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# Loving a partner in a Foreign Language<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This is the first relatively large-scale study ( $N = 429$ ) based on an online questionnaire and written interviews to investigate whether language and cultural differences within cross-cultural couples made emotional communication more difficult. Opinions were divided with a third of participants claiming no difficulty and half mentioning limitations in the Foreign Language (LX) as well as a lack of emotional resonance of the LX. A minority reported experiencing a lack of genuineness at the start of the relationship. However, obstacles turned out not to be insurmountable and faded in months for more than three quarters of participants. Longer relationships led to affective socialisation in the LX and the partner's language often became the language of the heart. The speed and depth of this affective socialisation in the LX was linked to multicultural personality traits and gender, with female participants reporting more difficulties in communicating emotions and feeling less authentic at the start of the relationship. This gender difference faded over time. Female participants were also more likely to adopt their partner's language. Qualitative data revealed a wide variety of views, with over half of the participants mentioning the constraints of the LX while a quarter reported emotional liberation in the LX.

Keywords: Emotion, love, multilingualism, personality, gender, cross-cultural couples

## 1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are arguably the most profound, exhilarating and meaningful relationships humans experience (Tomlinson and Aron, 2013). Effortless expression of emotions is crucial in such relationships. Communicating these emotions appropriately can be challenging even in a native language (L1). A famous example occurs in the romantic French play by Edmond Rostand *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). In acte III, scene 7, handsome Christian is standing under the balcony of the beautiful Roxanne to woo her. As he is unable to express his romantic interest appropriately, he has asked Cyrano – who has an extremely large nose – to help him, again, to express his tender feelings. After a tepid start to the conversation, Roxanne threatens to close the window “Vous parlez trop mal. Allez-vous-en ! (...) Vous ne m'aimez plus !” (‘You speak too badly. Go away (...) You don't love me anymore’). Cyrano whispers poetic phrases in Christian's ear which he reproduces haltingly until Roxanne complains about the delivery. At that point Cyrano takes over, and, imitating Christian's voice and remaining out of view, manages to charm Roxanne with his witty and heartfelt rhyming couplets. After several minutes of this interaction Christian become impatient and when Cyrano pauses momentarily, he butts in and demands a kiss. Roxanne reacts badly and says “Hein?” (‘What?!’), “Vous demandez?” (‘You ask?’). Cyrano berates Christian for wanting to go too quickly and manages to take up the thread again. When Christian sits next to his beloved in a later scene he decides the moment has come to declare

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his love and he says: “Je vous aime” (‘I love you’), she answers “Oui, parlez-moi d’amour” (‘Yes, talk to me about love’), so Christian shifts to the informal second person pronoun and says “Je t’aime”. Roxanne is still not satisfied and encourages him to say more: “C’est le thème. Brodez, brodez” (‘that’s the theme, develop it now’). The only thing Christian then manages to blurt out is: “Je t’aime tant” (‘I love you so much’), which Roxanne greets coldly and impatiently: “Sans doute! Et puis?” (‘No doubt! And what more?’).

Foreign language (LX) users<sup>2</sup> may find themselves in Christian’s shoes because it is difficult to express emotions as fluently and as well in an LX as in an L1. Knowledge of the right words is crucial but not sufficient – indeed Christian knows the words – but the difficulty lies in how they are combined into stretches of discourse in order to create the intended complex illocutionary effects. Wood’s (2016) work on family communication shows that emotions are key to communication and that they are affected by the language used: “Emotions are affected by words and thoughts. How we feel is affected by what we say to others and what we communicate to ourselves through self-talk” (p. 343). Wood could have been commenting on the extracts of *Cyrano de Bergerac* discussed previously. Cross-cultural communication in an LX adds an extra obstacle because the emotions wanting to be expressed or needing to be decoded in the LX can have subtle shades that escape easy verbalisation, the connotations of the emotion words or expressions can be complex, the scripts (and hence the order) in which these words and sentences and silences appear differ widely from language to language and from culture to culture (Dewaele, 2012, 2013; Jahoda and Lewis, 2015; Pavlenko 2005). It means that asking for a kiss too soon could lead to a flat refusal, or that the inability to expand on a generic declaration of love could risk creating the impression of being trite and uninteresting.

Once the first hurdles have been crossed, and the participants become lovers, misunderstandings can still occur which can put a strain on the relationship (Fitzpatrick et al., 1993). Piller (2002) argues that because the nature of intimate relationships has changed in recent times, “spousal communication has increased in importance” (p. 4). Whereas in the past couples could be formed to constitute an economic unit and to start a family, partners today are more inspired by romantic reasons: “to share their free time and to be friends” (p. 4). In other words, the focus has shifted from being a “good housekeeper, breadwinner or sexual partner to being a good communicator” (p. 4). This has profound implications for modern couples with different language profiles. They will have to choose a (set of) common language(s) and cultural values. What factors will intervene in these choices? To what extent will they celebrate their multilingualism and multiculturalism? Will these multilingual and intercultural couples face language “issues” and could these lead to conflict? Research to date has often been limited to case studies, such as Piller’s (2002) pioneering work on a corpus of more than 20 hours of private conversations between partners in English-German bilingual marriages.

The present study presents a larger-scale retrodictive investigation<sup>3</sup> of multicultural couples’ communication and more specifically the impact of LX use on communication of emotions. The approach will be mainly quantitative with some qualitative data, as we used an online questionnaire to collect data from 429 participants who were in a romantic relationship with a speaker of a different first language.

The focus will be on the language choices for the expression of emotions rather than on the emotions themselves and on the feelings that participants experienced in these interactions. After a brief literature review, we will introduce the research questions and

<sup>2</sup> We use the term Foreign language users (LX users) rather than “non-native speakers” because it is a value-neutral term referring to legitimate users of an LX who are by definition also native speakers of L1(s). LX(s) are acquired after the L1(s), i.e. after the age of three, to any level of proficiency (see Dewaele, to appear).

<sup>3</sup> Chan, Dörnyei and Henry (2015) defined this as a method that looks at outcomes – in other words end-states – before tracing back the developmental trajectories leading to these outcomes.

present our analytical framework and methodology. The analyses of quantitative and qualitative data will be presented in the following section. The findings will be linked to patterns highlighted in the literature review. Finally, we will point to the limitations of our research design and draw some tentative conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

Riela et al. (2010:491) summarised the amazing experience of falling in love as follows: "Falling in love is complex – it can occur swiftly or gradually, softly or to an overwhelming degree". Communication between the lovers is crucial for the relationship. Coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds adds an extra dimension to a complex psychological process (Piller 2001). Piller (2002) in her study of German-English couples describes the importance of the private language. She argues that this private language is the central element of the relationship, a glue that binds it together (p. 222). She found that many couples perceive their private language as the foundation of their relationship:

...we were both happy then that we could speak German, and our relationship started with drinking coffee and speaking, and so speaking was- was very important to us and whenever we are having a serious conversation, it really needs to be in German, otherwise it doesn't go well, and it doesn't feel right (p. 222).

Indeed, a prerequisite of romantic relationships is smooth communication. This communication relies on three channels, a visual channel such as body language, facial expressions and gestures, a vocal channel such as vocalisations, prosody, intonation, pitch, volume, and a verbal channel that covers the content of the speech (Dewaele, 2013). Difficulties can arise when the information "broadcast" on the three channels is not congruent. For example, when somebody sounds but does not look angry, or when somebody says something positive without looking and sounding positive. LX users seem just as capable as L1 users in recognising basic emotions if they have both visual and audio input (Lorette and Dewaele, 2015) but they struggle more if the input is audio only (Lorette and Dewaele, 2016).

Rich linguistic resources are needed to convey emotions accurately. This implies not just lexical knowledge, but also grammar, discourse and rhetoric's. Limitations in language proficiency do seem to have an impact on the capacity and the quality of the communication of emotions. On the lexical level, the study by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) showed that the frequency of use of emotion vocabulary was largely linked to language proficiency as well as other factors, such as gender, the type of linguistic material and extraversion. In other words, male LX users, those with lower levels of proficiency and introverts used fewer emotion words and avoided emotional topics.

Cross-cultural and socio-pragmatic issues also arise when a partner come from a widely different background. Emotions are expressed very differently in Asian and Western cultures (Mesquita, 2003). Zhengdao Ye (2004) describes Asian and Western cultures as two different worlds where some emotions and feelings are not transposable. She struggled to express emotions of love verbally in English when she arrived in Australia from China and would prefer to express them in the Chinese way, namely in a very restrained non-verbal way: "We do not place so much emphasis on verbal expression of love and affection, because they can evaporate quickly. For a Chinese, love and affection are embodied in care and concern, in doing what we believe are good things for the other party" (p. 140). This preference is typical for multilinguals who prefer to use the L1 when talking about emotional topics or recalling emotional memories, and who feel that the L1 has a stronger emotional resonance (Dewaele, 2011, 2013; Caldwell-Harris, 2015; Pavlenko 2005, 2014).

However, not all studies on the emotionality of the L1 and LX emotion words have shown superior scores for the L1. Ferré et al. (2010) study of 133 proficient bilinguals of

Spanish and Catalan based on memory tasks showed that words had the same emotional intensity in both languages. Dewaele (2016) found that the perceived emotionality balance can sometimes tip towards LX words. In a study of the perception of offensiveness of 30 negative emotion-laden words among 1159 English L1 users and 1165 English LX users, the LX users were found to judge the offensiveness of 29 words (with the exception of the most offensive one) significantly higher than the L1 users.

A number of studies have focused specifically on the language of love among multilinguals and their preferred languages for inner and articulated speech. Dewaele (2008) found that of 1564 multilingual participants, 45% reported that the phrase “I love you” had most emotional weight in their L1, 30% felt that it had equal weight in their L1 and an LX, and 25% felt it was stronger in their LX (p. 1767). Some Japanese participants pointed out that the phrase was not used in Japan because, as one participant put it, love needs to be communicated without words (p. 1768). The perception of the emotional weight of the phrase “I love you” in the LX was linked to context of acquisition, age of onset, degree of socialization, network of interlocutors and self-perceived oral proficiency. It was unrelated to gender, education and trait emotional intelligence. Participants were often aware of the subtle sociopragmatic and sociocultural differences in emotional weight and meaning of “I love you” in their LX but it took a long time of socialisation in the LX before these intellectual insights became affective reactions. Further research on the emotional resonance of multilinguals’ languages showed similar patterns for swearwords (Dewaele, 2004, 2010, 2011, 2013).

Caldwell-Harris et al. (2013) used a questionnaire to collect data from 66 Chinese university students on their use of the Mandarin phrase “Wo ai ni” (“I love you”) and compared them with the uses of “I love you” by 71 monolingual English American students in the United States. Chinese participants were found to be significantly more reticent in verbal and nonverbal expressions of love than the Americans. The Chinese preferred nonverbal expressions of love rather than verbal communication (p. 62). While the Americans used the phrase “I love you” mostly with family members, the Chinese used “Wo ai ni” more frequently with romantic partners and friends (p. 59). Interviews revealed that the expression was used for different reasons in both groups. The Americans insisted on the inherent importance of saying “I love you”, something the Chinese seldom mentioned. Even the bilingual and bicultural Chinese interviewees used the English “I love you” very rarely. The bilingual and bicultural American participants did use “Wo ai ni” more frequently with family than with romantic partners (p. 64).

Dewaele (2015b) looked at 1453 multilinguals’ language preferences for inner speech and for emotional inner speech. The L1 was preferred for both inner speech and for emotional inner speech. LXs acquired later in life were used gradually less frequently. LXs were used less frequently for emotional inner speech than for general inner speech, which was interpreted as evidence that it takes a relatively long time before an LX becomes fully internalized. Increased use of the LX for emotional inner speech was linked to higher levels of proficiency and LX socialization. LX users who had started learning the LX early in life used it more frequently for inner speech and for emotional inner speech. The conclusion was that “an LX can evolve from an obscure echo of social interactions (...) to a language of the heart, i.e. the LX can attain embodiment and take over -or share- the role of the L1 in inner (emotional) speech” (p. 15).

Ożańska-Ponikwia (2012) focused specifically on feelings of difference and their psychological correlates. She found that among the 102 Polish-English bilinguals who had been living in the UK and Ireland for some time those who felt more different when switching language were more extravert, agreeable and open. They also scored higher on emotion expression, empathy, social awareness, emotion perception, emotion management, emotionality and sociability. Ożańska-Ponikwia argued that only bilinguals with specific

personality profiles notice and report the subtle changes in their personality when switching languages.

Following the same line of investigation, Wilson (2013) reported that introvert multilinguals were more likely to feeling different when operating in an L2. She argued that they used an LX as a mask to hide behind even at intermediate levels of proficiency and allows them to be more adventurous in an LX.

Dewaele and Nakano (2012) examined the feelings of 106 multilinguals when switching languages. Their findings showed that the majority of participants felt less logical, less emotional, and less serious and increasingly fake especially when using their L3 (less so for their L2 or L4). The authors speculated that at very high levels of proficiency (typically in the L1 and L2) shifts in feelings are less perceptible but that at lower levels of proficiency (typically the L4), participants may still be unsure about how they feel. The ability to determine feelings in a language is only possible if the language is mastered relatively well (such as an L3), because participants have their L1 and L2 as points of reference.

In a later study, Dewaele (2015b) looked at the feedback from 1005 participants that answered the question about feelings of difference when switching languages. Although participants presented a variety of unique interpretations and explanations, the study showed that a lower level of proficiency, or a later age of acquisition are not the main contributors to feeling different when switching languages. Instead, age, education level and foreign language anxiety proved to be significantly linked to feeling different (Dewaele, 2015b).

Applied linguists have been investigating the phenomenon of semantic and conceptual change among people who had intense exposure to the L2 and to L2 culture (Pavlenko, 2009, 2014). As result, multilinguals diverge from the L1 pattern and approximate the divergent L2 pattern (2014:304). This conceptual destabilization is followed by restructuring in the L1, namely “readjustment of the category structure and boundaries in accordance with the constraints of the target linguistic category”. Moreover, there is “conceptual development”, namely “development of new multimodal representations that allows speakers to map new words onto real-world referents similar to native speakers of the target language” (Pavlenko 2009:141).

The process of change has also been considered by applied linguists and sociologists interested in cognitive and affective socialisation (Jahoda and Lewis, 2015). The process is described as learning to fit in socially by acquiring new interpretative frameworks, something that every child experiences, and that immigrants experience again, sometimes referred to as secondary socialisation (Bayley and Schechter, 2003).

A different perspective on change comes from cross-cultural psychologists who look at differences in patterns of emotions – how frequently and intensely people experience a range of emotions – across cultures (Mesquita, 2003). Changes in people’s cultural context (e.g., due to migration) transforms their patterns of emotional experience, a process called emotional acculturation (De Leersnyder, Mesquita and Kim, 2011).

To conclude, this brief overview of the literature shows that multilinguals generally have clear language preferences to express emotion, and these choices have an effect on how they feel and on their relationships. It also shows that there is no ‘permanent’ language of the heart (Dewaele, 2008) as new languages can dislodge and transform older ones. Moreover, emotional acculturation is inevitable with a romantic partner, meaning that language and cultural accommodation will boost semantic and conceptual restructuring and be accompanied by a gradual shift in patterns of emotional experience. This exact point will be the aim of this study, to try and understand how romance may affect the communication of emotion in an LX and how it may change the person itself.

### **3. Research questions**

The following five research questions will be addressed:

1. Do multilinguals find it harder to communicate emotions in an LX at the beginning of a romantic relationship and does that improve with time?
2. Do multilinguals feel less genuine or authentic in the LX at the beginning of an intercultural romantic relationship and does that change with time?
3. Are personality dimensions linked to feeling different in the LX in intercultural romantic relationships?
4. Is gender linked to background variables and language choices in intercultural romantic relationships?
5. Is the use of the partner's language as the “relationship language” linked to its status in the country of residence?

## **4. Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-method approach. Because “questionnaire surveys usually provide a rather 'thin' description of the target phenomena” (Dörnyei, 2007:115), we decided to gather both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, which would allow us to identify significant statistical trends in the quantitative data, the possible causes of which can be pursued through open questions in the survey or in interviews with a smaller number of participants (see Creswell and Plano Clark, 2010).

### **4.1. Instruments**

The quantitative part of the study was based on data collected through an online questionnaire. In addition to sociobiographical data, it collected data regarding language preferences in romantic relationships at two stages: the beginning of the relationship, and after a certain time. Participants had to answer closed questions with 5-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (absolutely not) to 5 (absolutely yes).

Participants also filled out the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) which consists of 40 items (Van der Zee et al., 2013). It measures five traits that are highly relevant in inter-cultural situations: Cultural Empathy, Flexibility, Social Initiative, Open-mindedness and Emotional Stability. This instrument was well suited to capture the personality traits of individuals from different cultural backgrounds in multicultural relationships. Moreover, these personality traits are thought to be adaptive to individuals in culturally heterogeneous societies (Van der Zee et al., 2013).

The qualitative data came from one open question inquiring after the reasons for finding it harder to communicate emotions in an LX and from written interviews with eight participants after they had completed the online survey. They answered additional questions regarding their communication experience in romantic relationships in LXs.

The research design and questionnaire obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London. The final version of the questionnaire was posted on-line using GoogleDocs and we used snowball sampling contacting participants in previous studies and asking them to recruit their friends, who spread the call for participation to their friends and contacts (Ness Evans and Rooney, 2013).

### **4.2. Participants**

A total of 429 participants (329 females, 100 males) answered the questionnaire. The age of participants varied from 19 to 81 years, with 31% in their twenties and below, 46% in their thirties, 12% in their forties, 8% in the fifties and 4% in their sixties and above. The majority of the participants were highly educated; 25% held a PhD, 44% a MA, 22% a BA and 10% a High School Diploma or other qualification. The participants spoke a total of 41 languages. The most frequent languages were English (23%), Spanish (9%), German (6%), French (5%), Greek (5%), Italian (5%), Portuguese (5%), Turkish (5%). Other languages

spoken included Arabic, Armenian, Basque, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Dutch, Flemish, Estonian, Hebrew, Hungarian, Finnish, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Mandarin, Malay, Maltese, Norwegian, Romanian, Pashto, Persian, Polish, Tamil, Hindi, Russian, Slovak, Swedish and Serbian. The participants were quite multilingual with 11 monolinguals (3%), 83 bilinguals (22%), 151 trilinguals (35%), 101 quadrilinguals (24%), 52 pentalinguals (12%), 31 participants with six or more languages (7%). The partners were slightly less multilingual with 52 monolinguals (12%), 122 bilinguals (28%), 131 trilinguals (31%), 84 quadrilinguals (20%), 527 pentalinguals (6%), 13 participants with six or more languages (3%).

All participants had used an LX in a romantic relationship at least once. Only 3 participants reported using their L1 exclusively with their partner, 56 reported mixing their own L1 with that of the partner, 160 participants reported using a common LX and 210 participants reported having adopted their partner's L1. The participants knew significantly more languages ( $Mean = 3.5$ ) than their partners ( $Mean = 2.9$ ) ( $t(428) = 14.5, p < .0001$ ).

To preserve participants' anonymity we have replaced the names by numbers for extracts from the open question in the online questionnaire and by letters for extracts from the interviews.

### 4.3. Dependent variables

In order to assess the perceptions of feeling of difference at the beginning of a multicultural relationship, judgments were asked about the following statements (using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'absolutely disagree' to 'absolutely agree')<sup>4</sup>.

- 1) *It was harder to communicate emotions in an LX when I first started my relationship.*
- 2) *I felt less genuine or less authentic in communicating my emotions to my partner at the beginning of my relationship.*
- 3) *I feel that due to language limitations, some emotional intensity was lost when communicating with my partner.*

The following two statements enquired about a later point in the multilingual relationship:

- 4) *At some point in time I noticed that it became easier to communicate my emotions in the LX.* A follow-up question enquired about the length of time before this improvement happened. Answers were categorised as 1) never, 2) hours, 3) days, 4) weeks, 5) months, 6) one year and 7) more than one year.
- 5) *At some point in time I felt that the language I spoke with my partner had become my 'language of the heart'.*

A one-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test showed that the distribution was not normal for the feedback on any of the five items, with KS Z varying between -0.20 and -0.15 (all  $p < 0.0001$ ). As a consequence we used non-parametric statistics such as Spearman rho rank correlations and Whitney U tests.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Quantitative analysis

#### 5.1.1. Descriptive statistics for Likert scale items

Mean scores for agreement with statements are not very informative when the distribution is definitely not normal. We will therefore complement them with the distribution of responses for each item in the form of a graph (see Fig. 1).

<sup>4</sup> Loewen and Plonsky (2016) explain that in applied linguistics the range for Likert scales is often from 1 to 5, "but it may vary anywhere from a three-point scale (1–3) and up" (p. 99).



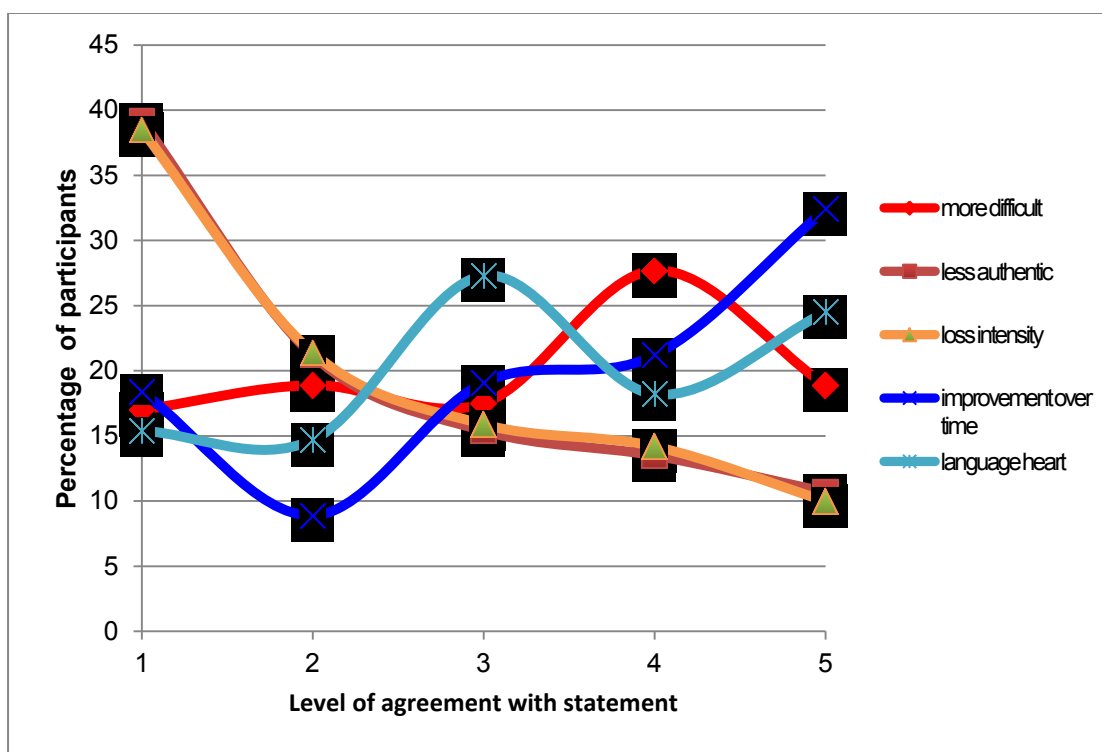


Fig. 1. Distribution of participants according to their Likert scale scores on perceived difficulty of communicating emotions in the LX, loss of authenticity, loss of emotional intensity, improvement over time and the adoption of the LX as language of the heart

The difficulty of communicating emotions in an LX at the beginning of a relationship had a mean score of 3.1 ( $SD = 1.4$ ). A closer look at the distribution shows fairly similar percentages for each score on the Likert scale (between 15% and 18% of participants), with a spike (28% of participants) for those who “agreed” with the statement. In other words, no clear pattern emerges, though overall about a third of participants disagreed while nearly half of participants agreed (see Fig. 1).

A clearer pattern emerged for feeling less genuine and authentic in communicating emotions at the start of a relationship ( $Mean = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) or in experiencing a loss of emotional intensity when using the LX ( $Mean = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ). The distribution shows that close to 40% of participants strongly disagreed with both statements with gradually declining numbers agreeing with them (see Fig. 1). In other words, 60% of participants did not feel less genuine and authentic, nor did they experience a loss of emotional intensity when using the LX.

The mean score for the item on ease of communicating emotions after being in a relationship with a speaker of an LX for some time was 3.4 ( $SD = 1.5$ ). A look at the distribution shows increasing levels of agreement with the statement, with a quarter of participants disagreeing, a fifth remaining neutral, and over half agreeing (see Fig. 1).

A broadly similar pattern emerged for the level of agreement with the statement that the language of their relationship had become ‘the language of their heart’. A look at the distribution shows increasing levels of agreement with the statement, with a third of participants disagreeing, over a quarter remaining neutral, and over half agreeing.

Considering the length of time it took participants to feel more comfortable communicating emotions in the LX, it seems that for half of the participants it happened in a matter of months, for 18% it never happened and for 20% it took at least a year or longer (see Fig. 2).

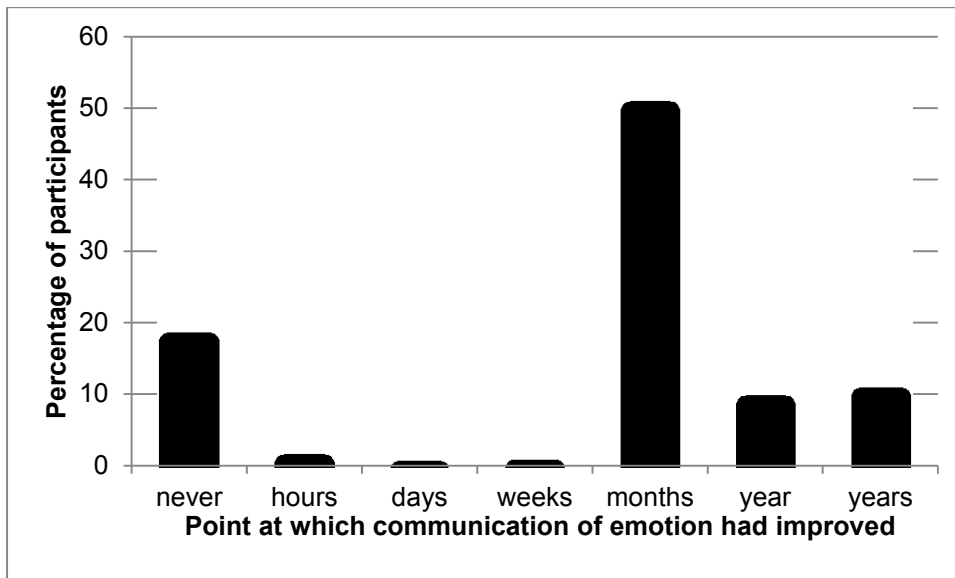


Fig. 2. Distribution of participants according to the time it took for them to feel that communication of emotion in the LX had improved

It is reasonable to assume that the majority of participants disagreeing with the negative phrased items and agreeing with the positively phrased ones reflect the increased cognitive and affective socialisation in the LX.

#### 5.1.2. The link between multicultural personality dimensions and the dependent variables

To test whether the five personality traits are linked to the dependent variable we used a series of Spearman rho correlation analyses. Cultural empathy was not not significantly related to any dependent variable. Flexibility had a significant negative correlation ( $\rho = -0.116$ ,  $p < 0.017$ ) with the feeling that the partner's language had become participant's "language of the heart", with a perceived loss of emotional intensity ( $\rho = -0.126$ ,  $p < 0.009$ ) and with the feeling that it was harder to communicate emotions ( $\rho = -0.123$ ,  $p < 0.011$ ). In other words, participants who were more flexible agreed less with these statements. Social Initiative was positively correlated only with the statement about the partner's language having become the participant's "language of the heart" ( $\rho = 0.118$ ,  $p < 0.015$ ). Open-mindedness was significantly positively related to the statement about the partner's language having become the participant's "language of the heart" ( $\rho = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ) and negatively correlated with the statement about loss of emotional intensity ( $\rho = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.012$ ). Emotional Stability was negatively correlated with a loss of emotional intensity ( $\rho = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ). Emotionally stable participants thus seemed to have fewer fears and doubts about the loss of intensity in the communication of emotion with their partner. It is important to add that the effect sizes are very small, explaining a maximum of 2.25% of shared variance between the personality traits and the dependent variables. Had we applied a Bonferroni correction, to reduce the risk of type I error (a false positive), only one correlation would have reached significance (with  $p < .002$ ). We decided against a Bonferroni adjustment because it is fairly conservative and produces a slightly more elevated risk of Type II errors<sup>5</sup> overall.

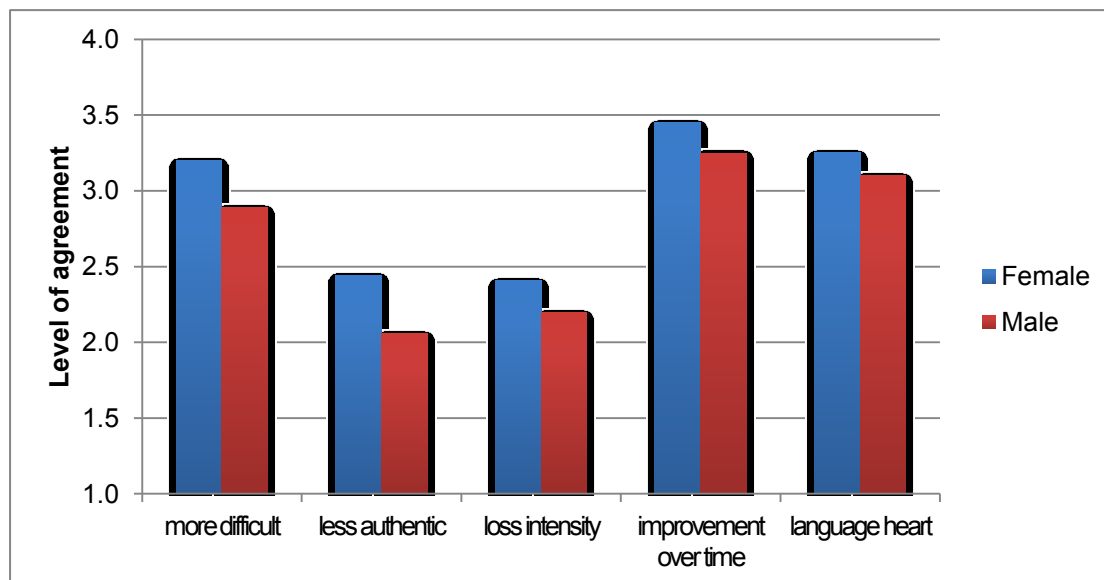
<sup>5</sup> A type 2 error refers to the situation where "no statistical difference is found between scores, even though the difference exists within the population as a whole" (Loewen and Plonsky, 2016:12).

### 5.1.3. The effect of gender on language choice, multilingualism, perceived difficulty of communicating emotions, loss of authenticity, emotional intensity, improvement over time and the adoption of the LX as language of the heart

A cross tabulation analysis (Pearson  $\chi^2$ ) showed that female participants were significantly more likely to adopt their partner's L1 ( $d.f. = 3, \chi^2 = 17.4, p < .001$ ). A closer look at the data shows that of the 210 participants who adopted their partner's language, 84.3% were female. A  $t$ -test for independent samples showed that female participants knew significantly more languages ( $Mean = 3.6, SD = 1.3$ ) than the male participants ( $Mean = 3.2, SD = 1.2$ ), ( $t(427) = 2.2, p < .026$ ).

A series of Mann-Whitney U tests showed that female participants also felt that it was harder to communicate their emotions in an LX at the start of the relationship ( $Whitney U = 14341, Z = -2.0, p < .047$ ) (see Fig. 3). Female participants reported feeling significantly less genuine and less authentic in communicating their emotions with their partner at the beginning of their relationship ( $Whitney U = 13653, Z = -2.7, p < .0007$ ) (see Fig. 3). No significant gender difference emerged for loss of intensity in communicating emotions at the start of the relationship ( $Whitney U = 15024, Z = -1.4, p = ns$ ). The gender difference on the improvement of emotional communication over time and about the LX becoming their language of the heart was not significant either ( $Whitney U = 15223, Z = -1.2, p = ns$  and  $Whitney U = 15434, Z = -1.0, p = ns$  respectively) (see Fig. 3). Therefore, it can be concluded that our female participants expressed more doubts about communication and authenticity issues at the start of their multilingual relationships but that they were as positive as male participants about subsequent developments.

Fig. 3: Gender differences for the perceived difficulty of communicating emotions in the LX, loss of authenticity, loss of emotional intensity, improvement over time and the adoption of the LX as language of the heart



### 5.1.4. Status of the relationship language

Finally, we examined if there is a relationship between using the partner's language as the “relationship language” and its status in the country of residence (whether it is the country's dominant language). A cross tabulation analysis revealed a significant association between both variables for the whole sample ( $\chi^2(1) = 55, p < .0001$ ). Indeed, in 60% of relationships where the participant used his/her partner's L1, it was also the majority language. A limitation of this specific analysis is that it did not take into consideration the proficiency of participants, which could have an impact on language choice.

Upon shifting the focus on female participants only, results are very similar. A cross tabulation analysis shows a significant association ( $Chi^2(1) = 40.5, p < .0001$ ). In 63% of relationships where a female participant used her partner's L1, this language was also the majority language.

## 5.2. Qualitative analysis: the open question and the interviews

The qualitative part of this study will attempt to identify possible causes by reporting, firstly on the feedback to the open question asking why participants found it harder and less natural to express emotions in their LX and secondly by the data obtained through eight interviews.

The purpose of this section is to provide illustrations of the closed items in the questionnaire. Results provided by the two types of data are mixed and combined in the discussion section. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2010:81) explain that with this type of analytic approach "...the qualitative items are an add-on to a quantitative instrument, the items generally do not result in a complete context-based qualitative data set. However, they provide the researcher with emergent themes and interesting quotes that can be used to validate and embellish the quantitative survey findings."

The open question on the difficulty of communicating emotions with a romantic partner generated 11,513 words, the interviews generated another 4,830 words. A thematic analysis revealed six broad -sometimes slightly overlapping- themes: (A) "Conceptual problems with the LX" (cultural differences, different pragmatic values, untranslatable concepts, different emotional value); (B) "Limited vocabulary in the LX" (i.e. a lack of basic words to express or understand emotions in the LX); (C) "Happy LX users" (participants who reported having no difficulties or who quickly managed to overcome the obstacles); (D) "Constraining effects of the LX" (the feeling of frustration at not being able to express themselves with the richness and subtlety that their L1 allowed them); (E) "Varia" (comments that did not directly address the question or were unclassifiable); and (F) "The liberating effect of the LX" (the ability to express emotions in the LX that participants were unable to utter in their L1). The themes are presented in table 1, ranked in descending order of frequency and relative proportion. The categories "Conceptual problems" and "Limited vocabulary" each represented a quarter of the responses, followed by the category "Happy LX users" representing a fifth of the responses. The categories "Constraining effects of the LX" and "Varia" each represented about 10%, with the final category "The liberating effect of the LX" representing the final 5% (see table 1).

Table 1. The themes in the data generated by the open question on the difficulty of communicating emotions with a romantic partner

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Conceptual problems	120	25.6
Limited vocabulary	118	25.2
Happy LX user	94	20.1
Constraining effect of LX	59	12.6
Varia	51	10.9
Liberating effect of the LX	26	5.6

We chose data extracts that were most representative of the category, most poignant and most interesting. Interviews extracts were chosen following the same criteria. It is a way to give voice to participants looking back at their unique romantic relationships and have them reflect on their developmental trajectory.

### *Conceptual problems*

Participant 1 pointed out that the emotion concept of “love” in English and “liebe” in German are conceptually nonequivalent: “I love you” is a lot less meaningful and serious than “Ich liebe dich” (exact translation in German). The former is easily said, the latter is hardly used, even in German relationships”.

Participant 2 mentioned a different type of conceptual problem, namely that of controlling the words that get simultaneously activated in moments of strong emotion: “At times of emotional turbulence a mix of words springs to mind in different languages. It takes extra effort to screen the English ones.”

Participant 3 complained about the lack of certain linguistic resources in the LX, such as diminutives, to allow her to fully express her emotion as she could in her Croatian L1: “Because of the expressions indicating cuteness and tenderness. There are so much more of this words and suffixes indicating such emotions in Croatian than in English. I felt I couldn't express my emotions fully (I still feel like that sometime)”.

Participant 4 reported being particularly worried about not using the right emotion word in his LX, which slowed him down, and this was even more important when he was unable to supplement the word with appropriate non-verbal communication: “It slows down my conversation because with emotions, it is imperative to find the exact right words. However this only becomes important when non-verbal forms of communication are not available (or have failed)”.

An interviewee also elaborated on the communication difficulties her partner faced with at the beginning of their relationship when he attempted to use her L1:

Participant A (Female, 24, Spanish L1, Partner's language: Dutch, Language of relationship: English, Country of residence: Netherlands):

“My partner would try to say affective things in my first language because he thought that would be special or would mean more to me. But it was actually the other way around, because he didn't actually speak the language, those expressions (things like 'I love you') wouldn't really have much effect on me, rather they would sound quite forced and strange.”

Another interviewee wondered why it seemed more difficult to communicate negative emotions rather than happy emotions despite a high level of proficiency in the LX:

Participant B (Male, 32, English L1, Partner's language: Spanish, Language of relationship: Spanish, Country of residence: USA): “I would say that I still have problems communicating my anger because I can't fully explain why I'm angry. With happy emotions, it is easier to show through touch, etc., but with anger, it is difficult because one needs to explain why he or she is upset.”

### *Limited vocabulary*

Participant 5 did not mind her vocabulary gaps in the LX because her partner was also an LX user of Spanish and the use of the LX became an exciting romantic game:

“Sometimes it was difficult to use Spanish to communicate because the natural vocabulary was not there, but it made it easier to communicate in Spanish with my husband because we both were not native speakers and it seemed like less pressure to know everything. It was also more fun to speak in Spanish because there are more romantic ways to say things in Spanish than in English, and the fact that we were both speaking another language different from our native language was enticing”.

Participant 6 pointed out that the lack of words did not impede the emotional connection with the partner and that while the memory of the language has faded, the memory of the feelings remains strong:

“Romantic feelings I spoke more in Japanese but it was more difficult at times because of lack of vocabulary rather than emotional connection. The amazing thing about this topic as I'm thinking back is I often remember the feelings we communicated but not which language we spoke in.”

### *Happy LX user*

Participant 7 explained that being in a multilingual relationship means that partners can switch between their languages to express emotions, and wish their partner spoke their L1 too:

“When we use affectionate language we don't always use German - we use both regularly French and my partner knows how to respond in French, which I find really nice. I like code switching ! We do it often - not only in German and French, but also in German and English (when I can't express myself properly in German, or in the case the words come up to my mind in English.) But it's a constant awareness of the language I use. This is tiring - plus I switch languages all the time and speak and think in different languages. And sometimes my partner doesn't realise how demanding that is - that's also way I wish to teach him my mother tongue”.

Participant 8 argued that no words are needed when one is in love, at least at the beginning: “Emotions at the beginning were easy to express even without words”.

This view was shared by participant 9: “Lingua franca was English, and sex was more important than language”.

Some interviewees insisted that they experienced no communication difficulties using an LX. Participant C, for example, in her answer to the question whether switching back to the L1 would make emotional expressions more intense, answered:

Participant C (Female, 30, Czech L1, Partner's language: Hungarian, Language of relationship: English, Country of residence: Norway): “It would stay exactly the same. It was the situations (action and reaction), not the language that mattered.”

Another interviewee explained that emotional expressions in her L1 were devoid of meaning:

Participant D (Female, 59, French L1, Partner's language: Russian, Language of relationship: Russian, Country of residence: Russia): “I think I have never said "I love you" in my native language. It seems to me empty.”

She also stated that because she had "sufficient" knowledge of Russian, the profoundness of her relationship in Russian was not compromised. She also downplayed the importance of knowledge of the LX.

### *Constraining effect of LX*

Participant 10 explained that expressing emotions in an LX becomes particularly difficult in situations of stress: “My language skills were not very good, and still it's easier to describe complex emotions in a native language, especially in stressful situations, if we are arguing, and also in intimate situations”.

Participant 11 mentioned the sense of artificiality and limitation inherent to her expression of emotions in the LX: “When you start using an LX, things sound less serious to you. They sound like a joke that you don't take seriously and sometimes it doesn't feel natural to speak words of love in other language”.

One of the interviewees, Participant E (Female, 32, Romanian L1, Partner's language: Italian, Language of relationship: Spanish, Italian, English, Country of residence: Spain) expanded on the lack of emotional resonance of the LX:

“It was, definitely harder, as words expressing emotions in an LX can't produce in me the same vibrations, nor the same as they do when expressing them in my mother tongue (and not only at the beginning of my relationship). So I assume that if they didn't make me feel strongly emotional, they weren't able to transmit my true feeling toward him. He expected me to be able to communicate with him in that register that was and still is unknown to me. Our relationship failed because of such lack of deep communication.”

One participant complained about the fact that her partner never attempted to acquire her L1 and seemed to assume that she was a native speaker of his own L1, which led to break-down in the relationship:

Participant 12: “My professional English and the everyday English I use socially is not enough to communicate private feelings of love, intimacy, or sex. (...) he expected me to be able to communicate with him in that register that was and still is unknown to me. Our relationship failed because of such lack of deep communication.”

### *Varia*

Participant 13 complained “I sucked at communicating my emotions in any language” and participant 14 felt that “Emotions have little to do with the language”.

### *Liberating effect of the LX*

Participant 15 loved the freedom that the LX gave her: “Being emotionally detached from a non-native language makes it much easier to discuss feelings/ “cheesy” topics. The things we talked about in English, I would have a lot of trouble conveying in my native language”.

Participant 16 felt that the more disembodied nature of her LX allowed her to express love more easily: “It's definitely easier to say "I love you" in English than in Swedish. Seems not to carry as much meaning as "Jag älskar dig”.

One interviewee explained that her knowledge of her husband's L1 allowed her to tune in on his emotional channel whenever that was necessary:

Participant F (Female, 37, English L1, Partner's language: Hungarian, Language of relationship: English and Hungarian, Country of residence: Hungary): “Knowing my husband's native language definitely makes me feel more like I'm being heard. When I'm frustrated I prefer to use his language to make sure he's getting the point.”

## **6. Discussion**

The answer to the first research question on the difficulty of communicating emotions with a romantic partner at the beginning of a relationship and on the potential improvement over time turned out to be much more nuanced than expected. Almost half of the participants agreed that they had experienced some difficulty in expressing their romantic feelings at the start, most insisted that it had become easier after a couple of months. A third of participants reported not having experienced difficulties in expressing their emotions in an LX. An analysis of the feedback on the open question and in the interviews illustrated this wide range of views. Many participants (60%) reported that lacking the words to express emotional matters complicated communication with their partner. However, a minority (26%) took the opposite view and insisted that romantic relationships rely on the shared passion and that basic verbal communication sufficed at the time. Some participants even pointed out that jointly discovering and trying out the emotion words with a non-native partner was an exciting game. A larger group of participants who had a fair degree of mastery in the LX highlighted the fact that they discovered that their gaps were not so much lexical but more often conceptual. Some realised that some emotion concepts in their L1 and in the LX were untranslatable, which led to meta-pragmatic analyses not just of words but also of scripts. Others realised that the differences existed not just with the words but also with nonverbal communication (cf. Caldwell-Harris et al, 2013) and some mused about the things that could be communicated without words in some cultures. Participant 6 remembered struggling with Japanese vocabulary, and reported having forgotten the language used but not the feelings experienced at the time. This is quite revealing because the words may in fact have mattered less than the nonverbal expression of love.

The language balance could also be perturbed in emotional outbursts, with other languages barging in. This phenomenon is well-documented as has been attributed to the fact that control over the languages can get lost when the speaker experiences strong emotions, or that the emotions cannot be expressed quickly enough in the LX and that this bottle neck leads to a spillover in other languages (Dewaele, 2013).

The difficulties in expressing an emotional state could also be linked to the absence of the appropriate morphology, such as participant 3 who complained that her LX did not allow her the diminutives of her L1. It seemed like the lack of required sugar in a cup of tea. The sometimes arduous process of accessing the accurate conceptual information to express emotion in the LX was experienced as a handicap by some, which was linked to a slightly different type of comment, namely the constraints imposed by the use of the LX. Participant 11 commented on her lack of certainty about the illocutionary effects of her emotion words in her LX. Talking to her partner in an LX led her to question her authenticity. A relatively smaller number of participants downplayed the difficulties in communicating emotions in the LX, pointing out that sex was more important than language at the beginning stage of a relationship. Looking back, they acknowledged some of the difficulties that they had to overcome, but explained that they did not experience them as major obstacles. Participant 7 explained that code-switching allowed her to avoid getting stuck although the verbal acrobatics could be tiring. Further analysis of the feedback revealed a dazzling amount of sometimes contradictory experiences and statements. Participants mentioned differences in both verbal and non-verbal behaviour, reported different language choices during sexual intercourse in native languages, mentioned culture as a potential cause for misunderstandings but also as the exotic mystery at the heart of romance. While some participants remembered struggling to communicate emotion in an LX, it did not put them off starting a new relationship in an LX. This supports Wilson's finding (2013) that using LXs, despite the challenges, provides speakers with a sense of freedom, new experiences of the world and a discovery of different sides of their personalities. Over half of our participants agreed that with time they adjusted and started to feel that communication of emotions improved and their relationship made them culturally more competent and amplified their confidence in using the LX in other domains. However, a minority of participants (18%) felt that the use of an LX would remain an obstacle. In contrast, over half of the participants adopted their partner's language as their language of the heart, a result that is consistent with Dewaele (2008). Participants also believed that longer duration of relationships reduced the belief that communication in L1s would be more profound. The longer duration also increased the feeling that partner's language had become the language of the heart. These findings can be interpreted as evidence of conceptual development in the LX in the first stages of the cross-cultural relationship (Pavlenko, 2009). In some cases however, like participant 12, difficulties in expressing emotions adequately in the LX and the unwillingness of the partner to acknowledge that the participant was using an LX, or to make any attempt at linguistic reciprocity, were seen as having contributed to the failure of the relationship.

This lack of reciprocity in multilingual relationships has been brilliantly dramatized by Andrew Muir in his 2015 play *The Session*. The play is based on case notes from psychotherapists belonging to the charity *Mother Tongue* who deals with immigrants and cross-cultural couples. The main characters, Lena (Polish) and Robbie (British) live in the UK and their marriage is coming to an end after twenty years of misunderstanding and crossed wires, which Lena attributes to Robbie's lack of interest in her linguistic and cultural heritage.

Overall, it appears that communication difficulties in multilingual romantic relationships are not as common as expected and do not seem to play a key positive or negative role in the formation of a relationship. To get a better idea about the types of answers concerning the difficulties in communicating emotion, we coded the responses to the open question and delved into the interview material. About 60 per cent of the comments were "negative", i.e. related to conceptual problems in communication, to the struggle to find appropriate words and to the more general constraining effects of having to use the LX. A quarter of responses were positive, relating happiness and excitement in using the LX to communicate emotions and even experiencing the LX as liberating. Ten per cent of responses were unclassifiable.



The second research question focused on feelings of authenticity at the beginning of a romantic relationship and the possible change over time. Participants' feedback on the Likert scale item revealed that lack of authenticity was not perceived as a problematic aspect of the early relationship by 60% of participants. However, a quarter of participants did agree with that using the LX made them feel less genuine.

This view was also partly reflected in the findings reported by Dewaele (2015a) about feelings of difference when switching languages, with about a third of participants reporting feeling just as authentic in the LX as in their L1. Participants in the present study who did feel less genuine and authentic on occasion attributed it to their lack of lexical, conceptual and cultural understanding of the LX. Dewaele and Nakano (2012) found the opposite proportion, with more multilinguals reporting feeling significantly more fake and less emotional in their LXs. Overall a majority of our participants reported cognitive and affective socialisation (Jahoda and Lewis, 2015) in a matter of months. They had to establish a new interpretative framework with their partner. Often this framework was their partner's and that of the society they lived in, sometimes it was a unique blend of their own values and practices, their partner's language and culture, and the culture of the country in which they resided.

We argue that our participants acculturated emotionally towards the patterns of emotions of their partners, and, more generally, towards the cultural-specific emotions of their country of residence (De Leersnyder, 2014; De Leersnyder, Mesquita and Kim, 2011; Mesquita, 2003). In other words, the cross-cultural relationship (often in combination with living in a new environment) contributed to a transformation of their patterns of emotional experience.

The third research question looked at the relationship between the five multicultural personality dimensions linked to feeling different in intercultural romantic relationships. Participants who scored higher on Social Initiative and Open-mindedness, and –counter-intuitively- lower of Flexibility were more likely to agree that their partners' language had become their language of the heart. This fits with the finding in Ożańska-Ponikwia and Dewaele (2012) that Open-mindedness and self-esteem were the strongest predictors of general English L2 use by Polish immigrants in the UK and Ireland. Moreover, participants who scored higher on Flexibility and Open-mindedness were less likely to feel that emotional intensity was lost in communication with their partner. Participants with higher scores on Emotional Stability disagreed more strongly with the statement that the use of an LX implied a loss of emotional intensity. These results complement the findings of psychologists working on love who found that people with low self-esteem are much more worried about partner acceptance and responsiveness while those with higher levels of self-esteem feel valued by their partners (Tomlinson and Aron, 2013:9). It also shows that in cross-cultural couples there are important individual differences in the adoption of an LX as the language of the heart -which could be the partner's L1 or a common LX- and that these differences are partly linked to individuals' personality profiles (Dewaele, 2015b; Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012).

Gender was the central independent variable in the fourth research question. It turned out to have an effect on a number of dependent variables. The female participants reported more worries about emotional communication with their partner in an LX at the beginning of their relationship. Not only did they feel less genuine in communicating their emotions with their partner, they also felt that it was more difficult and less natural to communicate their emotions in an LX. This feeling of inadequacy does not necessarily reflect more severe **actual** communication difficulties than those experienced by the male participants. It is possible that the female participants held themselves to a higher standard than their male peers, and worried more about their limitations in expressing their emotions. There might also be an interaction between gender and Emotional Stability. Male participants were found to score higher on Emotional Stability ( $t(421) = -3.1, p < .002$ ), which could explain why females reported struggling more to communicate emotions, and felt less authentic or genuine

in doing so. This result is consistent with previous findings associated with higher negative emotionality in females (Lippa, 2010).

Our female participants were also significantly more likely to adopt their partner's L1. It is of course impossible to know to what extent this was their own choice or the result of gentle coercion. Part of the answer lies in the fact that the female participants were significantly more multilingual than the male participants so they might have been better able to adopt the language of their partner.

The final research question focused on the use of the partner's language as the "relationship language" and its status in the country of residence. It turned out that for 60% of participants who had adopted their partner's L1, this language was also the majority language of the country where they lived. Piller (2008) suggested that language proficiency is more likely to determine the language choice than the dominant language in the country.

The present study is not without some limitations. Using a cross-sectional design did allow us to ask questions about the participants' linguistic past in multilingual relationships and how it had evolved. However, we cannot not be sure that all participants remembered with equal clarity what their linguistic practices and what feelings they harboured about their languages with their partner. A longitudinal study would be needed to detect developments in language practices or changes in feelings after certain period of time in a relationship. We are also aware that language proficiency plays a role in language preferences for emotion talk (Dewaele, 2013). Higher proficiency is typically linked with increased socialisation in the LX and increased emotionality in the LX (Dewaele, 2008, 2013). We reasoned that participants' memories about their past LX proficiency might have been less reliable than their memories about the language practices with their partner.

The final limitation relates to the nature of the sample. It contained a majority of highly educated, highly multilingual and mostly female participants, which is typical in this type of research (Wilson and Dewaele, 2010). Moreover, to be included in the study the participants needed to have a partner who spoke an LX (or used an LX with a partner) which may make them stand out from the general multilingual population for some crucial personality trait like Open-mindedness and Cultural Empathy. Also, the relatively rosy picture that emerges from the present study can be the result of the non probability sampling technique. It is likely that the online questionnaire attracted more multilinguals whose romantic relationships in an LX worked out, hence their willingness to share their experience. Those for whom LX proved to be obstacle in a relationship might have been less eager to participate in the study. Our findings are thus true for our specific sample of 429 participants but it is impossible to generalise these findings to the general population. This caveat is common in research using questionnaires (Ness Evans and Rooney, 2013:132). Further research could focus on the question whether people might resist starting a relationship in an LX, anticipating the potential linguistic and cultural difficulties and deciding not to risk it.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has explored the perceptions of multilinguals reflecting on emotional communication in LXs in romantic relationships. While some participants identified themselves or their partner with the character of Christian in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, complaining about the limitations that the LX imposed on their emotional communication, of feeling like actors on stage having forgotten their lines and struggling to get through to each other, most were able to overcome this obstacle in a matter of months.

The quantitative data showed that participants' opinions on the difficulty to express emotions in the LX at the start of the relationship were divided. Half of the participants agreed that they had experienced some difficulty in expressing their emotions but a third of participants claimed that the LX had not constrained their expression of emotion. A majority did not feel less genuine or less authentic in communicating their emotions in an LX.

Emotional communication improved with time for most participants and the partner's language often became the language of the heart. Gender had an effect on perceptions at the start of the relationship but not later on. Female participants reported more difficulties in communicating emotions at the start of the relationship and reported feeling less authentic in the LX at that point. However, they no longer differed significantly from male participants after some time in the relationship, which suggests that they had managed to overcome the initial difficulties and that the LX had the potential of becoming their language of the heart. Our female participants were also more numerous in adopting their partner's language.

The multicultural personality traits Open-mindedness, Social Initiative and Emotional Stability were found to have a small but significant positive effect on some dependent variables.

The qualitative data uncovered similar patterns with over half of participants pointing to the conceptual and lexical restrictions they faced in expressing emotions in their LX, which led them to feeling constrained. For a quarter of participants the use of the LX had the opposite effect: liberating them and making them happy.

In sum, drawing from the experiences of our participants, love in an LX is perfectly possible but it adds some extra challenges. Love and sex (usually) allow partners with different L1s to bridge the inevitable linguistic gaps and to create their own unique multilingual and multicultural relationship.

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