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Bilingualism and Issues of Identity: A Sociolinguistic Study with Special Reference to Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intricate relationship between bilingualism and identity construction, with a particular focus on the Pakistani sociolinguistic context. Drawing on an extensive review of existing literature and an analytical case study of the Hindi film *English Vinglish* (2012), the article argues that bilingualism, far from being a purely linguistic phenomenon, is deeply embedded in the social, political, and psychological fabric of a speaker's identity. In Pakistan's tri-lingual structure, where speakers navigate between vernacular regional languages, Urdu as the national language, and English as the official language of power, identity construction becomes a site of contest, negotiation, and crisis. The article demonstrates how the hierarchical valuation of languages engenders issues of prestige, shame, and loyalty that determine not only linguistic choices but also social mobility and self-perception. The case study of *English Vinglish*, though a Hindi film, illustrates these dynamics in the South Asian context by tracing the protagonist's journey from identity crisis to self-actualization. The article concludes by advocating an acceptance-based framework for bilingual identity that acknowledges the compound, rather than conflicting, nature of bilingual selfhood.

1. Introduction

Language has long served as more than a mere instrument of communication. Language functions as more than a medium of communication; it shapes identities, values, and individuals' perceptions of their relationship with the surrounding world (Hussain et al., 2025). Language is not ideologically neutral; discourse contributes to the production of social identities by framing how individuals and communities are perceived within broader political contexts (Younas & Riaz, 2024). It is, as linguists and social theorists have repeatedly demonstrated, a constitutive force that shapes realities, enacts attitudes, and mediates the relationship between the individual and the social world. Nowhere is this mediating role more apparent than in bilingual and multilingual contexts, where speakers must negotiate between two or more linguistic systems that are rarely, if

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ever, socially neutral. Each language carried by a speaker comes embedded with its own history, its own community of use, its own economy of prestige and stigma and, crucially, its own implications for identity.

The global demographic context renders this issue increasingly significant. As *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Lewis, 2009) documents, over 6,900 languages are spoken worldwide, yet a profound asymmetry characterizes their distribution: a mere six percent of languages account for ninety-four percent of the world's speakers. The pressures exerted by dominant languages, most conspicuously English, which has assumed the role of a global lingua franca on smaller and regional languages have generated sweeping transformations in language use across the world. Urbanization, migration, colonial legacies, and globalization have all accelerated the conditions under which individuals come to inhabit two or more languages simultaneously. In such circumstances, the question of who one is linguistically, culturally, and socially becomes neither simple nor stable.

This article examines the relationship between bilingualism and identity with a dual focus. First, it situates the issue within Pakistan's distinctive linguistic landscape, where a tri-lingual structure has created complex hierarchies of prestige and belonging. Second, it offers a close observation of the Hindi film *English Vinglish* (Shinde, 2012) as a cultural text that dramatizes the psychosocial dimensions of bilingual identity crisis and its potential resolution. The analytical framework draws on sociolinguistic theory, social psychology, and post-colonial perspectives to illuminate the ways in which bilingualism becomes not merely a feature of an individual's communicative repertoire, but a defining and often destabilizing element of self.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Defining Bilingualism

Bilingualism, in its most broadly understood sense, refers to the use of two languages by an individual or within a community. However, the apparent simplicity of this definition conceals considerable theoretical complexity. Hamers and Blanc (2004, p. 6) distinguish between societal bilingualism the state of a linguistic community in which two languages are in contact and individual bilingualism, or bilinguality, which they define as "the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication." They note that the degree of such access varies along a range of psychological, social, and linguistic dimensions.

Grosjean (2010, p. 5) offers a more pragmatic and inclusive definition, identifying bilinguals as "those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives." This definition, as Grosjean himself notes, shifts the emphasis from the contested criterion of fluency to the more observable criterion of actual language use. It has the additional advantage of avoiding the maximalist demand, prevalent in popular perception, that a bilingual must demonstrate equal or near-native competency in both languages. In reality, most bilinguals are rarely symmetrically proficient across their two languages; levels of fluency are typically domain-specific, reflecting the unequal demands placed on each language in different contexts of a speaker's life.

Appel and Muysken (2005) further describe three ideal types of societal bilingualism: communities in which each language group is internally monolingual with bilingual intermediaries; communities in which most individuals possess some degree of bilingualism; and communities in which one group is bilingual while the other remains monolingual, typically due to social subordination. Pakistan represents elements of all three types, with significant regional and socioeconomic variation.

For the purposes of this article, bilingualism is understood as the knowledge and habitual use of two languages to a degree sufficient for meaningful communicative engagement, without prejudging the question of relative proficiency. This operational definition allows for the inclusion of speakers who may be highly competent in one language and partially competent in another, a circumstance that characterizes many speakers in postcolonial societies like Pakistan.

2.2. Identity and Identity Crisis

Identity, as a theoretical construct, encompasses a speaker's sense of who they are, both as an individual and as a member of social groups. The *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* (2001, p. 332) describes identity as an individual's mental representation of selfhood, comprising both a sense of personal continuity and a sense of social membership. Erikson (1970, p. 20) offered an influential formulation of identity as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image." For Erikson, identity emerges through the dialectic between the given, biological constitution, early experience and the chosen: social roles, ideological commitments, and interpersonal bonds. Identity is not a fixed personal attribute but is continuously performed and negotiated through patterns of language use in specific social and cultural contexts (Tahir et al., 2025). Identity is constructed through discourse, with linguistic choices contributing to the production, reinforcement, and negotiation of social identities within specific cultural

contexts (Riaz et al., 2024). Identity is continually reconstructed in response to changing social realities, demonstrating the close relationship between individual experiences and wider societal conditions (Tahir et al., 2024).

Blommaert (2008, p. 83) emphasizes the composite nature of identity, arguing that what we are at any given moment is "a blend of inhabited and ascribed identities, of things we seek to articulate ourselves and of things that others believe we articulate." This formulation is particularly pertinent to bilingual speakers, whose identities are often as much a product of how they are perceived by monolinguals as of how they perceive themselves. In bilingual contexts, language becomes a key site at which this negotiation between self-ascription and other-ascription plays out.

The concept of identity crisis was coined by Erik Erikson to describe a period of heightened self-questioning and social disorientation, most characteristic of adolescence but by no means confined to it. Erikson described such a crisis as "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (quoted in Feist and Feist, 2009, p. 263). In the context of bilingualism, identity crisis refers more specifically to the disorientation and internal conflict that arises when a speaker cannot fully reconcile the two (or more) social identities associated with their two languages. When linguistic competence in the dominant or prestigious language is lacking, the individual may find themselves excluded from the social world that language inhabits, with consequent damage to self-esteem and a sense of social belonging.

Rogers' person-centered theory offers a complementary psychological framework: identity confusion arises when there is incongruence between the organismic self, one's authentic felt experience and the perceived self, the image that one presents or is forced to present to others. For bilingual speakers in hierarchically organized linguistic environments, this incongruence is frequently structurally imposed: the social world values a language in which they may have limited competence, while devaluing the language in which they are most fully themselves.

3. Literature Review: Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Identity

3.1. Language as Identity

The theoretical literature converges on a view of language not merely as a vehicle for expressing pre-existing identity, but as constitutive of identity itself. Joseph (2004, p. 11) argues that language gives rise to identity by virtue of its capacity to abstract experience into words, making language not only a medium through which identity is expressed but the very substance through which it is constructed. He contends that any serious study of language must engage with identity, since "identity is itself at the very heart of what language is about, how it operates, why and how it came into existence" (Joseph, 2004, p. 204). The representation of social issues through language is never neutral; instead, discourse reflects and reinforces existing social hierarchies, authority, and cultural values (Hussain et al., 2026). Recent research suggests that bilingual speakers strategically employ code-switching to negotiate identity, engage different audiences, and express multiple facets of the self across digital spaces (Riaz et al., 2025).

Llamas and Watt (2010) extend this argument by insisting that language does not merely reflect who we are, it is, in a fundamental sense, what we are. This assertion has important consequences for bilingual speakers: if identity is partly constituted by language, then speaking two languages implies, at least potentially, navigating between two identities. The relationship is further complicated by the fact that neither language nor identity is static; both evolve across contexts, communities, and life stages. Social and cultural environments contribute significantly to identity formation by shaping the cognitive frameworks through which individuals interpret social norms and expectations (Tahir et al., 2024).

3.2. The Bilingual Self: Biculturalism and its Tensions

The coexistence of two languages in a single speaker is often, though not invariably, accompanied by engagement with two cultures. Grosjean (2010) cautions that bilingualism is not coextensive with biculturalism, the two phenomena frequently coincide but are analytically distinct. For those bilingual speakers who are also bicultural, identity negotiation takes on an additional layer of complexity. Being asked to identify with one of two groups to which they belong can produce a form of identity paralysis, particularly when each group regards the bilingual as belonging to the other.

Grosjean (2010, p. 120) illustrates this with the example of young North Africans in France, who are perceived as foreign both in France (the country of their birth) and in their parents' countries of origin. They belong fully to neither world, a predicament that engenders profound ambivalence regarding cultural identity. The optimal resolution Grosjean suggests, is acceptance of dual identity, but this acceptance requires social recognition from both communities, which is frequently withheld.

Pavlenko (2006) documents the broader discursive landscape within which bilingual identity has been theorized, noting that scholars and lay commentators alike have often characterized bilingualism in terms of conflict, schizophrenia, and inner division. From Bossard (1945) to more recent scholars, the dual-language self has been construed as a self at war with itself. The emotions catalogued in bilingual narratives, guilt over linguistic disloyalties, insecurity about the legitimacy of the second

language, sadness at feeling divided, testify to the psychic costs of inhabiting two linguistic worlds in societies that typically valorize linguistic singularity.

3.3. Bilingualism and Identity in North American Contexts

Schmid (2001) demonstrates that in the United States, despite its celebrated self-image as a nation of immigrants, the relationship between language and national identity has been persistently exclusionary. English has functioned not merely as a shared medium of communication but as a symbolic criterion of Americanness, such that immigrant communities have typically faced strong pressure toward linguistic assimilation, a process Schmid characterizes as "subtractive linguistic acculturation" (2001, p. 99). The result has been widespread loss of heritage languages across immigrant generations, accompanied by attendant losses of ethnic identity and cultural continuity.

Canada presents a contrasting model, in which official bilingualism, English and French, has been institutionalized at the federal level. Schmid argues that the survival of French-Canadian identity in Quebec reflects a sustained collective resistance to anglicization, enabled by territorial concentration, institutional support, and a strong sense of linguistic identity among Francophone Quebecers. Canada's experience suggests that bilingualism can be successfully sustained at the societal level when it is accompanied by political recognition and institutional backing, conditions that are rarely met in postcolonial contexts.

3.4. Asian and South Asian Perspectives

Tse's (2000) analysis of published narratives by Asian Americans reveals that for many speakers of Asian heritage languages in the United States, ethnic language proficiency has been experienced primarily as a source of shame and social marginalization, while English proficiency has been constructed as the emblem of belonging and prestige. The structural devaluation of heritage languages in the educational system reinforces these attitudes, creating a feedback loop that accelerates language shift and erodes ethnic identity.

Kachru (in Baumgardner, 1996) draws attention to the particularly complex linguistic landscape of South Asia, where over 160 years of British colonialism have made English a language of power and prestige while simultaneously rendering it a marker of social inequality. South Asian speakers of English, Kachru notes, have not learned the language as equals: their relationship with English is mediated by a colonial history in which it signified domination and exclusion. The consequence, as Kachru argues, is that many South Asians present a "double linguistic face" a public posture of English proficiency and a private attachment to the native language, reflecting a form of linguistic schizophrenia built into the very structure of postcolonial society.

Mills' (2001) study of third-generation Pakistani-heritage children in Birmingham, UK, offers a nuanced portrait of bilingual identity among diaspora communities. Despite limited proficiency in the family's heritage languages (Punjabi, Mirpuri, Urdu), the children in Mills' study expressed positive attitudes toward those languages as markers of familial and communal belonging. Language, for these young people, served not as a site of crisis but as a bridge to cultural and religious identity, though they also acknowledged the challenges of managing multiple identities simultaneously.

4. Bilingualism and Identity Construction in Pakistani Society

4.1. The Tri-Lingual Structure

Pakistan presents a rich and challenging linguistic landscape. A nation of approximately 220 million people today, it encompasses considerable ethnolinguistic diversity: Punjabi speakers constitute roughly 38% of the population, followed by speakers of Sindhi (12%), Pashto (11%), Saraiki (9%), Urdu (7%), and Balochi (2%), among others (Coleman, 2010). Urdu, designated the national language by the Constitution of 1973, is the mother tongue of only a small minority but functions as the dominant medium of inter-group communication. English, meanwhile, retains its colonial inheritance as the official language of government, the judiciary, higher education, and corporate commerce.

This arrangement has produced what scholars of Pakistani linguistics describe as a tri-lingual structure (Nadkarni, 1983), in which the individual Pakistani speaker routinely operates in three distinct linguistic registers: the vernacular (for in-group, family, and community communication), Urdu (for broader national communication and domestic literacy), and English (for specific purposes associated with power, prestige, and economic opportunity). The demands of this structure are not trivial: achieving functional competence in all three registers requires sustained effort and access to educational resources that are distributed deeply unequally across the population.

4.2. Language Hierarchies, Prestige, and Identity

Linguistic choices are not neutral; they communicate ideological positions and contribute to the construction of social identities within particular political and cultural contexts (Tahir et al., 2025). Identity is shaped through the interaction of language, culture, and social norms, with literary discourse serving as an important site for the construction and negotiation of social identities (Riaz et al., 2024). The hierarchical organization of Pakistan's linguistic ecology with English at the apex, Urdu in the middle, and regional languages at the base, has profound consequences for identity formation. Rahman (2000, 2004) has extensively documented the ways in which English functions as a language of economic gatekeeping in Pakistan: access to elite employment, higher education, and professional mobility is effectively conditioned on English proficiency, which is itself largely determined by access to English-medium private schooling. The consequence is a deeply stratified linguistic economy in which language competence serves as both a reflection and a determinant of social class.

The attitude of Pakistani society toward English is correspondingly complex. English is simultaneously coveted and resented, coveted for the social and economic capital it confers, and resented for the exclusions it perpetuates. Former Education Minister Zubaida Jalal encapsulated the instrumentalist logic of English promotion: arguing that Pakistan's economic future in the information technology age necessitates widespread English proficiency (Jalal, 2004, p. 24), she positioned English as a public good whose expansion is a governmental duty. While this position reflects a genuine recognition of English's global importance, it also risks naturalizing a linguistic hierarchy that systematically disadvantages those without access to quality English-medium education.

Urdu occupies a different but equally complex position. As Rahman (2000) argues, Urdu's primary social function in Pakistan is political: it serves as the language of national unity, constitutionally designated to transcend ethnic and regional divisions. In performing this function, however, it simultaneously suppresses regional languages and the ethnic identities associated with them. Communities for whom the regional language—Sindhi, Pashto, Punjabi—is the primary medium of cultural life and identity thus face pressure to adopt a language that, while nationally unifying, represents an external imposition on their cultural selfhood.

4.3. Prestige, Shame, and Loyalty

The sociolinguistic consequences of Pakistan's language hierarchy manifest most acutely in the dynamics of prestige, shame, and loyalty. Asif (2004) documents the case of Saraiki, a regional language spoken primarily in south Punjab, whose speakers have been so thoroughly stigmatized in urban educational contexts that many parents have ceased to transmit the language to their children. Interviewees in Asif's study expressed the belief that using Saraiki would contaminate their children's Urdu accent, a striking illustration of the internalization of linguistic hierarchy, in which the native language becomes a source of shame rather than pride. The abandonment of Saraiki is thus experienced not as a linguistic loss but as a social advance, even as it represents the erosion of a deeply rooted cultural identity.

By contrast, Pashto and Sindhi speakers have, to a greater degree, maintained their linguistic loyalties, in part because these languages are sustained by strong regional political movements and institutions. Dorian's observation, cited by Asif (2004), is apposite: language loyalty persists as long as economic and social circumstances are conducive to it. Where a language retains social prestige and institutional support, its speakers are more likely to maintain it; where it does not, the gravitational pull of more prestigious varieties tends to prevail.

4.4. Code-Switching, Code-Mixing, and the Fragmentation of Identity

At the level of everyday linguistic practice, the coexistence of Urdu and English in Pakistani public life has generated pervasive code-switching and code-mixing—the alternation between and blending of two languages within a single communicative event. Rasul (2006) documents this phenomenon in Pakistani electronic media, where English nouns, adjectives, terms of address, acronyms, and phrases are routinely embedded in Urdu discourse. This linguistic hybridity is sometimes celebrated as evidence of creative bilingual competence; it can also be read, however, as a symptom of identity fragmentation, an indication that neither language alone is sufficient to express the hybrid cultural reality of urban Pakistani speakers.

From an identity perspective, code-switching is more than a pragmatic strategy for maximizing communicative efficiency. It signals social alignment, group membership, and aspirational identification. The urban Pakistani professional who code-switches between Urdu and English signals, simultaneously, membership in the national community and aspiration toward the globally connected, economically powerful class associated with English. Yet this very signal can be read as inauthenticity by speakers at either end of the spectrum, those who regard English as a marker of cultural alienation, and those for whom the mixing of languages suggests incomplete mastery of either.

4.5. Self-Identity and the Bilingual's Dilemma

At the level of individual psychology, the question posed by Pakistan's linguistic landscape is stark: to which group does the bilingual speaker belong? Pakistani nationalism, ethnic regionalism, and cosmopolitan globalism each have their own associated language—and each makes competing claims on the individual's sense of self. Rahman (2000) notes that the use of English in power domains enables its speakers to command more resources and opportunities than speakers of other languages; this economic reality creates powerful incentives toward English-medium identity performance, even among those for whom English is not the language of emotional authenticity.

Maslow's framework of self-actualization is illuminating in this context: the bilingual speaker, caught between competing linguistic worlds, may find the highest stage of self-realization the full recognition of one's own worth and potential, blocked by structural barriers that equate linguistic prestige with human value. Children in Pakistan's forty-four or more languages who lack access to mother-tongue education face not only educational disadvantage but also the psychic cost of systematic devaluation of their primary means of self-expression (Coleman, 2010). The identity crisis that results is not merely developmental in Erikson's sense; it is also a product of political and economic structures that distribute the burdens of bilingualism unequally.

5. Case Study: English Vinglish (2012)

5.1. The Film as Sociolinguistic Text

The Hindi film *English Vinglish*, directed by Gauri Shinde and released in 2012, offers a richly textured narrative of bilingual identity crisis in the contemporary South Asian context. The film follows Shashi Godbole (played by Sridevi), a middle-class Marathi homemaker in Mumbai whose limited English proficiency makes her the object of ridicule within her own family and the source of social humiliation in public contexts. When she travels alone to New York to assist with her niece's wedding preparations, her encounter with an English-speaking world outside the familiar comfort of Hindi-speaking India precipitates a crisis of identity that also becomes, ultimately, the occasion for profound self-discovery and self-affirmation.

English Vinglish is significant as a cultural text for multiple reasons. It addresses the sociolinguistic anxieties of a very large constituency, women in particular, but also working-class and lower-middle-class men who lack the English competence that modern India's aspirational culture increasingly demands. It situates these anxieties within the broader legacy of British colonialism, acknowledging that the prestige attached to English in the subcontinent is not a natural or neutral fact but a historically constructed hierarchy. And it proposes, through the arc of its protagonist's experience, a vision of bilingual identity that is neither assimilationist nor nativist, but affirmative: a recognition that competence in a second language need not entail the abandonment of the first.

6. Characters and Their Identity Crises

6.1. Shashi Godbole

Shashi is constructed in the film's opening sequences as a woman of considerable competence and warmth within her own domain. She runs a small but successful home-based business making and selling laddoos (Indian sweets) to her neighbors; she is a devoted wife and mother; she is socially skilled and emotionally intelligent in the Marathi-Hindi world she inhabits. Her identity within this world is confident and clearly defined. The moment she is required to operate in an English-speaking environment, however, this confident identity fractures. She cannot understand the school newsletter; she cannot hold her own in the parent-teacher conference; she cannot order coffee in an American café without creating an inadvertent scene. Each of these failures is experienced not merely as a practical inconvenience but as a fundamental assault on her sense of self.

The humiliation Shashi experiences is compounded by the fact that it comes not only from strangers but from her own family, her husband Satish, who routinely jokes about her English limitations with their daughter, and her daughter Sapna, who mirrors and intensifies her father's condescension. The family's mockery is not malicious in intent, but it is devastating in effect: it tells Shashi, repeatedly and in multiple registers, that her inability to speak English renders her inadequate, less than an equal participant in the life of her own household.

6.2. Sapna

The daughter Sapna's identity crisis is of a different, though related, kind. A teenager educated in an English-medium school and immersed in the aspirational consumer culture of urban India, Sapna has internalized the equation between English competence and social value so thoroughly that she can no longer recognize her mother's real achievements and qualities. Her embarrassment at Shashi's Hindi-accented English, her preference for imported food over her mother's desi cooking, her exclusion of Shashi from the English-language banter she shares with her father—all of these behaviors signal a young person

in the grip of a cultural identity that has been purchased at the cost of contempt for her own origins. Sapna's crisis is not that she cannot speak English; it is that she has come to believe that English is the only language that matters.

6.3. Satish

Satish, the husband, represents the professional bilingual who has achieved a degree of English competence that grants access to the multinational corporate world, but who has allowed this competence to distort his valuation of others, including his own wife. His dismissal of Shashi's laddoo business as trivial, his habit of joining in his daughter's mockery rather than defending his wife, and his obliviousness to the emotional cost of the family's attitude all suggest a man whose professional identity has been constructed partly in opposition to the domestic, non-English-speaking world that Shashi represents. His identity crisis is resolved when Shashi's speech at the wedding forces him to confront what he has undervalued.

7. Factors Leading to Identity Crisis

The film identifies several interconnected factors that precipitate and sustain Shashi's identity crisis. The most immediate is the social prestige accorded to English in contemporary India—a prestige that is the direct legacy of British colonialism and that continues to structure access to education, employment, and social recognition. Mallikarjun (2001, para. 14) notes the paradox of Indian urban families who want their children to acquire English as a first language even while acknowledging it as a foreign tongue, a formulation that captures precisely the ambivalence of postcolonial linguistic identity.

A second, closely related factor is the domestic dynamics of the Godbole household, in which the valorization of English has been reproduced at the micro-level of family interaction. The systematic exclusion of Shashi from the English-language conversations of her husband and daughter, her relegation to a linguistic second-class within her own home, constitutes a form of symbolic violence that mirrors, and reinforces, the broader social hierarchy. Shashi's identity crisis is thus not simply a response to external social pressure; it has been cultivated within the most intimate of contexts.

Third, Shashi's journey to New York removes her from the protective environment of Hindi-speaking India and places her in a context where her coping strategies, her social skills, her culinary excellence, her warmth are rendered invisible by her linguistic limitation. The coffee shop scene, in which an inability to navigate an English-only transaction results in public humiliation, crystallizes the crisis: Shashi realizes, with full emotional force, that in the English-speaking world, she does not exist as the person she knows herself to be. This moment of radical dislocation is the turning point of both the narrative and her identity trajectory.

7.1. Dissolution of the Identity Crisis

Shashi's enrollment in a conversational English course in New York marks the beginning of her journey out of identity crisis. Significantly, the course is composed of a diverse group of language learners: a Spanish nanny, a Pakistani cab driver, an African child, a Chinese hairdresser, a Tamil software engineer, a French chef, all of whom have been marginalized by their inadequate command of English. The course thus constitutes a community of the linguistically excluded, a space in which Shashi's situation is not exceptional but shared, and in which her other competences can be recognized and valued.

The turning point within the course comes when Shashi introduces herself and her laddoo business to the class, and her teacher responds by designating her an "entrepreneur." This single act of linguistic recognition, of naming what Shashi does in the prestigious vocabulary of professional achievement, begins the restoration of her self-esteem. She carries the word home and uses it with her husband; his failure to take it seriously is a setback, but it does not extinguish the sense of self-worth the teacher's recognition has kindled.

As Shashi's English improves, the film charts a visible transformation in her bearing and confidence. The progression from subtractive to additive bilingualism, from a situation in which English acquisition came at the perceived cost of her Hindi identity, to one in which it represents an addition to her existing competences, is embodied in her increasing ease with the language. She watches English films with subtitles, practices with her classmates, and orders confidently in restaurants: each of these small victories is a reclamation of social agency.

The climax of this trajectory is Shashi's speech at her niece's wedding, in which she addresses the assembled guests in English: fluently, warmly, and with evident confidence. The speech stuns her husband and daughter into recognition: they see, perhaps for the first time, the person Shashi has always been, now rendered visible through the medium of the language they have used to exclude her. The resolution is emotionally satisfying but also ideologically complex: Shashi has earned her family's respect,

in part, by mastering the master's language. The film does not fully interrogate this dynamic; it accepts the social prestige of English while using Shashi's journey to insist on the equal worth of those who must work harder to acquire it.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this article, of Pakistan's sociolinguistic landscape and of the narrative arc of English Vinglish converges on several conclusions about the relationship between bilingualism and identity.

First, bilingualism is never simply a linguistic condition. It is embedded in social structures that assign differential values to different languages, and these valuations have direct consequences for the identities of speakers. In Pakistan, the prestige hierarchy of English over Urdu over regional languages is not a neutral reflection of communicative utility; it is a historically shaped, politically maintained, and socially reproduced ordering that distributes opportunities and stigmas in ways that penetrate to the deepest levels of self-perception. The person who cannot speak English in contemporary Pakistan or contemporary India is not merely linguistically limited; she is symbolically diminished, her other competences rendered invisible by a single, structurally determined deficiency.

Second, the consequences of bilingualism for identity are mediated by context and community. Where bilingualism is officially recognized and institutionally supported as in Canada's federal framework, or in schools that incorporate heritage language instruction, its identity implications can be positive: bilinguals may experience their dual competence as a resource, a form of cultural capital that enriches rather than fragments their sense of self. Where bilingualism is unrecognized or actively discouraged, as in many postcolonial contexts, it tends to produce the identity tensions documented throughout this article: shame, alienation, and the sense of belonging fully to neither world.

Third, the resolution of bilingual identity crisis cannot be achieved through language desertion, the abandonment of the native or heritage language in favor of the socially dominant one. As Shashi's journey illustrates, subtractive bilingualism may temporarily resolve the social anxiety associated with inadequate English, but it does so at the cost of cultural continuity and authentic selfhood. The only sustainable resolution, as Grosjean (2010) argues and as the film ultimately suggests, is acceptance: acceptance of the compound nature of bilingual identity, in which the two languages are experienced not as competing loyalties but as complementary dimensions of a richer, more complex self.

Identity is constructed through discourse, where language functions as a medium for negotiating power, ideology, and social positioning rather than merely conveying information (Sattar et al., 2021). Joseph's (2004) observation that identity is the organizing center of one's representation of the world is borne out by the experiences examined in this article. When the linguistic scaffolding of that identity is disrupted, when a speaker cannot fully inhabit the dominant language of the social world, she is compelled to navigate the disorientation is not merely communicative but existential. The American linguist Edward Sapir's insight that human beings are "at the mercy" of the particular language that has become the medium of expression for their society resonates powerfully in postcolonial contexts, where the mercy of any single language is differentially distributed.

The findings of this article have implications for language policy, pedagogical practice, and social discourse. Language policies that promote English acquisition without supporting the maintenance of regional and national languages risk deepening the identity crises documented here. Pedagogical approaches that recognize and build on learners' existing linguistic resources rather than treating the first language as an obstacle to the acquisition of the second, are more likely to foster the additive bilingualism that consistently identifies as cognitively, psychologically, and socially beneficial. And public discourses that celebrate the prestige of English without interrogating the historical and political conditions of that prestige risk naturalizing inequalities that are, in fact, contingent and challengeable.

Future research should extend the analysis undertaken in this article in several directions. Longitudinal studies of bilingual identity development across the lifespan, drawing on narrative and ethnographic methods, would provide a richer picture of how bilingual speakers negotiate identity over time and across contexts. Comparative studies of bilingual identity in different postcolonial societies, including, but not limited to, South Asian contexts, would help distinguish the features of Pakistan's situation from broader patterns. And studies that center the voices of speakers who have found positive, integrated bilingual identities would offer both theoretical enrichment and practical inspiration for those navigating the challenges that bilingualism can pose.

As the world's linguistic landscape continues to shift under the pressures of globalization, migration, and digital communication, the questions raised by this article acquire ever greater urgency. The relationship between the languages we speak and the people we are is not a peripheral concern of linguistics; it is, as Joseph (2004) argues, at the very heart of what language is and does. Understanding that relationship in all its complexity, its tension, and its possibility, is among the most important tasks that sociolinguistics can undertake.

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