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Between Text and Code: Translingual Practices and the Expansion of Philological Inquiry in Kazakhstan

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Abstract
This study examines translingual practices among multilingual youth in Kazakhstan, focusing on the use of Kazakh, Russian, and English in academic, professional, and digital contexts. Through the interpretation of personal accounts and written records, this research demonstrates that code switching and code mixing are utilized as planned tactics, rather than developmental language delays. Participants use numerous languages to express their identity, alter the mood, and satisfy industry standards. They do this while maintaining their truthfulness and persuasiveness, in both institutional settings and academic fields, as well as in internet-based communication systems. These practices present the need to control language repertoire practices in various communication environments effectively. Assumptions of linguistic purity in educational and institutional policies, emphasizing the value of multilingual language use, are countered by the findings. They support a pedagogy that values flexibility, emotional expression, and community-based literacy. Examining how languages are used in Kazakhstan is a lively and complex process where identity, social status, and professional communication interact in sophisticated and creative ways.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, globalization, digital transformation, transnational mobility, and the internationalization of higher education have reshaped not only patterns of communication but also the epistemological foundations through which language and multilingualism are understood. Within structural and generative traditions, linguistic practices were interpreted primarily through systemic constraints, and phenomena such as code-switching were often described as deviations from idealized monolingual standards. This new outlook challenges us to see languages as adaptable tools that people use to communicate, structure identities, and connect with others.

The translingual practices described by Canagarajah (2013) emphasize the sociocultural mediation that takes place when individuals switch between languages based on the context, purpose, and audience. Recent theoretical developments in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics have provided a framework for rethinking multilingual practice. Translanguaging theory conceptualizes the speaker's linguistic repertoire as an integrated, meaning-making system rather than a set of parallel codes (García & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018). This perspective shifts attention from structural alternation to the strategic deployment of resources across contexts. More recent scholarship has extended translanguaging beyond classroom interaction, examining its role in academic writing, professional discourse, and digitally networked communication (Li, 2018; Mendoza et al., 2024).

Repertoire theory further emphasizes that language choices are embedded in lived experience and shaped by relations of power, affect, and subjectivity (Busch, 2017; Vallejo & Dooly, 2020). From this perspective, multilingual practices cannot be reduced to linguistic hybridity alone; they represent socially situated strategies through which speakers negotiate legitimacy, belonging, and authority. At the same time, digital sociolinguistics has foregrounded the platform-based, multimodal, and algorithmically structured nature of contemporary communication. Online environments collapse boundaries between written and spoken modes, between local and global audiences, and between institutional and informal discourse. Within such spaces, code-switching acquires indexical force: it positions speakers, signals affiliation, and mediates access to symbolic and academic capital.

Within these global processes, Kazakhstan appears as a unique sociolinguistic space. Since independence, language policy has been aimed at strengthening the Kazakh language as the state language, while Russian has retained its role as a means of

institutional and interethnic communication. English has become the language of academic mobility, international publication, and professional advancement. As a result of the policy of trilingualism, the internationalization of education, and digital transformation, a multi-layered linguistic ecology has emerged, in which each language possesses different but overlapping symbolic and material capital (Goodman & Manan, 2026).

In such a situation, multilingual youth are forced to coordinate the changing demands of the academic, professional, and digital environments. This is not just a matter of language switching, but a process of strategic adaptation to institutional norms, audience expectations, and personal positions. Nevertheless, studies of multilingualism in Kazakhstan often focus on macro-level language policy or statistical descriptions of language use, and do not delve deeply into the issue of strategic management of repertoire across domains. Global translanguaging research, however, has been largely focused on Western contexts and has not adequately covered the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia.

In order to fill this gap, this study draws on translanguaging theory, the concept of repertoire, and digital sociolinguistics to examine the language practices of multilingual youth in Kazakhstan as strategic repertoire management. Code-switching is analyzed as a mechanism for adapting to institutional requirements, constructing professional identity, and negotiating symbolic capital, rather than as a structural deviation; and the relationship of linguistic hybridity to social positioning, professional aspirations, and digital participation is considered.

The study is guided by the following research questions:
RQ$_1$: How do multilingual youth in Kazakhstan coordinate linguistic resources across academic, professional, and digital domains?
RQ$_2$: What communicative and rhetorical purposes are realized through code-switching and translanguaging practices?
RQ$_3$: How do these practices contribute to the construction of social and professional identities?
RQ$_4$: What implications do such practices hold for educational pedagogy and language policy?

This research contributes to the field in several ways. First, it extends translanguaging scholarship into a post-Soviet multilingual context, grounding theoretical claims in empirical data from Kazakhstan. Second, it reframes code-switching as socially and professionally strategic rather than linguistically deficient. Third, it shifts the analytical lens from static textual products to dynamic, domain-crossing language practices, offering a theoretically informed account of repertoire management in a digitally mediated environment.

Literature Review

Throughout the twentieth century, the theoretical understanding of multilingualism was largely shaped by the monoglossic paradigm. In this view, code-switching was characterized as a phenomenon governed by systemic constraints (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Poplack, 1980). However, this structural approach did not fully take into account the social, pragmatic, and discourse dimensions of linguistic hybridity: the relationship between language choice and power, status, and belonging was not sufficiently analyzed. The ideology of monolingualism tended to normalize "linguistic purity" and to interpret mixed speech as interference or low competence (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).

The sociocultural turn fundamentally changed the understanding of language. While Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia substantiated the multilayered nature of language, Blommaert (2010) developed the linguistic dynamics in the context of globalization. Indexicality theory (Silverstein, 2003) has shown that language choice is a reflection of social position and status. From this perspective, code-switching is not just a syntactic phenomenon, but a discourse mechanism that produces social meaning.

As a result of these theoretical developments, the concept of translanguaging emerged: languages are not understood as separate codes, but as a unified repertoire of the speaker (García & Wei, 2014). In this model, language use is described as a process of flexible coordination of resources, not as a "combination of two languages". Canagarajah (2025) notes that linguistic boundaries are constructed socio-ideologically. Later studies have examined translanguaging in relation to epistemic justice (Li, 2018) and language practices on digital platforms (Sun, 2026).

Translanguaging theory is associated with an expansion of the concept of repertoire: repertoire is no longer understood as a set of codes, but as a dynamic resource based on the speaker's life experience and social trajectory (Busch, 2017; Chovancová & Kubašová, 2024). Recent discussions have focused on clarifying the definitional boundaries of the concept (Akter, 2026) and systematizing it in relation to pedagogical code-switching (Balam & Carroll, 2025).

Code-switching was initially studied within the framework of structural linguistics and explained in terms of the internal logic of language systems (Poplack, 1980). The Matrix Language Frame model proposed by Myers-Scotton (1993) showed that one language acts as a structural "framework" in language exchange. However, such models only explained the social meaning of code-switching to a limited extent: they answered the question "how does it happen?" but did not fully address the question "why and for what purpose is it used?"

Since the 1990s, code-switching has been considered from a sociolinguistic perspective. Gumperz (1982) described it as a contextualization tool that regulates the relationship

between participants in a discourse, and Silverstein (2003) argued through the theory of indexicality that language choice indicates social position and status. Thus, code-switching has been reinterpreted as a discourse mechanism that produces social meaning from syntactic phenomena. Subsequent studies have linked it to processes of identity construction, positioning, and audience adaptation. In the context of higher education and the digital environment, Sun (2025) has linked code-switching to academic voice and epistemic justice, while Chovancová and Kubašová (2024) has interpreted it as a social act determined by platform conventions; Yang and Shen (2025) has shown the role of language strategies in regulating interaction with the addressee and social distance in online hybrid genres. This shift has led to a shift from linguistic correctness to social meaning and contextual relevance.

The distinction between translanguaging and code-switching is also relevant. While code-switching is characterized as a movement between languages, translanguaging does not recognize linguistic boundaries as a primary analytical category. However, it is argued that it is more effective to consider these concepts in an integrative manner than to oppose them (Balam & Carroll, 2025).

The literature has a number of limitations: code-switching is often studied within a single domain (classroom, professional environment, online communication); the interrelationship between academic and digital spaces is rarely analyzed; most studies are based on the context of the Global North; and the relationship between code-switching and professional reputation, symbolic capital, and institutional adaptation is rarely presented in the form of a systematic model.

Therefore, it is relevant to analyze code-switching at the intersection of academic, professional, and digital domains, within the framework of strategic repertoire management. Such an approach allows us to interpret it not only as a “mixed speech” or structural phenomenon, but also as a mechanism for constructing social position and professional status. This issue is of particular importance in a multi-layered linguistic ecology such as Kazakhstan, since the mechanisms of coordinating repertoire between different institutional regimes have not yet been fully empirically analyzed.

The expansion of digital communication has fundamentally changed the structure of linguistic practice: modern texts are not only composed of words, but also co-constructed through emojis, hashtags, hyperlinks, video, sound, and visual elements. This multi-channel process of meaning-making is explained by the concept of multimodality. In this context, language does not function as an isolated code, but as part of a semiotic system that interacts with visual and platform-specific elements.

In recent years, the direction of digital translanguaging has become systematic, describing multilingual practices in online environments. A bibliometric analysis

conducted by Lu and Gu (2024) shows that this field is developing rapidly, especially in the context of education. However, it is not enough to explain digital hybridity simply as the simultaneous use of several codes. What is important is the selection of linguistic resources according to audience, purpose, and rhetorical effect. Montes-Alcalá (2024) analyzes Spanish-English code-switching in messengers, showing that emojis and abbreviations function to regulate social distance and convey emotional tone.

Research in 2024 – 2025 re-examines digital discourse in terms of platform conditioning. Chovancová and Kubašová (2024) argues for the need to analyze linguistic activity in conjunction with algorithmic logic and interface design: language choice is determined not only by speaker intent, but also by technical capabilities such as character count, visual format, and response buttons. Herring (2025) emphasizes the importance of combining linguistic analysis with technological architecture. Thus, code-switching in the digital environment should be considered not only as a social strategy, but also as a form of platform adaptation.

Digital multilingualism has also been linked to issues of social justice. Sun (2026) argues that linguistic resources in digital spaces are related to epistemic justice, while Alon and Krtalić (2025) show that interface design and technical constraints can limit the linguistic agency of multilingual users. This highlights the tension between linguistic practice and technological structure.

At the same time, fragmentation persists in the literature: the digital environment is often considered separately from academic and professional discourse. The relationship between academic voice, professional self-presentation, and digital repertoire flexibility is not systematically analyzed. In the case of Kazakhstan, this issue is particularly relevant: while the politics of trilingualism and the role of English as academic capital are evident in digital spaces, empirical work that examines it in conjunction with academic and professional domains is limited.

Therefore, it is not enough to explain digital linguistic activity only at the level of “online slang”. It is a complex discursive mechanism for meaning-making, social positioning, and the construction of professional agency. In this regard, it is necessary to analyze digital, academic, and professional spaces as interconnected ecosystems, both theoretically and empirically.

Since independence, multilingualism in Kazakhstan has been studied mainly in the context of language policy, national identity, education reform. Early works focused on the status of the state language and the role of Russian in public communication (Smagulova, 2008; Suleimenova, 2019), but did not focus on in-depth analysis of language practices at the level of specific discourse. In the context of higher education, Burkhanov

and Sharipova (2020), Tleuova and Seitova (2022) examined the role of English, EMI programs, and the impact of international publication requirements.

In recent years, the concept of translanguaging has actively entered Kazakhstani academic discourse. Karabassova and San Isidro (2020) analyzed its theoretical foundations and demonstrated its educational potential; Abilkassymova et al. (2025) described the pedagogical effectiveness of language hybridity in digital and academic environments; Odanova et al. (2025) identified the role of the Kazakh language in the context of translanguaging. These works substantiate translanguaging as a specific communicative practice in Kazakhstan and allow us to consider multilingualism as a resource.

At the same time, code-switching research has mostly focused on urban Kazakh-Russian bilingualism and identity issues (Smagulova, 2017), and an integrated analysis at the intersection of academic, professional, and digital domains is lacking. Digital multilingualism has also largely remained at a descriptive level, and international theoretical concepts such as platform effect, epistemic justice, or repertoire ecology have not been systematically applied in the national context.

In general, research has focused on three areas: (1) language policy at the macro level; (2) pedagogical translanguaging; (3) descriptive analysis of urban code-switching. However, theoretical integration between these areas is weak, and a model that considers academic, professional, and digital spaces as a single repertoire ecology has not been developed. The cognitive and epistemological aspects of translanguaging, strategic repertoire management, and the place of the Kazakh language in the multilingual repertoire have not been sufficiently analyzed in international theoretical discussions.

This situation highlights the need to rethink translanguaging in the context of Kazakhstan not only as a pedagogical method, but also as a socio-epistemological phenomenon. Therefore, it is relevant to study multilingual practices empirically, not only within the framework of macro-level and micro-descriptive analysis, but also at the intersection of academic, professional, and digital domains.

The literature reviewed above highlights a number of important theoretical developments. First, the limitations of the monoglossic paradigm have been recognized, and multilingual practice has come to be interpreted in terms of repertoire-based and translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Wei, 2014). Second, code-switching research has shifted from structural models to social strategies, bringing the indexical and discursive functions of language choice to the fore (Gumperz, 1982; Silverstein, 2003). Third, the development of digital communication, especially multimodality and platform contingency, has highlighted the need to rethink linguistic hybridity as a form of meaning-making that takes place in technological environments (Herring, 2025; Lu &

Gu, 2024). Nevertheless, systematic limitations remain. The literature is often fragmented by domain: code-switching in the classroom, translanguaging in academic writing, and digital practices in online communication are considered separately. The interactions between academic, professional, and digital spaces and the cross-domain organization of repertoires are under-theorized.

The global theoretical debates are largely based on the context of the Global North, and Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, remains marginalized as an empirical base. The post-Soviet linguistic ecology – state language policy, the historical role of the Russian language, and the transformation of English into academic capital – provides a unique context that allows for a rethinking of existing theories.

Most research in Kazakhstan is limited to language policy or pedagogical practice (Burkhanov & Sharipova, 2020; Tleuova & Seitova, 2022). Although translanguaging is described as a methodological resource, the issue of strategic repertoire management in specific discourse situations has not been sufficiently analyzed. The theoretical bridge between macro-level policy and micro-level language practice is weak.

Thus, a multi-layered research gap can be identified. At the theoretical level, the concepts of repertoire, code-switching, and digital discourse have not yet been integrated into a unified analytical framework. At the empirical level, relatively few studies simultaneously encompass academic, professional, and digital domains within a single research trajectory. At the regional level, Kazakhstan remains underrepresented in international theoretical discussions. Finally, at the interpretative level, multilingual practices are still at times construed as “deviations,” while their socio-strategic dimensions remain insufficiently explored.

In the context of Kazakhstan, it is relevant to study how multilingual youth organize their language repertoire and for what purposes they use various strategies in a cross-domain empirical context at the intersection of academic, professional and digital domains. Considering Kazakhstan as a unique area of language communication with technological influence, this analysis shows that Kazakhstan's experience of multimodal digital communication can complement the global scientific discourse with new content and perspective on texts and meanings.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographically informed design aimed at examining multilingual practices as they are lived, negotiated, and reflected upon within specific sociocultural and institutional contexts. Rather than treating language choice as a fixed attribute, the study approaches it as a situated practice shaped by interaction, institutional norms, and platform conditions.

The analytical orientation is grounded in a translingual and repertoire-based framework. Language use is conceptualized not as movement between clearly bounded systems, but as the flexible deployment of an individual's full communicative repertoire across contexts. This perspective is complemented by insights from the sociology of knowledge, allowing the analysis to consider not only linguistic forms but also how participants interpret, justify, and evaluate their own language practices in relation to institutional expectations, legitimacy, and professional positioning.

The research was conducted in 2024 – 2025 in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest academic and multilingual urban center. The city represents a layered linguistic ecology in which Kazakh, Russian, and English intersect in everyday academic, professional, and digital life. English is increasingly associated with research productivity and international mobility, Russian remains a stable medium of academic and interethnic communication, and Kazakh occupies both symbolic and institutional roles within national language policy.

Empirical material was collected at two large state-funded universities operating within Kazakhstan's trilingual education model. Both institutions offer parallel degree tracks in Kazakh and Russian, alongside English-medium instruction (EMI) programs, particularly in STEM and internationally oriented disciplines.

Thirty individuals aged 18-35 initially participated in the study. After excluding incomplete interviews, the final sample consisted of 25 participants (14 women and 11 men; mean age = 24.5). Recruitment followed purposive sampling procedures designed to capture variation in linguistic trajectories and educational backgrounds. Invitations describing the aims and criteria of the study were distributed via university mailing lists, student networks, and faculty referrals. Eligibility was determined based on several criteria, including the regular use of at least two languages, prior experience in multilingual higher education settings, active participation in digital communication environments, and informed consent to audio recording and analysis. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, operationalized as the point at which additional interviews did not generate substantially new codes related to the study's core themes. Participants represented diverse fields, including linguistics, education, translation studies, computer science, and other STEM disciplines.

To enhance interpretive rigor, several contextual and mediating factors were systematically documented, including the language of schooling, region of origin (urban versus regional background), academic specialization, participation in international mobility programs, as well as the level and type of digital engagement. These factors were not treated as statistical variables but as interpretive lenses during coding and memo-writing. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting 45-90 minutes. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online (via Zoom), depending on participant preference. Participants were free to use Kazakh, Russian, English, or any

combination thereof. Instances of code-switching were not restricted and were treated as analytically meaningful rather than corrected or standardized.

The interview guide encompassed five key thematic domains, namely language biography, academic language practices, informal and digital communication, identity and language ideologies, as well as the relationship between language and technology. This structure encouraged reflection on both everyday practices and perceived institutional norms. All interviews were audio-recorded, stored in encrypted form, and anonymized using coded identifiers (P01- P25). When excerpts were translated into English for reporting purposes, translation was conducted by the research team with attention to semantic equivalence. Code-switched segments were preserved in their original form whenever analytically relevant. Ambiguous cases were discussed collaboratively to ensure contextual accuracy. First, interviews were transcribed verbatim, retaining pauses, laughter, and other paralinguistic features. Second, open thematic coding was conducted in *NVivo*. Codes were generated inductively from meaningful text segments. Third, initial codes were organized into broader analytical categories, a structured codebook was developed containing working definitions, illustrative excerpts. Fourth, analytic memo-writing was used to explore emerging relationships among themes, particularly those related to legitimacy, institutional expectations, language choice, digital positioning. In addition to thematic coding, selected elements of discourse-oriented analysis were incorporated. Particular attention was paid to recurring lexical patterns, the narrative structuring of experience, explicit and implicit evaluations of language hierarchies, as well as forms of linguistic self-positioning. This multi-layered approach enabled the study to connect reported practices with broader ideological and institutional frameworks. To enhance reliability, 20% of the transcripts were independently recoded by a second researcher using the shared codebook. Agreement was calculated at the level of coded segments (Cohen's kappa = 0.82), indicating high interpretive consistency.

The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving adult participants. All participants provided informed consent and were informed about the aims of the study, data storage procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Data were stored securely in encrypted format. As a qualitative inquiry, the study does not seek statistical generalization. Findings are context-sensitive and shaped by the urban, higher-education setting of Almaty. Regional contexts, types of academic programs, and varying levels of digital engagement may produce different configurations of multilingual practice. However, the study's contribution lies in its in-depth, domain-sensitive exploration of how multilingual repertoires are organized across academic, professional, digitally mediated environments. By making contextual conditions explicit, documenting analytic procedures transparently, the design allows for informed comparison, potential replication in similar multilingual settings.

Results

The core findings from interviews with 25 multilingual participants in Kazakhstan, including IT professionals, government servants, and language teachers are presented. The aim is to understand how individuals narrate their linguistic lives-how they frame identity, navigate multilingual, digital spaces, and attach affective or symbolic value to various languages and codes.

Each participant was given a total of 60 questions set in 3 key thematic areas (Table 1). The questions that appeared in the interviews were designed to be conversational and flexible, allowing for both narrative depth and individualized trajectories.

Table 1

Interview Themes and Focus Areas

Theme	Focus of Inquiry	Key Subcategories
1. Linguistic Repertoires and Identity	Exploring how participants perceive, describe, and experience their language knowledge and use	Language acquisition; emotional resonance; language hierarchy; identity framing; cultural belonging
2. Translingual Practices	Understanding everyday code-switching, hybrid discourse, and creative language mixing	Motivations for switching; rhetorical effects; humor and irony; correction or policing of language use
3. Language, Code, and Digital Environments	Investigating the role of natural and programming languages in digital contexts	Coding as language; language choice in technical writing; digital authorship; affect in code

Each thematic block contained approximately 20 questions, prompting not only factual responses but also reflective storytelling, personal interpretation. Participants often elaborated freely, moving between anecdotes, analysis providing rich material for philological and discourse analysis. To synthesize the narrative data, Table 2 below outlines key patterns identified across interviews, alongside notable linguistic or rhetorical features. These patterns illustrate how language operates as both social practice, symbolic resource in multilingual Kazakhstan.

Table 2

Summary of Thematic Findings

Theme	Common Patterns	Notable Linguistic and Rhetorical Features
1. Linguistic Repertoires and Identity	High multilingual fluency; dynamic switching across Kazakh, Russian, English	Kazakh linked to intimacy and cultural depth; Russian to ease and humor; English to global or academic legitimacy
2. Translingual Practices	Frequent and often unconscious code-switching, especially online	Switching used for tone-shifting, humor, solidarity, or emphasis; viewed as creative rather than flawed
3. Digital Language and Code	Programming languages perceived as expressive yet ideologically "neutral"	Mixed-language code comments; affective expressions embedded in technical texts; English dominant in platforms like GitHub

Respondents linked Kazakh to family, memory, emotional depth, Russian to spontaneity, social ease, and English to formal, career-oriented interactions. Such relationships were

frequently expressed in metaphor. A second-year linguistics student put it this way: "*Kazakh is the place where my emotions are located. Russian is automatic-fast. English? That's one for structure and essays."*

Some participants were feeling a sense of responsibility or guilt for not using Kazakh more, although they felt fluent, leading to conflicts between language loyalty, social performance. A computer science student noted, "*In Russian, I feel like I can joke and be fast. In Kazakh, I do have to slow down, it's heavier but warmer."*

Participants also described constant code-switching, both deliberate and natural, especially in texting, online posts and in classroom dealings. Instead of seeing it as interference, many considered it a method for expressing tone, joking, or nuanced changes of position. One third-year education student remarked, *"If I say something serious in English, I can add a Kazakh word soften it.. Such as 'You ought to turn in the assignment, child.' I'm not sure why, but it just sounds better."*

However, policing of language occurred in formal academic or professional environments where translingual expression was at times deemed inappropriate. An information technology student recalled, *"I was not showing off. I just knew the right word in English. But the professor said I was being confusing."*

These experiences reveal ideological currents linked to linguistic purity, social gatekeeping, intelligibility politics that consider translingualism as both a resource and a site of tension. Interestingly, programming languages were repeatedly characterized as emotionally neutral but expressive. Writing in code was often seen as easier and more consistent than academic English writing. A software engineering fourth-year student said, "*Frankly, Python is easier than writing in academic English. It's black and white, it's cut and dry. No passive voice!"*

Hybrid language practices were also facilitated by digital environments. Kazakh or Russian comments were commonly placed in code by participants: that they developed together with someone, or in local developers' projects. A backend developer reported, *"My READMEs are in English, but I would put some Kazakh side-comments while it has one for the local friends. Sometimes it's just amusement, like having just written particularly challenging code, saying 'osyndai boldy.'"*

A striking contrast emerged between informal or digital contexts and institutional settings, such as universities, workplaces, and formal online platforms. These were consistently framed as spaces of linguistic friction, where participants felt compelled to regulate or discipline their language use. Institutional norms often demanded adherence to standardized or "pure" versions of a single language, formal Kazakh in governmental

contexts, Russian in academic settings, and English in professional or global-facing roles, producing cognitive effort, a sense of alienation.

A multilingual education student explained: *"At university, I know I am supposed to present in Russian or English, but when I prepare, I think in Kazakh first. Then I translate in my head. It slows me down, and it does not sound like me anymore*." Similarly, a fourth-year linguistics student reflected: *"They want clean English in essays, but we live in a messy language world."*

Language policing extended beyond essays to classroom participation, digital platforms, project submissions. A philosophy student recalled: "*Once, during an online seminar, I used an English term, 'framework', because there is no good Kazakh or Russian equivalent. The professor stopped me and said to use only one language at a time. But I was just trying to explain."*

English dominance in science, technology, engineering, mathematics introduced a prestige hierarchy, creating social and symbolic pressures that sometimes undermined Kazakh or Russian. A backend developer observed: "*You can say the same thing in Russian, but it sounds less smart. People respect English, even if they do not fully understand it."* A user experience designer added: *"Sometimes I translate my technical emails into English even though everyone in the team speaks Russian. It just feels more professional. But it also feels fake."*

Experiences highlight the tension between performative professionalism and authentic communication, where switching between languages serves to navigate social power, perform legitimacy, and at times suppress parts of one's identity. Participants also expressed frustrations about Kazakh's ambiguous institutional role. One student explained: "*In my university's mission statement, everything is about 'developing Kazakh.' But when I submitted a short assignment in Kazakh, the instructor asked for a Russian version because they were not comfortable reading it."*

For many participants, Kazakh remained their most personal and fluent language, yet lacked institutional recognition or support. Participants' narratives reveal the emotional, strategic, and symbolic dimensions of multilingual language use. Institutional monolingual norms often clash with lived translingual practices, producing tension, self-monitoring, and adaptation.

Table 3

Summary of Linguistic Frictions across Institutional Domains

Type of Friction	Institutional Norm	Participant Experience	Consequence
Monolingual academic expectations	One language per assignment (Kazakh, Russian, or English)	Translating thoughts, self-censoring expressions	Loss of voice, academic fatigue
Code-switching regulation	"Stick to one language" in writing	Desire to clarify, personalize meaning through mixed codes	Correction, embarrassment, disengagement
English hegemony in professional work	English as default for scientific communication	Kazakh, Russian treated as informal, less prestigious	Identity suppression, strategic performance

Despite institutional pressures, some found subtle ways to resist or reframe expectations. They could incorporate humor, irony, or code-mixing into academic writing, adding Kazakh idioms in English essays or inserting Kazakh comments in programming scripts. Others found confidence in decentralized peer-led platforms, where the community and its norms, rather than institutional rules, determined suitable language use. A student of computer science explained: *"I do not feel as much pressure online. Whatever works for me, Kazakh, Russian, English, or even memes. This is more free. No one is there to guide you and make it correct anymore!"*

While institutions emphasized standardized, hierarchical norms, digital and peer-led spaces offered authors ways of being attractively phrased yet deeply rooted in their culture. A second-year law student reported*: "I speak three languages and yet when in the classroom it feels as though I am constantly betraying who I am supposed to be. My English is too colloquial, perhaps; my Kazakh is not the kind of written language they were expecting."*

Linguistic self-monitoring was very sensitive for participants whose everyday habits, including regional dialects or informal code-mixing, differs from institutional norms. One rural participant explained she was proud of her Kazakh, yet "toned it down" at university because "it sounds too village." Others reported doubts supported by standardized tests and classroom corrections. A fourth-year economics student reflected, *"My IELTS score is okay, but I still feel like my English is not real. It is just memorized phrases."*

These narratives illustrate that language proficiency was often less an issue of actual fluency than perceived authenticity – whether or not your speech "sounded right" to authority. Frequently, participants judged themselves against the monolingual norms of the institutions where they studied, creating a sense that they were not genuinely Kazakh, or genuinely anything else either. Though Kazakh felt resonant and personal, at times it was seen as unfit for academic use; English was considered professional but emotionally distant; Russian stood in between the two extremes, both accessible and pressuring. A student enrolled in a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

programme reflected, *"When I write in English, it looks smart, but it is not me. In Kazakh, I could explain things from my heart, but that is not how assignments work."*

Many participants described psychological effects of navigating these ideological terrains. They felt "between two languages," or lost confidence when corrected, even if the message was plain.

Table 4

Language Ideologies and Self-Positioning

Theme	Participant View	Language(s) Involved	Reported Effect
Academic legitimacy	"My English isn't academic enough"	English	Anxiety, self-censorship
Dialect stigma	"My Kazakh sounds too rural for university"	Kazakh	Identity suppression, code-shifting
Emotional distance	"I express better in Kazakh, but write in English"	Kazakh, English	Disconnection, rhetorical inauthenticity
Institutional expectations	"Russian is easier, but they prefer English in my field"	Russian, English	Strategic language choice, performance pressure
Empowered hybridity	"I write in Kazakh even if it's harder-because it matters"	Kazakh, English	Affirmed identity, language ownership

These stories offer us a window into the actual experience of contradiction in life lived by multilingual people in schooling or digital spaces across Kazakhstan. Across interviews, many participants began their stories with a disclaimer or apology about their use of language-particularly English. Phrases like *"Sorry for my English," "I'm not sure how to say this," or" My grammar is bad but"* could frequently be found on the first line. These remarks were not isolated and admitted to linguistic norms in a habit of recurring narrative strategy.

In some cases, participants used metaphors and brief parables to explain their experiences with language intertwining. A girl said of her three-language thinking that it *was "like a radio that could tune into three different stations,"* while another explained switching between Kazakh, Russian, and English as "*changing shoes for different roads*.

Participants also gave different perspectives on what qualifies as a "text" in their academic and social life. Although formal essays and presentations were mentioned, the interviewees more frequently brought up digital forms such as GitHub commits, TikTok captions, Instagram stories, or bilingual memes to narrate everyday texts which they themselves have produced and read.

One student spoke of how her group used Google Docs in many languages together, English outline, Russian comments, and Kazakh motivational messages. Another described the coding project she participated in as a "textual artifact," pointing to the need for good style not only in commit messages but also README files.

Table 5

Patterns in Interview Narrative

Emergent Theme	Observed Practice or Pattern	Illustrative Quote or Example	Interpretive Note
Linguistic Disclaimer Framing	Starting stories with "Sorry for my English"	"I'll try, but my English isn't so good..."	Signals self-awareness and anticipation of norms
Metaphorical Language for Multilingualism	Use of metaphors or analogies for code-switching	"Languages are like shoes for different roads"	Frames linguistic practice as intentional
Expanded Notion of Text	Inclusion of memes, captions, TikToks, and GitHub as "texts"	"A meme is still a text-it shows what I think"	Views authorship beyond print-centric models
Multilingual Digital Writing Practices	Mixed-language Google Docs, coding logs, bilingual social posts	"We write in English, comment in Russian, cheer in Kazakh"	Blended authorship, collaborative creation

Together, these emergent patterns highlight how participants actively reshape notions of linguistic authority and textuality through strategic self-presentation and digital, multilingual authorship.

Discussion

The study aimed to describe the language experiences of 25 multilingual young people and professionals in IT industry, civil service, language teachers in Kazakhstan. The results (Tables 2-5) indicate a high degree of dynamism in the participants' repertoire: switching between Kazakh, Russian and English is often automatic and natural. Participants described languages not only as a means of communication, but also as a mechanism for self-realization, social adaptation, and the management of prestige and belonging.

The data in Tables 4 and 5 show that many participants use linguistic strategies that preliminarily put themselves in a "weak" position when they start speaking or writing in English: remarks such as "*Sorry, my English is not good*", "*I don't know how to say it correctly*" are common. Such self-deprecation is not just politeness, but also an attempt to manage legitimacy. This phenomenon demonstrates that the "native speaker" norm remains a dominant ideology in the educational space and that "non-native" speakers question the legitimacy of their own voice (Dey et al., 2023). Therefore, the issue is not only the level of linguistic competence, but also the right to speak English and the ability to be recognized as a "legitimate" voice.

The statement "*I think in Russian and then speak in English*" reflects not only the cognitive process, but also the pressure associated with the ideology of "natural speech". In such a situation, the multilingual subject feels himself in the position of a "translator" and perceives English discourse as an externally imposed, normalized system. English becomes not just a new vocabulary and grammar, but a socially ordered style, presented as a "measure of competence" through international publications, IELTS/TOEFL exams,

scientific conferences and professional circles. This symbolic power pushes participants to prove their professionalism.

As a result, a mode of self-control, correction and “no mistakes” is activated when speaking and writing in English. The constant doubt of one participant while writing a dissertation, “*would a native speaker write this like this?*” is a manifestation of this normative pressure. This pressure applies not only to grammar, but also to scientific style, register and authorial tone. If the text is perceived as “not natural enough”, it may not be fully recognized in the academic space.

Therefore, the problem of academic legitimacy, as shown in Table 4, is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also reveals the social experience of multilingual youth in Kazakhstan. English is, on the one hand, a tool for international opportunities and career advancement, and on the other hand, an emotional burden associated with pressure, alienation, and a sense of “artificial voice.” As Dey et al. (2023) show, global English shapes the subject as a person who is constantly evaluated and compared.

In addition, the results of Table 2 show that Kazakh, Russian, and English act not only as functional, but also as emotional and symbolic maps in the minds of the participants. Kazakh is associated with warmth, family, and cultural memory (“*when listening to proverbs, it feels like my grandmother is speaking*”), that is, it is indexed as a safe, “homelike” space. While Russian is associated with lightness and humor, English is associated with global academic legitimacy. This pattern shows that languages act not only as communication tools, but also through the indexation of affect, emotional tone, and social meaning. However, for some participants, the Kazakh language is also associated with responsibility, national expectations, and norms of "correct speech," which determines its dual emotional weight. Russian, on the other hand, was associated with immediacy, automaticity, and humor. The participants’ statement that “I can tell a joke in Russian” indicates that Russian is an interactional resource of stance: it provides social convenience, speeds up communication, and reduces pressure. Here, Russian often indexes a position that is urban, socially flexible, and more likely to be informal. Russian is also seen in some contexts as a language of “academic safety”: because its place in university and official discourse is still stable.

English was often characterized by structure, ambition, and emotional distance. The statement “If I write in English, I look smart, but that’s not me” indicates that English allows the participant to assume a professional role, but that role subjectively feels alien. Thus, the high symbolic prestige of English leads to its perception at the affective level as cold, artificial or discursive distance. For some participants, English was perceived as a language of professional self-presentation rather than personal expression: it offers symbolic and career capital, but feels emotionally less authentic.

Most importantly, this "linguistic emotional map" in Table 2 allows us to interpret multilingualism as a process of identity positioning. One participant's statement that "*in Kazakh I feel like a girl, in English I am a student and a specialist, but I don't dare to smile*" proves that language directly affects a person's sense of self.

As the results of Table 3 show, most participants often encountered linguistic regulation and control in formal educational and professional spaces. In universities, workplaces, or in official document circulation, the principle of "one task, one language" prevails (Ou & Gu, 2020).

In institutional spaces, code-mixing was often described as "confusion," "disorder," or "mistake." One participant's experience of "*I used the English word because there was no other, but the teacher said to speak only one language*" illustrates how the ideology of linguistic purity operates. The issue here is not one of clarity, but of who has the power and the norm: the institutional environment enforces linguistic boundaries, while multilingualism is perceived as a practice that violates those boundaries. This control, often called "discipline," in reality narrows the natural discourse repertoire of the multilingual subject and confines him or her to a single register. The consequences of this conflict are clearly illustrated in Table 3: self-censorship, loss of voice, academic fatigue, and emotional alienation. The participant's statement that "*pure English is required, but we live in a dirty linguistic world*" clearly illustrates the structural difference between institutional monolingualism and everyday multilingualism.

The results of Table 2 and Table 5 show that code-mixing is not only a practical but also a rhetorical tool for the participants. The participants used code-mixing to soften the tone of speech, add humor, establish intimacy, convey emotion, or indicate belonging to a social group. One student's use of adding a Kazakh word to the end of an English sentence "*to make it sound warmer*" demonstrates the affective function of code-mixing. This behavior does not arise from a "lack" of language, but rather from the abundance of linguistic resources.

Through code-mixing, participants quickly change their stance: for example, a harsh demand made in English is softened by a Kazakh word, and a Russian joke takes on a "smart" tone through an English term. This reflects the interactional nature of multilingualism: languages do not replace each other, but rather simultaneously activate different social meanings within the same speech act. In this sense, code-mixing is not a "mistake" but a sign of complex pragmatic and rhetorical competence (Li, 2018).

However, this rhetorical flexibility is often not accepted in institutional environments. The natural communicative strategies of multilingual subjects are subjected to normative pressure in official environments. From this, code-mixing becomes a practice that is "free in private space" and "dangerous in official space".

The results of Tables 2 and 5 show that digital spaces like Telegram, GitHub, Reddit, Instagram, TikTok allow participants to freely practice multilingualism (Boumaza & Baker, 2026). Here, language norms are formed not by institutional authority, but by the community itself. The fact that participants say "*we joke in Russian in group chat, we give assignments in English, we thank you in Kazakh*" shows that multilingualism has become a natural ecology in digital environments.

At the same time, English has maintained its symbolic dominance in digital spaces, especially in IT and scientific communication. The fact that the README on GitHub is written in English, with the addition of Kazakh/Russian "indirect comments" is a reflection of this hierarchy. Although participants describe programming languages as "ideologically neutral," the textual culture types surrounding them, such as committing messages, documentation, technical email often reinforces the authority of English. Here, English is not just a language, but part of the "platform norm": it acts as a discursive standard that encodes professional identity and authority.

A notable innovation in the data is the practice of "translingual coding," where participants embed Kazakh or Russian notes into code to add emotion, humor, or interpersonal nuance to otherwise technical text. This suggests that multilingualism in Kazakhstan should be examined not only through language policy, but also through digital authorship and professional text production.

These findings provide several concrete recommendations for language policy and pedagogy in Kazakhstan. First, higher education institutions should consider the academic writing practices of multilingual students not only in terms of "errors" but also in terms of legitimacy and voice. This can be done, for example, by introducing the concept of "multilingual authorial voice" in academic writing courses, recognizing linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a disadvantage in peer-feedback systems, and strengthening reflective components in writing assignments.

Second, translingual practices should be legitimized in curricula and assessment systems in genres such as reflective essays, portfolios, project writing, and digital writing (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). This is not a "rejection of standards," but rather an effective way to use students' multilingual resources in a targeted manner for learning purposes. For example, allowing a student to conduct data collection in Kazakh, write the analytical conclusion in English, and write the reflective section in mixed code when preparing a research project can increase discourse naturalness without compromising academic quality.

Third, at the level of language policy, there is a need for specific institutional support that allows the functional use of Kazakh in academic and professional spaces, not just as a symbolic slogan. Otherwise, the gap between the "national language" and the "scientific

language" will only increase the emotional conflict and sense of alienation among young people. This support should not be limited to the requirement to "speak Kazakh"; on the contrary, it should include the ability of scientific supervisors and teachers to accept academic texts in Kazakh, provide quality feedback, and provide access to resources for developing a scientific style in Kazakh.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that institutional policies and pedagogies must shift from monolingual standardization to translingual recognition. This does not mean compromising standards, but expanding their scope to allow for adaptability, multilingualism, and emotional authenticity. Until then, the linguistic richness of Kazakh youth will only appear in side comments, whispered apologies, or memes shared after classes. Recognizing these forms of self-expression as central to 21st-century literacy, instead of empowering them, is a necessary step toward a more inclusive and responsive linguistic future.

Conclusion

This study explored how young people in Kazakhstan negotiate their multilingual existence, focusing on relationships among Kazakh, Russian, and English across institutional, educational, and digital contexts. Participants revealed a complex and deeply personal landscape where language functions not only as a tool but also as a terrain for belonging, negotiation, and subtle resistance. Institutional expectations continue to privilege standard English and, to a lesser extent, Russian, while Kazakh is often symbolically celebrated yet practically marginalized, especially in academic and scientific domains. However, this linguistic hierarchy is neither fully accepted nor passively reproduced. Through small acts, such as inserting a Kazakh proverb into an English paper or playfully adding Russian comments in a GitHub document or feed, individuals redefine what "proper" communication means and how it should function. The findings highlight the need for pedagogical strategies and language policies that move beyond monolingual norms and recognize the legitimacy of translingual voice. This does not require sacrificing clarity or academic standards; rather, it calls for space that allows rhetorically purposeful and culturally grounded multilingual expression. Without such shifts, educational institutions risk silencing voices they seek to empower.

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Ethics Declarations

World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed written consent prior to participation, and participation was voluntary.

Competing Interests

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data Availability

The datasets are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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