

BILINGUAL IDENTITY AND CODE-SWITCHING AMONG ALBANIAN MIGRANTS IN GERMAN-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

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Abstract: Migration creates complex linguistic and cultural environments in which individuals negotiate their identities through the use of multiple languages. Albanian migrants living in Germany, Austria and Switzerland represent an important example of bilingual communities where the Albanian language interacts continuously with German. This article investigates the relationship between bilingual identity and code-switching among Albanian-speaking migrants in German-speaking countries.

The study explores the use of Albanian and German by migrants in different social contexts, and the relationship between language choice and identity, belonging and integration. Special attention is paid to the differences between first-generation migrants and younger generations who acquired German through schooling and socialisation. The article relies on sociolinguistic theories of bilingualism, language contact, and identity construction to claim that code-switching is not only a manifestation of poor language proficiency but a crucial communicative strategy that communicates social relationships, cultural affiliation, and situational adaptation.

The results indicate that Albanian migrants construct fluid bilingual identities, with Albanian as a language of cultural heritage and emotional belonging and German as a language of education, professional success and social participation.

Keywords: bilingual identity, code-switching, Albanian diaspora, migration linguistics, language contact, German-Albanian bilingualism

1. INTRODUCTION

European societies have become increasingly multilingual and multicultural through migration, a space where different languages, traditions and cultural identities coexist and interact. The migration of Albanian-speaking populations into countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland has played an important role in shaping the linguistic and cultural diversity of the German-speaking region. Migration has helped Albanian communities to build new social networks, maintain links with their country of origin and contribute to the growth of multilingual environments in their host societies.

Since the 1960s, Albanian migration has experienced several historical phases: labour migration during the economic boom in Western Europe, driven by social and political conditions in the Balkans, refugee movement during times of conflict, followed by processes of family reunification and permanent settlement. The phases have differently impacted on the linguistic behaviour and identity formation of Albanian-speaking migrants. Therefore, several generations of Albanian speakers are living in German-speaking countries now and their experiences are diverse, depending on age, migration background, education, social integration and contact with other languages.

Language is not only a means of migration communication, but also a constitutive element of individual and collective identity. The question “Who am I?” is often coupled with the questions “What language do I speak?”, “What cultural traditions do I have?”, and “Where do I belong?” In multilingual settings, people tend to develop complex and variable identities that incorporate elements of both their heritage culture and the culture of the receiving society. Rather than choosing between two identities, many migrants develop hybrid identities where Albanian and German cultural and linguistic influences coexist.

In this sense, Albanian migrants’ bilingualism can be considered a resource for accessing different social worlds. The use of Albanian in families and communities helps to maintain cultural heritage and emotional ties, while the use of German creates opportunities for education, professional advancement and wider social participation. The language practices of Albanian migrants are, therefore, not just an adaptation to a new environment but a continuous negotiation of identity in a multilingual European society.

This article is about two main sociolinguistic phenomena:

- The bilingual identity of Albanian migrants;
- code-switching between Albanian and German.

The main research questions are:

- How do Albanian migrants construct their identities through language use?
- When do speakers change from Albanian to German?
- What role does code switching play in communication and identity formation?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Language and Identity

Language is one of the strongest symbols of individual and collective identity. According to sociolinguistic approaches, identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through social interaction.

For migrants, identity often develops between different cultural environments. They may identify simultaneously with:

- their Albanian cultural background;
- the German-speaking society where they live;
- a combination of both identities.

Bilingual individuals are therefore not necessarily divided between two cultures; rather, they may develop multicultural identities.

Oppenrieder and Thurmair (2003) point out that "language is a central factor for the construction of identity, as people express belonging and feelings and social relationships by choosing their language".

Bilingualism and Bicultural Identity

Bilingualism is the ability to use two languages but the level of proficiency may vary according to the context.

Often bilingualism among Albanian migrants is a generational phenomenon:

First generation:

- Albanian generally is the preferred language in private life; German is spoken mainly at work and with institutions.

Second generation: • German is the dominant language in general;

- Albanian is linked to family and cultural identity.

Such difference creates new forms of bilingual identity in which people combine linguistic resources from both languages.

Code-Switching as a Strategy of Communication

Code-switching is the use of more than one language in a conversation. Bilingual speakers switch languages within and between sentences, depending on social and conversational factors (Poplack, 1980).

Among Albanian-German bilingual speakers, code-switching may occur because of:

- lack of an immediate equivalent word;
- influence of school and professional environments;
- expression of social belonging;
- emphasis or emotional expression.

Therefore, code-switching should not be interpreted as linguistic weakness. It represents a natural feature of bilingual communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research is based on interviews and questionnaires conducted with Albanian-speaking migrants living in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The participants are divided into two groups:

Group 1: Older Generation

This group includes migrants whose migration history began mainly during the labour migration period of the 1970s and 1980s.

The interviews investigate:

- migration background;
- language use within family;
- relationship with homeland;
- perception of identity;
- integration experiences.

Group 2: Younger Generation

This group includes migrants who grew up in German-speaking countries.

The research focuses on:

- language preferences;

- educational experiences;
- identity perception;
- use of Albanian and German.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Albanian as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

The results show that Albanian continues to hold an important status as a marker of cultural identity for Albanian migrants in German-speaking countries. For many the Albanian language is a source of family traditions, childhood memories, emotional attachment and a feeling of belonging to a wider cultural community. It is not only a tool of communication but also a bond with historical roots and collective identity.

Parents often stress the importance of keeping up with Albanian because it offers:

the bond with ancestors and past generations; the maintenance of cultural values and traditions; the opportunity to contact with relatives and communities in the homeland; the transfer of cultural heritage to younger generations. But it is getting harder for the younger generations to keep Albanian as a primary language. In addition to their education, friendships and daily activities, German is often the main language of interaction outside the home. Consequently, younger migrants may acquire differential levels of proficiency in Albanian, ranging from fluent bilingualism to more limited heritage-language knowledge. This is a consequence of the social environment and the dominant position of the German language in public life.

German as the Language of Integration

Results also point to the centrality of the German language as a language of social integration and participation. For Albanian migrants living in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, German is important to allow them to successfully interact with the institutions and structures of the host society.

German skills are especially important for:

access to education and academic progress; • professional and employment opportunities; • communication with administrative and public institutions; • social mobility and participation in the wider society.

For the younger generations of Albanian migrants German is the preferred language at schools, universities and the workplace and in social encounters with friends of various cultural backgrounds. Thus, German language skills are more than just a linguistic competence; they are a form of social capital, opening doors to opportunities, networks and greater inclusion in society.

At the same time, the growing importance of German does not mean the disappearance of the Albanian identity. Rather, many bilingual migrants learn to use both languages according to different social situations and communicative needs.

Types of Albanian-German code-switching

The interviews show that code-switching between Albanian and German is a normal and common part of bilingual communication. Code-switching is not a sign of language loss or confusion. Rather, it is evidence that bilingual speakers have the ability to be flexible and modify their language to suit the situation. Several ways of Albanian-German code-switching patterns were identified:

Communication with family

In the family context, younger bilingual speakers often use Albanian when talking to parents and older relatives. But when they speak of things that concern their daily life they often use German expressions, for example: education and school activities; technology and digital communication; administrative issues; professional experience.

P2P communication

For younger Albanian speakers, Albanian-German switching may be used as a way of expressing group identity, intimacy and common migration experiences. The mixture of both languages is often a reflection of their multicultural background and everyday reality.

Context of the institution

In general, German is the most commonly used language in formal settings. Communication in schools, universities, workplaces and public institutions happens predominantly in German, as it is the language needed for success in education, career and participation in society.

Identity Negotiation between Two Cultures

The Albanian migrant experience shows that in multilingual contexts identity formation is a complex process, and not a binary choice between two cultures. Many migrants do not experience their Albanian and German speaking identities as contradictory. Rather, they mix aspects of both cultural environments.

Participants often describe themselves in a number of ways of belonging such as:

Albanian; German, Austrian or Swiss; Albanian-German, Albanian-Austrian or Albanian-Swiss.

These descriptions show the development of hybrid identities through migration, language contact and social experience. Bilingual migrants are often active in several cultural spaces simultaneously: they have links to Albanian heritage and are also involved in the society in which they live.

Thus, the linguistic behaviour of Albanian migrants can be considered as a reflection of the complexity of their identity structure. The ability to shift from Albanian to German does not entail a loss of identity, but rather the construction of a flexible, multilingual identity that corresponds to the realities of contemporary European migration.

5. CONCLUSION

The results show that the development of a bilingual identity among Albanian migrants in Germany, Austria and Switzerland is a dynamic process that is influenced by migration history, social environment, family practices and everyday language use. Albanian is core to cultural heritage, family ties and ethnic identity, while German is core to education, employment and participation in host societies.

The study shows that bilingualism is not an indicator of language attrition but an advantage that allows migrants to successfully function in different social and cultural contexts. Bilinguals often code-switch between Albanian and German and this provides more insight into their linguistic flexibility and communicative competence than their linguistic deficiency.

The study shows that bilingualism is not a sign of language attrition but an advantage that helps migrants to function successfully in diverse social and cultural settings. Code-switching between Albanian and German is a natural bilingual practice and it is an indication of linguistic flexibility and communicative competence rather than linguistic deficiency. Both languages are used strategically by participants depending on the situation and their interlocutors.

The findings also emphasise the role families, schools and community organisations play in fostering the intergenerational retention of the Albanian language. But at the same time, good skills in the German language still remain a key to education, employment and social integration.

This finding implies that language policies and education institutions should encourage additive bilingualism by supporting the maintenance of heritage language in addition to the acquisition of German. Bilingualism can be seen as an added value that can lead to greater social inclusion and intercultural understanding.

The study provides important insights into the bilingual identity of Albanian migrants, but is limited to three German-speaking countries. Future studies may also include larger and more diverse samples, compare with Albanian communities in other countries and explore the role of digital communication and transnational networks in shaping language use and identity development.

In general, the study shows that the bilingual identity is a continuous effort of balancing the linguistic and cultural resources, which means that the successful integration can be combined with maintaining the Albanian language and cultural heritage.

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