

Moral Judgments and Social Norms Vary Across L1 and L2, but not L2 and L3

Recent research has shown that the same dilemma may elicit different moral judgements depending on the language in which it has been described. For instance, reading scenarios in which noble intentions lead to bad outcomes—or good outcomes ensue despite dubious motives—in a foreign language (L₂) lead participants to place greater weight on outcomes in making moral judgments (Geipel, Hadjichristidis & Surian 2016). The explanation usually invoked in the above scenarios is the different purported emotionality of content presented in one's first vs second languages.

Using a covert 2×2×2 experiment where 61 L₁ Polish – L₂ English bilinguals – final year MA students majoring in either Applied Linguistics (with English as their first foreign language) or English – were asked to translate (L₁↔L₂) a passage peppered with swearwords, and two weeks later evaluate on a Likert scale the offensiveness of both the source stimuli and the translational equivalents they themselves provided, we show that the picture is much more complex. While the results ostensibly corroborate the so-called 'foreign language effect', with a significant interaction between source vs target words' offensiveness and the direction of translation, it was only observed in the case of *ethnophaulisms*, that is expletives directed at social (out)groups (significant interaction between source and target words, direction of translation, and type of words, $F_{(1,59)}=59$, $p<.01$; $\lambda_p^2=.16$), but not *generic swearwords*. 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*.

In a follow-up study, we extend the investigation of the effect of language choice on acceptability judgments of social norm violations by looking at whether a difference will be observed in ratings given in multilingual speakers' third vs second language. Expectedly, the acceptance rates of scenarios presented in the two languages did not differ much. However, regression analyses indicated different predictors of evaluations: in the L₂, the age factor was significant, with older participants more severe in their judgments; the severity of judgments passed in the L₃ in turn depended on the respondent's gender, with male participants evaluating the scenarios as less severe.

Long cultural learning and socialisation make expressions in L₁ highly prone to normative influences, whereas using a second/third 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).

Reference for first study:

Gawinkowska, M., Paradowski, M.B. & Bilewicz, M. (2013). Second language as an exemptor from sociocultural norms. Emotion-Related Language Choice revisited. *PLoS ONE*, 8(12): e81225. [10.1371/journal.pone.0081225](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0081225)