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Language and identity in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation has significantly altered perceptions of language and identity. However, some communities resist emerging language practices and their identity connotations. This paper examines how university students in Turkey navigate their national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities amidst globalisation and language commodification. Drawing on interview data, classroom observations, and field notes, we analyse 70 students' language attitudes and practices through a framework combining symbolic capital, chronotope, and identity. Findings show a robust reproduction of Turkish national and religious identities through language use and resistance to the cultural implications of English, even among non-Turkish individuals. The symbolic value of the Turkish language emerges as a resilient identity element against potential transitions, shaped by chronotopic positioning. The study contributes to sociolinguistic research by demonstrating how language value is recalibrated across time–space configurations in higher education settings.

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1. Introduction

The impact of globalisation on language practices and identity has been widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Castells, 2000; Hasanen et al., 2014; Heller, 2003; Hopkyns, 2020; Idris, 2016). However, the responses of different communities to this impact vary, with some quickly adapting and others showing resistance to emerging language practices and their associated identity connotations. In Turkey, a country with a complex sociolinguistic landscape, the issue of language and identity is particularly salient. Recent transformations in Turkish higher education, marked by increased internationalisation and the commodification of language practices, have stimulated intricate negotiations of identity among university learners, who must navigate a balance between national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities amidst evolving language dynamics. This is informed by critical sociolinguistics and identity research that view identity as produced in discourse and social practice (Fairclough, 2010; Norton, 2013; Norton & McKinney, 2011), by work on language as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), and by recent chronotopic approaches to multilingual identity that foreground time–space configurations of experience (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; Karimzad, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2025).

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This paper argues that students' language choices and evaluations in Turkish universities are best understood as chronotopically-situated identity practices mediated through symbolic capital. Drawing on ethnographic sociolinguistic research conducted at Ibn Haldun University in Turkey, we examine the construction and negotiation of identities through language use and attitudes. By examining how Turkish and English are differently valued across past-oriented national narratives, present campus interactions, and imagined global futures, the study shows how language becomes a key symbolic resource in negotiating belonging and legitimacy. In doing so, the paper brings together chronotope, symbolic capital, and identity to offer a fine-grained account of multilingual subjectivities in contemporary Turkey.

1.1. Context

After the Republic's founding (1923), language policy became a core nation-building tool in Turkey. The 1928 Alphabet Reform replaced Ottoman script with a Latin-based alphabet and standardised 'modern Turkish' as the language of citizenship, schooling, media, and administration (Lewis, 1999; Wright, 2004). In parallel, puristic reforms institutionalised through bodies such as the Turkish Language Association (founded 1932) promoted lexical purification and a singular linguistic norm to symbolise rupture from the Ottoman–Islamic past and alignment with Western modernity (Aytürk, 2004; Bora, 2003). Campaigns like 'Citizen, Speak Turkish!' (c. 1928–30s) pressed Turkish as the exclusive public language, discouraging other languages in streets, courts, and schools, and embedding a monolingual public sphere (Aslan, 2007; Gingeras, 2014). These shifts redefined belonging from the Ottoman millet logic[1] to a civic–national model centred on Turkish as the emblem of unity (Yüce, 2019). The long-term effects included restriction and stigmatisation of minority languages – especially Kurdish – in education, broadcasting, and administration, even as private/familial use persisted. Limited liberalisations since the 2000s (e.g. elective Kurdish, expanded broadcasting) have not undone the dominance of Turkish in high-stakes domains. In short, the Kemalist reforms, the Latin alphabet shift, the 'Citizen, Speak Turkish!' campaign, and their enduring monolingual effects provide the essential backdrop for interpreting how students position Turkish and English in their identity negotiations.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Turkish and minority languages

Turkish serves as the sole official language in the country, with minority languages such as Kurdish, Arabic, Greek, and Armenian also present. Research documents a long-standing monolingual Turkish public order that has constrained minority languages – particularly Kurdish- in education, media, and administration. Early republican and later measures included prohibitions on public Kurdish use, denial of Kurdish as a distinct language/identity, toponym changes, and forced relocations as part of Turkification (Aslan, 2007; Jongerden, 2009; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012). Kurdish has been privately taught since the mid-1990s by Kurdish cultural organisations operating in major urban centres (Öpengin, 2012). Since the 2000s, some limited liberalisations – e.g. elective Kurdish courses and expanded broadcasting – was implemented but have not displaced Turkish from high-stakes

domains (Kirişci, 2020; Öpengin, 2012). This policy history shapes current attitudes toward different languages in Turkey. While Turkish is framed as the legitimate medium of public life, additional languages such as English tend to be positioned instrumentally, or as potential sources of social friction.

1.2.2. English, national identity and EME

English has expanded steadily since the Ministry of Education approved English-medium education (EME) in 1957. While Turkish remains the dominant medium of instruction, English is now the second most widely used language in higher education, with full EME programmes offered by a small number of elite universities such as Boğaziçi University and Middle East Technical University, alongside partial adoption across the sector. This expansion has been closely tied to broader state-led projects of modernisation and Westernisation, positioning English as a gateway to global economic participation and international prestige. However, the spread of English has generated persistent tensions related to national identity, cultural continuity, and language protection. English is frequently framed as a double-edged resource: a modernising force associated with employability, mobility, and internationalisation, yet also a potential threat to Turkish linguistic purity and cultural heritage (Zok, 2010; Selvi, 2011). This ambivalence reflects deeper societal negotiations between aspirations for global integration and concerns over national cohesion. As a result, while English-medium education has expanded institutionally, its legitimacy remains contested within public and academic discourse.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, English is perceived as linguistic capital tied to employability, internationalisation, and social mobility (Bacon & Kim, 2018; Park & Wee, 2013; Piller & Cho, 2013). Ince and Meier (2023), in their study of Turkish students in the Arabian Gulf, show that English operates simultaneously as a local and global lingua franca, mediating both individual and collective identities. Their findings suggest that English is often valued more strongly outside formal educational settings, where it enhances confidence and future imaginaries, than within classrooms, where its use may feel constrained or ideologically charged. Similarly,Cetinkaya's (2005) study of Turkish students' willingness to communicate in English reveals cautious and selective uptake. Although nearly half of the participants reported willingness to use English, they preferred doing so in limited social contexts, such as with close friends, and viewed the use of English with Turkish peers or instructors as inappropriate or 'absurd' (p. 16). These findings point to a broader pattern in which English is recognised instrumentally but resisted symbolically within national spaces. These ideological tensions are further reflected in the challenges associated with EME practice.

1.2.3. Comparative perspectives from Turkic contexts

Scholarship from neighbouring Turkic-speaking countries provides valuable context for understanding Turkey's linguistic dynamics and offer crucial points of comparison in terms of perceptions of language and identity. Studies from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Ahn & Smagulova, 2022; Djuraeva, 2023; Zhunussova et al., 2022) show that while English is embraced as a tool for modernisation and global connection, it also coexists with national efforts to preserve local languages such as Kazakh and Uzbek. Kazakhstan's trilingual education policy (Kazakh–Russian–English) promotes symbolic and instrumental multilingualism, contrasting sharply with Turkey's largely monolingual orientation.

Kazakhstan positions English as both a vehicle of modernisation and a means of promoting national culture globally (Ahn & Smagulova, 2022), while Uzbekistan presents a more utilitarian view of English as economic capital and a pragmatic asset in the global market (Djuraeva, 2023). However, the reluctance towards English in Turkey could be attributed to the absence of significant economic demands for the language, much as how respondents in Kyrgyzstan express their ambivalence towards English due to uncertainties surrounding labour migration opportunities (Ahn & Smagulova, 2022). These cases illustrate how local histories and policy environments shape whether English is viewed as cultural capital complementary to national identity or cultural threat, an important dimension that informs this study's analysis of resistance and identity negotiation in Turkey.

1.2.4. Research gap

While there is extensive research on the global spread of English and its implications for multilingual societies, few studies focus specifically on the nuanced interplay between national identity and resistance to English in Turkey. Most existing research either addresses the historical significance of Turkish language reforms or explores English-Medium Education (EME) in isolation often neglecting learners' lived experiences and perspectives. This study bridges this gap by exploring the attitudes of Turkish university students toward English and Turkish, emphasising how these attitudes reflect broader sociolinguistic and identity-related dynamics. In doing so, we connect debates on English as linguistic capital and educational neoliberalism to the Turkish context (Park & Wee, 2013; Piller & Cho, 2013; Selvi, 2011) and analyse how the symbolic value of Turkish interacts with chronotopic positionings in students' narratives to shape resistance to English within a multilingual higher-education setting (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; Bourdieu, 1991). Unlike prior research, this study foregrounds students' lived experiences, highlighting how global linguistic trends intersect with local sociolinguistic realities, creating a distinctive form of resistance tied to cultural preservation.

1.3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in critical sociolinguistics (Fairclough, 2010) and views identity as socially constructed, negotiated, and contextually produced (Norton, 2013). Following Norton and McKinney (2011), we treat language as inseparable from identity, as individuals use linguistic resources to signal belonging, negotiate social positions, and navigate power relations across formal and informal contexts. Language choice thus indexes affiliation, legitimacy, and hierarchy, encompassing both resistance to and uptake of particular languages (Blommaert, 2006; Meier & Smala, 2022). Belonging to language groups is understood as 'layered' and dynamic (Blommaert, 2006), intersecting with other social affiliations and shifting over time. Accordingly, languages are conceptualised not as bounded systems but as part of individuals' communicative or multilingual repertoires (Blommaert, 2006; Blommaert & Backus, 2011). Identity, within this framework, is treated as indexical and interactional, emerging through stance-taking, alignment, and positioning in situated events, consistent with critical sociolinguistic approaches to identity as processual and contested (Fairclough, 2010; Norton, 2013).

Central to our analysis is Bourdieu's concept of symbolic value and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991), which provides a lens for understanding how language functions

beyond communication to reproduce social hierarchies and legitimacy. Linguistic resources carry unequal value within specific social fields, and speakers convert language competence into recognition, belonging, and authority within what Bourdieu terms linguistic markets. In this study, Turkish and English are conceptualised as differently valued resources within overlapping linguistic markets, where their symbolic power varies by context, audience, and institutional setting.

Building on recent work, we further conceptualise identity as spatiotemporally configured through chronotopes, time–space frames invoked in discourse that organise who speakers can be, where, and when (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; Karimzad, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2025). This allows to analyse how students locate themselves across settings (e.g. home, classroom, campus, city) and historical imaginaries (e.g. Ottoman past, republican modernity, current higher-education internationalisation) when negotiating Turkish and English. Analytically, we attend to lexical and narrative cues that signal time–space shifts and examine how those shifts recalibrate what counts as legitimate language and identity in each context.

Taken together, critical sociolinguistics, symbolic capital, and chronotopic analysis provide an integrated framework for examining students' language practices and identity trajectories. Figure 1 visualises these conceptual linkages, illustrating how chronotopes mediate the symbolic value of Turkish and English within overlapping linguistic markets. It shows how participants' spatiotemporal trajectories, rooted in layered historical imaginaries and contemporary mobility, shape evaluations of linguistic legitimacy, belonging, and value across contexts.

2. Materials and methods

Ibn Haldun University, where the study was conducted, adopts a multilingual education policy, particularly at Master's and PhD levels. Students are required to demonstrate competence in English, Turkish, and Arabic for graduation and are encouraged to expand their

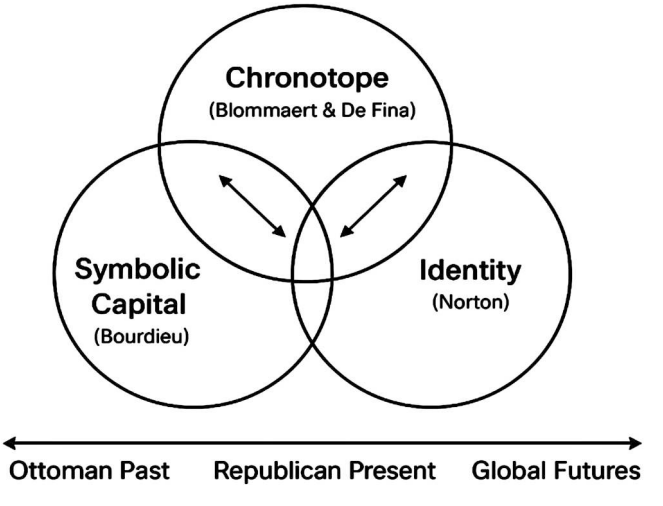

Figure 1. Chronotopes, symbolic capital and identity negotiation.

linguistic repertoires according to disciplinary needs. Most undergraduate and postgraduate students complete an English course at the School of Languages prior to entering their degree programmes. This institutional emphasis on multilingualism aims to support critical thinking, intellectual autonomy, and access to academic sources.

This study adopts an ethnographic sociolinguistic approach to examine the relationship between language practices and identity among students at the School of Languages at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul, Turkey. Data were collected between 2022 and 2023 through classroom observations and semi-structured group interviews with 70 undergraduate and postgraduate students, aged 18–29, drawn from diverse regions across Turkey. Ten participants identified with ethnic backgrounds including Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, and Georgian (see Table 1). To deepen the analysis, follow-up individual interviews were conducted with 30 participants selected on the basis of linguistic background and emerging themes. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, with occasional shifts to Turkish when participants referred to historical contexts or culturally specific expressions. The sample reflects the university's multilingual and multicultural student population.

Interviews focused on participants' self-perceptions, attitudes towards Turkish, other first languages, and English, and broader experiences of multilingualism. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect confidentiality and personal integrity.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and classroom observations were documented through contemporaneous field notes to provide contextual grounding. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to discern common patterns within the data. This was supported by narrative analysis to capture the complex interplay between language use and identity formation through personal stories, and discourse analysis to understand the symbolic power of language in Turkey (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 2010).

Open coding was conducted in NVivo, identifying recurring patterns such as resistance to English, symbolic attachment to Turkish, and cultural preservation. For instance, codes capturing phrases like 'we don't need English here' were grouped under themes of resistance. These initial codes were systematically reviewed and clustered into broader categories such as language-identity negotiation and multilingualism practices, and refined to align with the study's theoretical framework and research questions (see Table 2). To validate the themes, peer debriefing sessions were conducted with two researchers who cross-checked the coding process and thematic development against the raw data, helping to refine interpretations and minimise researcher bias. For instance,

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Participant Demographics	Description
Number of Participants	70 (Undergraduates: 30; Postgraduates: 40)
Ethnolinguistic Backgrounds	Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, Georgian, Pashtun, etc.
Age Range	Between 18 and 29
Education Level	Undergraduate and Postgraduate
Interview Length	30 min to 1 h
Languages Used in Interviews	Mostly English (Turkish intermittently)

Table 2. Summary of the main codes and themes.

Code	Sub-Themes	Sample Text
Linguistic and Ethnic Background	Turkish Other languages/ ethnicities	'I am not from Turkey, but I consider myself Turkish'.
Resistance to English	Cultural preservation, National sovereignty, Educational policies/ constraints, English as a cultural/ linguistic threat	'We don't need English here; Turkish is enough for everything'.
Symbolic Value of Turkish	National identity, Linguistic nationalism, Religious heritage	'Turkish is who we are; it's our history and culture'.
Globalisation and English	Pragmatism and opportunity, Ambivalence and utility, Economic utility	'English is important for jobs and connecting with the world, but Turkish is sufficient here'.
Identity Negotiation	Balancing modernity and tradition, Language as identity marker, Religious identity, Multilingual adaptation	'It is hard to be modern and hold onto all my traditions without questioning them first'.

discussions with peers highlighted the need to distinguish between resistance as cultural preservation and as economic practicality. Member checking involved sharing preliminary interpretations, such as the significance of Turkish as a symbol of unity, with participants to ensure they felt accurately represented. Reliability was further strengthened through a detailed audit trail, documenting decisions made at each step, while transferability was supported by providing rich examples from participants' narratives.

It is important to note that while our dataset comprises classroom observations, institutional documents (e.g. programme and language policy materials) and interviews, the excerpts in the Results section are drawn primarily from interview data. Interviews provided the most explicit and reflexive accounts of identity positioning and allowed participants' chronotopic orientations to be analysed through their own narratives. Classroom observations and field notes informed theme development and contextual interpretation but are not directly excerpted due to space constraints and analytic focus.

With regards to researchers' positionality, this study was conducted collaboratively by two researchers with complementary positionalities. The first author, an external researcher with extensive experience in multilingual contexts, conducted the primary fieldwork. While not Turkish, her regional expertise, familiarity with Middle Eastern sociocultural dynamics, and basic proficiency in Turkish facilitated rapport while enabling critical distance from dominant national narratives. Reflexivity was maintained through analytic memos and ongoing dialogue with the second author, a Turkish scholar fluent in Turkish and English, with extensive experience working with both Turkish and international students. His insider positionality contributed contextual sensitivity, participant trust, and nuanced interpretation of culturally embedded meanings. Together, this insider–outsider collaboration occupied what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe as the 'space between', a dynamic zone of shared reflexivity between acting as an outsider or an insider, allowing mutual interrogation of assumptions and strengthening interpretive balance and transparency.

3. Results

This section first outlines patterns of language competence and use, then examines identity-related themes (belonging, national and religious identity), and finally considers multilingualism in relation to educational policy.

3.1. Language competence and use: 'Turkish is enough here'

Participants reported high proficiency in Turkish, alongside varying levels of competence in languages such as Kurdish, Arabic, Georgian, Russian, Dari, Farsi, Mandarin, French and English. English was generally framed as a tool for global connectivity rather than local interaction. Across interviews and classroom discussions, language choices were closely linked to identity, nationalism, and everyday social positioning, revealing how participants navigate global linguistic resources while reaffirming the centrality of Turkish. The extracts below illustrate a 'pragmatic' orientation to language learning: Turkish is prioritised for daily life, while English is valued mainly for travel or interaction abroad.

> I believe Turkish is sufficient for daily life. I only study English in case I travel abroad. However, if foreigners come here, they should learn Turkish to communicate with us. (Zeynep)

> I focus on Turkish and Arabic, but I'm learning English for international communication and travel. But, in our context, Turkish is the only essential language for communication with locals. (Ahmet)

Zeynep and Ahmet both acknowledge the instrumental value of English while positioning Turkish as indispensable for local legitimacy and interaction. Similar views are expressed below:

> I think Turkish is enough. I learn English just because if I go abroad, I might need it. But here, if foreigners want to come, they should learn some Turkish to communicate. We do not need to speak English to talk to them. They are in our country. When we go to their countries, we speak their language so when they come here, they speak ours. (Yildiz)

> I believe Turkish is enough here. I learned English and Arabic and Russian before I came to Turkey. But, here, it's important for everyone to speak Turkish for communication. I don't rely on English to talk with them; just Turkish especially outside because they don't like when we speak another language. (Kaya)

These accounts construct Turkish as the legitimate language of the *here and now*, while English is projected onto imagined future or transnational spaces. Starting with a firm belief that 'Turkish is enough' places a strong emphasis on the value of the national language, and the importance of preserving one's cultural and linguistic identity in the face of the 'outsider' or 'foreigner'. Similarly, the assertion that in Turkey, if foreigners want to come, they should learn some Turkish to communicate implies that language plays a crucial role in defining a nation's identity and maintaining cultural boundaries.

From a chronotopic perspective, Turkish indexes everyday locality, continuity, and belonging, whereas English is displaced to an abstract global chronotope tied to mobility and elsewhere-oriented aspirations. Resistance to English is thus not framed as linguistic deficiency but as identity protection within a monolingual public order. Locally, Turkish functions as symbolic capital; English remains an optional resource linked to imagined

mobility rather than present necessity (Piller & Cho, 2013). Locally, Turkish indexes legitimacy and belonging.

3.2. Multilingualism and identity dynamics

3.2.1. Turkishness as belonging: voices and limits

While multilingualism is often associated with enhanced opportunities, participants described tensions between global languages and the preservation of cultural heritage. The extracts below reveal how Turkishness is articulated as a source of pride, belonging, and moral authority, while also functioning as a boundary against perceived external influence.

> I love Turkey. I am proud to be a Turk. We are the Ottomans; we have a history and a civilisation. We do not need people from outside to teach us ethics and science and principles. We teach people those things. (Furkan)

> Our roots are deep in this land, we are Turks. We have the legacy of our ancestors; we have resilience and greatness. We have a rich history; we have many ethnicities here and we live united. We have some problems with Kurdish people and refugees nowadays, but it is because of the west, we did not have them before. (Ozge)

> I found home in Turkey; I call it home now. Syria is not my home; I was born there. I can change my name and nationality. I have a Turkish identity, and I love the Turkish culture and heritage. I believe in our history and civilisation, and our power. (Ali)

> My grandparents and parents are from Georgia, but I am Turkish. I love Turkey. Ataturk said that 'if you feel Turkish then you are Turkish'. I feel Turkish and my blood is Turkish. (Ismat)

Read through a chronotopic lens, these narratives articulate Turkishness through layered historical and spatial frames. Ottoman heritage, republican nationalism, and contemporary migration intersect to produce distinct meanings of belonging. Participants' pride in their history, collective heritage and civilisation legitimises claims to cultural authority and positions Turkish identity as inclusive yet bounded.

References to 'problems' with Kurds and refugees reveal underlying tensions that are shaped by long-standing state policies aimed at homogenising national identity. Historically, 'Turkification' included prohibition of Kurdish and denial of the existence of the Kurds (Jongerden, 2009). Despite recent inclusive reforms and the recognition of Kurdish as an elective course in schools, socio-political discrimination continues on the ground (Öpengin, 2012). Our findings show that Kurdish participants often navigate a dual sense of belonging, expressing pride in their Kurdish identity while also feeling pressured to conform to Turkish linguistic and cultural norms. This is particularly evident in statements that reflect a strategic 'code-switching' between Kurdish and Turkish. As one Kurdish participant noted: 'I speak Kurdish at home, but at work or school, I have to use Turkish; otherwise, people look at me differently'. Linguistic choice here becomes a politically charged act embedded in unequal power relations. Similarly, ambivalence towards refugees, particularly Syrians, mirrors state and media narratives that portray refugees as economic burdens or cultural threats. Although Turkey has an 'open door' policy towards refugees, Syrian asylum seekers face various challenges, including difficulties with integration, securitisation and political discourse (Kılıçaslan,

2016; Koca, 2016). While some participants voiced empathy, others echoed discourses that depict refugees as destabilising forces. This was evident in statements such as: 'I understand they are fleeing war, but they bring problems to our neighbourhoods; they don't integrate, and it feels like they are changing our culture, norms, food, everything!'. This reflects how national identity is constructed in opposition to perceived 'others'. Such positions are chronotopically anchored in a national present that contrasts an idealised past 'unity' with contemporary anxieties.

Ali's and Ismat's narratives illustrate how Turkish functions as a symbolic resource for claiming belonging across ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The personal narrative of Ali implies personal agency and resilience, as well as a recognition of the strength derived from embracing one's adopted homeland. Moreover, Ismat's statement highlights the importance of individual sentiment and emotional connection in shaping one's national identity, emphasising a deep-rooted affinity for Turkey and its values. By invoking the words of Ataturk, 'if you feel Turkish then you are Turkish', Ismat emphasises the inclusive nature of Turkish identity. Hence, Turkish identity emerges as something enacted and acquired through language, affect, and alignment with national history rather than inherited solely through ancestry. From a chronotopic lens, these identities span ancestral pasts, national presents, and aspirational futures of belonging. This layering of timescales and spaces illustrates how individual identity is negotiated through the convergence of personal biography and broader sociohistorical narratives, where feeling Turkish becomes both a present enactment and a projection of one's desired position within national history. While both narratives exemplify the ways in which individuals navigate their identities amidst the complexities of globalisation, language practices and historical ties, it is important to acknowledge that as migrants, participants may be influenced by a desire for social acceptance and integration. This highlights the need for further research to explore the complexities of identity formation among migrants and how such narratives interact with broader sociopolitical dynamics.

In summary, the complex layers of national, linguistic and ethnic identities can be understood within the broader context of national identity construction, historical policies, and the sociopolitical ethos promoted by Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Atatürk initiated profound reforms that aimed to modernise Turkey and redefine it as a modern nation-state. Among these reforms was the emphasis on creating a cohesive Turkish identity that transcended ethnic, regional, and religious differences. This was encapsulated in his famous statement: 'Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!' ('How happy is the one who says I am a Turk!') (Ahmed, 2017; Karaduman, 2019). His vision for Turkey was grounded in the idea of civic nationalism, where the sense of national belonging is based not on ethnic lineage but on citizenship and allegiance to the nation-state. This approach was partly a practical solution aimed at uniting a diverse population that included Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, and other ethnic groups within the new Turkish republic. Hence, the assimilation policies (Aslan, 2007; Aydingün & Aydingün, 2004; Çolak, 2004; Hanioğlu, 2017) that discouraged ethnic distinctions have historically influenced how individuals perceive themselves. Over generations, these policies can lead to a strong identification with the Turkish identity at the expense of ethnic heritage.

3.2.2. Religion, secularism, and identity

Participants' accounts also foreground the intersection of religious identity, ethnicity, nationalism, and language.. Despite the secularist doctrines of Kemalist ideology, 'Turkishness' came to be predominantly defined by Muslim identity (Aslan, 2007).

> I am Muslim. I am proud to be as any other Turkish person. It is part of our culture and upbringing. I try my best to take my values, beliefs, and daily practices from it, but in Turkey it was so hard for us to be able to wear the hijab like nowadays. We are lucky that the policies changed, and we are allowed to practice our religion […] Turkish is still enough to know our religion. (Zeynep)

> Being Muslim in Turkey was hard and complex but now we have the freedom to wear what we want and attend university and work with our hijab […] sometimes I feel that our lessons of English try to impose the culture of the Americans or English people on us, and we do not like that. There are many things we do not agree on in our religion and culture as Turkish people and I wish they do not include them […] I do not speak any Arabic, but I still understand Quran and I practice my faith, it is not obligatory to speak Arabic for that. (Huriye)

> All Turkish are Muslim […] We are in the twenty-first century and our society is modern now, there are things in religion that we cannot apply nowadays […] We have to question everything, not just accept them because our grandparents and parents practice them. We have to accept differences to live in our world. (Bahadir)

These narratives illustrate the complicated interplay between religious identity, cultural values, and societal changes in Turkey. They highlight negotiations between past restrictions on religious expression, present visibility, and global exposure through English. Concerns about English-language content often centred on its perceived cultural and moral implications rather than the language itself. Chronotopically, English becomes associated with external value systems, while Turkish anchors religious practice and cultural continuity. Statements about the role of Arabic in understanding religious texts, imply that while multilingualism may enrich religious understanding, Turkish remains the cornerstone of identity, serving as the language through which individuals connect with their cultural and religious heritage in Turkey.

The participants' remarks about the centrality of being Muslim and wearing the hijab provide a window into the complex intersections of religion, identity, and state policy in Turkey. While Turkey is officially a secular state, Islam has been increasingly utilised by political actors to (re)define national identity (particularly under the ruling AKP- Justice and Development Party). Our data reveal a tension between state-promoted agendas and individual expressions of faith. Several participants mentioned that wearing the hijab was a personal choice reflecting their religious commitment, yet they also acknowledged feeling societal pressure to conform to either secular or more conservative norms. One participant stated: 'I wear hijab because of my belief, but sometimes I feel it is also expected of me, especially in certain communities which are conservative; but at the same time there is pressure from the outside to be more secular and non-practising because it is harder for us to go to university or find a job or travel; it is like an ongoing battle'. This reflects a dual negotiation: while religious symbols like the hijab are embraced by some as markers of identity, they are perceived by others as tools of society control to enforce conformity. More importantly, many young participants expressed outright resistance to what they see as a state-driven agenda to promote a

monolithic secular or religious identity. For example, a participant from a secular background noted in a classroom discussion: 'I respect people's choices to practice their religion, but I don't like how the state seems to push religion onto everything nowadays; I understand it has been difficult for religious women to study before because of the secular government but what is happening now is just the opposite and will create no good'. This tension highlights the diverse ways in which young people in Turkey engage with and contest dominant religious ideologies, pointing to a broader spectrum of identity practices that challenge old (secular) and recent (religious) state narratives. Therefore, participants' discussions of religion reflect a complex interplay between personal beliefs, social expectations, and state policies. These narratives show that religious identity in Turkey is far from uniform; instead, it is a contested space where individuals navigate competing pressures from state, society, and personal conviction. It is, thus, continually recalibrated across shifting political and temporal contexts.

3.3. Multilingualism and educational policies

The education system in Turkey has played a crucial role in shaping language preferences and identity. Participants consistently linked language education to national identity formation, and schools were described as spaces that prioritise Turkish while marginalising linguistic diversity.

> When we can speak different languages, it helps us understand different people and cultures better. But our schools taught us only Turkish; they need to do more to teach us about all other languages and also the languages spoken in Turkey, so everyone feels included. (Fatma Zehra)

> I do not mind learning other languages, it is good for us, especially English, but when I spend a long time speaking just in English, I miss Turkish. I really miss it, and I want to speak it with my friends. It makes me feel different. We can keep English for other purposes. We used Turkish throughout all our education; you do not expect us to use only English now, even in class. (Hasan)

> Turkish is my third language, but I choose to use Turkish here because it helps us fit in better and have the same chances as everyone else. Sometimes, being different can make things harder […] English does not help a lot here, but I wish it spreads more. (Nur)

These accounts collectively illustrate how linguistic choices are embedded in specific chronotopes of learning- school as a nationalising space versus the university as a transnational contact zone- each shaping different evaluations of Turkish and English. Fatma Zehra's statement highlights a significant gap in Turkey's educational policies, which predominantly focus on Turkish language instruction while neglecting other languages. Hasan acknowledges the value of multilingualism and the importance of maintaining proficiency in different languages like English, but his sentiment reflects an attachment to Turkish as a means of connection and identity, especially in social settings. He suggests that while English is beneficial for various purposes, Turkish should remain central, especially in educational contexts, to preserve cultural and linguistic continuity. Nur, on the other hand, addresses the pragmatic aspect of language choice, where prioritising Turkish over other languages, facilitates social integration and equal opportunities. Turkish as a repertoire here is used tactically for solidarity/fit on campus, reflecting how

prestige and power remains bounded by site (e.g. campus/class vs. public life vs. abroad). Overall, Turkish operates as locally legitimate symbolic capital across educational and social sites; English is valued instrumentally but bounded by context. This co-existence of resistance and uptake is organised by time–space positioning (e.g. present needs vs. future/global imaginaries, campus/local vs. abroad).

4. Discussions and implications

4.1. Multilingualism between resistance and uptake

Comparative studies from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan show that English can function simultaneously as a marker of national progress and global participation (Djuraeva, 2023; Zhunussova et al., 2022). In contrast, Turkey's monolingual ideology and historically grounded nationalism situate English outside the core chronotope of belonging. As a result, English is met with ambivalence rather than full embrace. The coexistence of resistance and instrumental uptake observed in this study reflects how linguistic value is produced through intersecting time–space configurations rather than static language attitudes. These comparisons highlight how historical trajectories shape distinct 'linguistic futures' across Turkic-speaking societies.

Multilingualism among young people in Turkey serves both as a bridge and a barrier. While it facilitates global and social mobility, it also necessitates careful negotiation of personal and collective identities. Consistent with Blommaert (2006) and Meier and Smala (2022), language choices reflect complex negotiations of social positioning, legitimacy and hierarchy. Many participants resisted English, seeing it as unnecessary for their future within Turkey and perceiving its cultural package as threatening to their national identity. Turkey's historical, political, geographical, and socio-economic conditions are central to shaping these orientations.

Participants' perceptions of English vis-à-vis Turkish reveal how language is deeply intertwined with identity, nationalism, unity, and belonging. While English is recognised for its international utility, Turkish is prioritised as a symbol of national pride and religious heritage. This dynamic resembles the relationship between English and Irish Gaelic in Ireland, where English is associated with modernity and rationality, while Irish functions as a marker of cultural purity, resistance and religious freedom (Crowley, 2005). Similarly, Turkish operates as a safeguard of cultural continuity, echoing the role of indigenous languages in postcolonial contexts such as South Africa (Kamwangamalu, 2020). The Turkish case, however, is unique in its dual emphasis on linguistic nationalism and religious heritage, which amplifies resistance to English despite its perceived global value. A chronotopic analysis clarifies how participants' orientations to Turkish and English are situated within layered temporal and spatial frames, ranging from national pasts to imagined transnational futures (Djuraeva, 2023; Karimzad, 2021). Resistance and uptake thus coexist as outcomes of situated evaluations rather than ideological contradiction.

From a policy perspective, Turkey's modernisation trajectory illustrates that the spread of English need not undermine Turkish if carefully regulated (Zok, 2010). Maintaining Turkish as the primary language of instruction in Turkish schools and universities does not undermine the potential benefits of multilingual education. Evidence from various global contexts highlights the value of sustaining first languages- especially in early childhood education- while incorporating English as a complementary resource (Reilly et al.,

2022). Educational models in Ghana, Zambia, Botswana, and Tanzania demonstrate how multilingual policies can preserve local languages while supporting broader communicative access. These cases reinforce the importance of balancing linguistic continuity with global engagement.

Overall, Turkish functions as a form of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), indexing national membership, and, in some cases, religious and ethnic belonging. Its strong reproduction through everyday language practices contributes to social cohesion and the maintenance of symbolic boundaries. The symbolic power of Turkish manifests in its resilience against perceived threats to national identity, echoing Bourdieu's assertion that cultural capital contributes to the preservation of identity. Resistance to English is therefore better understood as an identity-protective strategy rather than opposition to learning. At the same time, English is valued for imagined futures and transnational mobility but is down-ranked in local interactions, reflecting time–space positioning and local linguistic markets. By foregrounding chronotopic narratives on campus, this study extends work on symbolic value by showing how Turkish is continually renewed through situated practices.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and social positioning among young people in Turkey. Language operates as a symbolic resource through which identities are negotiated, affirmed, and protected (Norton & McKinney, 2011). Integrating critical sociolinguistics, chronotopic analysis, and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power offers nuanced insights into the complex relationship between language, identity, space, state and society in Turkey's multilingual context.

4.2. Implications

The findings have important implications for language education in Turkey. They suggest that policies promoting multilingualism must engage with learners' complex and intersecting identities without undermining the symbolic centrality of Turkish. Pedagogical approaches that acknowledge learners' multiple linguistic and cultural affiliations are more likely to support engagement with foreign language learning. Integrating critical sociolinguistic perspectives into language education is therefore essential, as it foregrounds the historical, social, and political dimensions of language practices and power relations. On this basis, we outline several policy and pedagogical implications.

First, educators should integrate multilingual education frameworks that reflect Turkey's linguistic diversity into curricula. This includes recognising both global languages such as English and the regional and minority languages spoken across Turkey, while embedding local cultural references that resonate with students' identities and lived experiences. To support this, sustained professional development is needed to equip teachers with multilingual instructional strategies and intercultural communication skills. Such training should also prepare educators to navigate sensitive identity-related issues – such as secularisation, nation-building, gender, and ethnic diversity – in informed and reflexive ways. Pedagogical practices may include language immersion days, cultural exchange initiatives, role-play activities based on real-life communicative contexts, and project-based learning that encourages critical engagement with personal narratives, storytelling, and creative expression in relation to language, identity, and policy.

Second, policymakers should promote multilingual education across both public and private schooling sectors. This requires moving beyond a narrow focus on English as a second language to supporting the maintenance and development of minority languages. Concrete measures include allocating adequate resources for curriculum development and teacher training in multilingual education, and ensuring equitable distribution of these resources, particularly in linguistically diverse regions.

Third, community stakeholders should be actively involved in language education planning. Community forums can provide spaces for parents and local leaders to articulate concerns and priorities related to language education, informing context-sensitive policies and practices. Such initiatives can also help establish support networks for students and families from minority language backgrounds. In parallel, cultural events that celebrate linguistic diversity can function as both educational and social platforms, strengthening community engagement and validating multilingual identities.

Overall, this study highlights how identity and multilingualism intersect in the experiences of young people in Turkey, offering insights relevant to educators, policymakers, and researchers working in comparable sociolinguistic contexts. The implications outlined here provide a foundation for further discussion on inclusive and contextually grounded language education practices.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how young university students in Turkey negotiate their national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities in response to globalisation and the increasing commodification of language practices. The findings highlight identity as dynamic and relational, shaped by competing pressures that simultaneously promote English for global participation and reinforce Turkish as a core symbol of national unity. While participants recognised the pragmatic value of English and other languages, they expressed strong emotional and ideological attachment to Turkish, resulting in ambivalent orientations toward multilingualism and, in many cases, resistance to English as a perceived threat to cultural and religious identity. Influenced by Atatürk's inclusive definition of Turkishness, participants including those from non-Turkish ethnic backgrounds frequently articulated identification with a Turkish national identity. This illustrates the complex interplay between state-driven nationalism and individual identity formation that transcends ethnic boundaries. However, such inclusivity may also mask or marginalise ethnic diversity and complicate personal identity negotiations, particularly as global discourses increasingly emphasise recognition, pluralism, and linguistic rights.

Overall, the study emphasises the need for language education in Turkey to engage more critically with learners' layered identities and the symbolic meanings attached to language use. Incorporating critical sociolinguistic and chronotopic perspectives into pedagogy can help account for how language values are negotiated across time, space, and social context, rather than treated as fixed or purely instrumental. Future research could explore the implications of these identity dynamics more broadly across different age groups and in other multilingual spaces to understand the patterns of linguistic resistance and adaptation. it could also examine the role of digital media in reshaping language practices and identity positioning, offering insights into the evolving nature of sociolinguistic changes in the digital age.

Note

1. The millet system was a form of administrative organisation used by the Ottoman Empire to govern its diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious population. Under this system, religious communities (millets) were granted a degree of autonomy to manage their own affairs, including education, religion, and law, in exchange for loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan (Barkey & Gavrilis, 2016). The system emphasised religious identity over ethnic or linguistic identity, allowing each millet to maintain its unique cultural and religious practices while coexisting under the broader Ottoman rule.

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