BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals

Jean-Marc Dewaele

School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture, Birkbeck College, University of London, London, UK

This paper investigates the perception of emotional force of swearwords and taboo words (S-T words) among 1039 multilinguals. It is based on data drawn from a large database collected through a web questionnaire on bilingualism and emotions. *t*-Tests revealed that the perceived emotional force of S-T words is highest in the L1 and gradually lower in languages learned subsequently. Self-reported L1 attriters were found to judge S-T words in their L1 to be less powerful than those who are still dominant in their L1. Participants who learned their language(s) in a naturalistic – or partly naturalistic – context gave higher ratings on emotional force of S-T words in that language than instructed language learners. Self-rated proficiency in a language and frequency of use of language significantly predicted perception of emotional force of S-T words. Age of onset of learning was found to only predict perception of emotional force of S-T words in the L2.

Keywords: multilingualism, perception of emotion, swearing

Introduction

One of the most graphical illustrations of the power of swearwords is undoubtedly the scene in *The Crab with the Golden Claws* (Hergé, 1940) where Tintin and Captain Haddock find themselves surrounded by armed Arab bandits in the desert. After Captain Haddock's bottle of whiskey is shot to pieces by the assailants, he becomes so enraged that he recklessly charges them, ignoring the bullets, waving his gun above his head, and releasing an unbroken torrent of swearwords in his mother tongue. As the book is aimed at children, the actual words are rather harmless, the most famous expression being 'mille milliards de mille sabords', translated into English as 'billions of blue blistering barnacles'. It is unclear whether the bandits understand French, but the swearwords are so powerful that they somehow get the message and flee into the desert. Whether words really have more power than bullets remains to be seen, but it is true that some swearwords and taboo words (S-T words) are the verbal equivalent of nitroglycerine. This might be the reason why some native speakers (NSs) avoid using them in public and why non-native speakers (NNSs) seem generally reluctant to use them. Indeed, inappropriate use of swearwords or taboo words might have devastating social consequences.

The study of S-T words among multilinguals is located at the intersection of and contributes to research in bilingualism, psychology, pragmatics, second language learning and emotions. In the present study I will investigate the

relationship between languages and emotions in bi- and multilingualism, focusing on one specific area: the perception of emotional force of S-T words. The key reason for this investigation is an interesting paradox concerning the use and perception of swearwords in the L2. These words are often among the first ones to be learned in an L2, typically outside the classroom with a gleeful NS of that language. Yet, they rarely figure in textbooks or in the classroom discourse because of their offensive character. As a consequence, instructed language learners seem to have a limited general knowledge of these words and use them infrequently. They do fascinate learners as the proliferation of websites containing swearwords and vulgar expressions in multiple languages testifies. One of these sites, *Foreign profanity exchange* – 'where people can exchange profane words and phrases in a variety of languages' – boasts:

> Knowing how to swear in a foreign language can make you seem sophisticated, well-traveled or at least give you a means to swear in front of others without them thinking of you as the foul-mouthed person you really are. It can also provide cocktail-party type conversations... impress you friends by informing them that one of the worst things you can tell a French Canadian is that you're going to 'Christ' them to death, or that in one of the Balkan countries (Croatia?) one of the worst things you can tell a person is 'Your mother is Easter'. (http://www.halfbakery.com/idea/Foreign_profanity_exchange)

In other words, knowledge of swearwords and expressions in an L2 allows one to show off at cocktail parties. Yet it can also be a source of potential embarrassment when used inappropriately with NSs. Such inappropriate use may be perceived as rudeness, and it might take a moment before the NS remembers the mitigating circumstances, namely that the interlocutor is a NNS and might therefore not possess complete sociopragmatic competence in the target language. The absence of S-T words in an L2 might not be as glaring as their unexpected presence, but taking heed of the Russian proverb 'Speaking without swearing is like cabbage soup without tomato', it might contribute to a perception that the NNS's speech is bland.

Previous Research

Defining swearwords

S-T words are multifunctional, pragmatic units which assume, in addition to the expression of emotional attitudes, various discourse functions. They contribute, for instance, to the coordination of the interlocutors, the organisation of the interaction and the structuring of verbal exchange; in that they are similar to discourse markers (Drescher, 2000). The use of S-T words is also a linguistic device used to affirm in-group membership and establish boundaries and social norms for language use (Drescher, 2000; Rayson *et al*., 1997; Stenstrom, 1995, 1999). Usage of S-T words varies both diaphasically (i.e. stylistic variation) and diatopically (i.e. geographic variation). It is not very surprising therefore to find that different variants of the same language can have different S-T words. Léard (1997) performed a comparative analysis of S-T

words and expressions in French from mainland France and from Québec and found that despite the fact that both variants of French share the same grammar, S-T words in Québec French with a religious origin (Crisse/Christ, tabernacle/tabernacle, hostie/host, calice/chalice, vierge/virgin) are not S-T words in France. An expression like *hostie de voisin* 'damn neighbour' would be considered forceful in Québec but meaningless in France where the expression *salaud de voisin* would be a better formulation of the communicative intention to negatively describe one's neighbour.

L1 studies on S-T words

The use and the perception of S-T words have been extensively studied with monolingual speakers. Psychologists have investigated whether S-T words stand out from neutral words in the L1. Lieury *et al.* (1997) investigated the role of emotion in word memory using vulgar or taboo words of spoken French. An experiment involving short- and long-term recall revealed superior recall of words with emotional value in relation to neutral words. This effect was most significant for the vulgar/taboo words (four times greater than neutral words in long-term recall). Emotion words also seem more prone to the so-called 'false memory effect' (Pesta *et al.*, 2001), i.e. false remembering of items in recall tests.

Sociolinguists have analysed the effect of independent variables such as gender, age and social class on the use of S-T words. Rayson *et al.* (1997) performed a frequency analysis of vocabulary items in the conversational component of the British National Corpus. They found that males and speakers under 35 used more taboo words and that social class did not affect the use of swearwords. Stenstrom (1995), in her analysis of taboo words in The Bergen Corpus of London Teenager Language, confirmed the generational difference (teenagers swearing more than adults, possibly as a way to establish group identity). She also noticed qualitative differences, with teenagers primarily using taboo words related to sex and drinking, and adults taboo words derived from religious subjects. No gender differences were observed in choice and frequency of swearwords among the teenagers but adult women were found to use more but 'weaker' taboo words than adult men. Stenstrom (1999) analysed a 21,000-word subcorpus of the same corpus, equally divided between females and males, aged 16, presumed to be upper-middle-class, engaged in same-sex conversations. She found that girls use intensifiers (*bloody*, *fucking*) more often than boys, but use a more restricted set of terms than boys, who include more swear words in their expanded set.

Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) analysed New Zealand university students' expletive usage through quantitative analysis of casual unstructured dialogue and purpose-oriented, more structured conversation. The authors found little gender difference in the strength of the expletives used, although males did tend to use stronger ones. They also found that females swore slightly less than males, but reduced expletives to a lesser extent in more structured contexts.

In sum, studies of the use and perception of S-T words in the L1 suggest that these words stand out psycholinguistically, and that their use is often linked to gender and generation of the speaker.

Emotions and S-T words in multilingualism and SLA research

The emotional resonance of languages known to bi- and multilingual individuals is highly variable. Both psycholinguistic investigations and psychoanalytic case studies suggest that languages learned after puberty may differ from previously learned language(s). Languages learned early in life seem to have a stronger emotional resonance than languages learned later, which seem to have a weaker emotional hold on the individual (Amati-Mehler *et al*., 1993; Javier, 1989; Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002). Bond and Lai (1986) and Javier and Marcos (1989) show that bilinguals may codeswitch to their second language to distance themselves from what they say. Ideas that would be too disturbing when expressed in the first language are less anxiety-provoking in the second language. Similarly, studies on emotion vocabulary in the first and second languages of bilinguals who learned their second language beyond early childhood showed a greater emotional resonance in the native/first learned language (Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1976; Javier, 1989). Harris *et al*. (2003) and Harris (this issue) measured fluctuations in reactivity for emotion words in the L1 and the L2 of bilinguals. Results suggest that for late L2 learners taboo words and childhood reprimands are more physiologically arousing in the L1 than in the L2. The authors suggest that the L1 vocabulary may have more emotional connotations, given the proliferation of neural connections in early and middle childhood. Anooshian and Hertel (1994) show that Spanish–English and English–Spanish bilinguals who acquired their second language after the age of eight, recall emotional words more frequently than neutral words following their presentation in the L1. Altarriba and Santiago-Rivera (1994) found that late bilinguals in therapy prefer the native language to express personal involvement. This is nicely illustrated by Nancy Huston (English L1, French L2), who emigrated as an adult from Calgary in Canada to France where she has become a major writer (see also Kinginger's paper, this issue):

> Chaque faux bilingue doit avoir sa carte spécifique de l'asymétrie lexicale, pour ce qui me concerne, c'est en français que je me sens à l'aise dans une conversation intellectuelle, une interview, un colloque, toute situation linguistique faisant appel aux concepts et aux catégories appris à l'âge adulte. En revanche, si j'ai envie de délirer, me défouler, jurer, chanter, gueuler, me laisser aller au pur plaisir de la parole, c'est en anglais que je le fais. (Huston, 1999: 61)

> Every false bilingual must surely have their own particular asymmetrical lexical map. To take my case, if I am involved in an intellectual conversation, an interview, a colloquium or any linguistic situation that draws on concepts and categories learned as an adult, I feel most at ease in French. On the other hand, if I want to go mad, let myself go, swear,

sing, yell, be moved by the pure pleasure of speech, I do all that in English.

Research confirms that perception and expression of emotion as an illocutionary act is more difficult in the L2(s) (learned later in life) than in the L1(s). Rintell (1984) found that English as a second language (ESL) learners had greater difficulty in accurately identifying and rating the intensity of different emotions in taped conversations between two NSs of English than a control group of English NSs. Linguistic and cultural background, and language proficiency played a crucial role in the students' performance. While advanced students scored significantly higher than beginners and learners at an intermediate level, they still fell short of the results of the NSs. Chinese students were also found to have greater difficulty in performing the task accurately than Arabic- and Spanish-speaking students. Using a similar research design, Graham *et al*. (2001) also found a strong effect of cultural competence on the recognition of emotion in English voices by Japanese and Spanish ESL learners. The results of both groups of L2 learners were significantly lower than those of a control group of English NSs. Within the learner group, the scores of the Spanish students were superior to those of the Japanese students. However, level of proficiency did not significantly affect the percentages of correct judgments of intended emotions. It thus seems that the perception of emotion in a second language is linked both to typological similarity with the first language, but also to cultural similarity, with regard to emotion scripts (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2002).

Dewaele and Regan (2001) analysed the proportion of colloquial words (including swearwords) in a cross-sectional corpus of advanced oral French IL of Dutch L1 speakers. The amount of authentic interactions in the target language (TL), as well as total immersion in the TL culture, were found to be linked to a more frequent use of colloquial vocabulary. Length and intensity of formal instruction in the TL was not found to have any predictive value on the use of colloquial vocabulary. The low frequency of S-T words and colloquial words in general in interlanguage (IL) might also have been linked to psychological variables. Using the same corpus of Dutch L1 speakers and a corpus of advanced French IL by British students, Dewaele (2004b) found that highly extroverted students used more colloquial vocabulary. Using a S-T word or a colloquial word is socially risky, something more anxious introverts want to avoid, but which extroverts enjoy. Frequency of contact with the TL and proficiency levels in the TL were also positively correlated with proportions of colloquial vocabulary, but gender and social class were not.

However, Register (1996) did find a gender effect in her analysis of comprehension and self-reported use of English taboo words and expressions by university-level ESL learners in the USA. Male learners comprehended more taboo terms than female learners and reported that they would use them more frequently. Toya and Kodis (1996) point out that the use of swearwords and the pragmatic use of rudeness in an L2 are linked to the variety of registers in the input and the confidence of L2 users. They found that English NSs were more expressive in their verbal and nonverbal display of anger than Japanese students with advanced English proficiency. The latter tended to avoid

swearwords. The authors point to the considerable gap between the L2 users' knowledge of the definition of swearwords and understanding of their emotional load: 'Subjects reported that they knew swearwords were ''dirty'' but they had little idea regarding the degree or typical use' (1996: 292). Toya and Kodis suggest that the lower degree of expressiveness in the L2 could be linked to the more restricted input to which the learners had been exposed and the fact that learners lack confidence in using angry words and fear miscommunication. Female NNSs expressed concern 'over what swearwords were appropriate for women because Japanese rudeness heavily corresponds to male/female language' (p. 292). Some informants who had stayed in English-speaking countries reported a preference for swearing in English rather than in Japanese.

In sum, research in multilingualism and SLA suggests that the emotional resonance of S-T words is stronger in the L1. Instructed L2 users seem to use fewer stigmatised words than NSs, which could be a reflection of their narrower stylistic range, linked to the lack of variety in registers in their input. The use of colloquial words is clearly also linked to the self-confidence of L2 users, which is related in turn to the L2 user's personality and amount of contact with NSs.

Research Design

Rationale for the present study

Consistent patterns emerge in the studies mentioned before, but limited sample sizes make it difficult to make more general claims. Ideally one needs a sufficient amount of comparable data (by asking many people the same questions) that could be analysed quantitatively and combined with participants' own intuitions. The use of a webquestionnaire allows the collection of self-reported data from a very large sample of multilinguals from all possible linguistic backgrounds. The combination of quantitative data collected through Likert-scale type responses and of qualitative data collected through open questions makes it possible to draw a fairly detailed picture of multilinguals' speech behaviour and perceptions.

Research questions

In the present research we will firstly investigate whether the perception of emotional force of S-T words is similar in multilinguals' several languages. Based on previous findings, the analysis will focus on the effects of gender, type of instruction, age of onset of learning, self-rated proficiency in speaking and frequency of use of the languages.

Participants

A total of 1039 multilinguals contributed to the database (731 females, 308 males). The participants spoke a total of 75 different L1s. English speakers represent the largest group: $n = 303$; followed by Spanish: $n = 123$; French: $n = 101$; German: $n = 97$; Dutch: $n = 76$; Italian: $n = 52$; Catalan: $n = 32$;

Russian: $n = 29$; Finnish $n = 28$; Portuguese: $n = 20$; Greek: $n = 15$; Swedish: $n = 15$; Japanese: $n = 11$; Welsh: $n = 10$, and 61 other language groups with fewer than 10 participants.

The population could be described as highly polyglot with 144 bilinguals, 269 trilinguals, 289 quadrilinguals and 337 pentalinguals. The L2 was defined as the second language to have been acquired by the individual, the L3 as the third language etc. A closer look at the ages of onset for learning the L2 revealed that 157 L2 users are in fact 'bilingual first language' users, having learned the L2 from birth. This represents 15% of the L2 group. Similarly, 19 L3 users are 'trilingual first language' users (representing 1.8% of the L3 group). There are no 'quadrilingual first language' users. More than half of the participants declared to be dominant in the L1 ($n = 561$); a smaller proportion reported dominance in two or more languages including the L1 ($n = 373$); and about 10% reported dominance in language(s) not including the L1 ($n = 105$). The participants are generally highly educated with 115 having a high school diploma or less, 273 a Bachelors degree, 308 a Master's degree, and 338 a PhD. Age ranged from 16 to 70 (mean $= 35.6$; $sd = 11.3$). A majority ($n = 837$) reported working in a language-related area. The strong proportion of highly educated female participants means that the sample is not representative of the general population. This potential pitfall (cf. Dörnyei, 2003: 75) is inevitable with web-based questionnaires and it needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the patterns, as results might be different for a sample of, for example, males with high school education. To partially remedy this problem, data were collected through a printed version of the questionnaire from about 50 multilinguals in the London area who did not finish high school. Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences between this group and the rest of the sample for the dependent variables under consideration in the present study.[1]

Methodology

Data were gathered through an online webquestionnaire with 34 questions related to bilingualism and emotions (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001). The following sociobiographical information was collected: gender, age, education level, ethnic group, occupation, languages known to the participant, dominant language(s), chronological order of language acquisition, context of acquisition, age of onset, frequency of use and typical interlocutors. Self-rated proficiency scores for speaking, comprehending, reading and writing in the different languages were obtained. The first part of the questionnaire consists of closed questions with 5-point Likert scales, the second consists of open questions where the participants had to write a response. Language choice was determined for self- and other-directed speech, for emotional and nonemotional speech. The questions also asked about language choice for swearing and perceived emotional weight of S-T words. The data obtained to the latter question constitute the basis for the present quantitative analysis. This analysis will be supported by participants' comments about the use and perception of swearwords in their different languages.

The use of the on-line web questionnaire allowed us to gather data covering a wide area of topics from a large sample of learners and long-time users of multiple languages from across the world and from a wide age range, i.e. not only the 18–22 year olds which are predominantly used in empirical research in applied linguistics and psychology. The present approach is not without its own methodological limitations (cf. Pavlenko, 2002). The problem of respondent self-selection has been mentioned before. To fill out the questionnaire, participants needed access to the internet and a certain degree of metalinguistic awareness, which has skewed the sample further. The sample is also dominated by female respondents, which is interesting in and of itself.

At the same time, doubts about the validity of this research instrument can easily be assuaged as questionnaires with Likert scales responses have been tried and tested extensively in sociopsychological research (cf. Dörnyei, 2003). They can offer excellent baseline data, provided they are backed up by different types of data. We argued in favour of triangulation in bilingualism research in Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002). Wierzbicka (2003) makes a similar argument, stating that researchers need 'to link the ''soft'' subjective experience of bilingual persons with ''hard'' objective evidence' (p. 577). This is the reason why the questionnaire also included open-ended questions, which invited respondents to share their subjective experiences.

Dependent variables

The quantitative analysis is based on the scores (five-point Likert scales) provided in response to the following question (and repeated for a maximum of five languages):

> Do swear and taboo words in your different languages have the same emotional weight for you? Please circle the appropriate answer. (1 = does not feel strong, 2 = little, 3 = fairly, 4 = strong, 5 = very strong).

Independent variables

The variable 'context of acquisition' has three levels: naturalistic, mixed and instructed. There is no doubt that real contexts of acquisition are infinitely richer than the crude distinction between 'classroom only', 'classroom + outside communication' and 'no-classroom, but only outside communication'. Learning practices at school have evolved over the years, and still vary hugely geographically and socially; but they all share one aspect: the learning happens within the confines of classroom walls, in the presence of a teacher and classmates. Similarly, despite the wide range of ways one can learn a language naturalistically, all these ways have a common denominator, namely that the learning process was not guided by a particular teacher or programme, but developed gradually through interaction with speakers of the TL.

Self-perceived proficiency reflects the individual's perception of his/her competence in a language. It was measured through feedback on the following question:

> On the scale from 1 (least proficient) to 5 (fully fluent) how do you rate yourself in speaking?

Similar self-report measures have been proved to correlate highly with performance measures of proficiency (e.g. Kroll *et al*., 2002).

Data on frequency of language use were collected through the following question:

> How frequently do you use each of the languages? (Never = 0, every year = 1, every month = 2, every week = 3, every day = 4, several hours a day = 5)

Research hypotheses

It was hypothesised:

(1) that the perceived emotional force of S-T words would be highest in the first language of speakers and would be gradually lower in languages learned subsequently;
(2) that gender, education level and age might be linked to perceived emotional force of S-T words;
(3) that the perceived emotional force of S-T words in the L1 would weaken if the L1 is no longer the dominant language of the speaker (L1 attrition);
(4) that participants who learned their language(s) in an instructed setting would give lower ratings on emotional force of S-T words in that language;
(5) that participants who started learning a language at a younger age, or are more proficient in the language, or use the language more frequently might have higher scores in perception of emotional force of S-T words.

Research design

Paired *t*-tests to check differences in perceived emotional force of S-T words in the L1, L2, L3, L4 and L5 were conducted. Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) and Scheffé post-hoc tests were used to check for intergroup differences (gender, education level, language dominance, context of acquisition). Pearson correlation analyses were used to check for a link between age of the participant and perception of emotional force of S-T words. Multiple linear regression analyses were used to identify and predict the effects of age of onset of acquisition (AOA), proficiency and frequency of use of a language on the perceived emotional force of S-T words in that language.

Results

Pair-wise comparisons (*t*-tests) revealed that S-T words in the L1 are perceived to have much more emotional force than S-T words in the L2: ($t(944) = 18.2$, $p < 0.0001$). The same pattern is repeated when comparing S-T words in the L2 with S-T words in the L3: ($t(689) = 12.8$, $p < 0.0001$) and S-T words in the L3 compared to S-T words in the L4: ($t(433) = 8.05$, $p < 0.0001$). The perceived emotional force of S-T words in the L4 is not significantly different from that in the L5: ($t(232) = 1.02$, $p = \text{ns}$) (see Figure 1 for mean scores).
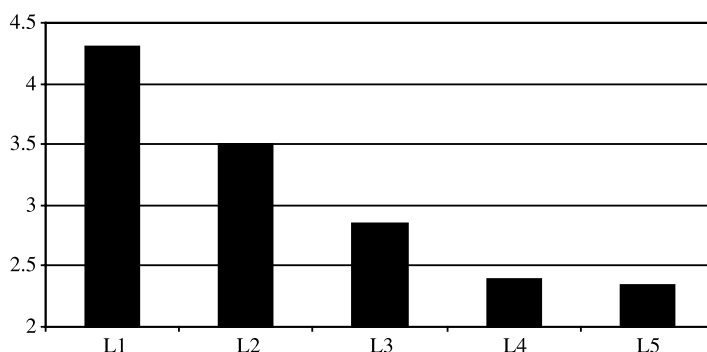
Figure 1 Mean scores on perceived emotional force of S-T words in five languages

These results are confirmed by participants' responses to the open-ended questions. Some report that they use S-T words in different languages but that the strongest emotions expressed to oneself tend to be in the L1:

> Kevin (Finnish L1, English L2, Swedish L3, German L4): I very rarely swear in Finnish but 'oh shit' or 'fuck' can easily escape my mouth even in quite trivial occasions – they just don't feel that serious to my (or my hearers') ears, even though I know they would sound quite horrible to a native speaker (milder English swear words like 'damn' for example don't even sound like swear words to me). If I would happen to hit myself with a hammer the words coming out of my mouth would definitely be in Finnish.

S-T words in the L1(s) are often preferred because of their greater perceived strength and exact calibration:

> Estela (Romanian L1, German L2, French L3, English L4, Italian L5): Romanian is more appropriate for hurting and insulting because it carries more weight and I can distinguish more nuances.

> Roberto (German L1, English L2, French L3, Spanish L4): I'm pretty much aware of the force of swear words in English, and yet they seem less immediate than swear words in German.

A number of participants with partners not proficient in the participant's L1 still report swearing at them in the L1:

> Erica (Spanish L1, English L2, Italian L3, Portuguese L4): We speak English and we argue in English because he doesn't speak Spanish. However, many times I find myself swearing at him in Spanish.

> Ellen (English L1, Catalan L2, Spanish L3, French L4): We only use Catalan as he doesn't speak English. We argue in Catalan although I always use English swear words!

Several participants reported an inability to swear in their L1 because of a kind of psychological barrier erected in their childhood:

> Ken (English L1, French L2): I was brought up not to swear or use slang so I am perhaps a cultivated Englishman.

> Maria (Spanish L1, English L2): I never swear in Spanish. I simply cannot. The words are too heavy and are truly a taboo for me.

S-T words in the L1(s) may be perceived by some participants as being too strong, hence their preference for S-T words in the 'other' language as these do not seem to have the same emotional force to the speaker:

> Nicole (English L1, German L2, French L3, Italian L4, Spanish L5): My parents were quite strict and I still have the phrase 'I'll wash your mouth out with soap and water' in my head! I'd never swear in English, but it's easier in German!

> Anne (English L1, German L2, French L3, Russian L4, Lithuanian L5): I have noticed that I will swear more in Russian when I'm in the U.S. and more in English or German when in Russia. I feel perhaps that it is 'not as bad' to swear in a 'foreign' language.

Many participants are aware that their perception of emotional force of S-T words in a second, third, fourth or fifth language is weaker than that of L1 speakers, and that, as a consequence, their swearing in the L2 may have unwanted illocutionary effects (Sbisa, 2001):

> Maureen (English L1, Italian L2): I prefer to express anger in my L2 Italian because I do not hear the weight of my words so everything comes out quite easily. Which unfortunately means that I probably hurt people more than I intend to!

> Melissa (Greek L1, English L2, German L3): I have noticed is that I can swear much more easily in English than in Greek. I sometimes use quite strong swear words in English but as I can't really 'hear' or 'sense' how strong they are.

Many participants underline that swearing happens within clearly defined cultural contexts. Scripts for swearing differ between languages, not only in the metaphors used but also in what is deemed acceptable. In other words, multilinguals do not simply use translation equivalents of S-T words in their different languages:

> Sandra (German L1, Italian L2): If I am really angry only German words come into my mind if I use Italian instead I may not use the right measure. Swearing in Italian means talking about God, Maria etc. in an obscene way which in German doesn't mean a thing. The other way round in German you might use animals names to insult a person in Italian it wouldn't mean anything.

> Martine (English L1, Spanish L2, French L3): It is easier to shout and get excited in Spanish. It's possible to say things that would be unacceptable in English especially if the expressions are negative. Spanish speakers seem to be able to insult one another without anybody getting very upset

whereas in English you would make enemies for life. English insults more subtly.

The second research question dealt with the effect of gender, education level and age on perception of emotional force. The analysis used ANOVAs rather than t-tests in order to measure the strength of the gender effect. Overall the female participants gave higher scores to perceived strength of swearwords. The difference between male and female participants was significant in the L1, although the effect was very weak ($F = 5.3$, $p < 0.022$, $\eta^2 = 0.005$). The gender difference was only marginally significant in the L2, with an equally weak effect ($F = 3.0$, $p < 0.085$, $\eta^2 = 0.003$). It was stronger in the L3 ($F = 4.6$, $p < 0.032$, $\eta^2 = 0.007$), but was no longer significant in the L4 ($F = 0.89$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0.002$) and nonexistent in the L5 ($F = 0.02$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0$) (see Figure 2 for mean scores).

Education level turned out to have no effect at all on the perception of swearwords in the different languages (L1: $F(4) = 1.34$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0.006$; L2: $F(4) = 0.62$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0.003$; L3: F(4) $= 0.41$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0.002$; L4: $F(4) = 0.37$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0.002$; L5: $F(4) = 0.72$, $p = $ ns, $\eta^2 = 0.009$ (see Figure 3 for mean scores).
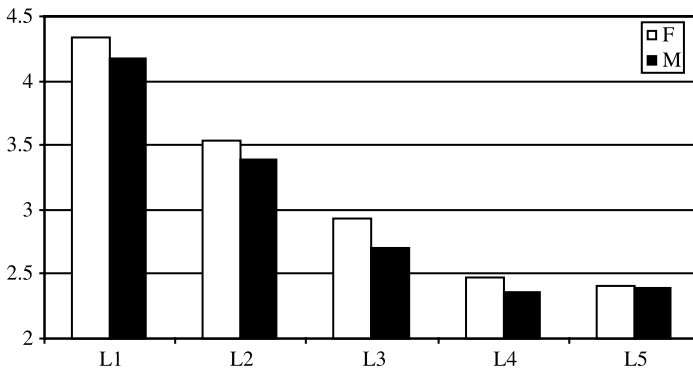

Figure 2 Effect of gender on perceived emotional force of swearwords in five languages
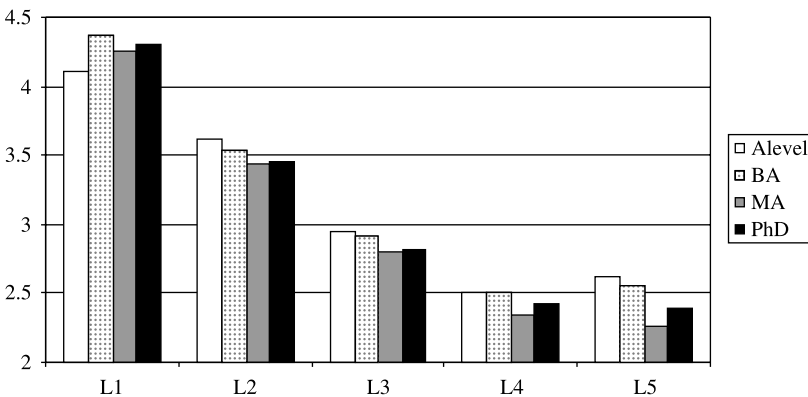

Figure 3 Effect of education level on perceived emotional force of swearwords in five languages

A Pearson two-tailed correlation showed that age of participants was not linked to perception of emotional force in swearwords in any of the five languages: L1: $r(962) = -0.003$, $p = $ ns; L2: $r(946) = -0.012$, $p = $ ns; L3: $r(698) = 0.006$, $p = $ ns; L4: $r(454) = -0.048$, $p = $ ns; L5: $r(247) = -0.026$, $p = $ ns).

Does self-reported L1 attrition affect perception of emotional force of swearwords? In other words, do participants for whom the L1 is no longer their dominant language (the LX category in Figure 4) perceive swearwords in the L1 to be weaker than those participants who are still dominant in the L1? A one-way ANOVA with language dominance as the main independent variable and perception of emotional force of swearwords in the L1 as a dependent variable revealed a significant effect but a small effect size ($F(2, 967) = 3.7$, $p < 0.024$, $\eta^2 = 0.008$). A Scheffé post-hoc test showed a significant difference ($p < 0.025$) between those who reported dominance in two or more languages including the L1 ($n = 344$) and L1 attriters ($n = 97$). The difference between L1-dominant speakers ($n = 527$) and L1 attriters was only marginally significant ($p < 0.059$). There was no difference between the L1-dominant speakers and those who reported dominance in two or more languages including the L1 (see Figure 4).

One self-reported L1 attriter noted that his L1 was particularly suited for swearing, because he disliked it so much:

> Jan (Dutch L1, English L2, German L3, French L4, Fijian L5): Dutch is a language I would only use to swear in or express anger. It's good for that as it's such an ugly sounding language.

The effect of instruction type turned out to be very significant for the L2: ($F(3, 945) = 20.7$, $p < 0.0001$, $\eta^2 = 0.061$). A Scheffé post-hoc analysis revealed that the difference is highly significant between the instructed group and the mixed and naturalistic groups ($p < 0.0001$ in both cases). The difference between the mixed and the naturalistic group is however not significant.
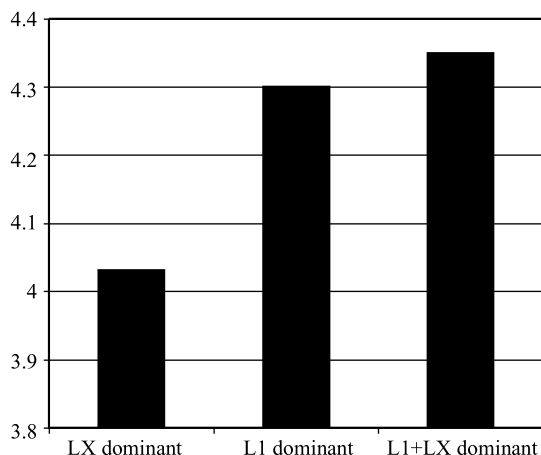

Figure 4 Effect of language dominance on perceived emotional force of swearwords in five languages

The same pattern appears for the L3. The effect of instruction type is very significant but the effect size is smaller: ($F(3, 697) = 12.3$, $p < 0.0001$, $\eta^2 = 0.050$). A Scheffé post-hoc analysis revealed that the difference is highly significant between the instructed group and the mixed and naturalistic groups ($p < 0.0001$ in both cases). The difference between the mixed and the naturalistic group is not significant. The effect of instruction type is similarly significant for the L4 ($F(3, 453) = 14.1$, $p < 0.0001$, $\eta^2 = 0.086$). A Scheffé post-hoc analysis shows a highly significant difference between the instructed group and the mixed and naturalistic groups ($p < 0.0001$ in both cases). The difference between the mixed and the naturalistic group is not significant. Instruction type also has a significant effect in the L5 ($F(3, 246) = 5.4$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.063$). A Scheffé post-hoc analysis shows a significant difference between the instructed group and the mixed and naturalistic groups ($p < 0.015$ and $p < 0.032$ respectively). The difference between the mixed and the naturalistic group is not significant. Mean scores are presented in Figure 5.

Although no participant complained about the absence of S-T words in the school curriculum, some did regret the fact that they had not been taught how to communicate anger in the L2:

> Bart (Dutch L1, French L2, English L3), an instructed user of French: in school we learn how to use French in a polite and friendly way but when I am calling to the Customer Service of a French company to complain about something and want to sound a bit more severe irritated angry... then it is difficult to find that severe irritated angry tone because you are concentrating on French grammar and vocabulary... I wouldn't have to do that in Dutch.

Talking about S-T words in her L4 and L5, both learned in an instructed setting, one participant observes that one should refrain from using specific words if one is not aware of their illocutionary effects:
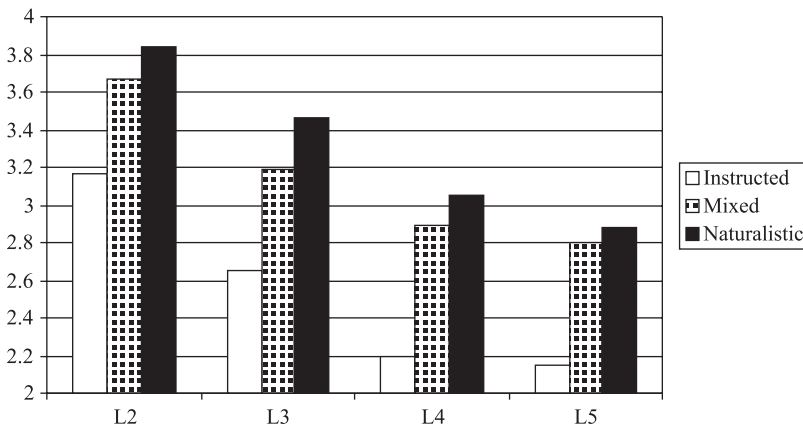

Figure 5 Effect of instruction type on perceived emotional force of swearwords in five languages

Isabelle (French L1, English L2, Italian L3, German L4, Japanese L5): you cannot possibly go around and use words without understanding/ knowing the impact these words will have on your interlocutors!

Standard multiple linear regression was used to examine the hypothesised relationships between (1) AOA, (2) self-rated speaking proficiency and (3)

Table 1 Mean scores for age of onset, self-rated proficiency in speaking, frequency of use of the L2, L3, L4 and L5

Variable	L2	L3	L4	L5
Age of onset (in yrs)	8.34	13.24	17.69	21.72
Speaking proficiency (maximum = 5)	4.17	3.26	2.59	2.40
Frequency of use (maximum = 5)	3.82	2.76	2.16	2.13

Table 2 The regression of age of onset, self-rated speaking proficiency and frequency of use of the language on perceived emotional force of swearwords in five languages

	R square	F	p
L2	0.101	24.7	0.0001
L3	0.163	31.5	0.0001
L4	0.166	20.6	0.0001
L5	0.191	12.3	0.0001

Table 3 The predictive value of individual variables on perception of emotional force

Language	Predictors	Standardised coefficients Beta	t	p
L2	Age	-0.113	-2.9	0.003
	Speaking proficiency	0.159	3.2	0.001
	Frequency of use	0.158	3.3	0.001
L3	Age	-0.061	-1.4	0.151
	Speaking proficiency	0.289	5.6	0.0001
	Frequency of use	0.14	2.7	0.006
L4	Age	0.036	0.7	0.5
	Speaking proficiency	0.224	3.5	0.0001
	Frequency of use	0.234	3.6	0.0001
L5	Age	0.038	0.5	0.6
	Speaking proficiency	0.192	2.1	0.038
	Frequency of use	0.287	3.1	0.002

frequency of use of the language. Mean values for these three variables are presented in Table 1.

The regressions of AOA, self-rated speaking proficiency and frequency of use of the language were highly significant for the L2, L3, L4 and L5 (see Table 2).

AOA, self-rated proficiency in speaking and frequency of use of language were significant predictors for the L2 (see Table 3). AOA ceases to be a significant predictor in the L3, the L4 and the L5 where self-rated proficiency in speaking and frequency of use of language are the best predictors. The three independent variables thus explain between 10% and 20% of the variance. Using Cohen's (1992) criteria for assessing the predictive power of a set of independent variables in a multiple regression model, the proportion of variance indicates a small to medium effect size.[2]

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study show that the perception of emotional force of swearwords in the multilinguals' different languages is determined by several independent variables, mainly those related to the individual's linguistic history (how and when the language was learned, what general level of activation does the language have, how frequently has it been or is it being used). Sociodemographic variables seem to have a weaker effect.

To sum up, the findings of the study fully support hypothesis 1 (perceived emotional force of S-T words is higher in the first language of speakers and is gradually lower in languages learned subsequently), partially support hypothesis 2 (female participants tended to give higher scores to perceived emotional force of S-T words but education level and age had no effect), fully support hypothesis 3 (perception of emotional force of S-T words in the L1 weakens if the L1 is no longer the dominant language of the speaker), fully support hypothesis 4 (participants who learned their language(s) in an instructed setting gave lower ratings on emotional force of S-T words in that language than those who learned the language in a naturalistic or mixed context) and partially support hypothesis 5 (participants who started learning a language at a younger age (for the L2 only), or are more proficient in the language, or use the language more frequently have higher scores in perception of emotional force of S-T words).

The data show that L1 S-T words are usually felt to have greater emotional force, which can either favour or hinder their use (depending on communicative intention). Secondly, S-T words from languages learned later in life are usually felt to have less emotional force. Participants report some detachment when performing in these languages, including a perception of lower emotional force of S-T words, which can, again, either favour or hinder their use. Most users of S-T words also admit that their perception of the emotional force might not be accurate, hence the danger of undesirable perlocutionary effects. The present study focused on perception of emotional force only, but we found similar patterns for the actual reported *use* of swearwords (Dewaele, 2004a). Significant positive correlations emerged between perception of emotional force and frequency of use of swearwords. Finally, it seems that

swearing is as much self- as other-directed. The stronger the emotion, the more likely for it to be expressed in the L1 (especially if it is the dominant language). It doesn't seem to matter in that case whether the interlocutor understands the language. The swearwords in the L1 allow the speaker to vent his/her anger efficiently, and the communicative intention and emotional force can probably be interpreted through nonverbal cues.

The present study seems to confirm the findings of smaller-scale studies using different methodological approaches, namely that languages other than the first are the languages of distance and detachment, or at least languages that don't have an emotional resonance that is quite as strong. Language users seem to avoid use of linguistic 'nuclear' devices if they are unsure about the yield (emotional force), and potential illocutionary or perlocutionary effects. The effect size of the sociodemographic variables was largely surpassed by the more powerful effect of type of instruction. It is not surprising that if one's contact with a TL has been limited to the classroom, one will have been relatively 'sheltered' from swearwords and therefore lack a complete understanding of their meaning and emotional force. Those who have experienced and used the TL in a wider variety of situations are more likely to have developed the necessary conceptual representations and the confidence to use these words in appropriate contexts. This point is further strengthened by the finding that frequency of use of the language and self-reported proficiency in speaking are the strongest predictors of perception of emotional force. Sociopragmatic competence can only develop through actual use of the language in authentic interactions. A proficient and frequent user of a language not only possesses the correct perception of emotional force but may also feel he/she is close enough to the in-group to dare use these powerful words. The younger one starts learning a language, the better one's perception of emotional force of swearwords, with a break-off point somewhere after the age of 12. This finding is in line with Kasper's (1998) observation that 'early and sustained contact with the target language and culture may be required to attain native pragmatic knowledge and skill' (p. 200). It also confirms Anooshian and Hertel's (1994) finding that for balanced bilinguals the emotional resonance of a language depends more on age of acquisition than on proficiency.

These findings have two important pedagogical implications. Firstly, instructed learning should ideally rely on a rich source of diverse types of written and visual authentic material allowing learners to familiarise themselves with a wide range of registers in the TL, including those rich in S-T words. Secondly, instruction should be complemented by 'beyond the classroom' encounters with members of the TL culture (cf. Byram *et al*., 2001), preferably by spending a period in the TL community. Finally, using swearwords in an L2 could be a hit at parties, but in interaction with NSs, it is probably better not to put too much tomato (or pepper) in the soup, and to taste it oneself before serving.

Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Jean-Marc Dewaele, Birkbeck College, University of London, School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture, 43 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PD, UK (jmdewaele@aol.com).

Notes

1. The danger of respondent self-selection is more acute if the dependent variable under consideration has a perceived 'desirable' end as it might discourage a sizable proportion of potential participants (Dörnyei, 2003: 75). As the main dependent variables in the present study are relatively value-neutral: 'how often do you use language X to express Y...', it seems less likely that respondent self-selection would unduly skew the results.
2. According to Cohen (1992), squared partial correlations values between 2 and 12.99% suggest small effect sizes, and values between 13 and 25.99% indicate medium effect sizes.

References

Altarriba, J. and Santiago-Rivera, A-L. (1994) Current perspectives on using linguistic and cultural factors in counseling the Hispanic client. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 25, 388–397.

Amati-Mehler, J., Argentieri, S. and Canestri, J. (1993) *The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.

Anooshian, L. and Hertel, P. (1994) Emotionality in free recall: language specificity in bilingual memory. *Cognition and Emotion* 8, 503–514.

Bayard, D. and Krishnayya, S. (2001) Gender, expletive use, and context: Male and female expletive use in structured and unstructured conversation among New Zealand university students. *Women and Language* 24 (1), 1–15.

Bond, M. and Lai, T-M. (1986) Embarrassment and codeswitching into a second language. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 126, 179–186.

Byram, M., Nichols A. and Stevens D. (eds) (2001) *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Cohen, J. (1992) *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*. New York: John Wiley.

Dewaele, J-M. (2004a) Blistering barnacles! What language do multilinguals swear in?! *Estudios de Sociolinguistica* 5 (1), 83–105.

Dewaele, J-M. (2004b) Colloquial vocabulary in the speech of native and non-native speakers: the effects of proficiency and personality. In P. Bogaards and B. Laufer (eds) *Learning Vocabulary in a Second Language: Selection, Acquisition and Testing*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Dewaele, J-M. and Pavlenko, A. (2001) Web questionnaire *Bilingualism and Emotions*. University of London.

Dewaele, J-M. and Pavlenko, A. (2002) Emotion vocabulary in interlanguage. *Language Learning* 52 (2), 265–324.

Dewaele, J-M. and Regan, V. (2001) The use of colloquial words in advanced French interlanguage. In S. Foster-Cohen and A. Nizegorodcew (eds) *EUROSLA Yearbook 1* (pp. 51–68). Amsterdam-Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Dörnyei, Z. (2003) *Questionnaires in Second Language Research: Construction, Administration, and Processing*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Drescher, M. (2000) Eh tabarnouche! c'était bon. Pour une approche communicative des jurons en français québecois. *Cahiers de praxématique* 34, 133–160.

Gonzalez-Reigosa, F. (1976) The anxiety arousing effect of taboo words in bilinguals. In Spielberger C.D. and Diaz-Guerrero R. (eds) *Cross-cultural Anxiety* (pp. 89–105). Washington, DC: Hemisphere.

Graham, C.R., Hamblin, A.W. and Feldstein, S. (2001) Recognition of emotion in English voices by speakers of Japanese, Spanish and English. *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 39, 19–37.

Harris, C.L., Ayçiçegi, A. and Gleason, J.B. (2003) Taboo words and reprimands elicit greater autonomic reactivity in a first than in a second language. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 24, 561–579.

Hergé (alias for Georges Remy) (1940) *Le crabe aux pinces d'or*. Brussels: Soir-Jeunesse.

Huston, N. (1999) *Nord perdu*. Arles: Actes Sud.

Javier, R. (1989) Linguistic considerations in the treatment of bilinguals. *Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychology* 6, 87–96.

Javier, R. and Marcos, L. (1989) The role of stress on the language-independence and codeswitching phenomena. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 18, 449–472.

Kasper, G. (1998) Interlanguage pragmatics. In H. Byrnes (ed.) *Learning Foreign and Second Languages: Perspectives in Research and Scholarship* (pp. 183–208). New York: Modern Language Association.

Kroll, J., Michael, E., Tokowicz, N. and Dufour R. (2002) The development of lexical fluency in a second language. *Second Language Research* 18, 141–175.

Léard, J-M. (1997) Structures qualitatives et quantitatives: sacres et jurons en québecois et en français. In P. Larrivée (ed.) *La structuration conceptuelle du langage* (pp. 127–147). Leuven: Peeters.

Lieury, A., Boissière, I., Jamet, E. and Marinkovic, K. (1997) Les mots grossiers et sexuels sont-ils mieux mémorisés que des mots neutres? *Le Langage et l'Homme* 32 (1), 17–37.

Pavlenko, A. (2002) Poststructuralist approaches to the study of social factors in second language learning and use. In V. Cook (ed.) *Portraits of the L2 User* (pp. 277–302). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Pesta, B.J., Murphy, M.D. and Sanders, R.E. (2001) Are emotionally charged lures immune to false memory? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 27 (2), 328–338.

Rayson, P., Leech, G. and Hodges, M. (1997) Social differentiation in the use of English vocabulary: Some analyses of the conversational component of the British National Corpus. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 2 (1), 133–152.

Register, N.A. (1996) Second-language learners and taboo words in American English. *English Today* 12, 44–49.

Rintell, E. (1984) But how did you *feel* about that? The learner's perception of emotion in speech. *Applied Linguistics* 5, 255–264.

Santiago-Rivera, A.L. and Altarriba, J. (2002) The role of language in therapy with the Spanish-English bilingual client. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 33, 30–38.

Sbisa, M. (2001) Illocutionary force and degrees of strength in language use. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33 (12), 1791–1814.

Stenstrom, A.B. (1995) Taboos in teenage talk. In G. Melchers and B. Warren (eds) *Studies in Anglistics* (pp. 71–79). Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International.

Stenstrom, A.B. (1999) He was really gormless – she's bloody crap. Girls, boys and intensifiers. In H. Hasselgard and S. Oksefjell (eds) *Out of Corpora: Studies in Honour of Stig Johansson* (pp. 69–78). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Toya, M. and Kodis, M. (1996) But I don't want to be rude: On learning how to express anger in the L2. *JALT Journal* 18 (2), 279–295.

Wierzbicka, A. (2003) *Universal human concepts as a tool for exploring bilingual lives*. Emotion and culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum. *Ethos* 31 (4), 577–600.