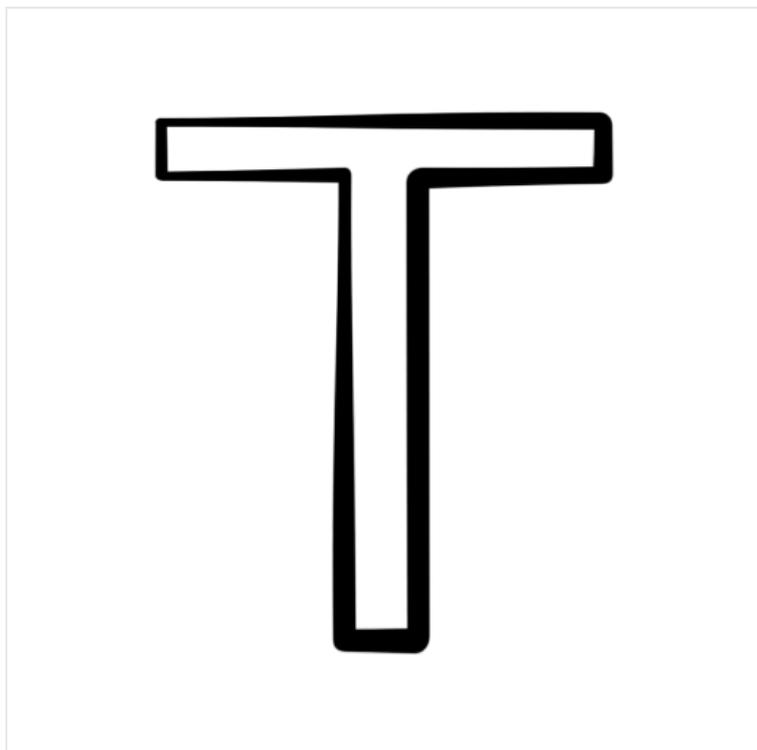


The Morality of Language — Human Parts — Medium



The Morality of Language

Does speaking in a second language make you a more moral person?



Tragedy can strike but it doesn't mean we can't make the best of it. When Frank's dog was struck and killed by a car in front of his house, he grew curious what Fido might taste like. So he cooked him up and ate him for dinner. It was a harmless decision, but, nonetheless, one could understandably consider it immoral. Or take incest: a brother, who's using a condom, and his sister, who's on birth control, decide to have sex. They enjoy it but keep it a secret and don't do it again. Is their action morally wrong? If they're both consenting adults and not hurting anyone, can one level a legitimate moral judgment?

Along with a student cheating on an exam and a woman secretly cutting up a national flag to use for cleaning her toilet, Janet Geipel of the University of Trento in Italy posed these fictional scenarios to Germanophone, Italophone, and Anglophone college students in both their native language and in a second language that they spoke almost fluently. What Geipel found in her brand new [July 2015 study](#) is that "the use of a foreign language, as opposed to a native language, elicited less harsh moral judgments." She also concluded that a distance is created between emotional and moral topics when speaking in a second language.

People are more likely to act less emotionally and more rationally when speaking their second language, according to Geipel. Nelson Mandela seemed to have understood this dynamic decades ago when he said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

The question of whether language influences morality is a desperately important one: if moral decisions are contingent on the language in which they are posed, then the decisions of people who must work in a foreign language on a daily basis—immigrants, international corporations, international institutions—would need to be reevaluated. Whether it's Goldman Sachs in Paris or the United Nations in Burma, decisions made by people speaking their non-native languages appear to be less concerned with morality and more concerned with rationality and utilitarianism.

Moral decisions tend to be made using two thought processes—one subconscious, one conscious. The emotional content of a dilemma is first **understood subconsciously**. One reacts to a situation's emotional content without realizing it. You hear about sibling incest and you get emotionally disgusted: you don't reason through it; you just react. The second step is **conscious evaluation**. This takes rationality, effort, and cognitive control. You think about incest or dead dog-eating further and realize that no one is being hurt and that just because something is peculiar might not necessarily mean it is immoral.

Geipel believes that moral decision-making in a second language does not significantly change this conscious-subconscious dynamic. “The present findings are not consistent with the idea that foreign language promotes a switch from intuitive to controlled processes,” she writes, “but rather suggest that intuitive processes remain active.” What this means is that people may be more moral when speaking their first language and more rational when speaking their second language, but people are still taking the time to think through all of their decisions.

Boaz Keysar of the University of Chicago and Albert Costa of the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona came to a similar conclusion. In 2014, Keysar and Costa posed the “trolley dilemma”—where pushing one man onto train tracks can save five people from being killed (sacrificing one for five)—to more than a thousand people in five different languages. They **found** that people reading the scenario in their non-native language were significantly more likely to push the man than those reading in their native language. When reading in their native language, 20 percent of participants would push the man; when reading in their non-native language, 33 percent would push him.

Similar to Geipel, Keysar and Costa concluded that the cognitive load required to understand a scenario in a second language creates an emotional distance, and, when

speaking in a second language, people tend to process moral dilemmas consciously and rationally rather than subconsciously and emotionally.

This conscious-subconscious dynamic of morality can be seen elsewhere. In 1986, Michael Bond and Tat-ming Lai [found](#) that Chinese-English bilinguals were more open to discussing embarrassing topics, such as intimate sexual information, when chatting in their non-native language. And in 2010 Jean-Marc Dewaele [found](#) that multilinguals from the United Kingdom preferred swearing in their second language, claiming that it allowed them to escape from cultural and social restrictions.



"Allegory of the Morality of Earthly Things," Tintoretto, 1585



Yet Keysar and Costa found that moral decision-making could, alternatively, be a function of not just language but the cultural norms that are associated with those languages as well.

For instance, Keysar and Costa asked Spanish, Korean, French, Hebrew, and English speakers to weigh in on the trolley decision in both their native language and a non-native language they spoke almost fluently. When native Korean speakers were asked in Korean about the dilemma not a single person chose to push the man in front of the track. When asked in in English, however, 7.5 percent of native Korean speakers made the utilitarian decision to push him, implying that speaking Korean makes one less aggressive and less willing to actively sacrifice a life. Alternatively, when native Anglophones spoke Spanish, they became more aggressive and were significantly more likely to push the man to save the five than when they spoke their native English, implying that speaking Spanish could make one more aggressive and utilitarian.

When people work in their native language, they read or hear a moral scenario like the trolley dilemma or the dog-eating story and immediately react. But working in a non-native language appears to create a barrier through which emotions must pass.

In many ways, this can be a positive change: when judgments of immorality are based on things that make us subconsciously feel “weird” or “unsettled” then skewed policy tends to follow.

Should gay or transgender people not be allowed to marry because it initially seems “bizarre” to a few people? Should contraception be denied to women because it is

“different” or because pre-marital sex makes certain people “uncomfortable”? If no one is being harmed by an action, rarely can it then be considered immoral. If one were to rationally and consciously think through these moral dilemmas, might one’s decision be different than if one were to merely react immediately and emotionally?

It seems likely. And yet, as the psychologist Nalini Ambady famously [showed](#), it’s extremely difficult to get past our initial reactions. Our first perception tends to color all future perceptions and first perceptions happen so quickly that we rarely have time to override them.

That’s the importance of a non-native language: if morally ambiguous scenarios are approached with a second language then that initial subconscious bias might not come into play. *All* decisions could be made consciously and rationally. Speaking a second language, therefore, may be one of the most moral things you can do.

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