

# Code-Switching as a Marker of Hybrid Identity and Communicative Strategy in Multicultural Europe

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**Abstract.** This article examines the role of code-switching in constructing and negotiating identity within multicultural European contexts. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories and empirical studies, it argues that code-switching serves a dual function: as a marker of hybrid identity and as a strategic communicative resource. In its identity-marking role, code-switching enables bilinguals to express dual cultural affiliations, assert heritage, and perform hybrid selfhood in diverse settings. As a communicative strategy, it facilitates clarity, manages interpersonal relations, and conveys emotional or rhetorical nuance. Using examples from bilingual communities across Europe—such as Turkish-German youth, British Caribbean speakers, and regional bilinguals—the article demonstrates how code-switching intertwines linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of identity. The discussion highlights implications for language policy, pedagogy, and social cohesion in multilingual societies, calling for a reframing of code-switching as a positive resource rather than a deficit.

**Keywords:** *code-switching; language and identity; multilingualism; Europe; hybrid identity; sociolinguistics; communication strategy*

## Introduction

Multilingualism is a defining feature of contemporary Europe, where daily communication often involves code-switching – the practice of alternating between two or more languages within a conversation. Far from a random or deficient habit, code-switching is now understood as a meaningful sociolinguistic phenomenon, deeply tied to identity and context. In multicultural European societies, individuals frequently switch codes to navigate complex social landscapes: a *Polish-English* bilingual in London might greet coworkers in English but share a joke in Polish with a compatriot, signaling dual belonging. Such language choices are not merely utilitarian, but carry symbolic weight in expressing “who we are, where we come from, and where we belong”.

This article argues that code-switching serves a dual role in Europe’s multicultural contexts: it is *both* a marker of hybrid identity and a deliberate communicative strategy. On one hand, switching languages can signal ethnic, cultural, or community identity—allowing speakers to claim heritage or solidarity and negotiate their “hybrid” self in a diverse environment. On the other hand, code-switching functions as a pragmatic strategy to achieve communicative goals: to clarify meaning, quote others, shift formality, include or exclude listeners, or inject emotional nuance into conversation. By drawing on sociolinguistic theories and empirical studies across Europe, we will demonstrate how these dual

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functions intertwine. We also address the linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of identity construction through code-switching, illustrating that language alternation is a key tool for identity performance in everyday life.

In what follows, we adopt an IMRaD structure. The Introduction has outlined the scope and significance of examining code-switching in European multilingual contexts. The Methods section explains our literature-based approach to analyzing code-switching practices and identity. In the Results, we present evidence from peer-reviewed studies and sociolinguistic frameworks, highlighting how European bilinguals use code-switching to mark hybrid identities and to manage conversations. Finally, the Discussion interprets these findings, addressing linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions and drawing implications for language policy, education, and social cohesion in multilingual Europe.

## Methods

This study employs a *qualitative literature review* methodology to investigate code-switching as related to language and identity in Europe. We systematically reviewed **peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and empirical studies** in sociolinguistics that focus on code-switching among European bilingual and immigrant communities. Key theoretical frameworks were consulted, including the ethnography of communication (e.g. Gumperz’s classic code-switching models), communication accommodation theory, and post-2000 perspectives on linguistic hybridity. By examining both seminal works and recent research (up to 2025), we gathered data on how code-switching operates as an identity marker and communicative tool.

Our sources encompass **diverse European contexts**. We included studies of traditional bilingual communities (such as Catalan–Spanish and Alsatian–French settings), as well as multilingual urban diasporas (e.g. Turkish-German youth in Germany, Afro-Caribbean communities in the UK, and North African-French speakers in France). The review also covered pan-European analyses and theoretical reviews of code-switching and identity. We prioritized research that explicitly addresses identity construction, cultural affiliation, or social function of code-switching, ensuring relevance to the theme of **hybrid identity in multicultural societies**.

No new fieldwork was conducted; instead, our *“desk research”* approach relied on existing data and analyses. We synthesized findings on the sociocultural and pragmatic functions of code-switching from these sources. Analytical categories were developed to separate evidence of identity-marking uses of code-switching from evidence of strategic communicative uses, though we recognize these often overlap in practice. Throughout, **real examples** from European multilingual interactions (drawn from the literature) are used to illustrate key points, and all claims are substantiated with citations to scholarly sources.

## Results

### Code-Switching as a Marker of Hybrid Identity

Across Europe, studies confirm that bilingual speakers use code-switching to express and construct complex identities. Language choices serve as powerful identity markers, allowing individuals to signal

belonging to a group, assert a hybrid cultural identity, or distance themselves from certain backgrounds. Far from being a static attribute, identity is *actively negotiated* in interaction, and switching languages is one way speakers perform this negotiation.

One classic finding is that bilinguals often associate each language with particular social domains or relationships, a phenomenon Gumperz (1982) described as “we-code” vs. “they-code.” Typically, the minority or heritage language serves as the *we-code* – the language of intimacy, family, and in-group solidarity – whereas the majority or official language functions as a *they-code* for more formal, public, or out-group contexts. For example, in a Norwegian town studied by Blom and Gumperz, locals alternated between the regional dialect and standard Norwegian depending on context, thereby indexing local identity in some moments and a more national or formal identity in others. This selective alternation illustrates how code-switching reflects *dual affiliations*: speakers align with a local community through one code and with the wider society through another.

Contemporary research further shows that code-switching is a hallmark of hybrid or bicultural identities. Many Europeans of immigrant heritage fluidly mix languages to embody their blended cultural background. A study of second-generation British Caribbean youth found they seamlessly shift between Jamaican Creole and British English to manifest both a “global” Black Caribbean identity and a “local” British identity. Using Creole phrases connects them to a transnational Afro-Caribbean community and youth culture, while using the local English dialect affirms their belonging in their city (London, Birmingham, etc.). The two codes, used in tandem, enable the speakers to be authentically both Caribbean and British. Similarly, Turkish-German bilinguals in Germany have developed mixed codes that incorporate elements of Turkish and German into single utterances. This “hybrid code-switch” is interpreted as evidence of an identity shift: from an originally Turkish-dominant identity to a new German-inclusive bicultural identity. Scanlon’s research on Turkish-German youth noted that many hybrid utterances simultaneously draw on Turkish and German social contexts, reflecting the speakers’ dual sense of self in the Turkish diaspora and German society. In short, code-switching provides a linguistic mirror of hybridity, allowing individuals to project complex identities that are not confined to one culture or language.

Code-switching can also mark ethnic group boundaries within multicultural settings. Speakers may *switch to a heritage language* as a way of signaling ethnic solidarity when fellow in-group members are present. For instance, in a French city, North African-origin friends might slip into Arabic or Berber during conversation, affirming a shared background that outsiders do not share. This acts as an in-group marker, subtly proclaiming “we are of the same community.” Conversely, choosing *not* to code-switch – i.e. sticking to the dominant language – in mixed company can signal a desire to be seen as part of the broader national group rather than emphasizing ethnic distinctiveness. Individuals adeptly manage these choices. One may avoid using their minority language at a formal workplace (to project a neutral, “integrated” identity), but readily revert to it at home or among close friends to reconnect with their roots. These patterns underline how code selection becomes a form of *identity positioning*: a conscious or subconscious way of aligning with (or distancing from) a particular cultural identity in the moment.

Moreover, research indicates that even subtle code-switching, like inserting single words or phrases from one language into another, carries identity meanings. A single colloquial expression from Polish dropped into an otherwise English sentence by a Polish Briton may signal *cultural pride or nostalgia*, instantly invoking the speaker's Polish identity. Such symbolic switches are especially common in youth slang, where multilingual European youths pepper dominant-language speech with heritage-language catchphrases, music lyrics, or exclamations. These linguistic choices become badges of ethnic pride or “street” identity in multiethnic peer groups. Even speakers who are not fully fluent in their heritage language (e.g. European-born children of immigrants) use fragments of it to assert pride in their ancestry – a creative form of identity expression noted by sociolinguists. In sum, code-switching in Europe's multicultural contexts is deeply entwined with identity construction. It enables expressions of ethnic heritage, the forging of hybrid identities, and the dynamic marking of group belonging in diverse social settings.

### **Code-Switching as a Communicative Strategy**

In addition to its identity functions, code-switching serves a range of pragmatic and communicative purposes in multilingual discourse. European bilinguals often switch languages strategically to achieve particular conversational goals or to convey nuances that would be difficult to express in a single language. In other words, code-switching is a *versatile linguistic strategy* that accommodates different communicative needs.

One common strategic use of code-switching is to facilitate understanding and emphasize meaning. Speakers may switch to whichever language best conveys a concept or sentiment. For example, a Spanish-German bilingual in Spain might use a German technical term when discussing engineering, then switch back to Spanish to explain everyday concepts – choosing the code that is more precise or natural for each topic. As the Wikipedia entry on code-switching notes, people often change languages when a specific term or idea “better conveys relevant concepts” in that language. This reflects the speaker's pragmatic judgment about clarity. Likewise, teachers in multilingual European classrooms sometimes switch to students' home language to clarify difficult concepts or ensure comprehension, even if the official medium is a national language. Such *instructional code-switching* can bridge gaps in understanding and reinforce learning by translating or rephrasing content in a more familiar code.

Code-switching is also employed to manage interpersonal dynamics. According to Communication Accommodation Theory, bilingual speakers may converge or diverge their language use to adjust social distance. *Convergence* involves switching to the interlocutor's preferred or dominant language to make them more comfortable, enhance solidarity, or smooth interaction. For instance, a Catalan-Spanish bilingual might stick to Spanish when a monolingual Spanish speaker joins the conversation, signaling accommodation and inclusivity. On the other hand, *divergence* entails switching to a language or dialect to highlight difference or create distance. A bilingual may respond in their native language even when the other speaks a different one, as a way to assert their identity or to exclude outsiders. As an illustration, second-generation Moroccan youths in the Netherlands might continue speaking Moroccan Arabic amongst themselves when a Dutch outsider approaches, thereby marking ethnic boundaries (a divergent move that says: “we have our own code”). These strategic switches align with

the speaker's intentions—either to foster rapport and understanding (*inclusive switching*) or to assert autonomy and group identity (*exclusive switching*). In effect, code-switching allows subtle manipulation of *social footing* in conversation, much like changes in tone or register.

Another communicative function of code-switching is to convey nuances of emotion, humor, or rhetorical effect. Bilingual speakers know that some expressions carry a certain emotional *color* or cultural resonance in one language that they lack in another. They exploit this by switching codes to, say, tell a punchline or express an endearment in the language that best delivers the impact. A joke told in Italian might simply be funnier or more vivid than in Swedish, prompting an Italian-Swedish bilingual in Sweden to switch to Italian for the humorous part and then back to Swedish. Similarly, immigrants may switch to their mother tongue for intimate or personal topics – for example, switching to Greek to express a term of affection or a curse, because it feels more emotionally authentic. By alternating languages, speakers tap into different cultural frames: one language might index seriousness or formality, while another signals playfulness or intimacy, and switching helps them achieve the desired tone. Indeed, code-switching can function as a conversational *contextualization cue*, a concept introduced by John Gumperz, where a shift in language alerts listeners to how an upcoming message should be interpreted (e.g. as an aside, a quote, a confidential comment, etc.). An example is a Greek-English bilingual lowering her voice and switching to Greek to quote a proverb from her grandmother – the change in code tells listeners that a culturally rooted wisdom or a humorous aside is being shared.

Importantly, code-switching may occur spontaneously or deliberately as a strategy. In casual bilingual interactions, many switches happen almost unconsciously, as speakers follow the flow of thought or the cues of their partner. For instance, among members of a bilingual family (say, Serbian and English in Austria), switching in mid-sentence can be a *natural practice* to express solidarity and closeness. These unconscious switches reinforce bonds — the family that code-switches together affirms their unique group identity and shared space. On the other hand, speakers can also deliberately code-switch to achieve specific effects. In diaspora communities, switching to a heritage language in the middle of an otherwise dominant-language conversation can deliberately signal who is an insider. It's a way of *telling* who belongs and who doesn't in that moment. Likewise, political or community leaders might insert phrases from multiple languages in a speech as a *rhetorical strategy*: to identify with a certain ethnic audience or to project an image of inclusiveness. A European parliamentarian, for example, could begin in English but switch to French for a few lines addressing French constituents, and close with a greeting in Polish – symbolically acknowledging Europe's multilingual identity. Such calculated code-switching serves to build solidarity across linguistic lines or to enhance the speaker's appeal by mirroring the audience's linguistic repertoire.

In summary, European bilinguals leverage code-switching as a communicative toolkit. It allows them to select the most expressive or effective language for each conversational task – whether explaining, persuading, joking, or bonding. The findings from our literature review underscore that code-switching in multilingual Europe fulfills sociocultural and pragmatic functions simultaneously. It is a practice that *enhances effective communication* by flexibly meeting interlocutors' needs, and at the same time it helps maintain social cohesion by enabling speakers to navigate multicultural interactions without foregoing any part of their identity.

## Discussion

Our review of European contexts illustrates that code-switching is intrinsically intertwined with both identity and communication. In the discussion below, we integrate the findings to explore the linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of identity construction through code-switching. We also consider how these insights relate to broader issues of language policy, education, and cohesion in a multilingual society.

**Linguistic Dimension:** From a linguistic standpoint, code-switching showcases the *complex repertoires* that bilingual speakers command. Rather than treating languages as sealed systems, recent sociolinguistic theory emphasizes fluid language practices and the breaking down of strict boundaries between named languages. The fact that speakers can smoothly alternate and even blend languages (as with Turkish-German hybrid forms) reflects a high level of linguistic competence and creativity. This hybridity challenges older notions that switching languages is a sign of confusion or deficiency. On the contrary, bilingual Europeans demonstrate a *symbolic competence* in deploying multiple codes — they understand the indexical meaning of linguistic choices (what social message each language conveys) and use that knowledge to shape interactions. For instance, choosing a regional dialect versus a standard language allows a speaker to index local authenticity versus cosmopolitan status in a single conversation. Linguistically, code-switching events can mark shifts in topic, emotion, or relationship, functioning as punctuation in speech. The structure of code-switching (whether it's a full sentence switch or insertion of a word) can itself carry meaning. A seamless intra-sentential switch might signal the speaker's dual identity is well-integrated, whereas a stark inter-sentential switch might be used to emphasize a boundary between ideas or contexts. In essence, code-switching at the linguistic level is a *resource for meaning-making*. It enlarges the expressive palette of a conversation, allowing speakers to communicate shades of meaning that a single language could not easily achieve.

**Cultural Dimension:** Culture and language are deeply connected, and code-switching often serves as a bridge between cultural worlds. Each language encapsulates cultural references, values, humor, and ways of thinking. When European bilinguals switch languages, they often invoke the cultural frame associated with that code. For example, switching to Arabic might bring in a culturally specific proverb or a way of showing respect, whereas switching to Swedish might align with a direct, factual style of communication. In our results, we saw how British-born Caribbeans use Creole to tap into a global Black cultural network, including music and slang, while using British English to anchor themselves in local youth culture. This exemplifies how code-switching allows multiple cultural identities to coexist in one individual's speech. Cultural nuances like humor or sarcasm can also be enhanced by choosing the language that carries the right connotations. In many cases, bilingual speakers report that certain feelings “feel different” or only truly authentic in one of their languages. By code-switching, they align their language choice with the cultural context of the message – for instance, using *Spanish* for a term of endearment that feels warmer or more intimate, or *German* for a technical explanation that feels precise. This adaptive use of cultural-linguistic knowledge underscores how identity is experienced through culture: code-switching enables speakers to perform culturally appropriate identities moment-to-moment. Furthermore, the cultural dimension of code-switching can be seen in how minority languages are sometimes consciously used as an act of cultural preservation or revival.

Young Europeans with ancestral languages (Irish, Basque, etc.) might insert phrases of these languages into daily talk as a proud reminder of their heritage, effectively *reclaiming* cultural identity through language. In summary, code-switching in multicultural Europe is not just a linguistic act but a cultural performance – it is a means of living and communicating multiple cultures at once.

**Social Dimension:** The social aspect of code-switching revolves around group memberships, power relations, and interpersonal alignments. Language choice in a conversation sends social signals: it can include or exclude listeners, assert status, or signal solidarity. Our findings echo that code-switching plays a key role in how social identities (like ethnicity, nationality, class, or generation) are enacted. Using a minority language in public, for example, can be a bold assertion of identity and rights – a statement that “we are here” and have a distinct presence. In some European contexts, such as regional minority language areas, this can even be politically charged (e.g., a Catalan speaker pointedly using Catalan in a majority Spanish setting as an expression of autonomy). In everyday social interactions, code-switching contributes to social cohesion by allowing people to shift into a shared code when they want to signal unity, and to shift out when formality or broader communication is needed. It is notable that many multilingual friend groups or neighborhoods develop their own norms for code-switching – effectively creating a mixed code community norm. For instance, adolescents in super-diverse cities like London or Stockholm might all switch between the national language and various heritage languages or dialects, producing a blended vernacular that everyone in the group understands. Such practices reinforce an inclusive group identity (a kind of “we are all multilingual here” sentiment). Conversely, code-switching can enforce social boundaries: not understanding someone’s switch can mark you as an outsider. The social dimension also includes *power dynamics*. In institutional settings (schools, government offices), the choice of language can reflect or challenge power. A teacher switching to a student’s home language momentarily equalizes the dynamic to show empathy, whereas a strict insistence on the state language might reinforce authority. Likewise, in workplaces, an employee might use the dominant language when speaking to a manager but switch to their native language with a co-worker to privately commiserate or build camaraderie. Thus, code-switching is a social negotiation tool – it lets speakers maneuver through the layered social structure of multicultural societies, aligning with different identities and communities as situations demand.

Overall, the interplay of these dimensions confirms that code-switching is pivotal in identity construction. Identity in multicultural Europe is not a fixed label but a performance that speakers continually adjust through language choice. Code-switching embodies the idea that identity is fluid and multifaceted: a bilingual person can be *multiple selves* in one conversation, and by switching codes they give voice to those different selves. Importantly, this is not done haphazardly – it is done in patterned ways that communities understand. As Hall and Nilep (2015) observed, what unites modern sociolinguistic approaches is analyzing language as mixed and unbounded, reflecting equally fluid social identities [colorado.edu/colorado.edu](http://colorado.edu/colorado.edu). Our review supports this: from immigrant neighborhoods to transnational digital communications, Europeans are embracing *flexible bilingualism*, using code-switching as a norm to navigate and unify their hybrid worlds.

Finally, it is worth noting that while code-switching offers many benefits, attitudes towards it can vary. Some traditional language ideologies in Europe still favor monolingual “purity” and view code-

switchers skeptically (as if they are not fully proficient in either language). However, the sociolinguistic evidence clearly debunks the notion that code-switching is a deficit or mere interference. To the contrary, code-switching is a sophisticated linguistic strategy and a marker of a confident bilingual identity. Embracing this reality has important implications, to which we now turn.

## Conclusion and Implications

Code-switching in multicultural European contexts is far more than a linguistic quirk – it is a deliberate, meaningful practice that allows speakers to be effective communicators and authentic to their complex identities. The evidence and arguments presented here lead to several key implications for how we approach language in society:

- **Language Policy:** European language policies should recognize and value *code-switching as a natural part of multilingual communication*. Rather than enforcing strict separation of languages, institutions can adopt inclusive language policies that accommodate multiple languages in public spaces, media, and official settings. By acknowledging code-switching (for instance, permitting mixed-language signage or bilingual forms), policymakers would validate hybrid identities and make linguistic minorities feel seen. Encouraging plurilingual practices can enhance social integration, as people no longer feel they must suppress one language to participate in the public sphere. Overall, a shift toward culturally responsive language planning – celebrating linguistic diversity instead of policing it – will help multilingual citizens thrive.
- **Education:** Educators and schools in multilingual regions can leverage code-switching as a pedagogical resource rather than treating it as a problem. Research suggests incorporating students' languages in the classroom (through translanguaging or strategic code-switching) can *affirm students' identities* and improve learning outcomes. Teachers might, for example, switch to a child's home language to ensure understanding of a lesson, or encourage students to compare concepts across languages as a learning exercise. Teacher training programs should emphasize positive attitudes toward bilingualism, so that teachers understand how code-switching can build rapport and facilitate comprehension. By integrating code-switching into curricula and language teaching, schools can foster linguistic awareness and pride among students. This approach not only helps bilingual students feel valued, but also prepares all students for a multilingual world. Embracing controlled code-switching in education can produce more inclusive and effective teaching practices.
- **Social Cohesion:** Rather than undermining unity, the fluid mixing of languages can actually bolster social cohesion in diverse communities. When multiple languages are given space in public discourse, people from different backgrounds find common ground in a *shared multilingual norm*. For example, urban youth across Europe increasingly share a hybrid slang that draws from various immigrant languages and the local language, creating a sense of belonging to the same contemporary culture. Authorities and community leaders should refrain from stigmatizing such mixes; instead, they can highlight them as examples of successful integration (where new cultural forms emerge from diversity). Promoting positive public discourse about code-switching – through media, community events, and campaigns –

can reduce prejudice and the feeling that minority languages are “foreign” or threatening. As our findings showed, code-switching often carries *messages of solidarity* and empathy. If society at large recognizes this, it can harness multilingualism as a bridge between groups, not a barrier. In practical terms, community centers, healthcare providers, and public services might adopt multilingual communication strategies (e.g. staff switching languages as needed) to make all residents feel accommodated. Such efforts strengthen trust and participation, contributing to social cohesion in multilingual Europe.

In conclusion, code-switching exemplifies how linguistic diversity, when embraced, becomes a force for unity and identity affirmation. European multilinguals use their linguistic repertoires to navigate daily life, express who they are, and connect with others. Rather than forcing people into monolingual molds, acknowledging the dual role of code-switching – as a marker of hybrid identity and a communicative strategy – allows for more inclusive policies, innovative educational practices, and harmonious multicultural communities. Multilingual Europe’s tapestry of languages is not a challenge to overcome, but a rich resource to be celebrated. As our review highlights, code-switching is at the heart of this tapestry, enabling individuals to honor *all parts* of their identity while effectively engaging with the world around them. Embracing that reality is key to fostering a Europe that is linguistically vibrant, socially cohesive, and respectful of the many identities it contains.

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