

Change of Language, Change of Personality?

Understanding the link between language and personality in bilinguals.

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Bilingual 1: *"When I'm around Anglo-Americans, I find myself awkward and unable to choose my words quickly enough ... When I'm amongst Latinos/Spanish-speakers, I don't feel [shy](#) at all. I'm witty, friendly, and ... I become very out-going."*

Bilingual 2: *"In English, my speech is very polite, with a relaxed tone, always saying "please" and "excuse me." When I speak Greek, I start talking more rapidly, with a tone of [anxiety](#) and in a kind of rude way..."*

Bilingual 3: *"I find when I'm speaking Russian I feel like a much more gentle, "softer" person. In English, I feel more "harsh," "businesslike."*

Could it be that bilinguals who speak two (or more) languages change their [personality](#) when they change language? After all, the Czech proverb does say, "Learn a new language and get a new soul."

Despite the fact that many bilinguals report being different in each of their languages, only few researchers have attempted to get to the bottom of this question. Early in her [career](#), Berkeley Emeritus Professor Susan Ervin-Tripp conducted a study in which she asked Japanese-American women to complete sentences she gave them in both Japanese and English. She found that they proposed very different endings depending on the language used. Thus, for the sentence beginning, "When my wishes conflict with my

family . . ." one participant's Japanese ending was, ". . . it is a time of great unhappiness," whereas the English ending was, ". . . I do what I want."

More than forty years later, Baruch College Professor David Luna and his colleagues asked Hispanic American bilingual women students to interpret target advertisements picturing women, first in one language and, six months later, in the other. They found that in the Spanish sessions, the bilinguals perceived women in the ads as more self-sufficient as well as [extrovert](#). In the English sessions, however, they expressed more traditional, other-dependent and family-oriented views of the women.

The spontaneous reports by individual bilinguals, and the results of studies such as those mentioned here, have intrigued me over the years. I noted first of all that monocultural bilinguals who make up the majority of bilinguals in the world are not really concerned by this phenomenon. Although bi- or multilingual, they are in fact members of just one culture. But what about bicultural bilinguals? I proposed in my first book on bilingualism, *Life with Two Languages*, that what is seen as a change in personality is most probably simply a shift in attitudes and behaviors that correspond to a shift in situation or context, independent of language. Basically, the bicultural bilinguals in these studies were behaving biculturally, that is, adapting to the context they were in (see [here](#)).

As we saw in an earlier post, bilinguals use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people (see [here](#)). Different contexts and domains trigger different impressions, attitudes and behaviors. What is taken as a personality shift due to a change of language may have little, if anything, to do with language itself.

Imagine the way we speak to a best friend and the behavior that we adopt. Then, think of how all this changes when we are speaking the same language to a superior (e.g. a school head, [religious](#) authority or employer). We behave differently and sometimes change attitudes and feelings even though the language is the same.

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The same is true for bilinguals except that here the language may be different. It is the environment, the culture, and the interlocutors that cause bicultural bilinguals to change attitudes, feelings and behaviors (along with language)—and not their language as such. In essence, there does not seem to be a direct causal relationship between language and personality.

A Swiss German-French-English trilingual gives us a concluding statement that is fitting:

"When talking English, French or German to my sister, my personality does not change. However, depending on where we are, both our behaviors may adapt to certain situations we find ourselves in."

Note: This topic is taken up again in a second post (see [here](#)).

References

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"Life as a bilingual" posts by content area:

http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/blog_en.html

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