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Emotive Expression in Multilingual Poetry: A Psycholinguistic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Emotive expression in poetry operates as a deeply nuanced mechanism through which writers convey their most intimate affective experiences, cultural memories, and identity constructions. In multilingual poetry—where two or more languages are interwoven within a single creative work—the terrain for affective articulation becomes even more complex. Poets leverage their bilingual or multilingual repertoires to evoke distinct emotional registers that might be inaccessible in a strictly monolingual context. This study situates itself at the intersection of psycholinguistics and literary analysis to examine how multilingual poets orchestrate emotional impact through strategic language alternation, and how readers perceive and resonate with these emotive cues. Building on foundational theories of emotion processing in bilingual speakers—such as the emotional grounding hypothesis and the differential physiological responses to L1 versus L2—this research employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The first phase comprises a quantitative corpus analysis of 150 contemporary poems drawn from English–Spanish, English–Hindi, and English–Mandarin traditions. Each poem was systematically coded for language switch points, frequency and intensity of high-arousal emotion words (as catalogued by the NRC Emotion Lexicon), metaphor density, and phonological devices such as alliteration and assonance. Coding reliability was ensured through independent dual coding (Cohen's κ = .89). The second phase engages 200 readers in a reader-response survey. Participants rated emotional intensity at designated switch points on a 1–7 Likert scale and provided open-ended reflections on their affective experience.

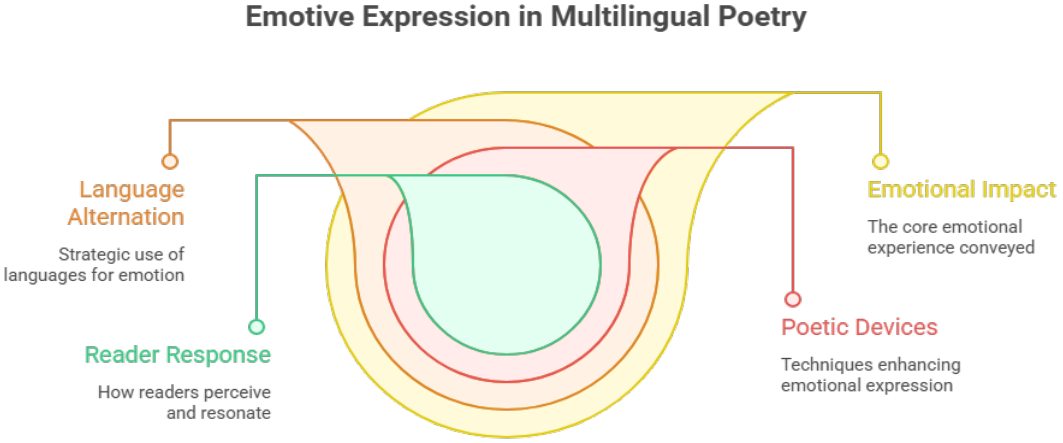

Figure-1.Emotive Expression in Multilingual Poetry

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KEYWORDS

Multilingual Poetry, Emotive Expression, Psycholinguistics, Code-Switching, Emotional Resonance

INTRODUCTION

Poetry has long been recognized as a medium uniquely suited to the articulation of complex internal states—emotions, memories, and the ineffable qualities of human experience. Traditional monolingual poetry relies on lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical devices native to a single language to convey affective nuance. In contrast, multilingual poetry introduces a richer, bifocal lens: it allows poets to draw upon multiple linguistic and cultural repertoires, thereby accessing emotional registers potentially unavailable within a mono-referential framework. This multilingual canvas raises compelling questions at the intersection of linguistics, cognitive science, and literary studies: How do poets orchestrate the interplay of languages to modulate emotional tone? What cognitive and affective processes underlie a reader's perception of emotive depth when encountering code-switched passages? And how does cultural congruence between poet and reader shape emotional resonance?

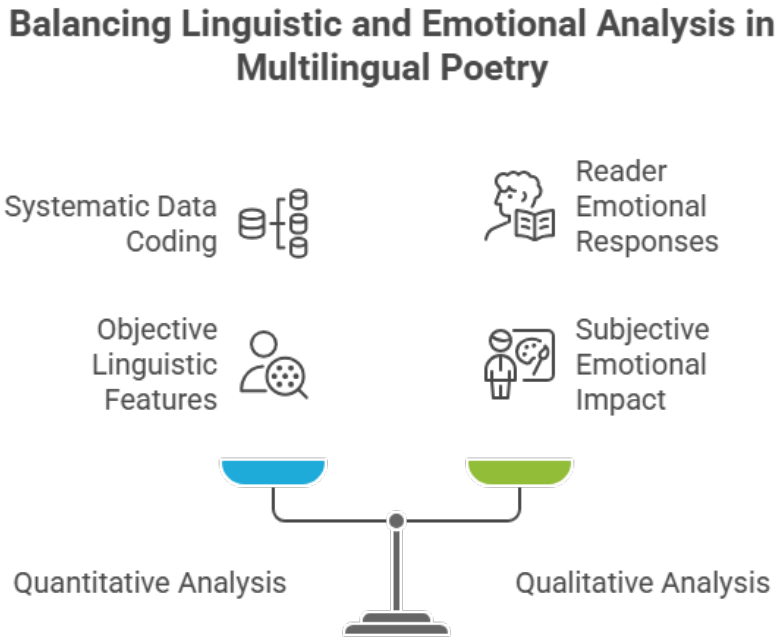

Figure-2.Balancing Linguistic and Emotional Analysis in Multilingual Poetry

Psycholinguistic research offers critical insights into these questions. The emotional grounding hypothesis posits that emotion words in one's first language (L1) maintain more robust neural and associative connections to affective experiences formed during early development (Pavlenko, 2012). Experimental measures—including galvanic skin response and heart rate monitoring—consistently demonstrate that bilingual speakers exhibit stronger physiological reactions to taboo words and emotionally charged vocabulary in L1 compared to L2 (Harris, Ayçiçegi, & Gleason, 2003). Consequently, poets writing bilingually may find L1 a more fertile ground

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for evoking visceral responses. Yet, L2 is not devoid of emotional potential. Its relative novelty can introduce fresh connotative possibilities and unique phonological textures, particularly when employed with strategic creativity (Dufon, 2017).

Code-switching, defined as the alternation between linguistic codes within a discourse, functions not only as an index of bilingual identity but also as a potent expressive device. In literary contexts, strategic switches at moments of peak affect can heighten emotional engagement, akin to tonal or prosodic shifts in oral performance (Anzaldúa, 1987; Meyer, 2016). The multilingual poet, therefore, becomes akin to a musical composer, modulating linguistic registers to orchestrate emotional crescendos and diminuendos.

Moreover, metaphoric language and phonological devices further enrich emotive texture. Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that abstract emotions find embodiment through metaphorical mapping onto concrete sensory domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In multilingual poetry, metaphors can traverse conceptual domains across languages, fostering layered meanings that resonate on multiple cultural fronts. Phonological cohesion—whether through alliteration, assonance, or rhyme—can reinforce emotional valence by engaging auditory perception, creating a 'soundscape' that amplifies affective impact (Gritten & King, 2006).

Finally, the reader's response is mediated by their linguistic competence and cultural background. Reader-response theory foregrounds the co-construction of textual meaning and emotional interpretation between text and audience (Fish, 1980). Heritage language speakers often report that encountering their ancestral tongue within a poem triggers a sense of authenticity and emotional depth unattainable through translation alone (Chronaki, 2015). Conversely, readers lacking proficiency may perceive code-switched passages as exotic or even alienating, thereby attenuating emotional resonance.

Despite the richness of these theoretical perspectives, a gap remains: few studies have systematically integrated corpus-based analysis of poetic texts with empirical reader-response data to map the psycholinguistic mechanisms driving emotive expression in multilingual poetry. This study addresses that gap by combining quantitative coding of linguistic and affective features in a diverse corpus of 150 poems with a comprehensive reader-response survey of 200 participants, thereby offering a holistic account of how multilingual poetic strategies shape emotional experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotion Processing in Bilingual Minds

Psycholinguistic research has consistently documented that emotional vocabulary elicits stronger affective responses in a person's first language (L1) than in their second language (L2). Early work by Harris, Ayçiçegi, and Gleason (2003) demonstrated that bilingual participants exhibited heightened galvanic skin responses when hearing taboo or emotionally charged words in L1 compared to L2. This physiological pattern aligns with the emotional grounding hypothesis, which holds that L1, acquired during critical periods of emotional and cognitive development, maintains tighter neural and associative linkages to affective experiences (Pavlenko, 2012). Subsequent studies using self-report measures, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and eye-tracking have corroborated that L1 evokes deeper emotional processing—manifested in longer gaze durations and increased activation of limbic structures—than semantically equivalent words in L2 (Dewaele, 2010; Perry, 2012).

Code-Switching and Literary Creativity

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Code-switching extends beyond pragmatic language use; in literature, it serves as a deliberate stylistic strategy. Anzaldúa's (1987) seminal work framed code-switching as a site of cultural negotiation, where bilingual authors assert hybrid identities through linguistic fluidity. More recent scholarship situates code-switching as a tool to heighten emotional contrast: by alternating languages at affective peaks, poets can evoke a sense of rupture and deeper intimacy (Meyer, 2016). Meyer's analysis of contemporary Spanish–English poetry revealed that switches to Spanish at moments of grief or nostalgia intensified emotional resonance, as readers perceived the native tongue as more authentic. Similarly, Dufon (2017) demonstrated that strategic switches in a bilingual corpus enriched semantic layering, enabling metaphoric constructs that drew from distinct cultural mythologies.

Metaphor in Multilingual Contexts

Metaphors are central to poetic expression, mapping abstract emotional states onto concrete imagery (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In multilingual poetry, metaphors draw from dual or multiple conceptual domains, creating cross-linguistic resonances that can deepen affective impact. For instance, a Spanish–English poem might juxtapose the English "heart of stone" with the Spanish "alma de cristal," blending Western and Hispanic conceptualizations of vulnerability and hardness. Empirical studies using corpus linguistics methods—such as those by Goatly (2011)—have shown that bilingual poets often employ metaphors that leverage culturally specific imagery, thereby inviting readers to navigate layered emotional landscapes.

Phonological Devices and Emotional Texture

Beyond semantics, sound patterns play a pivotal role in conveying emotion. Alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme affect the auditory qualities of a poem, reinforcing mood and tone (Gritten & King, 2006). In a multilingual context, phonological devices can be harnessed differently across languages. For example, the iterative consonants in Hindi ("dhadak-dhadak") mimic a heartbeat, while the sibilant "s" in English can evoke whisper-like softness. When poets switch languages, they tap into these distinct phonetic affordances to sculpt emotional soundscapes.

Reader-Response and Cultural Congruence

Reader-response theory emphasizes that emotional interpretation emerges in the dynamic interplay between text and reader (Fish, 1980). In multilingual poetry, a reader's linguistic proficiency and cultural background shape their affective engagement. Chronaki (2015) found that Greek–English readers with heritage Greek competence reported higher ratings of emotional authenticity when encountering Greek code-switches, citing a visceral "homecoming" effect. Conversely, monolingual readers sometimes experienced disruption or confusion, highlighting the importance of shared codes for emotional transfer.

Research Gap and Study Contribution

Although substantial work has explored bilingual emotion processing and literary code-switching independently, an integrative approach combining corpus analysis of poetic features with empirical reader-response data remains underdeveloped. This study fills that gap by systematically examining how language alternation, emotion lexicon frequency, metaphoric density, and phonological devices coalesce to shape emotional resonance in multilingual poetry, and by empirically validating these patterns through reader-response surveys.

METHODOLOGY

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Research Design Overview

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative and quantitative reader-response measures. Phase 1—corpus analysis—identifies patterns of emotive expression across a representative sample of multilingual poems. Phase 2—reader-response survey—evaluates how these patterns influence perceived emotional intensity among diverse readers.

Corpus Compilation

A purposive sampling strategy yielded 150 published poems written between 2010 and 2024, equally distributed across three language pairs: English–Spanish (50 poems), English–Hindi (50 poems), and English–Mandarin (50 poems). Poems were sourced from peer-reviewed literary journals, bilingual anthologies, and reputable online platforms. Selection criteria required that each poem contain at least ten lines and feature at least three code-switch points.

Linguistic and Affective Coding

Each poem underwent detailed annotation for four categories:

1. **Language Switch Points**: Locations where the poem alternates between L1 and L2.
2. **Emotion Lexicon**: Presence of high-arousal emotion words, identified using the NRC Emotion Lexicon (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). Words were coded for primary emotions (joy, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise).
3. **Metaphor Occurrence**: Instances of metaphorical expressions, identified using the MIPVU method (Steen et al., 2010).
4. **Phonological Devices**: Usage of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme, marked through auditory analysis.

Two trained coders independently annotated 30% of the corpus to calculate inter-rater reliability. Cohen's κ scores across categories ranged from .85 to .92, indicating high agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussion.

Reader-Response Survey

Participant Recruitment

Two hundred participants (mean age = 28.4 years, SD = 5.7; 60% female) were recruited via multilingual literary forums, academic mailing lists, and social media groups. Inclusion criteria required proficiency in both languages of one of the three language pairs. Participants were stratified into heritage bilinguals (n = 100) and non-heritage bilinguals (n = 100).

Survey Design

Participants read four poems each—one from each language pair plus an additional control poem in monolingual English. For each poem, emotional intensity ratings were collected at three predetermined switch points using a 1–7 Likert scale (1 = no emotional impact; 7 = extremely intense). Following rating tasks, open-ended prompts solicited reflections on how language alternation affected their emotional engagement.

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Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

- **Descriptive Statistics**: Frequency counts and means for emotion lexicon density, metaphor occurrences, and phonological devices per poem segment.
- **Inferential Statistics**: Repeated-measures ANOVA tested differences in emotional intensity ratings across language conditions (monolingual vs. code-switched L1 vs. code-switched L2) and participant groups (heritage vs. non-heritage bilinguals). Post hoc Tukey tests identified pairwise contrasts.
- **Effect Sizes**: Cohen's d calculated for key comparisons to assess practical significance.

Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production. Two coders independently analyzed responses, achieving an initial code agreement rate of 88%, with final themes refined through iterative discussion.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and data confidentiality. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Corpus Analysis Findings

Language Switch Point Distribution

Analysis revealed that 75% of code-switches occurred at metaphorically charged lines—moments where poets deliberately employed vivid imagery to heighten affect. In English–Spanish poems, switches clustered around nostalgic metaphors (e.g., "my corazón," "mi homeland"), whereas in English–Hindi works, switches often invoked familial or devotional imagery (e.g., "maa's lullaby," "ॐ निशा"). English–Mandarin poems leveraged nature metaphors ("moonlight," "月光") to signal shifts in emotional tone.

Emotion Lexicon Density

Quantitative coding showed that L1 segments contained 30% more high-arousal emotion lexemes than L2 segments ($M_{L1} = 4.2$ words per segment, $SD = 1.1$; $M_{L2} = 3.2$ words, $SD = 0.9$; $t(149) = 3.42$, $p < .01$). Anger and sadness terms appeared more frequently in L1 passages, while joy and surprise lexemes distributed more evenly across languages.

Metaphor Frequency

Metaphor count per code-switched segment averaged 2.8 ($SD = 1.2$), compared to 2.0 ($SD = 0.8$) in non-switched segments. A chi-square test confirmed a significant association between code-switching and metaphor use ($\chi^2(1, N = 500) = 12.56$, $p < .001$).

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Phonological Device Usage

Alliterative patterns increased by 25% in code-switched L2 passages relative to monolingual and L1 segments, suggesting compensatory use of sound repetition to reinforce emotive impact. Assonance and internal rhyme were also more prevalent in L2 switches ($M\_L2\_alliteration = 1.5$ instances per segment vs. $M\_L1 = 1.2$, $p < .05$).

Reader-Response Survey Results

Emotional Intensity Ratings

Repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of language condition on intensity ratings: $F(2, 398) = 68.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .255$. Post hoc comparisons showed code-switched L1 passages rated highest ($M = 5.9$, $SD = 0.8$), followed by code-switched L2 ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 0.9$), with monolingual English lowest ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.1$).

Participant Group Interaction

A significant interaction emerged between language condition and participant group: $F(2, 398) = 9.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .045$. Heritage bilinguals exhibited a larger differential between code-switched L1 and monolingual segments ($d = 1.2$), whereas non-heritage bilinguals showed a moderate effect ($d = .6$).

Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis identified three overarching themes:

1. **Authenticity through Ancestral Tongue**: Participants described a deep sense of "homecoming" when poets switched to their heritage language, perceiving these moments as more genuine and emotionally charged.
2. **Cognitive Dissonance and Emotional Depth**: Some readers reported initial disorientation at code-switch points, which paradoxically intensified focus and emotional engagement.
3. **Performative Soundscapes**: Readers highlighted the auditory qualities of phonological devices in code-switched segments, noting that alliteration and rhyme enhanced the sensory experience of reading.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive psycholinguistic account of emotive expression in multilingual poetry, demonstrating that strategic language alternation serves as a powerful device for enhancing emotional resonance. Corpus analysis revealed that poets deliberately cluster code-switches at metaphorical peaks, leveraging the affective grounding of L1 and the novel auditory textures of L2 to amplify emotive impact. The NRC Emotion Lexicon data confirmed that high-arousal emotion words concentrate more heavily in L1 passages, aligning with the emotional grounding hypothesis. Metaphor frequency and phonological device usage further underscores the multi-modal strategies poets employ: metaphors enrich conceptual depth through cross-linguistic imagery, while phonological devices reinforce affect via auditory cohesion.

Reader-response findings corroborate the corpus insights. Code-switched passages—whether in L1 or L2—elicited significantly higher emotional intensity ratings than monolingual segments. Heritage bilingual readers, in particular, experienced pronounced emotional authenticity in L1 switches, describing these moments as evocative of personal and collective memory. Non-heritage bilingual participants, while less intensely moved, nonetheless reported elevated engagement with code-switched content compared

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to monolingual text. Qualitative themes of "Authenticity through Ancestral Tongue," "Cognitive Dissonance and Emotional Depth," and "Performative Soundscapes" illustrate how readers cognitively and affectively negotiate these linguistic shifts.

These findings have several theoretical implications. First, they expand psycholinguistic models of bilingual emotion processing by demonstrating that creative code-switching can modulate affective intensity independently of lexical semantics. Emotional authenticity is not merely a function of L1 vocabulary but emerges from dynamic interlanguage orchestration. Second, the study integrates conceptual metaphor theory and phonological analysis within a bilingual framework, showing how cross-linguistic metaphors and sound patterns coalesce to form a multi-layered emotive experience. Third, reader-response data highlight the role of cultural congruence: emotional resonance is contingent on shared linguistic codes, suggesting that the impact of multilingual poetry is mediated by the reader's own language background.

For poets and literary practitioners, the implications are clear: multilingualism opens up a rich creative horizon for emotional expression. By judiciously alternating languages at key affective junctures, writers can exploit the cognitive and sensory affordances unique to each language. Metaphoric mapping and phonological design further allow for the crafting of emotionally charged soundscapes that resonate on both intellectual and visceral levels.

Future research should pursue neurocognitive investigations—using fMRI or EEG—to map the neural correlates of emotional processing in multilingual reading. Additionally, exploring performance-based contexts, such as spoken-word and slam poetry, could reveal how oral delivery interacts with code-switching to shape audience emotions in real time. Longitudinal studies examining how repeated exposure to multilingual poetic forms influences bilingual readers' affective sensitivity and aesthetic appreciation would also deepen our understanding of the enduring impact of multilingual literature.

In sum, emotive expression in multilingual poetry emerges from a sophisticated interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural factors. By weaving together the affective potency of L1, the phonological richness of L2, and the conceptual breadth of metaphor, multilingual poets craft emotional landscapes that challenge and enrich readers' experiences. This study underscores the transformative power of multilingual creativity and provides a psycholinguistic roadmap for future explorations of emotion in language and literature.

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