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Author

Paget, Aurora

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Lost in Translation

A look into Multilingualism's Effect on Personality and Identity

Aurora Paget

Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

Language is tied directly to identity formation, especially in the way individuals express themselves and are perceived by others. This extends to language being proven to have the ability to change an individual's personality depending on the language they are speaking (Ramirez-Esparza et al. 2006; Pavlenko, 2006; Wedérus, 2017). This study expands on these findings by comparing these theories to the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse multilinguals. This study is particularly concerned with the experiences of bilingual immigrants in the US and how issues of acculturation and xenophobia may affect these phenomena. This project aims to help better understand how language shapes identity, as well as gain insight into the challenges of immigration and multilingualism.

Meet the participants

Nitzan is 27 years old and immigrated to the US in 2002 from Israel. She is fluent in Hebrew and English, but also has proficient knowledge of Arabic and French. Nitzan described her ethnicity as an even split between Middle Eastern and Jewish, and identifies her nationality as Israeli. In Nitzan's own words, "That's who I am. I speak two languages. I'm bilingual. I'm multinational. That's part of my identity that's very upfront and in your face, and I'm okay with it".

Siddhant is 22 years old and immigrated to the US four years ago to pursue a bachelors degree in physics. He identifies ethnically as Indian. He is fluent in Hindi and learned English in extremely close conjunction, as Hindi was predominantly used in the home, but English was exclusively used in school. "I'm technically a Southeast Asian. So I'm from India. But I've been in the US for the last four or five years now. I identify myself as somewhere, as part Indian, but also, having lived through a lot of American culture. I do see myself as part American and part Indian".

Ness is 22 years old and a citizen of America, Italy, and Croatia. She ethnically identifies as Caucasian. She moved around a lot in her childhood but more permanently immigrated to the US in middle school. While she now considers English her dominant language, she learned English and Italian simultaneously. "I'm really lucky to have had a lot of contact with my culture, and I feel very strongly Italian. My dad is Croatian and I don't speak the language. So I think that makes me feel significantly less close to the culture".

Semin is 22 and originally immigrated to the US from Korea in 2007 when she was 6. Korean is her first language, but she now considers her dominant language as an even split between Korean and English. She strongly identifies her ethnicity and nationality as Korean. She said, " Although I've lived in the States for way longer than I've been [in Korea]. I definitely identify entirely as Korean and so my relationship with my country is very strong. Yeah, I think it will stay that way for the rest of my life honestly".

Mariela is 48 and immigrated to the US from Mexico City twenty four years ago. She identifies as Latina and her dominant language is Spanish. She acquired proficiency in English and Italian around the age of 18 but became more fluent in English after immigrating to the US. She is also furthering her knowledge of Hebrew that she began learning three years ago. Mariela shares that, "Before I came to this country, I was Latina. Coming [to the US] makes it hard. I can't identify, I don't know. I guess [I'm still] Latina. Coming here is difficult because I can't find my space."

Why immigrants?

This study was conducted in part by interviewing five diverse bilingual immigrants. By interviewing people who had immigrated to the US, the data collected is representative of bicultural and bilingual people. The goal was to gather qualitative data from a semi-structured interview in order to derive information from the personal experiences of bilinguals.

It was imperative to this study that our participants be both bicultural and bilingual (or multilingual). Biculturalism is the sufficient knowledge of more than one culture. Knowledge is considered sufficient when someone can effectively function in it (Lustig et al., 2018). Similarly, bilingualism is the ability to effectively communicate in more than one language. To investigate the connection between cultural frame switching and language, our participants needed to have a deep understanding of the language and the culture that accompanied it.

I also placed a large emphasis on securing a diverse sample of participants who represented different languages and cultures. Previous research has often focused on only one language or cultural comparison. For instance, Ramirez-Esparza et.al. (2006) investigated shifts in personality between Spanish and English bilingual speakers and Wedérus (2017) investigated personality shifts among multilingual Swedes. Thus, the findings of these studies may be influenced by the unique qualities of the specific culture or language studied rather than cultural frame switching. I wanted this research study to investigate a variety of languages and cultures to see if the results would reflect the trends of previous research. The languages investigated include Hindi, Italian, Hebrew, Korean, and Spanish. Their coinciding cultures are Indian, Italian, Israeli, South Korean, and Mexican.

There were three main motivations behind interviewing people who have immigrated to the United States. The first was that they would have a deep understanding of different cultures and languages as bicultural individuals. It also meant they would all be familiar with English and American culture, creating a common thread to compare their experiences to. The second motivation was to investigate the effects of acculturation on cultural frame switching. This study only investigates the effect of cultural frame switching as it pertains to language and personality. However, the effects of acculturation are of great concern when dealing with issues of language and identity in the minority group of a culture, especially because language use can be very indicative of acculturation level (Torres-Harding et al., 2008) The third reason was because I wanted to spotlight a group that is often overlooked. America's unique history as a land founded by immigrants as well as the current uptick in anti-immigrant rhetoric have interesting possible ramifications for the effects of acculturation.

Modeling the qualitative content analysis methods of Roulston (2013), I organized my data into three phases: data reduction, data reorganization, and data interpretation and representation. Data reduction required me to go through each transcribed interview and filter the data. In the second phase, I broke down the remaining data into multiple groupings, including attitudes toward culture and languages innerconnection, personality switching, and experiences of acculturation. I then created more specific subcategories for each section. These included references to instances of feeling stressed or split between cultures. Finally, I used direct quotes from the transcripts to represent the findings.

Cultural Frame Switching

My research builds heavily upon the theory of Cultural Frame Switching. This is the phenomenon of switching from one cultural mentality to another based on exposure to a cultural prime or stimulus (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Bond and Yang (1982) found that a bilingual's values and attitudes can change when responding to questionnaires in different languages, insinuating that language is a cultural

prime that can activate cultural frame switching. In this study, they gave Chinese undergraduates a questionnaire and had them respond to it, taking it once in English and once in Chinese. They found that the answers a student gave would differ, favoring the culture of the language they were currently using. For instance, on a question meant to gauge whether someone's values are more individualistic or collectivist, they predicted answers would stay the same regardless of the language it was taken in. However, they found that when taking the questionnaire in Chinese, students gave a more collectivist response, but when taking the questionnaire in English, the same students would give a more individualistic response. Their shift in response coincided with the cultural values of the language they were using at the time, as individualism is a greater cultural value of the United States and collectivism is a greater cultural value of China. This is possible because language primes the individual with culture-specific values, attitudes and memories. These then influence their behavior to correspond to that culture (Bond & Yang, 1982). For cultural frame switching to extend to personality, language has to be a strong enough cultural primer and personality has to be malleable enough (Ramirez-Esparza et. al. 2006). This lends itself to the idea that the stronger the connection between language and culture is perceived, the stronger the effect of cultural frame switching should be. The effect of cultural frame switching in this study would manifest as a greater perceived switch in personality when speaking different languages. In order to gauge how strongly my participants view the connection between language and culture, I asked them, "How much do you think language and culture are connected?". All five participants expressed strong support for the idea that language and culture are connected.

Participants' words: *"How much do you think language and culture are connected?"*

Nitzan's view was the most extreme, stating that language and culture go hand in hand: "I think there is not one without the other. One of the biggest elements of my culture is my language." Semin, Ness and Siddhant all agreed that culture and language are very much connected. Semin said that for her, "language itself has a lot of meaning and emphasis on culture."

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

One cannot talk about language's influence on identity without addressing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This hypothesis is the idea that language creates or constructs reality and can be broken down into two schools of thought. The first, linguistic relativity, is more popular as it claims that language influences our perception of reality. Meanwhile linguistic determinism, or the hard version, claims that language determines the way we think (Gibbs, 2022). The difference between "influences" and "determines" is significant as the latter assumes that we are locked into our perceptions of the world without hope of change. This research study relies on the idea of linguistic relativity and how language predominantly influences us through its unique semantics and syntax. Lustig et al. (2018) explains how these language structures influence how you identify and categorize things, creating habitual patterns that affect how you perceive and experience the world. For instance, language can affect how you address others and show respect, exposing the social hierarchy of a culture. In Spanish, there is a formal you, "Usted", that is different from the informal you, "Tú." By having a grammar form that linguistically shows greater respect for only some, it reinforces social distinctions and displays the high power distance cultural

value that is prevalent in Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico. Alternatively, English is the only language that capitalizes the pronoun "I" in writing and lacks different words that could be used to show an individual's interdependencies (Gibbs, 2022). This emphasis on the personal and isolated pronoun "I" could be argued as either a byproduct or precursor of a highly individualistic culture. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is central to my research because it provides an additional explanation alongside cultural frame switching as to why someone's personality may change when speaking a different language. This theory displays that separate from someone's relationship to the language and culture, certain qualities of a language could influence your perception of the world while you engage with it. In order to evaluate the participants' view of the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis, they were asked, "Do you think language determines thought?" The participants gave a majority of three affirmative responses, but there was some disagreement.

Participants' words: *"Do you think language determines thought?"*

Siddhant, Mariela, and Ness all expressed affirmative responses. Siddhant expressed that the different grammar or patterns and structures of words in different languages influence you to think differently. "Completely different words follow a different structure or different patterns. Then you often come to different conclusions," he explained. Ness talked about how language shapes your perception of the world, explaining that "when you describe things and think of how things are, you're thinking in your language."

Semin and Nitzan showed more hesitancy to this statement. Semin stated that this is not applicable to her experiences. Nitzan gave a more nuanced answer by offering that while the language may influence how she executes her communication and ideas, it does not influence the way she arrives at those ideas or thoughts. "I would think more diplomatically in English, because of the culture. The way I would communicate something in English differs from the way I would communicate to someone who is Hebrew speaking and maybe Israeli," she explained. "My thoughts are pretty much the same. The way I execute the communication of those thoughts is different."

Personality shifts

Research has supported the idea that personality can change depending on the language someone speaks. A study conducted by Ramirez-Esparza et al. (2006) found evidence that personality shifts in accordance with the cultural values and attitudes associated with that language. This study measured personality using Galton's Big Five model and had participants complete the BFI both in English and Spanish. Galton's Big Five model categorizes personality by extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism (John & Srivastava, 1999). The results showed that "bilinguals were more extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious in English than in Spanish and these differences were consistent with the personality displayed in each culture" (Ramirez-Esparza et al., 2006, p.115). This doesn't necessarily mean that somebody who is introverted will suddenly become extraverted when speaking English. Rather, someone who is introverted will score higher in extraversion when speaking English than they would when speaking Spanish. This supports the idea that language is a strong enough cue to activate a cultural frame switch and change personality to reflect the culture of that language. A

separate study conducted by Pavlenko (2006) asked bilingual individuals the question, "Do you feel like a different person when speaking a different language?". Out of the 1039 participants asked, 65% gave an affirmative response (Pavlenko, 2006). Furthermore, in Wedérus's (2017) study of 12 bilingual Swedes, results showed self-perceived changes in personality and extraversion. The majority expressed that they felt English allowed them to be more extraverted and sociable.

To retest these studies, these participants were asked, "Do you see your personality changing when switching between languages?" By adopting Dewaele's (2015) coding model, answers were placed on a 1-5 scale based on agreement to the question, with "no" being a 1, "no but" being a 2, "maybe" being a 3, "yes but" being a 4, and "yes" being a 5. Four out of five participants gave affirmative answers, mirroring the findings that personality switches due to language.

Participants' words: *"Do you see your personality changing when switching between languages?"*

The majority of participants agreed with the statement that their personality switches between languages. Siddhant gave a strong yes (score 5), stating, "Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I guess it just transports me to a different place. With some languages, different parts of my brain are active. Different memories and different connections. So yeah."

Mariela, also giving a 5-score response, took the idea further. She explained that when speaking different languages, not only does she feel her personality change, but also her sense of personhood. She stated, "Speaking different languages, it's like you're another person. I speak Spanish and I'm one person, I speak English and another person. Speak Italian, another person and then I speak Hebrew, I'm another person. One person and four people."

Ness agreed but expressed more uncertainty compared to the others stating, "Yeah, I think so. In a way." This answer scored a 4.

In Semin's response, she explained how she thinks language changes the way she expresses herself (score 5). She answered, "Yeah, I definitely think so. I think I'm a little more softer when I'm speaking Korean. Yeah, I'm generally a little more happy."

Nitzan echoed Semin's sentiment in that she may express herself differently when speaking different languages, causing others to perceive her differently. However, she did not agree that language causes a change in her personality (score 1). . She explained, "I try not to alarm Americans. So maybe a little less animated and a little less loud, but I think my personality stays the same."

While there are a variety of theories behind why individuals may feel different when switching between languages, studies show that CFS is the main reason. For example, linguist McWorther (2014) believes that late age of acquisition (when the language was first learned) and lower-level proficiency causes individuals to feel different when speaking various languages. However, this theory was debunked by Dewaele's (2015) statistical data analysis of 1005 bilingual and multilingual individuals. Dewaele (2015) was able to determine that frequency of the use of language, context of acquisition or how the language was learned, and the degree of multilingualism are unrelated factors in this phenomena. Furthermore,

Ramirez- Esparza et al. (2006) found that changes in personality coincide with cultural dimensions and prototypes, concluding that differences in personality are not due to differences between the age of acquisition of a language. However, it is worth noting that an individual's age has a positive relationship with feeling different. Older individuals perceive a greater switch (Dewaele, 2015).

Acculturation

This study focuses on the effects of acculturation on cultural frame switching as it pertains to language. When two different cultures interact, the interchange is known as acculturation. This interchange is a multidimensional concept that can pervade all aspects of an individual's life (Torres-Harding et. al. 2008). There are four types of acculturation: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Assimilation is when an individual must lose their cultural identity to blend into the dominant culture. This is best showcased by the melting pot metaphor often used to describe America. Many modern cultural theories, such as the Cultural Fusion theory (Croucher & Kramer, 2017), assume that assimilation is the goal. However, assimilation isn't necessarily good or even possible (Lustig et al., 2018). Furthermore, while humans have the drive and capacity to partially assimilate and adapt to environmental challenges, they also have the drive and desire to maintain their cultural identities (Gibbs, 2022). As bilingual immigrants navigate switching between languages, they are constantly engaging in identity negotiation. These issues of identity negotiation are especially heightened in immigrants who are bicultural and a minority of the dominant culture. Immigrants have a unique set of challenges and "face many issues related to guilt over linguistic and ethnic disloyalties, insecurity over the legitimacy of a newly learned language, anxiety about the lack of wholesomeness, angst over the inability to bring both worlds together, and sadness and confusion over seeing oneself as divided" (Pavlenko, 2006, p.5). My participants echoed some of these burdens. All participants gave strong affirmative responses to the question "Have you ever felt split between different languages and cultures?"

Participants' words: *"Have you ever felt split between different languages and cultures?"*

Nitzan described this feeling in large part by how she is perceived by others. She likens it to being in a sort of limbo between two cultures. " I obviously can't speak to everyone's experiences, but I know I've heard this a lot from my multinational and multilingual friends. Especially if you grow up outside of your country of origin it's conflicting, because you're not American enough for American people and you're not Israeli enough for the Israeli people…And I feel really conflicted because I kind of feel like I don't fit in anywhere"

Ness reiterated the idea of feeling like two different people. "I think it's like coexisting with different selves existing within one person. And they kind of talk to each other."

Semin feels this split greatest in her lack of clear social categorization or group identity. "As I get more aware of it," Semin explained, "I have 50/50 ish. I can't identify entirely as one or the other. So that confuses me sometimes."

Effects of Identity Negotiation: Stress

Greater levels of identity negotiation can lead to more stress (Lustig et al., 2018). While some of the greatest identity negotiation happens in the first few years of immigration (Gibbs 2022), these stressors are ever present throughout life. Stressors of identity negotiation can be heightened by the pressure to conform. Research suggests that "anxieties over an inner split may stem from the lack of social acceptance of bilingualism and may disappear once bi- and multilingualism are accepted as the norm" (Pavlenko, 2006, p.28). There is a challenge in balancing the normalization of bilingual experiences without dismissing their uniqueness. The more normalized bilingualism and multiculturalism is, the less pressure to conform to one identity and assimilate to the dominant culture. However, it's equally important to acknowledge the uniqueness of bilingual experiences to try and dissolve "the illusion of singularity." As linguistic researchers Smari and Navracsic explain, "The presumption that people can be easily categorized in a non homogenous society creates tension." (Smari & Navracsics, 2019, p.2). This leads to the idea that the more normal bilingualism is perceived, the less stress they will report in identity negotiation and switching between languages.

Participants' words

Nitzan provides support for this idea by expressing how when she was younger and bilingualism was not normalized in her community, she felt more pressure to conform. Now in adulthood as she thinks bilingualism is more normalized, she feels less identity negotiation. Nitzan was embarrassed by having a multilingual family when she was a kid because it wasn't common. She recalled that when her mom spoke to her in Hebrew, she would only respond in English because she wanted to be like everybody else. Later in life, however, she has embraced it more, and as a result, she believes it doesn't affect her identity as much.

Wilson (2013) found that pressure to learn a new language can lead to a negative relationship with that language and increase the stress identified when switching between different languages. Furthermore, when people are put under pressure to learn a foreign language, it can threaten their sense of self. This effect was especially found in refugees and economic and academic migrants (Wilson, 2013). Stress can have negative ramifications on an individual, affecting both their psychological and physical wellbeing. In trying to mediate the effects of stress, it's imperative to identify what can aggravate or worsen it. Torres-Harding et al. (2008) found evidence suggesting that there is a positive relationship between level of acculturation and stress. She found English-speaking Latinos face greater stress-related health issues and are more likely to have chronic fatigue than Spanish-speaking Latinos living in America (Harding, 2008). This supports evidence by Myers and Rodriguez (2003) that as Latinos become more acculturated, they may be prone to more negative changes in physical health. Torres-Harding et al. speculate their reasoning for this effect: "It is possible that persons who are English speaking may need to transition frequently between two languages and two cultures, which may ultimately result in more stress from exposure to racism and discrimination, and which in turn may lead to poorer health outcomes." (Torres-Harding, 2008, p.67) Almost all my participants have supported the idea that switching between languages is psychologically taxing (Pavlenko, 2006) and at times "mentally draining", or "stressful".

Participants' words: *"Do you think switching between different languages can be psychologically taxing?"*

Mariela and Ness both expressed becoming mentally tired. Mariela expressed it requires her to use twice as much cognitive function, stating "You get mentally tired because you're using your brain twice."

Ness relates this tiredness to the inconvenience of not having access to your whole vocabulary and "losing words" when speaking in only one language. She also highlights the idea of switching, not just between languages, but between the whole entanglement of a brain. "It's very mentally draining," Ness said, "I think of it as like switching brains."

Nitzan feels that this cognitive load can be exacerbated by other cognitive stressors, such as being tired or upset. "If I'm not in my most optimal state, mentally, it becomes really difficult," Nitzan explained. "Especially when I'm tired, or if I'm upset and something else is taking up that cognitive space. It is tasking and that's when a lot of the overlap or the slippage happens."

Semin acknowledged that it can be taxing but not in a stressful way, as it is only really triggered by certain types of conversations. Semin said, "I don't think it's too taxing. Unless the topic of conversation is very deep. Or there's a lot of jargon. In that case, it's a little taxing."

Siddhant, on the other hand, doesn't believe switching languages to be psychologically taxing and attributed this in part to the fact he had the same AoA for both languages. He explained, "I think it's pretty natural for me, given the fact that I learned both languages at the same time. So I have a lot of practice doing that."

Conclusion

This study supports the evidence that bilingual individuals experience a shift in personality when speaking different languages. Furthermore, the stronger people view the relationship between culture and language, the stronger the perceived shift in personality when speaking different languages. It's important to address both the internal and external challenges bilingual immigrants face. Discrimination takes many forms, including an insistent pressure on immigrants to assimilate to the dominate culture. This study found that normalizing bilingualism decreases the pressure to conform to only one identity. This normalization of bilingualism also helps lessen the stress of identity negotiation and stress associated between switching languages that the participants experience. Immigrants are especially vulnerable to the negative health effects that can be caused by acculturation. Whether it be shifts in personality or the stress of identity negotiation, learning a new language can be both a beneficial and taxing experience. It's important to bring awareness to these phenomena in order to increase empathy and appreciation to the struggles and uniqueness of multilingual individuals.

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