

A Critical Autoethnography of Multilingual Identity through the Dominant Language Constellation Lens

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Multilingual identity development is important in Kazakhstan's education system, where learners and teachers move across Kazakh, Russian, English, and other foreign languages in changing social and academic contexts. Although multilingualism is often presented as a valuable resource, individual language experiences are still shaped by wider language ideologies, including beliefs about correct pronunciation, language separation, native-like competence, and the unequal value attached to different languages. This autoethnographic study examines how my multilingual identity developed through my experiences as a learner, English language teacher, and master's student in multilingual education. Drawing on poststructuralist views of identity, language ideology scholarship, and Aronin's (2020) Dominant Language Constellation framework, the study explores how my key languages functioned together as part of an interconnected multilingual system. Through personal vignettes and reflexive analysis, the study shows a gradual shift from an early monolingual understanding of languages as separate and hierarchical to a more flexible multilingual perspective shaped by translanguaging, academic mobility, and critical reflection. The analysis shows that Russian represented home and emotional belonging, Kazakh cultural roots and schooling, English academic and professional mobility, German intellectual development, and Finnish emerging international experience. Overall, the study argues that multilingual identity is a dynamic process shaped by social context, identity negotiation, and ideological awareness.

Keywords: *Multilingual identity, dominant language constellation, language ideology, autoethnography, Kazakhstan.*

There are a majority of studies that demonstrate that identity is central to learners' linguistic development and academic engagement (Block, 2003, 2007; Cummins, 2001; Gass, 1998; Norton, 2000, 2013), while research on language teacher identity similarly reveals the influence of teachers' emerging self on their pedagogical and professional orientations (Rudolph et al., 2020; Varghese et al., 2005). This autoethnographic study allowed me to analyze how my multilingual identities have been shaped across my experiences as a learner, teacher, and emerging researcher responding to the multilingual turn.

Building on poststructuralist perspectives, language is not a neutral medium, rather it is a site where power, meaning, and identity are interconnected. As Weedon (1987, p. 21) states, "Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. However, it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed." From this perspective, multilingualism becomes a meaningful resource that enables individuals to cross cultural boundaries, negotiate their sense of belonging, and reformulate their identities.

Furthermore, identity is understood as a person's interpretation of their relationship with the social world, the ways this relationship extends across time and space, and the future possibilities they imagine for themselves (Norton, 2013). Therefore, identity is seen as a fluid, multilayered, and socially constructed phenomenon (e.g., Varghese et al., 2005). Additionally, there are language ideologies that are not only seen as shared beliefs, cultural narratives, and general assumptions, but also as the daily practices through which these assumptions are enacted (Gal, 1992), playing a central role. These ideologies function as an interpretive link, connecting individual language practices to broader sociocultural structures, including identities, aesthetics, morality, and ways of knowing (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994).

Given the powerful influence of language ideologies on the identity positions of multilingual speakers (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), this autoethnography examines how my own identities have been shaped, negotiated, and reimagined across different linguistic contexts. Through this process, I

aim to outline the ideologies that develop my relationship with multilingualism, to articulate how my identities are situated within particular social worlds, and to theorize how these understandings inform my language learning and teaching practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, 2011).

According to Adams et al. (2021), autoethnography can be conceptualized through three interconnected components: auto, ethno, and graphy. The auto dimension centers on the researcher's own experiences and reflections, while the ethno dimension situates these experiences within cultural frameworks by examining how social norms and values shape individual lives. The graphy element refers to the process of representing these experiences through narrative and analytical writing. Importantly, these elements should not be understood as independent parts. However, it can be inferred that the personal (auto) and cultural (ethno) dimensions are closely connected, reflecting the reflexive analysis in autoethnographic research (Yazan & Keleş, 2024).

From an interpretivist and postcolonial standpoint, autoethnography recognizes that individuals interpret the world through diverse perspectives shaped by their sociocultural positions (Ellis & Adams, 2020). This can be explained by the fact that this approach challenges traditional positivist views of research that prioritize objectivity and distance while often disregarding subjective experiences as valid sources of knowledge. Autoethnography acknowledges the analytical value of personal narratives in understanding social realities and cultural practices (Ellis & Adams, 2020), engaging in reflective examination of one's own experiences can therefore strengthen self-reflexivity and serve as a guide for questioning, revising, or improving existing educational and social practices (Yazan & Keleş, 2024).

This autoethnographic study adopted the construct of dominant language constellation (DLC), referred to as "a group of one's most important, vehicle languages, functioning as a whole, and enabling an individual to meet all needs in a multilingual environment" (Aronin, 2020, p. 19). The study was guided by the following questions:

- How have broader societal language ideologies influenced the development of my DLCs?
- How do my DLCs shape and reflect my identity negotiations in transnational spaces?
- In what ways do my ideological reflections inform my language learning and teaching practices?

Framing My Autoethnography through Identity Negotiation in Language Education

In recent years, identity-focused self-study has gained notable prominence in language education (Fisher et al., 2020). Building on this, the analysis of identity involves an exploration of the self, Fisher et al. (2020) outline three major traditions in identity research: the psychosocial, the sociocultural, and the poststructural. Fisher et al.'s review shows considerable overlap between the sociocultural and poststructural orientations. Both perspectives reject the assumption of a single, stable identity, an assumption central to psychosocial theories. The identity is seen as a construct that is socially produced, shaped by history, and constantly negotiated, with the learner's agency playing a crucial role. Furthermore, both perspectives emphasize the fluid, multiple, and continually transforming essence of identity. At the same time, Fisher et al. outline the point of divergence: sociocultural theorists primarily focus on how social, cultural, and contextual conditions shape individuals, whereas poststructuralists place greater analytical emphasis on power relations and the learner's potential for (self-)transformation. In this self-study, I rely on both perspectives, allowing me to examine the transformative processes that shaped my multilingual identity.

This study is shaped by a broad and interdisciplinary body of scholarship, building on post-structural theory of identity (e.g., Norton, 2000), as well as critical ethnographic sociolinguistics (e.g., Blommaert, 2005) and perspectives from language ideology research. These theories serve to examine an individual's identity work in relation to their language practices in different social conditions, such as power structures, institutional norms, and ideological expectations. Additionally, these theories explore the ways language ideologies change across contexts, mediating the participants' linguistic choices and their experiences of negotiating identity in a multilingual environment.

Guided by a poststructuralist perspective, this study conceptualizes identity as fluid, socially constructed, and continuously shaped through discourse and interaction. This approach shows how multilingual individuals reconstruct their identities as they move across contexts and experience different symbolic and material values attached to languages. From this perspective, identity is not fixed or inherent but is formed as individuals interpret their relationship with the world (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Norton, 2000).

Identity negotiation in multilingual contexts is complex, as speakers use their linguistic repertoires to

construct multiple, sometimes competing, identities. They refer to specific languages and their social meanings to position themselves in alignment with their goals and affiliations (Fisher et al., 2020). This hybridity is further complicated by the different levels of prestige or stigma attributed to languages in different contexts. A language may be highly valued in one environment but marginalized in another, and its speakers may be positioned accordingly (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In many cases, so-called "standard" languages and their users occupy privileged positions within broader social hierarchies.

Language Ideologies

In addition, this study draws on the concept of language ideology, which shows that the evaluative and ideological meanings attached to language practices in particular settings shape the ways individuals use languages and construct their identities. Language ideologies refer to the belief systems that speakers hold about language beliefs that function as explanations or justifications for how languages are structured, valued, and used in a given community. Identity in both sociocultural and poststructural traditions is seen as dynamic and shaped by the social conditions in which individuals interact. Within this broader orientation, language ideology offers a powerful analytical lens for investigating how identity formation is linked to the sociocultural and historical structures that individuals must navigate (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Language ideologies refer to socially constructed beliefs about languages and their speakers' beliefs that often appear "natural" but reflect deeper assumptions about power, legitimacy, and belonging. As Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) argue, these ideologies rationalize and justify why certain language forms (for example, accents, "native" or "non-native" labels) become associated with broader social values, prestige, or stigma. In doing so, these ideologies contribute to the maintenance of linguistic hierarchies and shape which identity positions are seen as acceptable and appropriate within different contexts (Yazan, 2019a).

Drawing on scholarship that examines multilingual contexts, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) emphasize that identity negotiation is always connected to wider sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and economic structures. Languages are not neutral resources, rather, they are tied to systems of symbolic power that determine who is positioned at the center and who is pushed to the periphery in any given setting (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Through this lens, language ideologies do more than merely describe linguistic preference they actively shape the pathways through which individuals can resist imposed identities, challenge dominant narratives, or claim new identity possibilities.

Research on educational settings illustrates how different ideological stances toward language lead to distinct pedagogical orientations. A monolingual ideology often supports practices that strictly separate languages and privilege one "standard" variety as the only legitimate medium (Creese & Blackledge, 2011). In contrast, multilingual ideology encourages flexible linguistic practices, such as pedagogical translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020) that recognize learners' full linguistic repertoires as meaningful

resources. Yazan (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) argues that multilingual educators and learners must critically unpack how their own language ideologies are produced within broader social and cultural structures, as these ideologies directly shape their teaching practices, identity development, and experiences in multilingual environments.

Developing this awareness enables multilingual individuals to better understand how power, ideology, and linguistic hierarchies influence their everyday interactions. It also helps them take greater ownership of their identity trajectories, making visible the complex ways identities are performed, negotiated, or resisted across different linguistic and social spaces.

DLC as a Framework for Exploring Multilingual Experience

The DLC refers to the group of languages that an individual relies on most consistently, choosing that work together as an interconnected system to meet communicative, emotional, and practical needs in a multilingual environment (Aronin, 2020). The DLC framework emphasizes the collective functioning of these languages as a single, coherent unit, instead of seeing these languages as separate codes in a linguistic repertoire. In this case, DLC allows researchers to examine the emergent qualities of a multilingual linguistic system, which cannot be reduced to, nor fully understood through, its individual components alone (Aronin, 2020). For instance, Aronin (2016, 2021) explains that a typical DLC is characterized by three interrelated features such as constitution, configuration, and dynamics, examining societal language ideologies, personal identity work, and educational practices. The constitution of a DLC refers to the specific languages that make up an individual's constellation; it provides a visual representation of the set of "vehicle languages" that a multilingual person actively relies on (Aronin, 2016). The second feature, configuration, concerns the function of each language within the constellation, demonstrating how different languages operate together and support one another in each social or academic domain. The third feature, dynamics, analyzes how the composition and internal organization of a DLC change throughout time. As Aronin (2016) notes, changes in either the languages included in the constellation or their relative importance reflect the inherently fluid, developing nature of multilingual identity across a person's life course. Guided by these conceptual principles, the present study traces how the constitution, configuration, and dynamics of my own DLC have developed and changed throughout different stages of my multilingual trajectory.

Methodology

This study applies the method of autoethnography is commonly described as "stories of/about the self-told through the lens of culture" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 2). According to Canagarajah (2012), the methodological essence of autoethnography has three main components: auto, ethno, and graphy. Firstly, the "auto" dimension focuses on the researcher's own perspective, assuming that meaningful knowledge is generated from one's lived position,

embodied identities, and situated experiences within particular communities. Secondly, the "ethno" element is related to the cultural aspects of the self and its influence on identity. Lastly, the "graphy" is related to the written ways of communicating, representing the data.

By narrating their own experiences, writers are able to externalize the dimensions of ideology and identity work and examine the way these experiences emerge in broader sociocultural conditions.

Analysis and Results: Multilingual Journey

This section unpacks the stages of my gradual shift from holding predominantly monolingual assumptions to developing a more deeply multilingual orientation. Each section begins with a vignette from my personal narrative, which serves as an entry point into the analysis. These vignettes are then examined to reveal the main language ideologies shaping my beliefs, linguistic practices, and identity performances at each stage. Following each analytic discussion, I reflect on how broader societal language ideologies influenced my own enactments of identity and language use.

To address the research questions, every section concludes with a visualization and explanation of my DLCs. These representations show: (1) how societal language ideologies contributed to the configuration of my DLCs at different points in my life; (2) how my DLCs were intertwined with the ways I positioned, constructed, and negotiated my identities; and (3) how my ideological engagements and identity enactments shaped my language learning and teaching practices.

Together, the six stages presented below illuminate the ongoing, non-linear nature of this transformation process and provide a structured account of how my multilingual self-evolved.

Stage 1: Monolingual Ideology

I was born in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where my linguistic journey started. In my childhood, through everyday interactions within my family, I acquired Russian as my first language, as both of my Kazakh parents had completed their secondary and higher education in Russian. This made Russian the natural medium of communication at home. However, when I entered primary school, Kazakh was introduced to me as the official language of instruction, and using Kazakh in the classroom was expected, while reliance on Russian was often discouraged. Since I had a linguistic belonging mainly in Russian, my early Kazakh language skills showed significant differences in Russian-influenced pronunciation. Throughout my schooling, I became increasingly aware of these differences, particularly when teachers corrected my pronunciation and when classmates occasionally commented on my accent. (Vignette 1)

English was introduced to me as a foreign language in the 5th grade during my primary school years. At that early stage, my classmates and I often relied on Cyrillic transliterations to approximate the pronunciation of new English words. This strategy helped us remember unfamiliar sounds, but our

English teachers quickly dismissed it as an inappropriate method, emphasizing that such practices would challenge the development of “proper” English pronunciation. (Vignette 2)

When I entered university, German became my additional foreign language, introduced with English; however, taught as a clearly separate subject. In most German classes, Kazakh or Russian served as the language of instruction, reinforcing a compartmentalized approach to language learning. I became increasingly self-conscious about pronunciation and made intentional efforts to approximate a more “native-like” accent, partly shaped by earlier experiences of linguistic insecurity in Kazakh- and English-medium settings. (Vignette 3)

These vignettes illuminate my early schooling years until my university years. I internalized a monolingual mindset that was deeply shaped by Kazakhstan’s sociolinguistic legacy following the country’s post-Soviet transition. During the Soviet Union legacy, by 1989, nearly 90% of Kazakhs were literate primarily in Russian, while only around 30% had functional proficiency in Kazakh, even though Kazakh had already been granted official status. In the decades following the dissolution of the USSR, Kazakhstan had an extensive reorientation of its linguistic landscape from a period of Russification, where Russian dominated education, administration, and public communication, to the national project of Kazakhization, which sought to restore Kazakh as the national state language.

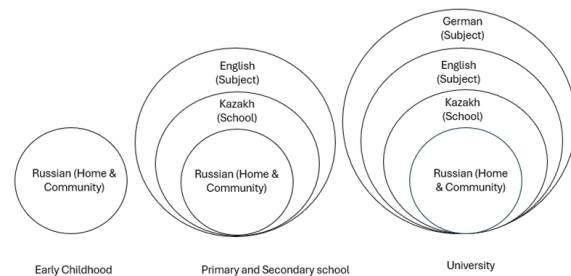
My enrollment in a Kazakh-medium school (KMS) also reflected the broader post-independence shift toward Kazakhization, during which the state expanded and harmonized Kazakh-, Russian-, and mixed-medium schools. As KMS availability increased nationwide from 38.6% of schools in 1993 to 51.2% in 2020, with the share of students in KMS rising from 39.6% to 65.4% during the same period, my parents’ decision aligned with these national trends. However, despite this growing emphasis on Kazakh, my later English learning experiences were still shaped by monolingual instructional norms.

In Vignette 2, my English learning through Cyrillic transliteration was quickly labeled “incorrect,” revealing how classroom language ideologies shaped my developing identity, using Kazakh or Russian to make sense of English was treated as a weakness rather than a resource, which made me more aware of which language practices were valued, and which were discouraged. These early assumptions influenced how I positioned my languages within my DLC: English gained symbolic capital as the language linked to competence, while my other languages were treated as tools that had to be used separately, reflecting the broader ideological expectations (Yazan, 2019a).

My linguistic development from early childhood to university can be illustrated through the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DLC) that reflects the languages present in different stages of my life. As shown in Figure 1, Russian dominated my early childhood as the main home and community language, while Kazakh and English gradually became part of my linguistic repertoire during schooling.

Later, German was added as an additional academic language during my university studies.

Figure 1
The DLC from My Early Childhood to University



Stage 2: Working as an EFL Teacher

When I began working as an English teacher in state and private schools, I realized that entering the profession required more than completing a bachelor’s degree. Many schools preferred candidates with additional pedagogical qualifications, stronger teaching portfolios, or even higher academic degrees, which made me aware that my professional growth would require continuous training.

In private schools in particular, classroom expectations subtly emphasized pronunciation. While no one explicitly demanded “standard” English, it was clear during lessons that a more native-like pronunciation was valued. Colleagues occasionally reminded me to “sound more natural,” and parents often commented on how “authentic” pronunciation influenced their choice of teacher.

Despite these pressures, teaching across different school types increased my commitment to the profession. I relied on my knowledge of Kazakh and Russian to support learners, even as I worked to refine my English and pursue further academic training. This is when I started becoming aware of institutional expectations while learning to embrace the multilingual resources that shaped me as an emerging teacher. (Vignette 4)

During this stage, broader language ideologies in Kazakhstan shaped how my professional identity as an English teacher was evaluated and constructed. English, often positioned as a gateway to social and economic opportunity, tends to carry greater symbolic value than Kazakh or Russian in many educational settings. This hierarchy influences hiring expectations, where features such as accent, fluency, and “sounding native” are treated as indicators of competence. Linguistic traits become connected to perceptions of authority and professionalism (Yazan, 2019a). From the perspective of identity negotiation (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), these ideological pressures required me to navigate competing expectations while reconsidering the relative status of my languages within my emerging teacher identity (See Figure 2).

This stage of my professional development can also be illustrated through the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DLC). As shown in Figure 2, Russian remained central in my professional environment, while English became dominant in the workplace. Kazakh continued to function in community interactions, whereas German gradually diminished due to reduced use during my teaching years.

Figure 2

The DLC during My Teaching Years



Stage Three: Negotiating the Multilingual Turn in My Master's Studies

After completing my bachelor's degree, I was accepted into a master's program at another university. When I entered my master's program, I immediately noticed how different languages were understood and practiced in academic spaces. In my first semester, classmates effortlessly shifted between Kazakh, Russian, English, and sometimes German during discussions, and using any language helped them express their ideas most clearly. Hearing this fluid movement across languages felt unfamiliar at first, because I had grown up believing that each language had to be kept separate and "pure."

As my courses progressed, I encountered theories of translanguaging, linguistic repertoires, and multilingual meaning-making. During seminars, we were encouraged to use any language we felt comfortable with when analyzing readings or sharing experiences. For the first time, I saw my languages working together rather than competing with one another. Later, during my studies, I attended my first international conference in Finland, and I was surrounded by scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds. I began learning some Finnish and practiced it while interacting with locals and international scholars, which expanded my sense of belonging in multilingual environments and strengthened my belief that languages coexist dynamically rather than hierarchically. Vignette (5)

linking "standard" or "native-like" forms to authority and professionalism. Similar patterns appeared in my context, where English held high academic value and Kazakh and Russian were essential for engaging with local communities. Although these languages were often treated as separate in earlier stages of my education, my program emphasized approaches such as translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020), which validated fluid movement across languages. This shift helped me recognize all my languages as meaningful linguistic capital rather than hierarchical or competing resources.

This stage of my linguistic development can also be illustrated through the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism. As shown in Figure 3, my linguistic repertoire expanded during my master's studies, reflecting the multilingual environment of my academic program. While Russian and Kazakh continued to play important roles in my daily interactions, English became increasingly central in academic communication, and my investment in German remained significant. At the same time, Finnish began to emerge as a new language connected to my participation in international academic spaces.

Figure 3

The DLC during My Master's Studies



Stage Four: Developing Multilingualism

As shown in Figure 6, the root represents Kazakh, as it connects me to my cultural origin and symbolizes the grounding influence of my Kazakh ethnicity and schooling. Although Kazakh was not my home language, it later became a central part of my identity, much like roots that nourish the tree. Russian is represented by the house because most of my early knowledge, emotions, and family memories were constructed through Russian. It is the language of home, comfort, and the linguistic foundation. The flowers represent German, which I studied intensively during my undergraduate years. German added intellectual beauty and enrichment to my linguistic life, much like flowers that bring color and growth to a garden, even if they occupy a smaller and more specialized space.

The car symbolizes English, as it is the language that carries me forward: academically, professionally, and geographically. English has taken me across educational and international borders, providing access to global academic communities and career opportunities. The cloud symbolizes Finnish, a language that entered my life during my international academic experiences. I cannot speak it fluently, but I can recognize and feel its presence, just like a cloud that is difficult to grasp but easy to notice.

Figure 4
My DLC Model



As shown in Figure 4, the tree, house, flowers, and car are positioned close to one another because these languages, Kazakh, Russian, German, and English, are the ones that I rely on most regularly in my everyday interactions, whether personal, academic, or professional. The cloud, Finnish, appears slightly further away, reflecting its emerging yet still peripheral role in my linguistic repertoire. The relative sizes of the items represent my proficiency and functional reliance on these languages, arranged in decreasing order as follows: House (Russian), Car (English), Root (Kazakh), Flowers (German), and Cloud (Finnish). This configuration shows how each language contributes differently to my multilingual identity and how its significance shifts across.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic study examined how my multilingual identity developed over time and how dominant language ideologies in Kazakhstan shaped my DLCs. Autoethnography is widely understood as a qualitative research approach that allows scholars to examine their personal experiences and memories in relation to broader sociocultural contexts. Through this method, I have critically explored dominant social beliefs, practices, and ideologies shaping my life (Keleş, 2022). In other words, personal experiences are treated as analytical resources that demonstrate broader cultural and social processes. The vignettes presented in this study illustrate how my multilingual identity and language practices were shaped by broader societal language ideologies in Kazakhstan.

Summarizing the above, this study suggests that multilingual development should not be viewed simply as the accumulation of separate languages but as an evolving process shaped by identity negotiation, social context, and ideo-

gagement. Recognizing multilingual repertoires as interconnected resources may help educators and learners move beyond monolingual assumptions and create educational environments that better support the complex realities of multilingual communication in contemporary societies.

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