Does the foreign language effect 'stand the test of time'? Moral decision making under time constraint

Rafał Jończyk and Sylwia Michalak
Adam Mickiewicz University

Recently, a growing body of literature has shown that language in which people make decisions may be an important factor shaping decision outcomes, a phenomenon referred to as the Foreign Language Effect (FLE; Keysar, Hayakawa & An, 2012; for a recent review see Del Maschio et al., 2022; Circi et al. 2021). For example, when faced with a moral dilemma in a foreign language, people are more willing to accept harm to maximize outcomes (e.g., deciding more often to sacrifice one person to save five in a footbridge dilemma; Costa, Foucart, Hayakawa, et al., 2014). While a recent meta-analysis of studies investigating the FLE showed that participants tend be more unbiased when facing decision problems or moral judgments in their foreign language, the reported effect is relatively small, with some studies failing to find evidence for the FLE (Del Maschio et al., 2022). Some researchers also argued that results from experiments using common moral dilemmas may be unreliable, because of moral dilemmas being unrealistic and hardly ever validated or normalised (Christensen et al. 2014). Here, we investigated moral decision making in highly proficient Polish-English bilinguals using twelve different moral dilemmas that had been normed and validated by Christensen et al. (2014). 38 bilinguals were asked to make moral judgments either in Polish or in English depending on the experimental block. Out of the twelve moral dilemmas, six were presented in Polish and six in English in a counterbalanced fashion. To mimic often quick and intuitive moral judgments in real-life settings, participants had limited time to make a decision. We found that participants made faster judgments in Polish than in English for moral scenarios where harm was an unforeseen side-effect. In English, by contrast, responses were faster for dilemmas where harm was intentional. No response pattern difference was found across languages, failing to provide evidence for the foreign language effect.