

Two languages = two emotional worlds or two sets of social norms? Moving beyond the Emotion-Related Language Choice theory

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In an ideal world, reactions and answers to ethical problems should be consistent irrespective of the medium through which the question or situation is presented. Yet recent research (Costa *et al.* 2014; Geipel, Hadjichristidis & Surian 2015, 2016; Ciolletti, McFarlane & Weissglass 2016; Corey *et al.* 2017; Hayakawa *et al.* 2017; Čavar & Tytus 2018; Brouwer 2019; Karataş 2019; Dylman & Champoux-Larsson 2019) has shown that the same dilemma may elicit different moral judgements depending on the language in which it has been described.

Using a covert 2×2×2 experiment where 61 bilinguals were asked to translate ($L_1 \leftrightarrow L_2$) a passage peppered with swearwords, we show that the picture is much more complex. While the results ostensibly corroborate the Emotion-Related Language Choice theory (according to which bilinguals find their L_2 an easier medium of conveying content that evokes strong emotional reactivity; Kim & Starks 2008), the effect was only observed in the case of ethnophobias, that is expletives directed at social (out)groups. This indicates that the key factor modulating response strength is not so much the different emotional power associated with the respective languages, but *social and cultural norms*.

Long cultural learning and socialisation make expressions in L_1 highly prone to normative influences, whereas using a foreign language exempts the speaker from these (whether our own or socially imposed) norms and limitations. It transpires that switching to a foreign language during decision-making may not only reduce emotionally-driven responses and political correctness biases, but also promote candid deliberative processes (e.g. rational cost-benefit considerations; in line with observations from the psychotherapy of bilingual patients, as well as models that perceive moral decision-making as the outcome of the interplay between intuitive emotionally driven processes and rational reflective processes; e.g. Greene & Haidt 2002; Haidt 2007).

The orthogonal influence of the language medium on decisions, judgments and reactions has far-reaching consequences in our multilingual and multicultural world (not limited to such high-stakes scenarios as legal contexts).