



The Perception of Emotions in L1 and L2 among Arabic-English Bilinguals: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract

Emotions in the context of bilingualism present a complex and dynamic field of study (Dewaele, 2014). The current research focuses on emotional experiences related to language use, including attitudes towards different languages, the emotional impact of swear and taboo words, and the emotional weight of terms of endearment, particularly the phrase "I love you." Ten Jordanian international students, proficient in English (L2) and Arabic (L1), participated in semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Results indicate that participants perceive L1 as more emotional than L2, with preferences for expressing emotions, using terms of endearment, and saying "I love you" in L1. Swear and taboo words were often considered more emotionally potent in L1. Context, community, and age of acquisition influenced participants' emotional experiences in both languages. The study contributes to the understanding of emotional dynamics in bilingualism, emphasizing the importance of personal and contextual factors in shaping emotional responses to language use.

Keywords: bilingualism, emotions, swear words, taboo words, love

1. INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism nowadays has become a common phenomenon, the increase of immigration rate, study abroad programs, and easy access to languages through technology made it easier for people to learn an additional language. In the year of 1996, it was estimated that approximately two thirds of the worlds' children were raised in bilingual families and environments (Crystal, 2004). With the continuous increase in the number of bilinguals in the world, the number of studies conducted to investigate the phenomenon is increasing as well. The topic, bilingualism, has been heavily debated in the literature, and it appears that researchers' perception of who qualifies as bilingual is quite varied as well. Liebkind (1995) suggests that a person can be considered bilingual if they feel that they are bilinguals, and are considered as bilinguals by others" (p. 80) . Grosjean(2008) states that "Bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages (or dialects), and bilinguals are those people who use



two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives". Pavlenko (2006) defines bilingualism as "a unique linguistic and psychological phenomenon". In the past, research conducted on bilingualism was held without considering emotions, for language and emotions were considered as two completely separate fields. However, in recent years, researchers and scholars started examining the language bilinguals use in relation to emotions. According to Harbsmeier, (as cited in Wierzbicka, 2004), viewing bilingualism and multilingualism in relation to emotions, provides a better and a deeper understanding to the phenomenon. Dewaele (2005) suggests that using psychological and emotional SLA research in second language improves second language learners' sociocultural competency. Emotions are very important to humans, and the inability to express one's emotions well, would probably cause misunderstandings, affect relationships, and cause unhappiness between speakers (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Due to the crucial role emotions play in communication and second language learning, it is worthwhile to investigate the impact of speaking more than one language on people's expression of emotions. The present study attempts to examine the way Arabic-English bilinguals, who live in Hungary perceive and express their emotions, and whether their perception and expression of terms of endearment, and swear and taboo words is similar in the different languages they speak.

1.1. Research questions

Despite the fact that several studies have looked into the role of emotions in second language communication, yet much remains to be discovered about how bilinguals perceive their emotions during first and second language communication and whether it is affected by second language learner's age of acquisition, proficiency level, context of acquisition and language exposure, and many other possible factors. The present study takes a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews to explore the way bilinguals perceive and express their emotions in their different languages.

The research questions are as follows: The first research question is: How do international students in Hungary feel about the different languages they speak? The second research question is: How do international students in Hungary feel about swear and taboo words in the different language they speak? And the last research question is as follows: How do international students in Hungary feel about terms of endearment in the different languages they speak?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bilingualism and emotions

Several key questions are raised regarding the relationship between bilingualism and emotions, yet little attention has been paid to emotions in second language acquisition, except for anxiety (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Research conducted



on emotional expression in bilinguals shows that bilinguals usually do not express their emotions in the same way, depending on the language they are using. Various studies on emotion and language make a comparison between the emotional connection people have with their first and second language, previous research suggests that bilinguals' L1 is considered the language of emotions, which they prefer to use to express their emotions better (Anooshian & Hertel, 1994; Gutfreund, 1990). Marcos (1976) indicates that L2 is often related to intellectual functioning and is relatively detached from emotions; whereas L1 is more connected to the heart and used to express emotions.

Dewaele (2008) emphasizes the importance of expressing love, and states that the only thing that people hope would not go wrong is the confession of love. In his study on multilinguals' emotions in their different languages, Dewaele (2008) compares the emotional weight of the phrase 'I love you' in the different languages multilinguals speak. Findings indicate that most people find the phrase to be more powerful in their first languages, the rest of the participants' answers were divided, as one third of the participants stated having the same power of the phrase in both languages, while the remaining quarter stated that the phrase had more power when used in their second language.

Studies on bilinguals' emotions show that bilinguals use their second language (L2) to protect themselves from negative memories, or to distance themselves from intense emotions (Aycicegi & Harris, 2004; Bond & Lai, 1989). Anooshian and Hertel (1994) discovered that participants recalled emotion words better than neutral words in their first language, but that was not the case in L2. Schrauf (2000) argues that when individuals mention memories which were experienced in their first language, they are usually significantly more emotional when those memories are discussed using their first language.

The above-mentioned studies suggest that L1 is the language of emotional expression, while L2 is the language of emotional detachment; as a result, various researchers in the field were intrigued to investigate the different variables that could be related to L1 stronger emotionality (Altarriba 2008, Dewaele 2004, 2008, 2010, Pavlenko, 2008, Haryanto 2020). Research proposes that higher L1's emotionality is related to the context in which the language was acquired. Since a bilingual's L1 acquisition often occurs in a rich emotional context, which is related to caretakers and parents, it is often considered to be the most emotional language and the closest to the heart, while the emotionality of the bilinguals' second language differs, as they are usually learned in less emotional contexts and more formal settings, like school or work.

King (2011) argues that the language which individuals feel more connected to, and which carries more emotional intensity is the language that is connected to the childhood, in which emotional events took place. It is known that childhood is the time in which most humans have the best and most emotional memories, which explains why first language is usually people's most emotional language. In the same line of research, another proposed variable related L1's higher emotionality is the



level of proficiency: a high level of proficiency in a second language could enable learners to gain access and exposure to more emotional contexts via close contacts with L2 native speakers (Harris et al. 2006). In contrast, Marian and Kaushanskaya (2008) in their study on Russian-English narratives, argue that participants expressed more emotions in their second language because they felt the urge to use more emotion terms in their narratives when using their L2 to compensate for the emotional distance effect, which contributed to the increased emotionality in the English narratives. They also argue that a bilingual's emotional language is usually the language of preference rather than proficiency. Ferré et al. (2010) tested bilinguals' memory of positive, negative and neutral words, their results are also in contrast with previous research, as their results suggest that age of second language acquisition, the context of the acquisition, language dominance, and similarities between the first and second language do not affect the memory of emotional words in the second language. In the light of previous studies it can be concluded that researchers agree that the mother tongue is the language closer to the heart, which people feel more connected to, and has more emotional weight than their second language; however, it is important that language emotionality should be investigated in relation to many other variables that play an important role in bilinguals' perceptions of emotions in their different languages.

2.2 Swear and taboo words in bilingualism

Using swear and taboo words is considered a linguistic device employed by the speakers to gain in-group membership and create social norms and boundaries in language use (Dewaele, 2004a). Dewaele (2004a) in his study investigated the choice of language for swearing in connection with the context of acquisition, age of acquisition, proficiency and language dominance. Data was collected from 1,039 multilinguals using a web questionnaire. Results show that participants preferred to express swear and taboo words in their L1 and not in their L2, but that is dependent on the intention of the speaker, also the results show that there is a positive relationship between frequent use of the language and the choice for swearing, while gender and educational level were found to have no significance on the language chosen for swearing.

Dewaele (2010) further investigated the preferred language of swearing among multilinguals who reported the same level of proficiency in their first and second language. The data suggested that even for bilinguals who perceive themselves equally proficient in their first and second language, the preferred language for swearing is the first language, because swear and taboo words were found stronger in L1 and that was found to help participants express their anger more powerfully. Colbeck and Bowers (2012) found similar results and suggest that the mother tongue is more emotional, and taboo words have a greater emotional effect in the first language. Additionally, reprimands were also found to affect bilinguals in their L1 more than in their L2, Pavlenko (2005) in her study found that Turkish-English late bilinguals consider reprimands in L1 to have a bigger impact than in their



L2. According to her, learning languages early in life causes participants to perceive taboo words and reprimands to be more powerful in these languages. At the same time, learning other languages later in life would produce a sense of detachment when processing such words in them (Pavlenko, 2005).

The literature suggests that L1 is perceived to be more emotional than L2 (in general, this may not always be the case), the emotional resonance of swear and taboo words is stronger in bilinguals' L1, which is affected by several independent variables, and this emotionality must be considered in relation of various variables that have a great impact on the way bilinguals feel. The current study seeks to investigate bilinguals' emotions in the languages they speak, in connection to the age and context of acquisition, L2 proficiency level, and language exposure, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the topic.

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

Participants are ten Jordanian international students, who won a scholarship to study in Hungary. Their first language is Arabic, their second language is English, which they speak fluently as they all obtain a minimum score of 80 in the TOEFL exam. They were contacted via social media (Messenger) to participate in this study. A message was sent to the participants to ask for their approval to participate and to provide them with a short explanation of the nature of the study and its main topic. The sample consisted of 10 participants (5 females, 5 males) studying Ph.D. in their first year, who have been residing in Hungary for at least two years. The ages of participants are 25, 26 and 28. All the participants learned their second language in schools, starting at the age of 7, In Jordan, it is compulsory for children to start learning English at this age. Since all participants live in Hungary, they all reported using their L2 almost as much as their L1 during the day.

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

Due to the pandemic situation the participants and the researcher communicated through Microsoft Teams, to do the online interviews, the whole process was recorded. No time limit was set in advance, and the meetings lasted between 30-45 minutes, the interviews were conducted in the participants' L1. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. The participants were also assured that all personal information would be confidential, and that the identity of the participants would be completely anonymous.

3.3 Research Instrument

Qualitative data are very important in the field of emotions, as the phenomenon has a fleeting nature, which cannot be apprehended by counting only on quantitative approaches (Li 2018). In order to achieve the aim of this study, a qualitative methodology was used, by designing semi structured interview guide, unlike



quantitative methods which basic goal is to confirm a hypothesis, qualitative methods aim to provide an in-depth exploration of an issue as they give participants freedom and flexibility to provide their responses. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview guide was first piloted before the actual data collection took place, to ensure the validity of each question and avoid any problems, before collecting the actual data from the participants. The interviews contained open-ended questions; the full interview guide is incorporated in the Appendix. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft teams.

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

The participants were contacted through social media (Messenger) to ask for their approval to conduct the interviews. On the day of the interviews, the researcher began by a brief and broad explanation about the nature and purpose of the study, also to inform participants that the researcher is interested in their personal opinions and there are no right or wrong answers. Additionally, an approval for recording the interview, and the participants' consent to take part in the study with a stress on the confidentiality of the information, were all checked and confirmed by the researcher. The language of the interview was Arabic which is the first language of the participants. Conducting interview in the participant's first language is crucial because it ensures clear communication, enables richer and more authentic responses, facilitates the expression of emotions and , ultimately enhancing the quality and reliability of research data.

3.5 Data analysis techniques

The data analysis began with the transcription of the interviews, then they were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), by generating categories and themes from the answers given by the participants. The purpose is to give a clear description of the investigated phenomenon, and to identify important themes and patterns in the data. Data analysis included the coding of the data, in which ideas were assigned labels, by selecting important units in the scripts and leaving out irrelevant parts, to reduce and simplify the data. The transcribed interviews were read more than one time and each time the codes were checked again to make sure that the results are reliable. The selection of important data units was guided by the research questions and the aim of the study, also the data were analyzed in relation to the most prominent ideas identified by each participant. A deductive coding approach was conducted, entailing the application of predefined categories and codes derived from established theories and research questions.

4. RESULTS

The data will be presented by exploring the emotional significance of each language, swear and taboo words and terms of endearment and the phrase (I love you) in each language for the participants. Furthermore, language preference to use swear and taboo words and terms of endearment and the reasons behind participants'



preference will be discussed as well. Some direct quotations will be mentioned to represent findings in different sections. The interviews and the quotes from the interviews which were conducted in participants' L1 in Arabic, were translated to English by the researcher and checked by another colleague, and some words were edited to provide more clarity.

4.1 The emotional significance of each language

In this section, the participants were asked questions about the emotionality of their different languages, how they feel about each language and what is the difference between their language. All participants reported L1 to be more emotional than L2. They were also asked about expression of emotions in L1 versus L2.

When participant 1 was asked to reflect on which language is the most emotional to him, he stated that it is definitely L1, he even presents a simile describing each language:

Well, my L1 reminds me of home and family so I find it warmer, while my L2 is the language I use with friends and when in university, when I think of L2, I remember studies and university life actually. To compare the two, I would say that my L1 is like my home, and my L2 is like my friend's home. I feel comfortable at both, but home (L1) is still where I feel safer, warmer, and more comfortable, I mean I can understand why they call it (mother tongue).

When asked about expression of emotions the same participant said that he prefers L1, but notes that it depends on the context and the person, he explained

I prefer my L1 to express my emotions, I don't know it just feels more natural, real and easy. But of course, it depends on who I am talking to. I have a friend from another country, with whom I express my feelings so easily, it is because he is a very close friend and a trustworthy person.

Another participant found L1 to be more emotional and explained that it is related to less anxiety and stress, she also preferred L1 to express emotions

She explained

My L1 and my L2 are both beautiful languages, and I use the two interchangeably, but I consider L1 more sentimental and emotional, I think because when I use it I am not worried about finding the right vocabulary or using correct grammar, so that is probably why I prefer to use it to discuss emotional issues. In L2 It is not that hard. It is okay to talk about them in my L2, but it takes more effort and when I am in an emotional discussion, I need to have the satisfaction of expressing my emotions effortlessly to feel better.



Participant 3 explained that her opinion about L2 being less emotional is affected by her community and where she grew up, because in her community, people consider L2 more prestigious than emotional.

Where I live English is always considered the language people use for showing off. My L1 Arabic is a poetic language, we have like 12 words for love, each has a certain degree. I love reading poems in my L1, and so I like to express my emotions in L1, because they are rich in emotions and it is easy to find passionate words.

4.2 Expression and emotional force of swear and taboo words

All participants when asked about the emotional force of swear and taboo words stated that they consider them to be stronger in L1.

Participant 7 stated

I find them more powerful in my L1. I honestly don't know why, maybe because my parents used to get really angry at me when I used to say them as a child, even though I had no idea what they meant. I was only repeating them from other kids. so they are related to reprimands.

When asked about swearing in the different languages a participant said

I prefer to swear in L1, I express my anger better and feel more satisfied when I use them in my L1, but that is when I am with friends and strangers, while when with my family especially my mother or father or an older relative I will not swear out loud, I may say them in my L1 in my inner speech or whisper them.

According to participant 2 in L2 swear and taboo words are less insulting. She explained

Because I have always heard them on tv shows and movies in my L2, swear words in my L2 never felt bad. Hearing them from my favorite actors made them feel acceptable and even favored.

Expressing swear and taboo words she explains

I prefer using them in my L2, I deliver my message, but they feel less shameful and acceptable by others.

Similarly, participant 3 also found swear and taboo words stronger in L1

In my L2 these words convey less shame, while in my L1 they are very offensive. Once my friend said a swear word in L1 and everyone was embarrassed and blamed her, so



she said why blame me ,and she pointed to another girl in the group and said : she always swears ,but in L2 ,it is the same, they mean the same so stop being a hypocrite, criticizing me.

When asked about expressing swear and taboo words participant 3 explained

I don't swear that much, but if I must choose, I will use English (L2) to express them. It just feels easier and less stressful. And more acceptable by others.

4.3 The emotional weight of terms of endearment and the phrase (I love you)

The participants were asked about the emotional weight of the phrase (I love you) in their different languages. All participants considered the phrase (I love you) and terms of affection, emotionally stronger in their L1 than in their L2. P1 reported that he prefers to say and hear (I love you) in L1. According to him, it was always used in his own childhood, by his mother, also P2 felt the same and stated that using the phrase feels fake in L2.

According to her

I prefer to hear it in my L1, I know that my heart beats faster and I blush when I hear or say it in L1,also it feels more intimate and private in L1, While in L2 it is less meaningful and more public.

When asked for more explanation about in L1 it is more private, but in L2 it is more public she clarified

I use (I love you) a lot in my L2. I say them to my other international friends all the time around a group of people, and on Facebook when I comment to them, but they feel more like a compliment than a deep real emotions , but in L1 I use it more privately and carefully ,I say in my heart when I remember my mom or someone dear who passed away.

Participant 3 had the same opinion and found (I love you) to be more genuine in L1. She states that, she likes Arabic poetry and would love to hear the phrase (I love you) or any other term of endearment in her L1.

She explained

I once had a relationship with someone who does not speak my mother tongue, I used to teach him love words in my L1, I just liked it more. I was so happy hearing them in my L1, even though they did not mean that much to him, but they did to me.



The findings show that all participants reported L1 to be more emotional than L2, also when asked about expressing their emotions participants preferred to express their feelings, use terms of endearment and the phrase (I love you) in their L1, while swear words are preferred by two participants to be expressed in L2, and one participant reported his preference to use them in L1.

5. DISCUSSION

The study has examined the perceived emotionality of the participants' languages. Findings indicate the participants' perceptions of L1 and L2 were different, all participants felt that the L1 was more colorful, rich, and emotional, while L2 is less emotional and more formal. The same difference is also found in the perception of the emotional strength of swear words, in participants' L1 swear and taboo words were found to have a stronger emotional force. The same result is also found in participants' perception of the phrase (I love you), all participants found the phrase more powerful in their L1 than in their L2. When it comes to the expression of emotions, all participants reported that L1 is the language they prefer to discuss emotional topics and use the phrase "I love you" to express their emotions. However, when it comes to using swear and taboo words, two participants stated a preference for using them in their L2, while one participant confirmed using them in his L1. Participants' answers show that many factors affect their perception, like family, community, the context of the conversations and the interlocutors, which suggest that the field of emotions and bilingualism is a dynamic field. All participants in this study reported that the context of acquiring L2 was through formal instruction, in schools, while L1 was learned at home, and they all started learning their L2 at the age of 7, which is later than L1. They all rated their proficiency in L2 lower than L1, and frequency of use was reported by all to be almost equal in both languages. We can conclude that this lack of emotionality in L2 can be related to the formal context of acquisition for each language and the late age of acquisition when compared to L1 age of acquisition, as well as the lower level of proficiency.

The findings confirm earlier studies in which L1 is found to be the more emotional than L2 for bilinguals and multilinguals, and that L1 is the language in which the phrase (I love you) is stronger (Dewaele 2004b, 2010; Dewaele, 2008). It is also the preferred language for expressing feelings and swearing (Dewaele 2004a, as cited in Dewaele, 2011). Also, in all these studies, self-perceived proficiency, the frequency of use, age and context of acquisitions were found to have an impact on the dependent variables.



6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, the literature suggests that the field of emotions and bilingualism is a dynamic and complex one. Different factors and independent variables influence bilinguals' emotions in their different languages and have an impact on how bilinguals perceive and express their emotions. Despite the diversity of the variables that emerge when discussing bilinguals' emotions, this paper suggests that bilingual's perception and expression of emotions, is also influenced by a variety of highly personal factors, as concluded from the participants' own responses, also this qualitative research results are consistent with previous research conducted by influential scholars in the field. Although the sample size is small, this kind of qualitative studies could possibly help to interpret quantitative research results on larger population samples (Dewaele 2010). The significance of the results derived from this qualitative study lies in their potential to enrich the existing body of knowledge on emotions and bilingualism. By delving into the nuanced, personal aspects of bilinguals' emotional experiences, this research provides a deeper and more holistic understanding of how language choice influences the expression and perception of emotions.

These findings have practical implications for various fields, such as education, psychology, and counseling. Understanding how bilingual individuals navigate their emotional landscapes can inform language teaching strategies and counseling approaches, taking into account the emotional nuances associated with language use. Moreover, the insights gained from this study can contribute to fostering cross-cultural communication and empathy, as it highlights the cultural and linguistic dimensions that underpin emotional expression.

Furthermore, the alignment of our results with previous research conducted by renowned scholars in the field underscores the robustness and reliability of the findings. This not only enhances the credibility of our study but also underscores the broader relevance of the qualitative approach in investigating the emotional dynamics of bilingualism.

In a broader context, this research advocates for the inclusion of qualitative methods alongside quantitative approaches in the study of emotions and bilingualism. While quantitative studies provide valuable statistical data, qualitative research offers a richer, context-driven exploration that can shed light on the intricacies of human experiences. The complementary nature of these approaches can lead to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this dynamic field



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