Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics 108 (2017) 116–130

journal of PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

# Loving a partner in a Foreign Language

Jean-Marc Dewaele *, Lora Salomidou

*Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom*

Received 7 July 2016; received in revised form 28 November 2016; accepted 11 December 2016

**Abstract**

This is the first relatively large-scale study ($N = 429$) based on an online questionnaire and written interviews to investigate whether language and cultural differences within cross-cultural couples made emotional communication more difficult. Opinions were divided with a third of participants claiming no difficulty and half mentioning limitations in the Foreign Language (LX) as well as a lack of emotional resonance of the LX. A minority reported experiencing a lack of genuineness at the start of the relationship. However, obstacles turned out not to be insurmountable and faded in months for more than three quarters of participants. Longer relationships led to affective socialisation in the LX and the partner's language often became the language of the heart. The speed and depth of this affective socialisation in the LX was linked to multicultural personality traits and gender, with female participants reporting more difficulties in communicating emotions and feeling less authentic at the start of the relationship. This gender difference faded over time. Female participants were also more likely to adopt their partner's language. Qualitative data revealed a wide variety of views, with over half of the participants mentioning the constraints of the LX while a quarter reported emotional liberation in the LX.


*Keywords:* Emotion; Love; Multilingualism; Personality; Gender; Cross-cultural couples

## 1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are arguably the most profound, exhilarating and meaningful relationships humans experience (Tomlinson and Aron, 2013). Effortless expression of emotions is crucial in such relationships. Communicating these emotions appropriately can be challenging even in a native language (L1). A famous example occurs in the romantic French play by Edmond Rostand *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). In acte III, scene 7, handsome Christian is standing under the balcony of the beautiful Roxanne to woo her. As he is unable to express his romantic interest appropriately, he has asked Cyrano – who has an extremely large nose – to help him, again, to express his tender feelings. After a tepid start to the conversation, Roxanne threatens to close the window ''Vous parlez trop mal. Allez-vous-en ! (. . .) Vous ne m'aimez plus !'' ('You speak too badly. Go away (. . .) You don't love me anymore'). Cyrano whispers poetic phrases in Christian's ear which he reproduces haltingly until Roxanne complains about the delivery. At that point Cyrano takes over, and, imitating Christian's voice and remaining out of view, manages to charm Roxanne with his witty and heartfelt rhyming couplets. After several minutes of this interaction Christian become impatient and when Cyrano pauses momentarily, he buts in and demands a kiss. Roxanne reacts badly and says ''Hein?'' ('What?!'), ''Vous demandez''? ('You ask?'). Cyrano berates Christian for wanting to go too quickly and manages to take up the thread again. When Christian sits next to his beloved in a later scene he decides the moment has come to declare his love and he says: ''Je vous aime'' ('I love you'),

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail address:* j.dewaele@bbk.ac.uk (J.-M. Dewaele).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.12.009
0378-2166/

she answers ''Oui, parlez-moi d'amour'' ('Yes, talk to me about love'), so Christian shifts to the informal second person pronoun and says ''Je t'aime''. Roxanne is still not satisfied and encourages him to say more: ''C'est le thème. Brodez, brodez'' ('that's the theme, develop it now'). The only thing Christian then manages to blurt out is: ''Je t'aime tant'' ('I love you so much'), which Roxanne greets coldly and impatiently: ''Sans doute! Et puis?'' ('No doubt! And what more?').

Foreign Language (LX) users[1] may find themselves in Christian's shoes because it is difficult to express emotions as fluently and as well in an LX as in an L1. Knowledge of the right words is crucial but not sufficient – indeed Christian knows the words – but the difficulty lies in how they are combined into stretches of discourse in order to create the intended complex illocutionary effects. Wood's (2016) work on family communication shows that emotions are key to communication and that they are affected by the language used: ''Emotions are affected by words and thoughts. How we feel is affected by what we say to others and what we communicate to ourselves through self-talk'' (p. 343). Wood could have been commenting on the extracts of *Cyrano de Bergerac* discussed previously. Cross-cultural communication in an LX adds an extra obstacle because the emotions wanting to be expressed or needing to be decoded in the LX can have subtle shades that escape easy verbalisation, the connotations of the emotion words or expressions can be complex, the scripts (and hence the order) in which these words and sentences and silences appear differ widely from language to language and from culture to culture (Dewaele, 2012, 2013; Jahoda and Lewis, 2015; Pavlenko, 2005). It means that asking for a kiss too soon could lead to a flat refusal, or that the inability to expand on a generic declaration of love could risk creating the impression of being trite and uninteresting.

Once the first hurdles have been crossed, and the participants become lovers, misunderstandings can still occur which can put a strain on the relationship (Fitzpatrick et al., 1993). Piller (2002) argues that because the nature of intimate relationships has changed in recent times, ''spousal communication has increased in importance'' (p. 4). Whereas in the past couples could be formed to constitute an economic unit and to start a family, partners today are more inspired by romantic reasons: ''to share their free time and to be friends'' (p. 4). In other words, the focus has shifted from being a ''good housekeeper, breadwinner or sexual partner to being a good communicator'' (p. 4). This has profound implications for modern couples with different language profiles. They will have to choose a (set of) common language(s) and cultural values. What factors will intervene in these choices? To what extent will they celebrate their multilingualism and multiculturalism? Will these multilingual and intercultural couples face language ''issues'' and could these lead to conflict? Research to date has often been limited to case studies, such as Piller's (2002) pioneering work on a corpus of more than 20 h of private conversations between partners in English–German bilingual marriages.

The present study presents a larger-scale retrodictive investigation[2] of multicultural couples' communication and more specifically the impact of LX use on communication of emotions. The approach will be mainly quantitative with some qualitative data, as we used an online questionnaire to collect data from 429 participants who were in a romantic relationship with a speaker of a different first language.

The focus will be on the language choices for the expression of emotions rather than on the emotions themselves and on the feelings that participants experienced in these interactions. After a brief literature review, we will introduce the research questions and present our analytical framework and methodology. The analyses of quantitative and qualitative data will be presented in the following section. The findings will be linked to patterns highlighted in the literature review. Finally, we will point to the limitations of our research design and draw some tentative conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

Riela et al. (2010:491) summarised the amazing experience of falling in love as follows: ''Falling in love is complex – it can occur swiftly or gradually, softly or to an overwhelming degree''. Communication between the lovers is crucial for the relationship (Piller, 2001). Coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds adds an extra dimension to a complex psychological process. Piller (2002) in her study of German-English couples describes the importance of the private language. She argues that this private language is the central element of the relationship, a glue that binds it together (p. 222). She found that many couples perceive their private language as the foundation of their relationship:

> . . .we were both happy then that we could speak German, and our relationship started with drinking coffee and speaking, and so speaking was- was very important to us and whenever we are having a serious conversation, it really needs to be in German, otherwise it doesn't go well, and it doesn't feel right (p. 222).

[1] We use the term Foreign Language users (LX users) rather than ''non-native speakers'' because it is a value-neutral term referring to legitimate users of an LX who are are by definition also native speakers of L1(s). LX(s) are acquired after the L1(s), i.e. after the age of three, to any level of proficiency (see Dewaele, in press).

[2] Chan et al. (2015) defined this as a method that looks at outcomes – in other words end-states – before tracing back the developmental trajectories leading to these outcomes.