# The use of Multilingual names and Identity

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Multilingual speakers across world use multiple names living in foreign, second country, or different situations (e.g., Edward, 2006; Hoffman, 1989, etc). As names can be used to reflect, shape and index one's identity (i.e., Alia, 2007; Makeham, 1994; Nicolaïsen, 1980), this study is valuable to find out the reason why they use multiple names and how their identities can be constructed within various names. The purpose of this study is to investigate how multilingual speakers use their names in different pieces of writing, e.g., letters to family members and friends, emails to acquaintances, bosses, or professors. Besides, what leads to the differences in using their names and how their different use of names represents their identities in the diverse situations. In this study, the name choice in different types of writing show whether the writer is more or less powerful in the relationship with the audience in the power structure. Also, names can be used to show affiliation and distance between the writer and his/her audience. In addition, in using names which contain ethnic/cultural features with particular audiences, the writer is constructing their ethnic and cultural identity within the situations. There were the cases when writers used different name choices when writing to the same person to show the negotiation in the relationships with these people. Lastly, writers also constructed their imagined identities by using their pseudonyms in online writing.

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## I.　　Introduction

　　Name is at the core of one's identity which many researchers agree on (i.e., Alia, 2007; Makeham, 1994; Nicolaïsen, 1980). In addition, it is possible to have multiple names as they grow and become a part of communities, depending on where they participate in. These multiple names include nicknames, pseudonyms that they use in certain cases, user names for the web-based environment, and simply different names within various circumstances. Thus, some multilingual speakers use different names in different situations (e.g., Edward, 2006; Hoffman, 1989, etc), so it is greatly fascinating to find out why they use multiple names and how their identities can be constructed within various names.

　　This study used Mendoza-Denton's (2008) definition of identity as "the active negotiation of an individual's relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiator is signaled through language and other semiotic means" (p. 475). Using multiple names can be powerful to explore one's identity because negotiation can occur within self to represent one's identity differently in different communities. Therefore, identity can be seen through the use of diverse names and those names are related to one's social communities, which are connected to the construction of multiple names by self and environment.

　　The purpose of this study is to investigate how multilingual speakers use their names in different pieces of writing, e.g., letters to family members and friends, emails to acquaintances, bosses, or professors. Besides, what leads to these differences in using their names and how their different use of names represents their identities in these diverse situations. Hence, the research will address the specific research question: *How do multilingual students use names to represent their identities in different types of writing?* Prior to describing the outcome and methodology of the study, the literature will be reviewed in the following sections in order to understand more about detecting specifically the use of multilingual students' multiple names.

## II.　Literature Review

Names can be used to reflect, shape and index one's identity (i.e., Alia, 2007; Makeham, 1994; Nicolaïsen, 1980). According to Cheang (2008), a name gives information about its owners. It can be used to tell gender (i.e., Amy, Emily for women and Mark, John for men); people's preferences on color (i.e., Scarlet and Pinky) or seasons/time of the year (i.e., April, July); and their cultural background (i.e., Sidonio as a Portuguese name, a French name as Françoise). Names can also indicate one's religion (Tait, 2006; Tan, 2001) and politics (Plutschow, 1995).

Accompanied by the Western acculturation for a long time in Zulu society, Zulu children have two personal names, which are their amagama asekhaya (home names) and school names that are westernized names (Suzman, 1994). Besides home names, Zulu adults also adopt "European-names" which are used in public settings like the local church or workplace (Koopman, 1979; Suzman, 1994). However, many young generations begin to use their Zulu personal names in all settings (Suzman, 1994). Aceto (2002) found out that almost every Afro-Panamanian resident of the island of Bastimentos has two given names, one Spanish-derived and the other Creole-derived, which is considered as ethnic names. Local residents prefer to use their Creole names because they give information about a person's culture and ancestry.

As immigrants move to an English-speaking country, some change their names to fit in the local community. Eva Hoffman (1989) mentioned about her and her sister's experiences of changing names from Ewa and Alina, to Eva and Elaine, when immigrating to Canada. However, this experience is accompanied by a loss of their linguistics identity (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Some immigrant children were given new American names when moving to the United States, either because their families realize the original names are difficult for English speakers to pronounce, or they want their children to fit in with their classmates (Gavigan, 2010). According to Louie (1998), for Chinese Americans who have two names, they tend to use English names in the workplace and Chinese names with their relatives and friends. This is similar with the Korean immigrants who use English names in public settings and ethnic names at home (Kim, 2007), as well as Japanese in Hawaii that use Japanese names at home while English names in public (Tamura 1994, cited in Aceto, 2002).

Chinese students who study in Canada tend to use names in different social contexts. They usually use their Chinese names with Chinese native speakers, and their English names with English speakers (Wang, 2009). Many would feel uncomfortable if a native Chinese speaker use an English name with them. In Taiwan, people who have English names prefer

to use their English names when communicating with foreigners. They also prefer to use English names with their English teachers, or when writing emails with their international friends to show intimacy (Liao, 2000). In general, using English names in official documents is uncommon and invalid in China and Taiwan (Liao, 2000).

In addition, Hong Kong bilinguals usually use their English names in educational settings and white-collar workplaces (Li, 1997). With a British colonial history, they use English names to enable themselves to speed up the process of "getting acquainted intimately" and to communicate in a more egalitarian way. Adopting an English name, is considered to be an "involvement strategy" (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1995) for Hongkongers to better develop interpersonal relationship. Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1995) mentioned that, when Mr. Chu, a Hong Kong exporter who also owned an English name, met an American buyer in an airplane, he introduced his English name to the American. However, he felt embarrassed when the American buyer insisted using his Chinese given name because he preferred to use his English name in this context. In another study about Hongkongers' use of English names, Mathews (1996) pointed out that as Hongkongers consider their full Chinese names to be too formal, and their Chinese first names too informal, an English name serves the function in between during their social interaction in educational or commercial settings where people do not have deep human relations. Wang (2009) also pointed out that Chinese people's using English names may objectively function as an involvement strategy in an English-speaking society. Besides, for some Chinese multilingual speakers, the practice of using English names can also be considered as a way to reduce cultural gaps in cross-cultural communication (Gao, Xu, & Kuang, 2010).

In a study of Chinese students who study in the UK, Edward (2006) considered students' using English names as an "investment" (Norton, 1995) in the target language and target culture learning. Using/ not using English names are considered as being a compliance or resistant to British culture and English learning. Furthermore, some Chinese multilingual speakers consider English names as mere practical functions to assist foreigners who cannot pronounce their Chinese names, and they do not consider English names as real self-belonging (Gao, Xu, and Kuang, 2010; Wang, 2009). Even more, some avoid using their English names as much as possible unless in situations which are really necessary. This is considered as consciously or unconsciously "protecting their native cultural identities against the encroachment of the target culture" (Gao, Xu, & Kuang, 2010). Such a result is in line with Kim (2007)'s study of Korean immigrants in Canada, which indicated that some immigrants keep their ethnic names because they have strong emotional adherence to

the Korean names. However, for some other Chinese multilinguals, English names are fully accepted and combined with emotions, and they never question about the legitimacy of their English names. Some even have argued that an English name is more than a symbol, or a label. To them, an English name is also related to their identity or actuality (Wang, 2009).

The use of nicknames and pseudonyms has also been discussed in the previous literature. According to Aceto (2002), a nickname is typically a name given to a person in addition to his/her given name/surname.  It is usually created and maintained by friends, family, and various social groups to character things that these members of a community want to emphasize to their fellows, even if the "recipients of the nicknames prefer to be reminded of or to index other aspects of their lives" (Aceto, 2002, p. 583). On the contrary, people usually adopt pseudonyms themselves to emphasize aspects of the identity that they wish to make known publicly. Pseudonyms are common in politics, social and religious contexts, and especially in entertainment. For example, "Sojourner Truth" was chosen by Isabella Baumfree to represent her new role as an African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist in the 19th-century USA. Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu chose Mother Teresa to represent her new spiritual life in Roman Catholicism. Black Muslims often drop their surnames because their family names can sometimes be identified as slave names. Pseudonyms are also frequent among actors. Before the 1960s, actors with "ethnic-sounding" names often adopted more Anglicized pseudonyms. For example, Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis were originally named Issur Danielovitch and Bernard Schwartz. Griffin (1999) pointed out that writers have many different reasons for withholding their names. In the 18th and 19th century Europe, these included: "an aristocratic or a gendered reticence, religious self-effacement, anxiety over public exposure, fear of prosecution, hope of an unprejudiced reception, and the desire to deceive."

## III.   Method

This study took place in one of the western universities in the United States focusing on multilingual speakers to see how they use different names in their writing. The participation was entirely voluntary because the data was personal writing. An email was sent out to the president of Language and Cultural Exchange Club to recruit participants. Three participants were willing to provide their writing; two Chinese and one Kazakh. In order to explore the use of multiple names, writing entries which have names such as emails, letters, messages

from social networks and academic papers were collected for this study. After collecting and analyzing data, there was an interview which approximately took 30 minutes in English for each participant to get further information about the data. The relevant portions of digital recorded interviews were transcribed carefully. Pseudonyms were used in this paper to protect each participant's identity.

## 1. The Use of Multiple Names of each Participant

Participant 1

Wen Hu (pseudonym) is a student who came from China to the United States six months ago. She used five different names: Wen (Chinese characters for 雯 ), Wen Hu ( 雯笏 ), Willa, Xuelu ( 雪璐 ), Huewen ( 慧雯 ), and Sunshine in different types of writing to different people. Wen is her first name and Wen Hu is her full name. She used Wen Hu for her papers in school and emails to people who she does not know. Willa is her English name suggested by her first English native teacher in China. Xuelu is the name she used to her Chinese friends but not in China. Huewen is another nickname that her family gave to her. Lastly, Sunshine is the name that she used for online chatting.

Participant 2

Sabira Uvaliyeva is a student from Kazakhstan. She has studied in the United States for five years and now she is a sophomore. In her writing, she used "Sabira Uvaliyeva" in formal situations like documents, formal invitations, or when writing to professors, administrators, and staff members in the university, etc. She used "Sabira" to close friends and acquaintances in the United States, "Sabira U." sometimes in formal situations, " Сабик" (Russian alphabets for "Sabi") to her cousins, "Сабик" ("Sabik") for friends in Kazakhstan, "Сабирок" ("Sabirok") to her parents. She also has two pseudonyms, "Lady Butterfly" and "Calipso", which she used in in a social networking website.

Participant 3

Ruoxuan Wang is a student from China, and now she is studying for the second year of her Ph.D program. The same as Sabira, Ruoxuan used her full name in formal situations. She used "Ruoxuan" only with close friends in the United States. For friends in China, she used "小若" (Chinese characters for "little Ruo" ) and "王若宣" (Wang Ruoxuan) in her writing. She also had a pseudonym "千年一叹" (a sigh of a thousand years) in an online literature forum.

# IV.　Result and Discussion

In discussion, there are five different categories that show the similar tendency of using multiple names among three participants. The first theme was the identity and power relationship which will be discussing in following part.

## 1. Identity and Power Relationship

Name choices can be used in the writing to show whether the writer is more or less powerful in the relationship with his/ her audience. In the following examples, there are the evidences of how writers use different names when writing to different audiences. By using one's full name, given name, nickname or even by not using a name, writers were negotiating their relationships with their audiences in the power structure.

Sabira and Ruoxua used their full names when writing to people who are in higher positions than themselves. These people include professors, administrators, and staff members in the university. For example, Sabira used her full name when writing to Dr. Peterson because "He is the director of my department. He is powerful and I have to show respect" (Sabira, interview, Nov 29th, 2011). Sabira also said "I use my full name when writing to old people, because you should respect old people" (Sabira, interview, Nov 29th, 2011). Besides, she used her given name "Sabira" when writing to close friends and acquaintances because "it will be too formal to use your family name with your friends, since they are just like you." For some very close friends, she did not even write her name in the writing "since these people know me quite well, and they won't be offended if I don't put my name".

Sabira is the president of Language and Culture Exchange club in her university. From the collected writing, there were three email entries which Sabira wrote to her officers and she did not put her name in the end. In these email entries, she was requesting for their addresses in order to fill in some documents about her club. She said that since she is the president, and they are her officers, it is not necessary to put her name. By doing this, I interpreted as Sabira was representing herself as having more power than her officers.

Another example of the relationship between power and the use of names, is when Sabira used the nickname "Sabi" when writing to her cousins. "Sabi" is the name she made for herself, and she only used it with her cousins.

Like its all hum…Maybe it depends on the sound it makes. It's all high, like "Sabi".
It's not something like, Lily. Okay, you know like, Sabi is strong, and it is not cute.
Because my image of how they perceive me as an oldest sister in the family, that I am

stronger and the leader who has power, and they should show respect. "Sabi" is more suitable to me.

From the interview which Sabira represented herself as "Sabi" in her writing, she was constructing her identity as the powerful oldest sister in her relative family. Accordingly, the use of multiple names indicates the writers' identity of empowerment, and their relationship.

## 2. Affiliation and the distance

As Eclert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) claimed that the way of people's talking and expression shows the relationship among them with their distance, Wen used distinctive names to different people based on how they are close to each other. She used her English name in the writing such as emails and messages on social network websites to represent her relationship with others. She expressed:

I use Willa to people who are my friends. If they are not my friends, I don't use Willa. If they can possibly be friends, I use Isabella but not everyone. Then, I use Wen for those not close American friends.

From data, Willa is the name that she wrote to her close people; international friends, American friends, and American people who know her very well to show intimacy. Also, she used Willa to people who can possibly be close friends. However, she used her Chinese name to other Americans who were not close to her. Interestingly, this is opposite to what Louie (1998) said. The researcher argues that some Chinese Americans use their English names at work and Chinese name to people who she involved in her private life. The name Willa shows her identity that she can informally represent herself to others rather than using it only because she thinks her Chinese name is difficult for native speakers and international friends to pronounce or to fit in to the environment in America which Gavigan described that (2010) people who immigrated from other countries to America make English names so that it is easier for others and can become a member of the community. She wrote her Chinese name to those who did not have a close relationship with her or who she thinks she will not develop a personal relationship with in the future. Thus, several names were chosen in the written pieces by writers based on the distance of relationship between writers and readers.

## 3. Names and Ethnic and Culture Identity

Names can be used to indicate one's nationality (Aceto, 2002; Joseph, 2004). Multilingual students use their original names to the people who have the same nationality. In this study, Sabira used "Сабик" (Russian alphabets for "Sabik") when she wrote to her close friends

in Kazakhstan. "Sabik" is a popular nickname in Kazakhstan for the name "Sabira". When asked about why she did not use the name "Sabik" as a nickname with Americans in the United States and international friends, she said:

　　Just as I can't understand "Mike" is the nick for "Michael," I think they are different names. Americans will not understand what means by "Sabik," because they will think "Sabik" is another name, which is different from "Sabira."

　　"Сабирок" (Russian alphabets for "Sabirok") is a name she used with her parents. "Рок" (Russian alphabets for "rok") is a Russian ending which means "little" and "small". Her parents always called her by "Сабирок" since she is the youngest daughter in the family. Sabira has a blog in which she names herself "Sabirok" said "all the writing from this blog are dedication to my parents."

　　Another participant Ruoxuan used "小若" (Chinese characters for "little Ruo") and "王若宣" (Chinese characters for Wang Ruoxuan) as a signature when she wrote to Chinese people. This is in line with what was found in another participant Wen; she would always use 雯 (Chinese characters for Wen) when writing to her Chinese friends in China. The reason for using their character-based name is that "…they are Chinese, and so it is so obvious that we should use Chinese characters. It makes no sense that I can use these characters with Americans do not know Chinese."

　　According to Eriksen (2001), ethnic identity refers to a notion of shared ancestry (a kind of fictive kinship), and cultural identity means "the relationship between individuals and members of a group who share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world" (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Our participants think that their friends and family members are the ones who share the same history, language and cultural background with them, so they use their original names which contain ethnic/cultural features particularly when writing to them. Yet this is not for Americans and their international friends since they do not share the same cultural and ethnic features. From the consequence, Americans will not understand when they use their Russian or Chinese names. By using these names, it is clear that they construct and show their ethnic and cultural identity in different writing materials.

## 4. Consistency and Exception in Name Use

　　For the majority of the time, three participants would use the same name when writing to a particular person. However, there were exceptional situations when they used different names. By using different names when writing to the same person, they were negotiating

their individual relationships with that particular person in specific situations.

　　For instance, to some professors with whom Sabira has close relationships, she used her given name all the time when emailing them. However, her full name was used in one email entry in which she apologized about a paper she wrote. She said since she was apologizing and it was a very serious talk, even though she was familiar with that professor, she still had to use her full name to show seriousness and formality. Another very interesting case is that Sabira used "Sabira U." as a signature when she wrote to the same professor. She was submitting her final paper to that professor via email. When asked why she used "Sabira U.," she said: "While sometimes I am typing and it is just a habit. And when I finally get to the alphabet 'U,' I start to think that I don't need to use my full name here."

　　As mentioned, the name choice one makes when representing to different audiences, is a very important component of identity construction. The example reveals how Sabira used "Sabira U." to negotiate her relationship with this professor. Here we would like to use Goffman's (1959) "front" in the interpretation. According to Goffman, Front is "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (p. 22). As Sabira by habit thought it was a serious and formal situation; she should have used her full name. However, since the writer has a close relationship with this professor, when she typed the first letter of her last name U, she finally changed her mind to use only U. instead of her full name. Somehow, this is different because she would always use her given name only when writing to this professor. Using "Sabira U." instead of "Sabira" unintentionally represents her front as being in a formal situation, while her final choice of using "Sabira U." instead of her full name "Sabira Uvaliyeva" showed her identity negotiation in the relationship with that professor, which means she intentionally wanted to represent her front as intimacy in this relationship.

　　Here is another example that Wen used different names to the same person. From her emails, she sometimes represented herself as Wen and, sometimes Wen Hu as her full name. Those email entries were to one of the staff at university international Office. She said, "I think if I use Wen Hu, she recognizes me and remember me by documents. It would be easier for the person to find out."

　　In line with Liao's (2000) finding that English name is not appropriate to use in official settings, Wen used her full name because it is convenient for the officers in school to use her full name depending on the content about documents or formal cases in school. Although the person is close enough to use only her first name, she used her full name. By using her full name, she constructed her front as serious and formal.

As the outcome explicated, while multilingual students use various names, they keep using the same name to the same people which is logical to show them as the same person. However, since they have multiple identities to people as well as even to the same person, it is possible to change using names to the same people based on the identities that they have to show to them.

## 5. Online Names and Imagined Identity

In online writing sources such as chat and social network devices, it is common to use pseudonyms. According to Aceto (2002), people usually adopt pseudonyms themselves to emphasize aspects of the identity that they wish to make known publicly, which is in line with our finding from the three participants. The pseudonyms our participants chose were related to positive features they wanted to show on these online communities. These desired qualities and features thus became their "imagined identity" (Norton, 2001) in these "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991).

For example, Sabira used "Lady butterfly" and "Calipso" in a social networking website. Whenever she writes something, these names will appear on the website. Sabira told me both Lady butterfly and Calipso are related to fiction and are mysterious: "Both of them are lady's name and I am very feminine. I like fiction. And both of them have fiction." Besides, from the time Sabira got this name Calipso, she was a big fan of fiction and horoscope. Calipso is the goddess of water, and it is related to mythology. It is mysterious, and also the way it sounds is beautiful for me." In the social networking website, which is an imagined community, she wanted to emphasize her identity as being feminine and mysterious. By using these names, she was also constructing her imagined identity as being mysterious, secretive, and beautiful, which were all desired qualities she wanted to achieve.

In the case of Ruoxuan, she used "千年一叹" (a sigh of a thousand years) in a literature forum. "千年一叹" is the title of a book from a famous Chinese writer 余秋雨 (Qiuyu Yu), and the book is about the writer's experience of travelling in Europe. Here is why she used this name: "When you look at their names, they are all English names, or ...some of their names are just very superficial. I use '千年一叹' because I want to show I am different, and I am decent." Ruoxuan, by using the name "千年一叹" on the literature forum, was constructing her identity as being knowledgeable in the literature field. She was trying to construct her front as: "I know a lot about literature because you can tell it from the name I use. Your name is too superficial, and I am not as superficial as you are. I am special here." Besides, being knowledgeable and different is also the identity which she imagined herself having when being online in the

literature forum.

　Another case for Wen, her choice of name for online was "Sunshine" to show her identity. From the interview she said:

　　Because I started using this, I think I began to use to my student at online chatting, and I am thinking my students need some name that they think it is me. For my students in their impression, I am like their sunshine because after my class, they were talking and I think sunshine is the best description of the teacher which represents me. I wanted to have them of me as positive affective. Sunshine is bright and energetic that teacher should be.

　Sunshine was the name in which she put her imagined identity to represent herself in this imagined online community. In this online chat, Wen displayed her identity as being "bright and energetic", and she wanted to have all positive features like the sunshine. It was the identity that she would like her students to have about her.

## V.　Conclusion

　People in general, think that one may only have one name yet it is very common for multilinguals to have multiple names. As many researchers agreed that names can be used to represent one's identity (i.e., Alia, 2007; Makeham, 1994; Nicolaïsen, 1980), this research aimed at exploring how multilingual writers use their names to represent their multiple identities through different types of writing. This study found that name choices can be used in writing to show whether the writer is more or less powerful in the relationship with his/her audience in the power structure. Moreover, names can be used to show affiliation and distance between the writer and his/her audience. Also, in using names which contain ethnic/cultural features with particular audiences, the writer is constructing their ethnic and cultural identity in these situations. There are cases when writers used different name choices when writing to the same person, which shows the negotiation in the relationships with these people. Lastly, writers also construct their imagined identities by using their pseudonyms in online writing. As a conclusion, in using multiple names in different types of writings, multilingual writers go through different processes of self-negotiation in the relationship with different audiences, as well as represent their multiple identities in these various situations.

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