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Sabine Little & Yue Zhou

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Beyond roots and wings: co-constructing a framework for heritage language children's liminal and limbotic identities

Sabine Little 🄳 and Yue Zhou

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

As identity research in a globalised world progresses, so does our understanding of the need for nuanced research methodologies, to capture the complexities of multilingual identities. In this paper, we systematically explore the entanglements surrounding dual or mixed identity, supported by the analysis of 132 identity narratives from multilingual young people (11–18 years old) with Chinese heritage. Applying a poststructural lens and drawing on Dörnyei's motivational self system, Norton's investment theory, and Little's conceptualisation of emotional and pragmatic reasons for heritage language maintenance, we strengthen the field of multilingual identity research by introducing a framework that corresponds to the complexities of participants' lived experiences as heritage language speakers and learners, while honouring their preferences for self-expression. Crucially, the framework has been co-produced with a group of young co-researchers (aged 11–16 years old), ensuring that young people's views and experiences are respected in the way we research and interpret identities in the heritage language context. In introducing the framework, we provide data examples in the form of relevant quotes for each aspect introduced, highlighting links to existing identity theories and situating the framework as a vital tool within heritage language and multilingual identity research.

Introduction

Our paper takes its title from a quote ascribed to German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): 'There are two things children should receive from their parents: roots and wings.' The quote highlights one of the dualities of identity development – on the one hand, an anchored feeling of security that is rooted in history, on the other, the self-belief to take flight, future-oriented, into unknown territory. Through the lens of poststructuralism, we focus on the complex identities inherent in multilingual children from migration backgrounds, and find our way towards a more nuanced understanding of multilingual identity construction, with the aid of seven young co-researchers. By examining binary components of several existing frameworks (Norton 2010, 2013; Dörnyei 2005, 2009; Little 2020), and with the aid of a large body of 132 identity artefacts constructed by young multilingual people, we will, throughout this paper, weave a more complex, co-produced and data-driven tapestry in the form of a framework that makes a contribution to researching and understanding children's multilingual identity narratives, offering new ways of viewing and analysing data in the field of multilingual identity research in heritage language context. Heritage language here denotes a home of family

language that is passed through the generations, and that is different from the societal language. Such a language may be accepted or rejected by the child in question (Little 2019)

Identity and heritage language children

Well-established links exist between heritage language proficiency and identity, with the heritage language serving as an important cultural marker in relation to identity establishment (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). Shen and Jiang (2021), in working with 30 s-generation Chinese children in Australia, identified that those scoring higher in Chinese proficiency tests also identified more directly with their Chinese identity. Conversely, heritage language children are also aware that those who may not speak the same languages as them may not necessarily grasp their complex identities (Little 2023). It is therefore important to understand heritage language children not solely as a group that is seeking to 'fit in' to any of the languages and cultures that make up their heritage and/or societal surroundings, but also as agentic individuals inhabiting multiple spaces, and calling upon the world to make the effort to understand these inherent complexities and entanglements.

Multiple theoretical viewpoints have been applied to multilingual identity research. Fisher et al. (2020), in bringing together the psychosocial, sociocultural, and poststructural dimensions of identity research, propose a theorised model for classroom practice that centres learner involvement. Their work differentiates between linguistic identity as 'the way one identifies (or is identified by others) in each of the languages in one's linguistic repertoire, whereas a multilingual identity is an 'umbrella' identity, where one explicitly identifies as multilingual precisely because of an awareness of the linguistic repertoire one has' (448-449). For the purposes of this paper, we explore in particular the poststructural dimension in more detail.

Poststructuralism in multilingual research: a theoretical lens

Poststructuralism allows us to examine the complexities inherent in multilingual development with more criticality and rigour. Multilingual lives are rarely simple, bringing with them entangled allegiances, histories, and sociopolitical contexts. Since language is not neutral, multilingual individuals are engaged in permanent balancing acts questioning and critiquing their own and others' actions and reactions in relation to language maintenance and use (Okita 2002). The poststructural lens helps us to query and examine potentially simplistic notions, even around the idea of 'mother tongue' or 'first language' (McNamara 2011). Specifically within the context of the diasporic Chinese, Mu (2014) warns against homogenising population groups and their experiences. He further critiques poststructuralism for its 'outside-in' approach, highlighting tensions vis-a-vis the notion of memory and personality shaping identity (499). While Mu turns to Bourdieu's habitus and its notions of 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1977, 72) in his quantitative study, we suggest that, in the lives of the children that are the focus of our study, 'durability' is perhaps not the most pressing concern, since childhoods are, by their very nature, embodiments of change, and children growing up in multilingual, multicultural contexts arguably experience more change than others (Little 2024). Rather than looking for neatness, our research therefore contributes a possibility to explore the messy and limbotic, focusing on the entangled complexities multilingual children find themselves in, caught in the web of multiple binary, often oppositional constructs, living the reality of resulting tensions. Poststructuralism thus serves as a meaningful lens through which we are able to acknowledge these complex balancing acts, rather than attempting to simplify them, but instead noticing the discomfort, and inhabiting it through our research.

The role of identity narratives in research

Personal stories, as told by the person experiencing them, are important constructs developed via psychosocial relationships between the individual and their cultural and contextual surroundings

(McAdams 2001). As McAdams argues, life stories, while based on biological facts, go beyond these facts as the narrator selects what is worthy of being told, and constructs narrative elements to arrive at a story that makes sense and explains how the person has come to be the person they are becoming (McAdams and McLean 2013). As the field evolves and becomes ever more complex, questions around how best to research stability and change within identity formation have been raised (Adler 2019), and qualitative data analysis offered as a possible solution (McAdams 2019).

Reese et al. (2017) argue that research involving identity narratives has traditionally foregrounded Western European participants, although there is some important work in other transnational contexts (Hornberger and Swinehart 2012; Ghiso 2016; Despagne and Suárez 2019). The research field continues to evolve, including intergenerational work (Ernstberger and Adaawen 2023). Work from the Chinese diaspora remains comparatively sparse, with research focusing on Chinese adoptees forming an exception to this (Blair and Liu 2020; Lin, Wu, and Leung 2024).

Exploring existing identity frameworks and tools for analysis

In providing a theoretical background to our framework, we turn to other frameworks and lenses that have been used to explore identity in multilingual and heritage language contexts.

Drawing on Norton's (2010, 2013) investment theory, and in reminiscence of the Goethe quote in the title of our paper, Nordstrom (2022) highlights the extent to which heritage language learner motivation may be rooted in links to the heritage identity, or views of the language as capital for the future. Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) motivational self system, while a core concept for second language (L2) acquisition for decades, has been used comparatively sparsely within the heritage language learning context (Kurata 2015; Xie 2014), partially because, in heritage language speakers, the distinction between L1 and L2 is frequently blurred and constantly evolving (McNamara 2011), dependent on societal circumstances, reinforcing the situating of heritage language speakers in liminal cultural and linguistic spaces.

More typically used in the context of learning the language of a country that is the *destination* of migration, investment theory nevertheless has the potential to provide fascinating insights in helping us understand how children understand the notion of investment in the context of learning the language of a country that is the *origin* of migration, especially if they themselves have never lived there.

Belonging and non-belonging, or feelings associated with being an insider/outsider, are well-established in identity research. Taylor-Leech (2022), for example, highlights how transnational families' literacy practices are shaped by their desire to connect with certain communities. Ceginskas (2010) speaks of allegiances when exploring the sense of belonging felt by adults from multilingual, multicultural backgrounds, and shows that individuals may identify as either, both, or neither when it comes to identity, resulting in confusion and heartache. While Gao, Lai, and Halse (2019) problematise the role of language knowledge in creating that sense of belonging, but also how lower language competence may result in society dissociating the person from belonging to a certain cultural group, we also know that speaking different languages can in and of itself lead to people feeling different about themselves (Panicacci and Dewaele 2017). As always, children's identity constructs are deeply linked to their own experiences and upbringing, and first-hand experience of migration or a transnational existence may influence their views (Jeon 2022), as will the extent to which their linguistic identity is acknowledged in formal spaces, such as school and public spaces (Little and Murray 2024). Somewhat linked to the notion of association and dissociation are Bucholtz (1999) positive and negative identity practices. In Bucholtz' work, negative identity practices are those that are defined by what participants are seeking to avoid and to not claim as part of their identity, e.g. language practices, cultural norms and customs etc. that participants seek to distance themselves from. Conversely, positive identity practices are those the individual readily adopts for themselves. In multilingual children in particular, these identity practices may be different across the various languages spoken, leading to a composite identity unique to the child.

Little's (2020; Little and Lahmar 2024) concept of a heritage language identity framework draws on emotional and pragmatic attachments to the heritage language, seeking to understand how these

attachments change over time and relate to motivation, identity, and belonging. In combination with assigning essential or peripheral importance to emotional and pragmatic reasons, the framework thus establishes four quadrants (essential/pragmatic, peripheral/pragmatic, essential/emotional and peripheral/emotional) within which heritage language identity maintenance may be situated, whilst acknowledging fluctuations in attachments and identities. While Little's work was initially focused on understanding parents' desires to pass on the heritage language, children have their own emotional and pragmatic attachments to the heritage language.

The above theories and frameworks provide a theoretical bricolage against which we mapped the data, following our data analysis workshop with our young co-researchers. Their data interpretations formed the basis of identifying suitable theories that were subsequently applied to the full data set, as further outlined below.

Research approach and questions

Crucially, nearly all existing work adopts a narrative inquiry approach, drawing on interviews or ethnography. In contrast, the identity narratives produced by children and young people for this research were shorter, but also more agentive in nature, encouraging participants to share whatever aspect of their identity they felt like sharing. In order to centre the children and young people in our development of the framework, we foreground their experiences – firstly, by taking the identity narratives themselves as a starting point for the development, and secondly, by engaging in this development with a group of young (aged 11-16) co-researchers. By adopting this approach, we are able to bring a fresh perspective to the field of identity research, and will offer additional literature as part of the discussion, mapping the data and the co-researchers' perspectives to the existing field, and extending it as appropriate. Crucially, the framework we develop as part of this paper addresses the need for work that is flexible enough to incorporate data that come from a poststructural paradigm – undirected, open, and entirely participant-centred. As such, we address the following research questions:

How do multilingual children and young people from Chinese heritage backgrounds choose to write about their identity?

How can their agentive choices of self-expression be utilised to formulate a new framework that captures their experiences?

Methodology

The philosophical underpinnings of our research revolve around principles of co-production, specifically, involving a group of young co-researchers at every step of the process. For the purposes of this paper, we therefore predominantly document how we – as adult and child co-researchers – came together to devise the initial plans for a framework, which was then subsequently written down by the adult researchers and re-shared with the child researchers for comment. We align ourselves with Storto (2024), in believing that discussions with young people throughout the data analysis will provide rich and unforeseen insights as part of a rigorous research approach. Similarly, Back's (2007) conceptualisation of the art of listening underpins our interactions. Early on in his book, Back contemplates the idea that we are all experts of our own lives, probing at this notion and arguing that, actually, most people do not feel like experts in their own lives at all. Instead, our lives are chaotic, unplanned, and poststructural. In acknowledging this, we employed the art of listening as a conscious attempt to give space – both to the young people who shared their identity narratives, and to our young co-researchers who helped us to read and interpret them. In developing our framework, we therefore deliberately do not seek to identify finite solutions or static positions, but instead embrace fluidity and uncertainty by placing the child at the centre of four continua, as outlined below. In order to understand our process, however, it is important to illuminate the original research project that led to the availability of data in the first place.

The project 'growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage' consists of two strands, one local, one global. Both strands are co-constructed with the same group of seven young co-researchers, aged 11–16 years old. In this paper, we specifically focus on the global strand, through which young people growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage were invited to self-submit texts or multimodal artefacts that they felt represented their identity. Over a period of 6 months, a custom-created website invited submissions via a Qualtrics survey. The website and invitation were shared openly via social media, as well as with a total of 58 Chinese heritage language schools worldwide. The invitation stressed that all views and opinions were welcome, and that submissions could include any language or mix of languages. Limitations are obvious in the languages in which the research was shared – invitations were made available in English, Mandarin Chinese and German, and the Qualtrics survey was available in Mandarin Chinese and English. We also understand that, despite being clear in explaining that young people were free to share all their experiences, regardless whether they were positive or negative, sharing the call via heritage language schools potentially situated the work within the predominant role of heritage language schools, namely to promulgate and promote the heritage language, typically with an aim to develop positive links to heritage language and culture (Leeman, Rabin, and Román-Mendoza 2011). Further, since most participants are minors, the study required parental awareness of the submission for ethical reasons. As Curdt-Christiansen, Wei, and Hua (2023) outline, pride, prejudice and pragmatism are all dominant in family language policies, and children are not necessarily enabled to speak freely about negative attitudes towards the heritage language (Little 2019); so we are aware that contributions that were critical of certain aspects of language or culture may have been subject to critique before the submission was made. Having said that, our data show a clear spread across different emotions linked to growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage, and we are overall confident that we have been successful in promoting the call in a way that was supportive of a wide range of emotions and experiences.

Identity research involving narratives tends to focus on interviews as the predominant research method (Scourfield et al. 2005), with a number of coding frameworks in place, most featuring alongside quantitative research. Reese et al.'s (2017) Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme focuses on context, chronology and theme, making a meaningful contribution to exploring and coding the coherence of identity narratives across the lifespan. Our approach is slightly different in that we situate ourselves within qualitative research, aiming to identify constructs that are particularly relevant to the lives and experiences of young multilingual participants, as identified by young multilingual people themselves. Rather than focusing on narrative interviews, the data created in our research project are comparatively short, and based almost entirely on what the young person in question chose to share. Crucially, we explicitly encouraged the use of translanguaging, making the language used a vital aspect of the coding process in and of itself. In this paper, we focus in particular on identity compositions that were predominantly text-based, some of which include illustrative images chosen by the author and inserted in the text. Since we recognise that doing justice to all expressions of identity in a single paper will detract from a rigorous approach and in-depth analysis of individual foci, a companion paper focusing on arts-based and multimodal representations, including collages, drawings, films, etc., is under preparation. This choice of images, as well as the choice of language offers important insights into identity construction and expression, and links to agentic research within the translanguaging context (Rajendram 2023). Co-constructed with a group of young co-researchers who fit the participant criteria (young people growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage), our framework therefore offers a rigorous and meaningful tool for qualitative identity researchers in the field of bi- and multilingualism.

A note on co-production

Participatory research is traditionally framed as an environment where the person in power – traditionally the adult researcher – relinquishes or transmits some of that power to participants (Grover 2004), typically with the intention to improve the research in some way. We were aware that we

were not growing up, nor had we grown up, multilingual with Chinese heritage, outside of a Chinese majority speaking country. Working with our seven co-researchers who were from the same demographic as our final participants was therefore a way to ensure we were asking the right questions. This role of 'knowledge brokers' (Marsh 2012) is common in participatory research, although we were, of course, aware that our seven co-researchers would not and could not speak representatively for the entire participant group. Recruited from one heritage language school, we had an initial meeting face-to-face, before our co-researchers expressed a preference to move subsequent meetings online. The mix in ages and a variety of heritage backgrounds (all including Chinese in some way, shape, or form) enabled us to have meaningful discussions about how the research should be structured, and then again to look at the data and take the co-researchers' leads in what areas to focus on, as further outlined below. In total, six meetings were held within the context of the study. Primarily, the co-researchers' role was to have experience in being a child in this context (Pahl 2023; Little 2024). What is important here is to distinguish between the role of co-researcher and participants: although we discussed a series of difficult concepts, we discussed them in the abstract, and co-researchers did not have to validate their suggestions by bringing examples from personal experience. Regular check-ins regarding levels of comfort both inside and outside of meetings, including communication with parents, and voluntary participation additionally sought to ensure co-researchers felt comfortable about their role.

Data analysis

In our approach to data analysis, we began by focusing on the young co-researchers' interpretations of the data set. We had 132 young people contributing to the global call, with 115 contributing from the UK, two from France, 10 from Greece, two from Spain and three from the United States. The young co-researchers had already been instrumental in shaping the call for contributions, making sure the language was accessible and inviting (see https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/multilingualchinese/take-part/global-call for the call), ensuring it was framed suitably with young people in mind. During a meeting specifically convened for data analysis purposes, we met (online) with our co-researchers and shared and reviewed the narratives received as part of the global call. In order to make data analysis manageable and appropriate for our young co-researchers (aged 11–16), we presented them with a sample of 20 of the 132 contributions in advance of the meeting, and adopted an approach that we'd like to call 'noticing', and which could arguably be framed as a more intuitive cousin to thematic analysis. The sample selected represented different countries of origin, a spread across age groups, and variety of narratives in terms of composition – hand-written, typed, etc. Rather than beginning with 'codes' and turning them into 'themes', we invited our young co-researchers to engage with the data at a more intuitive level, raising what they 'noticed'. This included both what was being written about (topics such as school, food, etc.), but also how the narratives were written (e.g. most taking a chronological format). The adult researchers' role in this instance focused on the art of listening (Back 2007), facilitating the young co-researchers to express their thoughts and noting them, both intellectually and literally, to be woven into the analysis. In our online discussions, this involved time for shared, quiet reading, followed by open discussions around how our young co-researchers experienced the narratives, including their reactions and interpretations. Time was spent discussing similarities and differences between different narratives, with adults asking clarification questions, bouncing back and paraphrasing statements and arguments, and, primarily, 'listening' as the young co-researchers 'noticed'. The adult researchers subsequently structured the results of our 'noticing' and 'listening' exercise, mapping the young co-researchers' thoughts, as appropriate, to existing frameworks and theories, in order to develop our over-arching framework, and applied this as the basis for a thematic analysis to the full dataset. Whereas, for example, the young co-researchers identified that submissions referred to past and future, or that parents had an impact on heritage language development and attitudes, the adults' contribution was to theorise these concepts, identify the children's limbotic state within the

narratives, and, once this was highlighted, work with co-researchers to see if there were juxtaposing experiences for all themes identified, which brought out further themes (e.g. children's agency in juxtaposition to parental influence). In the findings section below, we therefore combine the efforts of both adult and child researchers, starting with the 'noticing' that led to the mapping onto frameworks and themes, resulting in a thematic analysis of the full data set, in order to illustrate how the data align with the relevant sections. Quotes presented are drawn from the full data set, and include both those identified by co-researchers and those identified by adult researchers.

Results and discussion

As outlined above, almost every identity narrative held an example of young people positioning themselves as limbotic, liminal, and in-between – in between countries, cultures, languages, generations, allegiances. Participants used the research to explore their identity, sometimes in a historical context that sought to outline how their sense of identity changed over time. In the following, we present a series of these positionings, identified by the young co-researchers and underpinned by literature by the adult researchers. Taken together, these various positionings present a powerful image of the limbotic and liminal identity development of multilingual children.

Roots and wings

Our co-researchers commented on the role parents played in identity narratives, and how many identity narratives had an element of time inherent in them. In some instances, this illustrated a move from parent-directed to self-directed adoption of identity narratives (see below), in others, young people commented on links to heritage and future directly. Early parts of narratives were thus often focused on parents pushing their children to maintain heritage languages, with an assumption that children would understand parental arguments, grounded in ancestral cultural 'roots'. These parental arguments would focus predominantly on family cohesion and historical links to language and cultural identity. Norton's (2010, 2013) investment theory and Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) motivational self-system provide theoretical anchors here, with thinking about the future self being reminiscent of the 'wings' in this scenario, although Dörnyei's work is also relevant to the 'imposed and self-created identity contrasts' below.

The negotiation between 'roots' and 'wings', as well as the trajectories from parent-directed to self-directed heritage language identity, is a recurring theme in many narratives. As shown in the following excerpt, a 14-year-old participant illustrated this journey, from resistance to her parents' attempts to teach her Chinese – marked by mutual frustration – to an appreciation for her heritage language in connecting with her family as she matured:

> When I was younger, I used to dislike learning Chinese, because I didn't speak it very much at home and I wasn't very good at it. My parents tried to help by speaking as much Chinese to me as they could at home, but that only frustrated everyone. As I grew older, I began to understand that learning Chinese would help me communicate better with family members that didn't speak English, such as my cousins and grandparents who all live in China (Submission No.27).

Similarly, the narrative of a 16-year-old described that while his parents enrolled him in a Chinese school and actively encouraged his learning, he was initially 'not very much keen on' maintaining the heritage language at an early age. Yet, as he grew, so did his 'wings' – the aspiration and capability for self-direction – leading him to a profound appreciation of his multilingual identity, as illustrated below:

> As I've grown older, I've become prouder of being able to speak Chinese and realised that not many people have the opportunity to speak multiple languages, which is not easy. So now, I am genuinely happy to put in my utmost effort to learn Chinese (Submission No.31).

Despite the examples provided earlier of a transition towards an increasing appreciation of heritage language identities, young participants are observed to be developing and exploring various 'wings'

divergent from their 'roots,' reflecting different understandings of future aspirations. For instance, a 14-year-old participant perceived learning Chinese as irrelevant to her anticipated future, despite its importance emphasised by her parents:

> While I understand learning Chinese is important for things in life such as communicating with relatives and my mother, I dislike it. My mother likes to mention that one day I will go to China and will be unable to understand anything because I don't know a lot of Chinese even though there is an extremely high chance I would never want to visit China unless I was forced or needed to (Submission No.8).

Here, the differing imaginations of 'wings' diverging from 'roots' illustrate again the liminal and the limbotic, a constant negotiation and contestation of identities. While parents advocate for the maintenance of the heritage language possibly in anticipation of a future in the ancestral land, children re-imagine alternative futures. Children's work highlights a 'between-space', a fluctuation of allegiances and situatedness against the backdrop of different linguistic and cultural heritages. This liminal and limbotic space children occupy between the roots and the wings highlight particular identity struggles that contribute to our understanding of identity development in multilingual children.

Imposed and agentive identity constructs

In alignment with the concept of time, our young co-researchers noticed a change in narratives as linked to agency and external influence. An identity imposed by others may include parents looking to create a connection between the child and the heritage language and culture, but may also refer to societal interference, where, through bullying, racism, or prejudice, the child may be subjected to others creating an identity for them, including fitting into a 'model minority' discourse. The co-researchers identified moments of threat and/or coercion as a result of these imposed identities. As children got older, the co-researchers 'noticed' an increase of agency and ownership, as the participants identified ways for the heritage language to become 'useful', and 'finding meaning' for themselves. On several occasions, this usefulness became apparent when participants told of instances when the heritage language enabled them to be helpful towards others, arguably an empowering experience. The co-researchers also noticed the increased effort participants made to remain connected to their heritage language and culture, acknowledging that societal language would dominate, unless a concerted effort was made.

Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) motivational self-system offers a potential theoretical underpinning here, too, although his notion of the ideal and the ought-to self underpin language learning motivation, with the 'ought-to self' traditionally defined by parental or teacher input. Rather than applying Dörnyei's theories directly here, we posit that participants' narratives highlight how their identities are, on occasion, constructed for them by others, including through societal expectations, prejudice, and racism. In balancing family expectations, societal prejudices, and personal desires, young multilingual people once again occupy a limbotic space, where identity development is subject to fluctuations and influences, and may represent itself via an expression of association and dissociation, as outlined below.

Many narratives included experiences of racial discrimination and societal prejudice encountered by children when growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage. Constrained by dominant societal discourses and structural biases, heritage children tend to be positioned negatively, affecting their perceptions of themselves and the value placed on their heritage language (Zhou and Liu 2023). For example, young participants frequently described how societal pressures and prevailing attitudes led them to conform to and assimilate within mainstream society, often at the expense of their heritage language and culture. Participants became self-aware of this shift, noting that at certain stages of their lives, they started to 'lean more towards speaking English' and 'spoke less Chinese,' with many acknowledging that their 'ability to express themselves in Chinese was weakening' as they grew up. This broader societal interference again places them in a limbotic space, further complicating their identity constructions, which is illustrated in the following narrative from a 13-year-old participant:

> During my growing up years, I've experienced various forms of racial discrimination in public places, at school, and on social media. This discrimination has left me feeling confused and hurt. At school, I sometimes face mockery and exclusion from classmates just because my skin colour, language, or cultural background is different from theirs. It makes me feel different, and at times, I even question my identity and worth (Submission No.24).

Some participants, as agentive young individuals, actively contest structural constraints and reposition themselves, leading to the emergence of self-created identities reflected in their empowering narratives. For instance, despite facing significant challenges, several students noted that being multilingual helped them develop into 'a better version of myself.' A particularly compelling example comes from a 14-year-old participant who described instances of being bullied at secondary school and witnessing a Chinese friend being assaulted and injured. Yet, he concluded his narrative with a stronger, more empowered identity, as demonstrated in the following excerpt. However, it is important to recognise that not all young participants are able to negotiate these structural barriers without broader support and affordances.

> Today, I have no regrets and am very grateful to be of Chinese heritage in the UK. I believe that experiencing two different cultures and backgrounds has made me a completely different person. It has also allowed me to meet many different people and experience various things. Living in two different environments has made me a better version of myself (Submission No.98).

The negotiation between imposed and agentive identities was not only evident in young participants' narratives of social prejudice within mainstream UK society but also in interactions with Chinese communities. In the following excerpt, a 16-year-old mixed-heritage participant discussed an encounter at Chinese border control where she was labelled as a 'foreigner' who cannot speak Chinese at all. Her ownership and agency became clear in the narratives that followed this incident, as she managed to reposition herself and viewed learning her heritage language as a way to reclaim her identity:

> Since then, I've had a new understanding: in the eyes of many locals, I am a foreigner, not Chinese. Even though I first learned Chinese, many people assume I only speak English because of my appearance! This is why I must persist in learning Chinese! Although I am currently studying four A-level subjects, I cannot give up Chinese, or else I would be embarrassed to call myself Chinese (Submission No.1).

In taking ownership of her language learning journey, this participant seeks to negotiate a limbotic insider/outsider identity faced by many children growing up in similar circumstances, which is further manifested by associating with or dissociating from aspects of heritage, and heritage language.

Association and dissociation

The young co-researchers noticed that narratives expressed a sense of belonging, or an association, with certain practices, food, habits, festivities, etc. Even though language did not always feature as part of this, there was a cultural acknowledgement that linked these associations to identity (Gao, Lai, and Halse 2019). Co-researchers identified that participants chose to narrate or comment on experiences or practices that marked them as an insider or outsider, sometimes identifying the role of a heritage language speaker as belonging 'neither here nor there', a limbotic existence that required adjustments or was expressed through dissociation in the narratives (Bucholtz 1999). Whether through linguistic, behavioural, or visible differences, participants' identity narratives referred to a sense of being 'other ' – in some instances, these were imposed by society or the outside world (see above). A sense of belonging – or a lack thereof – were golden threads within these narratives, as were moments of self-identification.

A 12-year-old participant chose to narrate his associations and dissociations between Chinese heritage and British culture, manifested through the festivals celebrated and the manner of the celebration:

> I associate more with the British culture while having Chinese heritage because I was born, raised and taught In Britain […] Another reason I find myself associating more towards the British culture is partly due to the holidays I celebrate such as: Christmas, Easter and Halloween. This has affected my feelings towards the British culture due to the 'British Traditions' such as the sweets you are given on Halloween or the Christmas dinner that is traditionally made in Britain (Submission No.62).

The fluidity inherent in multilingual identities and the dynamics of association and dissociation across time and space can also be found in the narratives of young participants, where languages, cultural practices, and experiences play pivotal roles. For instance, the story of a 13-year-old exemplifies this fluidity as he negotiated a sense of belonging and navigated the complexities of identity within two cultures (Jeon 2022). Over time, this participant also recounted feeling increasingly connected to his Chinese heritage as he started to use Chinese more (Gao, Lai, and Halse 2019):

> Growing up in England, I associate with both cultures (Chinese and English). This is because most of my friends are English, so I am quite familiar with the English traditions. I celebrate Bonfire night and we sometimes set off fireworks. At home, I often speak Mandarin, so it isn't quite like school. Chinese traditions are still celebrated at home so I am also familiar with them. I celebrate mid-autumn festival by eating moon cakes while watching the moon. I felt more British in primary school and more Chinese in secondary school. This was because in primary school I was still learning Chinese and was not very fluent in it. In secondary school I learned it more and began to speak it more at home (Submission 53, aged 13).

However, many participants' narratives surrounding multilingual identities are far from being a 'neat solution'. While some children, like the one described above, expressed feeling comfortable associating with two cultures, others tended to experience a constant push and pull, grappling with feelings of belonging and disbelonging. For them, navigating a limbotic space – neither fully here nor there – becomes a recurring theme, as illustrated by the narrative of a 13-year-old below:

> From a very young age, I have always known that I am different from other kids because I am not white, and sometimes people might find me strange. However, being unique sometimes brings me joy. I was not bullied when I was younger, but sometimes I felt puzzled about my identity and which country I belong to (Submission No.36).

Emotional and pragmatic constructs

The young co-researchers noticed that, just because participants became more willing to engage with the heritage language, this did not necessarily automatically speak of an emotional attachment, instead, several links were made to formal assessments (such as the GCSE secondary school certificate in England, which is available in Mandarin). A motivational split was identified by the young co-researchers, where some participants viewed the language as a crucial bridge to experience the culture, citing emotional links – both positive and negative – to food and weather. Similarly, while some participants identified 'usefulness' as an emotional construct that enabled them to be helpful, others had more pragmatic interpretations of usefulness, including formal qualifications and future employment.

As outlined in the literature review, Little's (2020) heritage language identity framework focuses on the emotional and pragmatic reasons for heritage language maintenance. The emotional constructs of multilingual identity are expressed in participants' narratives, particularly through their emotional connections to aspects such as food preferences and cultural practices. Moreover, some participants appeared to adopt a more essentialist and uncontested perspective in their narratives when discussing the emotional underpinnings of their heritage language identities, emphasising the link between one's heritage and the imperative to acquire certain languages, as exemplified by a young participant's assertion that 'it's important for a Chinese person to know the language.' This sentiment is further echoed in the narrative of a 14-year-old participant:

> My Chinese is also improving now, and I understand that it's my language as a Chinese person, something I must learn and excel at (Submission No. 45).

Alongside the emotional forces, pragmatic constructs also emerge in the participants' identity narratives, notably in their essential need for communication within their families, especially when their parents have limited English proficiency. Many participants spoke of their role as 'little translators' or language brokers in their daily lives. Conversely, not being able to speak the heritage language and communicate effectively at home can lead to frustration, as one participant questioned, 'Shouldn't our family understand each other the most?' This essential pragmatic force for communication is further illustrated in the narrative of a 13-year-old:

> I enjoy learning Chinese because it's interesting and allows me to communicate with my grandparents and other relatives in China. Though it's challenging, not knowing Chinese would mean not being able to chat with my family (Submission No.10).

Furthermore, pragmatic constructs in the narratives extend to more practical considerations, particularly regarding formal qualifications and future employment prospects. Many participants construct the meaning and 'usefulness' of their heritage language in terms of its impact on GCSE and A-level scores, which are recognised within the mainstream educational system. For instance, a 12-year-old participant shared insights into her future plans, emphasising the pivotal role of her heritage language in academic achievement and career advancement:

> Living in the UK, I also have many joys. For example, I have learned Chinese, and I can read and write it. In the future, when I complete my Chinese GCSE at Chinese school, it will count towards my GCSE at my English school. This will help me find a good job when I grow up (Submission No.32).

While Little's (2020) framework focuses on parental attitudes, our data show that children themselves utilise both emotional and pragmatic reasoning to identify motivations to maintain the heritage language, thus expanding the applicability of the framework.

Conclusion

The four constructs 'noticed' by the young co-researchers and underpinned by literature offer opportunities for new ways of looking at the concept of multilingual identity. Embracing the poststructural concepts of situational discomfort and a lack of 'neat solutions' allows us to view multilingual identity as liminal and limbotic, constantly evolving and shifting, especially in young people. In our study, the children find themselves at the centre of multiple 'tussles', with shifting alliances and no pre-determined path. In designing our co-constructed framework, then, we have chosen to represent the child at the centre, surrounded by the associated – and sometimes opposing – constructs 'noticed' by our young co-researchers. While several of these constructs are already represented in the literature as two sides of the same coin (e.g. Dörnyei 2005, 2009; Norton 2010, 2013; Little 2020), the framework overall enables us to acknowledge how experiences linked to multiple languages and cultures can be experienced as unbalancing. Placing Roots and Wings at the top of this framework, on either side of the child, express the complex navigational journeys the child-in-the-present undertakes in relation to historical, ancestral roots and imagined futures. Most importantly, though, the framework, as data-driven and co-constructed, foregrounds the experiences children themselves choose to comment on when asked to write freely about their multilingual identity (Figure 1).

Our framework, while being grounded in existing literature around multilingualism and identity, therefore recognises the child at the centre of their own lived experience and, through the lens of poststructuralism, allows us to embrace the dynamics surrounding identity development. Crucially, while all children's identity development will be impacted by language, race, culture, etc., the framework specifically denotes heritage language children's in-between status, providing a visual reference to the balancing act children from heritage language backgrounds engage in on a daily basis. As highlighted via the chronological nature of most identity narratives in the study, a suitable framework must be flexible enough to embrace changes and uncertainty. While the eight associated aspects of the framework each deserve their own space and acknowledgement, poststructuralism allows us to reject the 'neatness' of such a model, instead enabling us to
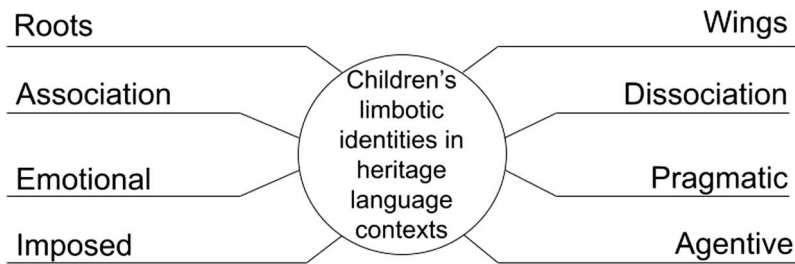
Figure 1. Heritage language children's limbotic and liminal identities.

understand that any experience or narrative will likely engage with several of the constructs, such as an agentive, emotional association linked to ancestral roots. We therefore encourage future researchers to engage with the framework holistically, embracing the messiness of identity research and allowing for limbotic discomfort to be made visible.

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ORCID

Sabine Little 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9902-0217

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