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Blistering barnacles! What language do multilinguals swear in?!

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Abstract

The present contribution focuses on the effects of language dominance / attrition, context of acquisition, age of onset of learning, frequency of general use of a language and sociodemographic variables on self-reported language choice for swearing. The analysis is based on a database to which 1039 multilinguals contributed through a web based questionnaire. Results suggest that, according to the self-reports, swearing happens most frequently in the multilinguals' dominant language. Mixed instruction, an early start in the learning process, and frequent use of a language all contribute to the choice of that language for swearing. Sociodemographic variables were not found to have any effect. Frequency of language choice for swearing was found to be positively correlated with perceived emotional force of swearwords in that language. Quantitative results based on answers to close-ended questions corresponded to participants' responses to open-ended questions.
Key words: sociopragmatics, multilingualism, swearing, emotional force.

Resumo

O presente artigo céntrase nos efectos do dominio e perda lingüística, contexto de adquisición, idade de comezo da aprendizaxe, frecuencia de uso xeral da lingua, e mais das variábeis socio-demográficas, sobre as respostas dadas polos propios falantes a propósito das súas escollas de lingua para maldicir. A análise fundaméntase nunha base de datos á que contribuíron 1039 plurilingües, a través dunha enquisa exposta na rede. Os resultados suxiren que, segundo o que din os propios falantes, os xuramentos ocorren con meirande frecuencia na lingua dominante dos plurilingües. Unha instrución mixta, un comezo precoz no proceso de aprendizaxe, e mais o uso frecuente da lingua contribúen á escolla da lingua coa que se xura. Non se atoparon efectos das variábeis socio-demográficas. Atopouse unha correlación positiva entre a frecuencia da escolla de código para maldicir e a forza emocional percibida nos xuramentos nesa lingua. Os resultados cuantitativos baseados en

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respostas a preguntas con final pechado correspondéronse coas respostas dos participantes a preguntas con final aberto.
Palabras clave: sociopragmática, plurilingüismo, maldicir, forza emocional.

1. Introduction

Swearing is a very tricky speech act, for monolinguals and multilinguals alike. There is little tolerance towards those who violate the unwritten rules of "extreme" linguistic behavior. These rules differ among speech communities and may vary according to multiple variables such as the situation, the type of discourse, the gender and age of the interlocutors. Attitudes towards swearwords and taboo words (ST-words) are very ambiguous. Swearwords might be tolerated in movies shown after nine o'clock on BBC channels but any occurrence of strong language in talkshows on the same station would be replaced during post-editing by a discreet bleep. In cases where ST-words do get through during live coverage of tennis matches, for example, the journalist will present his or her excuses to the viewers after the event. ST-words are similarly rare in the written press in the UK, verbatim reports that contain ST-words are typically edited so that only the first letter appears followed by "***" or the word is replaced by a parenthesis and the mention "four letter word". It is not uncommon to see music CDs marked with a red sticker warning the customer of the violent lyrics. Children learn the tricky rules governing swearing in their speech community as part of their socialization process. ST-words might be used with peers in certain contexts, to show group membership, but they would be banned within the classroom.

All this considered, non-native speakers (NNSs) are faced with a very challenging task in this vocabulary domain. They have sociopragmatic competence of their first language (L1) that allows them to guess that there are some "universal" pragmatic rules, such as the ban on ST-words in more formal registers. They might also realize however that more specific pragmatic rules governing the use of ST-words in informal situations cannot be easily transferred to the target language (TL) and hence that anyone using ST-words in the TL is skating on thin ice. There is an interesting paradox concerning the acquisition of swearwords in foreign languages. Any tourist will pick up a few of these words through interactions with native speakers (NSs). Yet, these words rarely figure in textbooks and are never heard in the classroom because they are deemed too offensive. As a consequence, instructed language learners have a limited general knowledge of these words and use them infrequently. They also learn that the proverb "When in Rome, do as the Romans" does not necessarily apply to swearing in the TL.

I personally learned this lesson when using a taboo word in Spanish, my fourth language (L4), in a group discussion with fellow students, NSs of Spanish, at two o'clock in the morning, after consumption of many *tapas* and red wine in one of

Salamanca's bars. Although the exclamation *joder* ('fuck') had been uttered several times during the evening, my use of it was greeted by a stunned silence. "It sounds funny in your mouth", a friend told me, "you shouldn't use it, it might offend people!". I wondered at the time why my friends displayed such a proprietary attitude towards their language and why my vulgar exclamation had had unwanted illocutionary effects[1]. It took me some years to figure out that the answer to my questions could not come from one single discipline but from an interdisciplinary inquiry combining research in bilingualism, psychology, pragmatics, and second language acquisition (SLA) with a focus on the relationship between languages and emotions in bi- and multilingualism.

There is a growing literature on interlanguage (IL) pragmatics which looks at the "many ways in which learners can differ from NSs in the production of speech acts" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001: 14). Bardovi-Harlig (2001) notes that "speech act realizations may deviate on three levels: social acceptability of the utterance, linguistic acceptability of the utterance, or pragmatic acceptability reflected in shifts of illocutionary force" (p. 14). Research in IL pragmatics has focused on speech acts such as apologizing, requesting, complaining, complimenting, refusing, suggesting, etc., in a SLA context (see Kasper, 2001; Kraft & Geluykens, 2002). Very little however seems to have been done on swearing, in either SLA or a wider bi- and multilingualism context, hence the need to shed light on this very specific speech act.

It is also necessary to broaden the field of inquiry from the typical student population (aged 18-22) to the larger community of mature multiple language users. The generation speakers belong to affects their speech patterns and in particular their choice of stigmatised *versus* more formal sociolinguistic variants (Rayson, Leech & Hodges, 1997). For instance, my own investigation into the use of colloquial IL vocabulary among mature speakers (ranging from 25 to 65) showed that younger speakers used significantly more colloquial words than older ones in dyadic interactions (Dewaele, 2004).

2. Previous research

ST-words are multifunctional, pragmatic units which assume, in addition to the expression of emotional attitudes, various discourse functions. They contribute, for instance, to the coordination of turn-taking between the interlocutors, the organization of the interaction, and the structuring of verbal exchange; in that, they are similar to discourse markers (Drescher, 2000). The use of ST-words is also a

[1] Communicative actions have propositional meaning or locutionary force, i.e. a certain "face value" (cf. Austin, 1962). The same utterance also has an illocutionary force, referring to the speaker's intended meaning.

linguistic device used to affirm in-group membership and establish boundaries and social norms for language use (Drescher, 2000; Rayson, Leech & Hodges, 1997; Stenstrom, 1995, 1999).

2.1. L1 studies on ST-words

The use and the perception of ST-words have been extensively studied in monolingual language settings. Psychologists have found that ST-words stand out from neutral words in the L1 and are more likely to be recalled in short- and long-term recall experiments (Lieury, Boissière, Jamet & Marinkovic, 1997). The neurobiologists Van Lancker & Cummings (1999: 99) observe that swearing and cursing can either be a spontaneous outburst or a speech routine:

> in periods of anger, frustration, and other intense emotional situations where limbic structures are activated and limbic vocalizations may be facilitated. In many normal and aphasic individuals, cursing also occurs frequently as habituated verbal production.

This distinction is potentially important for multilinguals as unplanned limbic vocalizations may be uttered in a different language than that used in the rest of the interaction.

In turn, sociolinguists have analysed the effect of independent variables such a gender, age, and social class on the use of ST-words. The results are rather mixed. Some researchers report an effect of gender and generational differences on swearing in the L1 but found no effect of social class (Bayard & Krishnayya, 2001; Rayson, Leech & Hodges, 1997). Another study confirmed the effect of generation (teenagers swearing more than adults, possibly as a way to establish group identity) but found no gender differences in choice and frequency of ST-words among the teenagers (Stenstrom, 1995).

2.2. Emotions and ST-words in multilingualism research

Different languages have a different emotional impact on bi- and multilingual individuals. The Anglo-Canadian-born author Nancy Huston, who emigrated to France as a young adult, gives a clear illustration of this phenomenon in her autobiographical text *Nord perdu*:

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

> [Every false bilingual must have a specific map of lexical asymmetry, in my case it is in French that I feel at ease in an intellectual conversation, in an interview, in a colloquium, in any linguistic situation that draws on concepts and categories learned in adulthood. On the other hand, if I want to be mad, let myself go, swear, sing, yell, be moved by the pure pleasure of speech, it is in English that I do it]

Huston's testimony is backed up by psycholinguistic explorations and psychoanalytic case studies confirming that when a second language (L2) is learned post-puberty the two languages may indeed differ, with the first being the language of personal involvement and the second the language of distance and detachment, or at least the language of lesser emotional hold on the individual (Amati-Mehler, Argentieri & Canestri, 1993; Bond & Lai, 1986; Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1976; Javier, 1989; Pavlenko, 2002b). Altarriba argues that words that label emotion are represented at a deeper level of conceptual understanding in a native or dominant language as compared to a second language (Altarriba, 2000, 2003; Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002). Bond & Lai (1986) and Javier & Marcos (1989) show that code-switching and the use of the second language may act as a distancing function, permitting L2 users to avoid anxiety-provoking materials and to express ideas in their L2 that would be too upsetting in their L1.

Other studies (Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1976; Javier, 1989; Harris, Ayçiçegi & Gleason, 2003) demonstrate that greater anxiety is produced by the presentation of emotional materials (e.g., taboo words) in the native/first learned language of bilingual speakers who learned their second language beyond early childhood. Harris, Ayçiçegi & Gleason (2003) used an electrodermal recording test to compare reactivity for emotion words presented visually and auditorily in the L1 and the L2 of 32 Turkish L1-English L2 bilinguals. They found that their participants reacted much more strongly to taboo words presented auditorily in their L1 than in their L2. Childhood reprimands in the L1 were found to be the most physiologically arousing while similar expressions in their L2 had very little effect. The authors suggest that "the modality-specific vocabulary may be tightly connected to brain systems for emotional arousal, given the proliferation of neural connections in early and middle childhood" (p. 573).

The number of contexts in which emotion words have been experienced and have been applied differ considerably in a first and second language in the context of late bilingualism, says Altarriba (2003). Emotion words in the L1 have been heard and used very frequently in varying ways and in many contexts. This use, in turn, strengthens their semantic representation, resulting in multiple memory traces. In contrast, emotion words learned in the L2 may not be as deeply encoded, if they are practiced much less and applied in fewer contexts. Research into emotion word memory in bilinguals has also confirmed the existence of a language-specificity effect. Anooshian & Hertel (1994) showed that Spanish-English and English-Spanish bilinguals who acquired their second language after the age of 8, recall

emotional words (such as 'mother', 'kiss', 'danger' or 'church') more frequently than neutral words ('table' or 'chair') following their presentation in the L1. Hence the authors' conclusion that language of presentation, which is generally irrelevant to the processing of meaning in most contexts, has a significant effect on recall of emotion words. Case studies of late bilinguals in therapy also suggest that many express personal involvement in the native language and detachment in the second (Altarriba & Santiago-Rivera, 1994).

It not surprising therefore that perception and expression of emotion is more difficult in the L2 (learned later in life) than in the L1(s). Rintell (1984) found that 127 foreign students, enrolled in an intensive English program, identified and rated the intensity of different emotions in 11 taped conversations between 2 participants less accurately than a control group of 19 native English speakers. Linguistic and cultural background, and language proficiency played a crucial role in the students' performance. The scores of the beginner group were significantly lower than the scores of the intermediate group, which were in turn below the scores of the advanced students. However, even the most advanced subjects in the sample did poorly compared to the control group. In addition, when learners of three major language groups were compared to each other, it was found that Chinese students had more difficulty with the task; their scores were consistently lower from those of the Arabic- and Spanish-speaking students.

Graham, Hamblin and Feldstein (2001) used a similar approach and came to comparable results concerning the effect of cultural competence on the recognition of emotion through vocal cues in English voices by 54 native Japanese speakers and 38 native Spanish speakers learning English as a second language. A control group of 85 native English speakers scored higher than the L2 learners. Within the learner group, the scores of the native Japanese speakers were lower than those of the native Spanish speakers. However, level of proficiency of the L2 users did not significantly affect the percentages of correct judgments of intended emotions. The authors conclude that two to three semesters of formal instruction in the L2 or short periods of exposure to the L2 environment are insufficient to learn to recognize emotion in voice.

Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002), in their review of the work of Graham, Hamblin & Feldstein (2001), and Rintell (1984), noted that: "comprehension of vocal and verbal characteristics which signal emotions is not only linked to typological similarity to the target language, but also to cultural similarity, in particular with regard to emotion scripts" (p. 268). Insults and ST-words are highly culture-specific, as was highlighted again in March 2003 in the bitter verbal exchange between a Kuwaiti diplomat and an Iraqi minister where their respective moustaches became the target of insults. What is laughable in one culture might be deeply offensive in another. It is not enough to have a semantic representation of a particular word in a TL argued Pavlenko (1999), one also needs the conceptual representation, which implies the sociocultural knowledge, including an array of scripts specifying

contexts where the word would be appropriate. It is hence not surprising that L2 users and learners use emotion words, and specifically ST-words, very sparingly.

Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) investigated the effect of five factors which were expected to influence the use of L2 emotion vocabulary (including ST-words) in 2 different IL corpora. The first study considered the impact of language proficiency, gender, and extraversion on the use of emotion words in the advanced French IL of 29 Dutch L1 speakers. The second examined the influence of sociocultural competence, gender, and type of linguistic material on the use of emotion vocabulary in the advanced English IL of 34 Russian L1 speakers. Combined, the results of the two studies demonstrated that the use of emotion words in IL is linked to proficiency level, type of linguistic material, extraversion, and, in some cases, gender of IL speakers. A multiple regression analysis in the first study revealed that gender and degree of extraversion were significant predictors for the proportion of emotion lemmas, a second regression analysis showed that gender and level of proficiency were strong predictors for the proportion of emotion word tokens. The finding that language proficiency does not influence the range of emotion lemmas used but does affect the frequency of use of emotion word tokens, with more advanced speakers using more emotion word tokens in their speech, was interpreted as an illustration of the detachment effect of the L2 (cf. Amati-Mehler, Argentieri & Canestri, 1993).

Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) also argue that the extraverts' use of a wider range of emotional words could be linked to the same cause that makes them use more colloquial vocabulary. These findings are also borne out in another study (Dewaele, 2004). There, I considered the effects of extraversion and grammatical proficiency on the use of colloquial vocabulary in the previously mentioned cross-sectional corpus of advanced oral French IL and in a corpus of advanced oral French IL produced by mature students from Birkbeck College. Analyses of variance revealed that both extraversion, frequency of contact with the TL and proficiency were significant predictors in the use of colloquial words. Participants with high morpholexical accuracy rates, with frequent contact with TL speakers, younger speakers and more extraverted participants used significantly more colloquial words.

Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) point out that both emotion and colloquial words pose a threat to the face of the L2 user. Inappropriate use of these words can be highly embarrassing, hence the option for those L2 users wishing to avoid pragmatic failure or sociolinguistic blunders at all cost, to ban these emotionally-laden words from their vocabulary. Extravert speakers who are by nature less anxious, happier and suffer less fear of punishment, could be more confident about their sociopragmatic competence and therefore choose to use a wider range of emotion and colloquial words that translate their communicative intentions more accurately.

A third study on the same cross-sectional corpus of advanced oral French IL produced by Dutch L1 students, and on a longitudinal corpus of 6 Hiberno-Irish

English L1 speakers, by Dewaele and Regan (2001), focused on the effect of socio-biographical variables on the use of colloquial words (including ST-words). It was hypothesized that authentic interactions in the TL, as well as total immersion in the TL culture, and longer and more intense formal instruction in the TL would be linked to a more frequent use of colloquial vocabulary. The latter factor was found to have no predictive value on the use of colloquial vocabulary in advanced French IL. Only active authentic communication in the TL, especially in a total immersion context was found to be linked to an increased use of colloquial vocabulary. It was hypothesized that speakers of intermediate proficiency did not know the colloquial words, or lacked the necessary morphophonological information at the lexical level. It was also argued that incomplete semantic and conceptual representation of the words could prevent the production of colloquial words in more advanced speakers. Drawing on Pavlenko (1999) and on Paradis' (1997) model of implicit and explicit knowledge, Dewaele and Reagan (2001) argue that only prolonged authentic contact with the TL community might allow learners to develop the kind of implicit, proceduralized sociopragmatic knowledge that is stored in the implicit memory.

The importance of authentic contact in the TL for development of sociopragmatic competence was also demonstrated in Toya and Kodis (1996) who found that the use of swearwords and the pragmatic use of rudeness in an L2 is linked to the variety of registers in the input and the confidence of the L2 users. The authors focused on the use of rude expressions as a result of anger among 10 NSs of English and 10 NSs of Japanese with advanced English proficiency (the latter group providing data for the L1 and the L2). Participants were presented with five situations in which anger was expected and were asked (1) how they would feel in each situation, (2) how they would or would not express their emotions verbally and/or nonverbally, and finally (3) why they would or would not express themselves in those ways. NSs were found to be more expressive although the difference in reactions was relatively small. The researchers suggest that the lower degree of expressiveness in the L2 could be linked to the more restricted input to which the learners had been exposed (there is little display of anger in the foreign language classroom) and the fact that learners have little confidence in using angry words.

While gender effects were inconsistent in the previously mentioned studies, some researchers, such as Register (1996), did find a gender effect in her analysis of comprehension and self-reported use of English taboo words and expressions by second language learners in a North American university (68 males and 88 females). A questionnaire was completed by the learners and by a control group of 86 undergraduate native English speakers while listening to an audiotape of 20 short monologues containing both taboo and non-offensive slang expressions. The male learners comprehended more taboo terms than female learners and more frequently reported that they would use them.

3. Rationale for the present study

The present study builds upon the existing research on swearing in L1 contexts, combining it with the new paradigm of bilingualism and emotion research, in order to investigate the hitherto unexplored territory of language choice for swearing in multilingual speakers. I will investigate whether the independent sociobiographical variables linked to swearing in monolingual contexts, and to the use of emotional language in a bilingual context, exert a similar influence of swearing behaviour in the other languages known to the speaker.

The present research distinguishes itself from previous studies not only in the object of the investigation, but also in the size of the sample and the methodology employed. While previous studies typically involved fewer than 200 participants with data usually obtained in experimental conditions, I used a web questionnaire to collect self-reported data from more than 1000 multilinguals from all possible linguistic backgrounds. More importantly, no other study so far has, to my knowledge, elicited multilinguals' perceptions of their ST-word use. The present study aims thus at presenting a more complete picture of intra-individual differences and interindividual differences in self-reported swearing behaviour in the L1, the L2, the L3, the L4 and the L5.

4. Research questions

The present study investigates multilinguals' reported language choice for swearing. I focus on the effects of gender, level of education, language dominance, context of acquisition of the TL, age of onset of learning the TL and frequency of use of the TL for every language known to the participant.

5. Methodology

Data were gathered through an on-line web questionnaire with 34 questions related to bilingualism and emotion (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001). The main advantage of an on-line questionnaire is that information can be gathered from a very large sample of learners and long-time users of multiple languages (i.e. not just the L2 as done in previous research) from across the world and from different generations and social classes, i.e. not only the young adults undergraduates which are predominantly used in empirical research in applied linguistics and psychology. The use of closed questions forced participants to condense a life-long communicative history to a single score on the dimension under investigation. A further advantage is that the data do not need to be laboriously processed, as is the case with corpora of spoken data. Moreover, an analysis of multilingual swearing patterns in spontaneous speech would require very large multilingual corpora, as swearing is a relatively infrequent event for the average speaker.

The present approach is not without its own methodological limitations. Questionnaires are by nature incomplete as one is forced to find a fine balance between the amount of topics covered and the amount of detail requested while keeping total length under control to avoid fatigue effects (Dörnyei, 2003: 132). Questionnaires with Likert scale responses have been tried and tested extensively in sociopsychological research (cf. Dörnyei, 2003). They can provide excellent baseline data, provided they are backed up by other types of data. This is the reason why open questions inquiring into emotion and communicative behaviour were also included in the web questionnaire. Another common problem with self-report is that participants' answers might be affected by social desirability or self-deception (Dörnyei, 2003). This might be less of a problem in the present research as the focus is not on the total frequency of swearing, but rather the language choice when ST-words are used. It is of course still possible, as one reviewer pointed out, that the respondents crafted their answers to the questionnaire —anonymous as it may be— based on a desirable self-image.

5.1. Participants

The following sociobiographical information was collected through the questionnaire: gender, age, education level, ethnic group, occupation, languages known to the participant, dominant language(s), chronological order of language acquisition, context of acquisition (naturalistic, mixed or instructed), age of onset, and frequency of use. The L2 was defined as the second language to have been acquired by the participant, the L3 as the third language, etc.

A total of 1039 multilinguals contributed to the database (731 females, 308 males). The participants spoke a total of 75 different L1s. English speakers represent the largest group: n = 303; followed by Spanish: n = 123; French: n = 101; German: n = 97; Dutch: n = 76; Italian: n = 52; Catalan: n = 32; Russian: n = 29; Finnish n = 28; Portuguese: n = 20; Greek: n = 15; Swedish: n = 15; Japanese: n = 11; Welsh: n = 10. The 127 remaining participants share another 61 L1s among themselves.

The population could be described as highly polyglot with 144 bilinguals, 269 trilinguals, 289 quadrilinguals and 337 pentalinguals. A closer look at the age of onset of learning of the L2 and L3 revealed that 157 L2 users are in fact "bilingual first language" users, having learned the L2 from birth. This represents 15% of the L2 group. Similarly, 19 L3 users are "trilingual first language" users (representing 1.8% of the L3 group). More than half of the participants declared to be dominant in the L1 (n = 561); a smaller proportion reported dominance in two or more languages including the L1 (n = 373); and about 10% reported dominance in language(s) not including the L1 (n = 105). The participants are generally highly educated with 115 having a high school diploma or less, 273 with a Bachelor's degree, 308 with a Master's, and 338 with a Ph D. Age ranged from 16 to 70 (Mean = 35.6 years; SD = 11.3). The strong proportion of highly educated female participants means that we cannot claim that the sample is representative of the general population. This

potential pitfall (cf. Dörnyei, 2003: 75) is inevitable with web-based questionnaires and it needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the patterns, as results might be different for a sample of, for example, men without a high school degree. To partially remedy this problem I collected data through a printed version of the questionnaire from about 50 multilinguals in the London area who did not finish high school. Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences between this group and the rest of the sample for the dependent variables under consideration in the present study (Dewaele, 2002).

5.2. Dependent variables

The present study focuses on the self-reported language choice for swearing. The question was formulated as follows: "*If you swear in general, what language do you typically swear in?*".

Information was collected for the L1, L2, L3, L4, and the L5. Possible answers on a 5-point Likert scales included: never=1, rarely=2, sometimes=3, frequently=4, all the time=5.

5.3. Research design

Paired t-tests were used to check for differences in frequency of language choice in the L1, L2, L3, L4, and L5. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) and Scheffé post-hoc tests were used to check for the nominal independent variables (gender, education level, language dominance, context of acquisition). Correlation analyses were used with the ordinal independent variables (age of onset and frequency of use of a language). Sample sizes may vary across the analyses because some participants did not provide data for all the variables. Statistical analyses are backed up participants' answers to open-ended questions. These answers highlight the uniqueness of multilingual experiences and a complete impossibility to create a homogenous portrayal of a "multilingual". Pavlenko (2002a: 297) insists on the importance of including this "emic", or participant-relevant view: "as a result of which the L2 learners' and users' voices and opinions (…) are heard on a par with those of the researchers".

6. Research hypotheses

1) The preferred language for swearing will be the dominant language of the participant (usually the L1), followed by languages learned subsequently or attrited languages.

2) Participants who learned a language in a naturalistic —or mixed— context will prefer this language for swearing compared to participants who learned it in an instructed context.

3) Age of onset of learning and frequency of language use are correlated with language choice for swearing.

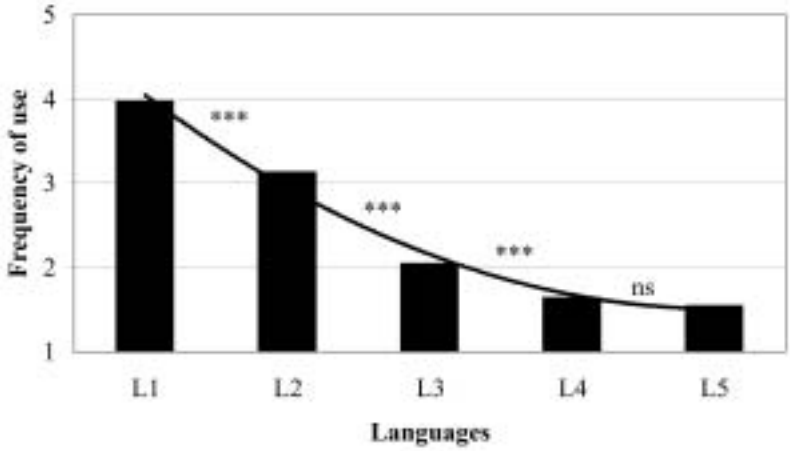
4) Sociodemographic differences might also affect language choice for swearing.

7. Analysis

7.1. Language choice for swearing

Pair-wise comparisons (t-tests) reveal that participants report using the L1 more frequently than the L2 for swearing: ($t(938) = 15.5$, $p < .0001$). The same pattern is repeated when comparing self-reported frequency of choice of the L2 compared with the L3 for swearing: ($t(725) = 16.6$, $p < .0001$); the L3 and the L4: ($t(494) = 7.7$, $p < .0001$). The difference between the frequency of choice of the L4 compared to the L5 for swearing is no longer significant: ($t(270) = 1.3$, p = ns). It thus appears that multilinguals prefer their L1 for swearing and use languages learned subsequently gradually less (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pairwise comparisons of frequency of language choice for swearing in the L1, L2, L3, L4 and L5.



A closer look at the data provided through the open questions shows that L1 ST-words are usually felt to have greater emotional force. Not surprisingly, they pop up automatically in moments of anger or pain:

K.[2] (Finnish L1, English L2, Swedish L3, German L4): If I would happen to

[2] Participants who expressed a wish to remain anonymous will be referred to through one initial.

> hit myself with a hammer the words coming out of my mouth would definitely be in Finnish.
>
> *Sandra* (German L1, Italian L2): If I am really angry only German words come into my mind, if I use Italian instead I may not use the right measure.

Several participants report code-switching back to their L1 for swearing, even if that language is not understood by their interlocutor(s):

> *Erica* (Spanish L1, English L2, Italian L3, Portuguese L4): We speak English and we argue in English because he doesn't speak Spanish. However, many times I find myself swearing at him in Spanish.
>
> *Didi* (Sundanase L1, Bahasa Indo L2, English L3): L1 is usually more significant to use when I get angry as I feel the effect is strongest even though the object of the anger does not know at all the language, e.g. I swear to somebody near Birkbeck College in 1997 using Sundanase while the person is English (it is also safer for me to do this).

The greater force of the L1 ST-words can either favor or hinder their use (depending on the speaker's communicative intention and attitudes towards swearwords in the L1). Some participants report that they are just too powerful in their L1 and are therefore avoided:

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

Another participant points out that her L1 (Japanese) lacks the variety of ST-words that exists in English, and that fear of social disapproval means she does not even use the single ST-word she knows:

> *Y.* (Japanese L1, English L2): I think I like Japanese way which does not have endearment words or swear words equivalent to English but emotion terms are colorful. I cannot think of any swear words that I use. Even though I found one I don't want to use it. Because I feel I become a very bad person make me feel so uncomfortable in Japanese.

The smaller emotional impact of L2 ST-words on the speaker means that they can be used more freely. The taboo that rests on the use of swearwords in the L1 reported in the previous testimonies can hence be overcome:

> *Maureen* (English L1, Italian L2): I prefer to express anger in my L2 Italian because I do not hear the weight of my words so everything comes out quite easily. Which unfortunately means that I probably hurt people more than I intend to!
>
> *Nicole* (English L1, German L2, French L3, Italian L4, Spanish L5): My parents were quite strict and I still have the phrase "I'll wash your mouth out with soap and water" in my head! I'd never swear in English, but it's easier in German!

Speaking in another language than their L1 allows some participants to escape the restrictive social conventions of their native culture:

> *L.* (Cantonese L1, English L2, French L3, Putonghua L4, Japanese L5): I find it more difficult to swear in Cantonese than in English. Swearing in Cantonese is a big taboo for people of my educational level however swearing in English doesn't sound vulgar (…). When the subject involves cultural taboos such as sex or swear words I prefer to use English (…). I feel less inhibited using L2 about cultural taboos probably because I don't feel the emotional intensity so strongly in L2.

Another participant explained that her strategy is to always use ST-words that do not belong to the language of the region where she is:

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

There are some English swearwords that have become borrowings in many languages. As they still retain their foreign character, they may have a lower emotional impact and therefore judged by the following participant to be socially more acceptable:

> *Ilana* (Russian L1, Hebrew L2, English L3): The reason I swear in English more often than in other languages is because lovely English words such as 'fuck' or 'shit' are perfectly understandable by speakers of any language.

Some participants expressed their reticence to talk about emotional and taboo topics in their L2 or L3 because of their fear of getting it wrong and causing unwanted illocutionary effects:

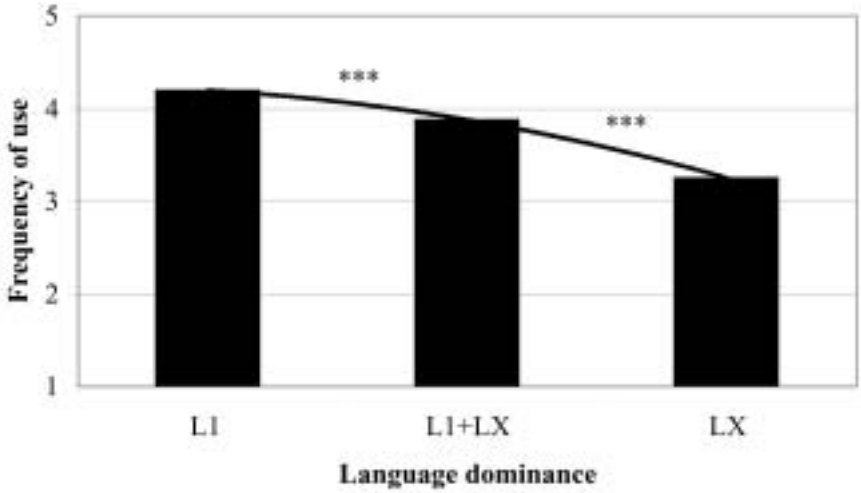
> *Jemma* (English L1, German L2, French L3): I feel safer sticking to my native English as tone nuance and subtlety are so important in such subjects and when using a learned language there is always the possibility of slightly misphrasing something or unwittingly choosing a word which has unwanted implications/connotations. Many seemingly harmless phrases are also sexual euphemisms or have become common ways of expressing taboo subjects. A prime example in English might be "He gave her one" —sounds quite harmless to a foreign student of English.

7.2. Effect of L1 dominance on L1 use for swearing

The ANOVA shows that language dominance is clearly linked to frequency of use of the L1 for swearing ($F (2, 976) = 39.1$, $p < .0001$, $eta^2 = .074$). Participants who are no longer dominant in their L1 (LX group) use that language less for

swearing than those who report shared dominance with another language (L1+LX group), and even less than those who are still dominant in their L1 (L1 group). A Scheffé post-hoc analysis reveals that the differences are highly significant between the three groups ($p < .0001$) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The effect of language dominance on frequency of use of the L1 for swearing.



A participant belonging to the L1+LX group explains that getting angry in her L1 (and presumably also swearing) does not feel right any more after many years in her L3 environment:

> *Johanna* (English L1, French L2, Italian L3, Spanish L4): I'm more likely to express anger in Italian. Mainly because I've only really learned how to in the last few years and since I've spent my young adulthood here I've gotten more practice raging at the government or the landlord in my adopted language. I still end up feeling ridiculous when I get worked up about things in English.

7.3. Effect of context of acquisition

A series of one-way ANOVAs shows a consistent and significant effect of context of acquisition on language choice for swearing for the different languages. Scheffé post-hoc analyses confirm that participants from the instructed group use the TL significantly less than the mixed and naturalistic groups.

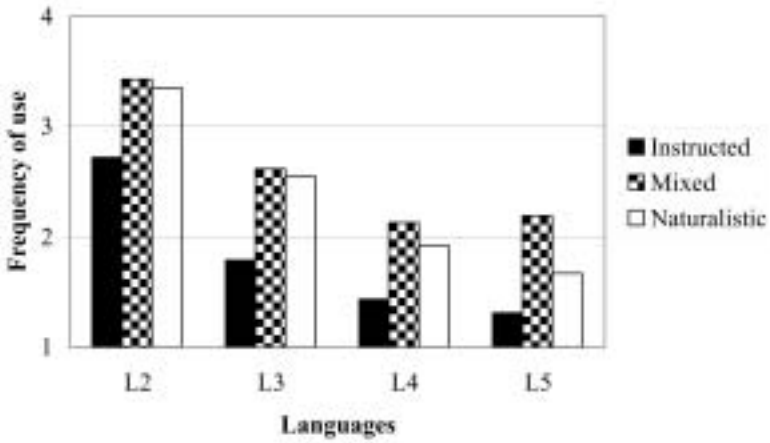
Table 1. One-way ANOVA results with context of acquisition (instructed, mixed and naturalistic) as main independent variable and language choice for swearing in the L2, L3, L4 and L5 as dependent variable.

Language	F	p	eta^2	Scheffé post-hoc analysis
L2	24.4	***	.07	Instructed/mixed***, Instructed/naturalistic***
L3	26.8	***	.10	Instructed/mixed***, Instructed/naturalistic**
L4	16.4	***	.09	Instructed/mixed***, Instructed/naturalistic*
L5	13.6	***	.13	Instructed/mixed***

p < .050, **p < .001, *** p < .0001

The means are presented in Figure 3:

Figure 3. The effect of context of acquisition on frequency of language choice for swearing in the L2, L3, L4 and L5.



The participants' responses show that naturalistic and mixed learners are very much aware that swearing is both language and culture-specific. In other words, ST-words that would have been appropriate in an exchange in the L1 cannot simply be translated in the L2:

> *Sandra* (German L1, Italian L2): Swearing in Italian means talking about God, Maria etc., in an obscene way which in German doesn't mean a thing. The other way round in German you might use animals names to insult a person in Italian it wouldn't mean anything.

Another participant notes that the speech act of swearing is very rare in Japan but very frequent in the US where she stayed for a while. It is not surprising then that she switches to English for this specific speech act:

> *Ryoko* (Japanese L1, English L2): I tend to use English when I am angry, Japanese when I'm hurt or sad, both when I am happy or excited (…). My other bilingual friends who are all returnees like me said the same thing about using English when they're angry. I guess I like the sound of the swearing words since I heard it so many times during my stay in the U.S. This swearing doesn't happen so often in Japan. It's a cultural difference.

Instructed learners point out that emotional words learned in a classroom remain emotionally flat, and therefore avoid using them.

> *Pierre* (French L1, Dutch L2, English L3, German L4): I do not feel the emotional load of words in foreign languages. I've only learned them in an "instructed" environment.

Moreover, some speech acts, such as getting angry, are not usually taught in the foreign language classroom, hence their difficulty in performing these acts in authentic situations:

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

7.4. The effect of onset of learning and frequency of use of languages on language choice for swearing

The participants supplied information concerning age of onset of learning the different languages as well as frequency of use of these languages in the first part of the questionnaire. These data are presented below in Table 2:

Table 2. Mean scores for age of onset and frequency of use of language.

Variable	Language	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age of onset	L1	1036	0.00	0.00
	L2	1034	8.48	6.32
	L3	894	13.63	6.68
	L4	631	17.69	6.88
	L5	342	21.96	8.17
Frequency of use	L1	1027	4.45	0.86
	L2	1028	3.73	1.40
	L3	877	2.43	1.56
	L4	621	1.94	1.50
	L5	342	1.92	1.51

Research into the effect of age of onset on ultimate attainment has shown that the earlier one is exposed to a language the higher the probability of reaching high levels of proficiency (e.g. DeKeyser, 2000). Learners who start the learning process under the age of 12 seem to have an advantage, although this does not mean that some older learners could not reach high levels of proficiency. Singleton (2001) points out however that it is always difficult to know whether the cause of the observed difference is age of onset of learning or the much longer duration of exposure. Studies on the effect of age of onset do suggest that learners who started at a younger age generally outperform those who engaged in the language learning process at a later age on aspects of sociopragmatic competence (Romero Trillo, 2002). More grammatically-oriented studies failed to find such an age effect (García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003). A negative correlation is therefore to be expected between age of onset of learning of a language and frequency of use of ST-words in that language. We have already referred to the study by Harris, Ayçiçegi & Gleason (2003) who found a link among bilinguals between age of onset of learning and emotional arousal following exposure to emotion words and childhood reprimands.

Frequency of speaking the language has also been linked to higher levels of sociopragmatic competence (Dewaele & Regan, 2001; Mougeon, Nadasdi & Rehner, 2002). A positive correlation can therefore be expected between general frequency of use of the language and frequency of use of ST-words in that language and a negative correlation between age of onset of learning a language and frequency of use of ST-words in that language. The results of the nonparametric correlation analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Spearman correlations between age of onset of learning, frequency of use of the TL and self-reported language choice for swearing.

	L2		L3		L4		L5	
Language choice for swearing	Age of onset	Frequency of use	Age of onset	Frequency of use	Age of onset	Frequency of use	Age of onset	Frequency of use
N	941	947	727	723	506	503	272	272
Rho	-0,12***	0,46***	-0.06	0,48***	-0.05	0,44***	-0.02	0,48***

p < .050, **p < .001, *** p < .0001

The analyses show that age of onset is significantly negatively correlated with self-reported language choice for swearing for the L2, but the relation is gradually weaker and no longer significant in the L3, L4 and L5. In other words, the lower the age of onset of learning the L2, the higher the scores on self-reported use of the L2 for swearing. This could be related to the fact that the average age at which the

learning of the L2 was undertaken was significantly lower ($t(892) = -23.7$, $p < .0001$) than the L3 (see Table 2), this included 157 participants for whom the L2 was in fact a second L1, learned from birth.

7.5. Link between language choice for ST-words and perception of emotional force

The final analysis focuses on the link between perception of emotional force of swearwords (Dewaele, to appear) and frequency of choice of a particular language for swearing. Do L2 users frequently use swearwords of which they ignore the exact emotional force, as some responses suggested, running the risk of hurting their interlocutors' feelings; or do they avoid using ST-words if they are unsure about their emotional force?

Table 4. Spearman correlation analyses between perception of emotional force of ST-words in a language and frequency of language choice for swearing.

	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5
N	936	902	647	415	219
Rho	0.16***	0.32***	0.43***	0.45***	0.50***

*** $p < .0001$

The correlations are all highly significant (see Table 4). A more frequent choice of a language for swearing is clearly linked to a perception of strength of the ST-words in that language. Inversely one could say that users avoid ST-words if the emotional force of these words is not clearly established.

7.6. The effect of sociodemographic variables

T-tests and two-way ANOVAs showed that gender and education level were not linked to language choice for swearing. Correlation analyses did not reveal any systematic significant relations between age of the participant and language choice for swearing.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study show that the multilinguals' choice of a language for swearing is determined by several independent variables, all related to the individual's linguistic history (how and when the language was learned, how frequently it has been or is being used). Sociodemographic variables do not seem to be linked to language choice for swearing.

To sum up, the findings of the study fully support hypothesis 1 (self-reported language choice for ST-words is higher in the first language of speakers and is gradually lower in languages learned subsequently or in the attrited L1), fully support hypothesis 2 (participants who learned a language in a naturalistic —or mixed— context prefer this language for swearing compared to participants who learned it in a purely instructed context); and partially support hypothesis 3 (participants who started learning an L2 at a younger age, or use the different languages more frequently, report using these languages more frequently for swearing).

The quantitative findings, backed up by participants' responses, confirm the results of smaller-scale studies using different methodological approaches, namely that the L2, L3, L4, L5 are the languages of distance and detachment that do not have the emotional resonance of the usually dominant L1 (cf. Bond & Lai, 1986; Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1976; Harris, Ayçiçegi & Gleason, 2003; Javier, 1989; Pavlenko, 2002b). As a consequence, multilinguals generally prefer to swear in their dominant language, though they might, using a conscious strategy, swear in a weaker language to somehow soften the illocutionary force or to escape social conventions that prevent them using ST-words in their L1. They are aware however of the potential unwanted perlocutionary[3] effects of their choice. As a rule, language users seem to avoid use of linguistic "nuclear" devices if they are unsure about their yield. It is not surprising that if one's contact with a TL has been limited to the classroom, one will rarely have heard ST-words and therefore lack a complete understanding of their meaning and locutionary or illocutionary force. On the other hand, those who have experienced and used the TL in wider variety of situations (i.e. classroom instruction *and* exposure to the TL environment for a prolonged period) are more likely to have developed the necessary conceptual representations and the confidence to use these words in appropriate contexts (cf. Kasper & Rose, 2001; Toya & Kodis, 1996).

The finding that the mixed instruction group reported swearing more frequently in the TL than both the instructed and the naturalistic group could suggest that this specific speech act might benefit from classroom instruction (cf. Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). The effect is probably indirect however, as swearing does not figure on the curriculum. It is not surprising either that frequency of use of the language and, to a somewhat lesser extent, age of onset of learning are linked to reported language choice for swearing. A frequent user of a language develops the correct perception of the emotional force of ST-words and may at some point feel he/she is close enough to the in-group to dare using these powerful words. Starting the language learning process at a young age heightens the probability of swearing in that language.

High levels of sociopragmatic and sociocultural competence are needed to be able to swear appropriately within a certain community. A skilled communicator

[3] The perlocutionary force describes the effect the speaker's utterance has on the hearer (Austin, 1962).

knows not only the meaning and connotations of ST-words in one particular language, but also knows how to use them confidently in various scripts, attached to certain registers. To become skilled, one needs a lot of practice. Lack of practice means the skill can become rusty, be it in driving, cycling or swearing. More personally, after the sociopragmatic "faux pas" with my Spanish friends, I decided to limit my swearing in Spanish to Captain Haddock's favorite expression "rayos y truenos" (the Spanish equivalent of the rather harmless "blistering barnacles").

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