

What's in a swearword? Translation alters offensiveness in non-trivial ways

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Recent research (Costa *et al.* 2014; Geipel, Hadjichristidis & Surian 2015, 2016; Cipolletti, McFarlane & Weissglass 2016; Corey *et al.* 2017; Hayakawa *et al.* 2017; Čavar & Tytus 2018; Brouwer 2019; Karataş 2019; Dylman & Champoux-Larsson 2019; Driver 2020) has shown that the same dilemma may elicit different moral judgements depending on the language in which it has been described.

Using a covert $2 \times 2 \times 2$ experiment where 61 L₁ Polish – L₂ English bilinguals – final year MA students majoring in either Applied Linguistics (with English as their first foreign language) or English – were asked to translate (L₁↔L₂) a passage peppered with swearwords, we show that the picture is much more complex (Gawinkowska, Paradowski & Bilewicz, 2013). While the results ostensibly corroborate the so-called ‘foreign language effect’, with a significant interaction between the source and target words and the direction of translation, $F(1,59) = 7.88$; $p < .01$; $\eta_p^2 = .12$., it was only observed in the case of *ethnophaulisms*, that is expletives directed at social (out)groups (significant interaction between the source and target words, direction of translation, and type of words, $F(1,59) = 59$, $p < .01$; $\eta_p^2 = .16$), but not *generic swearwords*. Specifically, the post-hoc analyses showed that in the translations from L₁ into L₂, the target ethnophaulisms were more offensive (M=2.79, SD=.42) than their source words (M=2.43, SD=.59), $p < .05$, while in the translations from L₂ into L₁, the target ethnophaulisms were less offensive (M=2.12, SD=.53) than their source words (M=2.87, SD=.51), $p < .01$. This indicates that the key factor modulating response strength is not so much the different emotional power associated with the respective languages, but *social and cultural norms*.

Long cultural learning and socialisation make expressions in L₁ highly prone to normative influences, whereas using a foreign language exempts the speaker from these (whether our own or socially imposed) norms and limitations. It transpires that switching to a foreign language during decision-making may not only reduce emotionally-driven responses and political correctness biases, but also promote candid deliberative processes (e.g. rational cost-benefit considerations). This clashes with the notion that the effort of using a FL cues our cognitive system to prepare for strenuous activity and thus a more deliberate mode of thinking. It also points to a qualitative difference – or boundary – between generic swearwords and ethnophaulisms.

The orthogonal influence of the language medium on decisions, judgments and reactions has far-reaching consequences in our multilingual and multicultural world (not limited to such high-stakes scenarios as legal contexts).