

FEELING DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES? WHAT DO POLYGLOTS SAY ABOUT IT?

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Abstract

This study focuses on multicultural polyglots who have lived in different countries and languages throughout their lives, maintaining strong ties to multiple countries. It is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. Forty-seven adult polyglots from various countries were interviewed. Participants speak between 4 and 35 languages and use several languages daily. Among the questions asked, one explores self-perception in different languages: do polyglots feel different when switching languages? While this question is not new in scientific literature, studies often focus on bilinguals or trilinguals.

I propose to examine the perceptions of adult polyglots: do they feel different when using different languages? I will only analyze cases where mastery of the language is not an issue.

Many respondents report feeling the same regardless of the language they use. I analyze the reasons provided for feeling different or not.

Keywords: *multicultural polyglots, feeling different, self-perception in different languages, voice, stuttering*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is known that learning a new language, especially when it is the first L2, brings about a sense of novelty. Adult learners realize how much comfort their native language provides them for expressing themselves and interacting in society. In situations where they cannot use their L1 (or any other well-mastered language), for example abroad, and function normally, a whole range of feelings arises. A new language brings many new things: a new way of articulating, constructing sentences, and communicating within a new cultural context. Each new language opens a door into a new world.

Depending on the progress in learning and mastering the second language, and especially on the effective use of the L2, the feeling of novelty and strangeness will diminish. The language may even become familiar. Maybe not.

The theme of feeling different when speaking different languages is not new, but it continues to generate considerable interest. This topic has been frequently addressed in second language acquisition literature, as well as in psychology, psychoanalysis, and literature.

2. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE QUESTION OF FEELING DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Bilinguals and multilinguals often assert that their personality changes – they feel like different people when speaking different languages.

The interpretation of the question “Do you feel different when you speak different languages?” varies greatly: changes in voice, expressions, use of humor, being more or less warm, talkative, rational, more or less extraverted or introverted, perceived obligation to conform to ideological standards (for example, appearing more tolerant than one actually is), or avoiding certain topics of conversation are reported.

Some research on the subject suggests criteria for analyzing perceived differences. However, it is impossible to have an exhaustive list of criteria to evaluate all the perceptions of differences that bilinguals and multilinguals describe. The same applies to the number of variables involved. Even with

a similar profile (for example, immigrants from country X in country Y, of the same age and similar socio-economic status, and with similar proficiency in L2), the relationships that each interviewed person maintains with a language remain unique.

By asking the question “Do you feel different when you speak different languages?”, it implies that one always feels the same when speaking a language and remains the same person. Obviously, this is not about cases of schizophrenia. In adult life, we take on multiple social roles in a variety of communication situations, and each person performs these roles in their own way. Lexical choices result from these roles. If a monolingual person does everything in one language, in the case of multilinguals, a particular language may be partially or completely excluded from certain contexts: for example, L1 is reserved for family use, L2 for work, L3 for studies, and so on. Therefore, it seems legitimate to feel somewhat different in these three languages. Imbalances in language use according to contexts, frequency of language use, language proficiency, as well as attitudes and feelings towards languages, cultures, and countries lead to highly heterogeneous responses.

Now, let's imagine multilinguals who use the same languages in the same contexts, learned these languages during childhood, and have the same level of proficiency in these languages. Unlikely? Would these individuals feel identical in all these languages? I suppose that even in this situation, the responses would vary.

Ultimately, to what extent are multilinguals aware of the changes caused by switching languages and environments? The impossibility of considering all variables and reducing every scenario to a common denominator leaves the question open.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted to examine the perceptions of bilinguals and multilinguals when switching languages. The question of feeling different has been analyzed from different perspectives, and the results obtained vary.

Pavlenko (2012) quoted by Dewaele (2015a) argues that

the L1 is often, but not necessary always, the most emotional language, as multilinguals' different languages can have different affective meaning depending on the interlocutors and the situations, and suggests that for some late bilinguals and foreign language users, their languages may be differently embodied, languages learned later in life being processed semantically but not affectively (Dewaele 2015a, p. 6).

Ramírez-Esparza et alii (2006) investigated Spanish-English bilinguals. They asked whether Spanish-English bilinguals show different personalities when using different languages? If so, are the two personalities consistent with cross-cultural differences in personality? The authors found “bilinguals were more extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious in English than in Spanish and these differences were consistent with the personality displayed in each culture” (Ramírez-Esparza et alii 2006, p. 115).

Venturin (2020) analyzed the views of nineteen Russian-Australian 1.5 generation migrants on feelings of difference when switching languages. The responses were categorized into three themes: emotions, personality/identity, and extra-linguistic causes. Those who reported feeling different when switching languages attribute it mainly to a lack of proficiency in Russian. Venturin (2020) mentions that “the freedom provided by the L2 seems to originate from [...] the limits imposed by reduced L1 skills, which hinder their full self-expression in this language”.

By analyzing 106 highly educated multilingual adults, Dewaele & Nakano (2012) found

a systematic shift in how multilinguals feel in their different languages. They reported feeling significantly more authentic, more logical, more emotional and more serious in their L1, with gradually lower values for languages which they had acquired later in life, and in which they felt significantly less proficient (Dewaele & Nakano 2012).

The environment and different interlocutors, rather than the language itself, can cause a feeling of being different when switching languages (Koven 2007, Ramírez-Esparza et alii 2006, Grosjean 2010, Dewaele & Nakano 2012, Dewaele 2008, Markus & Kitayama 1991). The change in socio-cultural context leads to a whole range of changes in verbal and non-verbal behavior that some bilinguals or multilinguals tend to attribute to a single language.

Another study conducted by Dewaele (2015b) with 1005 bilingual and multilingual participants who had answered the question about feeling different in different languages shows a rich diversity in participants' views and raises "some methodological issues, such as the accurate categorization of participants' ambiguous statements and the individual interpretation on the question". Dewaele (2015b) concludes:

So why do so many bi- and multilinguals feel different when switching languages? It seems that they do not always know. Many participants did present their own unique explanations, linking feelings of difference to conscious or unconscious behaviour and to the unique contexts in which they use their languages. Moreover, several participants reported these feelings to be dynamic in nature (Dewaele 2015b).

Keely (2018) examined the question from a cultural perspective: identification with the language's culture, significant experiences within that language and culture, and language proficiency play important roles:

Numerous multilinguals, the author included, have reported that they sometimes feel different when switching languages. The intensity of this feeling depends on the degree to which people identify with the culture associated with the language in question as well as their proficiency in the language and the total emotional salience of their experiences in the language and culture (Keely 2018, p. 75).

To summarize, research highlights several factors that influence the perception of differences, including: age of language acquisition, language proficiency, environment and socio-cultural context, interlocutors, experiences in language and culture, identification with the language's culture, as well as the challenges faced by bilinguals/multilinguals in grasping and describing these differences.

4. METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This study focuses on multicultural polyglots who have lived in different countries and languages throughout their lives, maintaining strong ties to multiple countries. It is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. Forty-seven adult polyglots from various countries were interviewed. Participants speak between 4 and 35 languages and use several languages daily. Among the questions asked, one explores self-perception in different languages: do polyglots feel different when switching languages? While this question is not new in scientific literature, studies often focus on bilinguals or trilinguals.

The qualitative approach based on interviews makes it possible to analyze the research question based on individual cases containing too many variables and therefore difficult to quantify.

The interviewer (the author of this article) is a hyperpolyglot and globe-trotter (Dankova 2021). This affinity with the participants facilitated establishing exchanges on equal footing and obtaining profound responses. Recruitment took place within the interviewer's circle and through friends and acquaintances, making the interviews more friendly and the responses more spontaneous and sincere.

In this article, I propose to examine the perceptions of adult polyglots: do they feel different when using different languages? I only analyze cases where mastery of the language is not an issue.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. *Feeling of difference*

The feeling of difference is primarily linked to the perception of differences in language proficiency. Objectively, expecting equal mastery of languages in bilinguals is unrealistic, especially when speaking four or more languages. Julien Green, an author who wrote in French and English and is often cited as an example of perfect bilingualism, mentions:

A completely bilingual person is indeed a very rare bird. I have known people who supposed to speak English as well as French and who, when the effort of speaking in a foreign tongue had been sustained too long, suddenly stumbled over the simplest words. Why this should be I don't understand, any more than I can understand why we are not all ambidextrous. (Green 1987, p. 168).

If most respondents are aware of the imbalance in language proficiency, the perception of differences can also be influenced by the environment:

(I) When I speak a language that I don't master 100%, I am perceived differently: there is less bla-bla-bla, fewer jokes, less spontaneity. Because of this perception, I start to feel somewhat different.

All the respondents have lived in multiple countries and languages, which results in chameleon-like behavior. There is significant confusion regarding the adaptation of verbal and non-verbal behavior to socio-cultural contexts on one hand, and the impression of being a different person on the other.

(K) I can't be a Frenchwoman who speaks Chinese. I have to behave like the Chinese.

A French-Canadian woman working in both English and French feels that her extraverted side is less well-received in English:

(L) I smile a lot and enjoy talking with others, but I feel like my cheerful temperament, even though I always remain professional, bothers some English speakers. I can't seem to be coolly polite and reserved. I don't have this problem when I speak French at work.

Several participants mention that they do not use familiar or slang words in languages other than their L1, tell few jokes (or none at all), and despite their good proficiency in these languages, their rhetorical style remains quite neutral. This verbal behavior results in them feeling less natural and spontaneous. A female participant explains:

(B) Yes, I feel different. In Spanish, I feel more affectionate; there is more warmth. In French, I am more rational. I was educated in French. If I am asked to write an argumentative text or an essay, I will not be able to do it in Spanish. In English, I am more social. Professionally, it's in French. Spanish is more about family. My father (French) didn't use many affectionate expressions in French. French feels more formal to me. I realize that I speak Spanish like my mother; I use the same expressions.

Experiences associated with a language can make one feel less comfortable in that language. A Kabyle participant, who claims to be the same person regardless of the language, describes his relationship with Arabic:

(F) It's rather cultural: I speak Kabyle; we were colonized by France, and you won't find a Kabyle who doesn't speak French. Speaking French is natural for people. Arabic is different: I feel a bit unlike myself when I speak Arabic because it's the direct contrast there that comes out. Because I don't feel comfortable, I force myself, especially with the dialectal Arabic. For two reasons: the first is that I have had bad experiences in Arabic; some Arabs, not all, in Algeria are like that - if you speak bad Arabic, they will think you're dumb, they will laugh at you. In dialectal Arabic, I don't feel like myself because of these bad experiences.

Another participant, born in Russia, shares her recent negative experiences in Germany and how this has altered her relationship with the German language:

(H) At university, I decided to learn German because I was drawn to German philosophy and authors. At that time, German was not popular in Russia for well-known reasons. I made several trips to Germany. The last two visits to Germany, along with an overdose of anti-Semitism and Russophobia, completely killed my desire to speak this language.

Spontaneously, many answer affirmatively to the question “Do you feel different when you speak different languages?” But when I rephrase the question as “Do you feel different when you speak different languages with the same people who are also multilingual?” – the responses change, and people tend to say no. The non-compartmentalized coexistence of languages and their regular use in the same contexts attenuate or eliminate the feeling of differences – this is the main reason why participants say no.

Age also appears to play a role when discussing perceptions of personality across different languages. Many mature respondents emphasize that their personality remains stable regardless of the language used or their language proficiency. A respondent in her fifties summarizes:

(M) At my age, I know who I am and how I am. I know myself well enough, and my personality and identity are already formed. Languages no longer exert any influence: they are part of me. This applies even to a new language I am currently learning; my proficiency in this language needs improvement, but it does not affect my personality.

5.2. Languages when things go wrong

When discussing different languages, some participants brought up topics related to therapy and stuttering. The choice of languages is crucial when a polyglot is struggling. The significance of language in therapy is documented in literature dealing with the care of migrant patients (Dahoun 1998, Douville 1998, Moro & Revah-Levy 1998, Sinatra 1998); however, studies focusing on the use of multiple languages in therapy are rare.

Costa & Dewaele (2012) that investigated beliefs, attitudes and practices of 101 monolingual and multilingual therapists in their interactions with multilingual patients consider that

training of psychotherapists needs to include a component on the psychological and therapeutic functions of multi/bilingualism and underlying implications for therapy. Training and supervision for psychotherapists could also include practice for therapists to make formulations in different languages (Costa & Dewaele 2012, p. 36).

Another study conducted by Costa & Dewaele (2013) focused on the experiences of 182 multilingual clients who had been exposed to various therapeutic approaches in different countries. The authors highlight that “code-switching allows clients to express themselves more fully to the therapist, adding depth and nuance to therapy. The therapist's multilingualism promotes empathy, and clients' own multilingualism constitutes an important aspect of their sense of self” (Costa & Dewaele 2013, p. 1).

Another issue concerns the therapeutic framework itself, for example, to what extent does the psychoanalytic framework suit patients who carry within them a cultural frame of reference distinct from that of the psychoanalyst, given that “this frame organizes their body image, the core of their identity, their screen of dreams, the mode of organization of their pathology” (Nathan 1988, p. 82).

Some participants emphasize that during difficult times (bereavement, divorce, illness, etc.), they mention that they would have liked to talk to people they knew when they were young, with whom they grew up and who share the same cultural framework. They quickly realize that the closeness they seek is part of the past: these participants are faced with the impossibility of using the languages they have mastered with their childhood and adolescent friends, who have also traveled and evolved in different environments. Some emphasize that the feeling of being uprooted amplifies negative emotions.

Sometimes, living in different countries and languages makes it difficult to talk about issues related to parents and childhood. One participant shares their therapeutic journey:

(G) I went to therapy in French. Then I had a therapist who spoke Portuguese, but she was from another country. That created a barrier. Ultimately, it wasn't very conclusive. After that, I tried

therapy in English, but I struggled to talk about my childhood. The culture of the country also influences this. I find it difficult to talk about my family, who are somewhat racist and homophobic, because the culture here is more tolerant. I censor myself depending on who I'm talking to.

5.3. *Escaping the mother tongue*

The fantasy of the foreign language as a liberating tongue that brings a new breath is common. In the book *Le schizo et les langues* (Wolfson 1970) ('The Schizophrenic and Languages'), the English-speaking author describes in French his attempts to escape his mother tongue by learning other languages without going through English. In the preface of the book, Deleuze describes this approach as a "ritual and propitiatory murder of the mother tongue": "the author cannot bear to hear his mother speak. Every word she utters wounds him, penetrates him, and resonates, echoing in his head" (Deleuze 1970, p.11).

For many individuals, learning a foreign language can represent a form of personal renewal and an opportunity to define oneself independently of previous family or cultural contexts. Mastering a foreign language can be seen as a way of rebuilding an identity independent of past family influences. A foreign language creates distance from the past, marks a new beginning, and provides a different voice.

5.4. *Stuttering, voice and languages*

Multilingualism, although it offers many advantages at all levels, is often accused of causing various language disorders such as language learning delays, stuttering, or academic delays. Most studies on stuttering examine cases of stuttering in children.

The relationship between bilingualism or multilingualism and stuttering has been a subject of inquiry since the 19th century, but even today, the topic remains under-studied. Most studies report clinical cases, which are few in number and have diverse profiles. These cases often involve migrant patients who are treated in a foreign language by speech therapists whose practices and tools are not universally applicable or culturally neutral (Rosenbaum 2012).

Prejudices against multilingualism are persistent: using two or more languages is discouraged or prohibited in the case of a child who stutters, with claims that "learning multiple languages is a challenging task that causes cognitive overload, which can manifest as stuttering" (Bijleveld 2014).

There is no consensus on the differences in stuttering manifestations in different languages in bilingual or multilingual individuals. Bijleveld & Estienne (2018) argue that when a multilingual child stutters, it occurs in both languages. If stuttering disappears in one language, it also disappears in the other languages (Bijleveld & Estienne 2018, p. 42).

Woumans et alii (2021), who conducted a study with twenty-eight bilingual people who stutter, performed spontaneous and controlled speech production tasks. Participants spoke once in their dominant language and once in their non-dominant language state that "speaking in a non-dominant language increases both typical and stuttering-like disfluencies in bilingual persons who stutter, but also that these two types of dysfluencies differ regarding their attentional origins".

Examining the presumed link between bilingualism and stuttering, Szmalec (2013) notes that:

There is no clear evidence, for example, that adults learning a second language begin to stutter. A direct causal link therefore seems unlikely at present. Does bilingualism pose a risk of stuttering? Here too, it appears highly improbable that bilingualism alone is a sufficient factor to cause stuttering (Szmalec 2013, p. 295).

The causes of stuttering are not unanimously agreed upon among researchers and speech therapists. Stuttering can have several causes: genetic, psychological, neurological, or linguistic (when a person uses two or more languages). In addition, stressful situations can cause stuttering. These factors can interact in a complex manner and vary from person to person. Physical predispositions leading to stuttering are rarely mentioned; proponents of this view emphasize that existing treatments are

ineffective. In cases where stuttering does not spontaneously disappear with age, which occurs in some children, speech therapy is powerless.

Having suffered greatly from stuttering himself and having tried various treatments proposed, Nagorny (1985), who presents a meticulous analysis of methods used for over a century, all of which have been disappointing in treating stuttering, asserts that:

The onset of stuttering in children results from an organic predisposition involving the constriction of the vocal cords. When this predisposition exists, any psychological or physical disturbance can trigger the reflex of contraction. In order to speak despite this vocal constriction, the child exerts physical efforts on their vocal organs, which can become habitual and manifest as stuttering (Nagorny 1985, p. 282).

The idea that stuttering disappears in a language other than L1 is not new. Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, a 19th century French physician, apparently assumed that it was possible to stutter in one language and be fluent in another one (van Borsel 2011). This idea has followers, and there are cases that prove it. Sibien (2021) mentions:

Some people believe that we change our personality when speaking a foreign language. This could help explain why individuals who stutter tend to speak more fluently in a specific language. Perhaps when speaking another language, we unconsciously take on a persona that is not quite ourselves, akin to an actor in a movie portraying someone else (Sibien 2021).

Two of our participants in the present study spontaneously raised the issue of stuttering. The first is a man in his thirties who experiences constant stuttering in Russian, his native language. In contrast, his stuttering does not manifest in three other languages learned in adulthood (English, French, and German). Having studied English and German at the linguistic university, he expresses himself with great ease and eloquence in English, his dominant foreign language. He mentions that the staccato rhythm and accentuation of German facilitate his articulation. Although he is less proficient in German than in English, he does not stutter. He also does not stutter in French. The interview was conducted in these four languages and confirmed his statements.

Another participant who suffered from stuttering as a child emphasizes that she still stutters in L1 if she is tired or stressed, but this does not occur in five other languages that she speaks. She has been working as an interpreter for several years. She explains that French gave her challenges: since in French, the accent falls only on the last syllable of a rhythmic group, the less marked accentuation compared to Italian or Hebrew, for example, sometimes triggers stuttering. She finds this "floating and unstable" accentuation, as she says, challenging, especially when she transitions from a language with a clearly marked accent to French, which she finds monotonous.

Another aspect of voice that some participants discussed is singing. These individuals assert that they have always had difficulties with singing, more physical than psychological. According to their testimonies, singing in languages other than L1 proves to be simpler. A participant testifies:

(J) I am not naturally shy, quite the opposite. My problem with singing seemed more physical: I couldn't sing, whether in a group or in the shower – my voice wouldn't come out. However, my job requires me to speak in public and I have a strong voice. Strangely, I can sing in languages I learned as an adult.

Another agrees along the same lines:

(Z) I have always hated singing. In the school choir, I opened my mouth to pretend to sing. It was impossible for me to sing. I studied at the conservatory of music, so it's not an issue with my ear. To my great surprise, I started singing without realizing it in language classes. Now, I can sing in my mother tongue. I don't know what happened...

It is difficult to draw conclusions from these cases. I limit myself to mentioning them. However, it is noteworthy that our participants attribute the changes to languages without indicating any other factor. I emphasize once again that I did not ask questions about stuttering or singing: our participants brought up these themes themselves.

A number of participants say that those around them notice a change in their voice when they speak different languages. However, these participants themselves do not perceive any change in their voice. While a person's voice remains recognizable regardless of the language they speak, there are indeed subtle variations in the way they use their voice for each language. These variations can be influenced by linguistic, cultural, and emotional aspects specific to each language. For example, apart from the phonetic characteristics of each language, in some cultures, speaking loudly may be socially acceptable, while in others, women are expected to speak in more distinctly high tones than men.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Participants, all multicultural polyglots, interpreted the question in various ways and spontaneously mentioned different aspects such as: language proficiency (for example, the degree of fluency in a language, non-use of slang or colloquial words, rhetorical style differing among languages, level of politeness); adaptation to cultural context and conformity to ideological standards; non-verbal behavior; experiences associated with a language; and perceptions of changes in emotional, rational, or reserved attitudes, among others.

Thus, participants tend to attribute differences to the language itself, whereas in reality, several variables influence the perception of differences.

When I asked for clarification on whether the differences mentioned persist when they speak different well-mastered languages with the same people and in the same situations, the majority of participants claim they feel the same. Therefore, it is not the language itself that is responsible for the feeling of being different when speaking different languages, but rather other variables related to socio-cultural context, communication situations, and interlocutors. Additionally, language proficiency and frequency of use also play a role.

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