

Researchers find thinking in a foreign language causes people to make more rational decisions

April 25 2012, by Bob Yirka

(Medical Xpress) -- While at first glance it might seem irrational, researchers from the University of Chicago have found that people who speak two languages tend to make more rational decisions when thinking in their non-native tongue. They came to this conclusion after conducting a series of experiments, the results of which they have published in a paper in the journal *Psychological Science*.

Intuitively, most people would assume that it shouldn't matter which language a person is thinking in when making a decision, but the research team found just the opposite to be true, and they theorize that it's because when people think in a language that takes more effort, they tend to be more analytical and less emotional when faced with making a choice.

To find out if their idea was sound, they conducted several experiments.

In the first experiment, the team revisited the famous experiment conducted by Daniel Kahneman where volunteers were given a choice regarding whether to save a certain few from death, or try another option that might save more lives, but was riskier. In this case, the researchers asked 121 American volunteers that had learned Japanese to choose between a cure for a disease that could definitely cure a third of the victims of a plague, versus a cure that had just a one third chance of curing all of the victims. They found that almost eighty percent of those

chose the safe option when it was framed in English. The number dropped to just forty seven percent when the question was framed in terms of losing lives rather than saving them. When the question was posed in Japanese however, the safe option was chosen around forty percent of the time regardless which way it was phrased.

To make sure their results were sound, the team conducted several variations on this experiment and found nearly identical results. Then, to look at things in another way, they set up an experiment to test myopic aversion (focusing on a big gain instead of minor losses) in volunteers when making decisions in a non-native language. In this experiment, native Korean speaking volunteers who spoke English as a second language were asked in Korean to make bets with potentially big gains and minor losses. They accepted the bets in fifty seven percent of the trials, whereas when asked in English they made sixty seven percent of them, indicating they found the bets more reasonable when thought about in a second language.

The researchers then took the experiment out into the real world, asking volunteers to make bets with very small sums of money given to them and found virtually the same outcome.

Because of these results, the research team believes their original assumptions were correct as it appears that people tend to become more analytical when thinking in a foreign [language](#) and their decision making tends to reflect that.

More information: The Foreign-Language Effect: Thinking in a Foreign Tongue Reduces Decision Biases, *Psychological Science*, Published online before print April 18, 2012, [doi: 10.1177/0956797611432178](#)

Abstract

Would you make the same decisions in a foreign language as you would in your native tongue? It may be intuitive that people would make the same choices regardless of the language they are using, or that the difficulty of using a foreign language would make decisions less systematic. We discovered, however, that the opposite is true: Using a foreign language reduces decision-making biases. Four experiments show that the framing effect disappears when choices are presented in a foreign tongue. Whereas people were risk averse for gains and risk seeking for losses when choices were presented in their native tongue, they were not influenced by this framing manipulation in a foreign language. Two additional experiments show that using a foreign language reduces loss aversion, increasing the acceptance of both hypothetical and real bets with positive expected value. We propose that these effects arise because a foreign language provides greater cognitive and emotional distance than a native tongue does.

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