the identification of the patterns that those individuals experienced as bilinguals in different cultures.

### 1.1 Objectives

This paper aims to achieve two objectives in order to have a better understanding of the topics that will be analyzed and also will work as a support for the research question. The objectives are:

Objective 1: To identify the connection between bilingual development and the adoption of a new culture.

Objective 2: To analyze the different perspectives about bilingualism between late and early bilinguals.

The research questions answered in this paper are:

(1) *How are language learning and the cognitive processes involved in language production different between early and late bilingualism?*

(2) *What cultural facets and elements influence the cultural identities of bilingual people?*

## 2. Literature review

In this section, the terms that are used in this paper will be defined and explained to provide a better overview of this study.

### 2.1 Bilingualism

Being bilingual is different from being a language learner because, although both terms are related in some way to the capacity of a person in a second language, the cognitive processes involved in language production are distinct. To be considered “bilingual,” we must have already experienced the process of learning a second language. To further explain this, Hamers et al. (2000) state: “The concept of bilingualism refers to the state of a linguistic community in which two languages are in contact with the result that two codes can be used in the same interaction”. Therefore, it can be inferred that bilingualism is related to the way in which the individual behaves in his language production, considering the outcome of a language for a bilingual individual, following a different process than an English learning outcome.

This distinction in the term is also made by Bialystok et al. (2005), who mention that bilingualism is more frequently used when discussing a person's overall level of language proficiency. Which ranges from managing the use of language skills and its correct cognitive processes. Whether the person is expressing themselves in their mother tongue or if they do so with the same accuracy as a native speaker. Second language learners, on the other hand, are those who have specialized linguistic proficiency but are not as advanced in the language as native speakers.

#### 2.1.1 Early and late bilingualism

For this study, two concepts that describe the participant's context will be used. The first one *early bilinguals* (EA) will be a different way to refer to early bilinguals, which will focus on a participant that for any reason was raised from an early age as bilingual. Individuals that grow developing Simultaneous Acquisition in the language that is when a children start the linguistics development of two languages at the same time at an early age. Lowry also describes that (2015) children who learn two languages simultaneously experience the same developmental stages as a child that is learning one language. This kind of EA will also present a different background for

each individual because this may depend more on the parents of individuals and the decision of raising each child. This term is also a separate way to refer to childhood bilingualism described by Baker and Wright (2017).

On the other hand, there will be bilinguals who have developed this ability to speak two languages in late development. For the purpose of this paper, they will be named *late bilinguals* (LB) In contrast to the first kind of individuals described in this paper, there will be bilinguals that have acquired a second language by Sequential Acquisition. According to Lowry (2015), this process occurs when a second language is presented to an individual who has well-established a first language. In other words, these kinds of bilinguals have developed a mother tongue during childhood, and once those individuals have grown to be monolingual speakers, feel interested in learning a new language that usually is presented in school and creates to them this interest of learning.

## *2.2 Identity*

Another aspect to analyze in this paper will be the identity that the participants perceive of themselves about the culture and language that is in their environment. Bustamante et al (2008) define identity as how individuals represent themselves in a social world. How an individual perceives the way in which they belong as part of society and in how they relate to people in their social and familiar background. Kidd and Teagle (2012) explain that “Identity is related to how we perceive ourselves as individuals, how we perceive those around us, and how we perceive others. Culture is another way that identity may be represented.” How individuals perceive themselves as bilinguals and as people who belong to two cultures may also perceive a new culture that is not related to any of the backgrounds in their life. For a better understanding of this aspect and the relation it has, it has been decided to divide identity into cultural and linguistic connections.

### *2.2.1 Cultural identity*

For this article, cultural identity will describe some of the cultural aspects that make the participants feel represented by a certain culture. For example, Clarke (2011) identifies some factors that are related to the cultural identities of individuals. Which are, race which can be defined as “a biological construct intended as a means of classifying different groups of people possessing common physical characteristics and socio-cultural affinities” (Wilson, 2003: 1). Chandra (2006) defines ethnicity as a concept that “identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with or believed to be associated with descent” (p. 397) and gender differentiates individuals in social roles.

This kind of aspect provides individuals with the social belongingness they may have to feel identified in certain social cultures in their environments. Mostly those aspects of identity are more visible in how individuals get related in the culture that is more present with them or by some culture they may feel more comfortable with because they have a loser relation with certain aspects of it.

### *2.2.2 Linguistic identity*

This part of identity will be more focused on what is the language that individuals feel more comfortable when they are speaking or that they feel more practical because of the language they use the most. Bustamante et al (2008) define linguistic identities as “the language that individuals employ to represent themselves in society” (pp. 279-280). The language in this identity

works as the principal factor that will describe who an individual is. This characteristic works to see how a person communicates with other people and is one of the principal factors that will describe the identity of a person because it will give an idea of the background of an individual.

Andrews (2010) mentions that “language is closely tied to our identity since it is connected to who we are as individuals,” in this view of identity, it can be also considered the affinity that an individual has with the language that is predominantly involved in their environment. Another aspect that may influence this factor is the educational implications that certain schools integrate into their programs. Research conducted by De Mejía (2006) described the interrelation of language affects in how students tend to develop cross-language interaction facing the inheritance from some students. If a student is made to have an educational development in a certain language, this may affect the way they perceive their identity in order to feel a better connection with the language they interact with or tend to develop themselves the most.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 *Qualitative paradigm*

In this paper, to get the data that will be analyzed to determine the influences that present culture in bilingualism to the different contexts of individuals, the paper was based on a qualitative paradigm to get more precise data that will show us the different aspects that are involved in the connection between culture and bilingualism.

Heigham and Croker (2009) define qualitative research as “an umbrella term used to refer to a complex and evolving research methodology” (p. 5). This approach enables researchers to test out various data-gathering techniques, such as observation, interviews, diaries, etc. Additionally, this approach incorporates several research methodologies and tactics that have been established to gather data and evaluate it in a day-to-day conception that offers data that indicates how people behave naturally (Heigham & Croker, 2009).

As researchers, we can more easily understand how people who are learning a second language (SLA) develop their language skills depending on the various contexts in which they can acquire that knowledge by using interpretative analysis, which is made possible by the qualitative approach in applied linguistics (Heigham & Croker, 2009).

#### 3.2 *Method: A case study*

The method that this paper is following to get information and create a research question that will answer the question of this work is a case study, this was decided because the information required to elaborate the analysis requires the study of how an individual may behave in a natural basis and a day to day behave, how those individuals interact with the environment that is surrounding them a how the individual behaves in his language production, considering the outcome of a language for a bilingual person, following a different process than as a method was decided to take into consideration what Flyvbjerg (2011) mentions that case studies focus on analyzing the behavior of the individual (as a person or community) based on the relation to the environment or context (p. 301).

#### 4. Context

##### 4.1 *Participants*

The participants in this study are all bilinguals, and the difference between them is the way they get raised, on this study, we have already reviewed the concepts of early and late bilinguals. First, the early bilinguals for this paper were, Bruno who is 28 years old, he comes from a Mexican family that migrated to the U.S. He has to learn Spanish and English at the same time when he was growing up. In this same context, Luis is a man that is 23 years old he was born and grows in Canada, but his parents raised him as bilinguals due to the fact they were bilinguals and provide him with the same background a linguistic development from an early age.

The other two participants share the background of late bilinguals, first one is Sofia, a 20-year-old Mexican female that born and gets raised in Mexico as a monolingual that then started to get interested in learning a second language (English) once she developed his mother tongue (Spanish). Judith is a 24-year-old Austrian female that first develops a mother tongue (German) to then develop English as a second language, but this participant, in particular, has the quality of being Multilingual, she speaks 4 languages in total (German, English, Spanish, and French).

Even though these participants have different backgrounds in how they become bilinguals, they share the same characteristics of speaking more than one language and being able to identify some differences in the languages they speak, this allows me as a researcher to identify some of the aspects that differentiate them in the way they get raised with the language. My participants are aware about the information they share will be used for academic purposes and that their identities will be protected by providing them with a code name. These participants were selected having in mind first, that all of them share English as one of the languages they speak, and also, they were selected by knowing they were fully developed bilinguals.

##### 4.2 *Data collection techniques*

###### 4.2.1 *Questionnaires*

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) mention that the process of data collection can be fast and relatively straightforward. The data that will be acquired with this research tool can be acquired in a fast way from the participants due that the questions will provide you with direct answers that can be analyzed in a better way. Also, you just give the questionnaires to the participants and let them answer in their freedom. It can be easier to send the questionnaire to many participants at the same time and you can get data from several people in a short period.

These authors also mention that questionnaires can be successfully applied to a variety of people in a variety of situations targeting different topics. For me, applying this tool allowed me to apply the same questions to bilinguals even though they share the characteristic of speaking two languages, they have different linguistic backgrounds (early and late bilingualism) but those participants provide me with the same kind of answers that I needed to get the data and analyze it.

A crucial concern in the creation of this research instrument refers to the construction of useful questionnaire questions. It is necessary to carefully develop questions that avoid the possible danger of generating simplistic, quick replies or binary responses (such as yes or no). Such questions may obstruct the gathering of thorough and in-depth data that is consistent with the researcher's goals and requirements for nuanced insights. Therefore, the researchers that apply this tool in research, have to be aware of what are the kind of answers that are needed to get analyzed, and in that way, elaborate the questions that will be useful for the research.

### 4.3 Interviews

The use of interviews in this paper was decided to be applied because it was necessary to expand some of the responses of the participants. The interviews were decided to follow the same questions as the questionnaires but modify them to make them more conversational in order to allow a similar discussion of the participant's answers but with more discussion about it.

Opdenakker (2006) mentions "The interviewer and interviewee can directly react to what the other says or does. An advantage of this synchronous communication is that the answer of the interviewee is more spontaneous, without an extended reflection" (p. 3). This claim supported the decision of using this instrument in the paper. Also, the interview provides more "natural" answers due that it was more spontaneous responses by the interviewee.

One advantage of using interviews as a tool that I decided to use in this paper, is that it compensates for the data that was acquired before. Using interviews, data can be acquired in a more "natural" way because it can be seen as a conversation that can provide information for a specific purpose in research (Aksu, 2009). In this case, the information contained a vast quantity of details that work to see how the participants perceived bilingualism in a daily interaction with more than one language.

## 5. Data analysis procedures

The process on which the data collection was based was first the creation of a questionnaire for my participants, the questionnaire consisted of 8 open-ended questions that covers the topics of: (1) Participants' linguistic background; (2) Participants' language learning process; and (3) Cultural perceptions. The questions of the questionnaire were conducted in English because is one of the languages that all of the participants speak. It was requested to the participants extend the most they could in their answers to avoid "yes/no" questions. The questionnaires were sent to the participants, it was expected that participants do not spend more than one hour answering the questionnaire.

Some of the responses of this research required the participants to extend in order to get the correct context of their linguistic background. It was decided to apply an interview with some of the participants of this paper. They were one of each type of bilingual on this paper that at the same time present a peculiar characteristic in the language and culture that is around them. The interview itself covered the same questions as the questionnaire, but with the difference that this allows the participants a better explanation of the questions they have answered before in a discussion with the interviewer.

Then I started analyzing all my data collected at a micro level and organization, allowing me to identify the themes that my participants mentioned in their answers, then I put all that themes in a micro level organization to find the pattern that my participants have in common or the ones that present interesting data to discuss.

## 6. Data analysis

### 6.1 Family and school roles

The family plays the most crucial role in the development of linguistic skills for individuals. From birth, it is the family that exposes children to the language they will be speaking and developing. In the case of the participants, the role that family plays were focused to expose them to the language they were going to speak, but with a difference. For example, for Late Bilinguals, the presentation of a language was based on a monolingual context. In order to provide them with the development of just one language as their mother tongue, these participants have

the facility to identify their mother tongue. The acquisition of a second language was presented once they have already developed their mother tongue. Late Bilingual participants share this same fact in the how they become bilinguals.

When those participants were asked in how they become bilingual they mentioned something similar. Judith mentions *“School and university, partner, friends.”* And Sofia answered, *“By school and by myself.”* For these participants seems that the role that school plays was most focused on awakening their interest in learning a second language, and due to that, a new language was introduced to them in the environment.

Early Bilingual participants described that their family has developed before as bilinguals, and this was the same development they perceive, even though they identify one of their languages as their mother tongue, they have had a bilingual development since early childhood, which makes them get an easier relationship in their social environment. Luis mentioned:

*“My mom is English Canadian with a bit of knowledge of French. Dad is a French Canadian who moved to an English-speaking province and learned English there.”*

He developed his bilingual skills due that his parents being bilinguals with an identified mother tongue, but they decided to move into a region that speaks a different language.

Bruno mentioned something similar that the development he acquires as bilingual was influenced by his parents even though they are not native speakers, he mentioned about his exposure to the language:

*“I learn English because my mother taught me when I was a child and was learning to speak. even she gets stuck in some parts of the language, she taught me the basic to be prepared.”*

In this case for these bilinguals, the school for them presents the role of being the principal environment in which they develop the second language that their family presents to them, but in this context, the use of the language was more frequent allowing them to have a development of the language by the practice they give it since an early age. This process of bilingualism to the participants presents to them with the adoption of a new culture as well that is more related to their social life, having the factor that maybe they feel identified with this culture because it could be the one that they relate to the most of the time.

## 6.2 Language development

As it was described before, for Late Bilinguals, the development of a second language comes once they have already developed their mother tongue almost in totality that they get raised in a monolingual family context, then the acquisition of a second language presented to them in advanced age, primarily at school, awakening to the participants the interest in acquiring a new language, Judith talked about her acquisition of her second language.

*“I started to learn English in the last year of primary school so I think I was 8 years old or nine years old I wouldn't say that there was so early but that was only English, and French I started to learn when I was, I think 15.”*

She mentions what was discussed, she acquires a second language in childhood, but the development of her mother tongue was completed.

Judith's experience fits with the commonly noticed pattern of early exposure to English, which might help explain why they are more proficient in it than they are in French. The individual's assessment of the difficulty and competency in these languages may have been

impacted by the age difference between learning English (at roughly 8–9 years old) and French (at around 15 years old).

In a study conducted by Nittrouer and Burton (2005), it was described what are some characteristics of the process of becoming bilingual since early childhood. There are many factors that are involved in this development, some of them comprise personal motivation, language exposure, language learning techniques, and cultural immersion. Additionally, the results of language acquisition across different age groups are significantly influenced by linguistic aptitude, cognitive capacities, and individual characteristics.

### 6.3 Language acquirement

The process of learning a second language is one factor that considerably divides the participants; nonetheless, for the Late bilingual individuals, the process followed a similar trajectory. The participant Sofia mentioned for example about the time she learned a second language *“In the last year of primary school, English classes started. I would not say that that was early”* indicating that she had developed a mother tongue in totality before, and then she started the development of a second language.

As it was described before, for Late Bilinguals, the development of a second language comes once individuals have already developed their mother tongue almost in totality, once they get raised in a monolingual family context, then the acquisition of a second language presented to them in advanced age, primarily at school, awakening to the participants the interest in acquiring a new language, but presenting to them the problem being a new learning process that may have problematics due that the mother tongue should present some obstacles for appropriate development.

### 6.4 Cultural perception

The perception of the culture tends to seem to be related to the culture that my participants were more related to, this for my participants was due to the different contexts they experienced, for example, Luis, mentions that their family adopt a new culture as the main because in the place they live in, it is easier to communicate or to interact on a culture that is based on English.

*“Yes, in the region of Quebec where I live, being bilingual is viewed as important for job opportunities since our region is neighboring Ontario, an English-speaking province. Even in slang, a lot of words are spoken in English instead of French, because most people are bilingual. It becomes a strange mix of French with a little bit of English here and there.”*

This could be the same that one of the Sofia, that mention that the culture that she felt more comfortable with is the one present in their family, but this case maybe was based in that this participant has the same culture in their familiar and social environments and there was not an external factor that affects in a different perception.

On the other hand, I notice two factors that called my attention in my other two participants, for example, Judith more than being an NRB participant, has also developed herself as multilingual, she mentions that even though she has identified a mother tongue and a culture that is connected to this, she feels more comfortable and has a better identity with external cultures that her foreign friends present to her. She mentions:

*“Right now I’ll say Spanish and English and of course German because it’s some other time but less and less because I catch myself making a lot of mistakes in*



*German because I use it less and less especially when I have to speak the standard form of German because in my family, we speak a very harsh dialect so I'm for example more comfortable to speak Spanish or English than standard German."*

In this case, even with the development of a "mother culture" this participant feels more related to a foreign culture because it is the culture that she is relating the most actually.

The other case is based on Bruno's experience, he mentions that once he was growing up, he used to feel comfortable with aspects of the Mexican and American cultures, that was the ones that he related to his familiar and social life respectively.

This participant also mentions that he finds the combination of these two cultures that is the "Chicano" culture, that in his own words,

*"I think that Chicano culture is a good mix of both cultures and I like to say that I am Chicano because it makes me proud of saying that I belong to both countries at the same time. this combination of the cultures makes me feel adapted to the American culture, but it also makes me to still feel connected to my heritage as Mexican."*

It is showing to me that the perception of the culture that this participant has, make the merge of a new culture that is a mixture of different aspect of two different cultures. Bruno mentioned one aspect that was claimed by Rothman and Rell (2005) when they mentioned that immigrants are always re-forming their dual identity in looking to assimilate the culture of the country, they live in. And to retain a part of their heritage in their familiar cultural background.

## 7. Conclusions

The data that was collected in this paper shows the different relations that each participant has with culture and the languages they speak, it shows that even though the background of bilingualism is the same for many people, it has different acquisition backgrounds, they present the same perception in some aspects for example, in how different are the cultures in their environments and that each culture affects them in the different environments that are around them. Also, this paper shows that the language of the participant has a strong influence on how they develop an identity, in how multilingual have an identity with more than one culture that is more present in their familiar background. Or a raised bilingual that have a comfortable connection with two cultures at the same time and perceives a culture that is a combination of both, giving him a different identity besides the two cultures in his environment. This investigation aims to show that language and culture have one strong relation and that even these aspects support individuals to create their identity. Some of the limitations that were presented in this research were that it was difficult to contact more participants who were able to expand their responses in an interview. Also, to find more participants of the raised bilingual context that provides more data.

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