

# 'I look forward to a bright future': the multilingual identity construction of Malagasy undergraduates

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DOI: 10.1080/14790718.2025.2509146

## INTRODUCTION

Language and identity are closely intertwined, particularly in multilingual contexts where individuals continuously negotiate their social positions through language practices. Previous research has demonstrated that multilingualism plays a central role in shaping learners' beliefs, motivations, and future self-concepts. However, existing studies have predominantly focused on migrant-background multilinguals, while indigenous multilingual populations in Africa remain underexplored. Madagascar represents a prototypical multilingual society, where individuals acquire multiple languages sequentially through formal education and everyday interaction. Malagasy undergraduates, typically proficient in Malagasy, French, English, and increasingly Chinese, constitute a distinctive multilingual group whose identity construction warrants systematic investigation. Grounded in poststructuralist and sociocultural perspectives on identity, this study examines how language learning experiences relate to multilingual identity construction among Malagasy university students. By situating identity as dynamic, socially constructed, and future-oriented, the study seeks to enrich current understandings of multilingual identity beyond migration-centered frameworks and contribute empirical evidence from an African multilingual context.

## OBJECTIVES

This study aims to examine multilingual identity construction among Malagasy undergraduates in an indigenous, non-migrant multilingual context. Specifically, it seeks to:

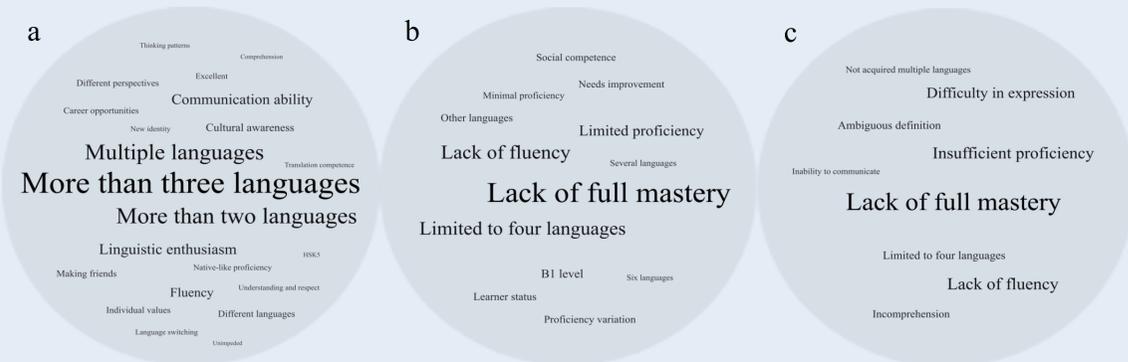
- investigate students' beliefs about multilingualism, particularly its perceived cognitive, social, and economic value;
- explore learners' future multilingual self and their aspirations toward multilingual competence;
- analyze multilingual open-mindedness as an attitudinal dimension related to identity construction

## METHODS

A mixed-methods research design was employed. Participants were 202 undergraduates enrolled in a Chinese language program at the University of Toamasina, Madagascar, aged 20–26, all of whom had acquired four to six languages, including Malagasy, French, English, and Chinese. Data were collected using a modified version of the UngaSpråk questionnaire developed by Haukås et al., administered in French to ensure comprehension. Quantitative data were drawn from three validated scales: Beliefs About Multilingualism (BAM), Future Multilingual Self (FMS), and Open-mindedness (OPM), rated on five-point Likert scales. Reliability and validity were assessed using SPSS and AMOS through confirmatory factor analysis, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. Qualitative data were obtained from open-ended questions probing participants' definitions of multilingualism and their self-identification. These responses were coded and thematically analyzed using NVivo, allowing triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that multilingual identity among Malagasy undergraduates is dynamic, socially grounded, and future-oriented. Learners' multilingual identities are shaped by positive beliefs about multilingualism, strong expectations for future multilingual selves, and a high degree of open-mindedness. Language learning functions not merely as a communicative skill but as a form of symbolic and economic capital that supports identity formation, aspiration, and social integration. Situated at the intersection of past linguistic experience, present social interaction, and future imagination, Malagasy multilinguals actively construct their identities through engagement with multiple languages. By focusing on an indigenous African multilingual population, this study extends existing theories of multilingual identity beyond migration-focused contexts and underscores the importance of educational and sociocultural ecologies in shaping multilingual selves.



The word cloud depicts participants' interpretations of identity judgments, with 'perceived multilingual' in the upper left (a), 'perceived non-multilingual' in the upper right (b), and 'unsure' interpretations in the lower centre (c).

## FINDINGS

### ***Positive multilingual beliefs***

Participants demonstrated strong endorsement of multilingualism. High BAM scores indicate that multilingualism is widely perceived as cognitively beneficial, socially empowering, and economically advantageous. Multilingual competence was associated with intelligence, creativity, social understanding, and improved career prospects, reinforcing the perceived instrumental and symbolic value of languages.

### ***Future-oriented multilingual self***

Results from the FMS scale reveal that participants maintain optimistic and aspirational visions of their future multilingual identities. Most learners imagined themselves as proficient users of multiple languages in future professional contexts, reflecting a strong alignment between language learning, self-development, and social mobility.

### ***Multilingualism and open-mindedness***

Participants exhibited high levels of open-mindedness, characterized by openness to diversity, social interaction, and differing perspectives. Qualitative findings suggest that frequent language switching and multilingual social environments contribute to the development of communicative confidence and social competence, highlighting the socially constructed nature of multilingual identity.

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