

Oprima dos for better cognition

MANY people report feeling like different people when they speak a foreign language. I've been sceptical of these claims, since many of them seem to line up too neatly with national stereotypes: "I feel warmer and more relaxed in Spanish," "German makes me reason more carefully" and the like. But a new study seems to show that people really do think differently in a foreign language—any foreign language. Namely, people are less likely to fall into common cognitive traps when tested in a language other than their mother tongue. The study is "The Foreign-Language Effect: Thinking in a Foreign Tongue Reduces Decision Biases" by Boaz Keysar, Sayuri L. Hayakawa and Sun Gyu An in *Psychological Science* (unfortunately behind a paywall, but written up by *Wired* [here](#)).

Writers like Daniel Kahneman, Richard Thaler, Cass Sunstein, Dan Ariely and others have written extensively about our propensity for flawed reasoning. Mr Kahneman, in particular, has focused on loss aversion: people's willingness to take irrational risks (mathematically speaking) in order to avoid suffering a loss. But this effect, it seems, disappears when subjects are tested in a foreign language. One group of native English-speakers who also spoke Japanese was divided into two. One half was given a version of Mr Kahneman's loss-aversion game in their native language (English). The second was given the same test in their foreign language (Japanese). The tendency to take risky, irrational bets to avoid losses nearly disappeared for those tested the foreign language (Japanese). A second test, of Koreans who speak English, found the same thing: the Koreans made more balanced, cautious choices in English.

This fits Mr Kahneman's thinking nicely. He posits two general systems of thinking: System 1, intuitive and quick, good for most purposes, but prone to those pesky cognitive traps; and System 2, deliberative and slow, better at higher reasoning but effortful to activate and keep active. The brain, which minimises effort where it can, leans on System 1 wherever possible. But modern life presents many problems better suited to System 2.

The hypothesis behind the "foreign-language effect" is that speaking the foreign language activates System 2 in advance of tackling the tricky questions. This would not have been obvious from the outset, though. Another possible result might have been that using the foreign language tires the brain, and that this fatigue might make people more, not less, prone to mistakes. Mr Kahneman, after all, describes "ego deple-

tion" leading to bad choices in other studies. But in this study, the effect of priming System 2 appears to have been stronger than any fatigue effect.

Yet more reason to learn a foreign language, dear readers. Yet an irony emerges: if the hypothesis is correct, the better cognition should only obtain when people are using their foreign language with some effort. If you become so fluent that you are nearly a balanced bilingual, would the effect disappear? More research awaits, but Johnson certainly hopes that this result won't discourage anyone from polishing up their foreign languages.

People's introspection on their own thinking and language-use is often unreliable. Nonetheless, this study seems to indicate that there's something there. So a question: do you think differently when using different languages? And if so, how?