

How Morality Changes in a Foreign Language



What defines who we are? Our habits? Our aesthetic tastes? Our memories? If pressed, I would answer that if there is any part of me that sits at my core, that is an essential part of who I am, then surely it must be my moral center, my deep-seated sense of right and wrong.

And yet, like many other people who speak more than one language, I often have the sense that I'm a slightly different person in each of my languages—more assertive in English, more relaxed in French, more sentimental in Czech. Is it possible that, along with these differences, my moral compass also points in somewhat different directions depending on the language I'm using at the time?

Psychologists who study moral judgments have become very interested in this question. Several recent studies have focused on how people think about ethics in a non-native language—as might take place, for example, among a group of delegates at the United Nations using a *lingua franca* to hash out a resolution. The findings suggest that when people are confronted with moral dilemmas, they do indeed respond differently when considering them in a foreign language than when using their native tongue.

In [a 2014 paper](#) led by Albert Costa, volunteers were presented with a moral dilemma known as the "trolley problem": imagine that a runaway trolley is careening toward a group of five people standing on the tracks, unable to move. You are next to a switch

that can shift the trolley to a different set of tracks, thereby sparing the five people, but resulting in the death of one who is standing on the side tracks. Do you pull the switch?

Most people agree that they would. But what if the only way to stop the trolley is by pushing a large stranger off a footbridge into its path? People tend to be very reluctant to say they would do this, even though in both scenarios, one person is sacrificed to save five. But Costa and his colleagues found that posing the dilemma in a language that volunteers had learned as a foreign tongue dramatically increased their stated willingness to shove the sacrificial person off the footbridge, from fewer than 20% of respondents working in their native language to about 50% of those using the foreign one. (Both native Spanish- and English-speakers were included, with English and Spanish as their respective foreign languages; the results were the same for both groups, showing that the effect was about using a foreign language, and not about *which* particular language—English or Spanish—was used.)

Using a very different experimental setup, [Janet Geipel and her colleagues](#) also found that using a foreign language shifted their participants' moral verdicts. In their study, volunteers read descriptions of acts that appeared to harm no one, but that many people find morally reprehensible—for example, stories in which siblings enjoyed entirely consensual and safe sex, or someone cooked and ate his dog after it had been killed by a car. Those who read the stories in a foreign language (either English or Italian) judged these actions to be less wrong than those who read them in their native tongue.

Why does it matter whether we judge morality in our native language or a foreign one? According to one explanation, such judgments involve two separate and competing modes of thinking—one of these, a quick, gut-level “feeling,” and the other, careful deliberation about the greatest good for the greatest number. When we use a foreign language, we unconsciously sink into the more deliberate mode simply because the effort of operating in our non-native language cues our cognitive system to prepare for strenuous activity. This may seem paradoxical, but is in line with [findings](#) that reading math problems in a hard-to-read font makes people *less* likely to make careless mistakes (although these results have proven [difficult to replicate](#)).

An alternative explanation is that differences arise between native and foreign tongues because our childhood languages vibrate with greater emotional intensity than do those learned in more academic settings. As a result, moral judgments made in a foreign language are less laden with the emotional reactions that surface when we use a language learned in childhood.

There's strong evidence that memory intertwines a language with the experiences and interactions through which that language was learned. For example, people who are

bilingual [are more likely to recall an experience](#) if prompted in the language in which that event occurred. Our childhood languages, learned in the throes of passionate emotion—whose childhood, after all, is not streaked through with an abundance of love, rage, wonder, and punishment?—become infused with deep feeling. By comparison, languages acquired late in life, especially if they are learned through restrained interactions in the classroom or blandly delivered over computer screens and headphones, enter our minds bleached of the emotionality that is present for their native speakers.

[Catherine Harris and her colleagues](#) offer compelling evidence for the visceral responses that a native language can provoke. Using the skin's electrical conductivity to measure emotional arousal (conductivity increases as adrenaline surges), they had native Turkish speakers who had learned English late in life listen to words and phrases in both languages; some of these were neutral (*table*) whereas others were taboo (*shit*) or conveyed reprimands (*Shame on you!*). Their participants' skin responses revealed heightened arousal for taboo words compared to neutral ones, especially when these were spoken in their native Turkish. But the strongest difference between languages was evident with reprimands: the volunteers responded very mildly to the English phrases, but had powerful reactions to the Turkish ones, with some reporting that they "heard" these reprimands in the voices of close relatives. If language can serve as a container for potent memories of our earliest transgressions and punishments, then it is not surprising that such emotional associations might color moral judgments made in our native language.

The balance is tipped even further toward this explanation by [a recent study](#) published in the journal *Cognition*. This new research involved scenarios in which good intentions led to bad outcomes (someone gives a homeless person a new jacket, only to have the poor man beat up by others who believe he has stolen it) or good outcomes occurred despite dubious motives (a couple adopts a disabled child to receive money from the state). Reading these in a foreign language rather than a native language led participants to place greater weight on outcomes and less weight on intentions in making moral judgments. These results clash with the notion that using a foreign language makes people think more deeply, because other research has shown that careful reflection makes people think *more* about the intentions that underlie people's actions rather than less.

But the results do mesh with the idea that when using a foreign language, muted emotional responses—less sympathy for those with noble intentions, less outrage for those with nefarious motives—diminished the impact of intentions. This explanation is bolstered by [findings](#) that patients with brain damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, an area that is involved in emotional responding, showed a similar pattern of

responses, with outcomes privileged over intentions.

What then, is a multilingual person's "true" moral self? Is it my moral memories, the reverberations of emotionally charged interactions that taught me what it means to be "good"? Or is it the reasoning I'm able to apply when free of such unconscious constraints? Or perhaps, this line of research simply illuminates what is true for all of us, regardless of how many languages we speak: that our moral compass is a combination of the earliest forces that have shaped us and the ways in which we escape them.