

In search for the Foreign-language effect in moral judgement

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In the present study we explored how language (native – Bulgarian/foreign – English) and dilemma type (Personal/Impersonal) could affect moral judgements of Bulgarian-English bilingual participants. Participants deliberated on a set of trolley-like moral dilemmas, presented either in their native language, or in English and had to provide a Yes/No judgement either in favour, or against utilitarian resolution of the moral dilemma. Also, we included self-reported measures for emotional arousal and valence in order to explore whether and how the use of a foreign language influences participant's immediate emotional response to the moral dilemmas.

In line with prior research, our findings revealed that when presented with Personal dilemmas, participants tend to produce less utilitarian judgements, whereas if the dilemmas are Impersonal, participants find it more morally acceptable to kill one person in order to save five people.

Exploring the effect of foreign language on people's moral choices, our findings failed to reach statistical significance. Therefore, we did not provide support for the hypothesis that using a foreign language can increase the rate of utilitarian judgements for Personal moral dilemmas (considered to be more emotionally intensive than Impersonal ones).

In terms of emotional arousal, our findings demonstrated that Personal dilemmas were rated as more arousing than Impersonal dilemmas, both in native and foreign language. Again, no significant main effect of language and no significant interaction between dilemma type and language was found.

In terms of valence, we got rather surprising significant interaction of language and dilemma type: Personal dilemmas presented in English were rated as more negative than Impersonal dilemmas presented in English and there was no difference between different dilemma types, when presented in native language.

We suggest that the reason why most of our results concerning the Foreign-language effect lack statistical significance could be the high level of self-rated foreign language proficiency of our participants. Furthermore, our findings indicate the need for future research, focusing on the role of emotional valence in moral judgement in the framework of the Foreign-language effect.

329 words