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Between Languages, Beyond Words: Emotional Expression and Code-Switching in Bilinguals

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ABSTRACT

Code-switching, the alternation between two or more languages within a single interaction, is a ubiquitous feature of bilingual communication traditionally examined through linguistic or cognitive lenses. However, growing evidence reveals that code-switching also serves critical emotional functions, allowing bilingual speakers to express, regulate, and modulate emotions in context-sensitive ways. This literature review synthesizes interdisciplinary research from sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and neurocognitive studies to explore the emotional dimensions of code-switching. It highlights how language choice is influenced by emotional resonance, cultural identity, and interpersonal goals, and demonstrates how code-switching facilitates emotional authenticity, psychological distancing, and social intimacy. Practical implications are discussed across educational, therapeutic, and professional settings, with attention to how emotional code-switching enhances communication and belonging. The review concludes by identifying key gaps in current research—such as understudied language pairs, age-related patterns, and the need for longitudinal studies—and proposes future directions that leverage technological advancements to deepen our understanding of bilingual emotional life.

Keywords: *Code-switching, Bilingualism, Emotional Expression, Emotional Regulation, Language, Emotionality. Cultural Identity, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Multilingual Communication, Interpersonal Relationships*

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INTRODUCTION

Code-switching—the practice of shifting between two or more languages in the course of a single conversation or utterance—is a familiar and natural part of life for many bilingual and multilingual individuals. This linguistic phenomenon reflects the speaker’s ability to adapt to shifting communicative, cultural, and emotional demands. From casual chats with family to formal interactions in school or work settings, code-switching plays a key role in how people express themselves, negotiate meaning, and connect with others (Poplack, 1980; Myers-Scotton, 1993).

For decades, researchers have studied the structural and grammatical dimensions of code-switching, examining when and how these shifts occur (Poplack, 1980). Myers-Scotton’s (1993) Markedness Model, for instance, shows how speakers signal shifts in tone, social alignment, or context by switching languages. More recently, scholars have begun to explore the emotional and relational dimensions of code-switching, recognizing that switching languages is not only about grammar and fluency—it is also deeply tied to identity, emotion, and personal history (Grosjean, 2010).

Language choice is rarely neutral for bilingual speakers. Different languages often carry distinct emotional weights, shaped by a person’s cultural background, formative experiences, and the contexts in which each language was learned. According to the Emotional Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis (Perlovsky, 2009), languages learned early in emotionally rich environments—like at home during childhood—tend to evoke stronger emotional responses than those learned later in school or professional settings. These emotional differences help explain why a person might suddenly switch to their native language when feeling overwhelmed, nostalgic, or angry.

This ability to draw on more than one language allows bilinguals to use code-switching as a tool for emotional expression and regulation. They may switch to their native tongue to express vulnerability or switch to their second language to create a bit of emotional distance. Although these practices are becoming better understood, there is still much we do not know about why people choose one language over another in emotional situations—and what these choices mean.

Some studies have explored how bilinguals use code-switching in intimate settings—such as family conversations or romantic relationships—but fewer have examined how it relates to emotion regulation, conflict resolution, or expressions of social belonging. Understanding these dynamics is especially important in today’s increasingly multilingual societies, where emotional and cultural experiences are often interwoven across languages (Green & Wei, 2014; Pavlenko, 2012).

The goal of this review is to bring together what we know about how bilinguals use code-switching to express, regulate, and manage emotions. Drawing on research from sociolinguistics, psychology, and neuroscience, it highlights the cultural and personal meanings behind language choice, and explores how code-switching helps people connect with others, manage emotional intensity, and navigate everyday

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interactions. The paper also looks at how this knowledge can be applied in real-world settings—like schools, therapy, and workplaces—and outlines directions for future research on this complex and deeply human aspect of bilingual life.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Cognitive Mechanisms: Language Control and Emotional Interference

The cognitive underpinnings of code-switching behavior provide critical insights into the dynamic processes of bilingual language control and emotional expression. Green's (1998) Inhibitory Control Model offers a foundational framework, proposing that bilingual language selection involves active cognitive control to suppress non-target languages while enabling the production of the intended one. According to this model, emotionally heightened states can impair inhibitory mechanisms, thereby increasing the likelihood of involuntary code-switching. This phenomenon occurs because emotional arousal can compromise executive control resources, allowing previously suppressed language systems to surface.

Neuroimaging studies lend empirical support to this perspective, revealing that language switching, particularly in emotionally salient contexts, elicits enhanced activation in prefrontal cortical regions associated with executive control (Abutalebi & Green, 2016). Complementing the Inhibitory Control Model, the Bilingual Interactive Activation Plus (BIA+) model (Dijkstra & van Heuven, 2002) suggests that emotional stimuli differentially activate lexical representations depending on the emotional resonance of the language. Emotional words encoded in the first language (L1) often receive privileged access, reflecting the deep emotional associations formed during early language acquisition. Together, these cognitive frameworks underscore that emotional arousal is a potent modulator of bilingual language activation, directly influencing the propensity to code-switch in effectively charged environments.

Emotional Resonance Across Languages: The Language Emotionality Hypothesis

The emotional dimensions of code-switching are further illuminated through the Language Emotionality Hypothesis, often referred to as the emotional Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Perlovsky, 2009). This theoretical perspective posits that languages are not emotionally neutral vessels but instead shape emotional experience and expression in unique ways. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that bilingual individuals report stronger emotional intensities when communicating in their native language compared to a second language, with L1 often serving as a more authentic medium for emotional articulation (Pavlenko, 2012).

This emotional asymmetry emerges not only from developmental timing but also from the cultural frameworks embedded within each language. As Robinson and Altarriba (2014) note, emotional concepts are frequently culture-specific, with some emotions being lexicalized in one language but lacking direct equivalents in another. This phenomenon of "emotional untranslatability" often necessitates code-switching when bilingual individuals seek to authentically convey emotional nuances. Cultural and contextual factors further shape

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emotional resonance, as display rules and expectations regarding emotional expression vary widely across linguistic communities (Dewaele, 2010). For instance, bilingual speakers may perceive their native language as more emotionally vivid and personally meaningful, influencing their decision to switch languages in emotionally charged conversations. These findings align with Williams et al.'s (2020) observations that heightened emotional states often lead bilingual speakers to revert to their emotionally dominant language.

Social and Pragmatic Motivations: Code-Switching for Identity, Intimacy, and Solidarity

Beyond cognitive and emotional mechanisms, socio-pragmatic theories provide additional layers of explanation for code-switching behavior. Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model offers a valuable framework for understanding code-switching as a socially motivated strategy. According to this model, bilinguals make deliberate language choices based on the perceived norms of a given social context, opting for "marked" or "unmarked" language selections to signal identity, negotiate group membership, or manage interpersonal relationships. In emotionally charged interactions, code-switching may thus serve as a socially meaningful act, signaling solidarity, emotional intimacy, or psychological distancing.

Politeness theory further contextualizes code-switching within interpersonal dynamics. Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework highlights how language alternation can serve as a face-saving strategy, helping speakers navigate culturally sensitive interactions by mitigating threats to positive or negative face. In bilingual settings, code-switching can function as a subtle mechanism for softening emotional expression, enhancing rapport, or expressing deference.

Moreover, research underscores the role of code-switching in fostering emotional closeness and group cohesion. Grosjean (2010) emphasizes that bilingual speakers often deploy different languages strategically to regulate emotional proximity—either deepening emotional connections or creating emotional distance depending on their communicative goals. In-group linguistic codes become powerful markers of shared identity, reinforcing bonds of trust and solidarity within bilingual communities.

Collectively, these cognitive, emotional, and socio-pragmatic perspectives portray code-switching as a multifaceted phenomenon. Far from being merely a linguistic convenience, code-switching emerges as a complex socioemotional strategy, allowing bilingual individuals to navigate their multifarious cultural identities and manage nuanced interpersonal relationships across diverse social contexts.

Building upon these theoretical frameworks, a growing body of empirical research has sought to validate and extend these models by examining bilingual code-switching behaviors in real-world emotional contexts. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that emotional salience plays a pivotal role in bilinguals' language selection, influencing not only when code-switching occurs but also how it functions as a tool for emotional expression and regulation. The following section synthesizes key empirical findings that illuminate the dynamic interplay between emotional context, linguistic choice, and social interaction among bilingual

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speakers, offering concrete evidence for the cognitive, emotional, and socio-pragmatic mechanisms previously outlined.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Code-Switching as Emotional Expression

Empirical research consistently demonstrates the significant influence of emotional context on bilinguals' code-switching behaviors, particularly during emotionally charged interactions. Studies examining language-switching patterns reveal distinct emotional trajectories that shape linguistic choices among bilingual speakers. For instance, Dewaele and Nakano (2012) surveyed multilingual participants and found that bilingual individuals typically revert to their first language (L1) when navigating traumatic or intensely negative experiences, primarily due to the heightened emotional resonance and perceived authenticity of their native tongue. This pattern aligns with qualitative feedback from participants who reported that "speaking about emotional memories in my mother tongue feels more genuine and connected," underscoring the intrinsic emotional bond between native language and authentic expression.

Interestingly, research also indicates that positive emotional states are more often associated with second language (L2) usage, suggesting that lighter emotional contexts demand less psychological vulnerability. Pavlenko's (2012) theoretical framework proposes that second languages, typically acquired in less emotionally charged learning environments, generate fewer automatic emotional associations, making them preferable for expressing casual or non-intense emotional content. Supporting this, Williams et al. (2020) provide compelling empirical evidence from Chinese-American family interactions, demonstrating that joyful emotions like excitement were commonly expressed in English (L2), while intense emotions such as anger triggered switches to Mandarin (L1). Liu's (2023) cultural analysis further expands this understanding, noting that speakers from cultures valuing emotional restraint may deliberately select their second language to moderate the expression of negative emotions. These findings illustrate the critical intersection of emotional valence, cultural norms, and language choice in bilingual emotional communication.

Code-Switching for Emotional Regulation

Beyond emotional expression, code-switching also functions as a sophisticated emotional regulation strategy that enables bilinguals to modulate emotional intensity through psychological distancing. The concept of "emotional distancing" refers to the cognitive process through which individuals reduce emotional involvement in charged situations; second languages facilitate this distancing due to their relatively weaker emotional associations compared to first languages (Pavlenko, 2012). Williams et al.'s (2020) ethnographic study of immigrant Chinese-American families revealed that parents often transitioned from English (L2) to Mandarin (L1) when disciplining children or expressing anger, strategically employing their native language to intensify emotional communication. Conversely, children often shifted to English during moments of emotional overwhelm, deliberately utilizing their second language to create psychological distance from stressful

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interactions. Liu's (2023) research further substantiates this regulatory function, documenting how bilingual participants intentionally alternated between languages to reduce emotional vulnerability when discussing distressing experiences. This adaptive emotional regulation mechanism proves particularly beneficial for stress management and conflict resolution, allowing bilingual individuals to minimize anxiety, mitigate emotional distress, and navigate challenging interpersonal dynamics more effectively.

However, empirical evidence also highlights significant variability in the frequency and effectiveness of code-switching as a regulatory strategy across bilingual populations. Factors such as individual language proficiency, the duration of second language exposure, and cultural attitudes toward emotional expressiveness substantially influence these outcomes (Dewaele, 2010; Liu, 2023). Thus, while code-switching provides a powerful emotional tool for many bilinguals, its utility is mediated by personal and sociocultural factors.

Code-Switching in Relationships

In addition to individual emotional regulation, empirical investigations highlight the interpersonal and relational consequences of emotional code-switching, particularly within bilingual families and intimate relationships. Williams et al. (2020) documented parent-child interactions among Chinese-American families where parents frequently switched to their native language during emotionally intimate exchanges, such as providing comfort or expressing affection. Similarly, bilingual couples report strategically alternating languages to create shared emotional spaces that foster deeper intimacy and mutual understanding. The psychological mechanism underlying this enhanced intimacy involves increased emotional authenticity and alignment with culturally resonant emotional norms, thereby facilitating genuine emotional disclosure and connection (Dewaele, 2010).

Conversely, the strategic deployment of a second language can effectively buffer interpersonal conflicts by creating emotional distance during highly charged interactions. Cultural variations significantly influence these relational outcomes; Liu (2023) documented that bilingual individuals from emotionally restrained cultural backgrounds often employ their second language during conflicts to minimize emotional escalation and preserve relational harmony. However, studies also acknowledge potential limitations to emotional code-switching. Frequent switching between languages may inadvertently generate misunderstandings, particularly when conversation partners possess asymmetric language proficiencies, which can complicate rather than clarify emotional communication (Williams et al., 2020).

Neurocognitive Evidence

Neurocognitive evidence further substantiates these behavioral findings by revealing distinct patterns of brain activity during emotional code-switching. Electrophysiological studies, particularly those using Event-Related Potentials (ERPs), have identified significant variations in neural responses when bilingual individuals alternate languages during emotional discourse. ERP methodologies, which measure brain responses to stimuli through scalp electrode recordings, offer fine-grained temporal resolution in observing how the brain

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processes emotional and linguistic information. Emotional stimuli presented in a speaker's first language consistently evoke stronger autonomic responses and heightened activation in emotion-processing regions, including the amygdala and hippocampus (Harris et al., 2003).

The amygdala plays a central role in processing emotional salience, particularly fear and pleasure responses, while the hippocampus facilitates emotional memory formation and retrieval, explaining their pronounced involvement during emotional language processing. ERP studies across diverse bilingual populations, including Spanish-English and Turkish-English speakers, reveal that language pairs and cultural backgrounds modulate emotional neural responses, reflecting the intersectionality of emotionality, language dominance, and cultural identity (Harris et al., 2003). Despite these robust findings, researchers emphasize that considerable individual variability remains, influenced by factors such as bilingual proficiency, cultural exposure, and the contexts of language acquisition. These neurocognitive insights enrich our understanding of how bilingualism intricately links emotion, cognition, and linguistic behavior.

Together, these empirical findings underscore that code-switching is not merely a linguistic behavior but a complex emotional, cognitive, and social strategy intricately woven into bilingual individuals' lives. Emotional resonance, regulatory needs, cultural norms, and interpersonal dynamics all converge to shape language choices in powerful ways. Recognizing these multilayered influences is crucial for translating theoretical and empirical insights into practice. The following section explores how understanding the emotional dimensions of code-switching can inform real-world applications, particularly in educational, therapeutic, and interpersonal communication contexts, where emotional authenticity and cultural sensitivity are essential for effective engagement.

APPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Educational Contexts

Code-switching plays a crucial role in supporting bilingual students' emotional expression and academic engagement within classroom environments. For students whose first language differs from the language of instruction—such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learner (ELL) students in North America—code-switching can offer a means of participating more authentically in both social and academic activities. Alternating between languages allows students to express complex emotions, ideas, or unfamiliar concepts more comfortably by utilizing the language they are most proficient in. For instance, Spanish-dominant students may find it easier to articulate nuanced emotions or thoughts using familiar Spanish vocabulary.

Teachers' responses to code-switching often vary, but educators who encourage multilingual expression typically observe greater student engagement, emotional comfort, and linguistic development. Rather than restricting this natural behavior, culturally responsive teaching practices can support emotional well-being by validating students' linguistic identities. For example, a student expressing fatigue by saying "Estoy cansado/a"

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may receive an empathetic response from a teacher who acknowledges, "Oh, I see you're tired." Such bilingual exchanges promote emotional authenticity, increase students' learning confidence, and help bridge gaps between home and school cultural environments.

Therapeutic Settings

In therapeutic environments, bilingualism becomes an essential tool for emotional expression and psychological healing. Therapy often demands the articulation of vulnerable emotions and complex life experiences, making language choice highly consequential. Bilingual clients frequently find that their first language—or the language spoken during formative childhood years—carries stronger emotional resonance than languages learned later, particularly in academic or professional contexts. Early life experiences, emotional relationships, and cultural nuances are often encoded in one's native tongue, making L1 a more authentic medium for exploring deeply rooted feelings (Pavlenko, 2012).

Allowing clients to code-switch or conduct sessions partially or entirely in their native language can enhance therapeutic outcomes by fostering emotional authenticity and safety. Therapists attuned to the emotional significance of language choices can use these linguistic shifts as diagnostic tools, gaining deeper insight into clients' emotional worlds. Conversely, encouraging patients to use a second language when discussing overwhelming material can support emotional regulation by creating psychological distance, allowing difficult topics to be processed with greater manageability. Thus, sensitivity to bilingual clients' language preferences becomes a cornerstone of effective, culturally competent therapy.

Workplace Environments

In professional settings, code-switching serves as a dynamic strategy for managing communication across culturally diverse workplaces. Newcomers to a foreign country, for example, often rely on experienced bilingual colleagues to facilitate initial communication, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Over time, these newcomers may transition into intermediary roles themselves, supporting new employees unfamiliar with the local language and customs. This evolution highlights how code-switching not only eases emotional expression but also fosters empathetic collaboration and mentorship in the workplace.

A personal illustration of this dynamic can be seen in the experience of a Guatemalan family working alongside diverse coworkers, including Asian and Korean colleagues. Initially relying on others for Spanish language support, they gradually became intermediaries themselves, helping newer colleagues adapt to the linguistic environment. This illustrates how code-switching facilitates both practical communication and social bonding, creating pathways for deeper intercultural understanding.

Furthermore, code-switching in professional environments can promote empathy and solidarity among coworkers from diverse backgrounds. For instance, at a South Korean company collaborating with Korean-American professionals, native Korean workers might strategically incorporate familiar Korean phrases

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into casual conversation to ease cultural transitions. During a demanding late-night meeting, a spontaneous exclamation such as "*Aigoo, jukketda!*" (expressing exhaustion) might prompt laughter and a playful English response like "*Seriously, I need a kimbap ASAP!*" A European colleague might chime in with "*Fighting!*"—a pan-cultural Korean encouragement phrase. These small moments of linguistic flexibility foster camaraderie, emotional authenticity, and team cohesion far more effectively than strict adherence to a single working language.

Social Identity and Belonging

In social settings, code-switching powerfully influences identity construction and feelings of group belonging. By alternating languages, bilingual individuals actively navigate and reflect multiple aspects of their cultural identities, offering richer opportunities for self-expression and cross-cultural connection. This practice fosters inclusivity, allowing individuals to acknowledge and embrace linguistic and cultural differences within social networks.

Code-switching creates spaces where diverse cultural backgrounds are not only recognized but celebrated, strengthening emotional bonds and facilitating mutual respect. In multicultural professional or social environments, strategic language alternation can bridge gaps between social groups, fostering empathy and creating a sense of shared belonging. The example of Korean, Korean-American, and European coworkers navigating multilingual exchanges illustrates how bilingual practices can cultivate emotional resilience, shared vulnerability, and deeper collaboration through adaptive communication strategies. By weaving multiple languages into everyday interactions, individuals strengthen interpersonal trust and build richer, more emotionally attuned communities.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While recent scholarship has begun to uncover the emotional significance of code-switching, substantial gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research has focused on a limited set of language pairs and cultural contexts, and has largely relied on cross-sectional or self-reported data. To deepen our understanding of how emotional and linguistic processes intersect in bilingual speakers, future research must address several key areas.

Understudied Language Pairs and Cultural Contexts

The majority of empirical studies on emotional code-switching have concentrated on widely spoken languages, such as English-Spanish or English-Mandarin combinations, often within Western cultural frameworks. However, bilingualism is a global phenomenon that takes diverse forms across regions, from Arabic-French speakers in North Africa to Swahili-English bilinguals in East Africa. Emotional norms and code-switching behaviors are culturally bound, and findings from dominant language pairings may not

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generalize across all communities. Expanding the scope of research to include underrepresented language pairs and cultural settings will offer a more comprehensive and inclusive picture of emotional bilingualism.

Emotional Nuance Across Age Groups

Age is a critical yet underexplored factor in how bilinguals engage in emotional code-switching. Older adults, who often learned their first language in emotionally rich childhood environments, may show stronger emotional resonance with L1, while younger bilinguals, particularly those immersed in multilingual environments from an early age, may demonstrate more fluid emotional associations across languages. Developmental and generational perspectives could reveal how emotional expression through code-switching evolves over the lifespan, and how language socialization shapes emotional competence in bilingual speakers.

Technological and Methodological Advancements

Emerging technologies offer promising avenues for advancing research on emotional code-switching. Natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis tools powered by artificial intelligence can be leveraged to detect emotional content and switching patterns in a large corpora of bilingual speech, including social media, chat logs, and multilingual forums. Multimodal analysis—incorporating physiological data, facial expressions, or prosody—can further enrich our understanding of how emotions are expressed across languages in real time. These approaches will enable researchers to move beyond self-reports and capture more nuanced, ecologically valid data on bilingual emotional communication.

Longitudinal and Dynamic Studies

Most existing research on emotional code-switching is cross-sectional, capturing isolated snapshots of bilingual behavior. However, emotional experiences, language proficiency, and identity affiliations change over time. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore how the relationship between language and emotion evolves across key life transitions, such as migration, aging, or identity shifts. Such studies would allow for a dynamic view of how emotional code-switching develops, stabilizes, or transforms throughout a speaker's lifetime.

CONCLUSION

Code-switching is far more than a linguistic phenomenon—it is a deeply emotional, cognitive, and social practice through which bilingual individuals navigate identity, communicate authenticity, and manage interpersonal relationships. Drawing from theoretical frameworks in bilingual language control, emotional resonance, and socio-pragmatic strategy, this review has highlighted how bilingual speakers strategically alternate between languages to express, regulate, and process emotions in contextually sensitive ways. Empirical research, including behavioral, ethnographic, and neurocognitive studies, consistently supports the idea that language choice is both psychologically motivated and culturally embedded.

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From classrooms to therapy rooms, and from family conversations to workplace meetings, code-switching functions as a tool for emotional alignment, identity negotiation, and relational connection. Its role in promoting emotional authenticity, regulating psychological distance, and fostering cultural belonging positions it as a central element of bilingual life, not a peripheral one. Recognizing this emotional dimension of code-switching has significant implications for educators, clinicians, and intercultural communicators who seek to support multilingual individuals in diverse settings.

Despite the growing body of research, key questions remain: How do individual differences such as age of acquisition, emotional intelligence, or cultural attitudes shape code-switching patterns? How do digital communication environments influence emotional code-switching? Future research should further explore the intersections of emotion, cognition, and culture in shaping bilingual speech, while also investigating how these dynamics evolve over time.

Ultimately, code-switching reflects the bilingual speaker's ability to move not just between languages, but between emotional worlds. Understanding this phenomenon requires us to see language not merely as a vehicle of meaning, but as a deeply human medium for feeling, connecting, and belonging.

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