



How foreign language shapes moral judgment[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We investigated whether and how foreign language influences moral judgment.
- Foreign language prompted more lenient judgments for moral transgressions.
- Foreign language reduced confidence in people's moral evaluations.
- Violations of everyday norms were judged less harshly in a foreign language.
- Foreign language might act through a reduced activation of social and moral norms.

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ABSTRACT

We investigated whether and how processing information in a foreign language as opposed to the native language affects moral judgments. Participants judged the moral wrongness of several private actions, such as consensual incest, that were depicted as harmless and presented in either the native or a foreign language. The use of a foreign language promoted less severe moral judgments and less confidence in them. Harmful and harmless social norm violations, such as saying a white lie to get a reduced fare, were also judged more leniently. The results do not support explanations based on facilitated deliberation, misunderstanding, or the adoption of a universalistic stance. We propose that the influence of foreign language is best explained by a reduced activation of social and moral norms when making moral judgments.

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Introduction

Imagine reading about the case of a brother and sister who have an incestuous relationship. What would your moral reaction be? Most people judge incest as wrong, even in circumstances where potential harm is minimized (Haidt, 2001). Now imagine reading the same story in a foreign language that you comprehend well. Would your moral reaction change? It shouldn't — the story is the same (principle of description invariance (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) or extensionality (Arrow, 1982)).¹ But

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¹ The principle of description invariance or extensionality holds that the way options are described should not influence a person's preferences about them.

psychological research on moral violations suggests that it might: A higher proportion of participants judge that it is acceptable to shove a man into the path of a trolley to save five lives, when the scenario and questions are printed in a foreign language rather than in their native language (Cipolletti, McFarlane, & Weissglass, 2015; Costa, Foucart, Hayakawa, et al., 2014; Geipel, Hadjichristidis, & Surian, 2014).

Here we aimed to extend the foreign language effect to actions that are relatively harmless, but nevertheless typically condemned. We expected that foreign language would distance participants from intuition and gut-feelings, and through that promote less harsh moral judgments. We considered two competing hypotheses. Costa, Foucart, Hayakawa, et al. (2014) proposed that a “muted” intuition could make the moral machinery switch from the default automatic, intuitive mode, to a controlled mode, thus focusing the attention to the harmless consequences (see also Cipolletti et al., 2015). We call this the *controlled-processing* hypothesis. Alternatively, the moral machinery might remain on the automatic, intuitive mode, but the muted intuition would nevertheless promote less harsh moral judgments. We call this the *automatic-processing* hypothesis. This could happen either through an attenuation of the typical aversive reaction (see the *affect heuristic*; Kahneman &

Frederick, 2002; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002), or a reduction of the mental accessibility of moral and social rules (e.g., Bond & Lai, 1986; Dewaele, 2010). Moral and social rules are learned and experienced through interactions involving the native language, and so a foreign language might evoke them to a lesser extent (see Marian & Neisser, 2000).

Prior research

Foreign language has been shown to attenuate emotional response to words and phrases (for reviews see Caldwell-Harris, 2014; Pavlenko, 2012). For example, Harris and colleagues found that childhood reprimands, such as “Don’t do that!”, evoked reduced skin conductance responses when they were read aloud in a foreign language (Harris, Ayçiçeği, & Gleason, 2003; Harris, Gleason, & Ayçiçeği, 2006). Moreover, a large questionnaire-based study has shown that late bilinguals rated taboo words and swearwords as less emotional in a foreign language than in a native language (Dewaele, 2004; Pavlenko, 2004). Studies also suggest that a foreign language facilitates people to discuss topics that are considered off-limits or taboo in their native language. For example, Bond and Lai (1986) found that Chinese–English bilinguals spoke longer about embarrassing topics, such as sexual attitudes, in a foreign language. In the same vein, Dewaele (2010) found that several UK-based multilinguals preferred using swearwords in a foreign language, stating that a foreign language allows them to escape from social and cultural restrictions. However, some studies have failed to detect an attenuation of emotions (e.g., Ayçiçeği-Dinn & Caldwell-Harris, 2009; Eilola, Havelka, & Sharma, 2007; Sutton, Altarriba, Gianico, & Basnight-Brown, 2007). To reconcile these findings, Harris and colleagues proposed that the relative emotionality of a foreign versus a native language depends on a complex interplay between age of acquisition, level of proficiency, and the emotional context in which the foreign language is learned and used (Caldwell-Harris, 2014; Harris et al., 2006).

Foreign language has also been shown to reduce decision biases that are believed to have an emotional basis (Keysar, Hayakawa, & An, 2012). Moreover, recent studies demonstrated that it also influences moral judgment (Costa, Foucart, Hayakawa, et al., 2014; Geipel et al., 2014). This research was confined to trolley dilemmas (Foot, 1978; Thomson, 1985) that create tension between a characteristically utilitarian perspective, which aims at maximizing net benefit, and a characteristically deontological perspective, which forbids actions that harm innocent others. You are informed that a runaway trolley will kill five people unless an action is performed, either pulling a lever (standard trolley dilemma) that would make the trolley switch to alternative tracks where one workman is standing, or by pushing a person off a bridge (footbridge dilemma). Is it morally acceptable to perform such actions? Adults and children by the age of four typically respond that it is acceptable to pull the lever, but not to push the person (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Pellizzoni, Siegal, & Surian, 2010).

The dual-process theory of moral judgment (e.g., Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) explains these findings by suggesting that responses result from a competition between an automatic, emotional system that prompts a deontological response, and a slow, controlled system that favors a utilitarian response.² When the proposed action is emotionally salient (pushing a person off a bridge), the emotional system predominates; when it is not (pulling a lever), the controlled system overrides the emotional system and produces a characteristically utilitarian response (see also Koenigs et al., 2007).

When these trolley dilemmas were presented in a foreign language, utilitarian responses increased but just for the footbridge dilemma (Costa, Foucart, Hayakawa, et al., 2014; Geipel et al., 2014). Furthermore, as proficiency in the foreign language increased, language differences decreased. These results were robust across a variety of foreign–native language combinations and cultures (for a replication, see Cipolletti et al., 2015). The proposed explanation is that foreign language triggers emotional distance, which privileges controlled processing (controlled-processing hypothesis). Its effects are observed in the footbridge dilemma, as this is typically processed by the emotional system, but not in the trolley dilemma, which is commonly processed by the controlled system (Greene et al., 2001).

Notice that these findings are also compatible with the automatic-processing hypothesis. The footbridge dilemma involves a prohibited action (pushing a person; see Cushman, 2013), whereas the trolley dilemma does not. It could be that foreign language promoted utilitarian responses for the footbridge dilemma, because it allowed people to see past the taboo action (either by reducing the aversive response linked to the prohibition, and/or by deactivating social and moral norms). This interpretation is consistent with recent research that shows that characteristically utilitarian responses do not necessarily imply controlled processes, but may also arise from impaired social cognition, such as reduced empathy (see Duke & Bègue, 2015; Kahane, Everett, Earp, Farias, & Savulescu, 2015).

Previous studies examining the role of foreign language on moral judgment have four limitations. First, they have examined only the trolley dilemmas, which involve severe personal harm and concern contrived cases distant from the participants’ experience (Hare, 1981; Sunstein, 2005). Second, these dilemmas involve a numerical tradeoff (killing *one* in order to save *five*). As processing information in a foreign language is difficult, people might have treated the dilemmas as simple math problems (Bloom, 2011). Third, these studies offer no empirical support for the central claim that language has a cooling effect on emotions, or that this cooling effect prompts controlled (utilitarian) reasoning. Fourth, the results are open to an in-group out-group interpretation (Caldwell-Harris, 2014). Participants reading the materials in a foreign language might have inferred that the scenarios concerned foreign people (out-group), whereas those reading them in the native language might have inferred that they concerned co-nationals (in-group). Research suggests that feeling socially connected to the characters portrayed in a scenario influences moral judgment (e.g., Bloom, 2011; Greene, 2013; Lucas & Livingston, 2014). Thus, the observed foreign language effect might reflect added assumptions, rather than the use of foreign language per se. In the present study we address all these issues.

Present research

Our first aim was to broaden the scope of the foreign language effect on moral judgment. We examined different types of violations that, according to the categorization proposed by Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997; see also Guerra & Giner-Sorolla, 2010), concern the ethics of Community (e.g., violations of loyalty), Autonomy (e.g., violations of fairness) and Divinity (e.g., violations of purity) (CAD for short; for an extension of this model see Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Joseph, 2008). We selected violations that did not involve physical harm, such as siblings having consensual and safe sex (see e.g., Björklund, Haidt, & Murphy, 2000; Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008; adapted from Haidt, 2001). People typically judge such behaviors as ethically wrong, but struggle to supply moral justifications (*moral dumbfounding*; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). To test the generalizability of this effect, we also asked participants to evaluate relatively harmful and harmless social norm violations in community and autonomy ethics. We predicted that foreign language would promote less harsh moral judgments.

Our second aim was to test whether the effect of foreign language on moral judgment is underpinned by an attenuation of emotions, as

² We follow Greene (2014) in using deontological and utilitarian to mean respectively “characteristically deontological” and “characteristically utilitarian” as a function of the response content, not the underlying motivation.

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