JURNAL LINGUE : BAHASA, BUDAYA DAN SASTRA

TRACKING LANGUAGE STUDIES, 1913–2025: WHERE HAVE WE BEEN AND WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

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Abstract

Despite the increasing body of research on language and identity, heritage language, education, and multilingual practices, a comprehensive bibliometric overview of how these areas have evolved over time remains lacking. This gap limits our understanding of major trends, influential works, and emerging directions in the field. To address this, the study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis of language-related research by mapping publication patterns, keyword evolution, and thematic clusters to identify scholarly developments and underexplored areas. A total of 3,638 articles published between 1913 and 2025 were retrieved from the Scopus database using refined search terms such as "first language," "mother tongue," "heritage language," and "foreign language," and filtered to include publications in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Psychology. MS Excel and VOSviewer were employed to analyze co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic structures. Findings reveal a steady increase in publication output from 2000 to 2024, with a noticeable surge during the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States and United Kingdom remain dominant in research productivity, though rising contributions from Asia and the Global South reflect a more inclusive scholarly landscape. Influential scholars such as Bialystok and Ellis continue to shape discussions on bilingualism and cognition. Major research clusters include bilingualism and identity, heritage language maintenance, language and migration, and cognitive development. The study concludes that language research is interdisciplinary, collaborative, and increasingly global in scope. It recommends greater attention to indigenous language revitalization and digital multilingualism and urges educators and policymakers to apply these insights to foster inclusive, culturally responsive language education and planning.

Keywords: *bibliometric analysis; heritage language; language research; language and identity ;multilingualism*

INTRODUCTION

Language has always been central to human communication, identity, and social organization. Over the past century, its study has expanded to encompass not only grammar and vocabulary but also the ways in which language shapes learning, social participation, and cultural belonging. In an era defined by migration, globalization, and cultural mixing, the role of language has become increasingly complex, influencing how individuals navigate personal, social, and professional spheres (Silvestri, 2025).

As scholarly interest in language has grown, research has diversified across disciplines such as sociolinguistics, multilingual education, and language policy,

reflecting changes in social and educational priorities (Silvestri, 2025; Mendoza et al., 2025; Hamad et al., 2025). Studies have documented shifts from early investigations of linguistic competence and instruction to more recent explorations of language, identity, heritage language maintenance, and pedagogical practices, including translanguaging and multilingual approaches (Prasatyo et al., 2025; Moraru et al., 2025; Jeon et al., 2025; Tandih, 2025; Mhindu, 2025; Karpava et al., 2025). This evolution mirrors broader social and technological transformations, such as increased global mobility, the rise of English as a global language, and the emergence of digital communication platforms (Ysmailova et al., 2025; Mekheimer, 2025; Bayram & Eryılmaz, 2025).

Despite this expansive body of research, the field remains conceptually fragmented. While many studies examine specific phenomena, such as language use in education, heritage language maintenance, or bilingual pedagogy, few have systematically traced the historical development of language research, identified emerging trends, or mapped the evolution of key concepts over time. As new methodologies, theories, and terminologies have emerged, it has become increasingly important to understand the trajectory of scholarly attention, the evolution of research priorities, and the areas that remain underexplored.

To address this need, the present study conducts a bibliometric analysis of language-related research from 1913 to 2025. By examining publication trends, keyword evolution, and thematic clusters, the study seeks to provide a historical overview of the field, highlighting patterns, emerging directions, and gaps in the literature. Such an analysis offers insights not only into where the field has been but also into potential future directions for scholarship, informing researchers, educators, and policymakers interested in the development and impact of language studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is widely recognized as a central component of personal, social, and ethnic identity. Heritage languages, in particular, serve as key markers of ethnic identity, carrying cultural practices, literature, and collective memory that connect individuals to their communities and histories. As Prasatyo et al. (2025) argue, identity is dynamic and negotiated within social contexts, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, gender, and power structures. This perspective is supported by Silvestri (2025), who emphasizes that language practices both reflect and construct individuals' sense of belonging. Together, these studies suggest that heritage languages are more than communicative tools; they are symbolic resources through which people navigate and assert their identities.

For migrants and their descendants, balancing heritage and host languages is a complex process influenced by family language policies, intergenerational dynamics, and emotional attachment to heritage languages. Giménez and Masid Blanco (2025) highlight that families play a crucial role in maintaining heritage languages, often using strategies such as "one parent, one language" or relying on extended family networks. Similarly, Wang and Zhang (2025) and Nurjaleka et al. (2025) observe that consistent engagement with a heritage language supports both cultural continuity and bilingual development, reinforcing family bonds while fostering linguistic competence. Karpava et al. (2025), Rokita-Jaśkow and Panek (2025), and Prasatyo et al. (2025) further note that while emotional attachment encourages language maintenance, practical pressures such as schooling and societal language preferences often lead to reduced usage of heritage languages. These findings collectively highlight the tension between symbolic value and functional utility in heritage language practices.

Language also serves as a mechanism for social integration, particularly in migration contexts. Acquiring the host society's language facilitates connection and inclusion, yet migrants frequently face challenges including discrimination, trauma, and identity conflicts (Bayram & Eryılmaz, 2025). Within diaspora communities, language continues to maintain cultural bonds across generations, even as digital platforms reshape how individuals engage with language and culture. Goldstein and Matras (2025) argue that online spaces offer new opportunities for exposure and interaction, although Ysmailova et al. (2025) and Mekheimer (2025) caution that unequal access and potential misunderstandings can limit participation in mediated environments. Collectively, these studies underscore the multifaceted role of language in both sustaining heritage and navigating broader social contexts.

In educational settings, translanguaging has emerged as a promising approach to addressing linguistic and cultural diversity. Moraru et al. (2025) propose that bilingual and multilingual learners benefit from treating their languages as interconnected systems, rather than as separate entities. This approach is particularly effective in reducing language anxiety, enhancing comprehension, and supporting academic achievement, as observed in studies by Karpava et al. (2025) and Tandih (2025). Jeon et al. (2025) offer a four-layer classroom model that integrates language resources, pedagogical strategies, classroom functions, and students' cultural identities, providing a practical framework for implementing translanguaging. However, Moraru et al. (2025) also caution that challenges remain, including institutional constraints, limited resources, and potential overuse that may blur important language boundaries, particularly for young learners.

Translanguaging intersects with broader discussions on heritage language maintenance, mother tongue-based education, and multilingual practices in higher education. Mhindu (2025) emphasizes that mother tongue instruction enhances comprehension, reduces anxiety, and fosters inclusive classrooms, a finding echoed by Abu-Rabiah (2025) and Ysmailova et al. (2025). At the same time, Mendoza et al. (2025) and Hamad et al. (2025) highlight that the dominance of English as a medium of instruction can create barriers for students with limited proficiency, raising concerns about equity and access. By integrating translanguaging strategies and supporting mother tongue instruction, educational systems can better address linguistic inequalities, affirm students' identities, and create more meaningful learning experiences (Moraru et al., 2025; Jeon et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

A bibliometric analysis was conducted to systematically explore publication trends, thematic clusters, and conceptual patterns in language-related research. This method enables researchers to examine large datasets of scholarly output to uncover the intellectual structure and evolution of a field. Bibliometric approaches have gained prominence in recent years as tools to synthesize broad academic landscapes, particularly in education and language studies (Ma & Ismail, 2025).

Scopus was selected as the primary database due to its comprehensive and curated index of peer-reviewed journals across multiple disciplines. It is widely recognized for its reliability in bibliometric studies, offering structured metadata and robust filtering tools essential for mapping interdisciplinary research fields such as language, education, and identity (Singh et al., 2021). Compared to other platforms, Scopus supports more accurate retrieval and analysis of metadata, including keywords, subject categories, document types, and citation counts.

In order to refine the scope of the search, Boolean operators were used to construct a query string that captured key language-related terms. The search string applied was: TITLE-ABS-KEY("first language" OR "native language" OR "mother tongue" OR "home language" OR "second language" OR "foreign language" OR "heritage language" OR "dominant language"). This Boolean structure ensured conceptual precision while accounting for the diverse terminologies used across related subfields (Bayram & Eryılmaz, 2025).

As shown in Figure 1, the initial Scopus search returned 105,307 documents. After removing 840 records with unidentified authors, 104,467 valid records remained. The subject areas were then refined to include only publications in Social Sciences (80,407), Arts and Humanities (53,708), and Psychology (11,993), resulting in a focused subset of 87,851 records. Further filtering by publication stage, source type, and document type narrowed the dataset to 68,232. To identify studies relevant to language-related conceptual analysis, the search was limited to articles tagged with at least one of the following keywords: first language, mother tongue, foreign language, heritage language, and dominant language. This final step yielded 3,638 unique records used in the present bibliometric analys.
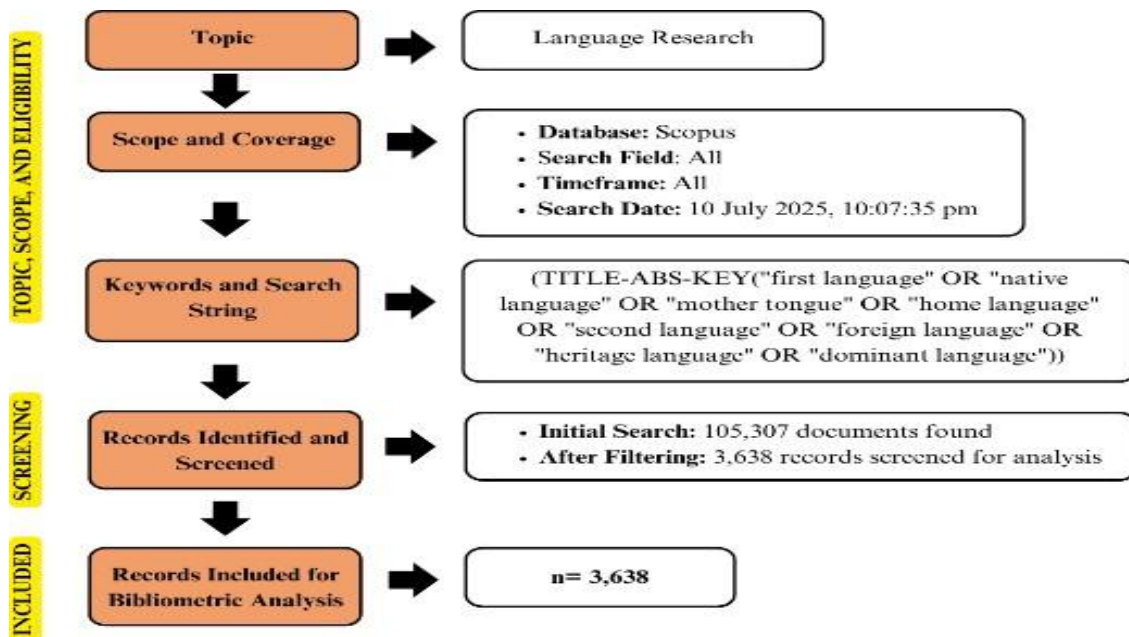

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart of the Study

Next, the data were exported from Scopus in RIS format, a convenient feature that facilitates compatibility with bibliometric tools. After exporting the files, MS Excel and VOSviewer were used to visualize keyword co-occurrences as well as author and source co-authorship networks. This tool enabled the identification of prominent themes, influential scholars, and interconnections among sources based on citation patterns and shared keywords. Following the generation of these visual maps and cluster diagrams, an in-depth analysis was conducted by interpreting the patterns and thematic groupings. These interpretations served as the basis for writing the bibliometric report, allowing for a systematic synthesis of emerging research directions and conceptual linkages in the field.

DISCUSSION
Trends in Language Research Over Time

Figure 2 reveals a clear upward trend in the number of publications over time, particularly from the early 2000s onward. From 1913 to the early 1990s, scholarly output on the topic was extremely sparse, with only one to two publications appearing in most years. The earliest recorded document is from 1913: Editorials: The natural method in languages; the educational efficiency engineer by Bell and Seashore, published in the Journal of Educational Psychology (Bell & Seashore, 1913). This single publication underscores the limited academic engagement with the topic during that period, likely reflecting either minimal scholarly interest or limited indexing of older works in digital databases.
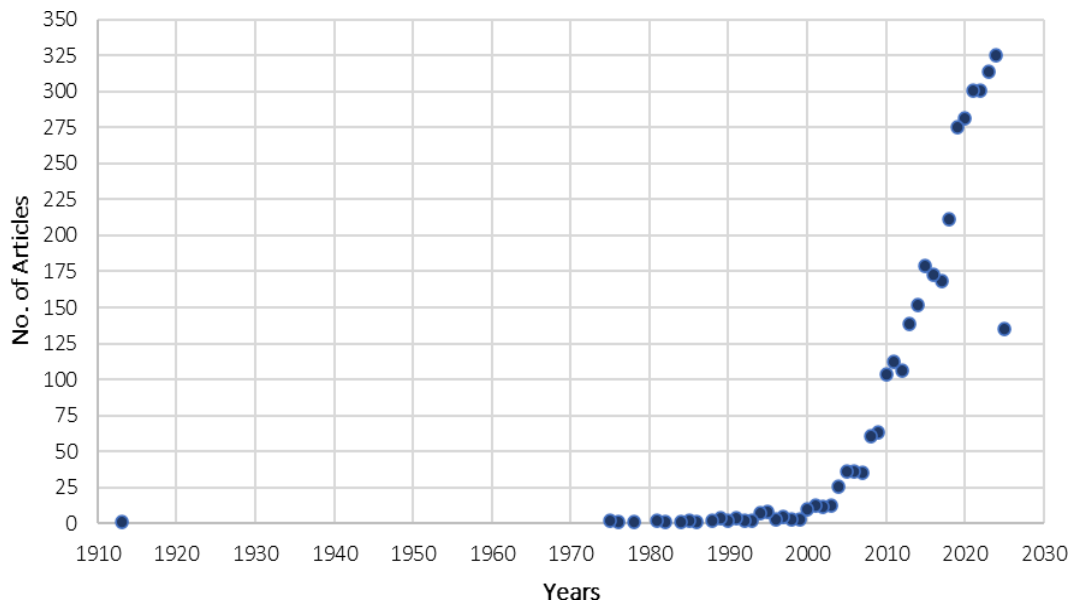

Figure 2. Trends in Language Research Publications by Year (1913–2025)

A gradual increase began in the mid-1990s, with annual publications slowly rising from single digits to double digits by the early 2000s. From 2004 to 2010, the numbers continued to climb steadily, reaching over 100 publications by 2010. A more significant growth period is evident between 2011 and 2019, where annual counts rose from 112 to 275. This expansion suggests a growing academic engagement with the topic, possibly influenced by global shifts in education, increased focus on multilingualism and identity, or improved access to digital publishing platforms.

The years 2020 to 2024 mark a period of high productivity, with publication numbers exceeding 280 annually and peaking at 325 in 2024. This surge may reflect increased interest due to emerging research themes, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational discourse, and a broader global academic collaboration. In 2025, the recorded number of publications appears to drop to 135. However, given that this data likely represents only the first half of the year, the decrease is almost certainly due to incomplete indexing rather than a true decline in output. Overall, the data indicates a long-term acceleration in scholarly production, with particularly rapid growth over the past two decades.

Global Distribution of Scholarly Output on Language Studies

Figure 3 shows the countries that are most active in language research. The United States stands out with the highest number of publications at 866, followed by the United Kingdom with 278, China with 216, Spain with 196, and Canada with 182. These numbers reflect how language research has been largely driven by countries with strong academic institutions and research funding.
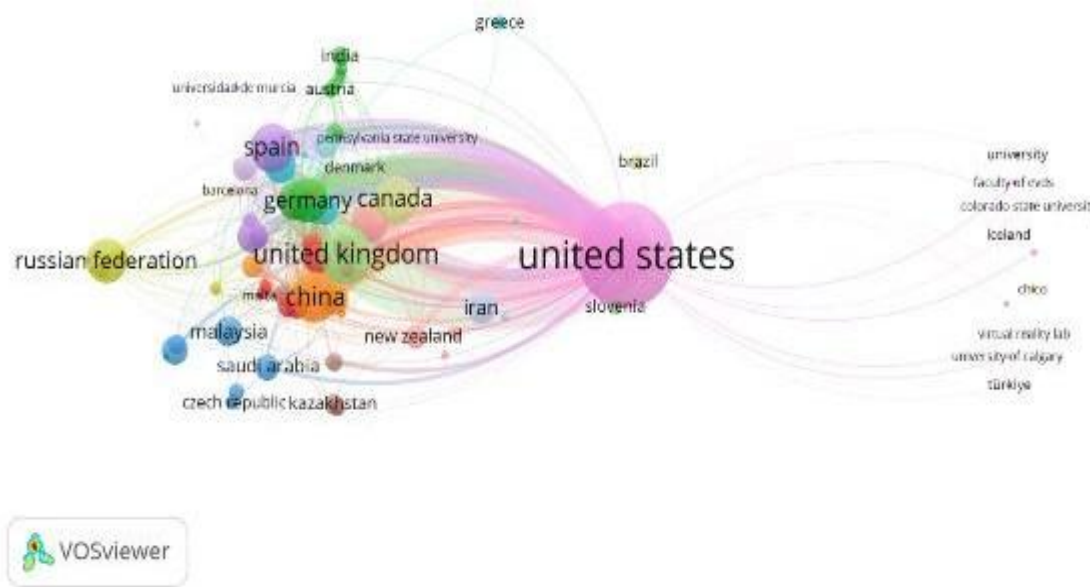

Figure 3. Countries Most Active in Language Research (Publication Count)

Several European nations like Germany, the Netherlands, and Russia also contribute significantly, while countries in Asia, such as China, Japan, Iran, and Malaysia, are becoming increasingly active in the field. Although some countries in the Global South, like the Philippines with 35 publications and Nigeria with 25, appear in the list, their presence is still limited. This could be due to fewer resources, lower access to publishing platforms, or underrepresentation in international databases. Still, it is encouraging to see more regions starting to contribute to global conversations on language.

Institutional Participation in Global Language Studies

Figure 4 shows the institutions that have been most active in publishing language research. Kazan Federal University leads the list with 75 publications, followed by Radboud Universiteit with 40 and the University of Toronto with 37. Many of the top contributors are well-known research universities from different parts of the world, including North America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania.

Universities like Beijing Normal University, the University of Texas at Austin, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Hong Kong also appear frequently, showing a wide global interest in language studies. While many of the institutions come from countries with long-established research traditions, it's interesting to see universities from non-English-speaking regions and developing countries taking part in the conversation. This includes institutions like Bar-Ilan University in Israel,

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and the Universidad de Granada. Overall, the data suggest that language research is gaining momentum across diverse academic communities and that more institutions are becoming involved in studying how language affects education, communication, and society.
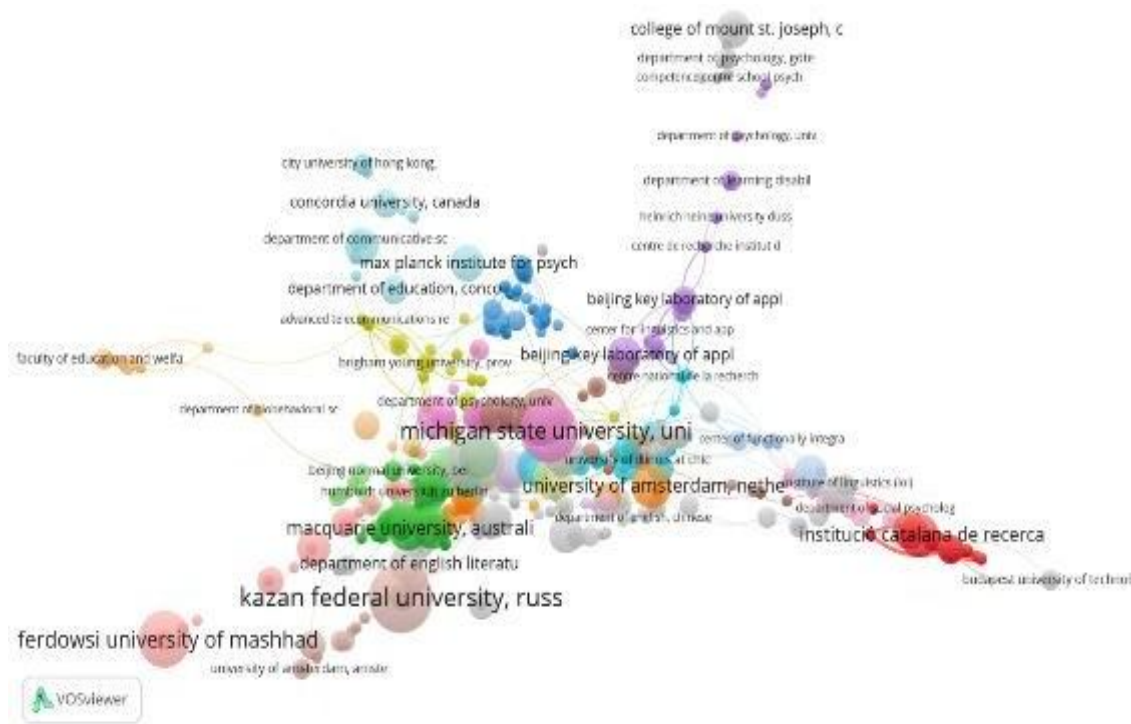

Figure 4. Top Academic Institutions Publishing Language Research

Publication Outlets with the Highest Contribution to Language Studies

The data in Figure 5 highlights the journals that have published the most studies related to language research. The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America tops the list with 97 publications, followed by Frontiers in Psychology with 84 and the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism with 67. These leading outlets show the broad scope of language research, spanning from psycholinguistics and education to multilingualism and technology.
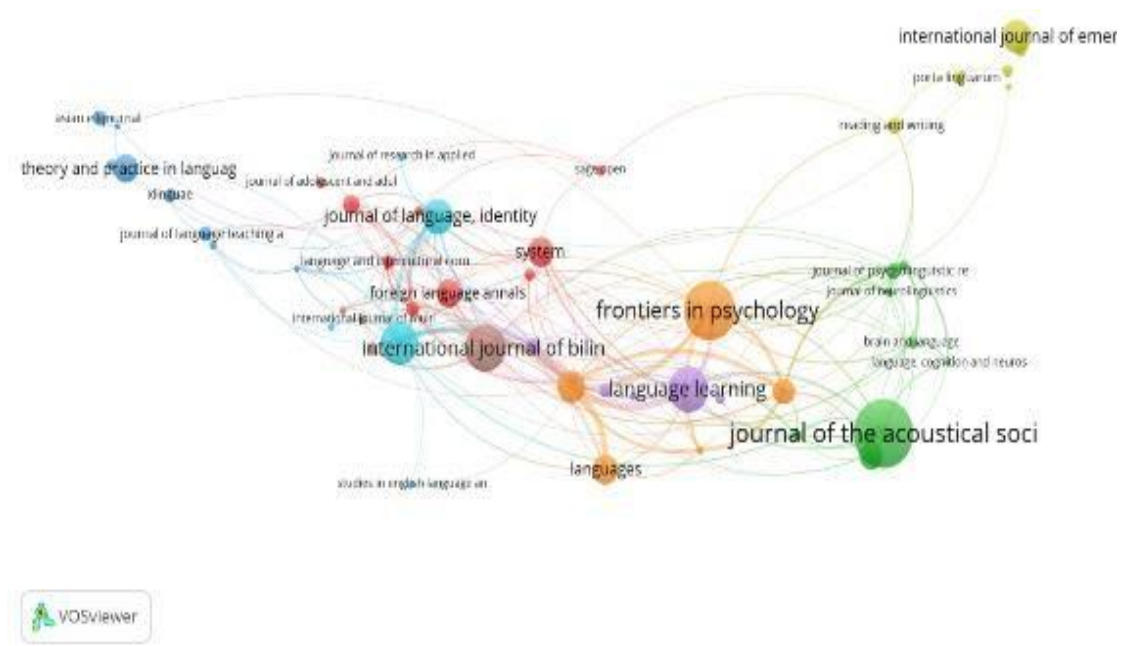
Figure 5. Leading Journals in Language Research Publications

Journals such as Language Learning, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, and Journal of Language Identity and Education reflect a growing interest in the intersection of language with identity, culture, and learning. The presence of technology-focused journals like International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning and Computers and Education also suggests that digital tools are playing a larger role in language education and communication. The wide range of journals indicates that language research is truly interdisciplinary, attracting scholars from fields like linguistics, education, psychology, and communication. This variety not only shows the richness of the field but also points to the importance of choosing appropriate publication outlets for different research focuses.

Individual Contributions Based on Number of Published Documents

Figure 6 shows the authors who have contributed the most to language research publications in the dataset. Chen (Chen et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2017; Cong & Chen, 2022; Deng & Cheng, 2019; Deng et al, 2017; Deng et al, 2016; Hao et al., 2021; Lü et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2017; Ma et al, 2015; Ma et al, 2016; Wang & Chen, 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Wei et al, 2015; Yang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Yao & Chen, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2017) and Trofimovich (Baker et al., 2008; Bodea & Trofimovich, 2024; Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008a, 2008b; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2004; Kumar et al., 2008; Le & Trofimovich, 2024; Le et al., 2024; Reid et al., 2020; Strachan et al., 2019; Tekin et al., 2022; Teló et al., 2022; Trofimovich, 2008; Trofimovich et al., 2025; Trofimovich et al., 2024; Trofimovich et al., 2023; Trofimovich et al., 2022; Trofimovich et al., 2021; Trofimovich et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2011a, 2011b) are tied at the top with 22 publications each, followed by several scholars with 10 or more publications. These include Meir (Bar On & Meir, 2022;

Bogdanova-Beglarian et al., 2022; Fridman et al., 2024; Gordon & Meir, 2024; Janssen & Meir, 2019; Meir et al., 2021; Meir & Polinsky, 2021; Otwinowska et al., 2021; Rekun & Meir, 2024; Zabrodskaja et al., 2023), Park (Park, 2024a, 2024b; Park, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Park, 2022; Park, 2019; Park, 2017; Park & Chung, 2024; Park & Chung, 2023), and Verhoeven (De Zeeuw et al., 2012; De Zeeuw et al., 2015; Mulder et al., 2019; Mulder et al., 2024; van de Ven et al., 2019; van de Ven et al., 2022; van den Bosch et al., 2020; van den Broek et al., 2018; Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2006; Verhoeven et al., 2011; Verhoeven et al., 2017).
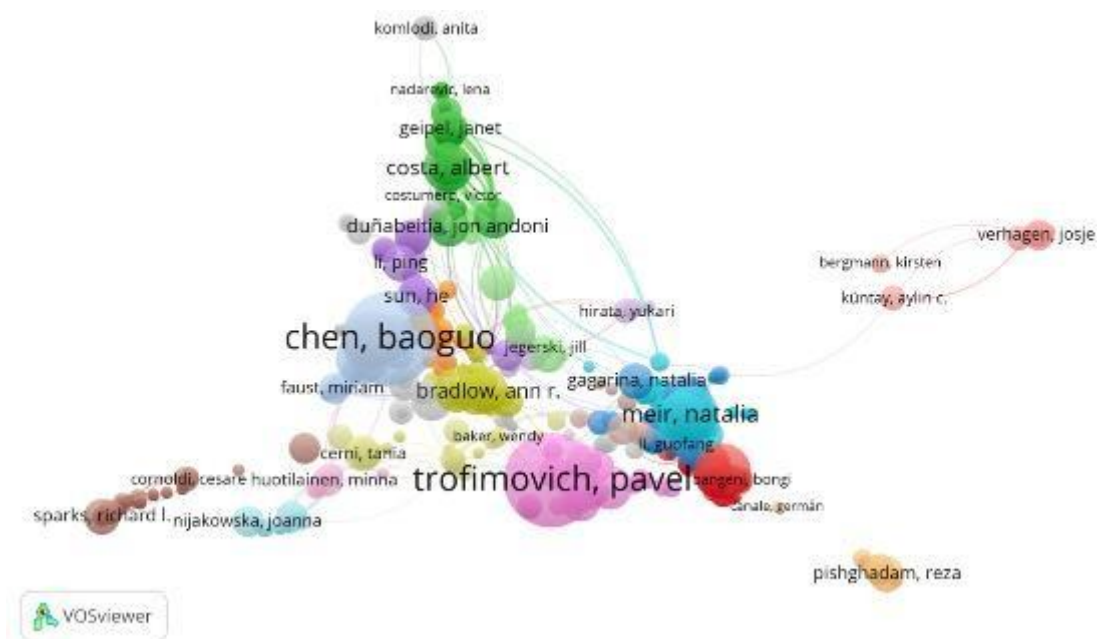

Figure 6. Most Productive Authors in Language Research

Many of the top contributors worked extensively in areas such as bilingualism, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition. The list also reflects a healthy mix of researchers from different regions. This reveals how language research is shaped by a global network of scholars. While a small number of authors have published a relatively high volume of studies, many others have also made consistent contributions with three or more publications. This shows how the field benefits from both leading experts and a broader community of engaged researchers working across disciplines and contexts. The wide range of contributors points to the collaborative and evolving nature of language studies today.

Highly Influential Works That Shaped the Field

Figure 7 highlights several of the most cited authors whose work has made a significant impact on language research. Among them, the study by Golonka et al. (2014) on the effectiveness of different technologies in foreign language learning has been widely referenced. This reflects the growing interest in digital tools and online instruction. Lemhöfer and Broersma's (2012) introduction of LexTALE, a quick test for assessing English vocabulary in advanced learners, has also gained substantial

recognition for its practical use in psycholinguistic studies.

Another highly cited work is by Marian et al. (2007), who developed the LEAP-Q, a tool for measuring language experience and proficiency in bilinguals and multilinguals. Johnson and Newport's (1989) classic study on the critical period for second language learning remains one of the most influential works in the field. While some of these publications are already considered outdated, they continue to be cited frequently because of their lasting relevance and foundational value. Their continued presence in the literature shows how certain ideas, tools, and theoretical frameworks remain central to the ongoing language research.
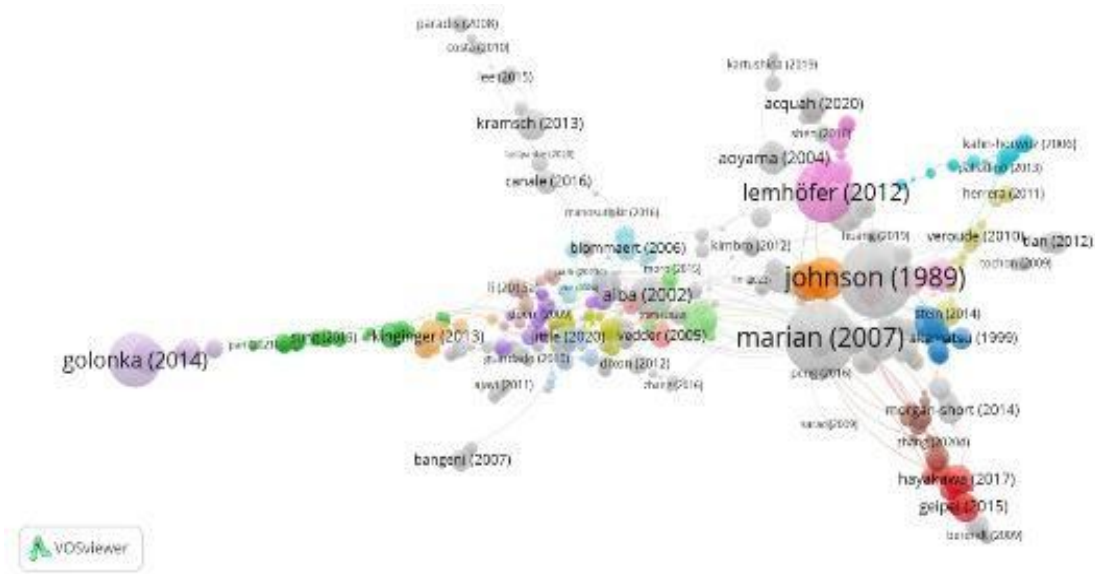

Figure 7. Most Cited Authors in Language Research

Co-Citation Network of Scholarly Influence and Intellectual Linkages

Figure 8 presents a co-citation network of the most frequently cited authors in language research, illustrating how scholarly influence is clustered and interconnected across subfields. Although exact citation counts are not shown, the size of each node reflects relative frequency of citation, while the lines (edges) between authors represent the strength of their co-citation relationships; that is, how often they are cited together in the same studies. This type of mapping helps reveal intellectual structure and thematic alliances within the literature.

At the center of the network are scholars, particularly Rod Ellis, who is referenced in 234 works; Ellen Bialystok, in 199; and Silvina Montrul, in 193. Their works bridge multiple domains of language research, and their central positioning and dense connectivity suggest broad interdisciplinary influence, likely spanning cognitive, developmental, and sociolinguistic aspects of language learning and use. To the left, the red cluster features influential sociolinguists and theorists including Jim Cummins (cited in 305 studies), Bernard Spolsky (127), Bonny Norton (254), and Aneta Pavlenko (270), whose work centers on language policy, identity, power, and multilingualism. The presence of Pierre Bourdieu (193) and Jan Blommaert (110) here reflects the influence of critical and sociological perspectives.

The green cluster on the right includes researchers, namely James Emil Flege

(cited in 202), Murray J. Munro (111), and Pavel Trofimovich (95), who are prominent in pronunciation, second language acquisition, and speech perception. Their strong co-citation links reflect focused contributions to psycholinguistic and phonetic research.

Nearby, in blue, are Albert Costa (cited in 138 studies), Marc Brysbaert (111), and Angela D. Friederici (88), authors who contribute to the cognitive neuroscience of language processing and bilingualism. The purple and cyan groupings, with scholars like Leonore Ganschow (54) and Silvina Montrul (193), suggest specialized intersections, possibly in language learning difficulties and heritage language acquisition, respectively.
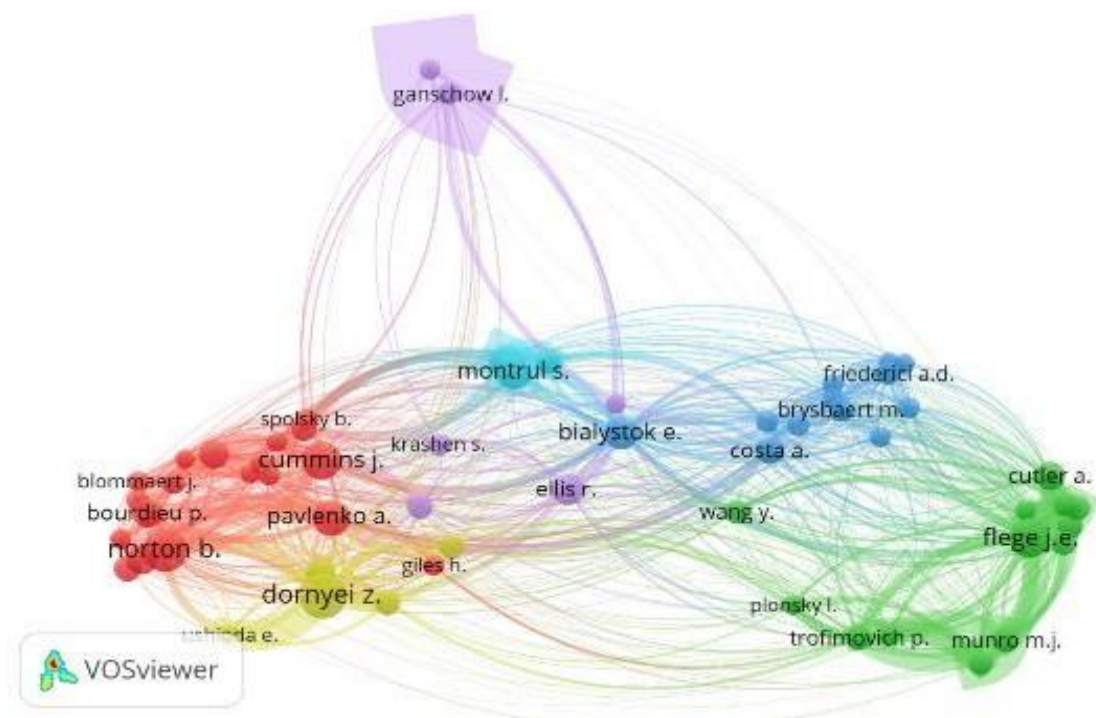

Figure 8. Most Cited Authors with the Highest Contribution to Language Research

Smaller but significant clusters, such as the yellow group featuring Zoltán Dörnyei (cited in 300 studies) and Ema Ushioda (88), represent motivational theories in second language acquisition. These authors are frequently co-cited in studies focusing on learner psychology, investment, and affective variables. The tight web of connections across all clusters reflects the interdisciplinary and dialogic nature of language research, where cognitive, social, educational, and psychological perspectives frequently overlap.

Mapping the Conceptual Landscape of Language-Related Keywords

Figure 9 presents a network visualization of frequently occurring keywords in language research as it highlights the conceptual clusters that dominate scholarly discussions. At the center of the network are the core concepts of language, second language, and culture, which serve as bridges connecting various strands of inquiry. Their centrality reflects their role in shaping interdisciplinary research across education,

identity, migration, and cognitive development.

The blue cluster, located in the upper left, revolves around terms such as foreign language, second language, students, and pedagogy, representing research focused on language learning and instruction, particularly in academic or institutional settings. Studies in this area often explore the challenges and strategies associated with teaching and acquiring additional languages in formal education contexts. Adjacent to this is the red cluster in the lower left portion of the map, which centers on keywords like mother tongue, heritage language, identity, and family language policy. This grouping reflects the sociolinguistic dimension of language use, with a strong emphasis on how individuals construct and negotiate identity through language within multilingual and intergenerational contexts.
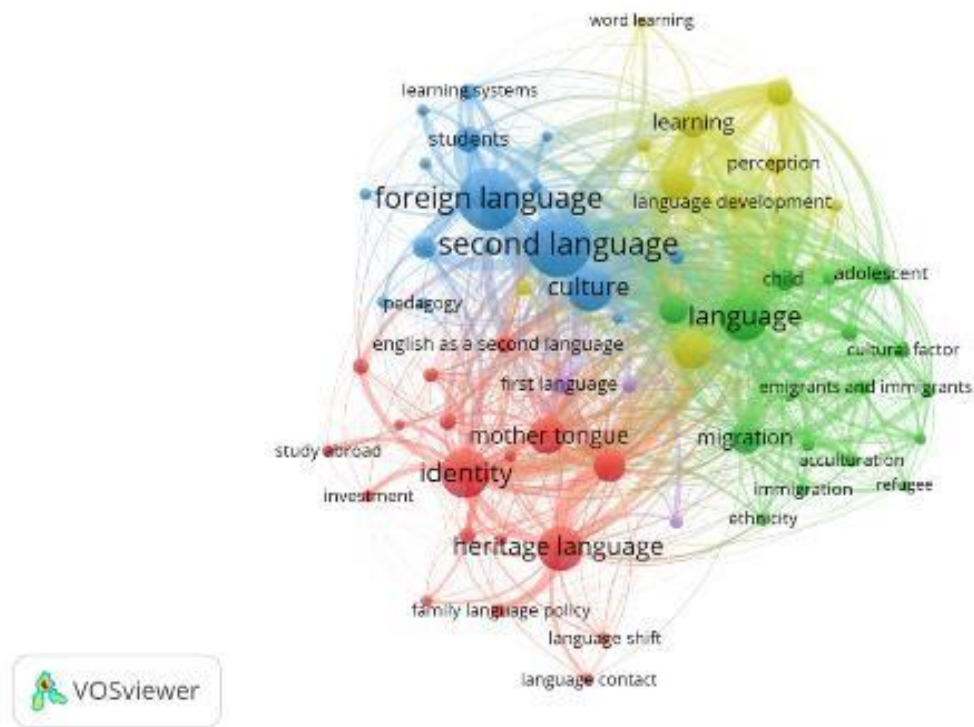

Figure 9. Co-occurrence of Key Terms in Language Research

To the right of the map, the green cluster includes terms such as migration, emigrants and immigrants, acculturation, and ethnicity, capturing the growing body of research that explores language and mobility. This cluster reveals how migration impacts language use, maintenance, and shift, and how linguistic practices intersect with issues of integration, cultural adaptation, and the preservation of heritage languages among displaced populations. In the upper right quadrant, the yellow cluster encompasses keywords like learning, language development, word learning, and perception, pointing to cognitive and developmental approaches to language. Research in this area typically focuses on how individuals, particularly children, acquire, process, and internalize language, drawing from fields such as psychology, early childhood education, and speech development.

All in all, the strong connections among these keyword clusters reflect the interdisciplinary nature of language research. Terms like identity, culture, and language development appear across different areas, showing that researchers from various fields

are exploring related themes and often using similar approaches. This visualization not only shows the range of topics being studied but also highlights opportunities for collaborative research that connects cognitive, social, educational, and cultural perspectives in the study of language.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study imply that language research is becoming more important, more inclusive, and more interdisciplinary. The steady rise in publication output, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggests that scholars are increasingly recognizing the role of language in education, identity, communication, and social change. Although research continues to be led by countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, the growing participation of scholars from Asia and the Global South also signals a shift toward a more globally representative academic community. The presence of diverse institutions and publication outlets further reflects this expansion. The study also shows how language research connects multiple disciplines, including education, psychology, and technology, highlighting the value of interdisciplinary approaches. The continued influence of older, foundational works suggests that the field values long-standing theories and tools while adapting them to current needs. Moreover, the frequent appearance of shared themes such as second language learning, identity, and migration means that researchers across different contexts are engaging with common questions.

Altogether, these findings suggest that language research is both increasingly inclusive and integrative. It brings together different disciplines and viewpoints while focusing on how language affects people and society. Future research can continue to build on this momentum by addressing greater international collaboration, encouraging contributions from underrepresented regions, and deepening interdisciplinary engagement. Because language remains a core component of human interaction and development, research in this field will remain relevant in the years to come.

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