

A person's language may influence how he thinks about other people

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The language a person speaks may influence their thoughts, according to a new study on Israeli Arabs who speak both Arabic and Hebrew fluently. The study found that Israeli Arabs' positive associations with their own people are weaker when they are tested in Hebrew than when they are tested in Arabic.

The vast majority of Arab Israelis speak Arabic at home and usually start learning Hebrew in elementary school. The subjects in this study were Arab Israelis, fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic, who were students at Hebrew-speaking universities and colleges. Researchers Shai Danziger of Ben-Gurion University and Robert Ward of Bangor University took advantage of the tensions between Arabs and Israelis to design an experiment that looked at how the students think differently in Arabic and Hebrew. Their [hypothesis](#): "It's likely that a bilingual Arab Israeli will consider Arabs more positively in an Arab speaking environment than a Hebrew speaking environment," says Danziger.

The study used a computer test known as the Implicit Association Test, which is often used to study bias. Words flash on the [computer screen](#), and subjects have to categorize them by pressing two keys on the keyboard as quickly as possible. It's a nearly automatic task, with no time to think about the answers. The trick is, the subjects are classifying two different kinds of words: words describing positive and negative traits and, in this case, [names](#) - Arab names like Ahmed and Samir and Jewish names like Avi and Ronen. For example, they might be told to press "M" when they saw an Arab name or a word with a good meaning, or "X"

when they saw a Jewish name and a word with a bad meaning. In this example, if people automatically associate "good" words with Arabs and "bad" with Jews, they'll be able to do the classifications faster than if their automatic association between the words is the other way around. In different sections of the test, different sets of words are paired.

For this study, the bilingual Arab Israelis took the implicit association test in both languages - Hebrew and Arabic - to see if the language they were using affected their biases about the names. The Arab Israeli volunteers found it easier to associate Arab names with "good" trait words and Jewish names with "bad" trait words than Arab names with "bad" trait words and Jewish names with "good" trait words. But this effect was much stronger when the test was given in Arabic; in the Hebrew session, they showed less of a positive bias toward Arab names over Jewish names. "The language we speak can change the way we think about other people," says Ward. The results are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Danziger himself learned both Hebrew and English as a child. "I am a bilingual and I believe that I actually respond differently in Hebrew than I do in English. I think in English I'm more polite than I am in Hebrew," he says. "People can exhibit different types of selves in different environments. This suggests that language can serve as a cue to bring forward different selves."

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