

# Which Language Do Bilinguals Swear in?<sup>1</sup>

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**Introduction.** The linguistic act of swearing is associated with the psychological notion of emotion in both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2)<sup>[1,2]</sup>. The connection between language and emotion is also considered to be bidirectional<sup>[3]</sup>. Previous studies on second language swearing do not make a clear distinction between self-reported swearing and the actual swearing behavior, do not demarcate the dimensions of emotional experience in connection with the speech behavior of swearing, and only partially support the view that L1 is more emotional than L2<sup>[4]</sup>. Past studies claim that emotion-laden words, such as swearwords and sexual words, produce a stronger emotional impact in L1<sup>[5,6]</sup>. Other studies, on the other hand, show that emotional response to swearwords is present in both L1 and L2 and the effect is of equal size<sup>[7]</sup>. The present study investigates the main constructs that trigger the language of choice for swearing in bilinguals. In particular, the study examines the effect of high-arousing versus low-arousing emotional scenarios on the frequency and pattern of swearing in bilingual individuals. To assess emotion, the study adopts Russell & Barrett's bipolar structure of valence-arousal within which affective experiences may be categorized as high-positive, low-positive, high-negative, or low-negative<sup>[8]</sup>.

**Methodology.** The participants are 34 speakers of English as a second language with Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, or Arabic as the first languages. The participants viewed 14 mute, multi-second, emotion-evoking video scenarios and immediately answered a question about each scenario in English and in their first language. Half of the scenarios displayed emotional situations with negative valence and high arousal (e.g., road rage), while the other half showed emotional situations representing negative valence with low arousal (e.g., accidentally dropping snacks on the ground). Later, participants also self-reported their preferred language of swearing in multiple hypothetical scenarios. In response to the video stimuli, a total of 745 utterances were elicited. The data obtained from video stimuli were coded based on the language of utterance, swear-positive or swear-free, and production in response to high-arousing or low-arousing situations. Group differences between L1 and L2 were calculated using chi-squared test. The data from self-reported swearing behavior were further analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

**Results.** The frequency of swear-positive utterances is significantly higher in response to high-arousing emotional scenarios in comparison with low-arousing situations,  $X^2(1, N = 745) = 43.77, p < .05$ . However, the prevalence of swearing in response to high-arousing scenarios does not show a significant difference in L1 and L2,  $X^2(1, N = 380) = 0.37, p < .05$ . In contrast, utterances that are produced in response to low-arousing emotions contain significantly higher occurrences of swearing in English in comparison to the respondent's first language,  $X^2(1, N = 365) = 5.24, p < .05$ . The data further demonstrate that in low-arousing scenarios where swearing is less likely to happen in L1, interjections are used with significantly higher rates,  $X^2(1, N = 248) = 5.08, p < .05$ . In other words, the absence of swearwords in an utterance does not imply that the utterance lacks emotional associations. Rather, the use of interjections in L1 counterbalances the lack of swearwords in negative emotional situations with low arousal. Further, according to self-reported data, second language speakers *perceive* L2 swearwords as

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weaker and less offensive and believe that their L1 is more powerful and has a larger lexicon for self-expression.

**Implications.** The present study shows that the speech behavior of swearing in bilingual speakers is more complex than it has been previously assumed. The distinctive swearing behavior in bilinguals can be explained based on the theoretical underpinnings of heuristic-systematic information processing<sup>[9]</sup>. In high-arousing situations, heuristic information processing is rendered which is quick, effortless, and automatic, while low-arousing emotions lead to systematic information processing which is deliberate, analytic, and comprehensive<sup>[10]</sup>. In high-arousing scenarios, speakers manifest their emotional state through swearing without much deliberation and regardless of the language. In contrast, in low-arousing scenarios, systematic information processing results in the application of judgmental rules that are stored in the speaker's socio-pragmatic repertoire. Therefore, the preference for swearing in English in low-arousing emotional situations may be a device for communication of emotions through a channel that is *perceived* to be less offensive and less face-threatening (i.e., second language).

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