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LANGUAGE AS A MASK HOW FOREIGN LANGUAGES CHANGE OUR SELF-EXPRESSION

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Abstract: Language is not only a tool for communication but also a powerful medium through which individuals construct and express their identities. This study explores how speaking foreign languages influences self-expression, emotional experience, and personality, framing the phenomenon as language as a mask. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from 30 multilingual university students through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Thematic analysis revealed that foreign language use often increases confidence, creates emotional distance, and allows individuals to express aspects of themselves that may be suppressed in their native language. Participants also reported shifts in personality and behavior, influenced by the cultural norms embedded in each language. Over time, these experiences can lead to a blending or expansion of identity. The findings highlight the psychological and cultural dimensions of multilingualism and underscore the role of foreign languages in shaping self-expression, identity negotiation, and emotional regulation.

Keywords: Foreign language, Self-expression, Identity, Emotional regulation, Multilingualism, Language as a mask, Cultural influence

Introduction: Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a powerful medium through which individuals construct, express, and sometimes conceal their identities. When people speak a foreign language, they often experience a noticeable shift in their self-expression, emotional tone, and even personality. This phenomenon has led scholars to explore the idea of language as a mask—a concept suggesting that foreign languages can serve as a psychological shield, allowing speakers to express thoughts and feelings they might suppress in their native tongue.

In multilingual contexts, individuals frequently report feeling braver, more confident, or emotionally distant when using a foreign language. This transformation is not accidental; it is deeply connected to cultural norms, emotional distance, and cognitive processing differences between first and additional languages. As a result, language choice can significantly influence how people present themselves to others and how they perceive their own identities.

Furthermore, the emotional detachment often associated with foreign language use allows speakers to discuss sensitive topics—such as love, fear, trauma, or personal desires—with greater ease. Studies in psycholinguistics suggest that a second language reduces emotional intensity, enabling individuals to speak more rationally and less impulsively. This emotional buffering effect reinforces the idea of language as a protective layer, behind which speakers can hide vulnerability or reshape their emotional responses. In addition, cultural frameworks embedded in each language influence communication styles, levels of politeness, directness, and even humor. When individuals switch languages, they do not merely change words; they adopt new cultural scripts and social expectations. Consequently, a person may appear more assertive in one language, more reserved in another, and more expressive in a third. This fluidity of identity challenges the notion of a fixed self and highlights the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and personality.

Understanding language as a mask is especially relevant in today's globalized world, where multilingual communication is increasingly common in education, business, and digital spaces. As people navigate multiple linguistic identities, they continuously negotiate who they are and how they wish to be perceived. Therefore, exploring how foreign languages shape self-expression is not only a linguistic inquiry but also a deeply human one, touching on issues of authenticity, belonging, and self-discovery.

Methods: This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how the use of foreign languages influences self-expression, emotional expression, and identity construction. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of personal experiences, subjective meanings, and psychological changes that occur when individuals switch between languages.

Research Design: The research follows a phenomenological approach, aiming to understand participants' lived experiences of using foreign languages in daily life. This design is suitable for investigating internal states such as confidence, emotional distance, and identity shift, which cannot be directly observed but can be explored through personal narratives.

Participants: The participants consisted of 30 university students aged 18–25 who are majoring in foreign languages. All participants were native speakers of Uzbek and had English as their primary foreign language. Several participants also reported proficiency in Russian, Korean, or Turkish. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who regularly use a foreign language in both academic and social settings, ensuring rich and relevant data.

Instruments: Two main instruments were used in this study:

Semi-structured interview guide – containing open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses and personal reflection.

Open-ended questionnaire – designed to collect written reflections on emotional and behavioral changes when using a foreign language.

These instruments were piloted with three students to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions.

Data Collection Procedure: Data collection took place over a period of three weeks. Interviews were conducted in a quiet classroom environment and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes each. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The questionnaires were distributed after the interviews to allow participants to further reflect on their experiences.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. First, all transcripts and written responses were read multiple times to gain familiarity. Then, initial codes were generated, focusing on key ideas such as emotional freedom, confidence, social behavior change, and identity transformation. These codes were organized into broader themes that reflect the role of foreign language as a "mask" in self-expression.

Trustworthiness and Validity: To ensure credibility, member checking was applied by sharing summaries of the findings with several participants for confirmation. Triangulation was

achieved by comparing interview data with questionnaire responses. Detailed descriptions and direct quotations were used to enhance the authenticity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations: Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the aims of the study. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely. Participants had the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Limitations: The study is limited to a small sample of university students, which may restrict generalizability. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data may be influenced by participants' subjective interpretations. However, the depth of qualitative data provides valuable insight into the phenomenon.

Result: The analysis of interview transcripts and questionnaire responses revealed several recurring themes that illustrate how foreign language use influences self-expression and identity. The findings indicate that participants consistently experienced psychological, emotional, and behavioral changes when communicating in a foreign language.

Increased Confidence and Freedom of Expression

Most participants reported feeling more confident and less anxious when speaking a foreign language. They stated that making mistakes in a foreign language felt less embarrassing than in their native language. This reduced fear of judgment encouraged them to speak more freely, express opinions openly, and participate more actively in discussions.

Emotional Distance and Reduced Sensitivity

A significant number of participants noted emotional detachment when using a foreign language. Sensitive topics such as love, personal problems, and fears were easier to discuss in English than in Uzbek. Participants explained that foreign language use created a psychological distance, making emotions feel less intense and more manageable.

Identity Shift and Personality Change

Many respondents described a noticeable change in personality depending on the language used. In their native language, they felt more reserved and emotionally connected, while in a foreign language, they perceived themselves as more direct, bold, and independent. This suggests that language choice plays a key role in shaping self-perception and social identity.

Cultural Influence on Communication Style

Participants highlighted that foreign languages influenced their behavior through cultural norms embedded in the language. For example, when speaking English, they tended to be more direct and assertive, while in Uzbek, they followed traditional politeness and respect norms. This shift demonstrates how language carries cultural scripts that affect interaction patterns.

In addition, several participants emphasized that using a foreign language gave them a sense of emotional safety. They felt less exposed and less judged, especially when expressing controversial opinions or personal feelings. This sense of safety encouraged honesty and openness, which they often avoided in their native language due to social expectations and fear of misunderstanding.

Another recurring theme was reduced social pressure. Participants explained that when speaking a foreign language, they were less concerned about social norms, traditions, and family expectations. This freedom allowed them to experiment with different ways of speaking, joking, and interacting. As a result, many felt more relaxed and authentic in foreign language conversations, even though the language itself was not native.

Furthermore, participants reported changes in voice tone, body language, and emotional intensity when switching languages. Some stated that their voice became softer or more confident in English, while others felt more expressive and animated. This suggests that language influences not only verbal expression but also non-verbal behavior, reinforcing the idea that identity is closely tied to linguistic choice.

Interestingly, a few participants mentioned that prolonged use of a foreign language led to a gradual blending of identities. They felt that over time, the "mask" became part of their real self, and the distinction between native and foreign language personalities became less clear. This indicates that language is not only a temporary mask but can also reshape long-term self-perception.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that foreign languages function as powerful tools for emotional regulation, identity exploration, and self-expression. The participants' experiences confirm that language choice significantly affects how individuals think, feel, and present themselves to others.

Discussion: The findings of this study confirm that foreign language use significantly influences self-expression, emotional experience, and identity construction. The participants' reports of increased confidence, emotional distance, and personality shifts strongly support the concept of language as a mask. When speaking a foreign language, individuals do not simply translate their thoughts; they reconstruct their identities through new linguistic and cultural frameworks.

One of the most striking results is the increase in confidence and freedom of expression. This aligns with previous psycholinguistic research suggesting that a foreign language reduces self-monitoring and fear of negative evaluation. Because emotional attachment to a second language is weaker than to the mother tongue, speakers feel less vulnerable and more willing to take risks. In this sense, the foreign language functions as a psychological shield that protects the speaker from embarrassment and social judgment. The theme of emotional distance also supports earlier studies on the "foreign language effect," which indicate that people process emotions less intensely in a non-native language. Participants in this study found it easier to discuss personal and sensitive topics in English than in Uzbek, suggesting that emotional detachment allows for more rational and controlled expression. This emotional buffering strengthens the idea of language as a mask that softens emotional impact and enables self-disclosure.

Furthermore, the reported identity shifts highlight the dynamic nature of the self. Participants perceived themselves as more assertive, independent, or open-minded in a foreign language, while more reserved and emotionally connected in their native language. This supports the theory that identity is not fixed but context-dependent and shaped by linguistic and cultural environments. Each language carries its own cultural values, communication styles, and social expectations, which influence how speakers behave and perceive themselves.

The cultural influence observed in communication styles further emphasizes the inseparability of language and culture. When participants adopted English, they also adopted its directness and individualistic orientation, contrasting with the politeness and relational focus of Uzbek communication. This demonstrates that speaking a foreign language involves entering a different cultural worldview, which reshapes interaction patterns and self-presentation. Interestingly, some participants reported a blending of identities over time, suggesting that the "mask" may gradually become integrated into the self. This finding indicates that foreign language use can lead not only to temporary role-playing but also to long-term identity transformation. As multilingual individuals navigate between languages, they develop flexible identities that adapt to different social contexts.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of multilingual identity by showing that foreign languages are not neutral tools but powerful psychological and cultural forces. They enable individuals to explore hidden aspects of themselves, manage emotions, and redefine who they are in social interaction. Recognizing language as a mask deepens our understanding of the relationship between language, identity, and human experience in an increasingly globalized world.

This study demonstrates that foreign languages play a transformative role in self-expression, emotional regulation, and identity construction. Speaking a foreign language often allows individuals to adopt new ways of thinking, feel less emotionally constrained, and express aspects of themselves that may remain hidden in their native language. The concept of language as a mask is strongly supported, as participants reported increased confidence, emotional detachment, and shifts in personality depending on the language they used.

The findings also highlight the interplay between language and culture: adopting a foreign language often entails adopting its cultural norms and communication patterns, which in turn influence behavior, social interaction, and self-perception. Over time, the use of a foreign language can even contribute to a blending or expansion of identity, showing that multilingualism is not merely linguistic but deeply personal and psychological.

Understanding the role of foreign languages in shaping self-expression has practical implications for education, cross-cultural communication, and personal development. It suggests that language learning is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional and identity-building experience. In an increasingly globalized world, appreciating how languages act as masks can help individuals navigate multicultural environments while exploring the multiple facets of their own identities.

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