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Dewaele, Jean-Marc (2017) Glimpses of semantic restructuring of English emotion-laden words of American English L1 users residing outside the USA. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* , ISSN 1879–9272.

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# Glimpses of semantic restructuring of English emotion-laden words of American English L1 users residing outside the USA<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present exploratory study focuses on the effect of living outside the USA on the understanding of the meaning, the perceived offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of four English emotion-laden words of British origin and four English emotion-laden words of American origin among 556 first (L1) language users of American English. Statistical analyses revealed that the scores of the Americans living in the UK or in non-English-speaking countries differed significantly from those of compatriots living in the USA. Positive relationships emerged between multilingualism and scores on the dependent variables for the four British words, but no link emerged between languages known and the dependent variables for the American words. This is interpreted as an indication that semantic representations of emotion-laden words originating from another variety of the L1 are relatively weaker and are more likely to shift as a result of exposure to their use in other varieties, and the knowledge of other languages.

**Keywords:** emotion-laden words, semantic representations, multicompetence, bi-varietal native English speakers.

## 1. Multi-competence and conceptual restructuring

English native speakers are more or less aware of the existence of different varieties of their language in different parts of the world, ranging from the United Kingdom to North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. A number of these speakers may have had contact with other varieties through cultural products (films, music, books) or through direct contact with speakers of another variety, possibly during a holiday or a period in the country where the other variety was used. It typically takes a moment to get used to the different accent, to different speech routines (the “good day!” in Australia, the “how are you today?” in the USA, the “how do you do?” in the UK. Even speakers who never had direct contact with another first language (L1) variety might have noticed words or expressions from another L1 variety appearing in their own linguistic environment. Awareness and knowledge of the other variety thus ranges along a continuum, from close to zero, to receptive knowledge, to full knowledge of the other variety. Yet every person on that continuum is potentially able to communicate with a speaker of the other variety and may have stereotypical representations of the other culture. One could argue that a speaker who has been in

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-print of the version that appeared in *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* (Published online: 6 Feb 2017). doi 10.1075/lab.15046.dew  
issn 1879–9264 / e-issn 1879–9272 © John Benjamins Publishing Company

(even limited) contact with another variety could be considered a specific kind of bilingual or maybe a “bi-dialectal” or rather a “bi-varietal” monolingual. Rather than “L2 users” (cf. Bassetti & Cook 2011), they could be labelled “L1A” versus “L1B users”. The presence of two distinct language varieties in the mind allows the use of Cook’s multi-competence framework. He defined multi-competence as “the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community” (2012: 1), by which he means “everything a single person or a single community knows about all the languages they use” (p. 1). Cook insists on the fact that multilinguals do not have their languages in neat separate spaces in the brain but that they are linked and can therefore influence each other.

Multi-competence is a useful concept because it assumes that the L2 user’s knowledge of the L1 and the L2 are typically different from that of monolingual native speakers in both languages: “L2 users have different minds from those of monolinguals” (Cook 2003: 5). Could the distinction between L1 and L2 be transposed to L1A and L1B? In other words, could an American-English speaker’s knowledge of English be affected by exposure to British English? Or could the English of a British-English speaker start exhibiting traces of American English after years of residence in the USA? It seems probable that the knowledge of English of American or British English speakers who have never left their country will differ from that of their expatriate compatriots. Whether the linguistic differences of the expatriates could be picked up by their compatriots back home during their visits to their home country is another question.

There is one study that looked precisely at the effects of exposure to British English language and culture on American students. Boring (2005) focused on the perceptions about English language use and identity of 107 Californian students (78 females, 29 males, in their early twenties, mostly third year students) who spent a semester studying in London, UK and were interviewed at the end of their stay. They were studying in a “branch campus” which allowed them to fulfil degree requirements while abroad. They were housed together as a group or with other American students and their teachers were a mix of American home institution professors and local British instructors. A common misperception of the American students in the UK is that language and culture will be very comparable to the home culture. Edwards (2000) argued that because Americans and Brits speak mutually comprehensible varieties of English there is a danger of treating the stay in the other country as an “autopilot immersion experience” (p. 86). It is indeed easy to assume that a shared language implies shared culture (Edwards 2000). The American students in London very quickly discovered the similarities and differences between their language and culture, and the British. Despite being based on an American “island” in London, a process of osmosis seems to have affected their English. Three quarters of students became acutely aware of their American accent. Two thirds of students reported having adapted their English (vocabulary and accent) to fit the local English variety. This also included non-verbal behaviour, such as gestures and intonation in speech. Interviews with administrators who were in direct contact with the students showed that they unanimously felt that their American students acquired and used British vocabulary and that they adapted their behavior in order to avoid the stereotype of the “loud” American. Students reported noticing pragmatic differences between American and British speakers, the latter being much more indirect and using euphemisms, the former being much more direct, and less inclined to use euphemisms. Edwards (2000) also noted that because of the indirectness in the English culture American students may not have the experience of contradiction, with

the exception of political debates which are more abrasive in the UK and scares Americans to the point of complete avoidance. It would be interesting to know to what extent the changes observed in American students in the UK are long-lasting. In other words, do they “continue using the vocabulary after they return home”? (Boring 2005: 31) or do they completely revert to their L1A, with enhanced receptive competence in the L1B?

Dewaele and Pavlenko (2003) argued that multi-competence is not a static end-state. Because of constant variation within and between multilinguals, no two multilinguals would ever have isomorphic multi-competence. Indeed, small differences in linguistic input and output could shape individuals’ multi-competence differently. Dewaele and Pavlenko (2003) presented a view of multi-competence as an ever-changing and highly complex system, with parts in provisional equilibrium, until unexpected changes in the frequency or nature of the linguistic input, or specific linguistic activities – such as exposure to specific books, films, speakers of an unfamiliar variety, dialect or sociolect – which could cause a shift with some ‘islands’ remaining in their original state (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2003).

The learning of multiple languages, and the resulting multi-competence, affects not just phonology, morphology, syntax, lexical choices, but also pragmatics, where the communication of emotion is situated (Dewaele 2013, 2016b; Pavlenko 2005). Exposure to emotions in different languages affects how these emotions are recognised and expressed in the multilinguals’ various languages (Lorette and Dewaele 2015). Emotions are a particularly good area to look at shift induced by sustained exposure to another language or language variety because they are communicated using different channels: visual, vocal and verbal. People from different cultural backgrounds focus differently on the channels, and have different strategies in case the information on the various channels is incongruent (Lorette and Dewaele 2015).

The framework proposed by Pavlenko (2008) on emotion and emotion-laden words in the bilingual lexicon is useful to differences in British and American English. Pavlenko (2008) argued firstly that emotion words are a separate class of words in the mental lexicon, which are “represented and processed differently from abstract and concrete words” (p. 147). This is also the point made by Altarriba and colleagues who have demonstrated that emotion and emotion-laden words are distinctive both from concrete and abstract words, in terms of representation, processing, and recall (Altarriba 2006; Altarriba & Basnight-Brown 2011; Altarriba & Bauer 2004; Kazanas & Altarriba 2015). Even emotion and emotion-laden words seem to be processed differently, with the former being processed faster, especially in bilinguals’ dominant language (Kazanas & Altarriba 2016).

Emotion words (“sadness”, “happy”), have been distinguished from emotion-laden words that “do not refer to emotions directly but instead express (“jerk”, “loser”) or elicit emotions from the interlocutors (“cancer”, “malignancy”)” (Pavlenko 2008: 148). Pavlenko presents a number of sub-categories of emotion-laden words, including “(a) taboo and swearwords or expletives (“piss”, “shit”), (b) insults (“idiot”, “creep”) (...)” (p. 148). The boundaries of the subcategories can be somewhat blurred because some words may fit in various categories. Depending on the context, taboo and swearwords that are typically used as insults can become friendly terms. Pavlenko adds that words that are not usually perceived to be emotion-laden can acquire emotional connotations in specific interactions.

Pavlenko (2009) defined semantic representations as: “the largely implicit knowledge of: (1) the mapping between words and concepts determining how many

concepts and which particular concepts are expressed by a particular word via polysemy or metaphoric extension and (2) connections between words, which account for phenomena such as collocation, word association, synonymy and antonymy” (p. 148). Emotion words and concepts vary across cultures and languages, which means that apparent translation equivalents in two languages can differ in emotionality.

Pavlenko (2009, 2014) showed that intense exposure to the L2, and to L2 culture, can lead to destabilization, “seen in the cases where speakers diverge from the L1 pattern in order to accommodate or approximate the divergent pattern of an L2” (2014: 304). This destabilization is followed by conceptual restructuring in the L1, namely “readjustment of the category structure and boundaries in accordance with the constraints of the target linguistic category” as well as “conceptual development” defined as “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). Pavlenko and Malt (2011) investigated the conceptual restructuring in the mind of Russian-English bilinguals in the distinction between the word pairs “cup”/ “chashka” and “glass”/ “stakan”. Russian learners of English started by associating the English words “cup” and “glass” with the already existing representations of “chashka” and “stakan”. After a while they realised that in English paper, plastic, and styrofoam containers for coffee are called “cups” and in Russian they are “stakanchiki” (little glasses). These Russian learners of English thus had to restructure their pre-existing representations, in the case of “glass”, for instance, shifting attention from shape to material in order to use English appropriately. Pavlenko (2002) had already observed similar shifts in the domain of emotion concepts. Twenty-one Russian L1 speakers with English as an L2, and who had been living in the USA for less than 10 years, exhibited extensive L2 influence on the L1 in the expression of emotion. Retelling silent film extracts in Russian, these bilinguals framed emotions linguistically as states (using emotion adjectives as English L1 monolinguals speakers do), rather than as active processes (using emotion verbs as Russian L1 monolinguals do), violating both semantic and syntactic constraints of Russian.

I argue that the process of semantic -and possibly conceptual- restructuring also applies to bi-varietal native English speakers. This includes those who have at least some awareness that other varieties of English exist. Emotion words in British English are instantly recognisable as English words by Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans or Nigerians. They will probably have relatively similar semantic representations for high frequency words like “angry” or “happy”, but there may be more variation in representations of less frequent words, especially in their level of emotional resonance.

Semantic information constitutes a crucial part of language users’ sociopragmatic competence, defined by Kasper and Rose (2001: 2) as “the social perceptions underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action”. It allows the user to know how often and in what situation a particular word or expression can be used, what it means, what its illocutionary effects will be, how interlocutors will react to a violation of the rules, how they will interpret a deviation from the rules, and what the social consequences may be of using particular words or expressions. The default position of users of English will be that if an emotion word, or an emotion-laden word, exists in their variety of English, it will also exist in another variety of English. It is very likely that users will unconsciously assume that the meaning and emotional connotations of the word in the other variety will be almost identical. Exposure to emotion words in the other variety and active use of

them with users of another variety will quickly dispel the assumption of complete semantic overlap. Words acquire unique emotional and cultural connotations in different locations. It is a good topic for dinner table conversations, especially when discussing swear words. What is considered more or less taboo in what variety of English? Everybody has their opinion on the matter, and the use of swear words in public always triggers avalanches of reactions in the press, social media and public opinion (cf. Dewaele 2015, 2016a).

The aim of the present study is to investigate to what extent the semantic representations of English emotion-laden words of American and British origin in the mind of the Americans abroad remain stable and whether knowing more languages may have a destabilising effect on the semantic representations of some words in the L1 lexicon.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Instruments*

Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire. It was an open-access survey, advertised through several listservs, targeted emails to teachers and students, and informal contacts asking them to forward the link to friends. This is so-called “snowball sampling”. The questionnaire remained online for five months in 2011-2012 and attracted responses from mono- and multilinguals across the world.

Participants started by filling out a short sociobiographical section with questions about gender, age, education, language history and language use. In the next section they were asked to report habitual frequency of swearing in five situations. The final section contained the English emotion-laden words embedded in short sentences which participants were asked to assess (see table 1).

On-line questionnaires allow efficient and cheap collection of large amounts of data. It also allows diversity in terms of sex, age, race, socio-economic status and geographical location (Wilson and Dewaele 2010) although participants in this type of research typically do not represent the general population. This drawback is countered by the fact that they must possess sufficient metalinguistic awareness to participate, and must be able and willing to engage with the questions on language preferences and use. The anonymity of the questionnaire means participants have no reason to lie about their linguistic behaviour or attitudes. This limits the social desirability bias, (i.e. the tendency of participants to answer questions in a manner that they imagine will be viewed favourably by the researcher) is another crucial advantage of internet-based questionnaires. Also, with close to 1000 adult participants, the results have stronger ecological validity. Finally, online versions of traditional questionnaires have been found to have very similar psychometric properties (Denissen, Neumann & van Zalk 2010).

### *2.2 Independent variables*

The independent variables were participants’ country of residence (USA, UK or another country) and the number of languages they knew.

### *2.3 Dependent variables*

Information was collected for three kinds of quantitative feedback on a list of 4 emotion-laden words of British origin and 4 emotion-laden words of American origin in short utterances extracted from Dewaele (2015, 2016a).

The emotion-laden words were extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC), “a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century, both spoken and written” (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>). Ninety per cent of the BNC is made up of written texts of various types with the remaining ten per cent consisting of transcriptions of oral speech, including unscripted conversations between British English participants from different age groups, regions and social classes in different contexts, ranging from formal meetings to radio shows and phone-ins. The BNC has been used for the creation of frequency lists (Leech, Rayson & Wilson 2014). The selection of eight emotion-laden words was based on the results of an analysis in Dewaele (2015) of 970 American and British English L1 users’ ratings of a total of 30 emotion-laden words with a mild to strong negative emotional valence (see appendix). Seven of the eight words figure in the list of 13,915 English words produced by 1,827 native speakers of American English residing in the USA (Warriner, Kuperman & Brysbaert 2013). The mean values for valence (the pleasantness of the stimulus), arousal (the intensity of emotion provoked by the stimulus), and dominance (the degree of control exerted by the stimulus) of these words are included in table 1.

The words were embedded in a short utterance, in order to include a minimal script as it affects the evaluative meaning of unambiguous emotion words (Greasley, Sherrard & Waterman 2000). The words are mainly nouns and adjectives. The utterances ended with exclamation marks, to suggest that they were uttered forcefully and/or with a loud voice (see table 1). The formulation of the carrier sentences could have been kept more constant, as the perceived offensiveness may in some part be sentence context-dependent. The reason some minimal variation was introduced was to maintain the interest of the participants. The eight sentences analysed in the present study formed part of a much longer list of sentences (Dewaele 2015, 2016a).

Table 1. Frequency of the emotion-laden words in the BNC and their affective norms for US English (Warriner et al. 2013) on a 9-point scale

Word	Frequency in BNC	Valence (mean)	Arousal (mean)	Dominance (mean)
That is <b>daft!</b>	635	4.5	2.75	4.82
<b>Bollocks!</b>	290	4.68	4.38	4.75
<b>Bugger!</b>	573	3.71	3.3	4.32
He’s such a <b>wanker!</b>	96	-	-	-
He’s a <b>wacko!</b>	17	3.89	5.32	4.11
What a <b>jerk!</b>	234	2.43	6.45	4.84
She’s such a <b>loser!</b>	338	2.85	4.95	4.53
She’s such a <b>slut!</b>	92	2.55	5.96	3.9

The Oxford dictionary defines the words as follows:

**DAFT** “(British informal): Silly; foolish. Daft came to refer to lack of intelligence during the Middle Ages, and from the 16th century it could also imply madness. It could also mean playfulness”

(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/daft>)

**BOLLOCKS** “(British vulgar slang): Testicles, Nonsense; rubbish (used to express contempt or disagreement, or as an exclamation of annoyance). Bollocks used to be ballocks, and in that spelling they go back to the time of the Anglo-Saxons. The word is related to ball, and like many rude words it was perfectly standard

English until around the 18th century. It is now used in several colourful expressions.” (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/bollocks>)

**BUGGER:** “(vulgar slang, chiefly British) **Noun.** 1 [WITH ADJECTIVE] Used as a term of abuse, especially for a man. 1.1 Used to refer to a person, typically a man, for whom one feels pity or respect. 1.2 An annoyingly awkward thing. 2 derogatory A person who commits buggery. **Verb.** 1. Penetrate the anus of (someone) during sexual intercourse. 2 (often bugger someone/thing about) Cause serious harm or trouble to. 2.1 (bugger about/around) Act in a stupid or feckless way. 2.2 Used to express an angrily dismissive attitude to (someone or something).”

(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/bugger>)

**WANKER:** “noun. British vulgar slang. A contemptible person (used as a generalized term of abuse)

(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/wanker>)

The definition in the American thesaurus is slightly different: “(vulgar slang, chiefly British) **Noun.** A person who masturbates (used as a term of abuse).”

([http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/wanker](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/wanker))

**WACKO:** “(informal, chiefly North American) Adjective. Mad. Insane. Noun. A crazy person. (..) Origin from the 1970s: from wacky + -o.”

([http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/wacko](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/wacko))

**JERK:** “**noun.** 1 A quick, sharp, sudden movement. 1.1. A spasmodic muscular twitch. 1.2. Weightlifting The raising of a barbell above the head from shoulder level by an abrupt straightening of the arms and legs, typically as the second part of a clean and jerk. 1.3. informal A contemptibly obnoxious person. **Verb.** Move or cause to move with a jerk: 1.1 Weightlifting Raise (a weight) from shoulder level to above the head. **Phrasal verbs:** 1. jerk someone around (North American informal) Deal with someone dishonestly or unfairly. 2. jerk off (vulgar slang, chiefly North American) Masturbate. (...) The word jerk was first recorded meaning ‘a stroke with a whip’; it is probably imitative of the action. The slang use meaning ‘fool, stupid person’ is originally a US usage dating from the 1930s.”

([http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/jerk](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/jerk))

**LOSER:** “**noun.** A person or thing that loses or has lost something, especially a game or contest. 1.1 A person who accepts defeat with good or bad grace; 1.2 A person or thing that is put at a disadvantage by a particular situation or course of action; 1.3 (informal) A person who fails frequently or is generally unsuccessful in life; 1.4 Bridge: A card that is expected to be part of a losing trick”.

(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/loser>)

The US thesaurus adds the following information: “(informal) failure, underachiever, ne'er-do-well, write-off, has-been; misfit, freak, unpopular person, informal geek, dweeb, nerd, hoser, flop, no-hoper, washout, busted flush, lemon”

([http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english-thesaurus/loser](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english-thesaurus/loser))

**SLUT:** “**noun.** (Derogatory) 1. A woman who has many casual sexual partners. (Dated) 2. A woman with low standards of cleanliness. (...) Middle English: of unknown origin.

([http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/slut](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/slut))

Quantitative data were collected through the following question: “For each word/expression, provide a score on a 5-point scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high) for the following: 1) how well you understand the meaning? 2) how offensive it is? 3) how frequently do you use it?” Since semantic representations are largely implicit knowledge (cf. Pavlenko 2009) rather than explicit knowledge, there is no easy way

to ask users to verbalize this knowledge. The first two questions thus provide indirect information about the semantic representation.

The emotion-laden words were selected on the basis that the differences in the values between British and American participants were greatest (Dewaele 2015). Four words which the British participants reported generally understanding better, finding more offensive and using more frequently were ‘daft’, ‘bollocks’, ‘bugger’, ‘wanker’. The four words for which American English participants reported generally a better understanding, rated as more offensive and used more frequently were ‘wacko’, ‘jerk’, ‘loser’, ‘slut’ (Dewaele 2015: 326). This is confirmed by the lower values for valence for these four words compared to the words of British origin in the affective norms collected by Warriner et al. (2013) (see table 1). In other words, the British words were considered to be more pleasant. Their values ranged from 3.7 to 4.7, which puts them one standard deviation below the mean of the scale ( $Mean = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) for the whole corpus of nearly 14,000 words. Three out of the 4 American words are more than one standard deviation below the mean. The same pattern emerges for arousal, with higher values for the American than for the British words. The American respondents felt that the American words elicited a stronger emotion in them, with values within one standard deviation above the mean of the scale ( $Mean = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ ), compared to the three British words where only “bollocks” has an arousal value slightly above the mean and the other two words below the mean. No differences emerged for dominance values.

One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed that the values for meaning, offensiveness and frequency of use were not normally distributed (all  $p < .0001$ ). As a consequence, non-parametric statistical techniques were used, namely Kruskal Wallis analyses instead of ANOVAs and Spearman Rank correlation analyses instead of Pearson product-moment correlation analyses.

The research design and questionnaires received ethical clearance from the School of Social Sciences, History and Politics at Birkbeck.

#### 2.4 Participants

A total of 556 L1 users of American English participated in the research. It consisted of 396 females and 159 males (71% vs 29%). Participants’ age ranged from 16 to 74, with a mean of 31 years ( $SD = 12$ ). Participants were generally highly educated with 40 participants having a high school diploma, 185 a Bachelor’s degree, 225 a Master’s degree and 106 a PhD. The strong proportion of university-educated, female participants is quite constant in web-based language questionnaires that rely on self-selection (Wilson and Dewaele 2010).

A majority of the American English L1 participants lived in the USA ( $n = 477$ ) but a small group lived in the UK ( $n = 23$ ) or elsewhere ( $n = 56$ ), this included Spain ( $n = 11$ ), France ( $n = 10$ ), Germany ( $n = 7$ ), Switzerland ( $n = 4$ ), with smaller groups in other European, Central American, Asian countries and Australia. The participants consisted of 87 monolinguals (16%), 188 bilinguals (34%), 139 trilinguals (25%), 80 quadrilinguals (14%), 36 pentalinguals (7%) and 26 with six or more languages (5%). The most frequent L2s were Spanish ( $n = 169$ ), French ( $n = 137$ ) and German ( $n = 26$ ). The same languages were also the most frequent L3s: Spanish ( $n = 53$ ), French ( $n = 35$ ) and German ( $n = 28$ ). The most frequent L4s were German ( $n = 15$ ), Portuguese ( $n = 14$ ) and Spanish ( $n = 14$ ). The most frequent L5s were Portuguese ( $n = 7$ ) and German ( $n = 5$ ). A cross-tabulation analysis revealed no significant interaction between country of residence and knowledge of specific L2s

(*Pearson Chi*<sup>2</sup> (df = 96) = 110, *p* = ns) nor L3s (*Pearson Chi*<sup>2</sup> (df = 106) = 117, *p* = ns).

The participants rated their proficiency in English as maximally high: (*Mean* = 5.0, *SD* = 0.4). Participants reported extremely frequent use of English *Mean* = 4.9, *SD* = 0.6) on a 5-point Likert scale.

### 3. Research questions

1. How stable are the semantic representations of English emotion-laden words of American and British origin in the mind of the Americans abroad?
2. To what extent is the stability of these representations linked to the number of languages known by the individual?

### 4. Results

The Kruskal Wallis analyses showed a significant effect for country of residence on the understanding of meaning of the four words of British origin, but no effect for the four words of American origin (with scores at ceiling for the three groups) (see table 2).

The mean ranks for the four British words of the Americans in the USA are the lowest, with those living outside the USA in an intermediate position and those living in the UK with the highest values (see table 1 and figure 1). It suggests that the Americans outside their home country felt they had picked up the exact meaning of these words, especially those living in the country where they originated, the UK. The same effect emerges for the offensiveness of the four British words, with the ranks of those living in the USA being lower than those living outside the USA. However, only the value for ‘wanker’ is highest among the Americans living in the UK. Living abroad does not affect the offensiveness of the four American emotion-laden words (table 2 and figure 2).

The pattern is repeated for self-reported frequency of use of the emotion-laden words. Unsurprisingly, the Americans living in the USA report lower use of the four British emotion-laden words, with those living abroad typically occupying an intermediate position and those in the UK using these words significantly more. The frequency of use of three American emotion-laden words is unaffected by the fact of living outside the USA, with the exception of “jerk”, which is used significantly less by the Americans abroad, especially those living in the UK (table 2 and figure 3).

Table 2. Mean ranks for understanding of the meaning, offensiveness and frequency of use of 8 emotion-laden words by Americans living in the USA, outside the USA, and in the UK (Kruskall Wallis)

Word	Meaning				Offensiveness				Frequency of use			
	USA	X	UK	$Chi^2$	USA	X	UK	$Chi^2$	USA	X	UK	$Chi^2$
daft	269	323	354	12.4**	272	319	307	12.4**	277	274	318	10.8**
bollocks	269	323	359	12.8**	270	332	324	12.8**	274	287	353	21.3***
bugger	272	301	351	7.2*	270	333	305	7.2*	275	276	347	14.6***
wanker	270	318	350	10.6**	271	322	330	8.2*	273	287	371	23.9***
wacko	276	296	277	3.4	276	301	273	1.4	281	282	220	4.4
jerk	278	284	272	1.8	274	303	304	2.3	286	256	183	10.6**
loser	278	282	276	0.5	274	306	302	2.5	281	280	227	2.8
slut	278	282	275	0.4	274	307	286	2.5	281	268	241	2.1

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figures 1, 2 and 3 visualise the means for the emotion-laden words on 5-point Likert scales. Figure 1 shows that the four American words were almost perfectly understood, while the four British words had lower scores and showed more variation between the three groups of Americans. The pattern reflects that presented in table 1 where the scores of the British and the American participants for these words were compared.

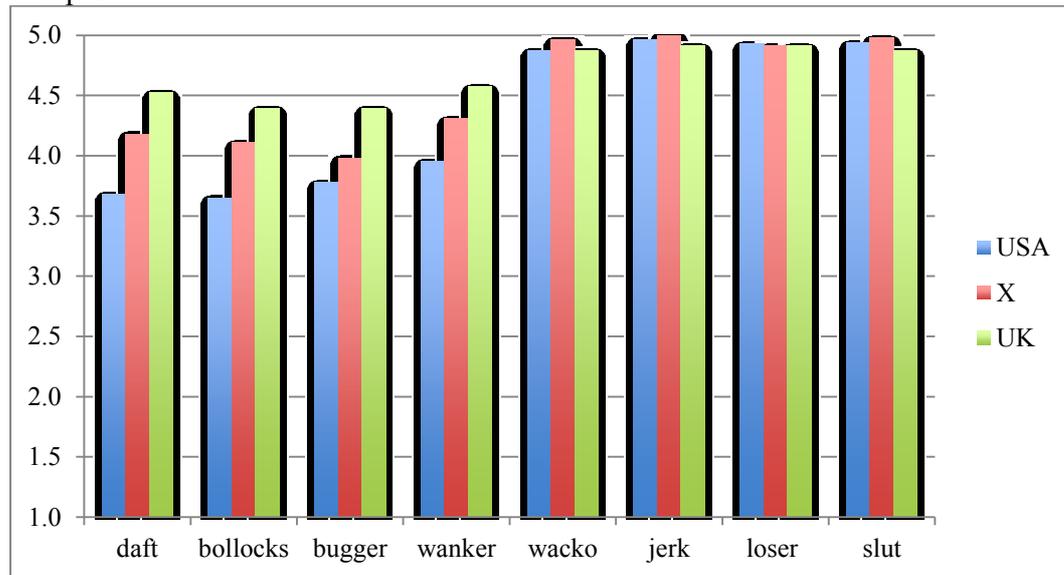


Figure 1. Means for understanding of meaning of 8 emotion-laden words by Americans living in the USA, outside the USA (X) and in the UK

Figure 2 shows higher mean offensiveness values for the British words among Americans living outside the USA, with “wanker” considered to be the most offensive. No such pattern emerges for the American words, where “slut” is considered the most offensive.

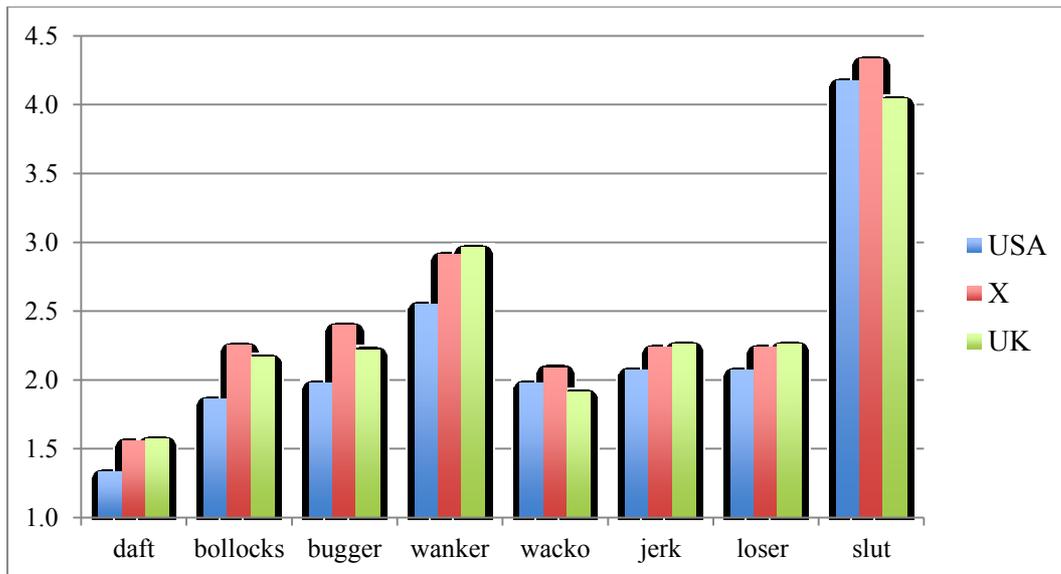


Figure 2. Means for offensiveness of 8 emotion-laden words by Americans living in the USA, outside the USA (X) and in the UK

Figure 3 shows that the Americans use the British words infrequently, although the Americans in the UK seem to pick them up. “Jerk” is the most frequently used word, though the Americans in the UK used it less frequently. The same pattern is repeated for the three other American words: in other words, the Americans in the UK seem to avoid using their L1A words and boost their use of L1B words instead.

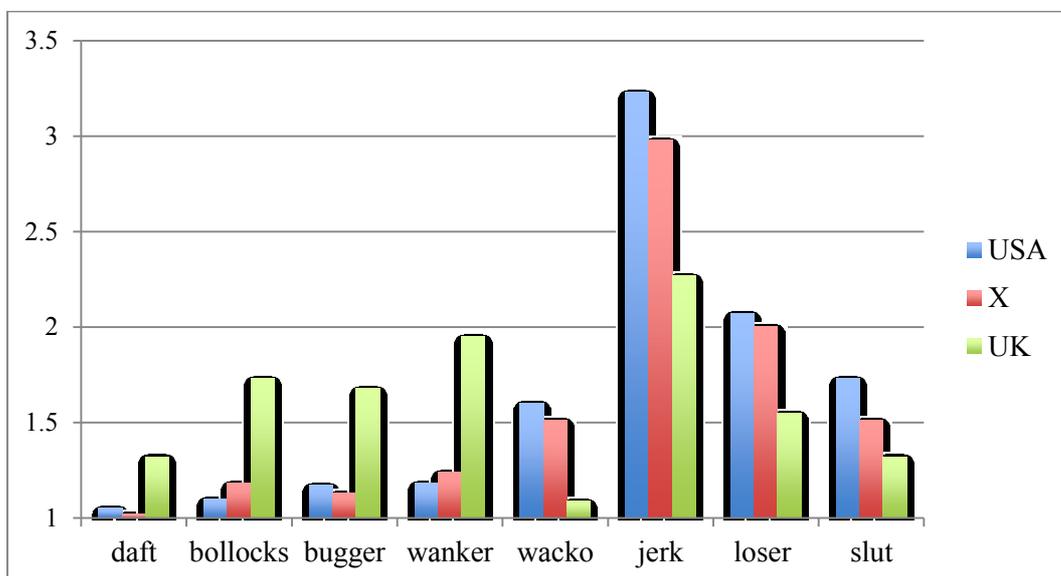


Figure 3. Means for frequency of use of 8 emotion-laden words by Americans living in the USA, outside the USA (X) and in the UK

The next research question dealt with the relationship between the number of languages known and the scores for understanding of meaning, offensiveness and frequency of use of the British and American words.

Table 3. The relationship between understanding of meaning, offensiveness and frequency of use of 8 emotion-laden words and number of languages known (Spearman Rank correlation)

	Meaning	Offensiveness	Frequency
daft	.11*	.05	.00
bollocks	.09*	.19**	.01
bugger	.15**	.25**	.09*
wanker	.11*	.18**	.09*
wacko	-.00	.03	.01
jerk	.01	.06	-.02
loser	-.04	.05	-.06
slut	-.01	.07	-.06

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$

The results of the correlation analysis show again the striking pattern of the British words standing out from the American words among all 556 American participants (table 3). Those knowing more languages report a better understanding of the British words, but it has no effect on their understanding of the American words. They also rate three out of four British words as being more offensive (the exception being “daft”), but it has no relationship with the American words. A significant correlation emerged between number of languages known and the effect of frequency of use was significant for only two British words: “bugger” and “wanker” (table 3).

## 5. Discussion

The stability of semantic representations of 8 English emotion-laden words turned out to be very different for emotion-laden words of American and British origin in the mind of the Americans living in the USA and Americans living abroad. The four emotion-laden words of American origin remained very stable across all groups. There was very little shift among the Americans who were no longer living in the USA. However, the four emotion-laden words of British origin were much more susceptible to shift among Americans speakers outside the USA. These participants felt more confident about the meaning of the word and their perceived offensiveness and self-reported use approximated the British norm. “Jerk” was the only emotion-laden word of American origin that was reported to be used less frequently by Americans living outside the USA – reflecting infrequent use of that word in the UK.

The second research question dealt with the relationship between the semantic representations of the English emotion-laden words and the number of languages known by the participants. Here again a striking difference emerged between the four emotion-laden words of American origin and the four emotion-laden words of British origin. While no relationship was found for the former, a positive relationship emerged for the latter. In other words, having more languages in the mind did not affect words of American origin, but it did affect those of British origin among all 556 L1 speakers of American English. It is possible that having multiple languages in the mind increases the dynamic nature of the elements of the language system that do not belong to its core. In other words, multiple languages and varieties keep pulling and pushing representations of words at the periphery of the mental lexicon.

What this suggests is that not all L1 words in the mental lexicon have the same status. Words that are frequently used within a speech community belong to the core

L1 vocabulary and their semantic representations are pretty stable. However, words belonging to the same L1, but that are more frequent in another variety, may not belong to the stable core L1 vocabulary, and their semantic representations are more likely to shift outside the usual speech community. This could be interpreted as evidence of cognitive restructuring: some English emotion-laden words display different levels of emotionality (probably also valence and arousal) in American and British English. Americans in the UK will get increased exposure to words that are “typically” British, and they will re-adjust and recalibrate their semantic representations of these words. Through a typical process of accommodation they will try to match their representations of these words that belonged to the periphery of their L1 mental lexicon with that of their interlocutors. As a result, these Americans in the UK will gain a better understanding of these words, they will get a better sense of their emotionality, and they will start to use them more, a phenomenon observed by Boring (2005). In fact, it could be argued that these words move from the periphery of the L1 mental lexicon towards the centre. American-English words that belong to the stable core L1A vocabulary of Americans are less likely to shift. The main reason is that lower frequency of use in the L1B British English means that there is less chance of Americans living in the UK noticing a mismatch between the apparent meaning attached to these words by British speakers and their own understanding of the words. The same broadly applies for emotionality and frequency of use of the American words. Even if Americans in the UK noticed a difference in the British speakers’ understanding and use of these American words, they might resist any change because they might have an identity function. It is therefore unlikely that the semantic representation would be altered, or that the exact perception of offensiveness of the word would change. Frequency of use is slightly more likely to be affected. Although using popular American words in conversations with British or foreign interlocutors could signal pride in American identity, they might also be avoided in order to avoid raised eyebrows. The word “jerk” is the best example, used significantly less frequently by Americans abroad, not because of differences in perceived offensiveness – because there is none (see appendix) – but because of differences in frequency of use.

The finding that L1 English emotion-laden words situated in the periphery are more likely to shift according to the number of languages in the speaker’s mind throws a new light on Vivian Cook’s concept of multi-competence. Firstly, it could be argued that multi-competence should not just imply the knowledge of two different languages but also different varieties of the same language. Just as a second language can have an influence on the first (Cook 2003), an L1B can affect an L1A. As consequence, the characteristics of the L2 users listed by Cook also apply to L1B users. Americans living in the UK are L1B users, and to paraphrase Cook, at some level the L1B user’s mind is a whole that balances elements of the L1A and L1B within it.

The present study raises novel questions about Cook’s (2003) integration model, namely several language systems in the same mind with multi-directional links as it “shows how the single conjoined system differs from monolingual versions of either language. There may be shared or overlapping vocabulary, syntax, or other aspects of language knowledge.” (p. 8). Cook proposed an integration continuum, “which does not necessarily imply a direction of movement. It may be that some people start with separation and move towards integration or vice versa, or the languages might stay permanently separate.” (p. 9). It could be argued that American multilinguals living in the UK are multi-competent foreign language (LX) users, with

partially overlapping English language systems and with parts of these systems moving in different directions. Constant exposure to British English might push an American English speaker to develop a partly separate language system (L1B), that could be characterised by a less audible American accent, that would include more typical British and fewer typical American words. This is exactly what the American participants in London reported in the study by Boring (2005). Speaking to fellow American English speakers, the L1A could be used again, in order to underline common cultural-linguistics roots. However, it is likely that the common L1A might in fact have subtle traces of the L1B. The American returning to the USA for a holiday may be teased for sounding, or behaving like a Brit, being too indirect, and using “new” words, or common words with a slightly different intonation, meaning or emotionality. Longer exposure to an L1B might lead to an increased distinctness from the L1A on the integration continuum. Indeed, some Americans may become bi-varietal, meaning they could become (almost) indistinguishable from British speakers, and yet remain able to fit in perfectly among American English speakers.

The present study adds to the debate in sociolinguistics on the notion of language as a bounded entity. Languages, varieties, dialects, ethnolinguistic repertoires are increasingly viewed as being situated on a continuum, without clear boundaries and viewed as fluid (Benor 2010).

Another question is whether subtle restructuring occurring in the some emotion-laden words present in the L1A because of increased contact with these words in an L1B could be labelled as L1 attrition (see Schmid & Jarvis 2014). The authors described the decrease in lexical accessibility among long-term residents in an L2 environment as attrition (Schmid & Jarvis 2014). Could subtle change in semantic and conceptual representations of certain L1A words be considered similar to slower lexical accessibility of these words?

A final interesting finding is the fact that the values of Americans abroad, but not in the UK, typically approximate values of Americans in the UK rather than Americans in the USA. One possible explanation is that Continental European English LX users – with whom most Americans abroad interacted - are more likely to have been taught British English rather than American English. It is also very likely that Americans abroad are simply exposed to a range of other native and non-native varieties of English, which will have an effect on the Americans’ L1.

The choice of a bilingualism framework (Cook 2003, 2013; Cook & Bassetti 2011; Pavlenko 2008, 2009, 2014) to analyse variation between mono- and bi-varietal L1 users of English, who were in majority multilingual, made sense because it appears that the same mechanisms are at work when two L1 varieties co-exist in the same mind as when different languages cohabit. In both cases shift can be observed. The variation observed for the 30 emotion-laden words between L1 and LX users of English (Dewaele 2016a), between British and American English L1 users (Dewaele 2015) was not dissimilar to the variation between the different groups of American speakers. This has an implication for the use of L1 users as control groups in bi- and multilingualism studies: groups of L1 users are probably less homogeneous than is generally assumed, and their use as a yardstick against which to compare LX users is probably more problematic than generally assumed. L1s are just as likely to experience the effects of other L1 varieties and LXs, like celestial objects exerting gravitational pull, though the consequences will be more visible at the surface than at the core.

The present study is not without some major limitations. The word “glimpse” in the title refers to the fact that the dependent variables offer no more than a narrow

view of semantic representations. Indeed, because implicit knowledge is hard to tap into the information collected on the semantic representation of the emotion-laden words was very indirect. Asking participants how sure they are about the meaning of a word might give a subjective general indication, but it is impossible to conclude that those who reported complete understanding actually had accurate semantic representations, as this would require additional information from participants. An interesting idea for future study would be to compare participants' definitions of these words and their perception of their understanding. Some more obscure or technical meanings of words might be unknown to L1 users (how many English L1 users know, for example, that "jerk" is a term weightlifters use to describe the raising of a weight from shoulder level to above the head?). The judgement about offensiveness of an emotion-laden word in a short utterance reveals how accurate that specific aspect of the semantic concept is, and the self-reported frequency of use gives a fair but subjective indication about occurrence. A different research design would be needed to follow this up and dig deeper. Much more detailed psycholinguistic analyses of the semantic representations, and different types of data on the semantic and conceptual representations, including recording of authentic use, or judgment of video-recorded instances of authentic use of these emotion-laden words would provide more solid and more granular data.

Another limitation of the present study is the unequal number of participants living in the US, in the UK and in other countries. Quota sampling would allow more similar numbers of participants in the different categories. The reason for the unequal numbers is that the present study was not originally designed to investigate differences between Americans residing in various countries. Dewaele (2016a) compared the values of the dependent variables between 1159 English L1 users and 1165 English LX users. The following study focused on the differences between the 414 British English L1 users and the 556 American English L1 users in that database (Dewaele 2015). At that point, interesting variation appeared **within** the sample of American English L1 users, which warranted a comparison of those living in the USA and the small number of American L1 users living abroad. Non-parametric statistics does allow the comparison of groups of unequal size but the risk of increased sampling error is inevitable (Loewen & Plonsky 2016). The results need therefore to be interpreted with caution.

Finally, further research could adopt a longitudinal design where American L1 users could be tested thoroughly on the semantic representations of emotion-laden words on arrival in the UK, and again at the end of their stay. Another important variable would be the length of stay as it would answer the question at what point semantic or conceptual shifts become discernible. Interviews with participants might also explore their awareness of the changes that their L1A representations may have undergone during their stay.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present paper has raised some intriguing points about the differences between American and British English in the mind of native speakers with more or less exposure to both varieties. More specifically, it posed the issue about whether bi-varietal American L1 users could be considered to be bilingual in their L1. The question is quite similar to the one many current - or former- foreign language learners ask themselves: how much does one need to know about the foreign language before claiming to be bilingual (Sia and Dewaele 2006)? The answer is subjective, as

there clearly is a continuum ranging from the monolingual end to the multilingual end. Would somebody who has picked up a handful of words of an L2 because they occurred in L1 interactions or in the press (think of the Russian words *glasnost* and *perestroika* that appeared in Western media in the late 1980s) call him/herself bilingual? Would the judgment be different if the same words had been picked up in L2 interactions – namely during a visit to a Russian-speaking environment? The question becomes even more difficult in the case of different varieties of the same L1. There is an abundance of American English words in the BNC, that most British English speakers would recognise as English words, even if they do not use them that much, or are not too sure about the exact meaning. Would they therefore claim to master two varieties of English? However, if the same British English speakers spent some time in the USA, heard these words used in context, and became able to imitate the accent, the intonation, and the subtle shades of meaning, as well as assessing their exact sociopragmatic values: could they claim to have started the process of becoming bi-varietal speakers of English?

The participants in the present exploratory study were Americans living inside and outside the USA, which meant that the latter were constantly exposed to different varieties of English, either spoken by L1 speakers of other varieties of English or by LX users of different varieties of English. It turned out that their American English L1A was not immune to influences from British English, a fact confirmed in previous research (Boring 2005).

Using Vivian Cook's idea of multi-competence - with different languages in the mind of multilinguals influencing each other - and Aneta Pavlenko's suggestion that bilinguals may experience destabilization which could lead to both semantic and conceptual restructuring, I focused on four emotion-laden words of American origin and four of British origin. It turned out that the British words were most likely to shift as a result of exposure to non-American English, especially among participants knowing more languages.

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## Appendix

The values of the three dependent variables for the eight emotion-laden words for the groups of American English and British English speakers (Mann-Whitney test) extracted from Dewaele (2015: 326).

Word	Meaning				Offensiveness				Frequency			
	USA	UK	M-W U	Z	USA	UK	M-W U	Z	USA	UK	M-W U	Z
daft	3.8	4.9	59845	15.5***	1.4	1.1	93571	-7.1***	1.1	1.7	80757	11.7***
bollocks	3.7	4.9	53483	16.8***	1.9	2.6	69455	10.9***	1.1	2.7	41327	19.7***
bugger	3.8	4.8	55205	16.2***	2.0	2.4	89111	-6.2***	1.2	2.5	49276	17.6***
wanker	4.0	4.9	62883	14.8***	2.6	3.5	61297	12.9***	1.2	2.5	50596	17.2***
wacko	4.9	4.6	104346	-4.3***	1.0	1.0	111681	-0.8	1.6	1.1	83008	-9.9***
jerk	5.0	4.8	107540	-4.5***	2.1	2.2	109181	-1.4	3.2	1.3	28332	20.8***
loser	4.9	4.8	111172	-2.3*	1.3	1.2	109421	-1.3	2.0	1.6	93020	-5.5***
slut	4.9	4.9	112166	-1.8	4.2	3.9	98789	-4.0***	1.7	1.5	103751	-3.0**

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .0001