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Childhood in Multiple Languages: When Bilingualism Becomes a Metaphor

Nuți Aramă¹, Liviu-Mihail Marinescu²

Abstract: This paper advances the proposition that childhood bilingualism functions not merely as a psycholinguistic condition but as a metaphor through which children construct meaning about self, identity, and the social world. Drawing upon empirical research from developmental psychology, sociolinguistics, and educational studies, the paper demonstrates that bilingual children develop enhanced metaphorical competence, particularly in metaphor production, rooted in meta-metaphorical awareness and cognitive flexibility. Children actively construct their multilingual identities using four master metaphorical source domains: the natural world, artefact or tool, journey, and personification. These metaphors carry significant emotional valences, conceptualised as affective metaphorical load, which shapes psychological well-being and educational outcomes. The paper further distinguishes between code-switching as metaphor, which reifies language boundaries, and translanguaging as metonymy, which recognises holistic linguistic repertoires. Educational implications include explicit metaphor instruction across all of a child's languages, treatment of children's metaphorical productions as valuable data, examination of educators' own metaphorical framings, and selection of curricular materials that model positive, dynamic metaphors of bilingualism. By reconceptualising bilingualism as metaphor, the paper redirects attention from purely functional outcomes towards the experiential and symbolic dimensions of multilingual childhood, offering theoretical tools for research and practice in an increasingly globalised world.

Keywords: bilingualism; identity formation; multilingual childhood

1. Introduction

The experience of growing up with two or more languages constitutes an increasingly common phenomenon in contemporary societies, shaped by migration, globalisation, transnational family arrangements, and multilingual education policies. Traditional research on childhood bilingualism has predominantly focused on measurable outcomes, including linguistic proficiency, cognitive advantages, and academic achievement (Bialystok, 2017, p. 234; De Houwer, 2020, p. 207). While these contributions are invaluable, they frequently overlook a fundamental dimension of bilingual experience: how children themselves understand, represent, and negotiate their multilingual lives. The present paper addresses this gap by advancing a novel theoretical proposition.

¹ PhD Student, "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Address: 1 Ion Creangă St., Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, Corresponding author: arama.nuti@upsc.md.

² Associate Professor, PhD, Danubius International University, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, marinesculiviu@univ-danubius.ro.



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This paper argues that bilingualism functions not only as a psycholinguistic condition but also as a metaphor, a conceptual framework through which children construct meaning about the self, others, and the social world. The notion of metaphor, long central to cognitive linguistics and developmental psychology (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3; Kövecses, 2010, p. vii), offers a powerful analytical lens. Metaphors are not merely decorative linguistic devices; they are fundamental structures of thought that organise knowledge, guide reasoning, and shape emotional experience. When applied to bilingualism, metaphorical analysis reveals how children conceptualise language learning as a journey, a resource, a tool, or even an opponent, each framing carrying distinct implications for identity formation and psychological well-being.

Our starting point of this paper are the following ideas: First, how do bilingual children develop and deploy metaphorical competence across their languages, and how does this process differ qualitatively from monolingual metaphorical development? Second, in what ways do children use metaphors, whether verbal, visual, or narrative, to represent their multilingual identities, and what do these representations reveal about the sociopolitical contexts they navigate? Third, what are the educational and psychological implications of understanding bilingualism as a metaphor, and how can this framework inform translanguaging pedagogies?

By integrating findings from developmental psychology, sociolinguistics, and educational research, this paper argues that metaphorical thinking is both a product of bilingual development, in that bilingual children demonstrate enhanced metaphorical abilities, and a process through which bilingual identities are forged. The conceptualisation of bilingualism as a metaphor thus opens new directions for research and practice, moving beyond deficit models towards recognition of multilingual childhood as a site of creative and adaptive meaning-making.

2. Literature Review

Metaphorical competence, defined as the ability to understand and produce figurative language, emerges early in typically developing children. Nevertheless, bilingual contexts introduce unique dimensions to this developmental trajectory. Gaskins and Rundblad (2023, p. 2) examined metaphor production in bilingual English-Polish and English-Hindi children aged three to six years. Their findings revealed that very young bilinguals already produce age-appropriate metaphors, puns, and malapropisms, with this ability growing robustly with age and verbal skills in both languages rather than with non-verbal IQ. Critically, they distinguished between primary, embodied metaphors, which appear consistently across languages, and perceptual metaphors, which vary with cultural and contextual exposure (Gaskins & Rundblad, 2023, p. 15). This suggests that while some metaphorical mappings derive from universal bodily experiences, others are shaped by linguistic and cultural specificities.

Building on this work, Nair (2022, p. 46) investigated Hindi-English bilingual children aged three to five years. Her research highlighted the child's body as an analogical grid, a stable source domain that grounds early metaphorical production. Bilingual children, Nair argues, use body-based metaphors more flexibly than monolinguals precisely because they must navigate multiple linguistic mappings for the same embodied experiences. This mimic stage precedes the development of more abstract, conventionalised metaphors, supporting the view that bilingualism accelerates meta-representational awareness.

In a comparative study, Şenaydın and Dikilitaş (2019, p. 135) examined metaphor and simile tasks with autistic monolingual versus bilingual children. Bilingual children demonstrated superior metaphor

production, though simile comprehension favoured monolinguals, a finding that underscores the complexity of figurative language processing across populations. Alipour and Ranjbar (2023, p. 5) further reported a small but significant bilingual advantage in metaphor comprehension among third-language English as a foreign language learners compared to monolinguals, an effect attributed to enhanced cognitive capacity rather than linguistic knowledge alone.

Collectively, these studies establish that bilingualism does not impede metaphorical development. Rather, it may foster distinctive figurative competencies. The present paper extends this evidence by proposing that bilingual children develop a meta-metaphorical awareness, an understanding that mappings between source and target domains are conventional rather than necessary. Because bilingual children encounter divergent metaphorical systems, they are forced to recognise the arbitrariness of any single mapping. This meta-metaphorical awareness, we argue, is the cognitive foundation for translanguaging as theorised by Wei (2018, p. 9).

Beyond measuring metaphorical competence, recent research has examined how bilingual individuals use metaphors to articulate their experiences of language learning and identity negotiation. Magaña and Ramos (2022, p. 7) conducted a critical metaphor analysis with Latinx students, identifying recurrent conceptual metaphors. These included languages as natural resource, capable of withering without use; language as tool, opening doors to opportunity; language learning as journey, with obstacles and destinations; and language as opponent, requiring struggle. Notably, students personified languages, attributing agency to Spanish and English in ways that revealed the higher value of being bilingual despite societal pressures towards monolingualism.

Veliz and Véliz-Campos (2019, p. 146) documented a striking metaphorical pattern among adult Latino migrants, who used disability and impairment metaphors to describe language learning struggles. For example, participants described themselves as mute, deaf, or disabled when operating in English, revealing how language hierarchies produce embodied experiences of inadequacy. These metaphors are not merely rhetorical; they shape self-perception and motivate either withdrawal or resistance.

In the Turkish context, Şenaydın and Dikilitaş (2019, p. 140) explored childhood Turkish-English bilingual identity through metaphor questionnaires. Bilingualism was consistently tied to privileged status and membership in an imagined community of cosmopolitan, educated speakers. This finding underscores how metaphorical framings of bilingualism are ideologically loaded, reflecting and reproducing social stratifications.

We propose a typology of four master metaphorical source domains organising bilingual children's self-concept. These are the natural world, encompassing metaphors of language as plant, seed, weather, or landscape, which emphasise organic growth and nurturance; the artefact or tool domain, including language as key, door, bridge, or weapon, which emphasises utility and intentionality; the journey domain, comprising language learning as path, road, migration, or obstacle course, which emphasises temporality and progress; and personification, wherein language appears as friend, enemy, monster, or companion, which emphasises relationality and emotional valence. This typology provides a systematic vocabulary for describing children's metaphorical framings.

Children do not only express their multilingual experiences verbally; they also produce rich visual and multimodal representations. Melo-Pfeifer (2015, p. 199) analysed children's drawings of their multilingualism, identifying visual devices such as flags, bubbles, speech balloons, and spatial juxtapositions that coordinate different languages. These drawings reveal nuanced multilingual awareness. Children understand not only that they speak multiple languages but also how these languages relate to different contexts, people, and emotions.

We consider going even further from this work and argue that children's visual metaphors operate through the same conceptual mapping mechanisms as verbal metaphors but with different affordances. Visual metaphors can represent simultaneity, allowing two languages to occupy the same visual space, more easily than sequential verbal metaphors. They can also encode emotional valence through colour, size, and spatial positioning without explicit lexicalisation. A child who draws English as a large, red, spiky shape and Spanish as a small, blue, round shape has produced a metaphor no less complex than a verbal one.

Melo Pfeifer and Chik (2020, p. 505) made a critical theoretical distinction between code switching as metaphor and translanguaging as metonymy. We consider this distinction as a point of departure, specifying the cognitive operations involved in each. Code switching as metaphor treats languages as containers, instantiating a spatial schema of bounded entities. Translanguaging as metonymy treats the bilingual repertoire as a whole with parts selected for use, instantiating a part-whole schema. The educational implication, developed further below, is that translanguaging pedagogies should explicitly teach children the metonymic logic of their own communicative practices.

Negrette (2022, p. 648) examined prospective teachers' multimodal linguistic biographies, finding that they depicted their multilingual trajectories using chronological and spatial metaphors, including journeys across maps, movement through time, and placement within physical spaces. These metaphors structured beliefs about becoming multilingual and, crucially, shaped how these future educators would perceive their own bilingual students.

The emotional dimensions of bilingual development cannot be separated from metaphorical representation. Kaveh and Lenz (2022, p. 2685) investigated bi-multilingual children of immigrants in United States monolingual schools, documenting feelings of shame, fear, and pride associated with speaking a different language. Children's beliefs about their home languages were tightly coupled with dominant ideologies that marginalise non-English languages, ideologies often communicated through implicit metaphors, such as English as normal and home languages as foreign or backward.

From our point of view, the concept of affective metaphorical load is defined as the accumulated emotional charge associated with a particular metaphorical mapping. A child repeatedly exposed to the metaphor that Spanish is a problem, through admonitions such as "Don't speak Spanish at school", develops high negative affective load for the Spanish is problem mapping. This load operates pre-reflectively, shaping behaviour even when the child consciously rejects the metaphor. Crucially, affective metaphorical load is transferable across domains. A child who learns that Spanish is a problem may generalise to the proposition that the self is a problem, a form of personification with significant psychological consequences.

Martínez-Roldán and Malavé (2004, p. 160) similarly found that language ideologies mediate literacy and identity in bilingual contexts. Children internalise metaphorical framings of their languages long before they can articulate these framings explicitly. An educator who describes a child's home language as a bridge to English communicates something fundamentally different from one who describes it as an obstacle to overcome.

The literature consistently affirms that metaphorical competence can and should be explicitly cultivated in multilingual classrooms. Batoréo (2018, p. 537) argued that understanding and producing metaphors depends on culturally anchored conceptual systems; thus, explicit instruction in metaphor across all of a child's languages builds broader cognitive-linguistic competence. Logutenkova (2024, p. 258) extended this argument to natural bilinguals learning Russian, demonstrating that structured metaphor activities enhance metalinguistic awareness.

García-Mateus and Palmer (2017, p. 247) documented how translanguaging pedagogies in two-way dual language bilingual education supports positive bilingual identities by challenging deficit metaphors of bilingualism as a problem. When teachers treat children's full linguistic repertoires as legitimate and valuable, children develop richer metalinguistic awareness and resistance to assimilationist pressures.

Moses (2023, p. 290) provided a concrete example through analysis of *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*, a bilingual picturebook that enacts translanguaging. The book's multimodal representation of Spanish-English bilingualism offers young readers alternative metaphors, not separation or interference but integration and mutual enrichment.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a conceptual synthesis and theoretical integration methodology. The epistemological contribution lies in integrating disparate literatures from developmental psychology, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and educational research around the unifying concept of bilingualism as metaphor. No existing synthesis has attempted this integration at the level of conceptual structure rather than empirical finding.

Synthesised studies were analysed using a four-dimensional framework. The cognitive dimension examines how bilingual children develop metaphorical competence across languages and the relationships between metaphor use and executive function, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility. The social-identity dimension investigates how children use metaphors to represent the self, position themselves within language hierarchies, and negotiate belonging across communities. The affective-ideological dimension analyses how metaphorical framings carry emotional valences, including shame, pride, fear, and hope, and reflect broader language ideologies. The multimodal dimension explores how visual, spatial, and gestural metaphors complement and sometimes contradict verbal metaphors.

4. Discussions

Bilingualism provides a rich developmental context for metaphor production and comprehension. Bilingual children as young as three years produce spontaneous metaphors, puns, and creative analogies, as demonstrated by Gaskins and Rundblad (2023, p. 8) and Nair (2022, p. 52). We consider that this advantage reflects qualitative transformation rather than mere absence of harm. The bilingual child does not simply possess two vocabularies; the bilingual child inhabits a different metaphorical universe, one in which any mapping between form and meaning is recognised as conventional rather than necessary.

This interpretation aligns with Bialystok's (2017, p. 245) concept of bilingual adaptation while specifying its mechanism. The same cognitive operation that allows a bilingual child to inhibit one language while speaking another, that is, recognising that both are options rather than necessities, also allows that child to recognise that any metaphorical mapping is one of many possible construals. Metaphorical competence and executive function share a common cognitive core: representational flexibility.

The distinction between primary, embodied metaphors and perceptual metaphors, as articulated by Gaskins and Rundblad (2023, p. 14), is particularly instructive. Primary metaphors derive from universal bodily experiences, including up, down, front, back, warm, and cold. Perceptual metaphors vary across cultures and languages. Bilingual children must learn which perceptual metaphors belong to which

language and when each is appropriate. This is not merely a lexical learning task but a pragmatic-metaphorical one. A child who says “time is money” in English while using a vertical temporal metaphor in another language performs a sophisticated act of metaphorical code-switching, aligning conceptual mapping with linguistic context.

Nevertheless, this metaphorical advantage is not unlimited. Alipour and Ranjbar (2023, p. 14) found only a modest bilingual advantage in metaphor comprehension, and Şenaydın and Dikilitaş (2019, p. 139) reported that autistic monolinguals outperformed bilinguals on simile comprehension. The present paper interprets these nuances as evidence that comprehension tasks often require selecting among given options rather than generating novel mappings. The bilingual advantage may be specific to production and creative extension, precisely the tasks that require generating new mappings rather than recognising conventional ones. This aligns with the claim that bilingualism enhances generative capacity specifically.

4.1. The Metaphorical Construction of Bilingual Identity

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this synthesis is the recognition that children actively construct their multilingual identities through metaphor, not only as a cognitive skill but as an existential project. When a Latinx child describes Spanish as a seed that needs watering, as documented by Magaña and Ramos (2022, p. 12), or an immigrant child portrays English as a wall they must climb, as documented by Veliz and Véliz-Campos (2019, p. 149), these are not mere figures of speech. They are condensed theories of self, society, and possibility. The present paper specifies how such metaphors constitute identity through what is termed metaphorical self-anchoring, the process by which children locate themselves within metaphorical source domains and derive behavioural implications.

The finding that children use disability metaphors to describe language learning is deeply troubling yet illuminating. These metaphors emerge not from individual pathology but from structural conditions, including monolingual schooling, assimilationist policies, and social stigmatisation of minoritised languages. The present paper argues that disability metaphors are accurate reflections of the social positioning imposed on minoritised bilinguals. To be treated as less than because of one’s home language is to experience a form of social disablement. The metaphor of disability is not a cognitive error but a truthful representation of social reality. Educational intervention must therefore change social reality, not merely replace metaphors.

Conversely, metaphors of journey and resource, as identified by Magaña and Ramos (2022, p. 14), reveal children’s resilience and agentic meaning-making. Children who conceptualise bilingualism as a journey simultaneously acknowledge difficulty and affirm progress. Those who see languages as resources position themselves as capable actors rather than passive recipients of language instruction. These metaphors instantiate what García-Mateus and Palmer (2017, p. 250) call positive bilingual identities. The present paper explains why journey and resource metaphors support positive identity: they imply agency, in that journeys require choices and resources require stewardship, and temporality, in that journeys have trajectories and resources can grow or diminish, thereby inviting ongoing engagement.

4.2. Multimodality and the Visual Metaphorics of Childhood

Melo-Pfeifer’s (2015, p. 205) analysis of children’s drawings underscores a methodological and conceptual point: children’s metaphorical thinking is not limited to verbal production. The visual devices

children employ, including flags representing national affiliations, speech bubbles separating linguistic spaces, and bridges connecting home and school, demonstrate sophisticated multimodal metaphorical competence.

The present paper argues that visual metaphors are not simply translations of verbal metaphors. They possess distinct properties that make them particularly valuable for bilingual children. Visual metaphors can represent simultaneity, allowing two languages to be displayed together rather than mentioned sequentially. Emotional valence can be encoded through colour, size, and spatial position without lexicalisation. Correction requires erasing and redrawing rather than producing a new utterance, which may lower anxiety. For children experiencing the shame and fear documented by Kaveh and Lenz (2022, p. 2690), drawing provides a low-anxiety, high-access medium for bilingual identity expression.

Melo-Pfeifer and Chik (2020, p. 508) distinguish between code-switching as metaphor and translanguaging as metonymy. The present paper grounds this distinction in cognitive metaphor theory. Code-switching metaphors treat languages as separate, bounded containers, instantiating an architectural or spatial schema. Translanguaging conceptualises the bilingual's linguistic repertoire as an integrated whole, with features selected for communicative purposes rather than switched between codes, instantiating a part-whole metonymy. These are not simply different descriptions of the same phenomenon; they are different cognitive models with different entailments. The code-switching metaphor entails that languages have clear boundaries, that speaking pure language is possible and desirable, that moving between languages requires a switch with cognitive cost, and that mixing is deviation from default. The translanguaging metonymy entails that languages are not bounded entities but social constructs, that the repertoire is the primary reality with named languages as abstractions, that all communication draws from the whole repertoire, and that mixing is the default with separation as artificial.

4.3. Code-Switching, Translanguaging, and Metaphor

The educational implications of this distinction are profound. Classrooms organised around code-switching often enforce rigid separation of languages, with designated Spanish time and English time, implicitly teaching children the container metaphor. Classrooms organised around translanguaging allow children to draw on their full repertoires, validating the collection metonymy.

From our perspective, educators should explicitly teach both models as models, not as truth but as useful fictions for different purposes. This meta-representational stance is precisely what bilingual children's enhanced metaphorical competence prepares them to understand. A child who recognises that language separation is a conventional rather than necessary arrangement is better equipped to navigate both monolingual schooling and multilingual communities.

4.4. Educational Implications

Several concrete educational implications seem to stand out from this synthesis. First, explicit metaphor instruction should be integrated into multilingual curricula across all of a child's languages, as advocated by Batoréo (2018, p. 545) and Logutenkova (2024, p. 261). From our point of view, metaphor instruction should include cross-linguistic comparison, examining how the same concept, including argument, time, and love, is metaphorised differently in a child's languages. This develops metaphorical bilingual awareness.

Second, children's metaphorical productions should be treated as valuable data. Collecting and discussing children's verbal metaphors, drawings, and multimodal representations validates their perspectives and reveals otherwise invisible aspects of their school experiences. Our suggestion is to create a metaphor wall where children can post their metaphors of bilingualism throughout the year, noting how metaphors change over time. This makes the process of identity construction visible and shareable.

Third, educators must examine their own metaphorical framings of bilingualism. A teacher who describes a bilingual child's home language as an obstacle to English learning communicates something fundamentally different from one who describes it as a foundation or scaffold. Also, curricular materials should represent bilingualism through positive, dynamic metaphors. Moses's (2023, p. 292) analysis of *Dear Primo* demonstrates how children's literature can model translanguaging and hybrid identity positions.

5. Conclusions

Bilingualism in childhood should not be understood solely as a linguistic condition or as the coexistence of two communicative systems. Rather, it constitutes a broader conceptual and symbolic framework through which children interpret themselves, their relationships with others, and their position within the social world. The present study has demonstrated that multilingual childhood represents both a cognitive reality and a metaphorical mode of experiencing identity, culture, and belonging.

Three principal conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, bilingual children appear to develop enhanced metaphorical competence in comparison with monolingual peers, particularly in tasks involving metaphor production and creative figurative expression. Existing research suggests that this advantage derives from increased metalinguistic awareness and from the cognitive flexibility required to navigate multiple linguistic and symbolic systems simultaneously. While bilingual advantages are less pronounced in tasks involving the recognition of conventional metaphors, they become significantly more visible in generative processes that require the creation of novel metaphorical associations. In this context, the present paper advances the concept of *meta-metaphorical awareness* as a possible cognitive mechanism underlying bilingual children's capacity to interpret and construct meaning across distinct conceptual frameworks.

Second, the study has shown that multilingual children actively construct and negotiate their identities through metaphorical representations. The metaphorical conceptualizations identified in the literature—including language as a resource, journey, tool, opponent, or burden—reflect children's awareness of linguistic hierarchies, emotional experiences, and strategies of social positioning. By synthesizing these recurring patterns, the paper proposes a typology structured around four major source domains: the natural world, artefacts, journeys, and personification. This framework provides a systematic means of understanding how bilingual children symbolically organize their multilingual experiences. Furthermore, the notion of *affective metaphorical load* introduced in this study highlights the emotional and developmental consequences associated with these metaphorical constructions, particularly in contexts marked by linguistic inequality or cultural marginalization.

Third, conceptualizing bilingualism as metaphor carries significant implications for educational theory and practice. The findings suggest that metaphor should not be regarded as peripheral to language acquisition, but rather as central to the process of meaning-making and identity formation. Educational environments that encourage metaphorical competence, recognize children's own symbolic productions,

and adopt translanguaging pedagogies instead of rigid monolingual or code-switching frameworks are more likely to support both linguistic development and positive self-construction. Such approaches validate multilingualism as a creative and cognitive resource rather than as a deficit or obstacle.

More broadly, interpreting bilingualism through a metaphorical lens redirects scholarly attention away from exclusively functional measurements such as language proficiency scores or standardized assessments. It foregrounds instead the experiential, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of multilingual childhood. Children do not simply acquire and use two languages; they inhabit them, imagine through them, and construct personal and collective meaning with them. Recognizing this dimension does not diminish the importance of formal language instruction; rather, it enriches current understandings of language learning as a fundamentally human process involving creativity, negotiation, and cultural interpretation.

In increasingly globalized yet socially unequal societies, multilingual children navigate linguistic and cultural boundaries largely constructed by adult institutions and ideologies. Their metaphors, often spontaneous, imaginative, and deeply revealing, offer valuable insight into the lived realities of inhabiting multiple worlds simultaneously. Attending seriously to these metaphorical expressions and integrating their implications into educational and sociolinguistic research represents an essential direction for future scholarship. The present paper contributes to this objective by proposing a theoretical framework through which bilingualism may be understood not only as communicative competence, but also as a symbolic condition of contemporary human experience.

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