

LANGUAGE AND THE SELF: HOW PERSONALITY SHIFTS ACROSS LANGUAGES

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18440732>

ABSTRACT

The research investigates how the students who study linguistics perceive their personality traits and emotional state when they speak their native (L1) compared to English (L2). The brief questionnaire was distributed to linguistics students who then shared their language switching experiences. The research findings indicate that students experience minimal shifts in their self-assurance and emotional state, however, their L2 boosts their confidence while reducing their social anxiety. This findings suggest that language proficiency and emotional distance in L2 can have a significant impact on one's communicational style. It was also observed that most participants thought that the language affected the way they expressed themselves, but it did not affect who they really were. The study also reveals that the role of language is to facilitate communication as well as emotions, emphasizing the importance of emotional and psychological factors in the process of successful language acquisition.

Keywords: personality traits, emotional regulation, cultural frame-switching, personality switches, emotional expression, multilingual identity, foreign language effect, language-dependent self, social anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a way through which people are able to share information. However, it is a vital factor in the way people think and feel. In addition, it is a tool that helps people understand who they really are. When it comes to bilingual or multilingual people, they are able to switch not only languages, but also their identities and the way they relate to others. Many people report the feeling of being "different versions" of themselves based on the language they choose to speak. They notice that they feel more or less confident, they often show their emotions differently, and sometimes, they even behave in ways their "true selves" would not. These experiences indicate that people develop their identity in various contexts of language, which is a reflection of their social identity. Scientists have been researching the impact of language on the way we communicate about ourselves. This has been one of the biggest question in the journey of understanding human nature. Their aim is to know if the language we speak changes who we are and how we see ourselves.

Literature review

One important research on this topic was carried out by Ramírez-Esparza et al. (2006). The researchers worked with bilinguals, who spoke Spanish and English, while living in United States. The bilinguals reported that when they speak English, they are more outgoing, speak their minds, and show their feelings more when speaking English (L2) rather than Spanish (L1).

The language spoken seemed to really influence how they thought about themselves and how they behaved. The researchers suggested that this is an example of **cultural frame-switching**, by which a different language activates a different cultural value system. This means that, when a person speaks a different language, they also try to fit into a different culture. Chen and Bond (2010) observed people who speak Cantonese (L1) and English (L2) in Hong Kong. What they found out is that people think they are more open and outgoing when they speak English, but not so much when they speak Cantonese. Chen and Bond think that the language we use might influence the way we show our personalities, but it does not really change who we are as a person. The researchers of this study think that the language we use is a clue that helps us figure out how to be ourselves in different situations.

Pavlenko (2005) studied people's expression across different languages. She found that people feel emotions strongly in their first language. This is because they learned about emotions in young age. Another thing that Pavlenko researched was how bilingual people express their emotions. She realized that many bilingual people like to talk about scary things using their second language. This is because it helps them feel less emotional about the issue. From the research done by Pavlenko, it is evident that emotions and language are linked. The first language is where one feels emotions the most, and the second language helps one deal with them better. The work of Keysar et al (2012) demonstrates that people are less emotional when they speak a second language. The foreign language effect was mentioned throughout this study. What they found out is that people who speak two languages tend to be more logical and less emotional in making decisions when they are thinking in L2, not their own language. According to the authors, this is because the second language does not have as much emotion as the first language does, and this affects the way people judge things, make decisions, and express their feelings. The **foreign language effect** shows that language can affect how people feel and think. Another large-scale survey research made by Dewaele and Ożańska-Ponikwia (2012) further confirmed that many multilingual speakers feel "like a different person" while switching languages. The usage of L2 is often associated with confidence and better control of one's own emotions. They also report that they are less anxious, especially if the language was learned in late adulthood. The authors also highlighted the importance of such aspects as the proficiency level, the frequency of use, and emotional attachment to the language.

There are still some gaps in what we know about this topic. A lot of the research that has been done looks at bilingual people in general, but it does not focus enough on linguistics students. These students usually have an understanding of language and often switch between languages. That is why we can look closely at how language affects personality and how emotions and language skills play a role, in this field as well. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a more detailed understanding of the multilingual self.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to fill these gaps by presenting how the students perceive their personality and how their emotional expressions change when they speak their native language and second language (English). The aim of the research is achieved by using a questionnaire to determine what the students think about themselves, such as their confidence level, how open they are about their feelings, and how friendly they are while speaking L2. Moreover, the research is looking at how bilinguals see and express themselves and their personality. The research uses a quantitative method, through a survey implementation. The Likert scale and

multiple-choice questions were developed in order to collect data that helped to identify the common patterns of students in their bilingual language switching experience. The research involved sixteen students who belonged to the age groups of under 18 and 28+. The majority of the students spoke two or more languages, including their native language and English as a second language, with proficiency levels of B2 to C1. This level of proficiency allowed them to use English effectively when answering self-reflective questions. The study did not distinguish between early and late bilinguals; instead, it focused on participants' self-analyzed experiences of personality expression across languages. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The survey included three parts:

The first part aimed to get to know the people who conducted the survey. This included things such as their age, gender, language they grew up with, what other languages they know, when they started learning English, and how good they think they are at their L2. The second part tried to find out how people show their personality and feelings when they speak a certain language. The survey measured how people assessed their ability to speak, emotional, and general ability to express themselves. Sample statements included: "I feel more confident when speaking English than my native language," "I express my emotions more freely in English," and "My personality feels different depending on the language I use." The final part of the questionnaire contained open response question for reflection. Respondents were requested to write out whether they think they are a different person when switching from one language to another, and how these changes happen in their academic, social, or personal lives. The questionnaire was written mainly in English to maintain consistency in responses. The electronic programs like Google Forms were used in order to distribute the questionnaire, so that each participant could complete it individually and anonymously. They were asked to describe their experiences of using both L1 and L2 in different settings, like everyday communication, academic, and personal life. There was no time limit set for this task. The time estimated for completing the task was 10-15 minutes. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the research. They were also made aware that the information they provided would be kept confidential.

RESULTS

In this section, results from a survey conducted among students majoring in linguistics will be presented. The main aim was to analyze students' views on changes to their personal character after learning different languages and their connection to emotions. The results will be based on feedback from 16 students.

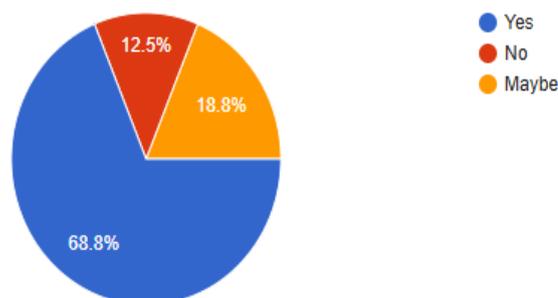


Fig. 1. (Do you feel like different languages activate different "versions" of yourself?)

Participants were asked if they think that using different languages brings out different "versions" of their personality. The findings showed a significant tendency to this idea. As can

be seen in Figure 1, a majority of 68.8% respondents have answered "Yes", which means they unmistakably feel a change in their personality when switching languages. Another 18.8% went for the "Maybe", signifying a kind of partial or situational awareness of these changes. Merely 12.5% reported that language does not bring out different sides of their personality. Based on these findings, most linguistics students appear to view language as very closely connected with one's identity and self-expression, which supports the idea that the person can change depending on the language used, rather than having a fixed personality.

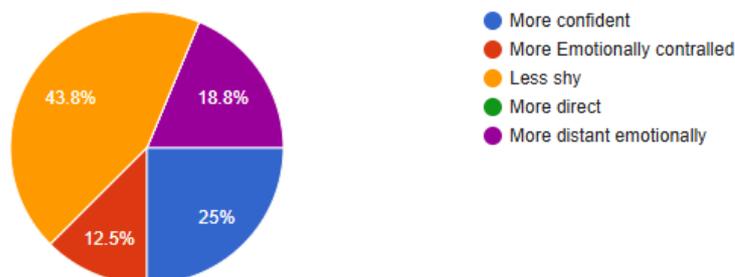


Fig.2. (Your emotional state when speaking your second language.)

Participants were also asked to describe their usual feelings when they speak a L2. Their answers reflect considerable differences in terms of emotional regulation and self-esteem. The most frequent response was "I feel less shy" (43.8%), and "I feel more confident" (25%) was the second most popular one. In addition, 18.8% of the participants said that they became more emotionally detached, and 12.5% claimed that they became more emotionally controlled. Such results suggest that one of the causes of elevated self-confidence in language students is that they speak English as a second language. As stated before, "the relationship between emotional distance and foreign language effect is very closely connected," with the latter referring to the tendency for people to feel less emotionally involved when speaking a L2. This helps speakers to control their emotions easily and express themselves in a less emotional way.

Overall, the results show that the majority of linguistics students perceive clear differences in the expression of personality and emotional experiences when switching from their first language to English. It is also notable that speaking in a foreign language is related to feelings of confidence, not being shy, and emotional detachment. This suggests that personality is changeable based on the language used, rather than remaining fixed.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this research was to find out if linguistics students are aware of changes in the way they express their personality and emotions when they use different languages. The results confirm that language significantly influences people's perception and expression of their own character. A majority of those students admitted that they experienced some changes when going from one language to another, mostly with feelings of self-confidence and emotional detachment. A majority of the participants reported that they felt differently while using a new language, or that L2 brings out a "slightly different version" of themselves. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that multilingual individuals often experience a **language-dependent self** rather than a single fixed personality (Dewaele & Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012). The large number of "yes" answers in the questionnaires is a confirmation of the cultural frame switching theory. The theory suggests that different languages can activate different cultural norms, values, and behavioral expectations (Ramrez,

Esparza et al., 2006). Since linguistics students are very aware of language as they analyze it, and they switch between languages a lot, they might be aware of such changes in the way they express themselves. At the same time, the “Maybe” responses can mean that changes are not always true and that they can just be influenced by different situations like communication context or emotional state of speaker. This insight fits well with contemporary identity theories that accept identity as something flexible and dependent on the context rather than being something fixed (Chen & Bond, 2010). In addition, language is most likely to be a situational signal that guides how personality traits are expressed, without actually changing who the person is.

Moreover, the research shows that people who learn English as their second language feel more confident in the social environment. Users of English reported they felt more comfortable with others when they spoke L2, which can indicate that they might experience less social anxiety during the use of L2. Research findings support the foreign language effect because people tend to reduced emotional level when they speak in their L2 (Keysar et al., 2012). People can communicate better when they show less emotional richness because they become more confident in their ability to speak. Additionally, the participants in the study shared that when they speak in English, they feel somewhat emotionally distant. As previous research indicates, people tend to express their feelings more when they speak in their L1 rather than when they speak in their L2 (Pavlenko, 2005). When people speak in their second language, they do not feel emotionally attached to it; that is why they may actually be better at controlling their feelings, which may prove to be beneficial for them. One important finding of this study is that students see a difference between who they are and how they express themselves. The majority of study participants disagreed that language affects their identity, but they did agree that language shapes their personality expression. The study findings support previous research, which shows that people who speak multiple languages have their way of expressing themselves, but their sense of self remains unchanged (Dewaele and Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2014). The study discovered that students recognize a difference between their personal identity and their communication styles. The majority of study participants disagreed that language affects their identity, but they did agree that language shapes the way they express their personalities.

From an educational point of view, these findings show that emotions and identity are important in language learning, and learning about emotions and identity changes between languages helps students to develop better communication skills. And also teachers who understand that students can use their second language to feel less stressed while building their self-confidence will find it simpler to motivate students for better classroom participation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions of linguistics students on personality expression and emotional experience through their first language and English as a foreign language. It turned out that the majority of students felt at least some degree of difference in their language expressions in various languages. Generally speaking, L2 was seen as a way to boost self-esteem, lower awkwardness, and create a more detached feeling, which indicates that a language can shape the expression of personality traits rather than change the individual’s real identity. From a general perspective, these findings seem to confirm the notion of a language-dependent self, where the linguistic tool acts as a situational way influencing the style of

communication. On the other hand, the data implies that personality is pretty much consistent with language being a factor of influence on the visible behavior rather than the intrinsic character trait. Further research might continue investigating the issue by involving a bigger number of participants and using observational or experimental approaches in order to get a fuller picture of how language affects personality expression in actual communications.

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