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Research Article

Linguistic Divergence as a Tool for Identity Construction: A Multiple Case Study of Individuals from Five Generational Cohorts

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Abstract

Introduction: Speakers emphasize linguistic differences to mark who they are and where they belong. In the multilingual and fast-digitalizing Philippines, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha draw on different linguistic resources, and these differences produce misunderstanding and social judgment across age groups. Existing studies focus on single cohorts or on specific linguistic features, leaving little evidence on how individuals from all five cohorts use divergence to construct identity.

Objective: The study explored the experiences, the challenges, and the similarities and differences of individuals from five generational cohorts in using linguistic divergence as a tool for identity construction.

Methods: A qualitative holistic multiple-case design was used in Regions XI and XII, Mindanao, Philippines. Five case participants, one per cohort, were selected through purposive maximum variation sampling. Data came from face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews with the five participants and with ten collateral informants (two per case) for triangulation. Within-case and cross-case analyses followed the data analysis spiral. The University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee approved the study (Protocol No. GS-FB-05-26-0309).

Results: Six themes described the experiences: cultural default, institutional authority, stylized persona, linguistic positioning, linguistic authenticity, and identity stability. Six themes described the challenges: semantic friction, social stigmatization, tone misattribution, relational friction, conformity pressure, and interactional tension. Linguistic positioning, linguistic authenticity, identity stability, and interactional tension appeared in all five cases. The sources of divergence differed. The Baby Boomer and Generation X participants maintained Hiligaynon as a marker of heritage, the Millennial used English to signal professional authority, and the Generation Z and Generation Alpha participants used conyo Taglish and digital slang to build personas and generational affiliation.

Conclusions: Linguistic divergence works as a socially meaningful practice through which individuals construct, negotiate, and sustain identities across generations. Generation is one of several identities speakers index through divergence, alongside region, profession, class, and peer membership. Schools, families, and communities should treat divergent speech as identity work, review English-only practices, and address language-based bullying.

Keywords: Communication Accommodation Theory, generational cohorts, identity construction, intergenerational communication, linguistic divergence, multiple case study, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Linguistic divergence refers to the process through which speakers emphasize differences in their verbal and nonverbal behavior to keep their distinctiveness from others (Giles & Ogay, 2007, as cited in Almayouf, 2024). Through such differences, individuals express group affiliation and negotiate social identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Divergence lets speakers display cultural background, claim belonging, and set themselves apart. The same differences also produce misunderstanding and interpersonal tension when linguistic, generational, and sociocultural backgrounds differ (Downs, 2019; Kohansedgh et al., 2024).

Research links divergence to social meaning rather than to geographic isolation alone. Groups preserve salient grammatical features as signals of social and regional identity (Mansfield et al., 2023), and speakers in contact settings maintain features tied to strong social networks (Almayouf, 2024). Ploog (2017) describes divergence as identity work which sharpens social boundaries and requires deliberate effort from speakers. Linguistic differences also position people as insiders or outsiders. In dialect-dominant regions, language places individuals in inner or outer circles (Zhu & Weng, 2026), and vernacular features expose speakers to exclusion and discrimination (Bock et al., 2023; Wijaya & Rizal, 2023).

Generational cohorts offer one lens for these processes. Cohorts share formative historical, social, and technological experiences which shape communication (Dimock, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Baby Boomers retain established linguistic practices and traditional word meanings (Fadilah et al., 2025; Ranes et al., 2025). Generation X combines established conventions with emerging digital expressions (Perdhani & Roni, 2019; Ranes et al., 2025). Millennials balance identity expression with professionalism (Qureshi et al., 2026). Generation Z uses internet slang, abbreviations, and code-switching to express individuality and peer affiliation (Mohammed et al., 2025; Suizo, 2024; Vacalares et al., 2023). Generation Alpha grows up in environments of touchscreens, algorithms, and short-form video (Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021), and its slang serves humor, creativity, identity differentiation, and group recognition (Mazaya et al., 2025). Age still intersects with gender, class, ethnicity, and communities of practice, so cohorts are analytic categories rather than homogeneous groups (Eckert, 2018).

These differences carry social costs. Unfamiliar slang and emojis lead to miscommunication and a sense of distance between generations (Bukhari et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2026). Baby Boomers read informal messages as disrespectful, while Generation Z reads highly formal messages as rigid (Kohansedgh et al., 2024). Perceived stereotypes about other generations also raise uncertainty and restrict communication (Downs, 2019). Divergence strengthens in-group solidarity, yet out-group members read the same behavior as distancing (Dragojevic & Zhang, 2018).

The Philippine setting adds layers of multilingualism and language ideology. Younger Filipinos show greater familiarity with internet slang than older generations (Vacalares et al., 2023). Studies in Mindanao document youth expressions such as lodi, petmalu, and werpa as resources for in-group affiliation (Catig & Parcon, 2025), TikTok slang such as Dasurv and Maritess as markers of Generation Z belonging (Sawe, 2025), and Generation Alpha slang as a source of communication gaps with older speakers (Corias et al., 2024). Cebuano remains the everyday language across generations in Cebu and Davao City, while younger speakers use more Filipino and English (Dreisbach & Demeterio, 2020, 2021). English and conyo, a register mixing English with a Philippine language, carry class-based and colonial associations. Listeners read English-dominant speakers as sosyal or socially elevated (Lactaoen, 2025), evaluate conyo as fake or excessive (Reyes, 2026), and attach both prestige and American influence to English (Ponce, 2025). Closely related languages also produce false friends. The word karon means "now" in Cebuano but "later" in Hiligaynon (Labio et al., 2026).

Language also functions as capital and as a resource for identity. Linguistic varieties carry unequal value, with prestige forms tied to education and authority and other forms stigmatized (Sarah, 2018). Individuals invest in language practices to reach desired identities and communities (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Filipino English teachers associate classroom English with authority and institutional prestige (Cagadas & Reynoso-Cagadas, 2026), and teachers in other Asian settings enact professional identity through English (Alam et al., 2024). Linguistic variants acquire social meanings through repeated use, which lets speakers construct personae and stances (Eckert, 2019; Hall-Lew et al., 2021). Adding languages expands a repertoire without erasing an established sense of self (McCrocklin, 2024; Siebenhütter, 2023). Speakers also face pressure to adapt. Speakers in less dominant positions adjust toward perceived standard forms, with costs to authenticity (Lin et al., 2026), teenagers adjust their online style when writing to older interlocutors (Hilte et al., 2021), and excessive conformity to others' norms produces alienation from one's own identity (Mseer, 2025).

1.1. Theoretical Lens

Three complementary perspectives anchored the study. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) explains how individuals adjust or maintain communication behavior through convergence, divergence, and maintenance, depending on social relationships and identity (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991). The study focused on divergence and treated maintenance as divergence in the broader sense, since speakers who preserve distinctive practices sustain their difference from interlocutors. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership through social categorization and in-group and out-group distinction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT guided the reading of how participants used linguistic markers to express affiliation and distinguish themselves from other groups. The Sociocultural Linguistic Framework of Identity Construction views identity as emergent, relational, and indexical, produced through interaction rather than possessed in advance (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The framework guided the analysis of how participants and their listeners negotiated identity through divergent speech.

1.2. Research Gap and Purpose

Most studies examine one or two cohorts, workplace communication, or specific features such as slang and emojis. Few studies examine all five living cohorts together, and fewer still examine divergence as identity work in a Mindanao multilingual setting where Hiligaynon, Cebuano, Filipino, English, and other languages meet. This multiple case study addressed the gap. The study explored the experiences of five individuals, one each from the Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennial, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha cohorts, in using linguistic divergence to construct identity. Three research questions guided the inquiry:

RQ1. What are the participants' experiences regarding the use of linguistic divergence in constructing their identities?
RQ2. What challenges do participants encounter in using linguistic divergence for identity construction?
RQ3. What similarities and differences emerge among the cases regarding linguistic divergence and identity construction?

The study responds to Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through its focus on sociolinguistic awareness, inclusion, and respectful intergenerational communication.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study used a qualitative collective case study approach (Stake, 2006) structured as a holistic multiple-case design (Yin, 2018). Each participant served as a single holistic unit of analysis representing one generational cohort. The cases were chosen for varied, information-rich accounts of divergence and identity, not for statistical representation of their cohorts.

Each case was first examined through within-case analysis, and the five cases were then compared through cross-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted in selected locations in Region XI (Davao Region) and Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), Mindanao, Philippines, where the participants resided and were interviewed.

2.2. Respondents and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling with a maximum variation approach identified cases which differed across relevant dimensions so common patterns would emerge despite the differences (Patton, 2015). Five cases fall within recommended ranges for multiple-case research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006). Cohorts followed Dimock (2019): Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2012). Generation Alpha (2013 onward) was classified based on the study's adopted boundary, with its digital characteristics described by Emelu (2025).

Inclusion criteria were membership in one of the five cohorts, active everyday communication in personal, professional, educational, community, or digital contexts, participation in some form of community life, experience of rural or urban settings, and the willingness and ability to describe experiences of language use and identity.

The researcher identified potential participants through personal, professional, community, and institutional networks, held an initial screening conversation to confirm eligibility, and sent eligible individuals a formal written invitation. A parent assisted with access to the Generation Alpha participant. The cases were a 71-year-old male church planter (Case A, Baby Boomer), a 50-year-old female election assistant (Case B, Generation X), a 44-year-old female Master Teacher with a doctorate in a language field (Case C, Millennial), a 29-year-old male social media manager, event host, and writer (Case D, Generation Z), and a 13-year-old female Grade 7 student (Case E, Generation Alpha). Table 1 presents the profiles.

For triangulation, two collateral informants per case (ten in total) were interviewed. Informants had a close familial, personal, or professional relationship with the participant, regular direct interaction with the participant for at least five years, observation of the participant's language use in more than one social context, and willingness to share observations. Participants helped identify potential informants, and the researcher screened them for eligibility. Informants included family members, friends, a school colleague, and a classmate, aged 12 to 67 years (Table 2).

2.3. Research Instruments

The researcher used two semi-structured in-depth interview guides, one for case participants and a parallel guide for collateral informants, aligned with the three research questions. Experts reviewed the guides for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began after endorsement by the Dean of the Graduate School and ethical clearance. Individual face-to-face interviews lasted about 30 to 60 minutes in locations chosen by participants for privacy and comfort. The researcher requested permission for audio recording at the start of each interview and kept detailed field notes when a participant declined recording. Interviews in Hiligaynon and Filipino were translated into English with reference to the original recordings. A bilingual Hiligaynon/Filipino–English validator reviewed the translations, and selected excerpts were back-translated to check fidelity. Discrepancies were resolved against the original-language transcripts. Excerpts in this article appear in their validated English translations, with key lexical items kept in the original language.

Analysis followed the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher transcribed recordings verbatim, organized transcripts and field notes by case, read and memoed the data, and coded meaningful statements on experiences, challenges, and the meanings of linguistic choices. Informant accounts were coded with the same framework and compared with each participant's account to note convergence, complementary perspectives, and discrepancies. Within-case analysis produced descriptive accounts and codes for each case.

Themes were then developed at the cross-case stage through clustering of related codes across the five cases (Stake, 2006). Themes were either shared (present in all five cases) or case-specific (present in one or a few cases). Excerpt codes identify the source: P marks a participant, I a collateral informant, A and B the first and second informants, RQ the research question, and L the transcript line. For example, P05_RQ1_L24 refers to Participant 5's response to Research Question 1 on Line 24.

2.5. Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Credibility came from triangulation of participant and informant accounts, transcript review, member checking of themes and interpretations, and peer debriefing (Carter et al., 2014). Thick description of each case supports transferability, and an audit trail of approvals, recruitment, coding decisions, theme revisions, and analytic matrices supports dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing with advisers and qualitative researchers supported confirmability. The researcher is a member of Generation Z who speaks Ilocano, Filipino, and English and has personal or professional connections with some participants. The reflexive journal tracked assumptions arising from this position.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC) approved the study under Protocol No. GS-FB-05-26-0309. The study followed the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Adult participants and informants gave written informed consent. For the Generation Alpha participant and the minor informant, parents or guardians gave written consent and the minors gave assent after an age-appropriate explanation. A minor's refusal or withdrawal of assent was respected regardless of parental consent. Participants were free to skip questions, pause, or withdraw without penalty. Pseudonyms replaced names, identifying details were removed, and encrypted, password-protected files held the data in line with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, with retention for three years. When the Generation Alpha participant disclosed repeated experiences of bullying, the researcher informed her parent to ensure awareness and support, with care for her well-being, dignity, and privacy.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Profile of the Case Participants and Collateral Informants

Table 1 summarizes the five case participants. Each case reflects a distinct communicative environment. Case A has served in church ministry since 1981 across stations with varied language preferences. Case B has worked for 20 years in an election office where colleagues speak Tagalog and Bisaya. Case C teaches English and keeps English with students, colleagues, family, and friends. Case D grew up in a Muslim household where Maguindanaon was not transmitted, relied on Tagalog and English, and called himself a *hilaw na Maguindanaon* ("unripe Maguindanaon"). Case E draws expressions from TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and X into school and family talk.

Table 1. Profile of the case participants

Profile	Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D	Case E
Cohort	Baby Boomer	Generation X	Millennial	Generation Z	Generation Alpha
Age / sex	71 / Male	50 / Female	44 / Female	29 / Male	13 / Female
Birth year	1955	1976	1982	1997	2013
Education	Master's degree	College graduate	Doctoral graduate	Fifth-year Veterinary student	Grade 7 student
Work or learning orientation	Church planter	Election Assistant II	Master Teacher (English)	Social media manager, event host, writer	Student
Main divergent resource	Hiligaynon	Hiligaynon	English	Conyo Taglish	Digital slang
Code	P01	P02	P03	P04	P05

Table 2. Profile of the collateral informants

Case	Code	Relationship	Age (birth year)	Work or learning orientation
A	I01A	Wife	67 (1959)	Retired government employee
A	I01B	Daughter	32 (1994)	Government employee
B	I02A	Daughter-in-law	32 (1994)	Government employee
B	I02B	Close friend	29 (1997)	Private employee
C	I03A	Colleague	40 (1986)	Government employee
C	I03B	Best friend	43 (1982)	Government employee
D	I04A	College friend	27 (1999)	Government employee
D	I04B	Best friend	28 (1998)	Self-employed
E	I05A	Mother	45 (1980)	Private employee
E	I05B	Classmate	12 (2014)	Student

3.2. Experiences in Using Linguistic Divergence to Construct Identity

Six themes emerged for the first research question (Table 3). Three themes were case-specific (cultural default, institutional authority, and stylized persona), and three were shared by all cases (linguistic positioning, linguistic authenticity, and identity stability).

Table 3. Experiences of the participants in using linguistic divergence to construct identity

Theme	Thematic statement	Cases
Cultural default	Speaking the home or regional language (Hiligaynon/Ilonggo) is automatic, comfortable, and a direct reflection of upbringing and culture, and is used even when others speak a different language.	A, B
Institutional authority	Consistent use of English is tied to a professional role and functions to establish authority and model correct usage for students.	C
Stylized persona	Taglish (conyo style) and generation-specific slang are deliberately kept as markers of a distinct persona, social-class association, or generational affiliation.	D, E
Linguistic positioning	Linguistic choices position participants within cultural, professional, generational, and social groups and communicate affiliation and distinction.	A, B, C, D, E
Linguistic authenticity	Participants affirm their manner of speaking as a genuine reflection of who they are, regardless of how others react.	A, B, C, D, E
Identity stability	Participants expect some vocabulary growth over time but expect their present linguistic core to stay intact rather than be replaced.	A, B, C, D, E

3.2.1. Cultural Default

For Cases A and B, identity rested on automatic reliance on Hiligaynon. Both kept Hiligaynon when interlocutors used Tagalog or Bisaya. Case A explained:

Even when the person I am talking to speaks Tagalog, I still respond in Hiligaynon because this is the language I am comfortable with. For me, it also represents where I came from. (P01_RQ1_L20)

Case B described the same pattern at work: "My supervisor speaks Tagalog, and there are others who use Bisaya. As for me, I still respond in Ilonggo. That is just how I am" (P02_RQ1_L22). Informants confirmed the pattern. Case A's daughter recalled relatives in Zamboanga who spoke Bisaya and Chavacano: "Even when they speak Bisaya or Chavacano, my father will still speak to them using his own language. They are the ones who adjust to him" (I01B_RQ1_L22). The finding fits accounts of heritage language as protection of cultural identity (Roostini & Manara, 2021) and of regional language as the comfortable default in family talk (Mokhatebi Ardakani & Tafazoli, 2026). In CAT terms, cultural default is divergence through maintenance. Speakers emphasize difference rather than accommodate the interlocutor (Popan, 2020), and they do so when ethnic and cultural identities are salient and valued (Giles & Ogay, 2007, as cited in Almayouf, 2024).

3.2.2. Institutional Authority

For Case C, divergence was tied to her professional and credentialed position rather than to heritage or peers. She kept English with students and colleagues inside and outside school:

> *My identity is linked to my language because I believe that through that, I show to people, especially my students, that I am in an authority, and it also shows my role as an English teacher. Actually, I can give them translations, but then I choose not to, because I believe that they really need to be exposed to it. (P03_RQ1_L4)*

Her best friend confirmed the long history of the practice: "since college, when we were roommates, she spoke to us in English even in everyday conversations" (I03B_RQ1_L4). The finding aligns with identity as situated at the intersection of ideology, capital, and social structure (Darvin & Norton, 2015). English worked as symbolic capital for Case C, consistent with studies linking teachers' English to professional role, authority, and institutional prestige (Alam et al., 2024; Cagadas & Reynoso-Cagadas, 2026). The present case extends these studies, since the professional register followed Case C beyond the classroom into seminars, malls, cafés, and home.

3.2.3. Stylized Persona

Cases D and E built identity through fluid, mixed registers. Case D treated conyo Taglish as a curated, class-indexed persona: "I maintain it because it has already become part of who I am and the persona that I have developed over time" (P04_RQ1_L20). An informant observed the contrast with peers: "Most people his age adjust their language... if the person they are talking to speaks Bisaya, they use Bisaya... he would only use Taglish" (I04B_RQ1_L16). Case E used fast-changing slang and online references for peer belonging:

> The words that I commonly use are ch, naur, is, anue ka ba, and na para bang. These are what I use to express myself so I will not feel out of place. It is not like I am forcing it, but it is the way I speak and how people know me. (P05_RQ1_L8)

Her classmate named the same markers, including the suffix *-ch* in *Helloch* and *Haytch* and the words *slay*, *rizz*, and *aura* (I05B_RQ1_L4, I05B_RQ1_L6). The finding parallels mixed English and Filipino as a source of Generation Z belonging (Suizo, 2024), conyo as a vehicle for creativity, humor, and group affiliation (Escarda et al., 2024), and slang functions such as identity differentiation and group recognition (Mazaya et al., 2025).

3.2.4. Linguistic Positioning

All five participants used linguistic choices to locate themselves within groups and to distinguish themselves from others. The reference group changed by case: regional communities for Cases A and B, professional circles for Case C, social and peer groups for Case D, and online and peer communities for Case E. Case D used language to communicate his individuality and the social identity he wished to maintain:

> I guess unique *siya* in a way, not to discriminate, *hahah*, *pero yung ganito kasi*, when I was young, I was really listening to the kids *na nasa* higher, *ano*. And they usually have a distinct style of speaking. (P04_RQ1_L16)

> He further stated: My father was rich *nung bata pa kami, hahaha.* So I always wanted to keep that, *ano ba,* status. (P04_RQ1_L16)

This theme supports Park et al.'s (2026) view that language enables individuals to establish belonging and negotiate their positions within communities. It also reflects Giles and Ogay's (2007, as cited in Almayouf, 2024) discussion of linguistic divergence as a means of expressing group affiliation, social distinctiveness, and group boundaries. Similarly, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory

explains how group membership contributes to self-concept, while Bucholtz and Hall (2005) emphasize the continuous construction and negotiation of identity through language and social interaction.

3.2.5. Linguistic Authenticity

All participants regarded their habitual way of speaking as a genuine expression of the self, though each tied authenticity to a different resource. Case D described language as accumulated experience: "it really represents my authentic self because although it is a compilation of my life experiences and my biases, it makes me who I am" (P04_RQ1_L32). A close friend of Case B observed: "she speaks naturally without forcing herself to sound like someone else. Even when she understands the language or slang that I use, she still responds in Ilonggo" (I02B_RQ1_L32). The theme agrees with work on language as part of self-concept (Siebenhütter, 2023) and on variation as a resource for social positioning (Hall-Lew et al., 2021). The cases add a speaker-centered view, since participants themselves named and valued their speech as a representation of who they are. Authenticity did not mean uniformity or resistance to adaptation. Participants kept a recognizable self while expressing the self differently across situations.

3.2.6. Identity Stability

Participants expected new vocabulary over time but expected their linguistic core to remain. Case A stated:

Maybe I can still learn the new words for me to understand them because it is needed when I talk to the younger ones. But, I will not use all of them. I will still continue to use the Hiligaynon words like yes, no, thank you, and please. These are more natural for me. (P01_RQ1_L34)

Participants described change as addition rather than replacement, consistent with findings in which proficiency in several languages does not erase an existing identity (Siebenhütter, 2023) and newly learned forms coexist with established ones (McCrocklin, 2024).

3.3. Challenges in Using Linguistic Divergence to Construct Identity

Six themes emerged for the second research question (Table 4). Five were case-specific, and interactional tension was shared by all cases.

Table 4. Challenges of the participants in using linguistic divergence to construct identity

Theme	Thematic statement	Cases
Semantic friction	Words carry different meanings across generational or regional groups (bulbol, karon, slay), producing confusion which requires clarification.	A, E
Social stigmatization	A distinct or elevated language style is read as arrogance or superiority, including labels such as "racist" and accusations of "smart-shaming."	C, D
Tone misattribution	A straightforward, complete-sentence style is misread by unfamiliar or younger listeners as anger or disrespect.	A, B
Relational friction	Maintaining a distinct style creates relational strain and reduces confidence in dating, friendship, or belonging.	D, E
Conformity pressure	Participants are asked or implicitly expected to simplify or translate their speech for others' comfort.	C, D, E
Interactional tension	Differences in linguistic practice affect the willingness, comfort, and ability of interlocutors to sustain communication.	A, B, C, D, E

3.3.1. Semantic Friction

Cases A and E met confusion when words carried different meanings across communities or generations. For Case A, *bulbol* means body hair, while other listeners understood pubic hair, and *karon* means "later" in his usage but something else for Bisaya speakers (P01_RQ2_L38). His wife confirmed the *bulbol* episode (I01A_RQ2_L36). A listener read Case E's *slay* in its dictionary sense of killing: "she thought I was talking about killing someone. That is why she became confused and called me after school" (P05_RQ2_L38). Her mother recalled a listener who asked "What is na-ur?" after Case E answered *naur*, meaning no (I05A_RQ2_L38). The Hiligaynon and Cebuano mismatch matches

documented semantic variation between the two languages (Labio et al., 2026), and the slang episodes match evidence of generational gaps in slang and emoji interpretation (Bukhari et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2026; Vacalares et al., 2023).

3.3.2. Social Stigmatization

For Cases C and D, the challenge was social backlash rather than comprehension. Listeners read English-heavy speech as arrogance. Case C said, "They may think that because I speak English, I am trying to show that I am better than them or that I have a higher educational attainment" (P03_RQ2_L38). Case D reported, "I often get labeled as racist or elitist sometimes. People misunderstand me whenever I try to say things" (P04_RQ2_L36). One of his informants described his speech as carrying "superiority" (I04B_RQ1_L4). The finding mirrors the reading of English-dominant Filipinos as *sosyal* (Lactaoen, 2025), the class and colonial associations of conyo and English in the Philippines (Ponce, 2025; Reyes, 2026), and the link between linguistic forms and education, status, and privilege (Lavalle & Protacio, 2025). Prestige varieties served these speakers as identity resources and exposed them to negative judgment at the same time.

3.3.3. Tone Misattribution

Cases A and B faced problems of delivery rather than word choice. Listeners read their direct, complete-sentence style as anger, impatience, or excessive seriousness. Case A said, "Some people think that I am too formal or that I speak like an old person... Others also say that I seem too serious because of my speaking style" (P01_RQ2_L40). Case B explained, "There are really times when I speak straightforwardly, and they think I am angry. But I am not. That is just my natural communication style" (P02_RQ2_L38). The theme fits evidence linking generational communication gaps to perception and self-perception (Downs, 2019) and to contrasting expectations of formality (Kohansedgh et al., 2024). Clear and appropriate speech for one speaker reads as harsh for a listener with other expectations.

3.3.4. Relational Friction

Cases D and E felt the interpersonal costs of divergence most. Case D linked his style to difficulty "maintaining relationships with people, especially having decent conversations with local people, such as riders, drivers, and others" (P04_RQ2_L40). Case E linked her expressive slang to exclusion:

> In my environment, they do not fully understand it. They find me weird, like I am an outcast. I became not so confident in expressing myself because I was afraid of being judged after experiencing bullying many times. (P05_RQ2_L36)

The finding aligns with the double effect of divergence, which strengthens in-group identification while out-group members read the behavior as distancing (Dragojevic & Zhang, 2018), and with language as a determinant of position within social circles (Zhu & Weng, 2026). Case E's account shows the cost turning into bullying, a concern for schools addressed in Section 3.6.

3.3.5. Conformity Pressure

Cases C, D, and E faced explicit or implicit expectations to simplify or translate their speech for the audience's ease. Case C noted, "some people want you to tone down your language and try to meet them at their level" (P03_RQ2_L44), and refused to switch. Case D said, "I feel like I have to dumb down my language sometimes because some people speak Bisaya or Ilonggo" (P04_RQ2_L46). Case E adjusted without giving up her style: "I slow down and explain the words. I do not completely change my style.

I adjust the speed and choose simpler expressions when needed" (P05_RQ2_L42). The finding echoes the risk of alienation under excessive pressure to conform (Mseer, 2025). The challenge arose when accommodation turned into an expectation to suppress identity-linked speech.

3.3.6. Interactional Tension

All five participants met tension when their practices differed from the preferences, expectations, or styles of interlocutors, and keeping everyday conversation smooth demanded extra effort. The trigger differed by case: unfamiliar regional words for Case A, perceived bluntness for Case B, limited familiarity with English among interlocutors for Case C, English-heavy conyo Taglish for Case D, and unfamiliar digital slang for Case E. Case D summarized the trade-off: "It could be easier if I adjusted to their way of speaking, but I really do not adjust" (P04_RQ2_L54).

His best friend recalled a *sikad* driver who misread his Taglish directions while expecting Bisaya (I04B_RQ2_L38). CAT explains the pattern, since the success of accommodation strategies depends on how listeners evaluate them (Giles et al., 1991).

3.4. Similarities and Differences Across the Five Cases

Figure 1 maps each theme across the cases, and Table 5 summarizes the main contrasts. The four shared themes show a common process: every participant positioned the self through language, regarded the chosen speech as authentic, expected a stable core, and met interactional tension. The differences lay in the source of each divergent resource, the group each resource indexed, and the costs each resource carried.

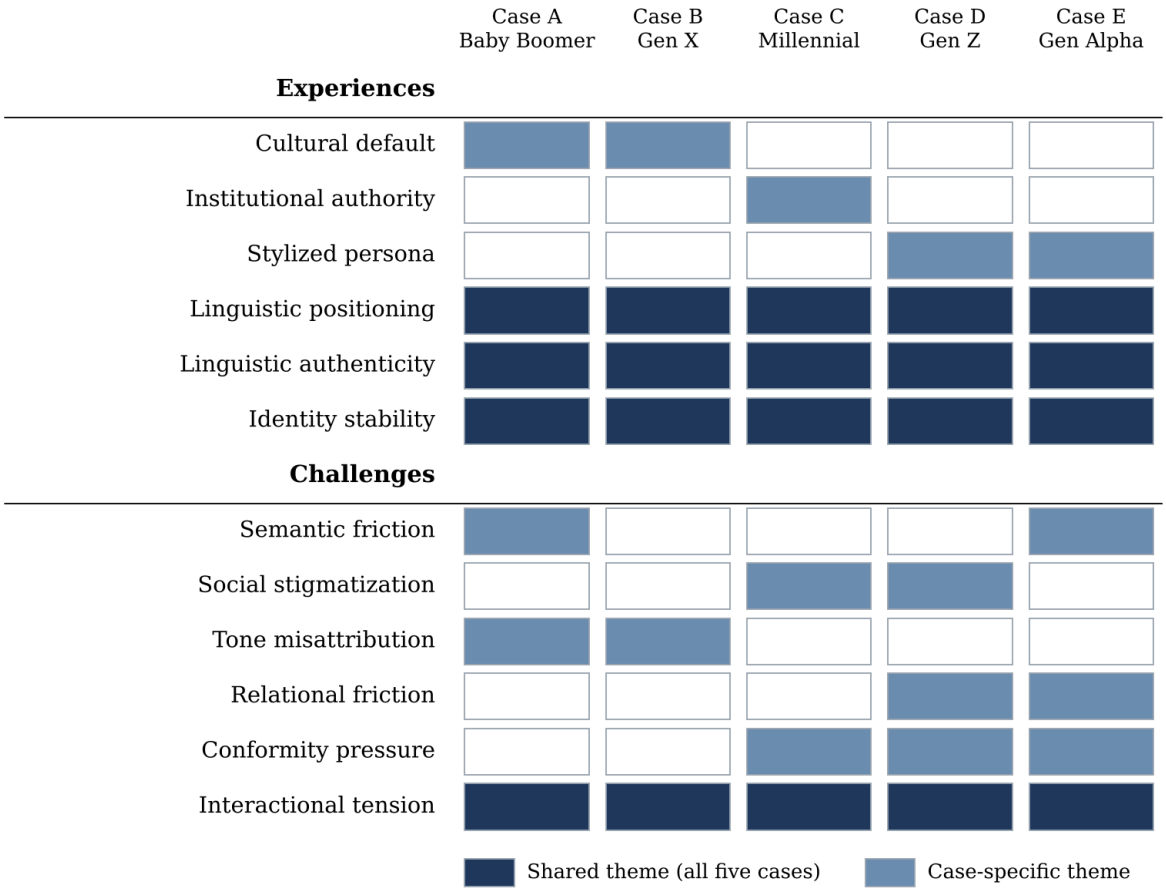


Figure 1. Distribution of experience and challenge themes across the five cases. Filled cells mark themes salient in a case, based on the cross-case analysis.

Table 5. Key similarities and differences across the five generational cases

Theme	Similar cases	Main difference across cases
Cultural Default	A, B	Cases A and B developed their linguistic defaults primarily through home and regional influences. Cases C, D, and E developed equally automatic defaults through different environments: school language policy, early reading, and teaching for C; conyo Taglish at home for D; and digital slang from TikTok and Facebook for E.
Stylized Persona	D, E	Cases D and E deliberately used distinctive linguistic styles to express individuality, social positioning, and peer belonging. Cases A and B preferred complete, respectful sentences, while Case C maintained formal English, with their distinctiveness arising primarily from tradition, social role, and education rather than deliberate stylistic performance.
Institutional Authority	C	Case C's English proficiency functioned as a marker of professional competence and institutional credibility. Unlike the other cases, whose linguistic practices were primarily associated with familial, regional, peer, or digital environments, Case C's linguistic authority was closely tied to educational and professional expectations.
Linguistic Positioning	A, B, C, D, E	All five participants positioned themselves through their linguistic choices, although the basis differed. Cases A and B drew on traditional and regional identities; Case C positioned herself through formal English and educational authority; Case D through conyo Taglish associated with class and individuality; and Case E through expressive digital language associated with youth and peer belonging.
Linguistic Authenticity	A, B, C, D, E	All participants valued authenticity in their linguistic practices, but expressed it differently. Cases A and B associated authenticity with preserving established speech patterns, while Case C associated it with professional and educational competence. Cases D and E expressed authenticity through personally meaningful contemporary linguistic styles, reflecting individuality and social belonging, respectively.
Identity Stability	A, B, C, D, E	Cases A and B demonstrated protective stability by understanding unfamiliar expressions without necessarily adopting them. Cases C, D, and E demonstrated additive stability through greater openness to incorporating new vocabulary while maintaining their established linguistic identities.
Semantic Friction	A, E	Meaning breaks down across generational and regional lines. Case A's 'bulbol' and "karon" are read differently by other speakers; Case E's "slay" was taken literally. Case B, Case C, and Case D rarely encounter raw definition errors; instead, they experience stylistic biases and differences in how their language use is perceived.
Social Stigmatization	C, D	Cases C and D encountered judgments associated with their linguistic styles, although the forms differed. Cases A and B were teased for sounding formal, old, or blunt but did not consider these comments damaging. Case E experienced more consequential stigmatization, including being labeled weird and bullied for expressive, youthful speech.
Tone Misattribution	A, B,	Two cases experienced or encountered the possibility of their linguistic styles being interpreted differently from their intended meanings. Case B is most affected: bluntness reads as anger, and some people hesitate to talk to Case B. Case A's experience is milder ("too formal" & "too serious"). Case C, Case D and Case E are also misread, but about personality rather than anger.
Relational Friction	D, E	Cases D and E experienced relational difficulties associated with linguistic differences, including hesitation, avoidance, or challenges in establishing social connections. Cases B and C also encountered hesitation or avoidance but maintained their confidence. Case A reported no significant relational cost.

Conformity Pressure	C, D, E	Cases C, D, and E experienced expectations to adjust their linguistic practices depending on their interactional environments. Case C encountered pressure in settings where English was less widely shared, while Cases D and E experienced expectations to accommodate different linguistic preferences. Cases A and B reported no pressure to simplify their speech and declined the expectation to learn younger generations' expressions.
Interactional Tension	A, B, C, D, E	All five cases encountered interactional tension, but its triggers differed. Cases A and B experienced difficulties involving unfamiliar expressions and differences in communicative expectations. Case C encountered challenges when formal English was not widely shared. Case D experienced differences in interpreting conyo Taglish, while Case E encountered misunderstandings involving digital slang and expressive language.

The source of the linguistic default separated the older participants from the younger ones. For Cases A and B, the default formed in the home and region. For Cases C, D, and E, the default formed in school, peer, home, and digital environments. The contrast agrees with older Filipino generations' retention of traditional meanings (Ranes et al., 2025), with the adoption of international and hybrid practices among younger Asian speakers (Li & Lee, 2026, as cited in Wang, 2025), and with the place of code-mixing and platform-based slang in younger repertoires (Hussain et al., 2025; Tasyarasita et al., 2023).

The type of identity indexed also differed. Case C's institutional authority reflects a profession where English proficiency is visible and valued (Qureshi et al., 2026; Sarah, 2018). The stylized personae of Cases D and E draw on the resources digitally networked spaces offer younger speakers (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Sawe, 2025) and on the indexical meanings speakers attach to forms (Eckert, 2019). Even these two personae differed, with class and individuality for Case D and peer belonging and playfulness for Case E. Authenticity was a shared value expressed through generation-specific forms, consistent with the view of speakers as constructors of social categories (Eckert, 2000) and of linguistic choices as dynamic, context-dependent identity resources (Toan, 2024). Stability took a protective form among the older participants, which matches the emotional attachment and intergenerational transmission tied to heritage-language maintenance (Libago & Adriano, 2024; Song & Wu, 2024), and an additive form among the younger ones.

The challenges followed a similar logic. Semantic friction appeared at the two ends of the generational range. For Cases B, C, and D, friction concerned the social meaning of a style rather than the meaning of words, in line with indexical meaning beyond literal sense (Eckert, 2019). Stigma took the form attached to each variety: prestige for English-heavy speech, age for traditional speech, and unconventionality for youthful speech (Sarah, 2018). Misreadings concerned tone for the older participants and personality for the younger ones, which reflects the relational view of identity in which listeners assign identities through the meanings they attach to styles (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Relational friction concentrated among the two youngest cases. Linguistic differences position speakers as insiders or outsiders (Bock et al., 2023), and life stage offers one explanation for the concentration. The younger participants were still forming peer relationships, while the older participants had settled roles and networks which buffered negative reactions. Conformity pressure fell on speakers in less dominant interactional positions, consistent with evidence on accent accommodation and on younger writers adjusting to older interlocutors (Hilte et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2026). Case C, though older than Cases D and E, met the same pressure in settings where her English was the less widely shared variety. Interactional tension was common to all five cases, yet the trigger was specific to each participant's practice, which matches the role of perception, uncertainty, and unfamiliar digital forms in generational communication gaps (Bukhari et al., 2025; Downs, 2019; Kohansedgh et al., 2024).

3.5. Theoretical Implications

The findings support and extend the three anchoring perspectives. For CAT (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991), all five participants maintained or emphasized distinctive practices and described the choices as intentional. Divergence took two forms. The Baby Boomer and Generation X participants diverged

mainly through maintenance of Hiligaynon in Tagalog- and Bisaya-dominant settings, while the Millennial, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha participants actively emphasized English, conyo Taglish, or digital expressions. Participants also adjusted selectively, explaining, translating, or slowing down when mutual understanding was at risk. Divergence and accommodation therefore coexisted within the same speaker, consistent with the view of power, relational goals, and institutional settings as influences on convergence and divergence (Gallois et al., 2016).

For SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), participants used language to signal membership in valued groups, but the groups were not only generational. Cases A and B indexed regional and ethnolinguistic groups, Case C a professional group, Case D a class-associated peer group, and Case E a generational and digital group. Generation emerged as one of several social identities made relevant through divergence rather than its sole basis. For the sociocultural linguistic framework (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), identities emerged through interaction and through how others read the speech, for instance as elitist, angry, or weird. The relational character of identity was most visible in the challenges. The five cases support these claims as analytic rather than statistical generalizations (Yin, 2018).

3.6. Implications for Educational Practice

Case C's experience calls for schools to examine how English-only policies shape learners' linguistic choices, professional identities, and perceptions of competence. Schools should keep English proficiency goals while giving learners room to use and value their home languages. Teachers should build generational language awareness through activities comparing vocabulary, digital expressions, and communication styles across age groups. Case E's experience of language-based teasing and bullying calls for stronger anti-bullying and child protection responses, with explicit attention to ridicule and exclusion based on accent, expression, or style in face-to-face and digital settings. Case D's account of a heritage language never learned at home points to the role of families and community groups in mother-tongue transmission through everyday conversation, storytelling, and intergenerational dialogue. Communication practitioners should use clear language, explain unfamiliar expressions, and consider age-group preferences in institutional and public information.

4. Conclusion

Individuals from five generational cohorts used linguistic divergence to construct identity through heritage language, professional English, conyo Taglish, and digital slang. Across the cases, participants positioned themselves through language, regarded their speech as authentic, kept a stable linguistic core, and met interactional tension. The cases differed in the source of divergence. The Baby Boomer and Generation X participants maintained Hiligaynon as a marker of heritage, the Millennial used English to signal professional authority, and the Generation Z and Generation Alpha participants built personas and generational affiliation through hybrid and digital forms. The same practices exposed participants to semantic friction, stigmatization, tone misattribution, relational friction, and pressure to conform, with relational costs heaviest for the youngest participants.

The study contributes a five-cohort, cross-case account of divergence in a Mindanao multilingual setting. The account shows generation as one identity among region, profession, class, and peer membership, and shows divergence and selective accommodation within the same speaker. Linguistic differences across generations are expressions of identity which deserve understanding rather than correction. Schools, families, and communities should treat divergent speech as identity work, review English-only practices, address language-based bullying, and support heritage-language transmission.

5. Limitations of the Study

The study relied on self-reported accounts of language use. Memory bias or conscious filtering might have shaped these accounts, and they do not capture spontaneous speech. Informant triangulation, transcript review, and member checking reduced this risk without removing the risk entirely. Five cases, one per cohort, from Regions XI and XII support analytic rather than statistical generalization, and no single participant stands for a whole generation. Each case also combined cohort

with other variables such as sex, occupation, ethnolinguistic background, and personal ties to the researcher, so generational effects are not separable from these variables. Translation from Hiligaynon and Filipino, though validated and back-translated in part, adds a layer of interpretation. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples from other linguistic, cultural, and geographic settings, add recorded conversations, observation, and digital communication samples, and use quantitative or mixed methods to examine relationships among linguistic practices, social perceptions, accommodation, and belonging. Longitudinal and digital ethnographic designs would show how linguistic identities and generational expressions develop over time in relation to social media, artificial intelligence, and new communication technologies.

6. Supplementary Details

6.1. Supplementary Materials & Data availability statement:
The interview transcripts are not publicly available because they contain information compromising participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with approval of the ethics committee.

6.2. Author Contributions:
This article follows the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT).

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
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Gloria P. Gempes	✓	✓		✓						✓		✓		

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

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6.4. Institutional Review Board Statement
The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, and was approved by the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC) on June 23, 2026, Protocol No. GS-FB-05-26-0309.

6.5. Informed Consent Statement:
Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants and collateral informants involved in the study. For the two minors, written consent was obtained from a parent or guardian, and assent was obtained from each minor.

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6.7. Conflicts of Interest:
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

6.8. Disclosure Statement:
The authors used AI tools only for language editing. No AI tools were used in the data analysis or in generating the study's results. The authors reviewed and validated all content and take full responsibility for the article's accuracy, originality, and integrity.

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