

Research examines impact of foreign language on risk perception, moral judgment

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Credit: Paul Brennan/public domain

Researchers are only beginning to understand how a foreign language affects decision-making, with early findings coming in areas such as moral judgment and risk assessment.

In a new article in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, scholars from the University of Chicago and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Spain

examine the growing literature on how using a foreign language changes the decisions people make. Their findings could have implications in a number of different fields—ranging from doctors' offices to voting booths.

"About a quarter of physicians and surgeons in the U.S. are foreign-born. If using a foreign language affects risk, a willingness to take risk, it could affect the kind of treatments prescribed," said lead author Sayuri Hayakawa, a UChicago doctoral student in psychology. "It's still the early days. Everything has been done in a lab setting, so we don't want to extrapolate too far, but it is relevant."

Many of the conclusions come from research in the laboratory of Boaz Keysar, professor in psychology and chair of the University's Cognition Program, and Albert Costa, a research professor at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. Both are co-authors of the survey article published in the November issue of Trends.

"This is a country of immigrants," said Keysar, whose native language is Hebrew. "One example is the electorate is comprised of people who don't always have English as a native tongue, and their political decisions could be affected by that. There could be all sorts of effects on society because people are using a foreign language."

Keysar's team is starting an interdisciplinary project focusing on the use of a second language. The work is being funded by a five-year, \$1 million grant from the National Science Foundation. The researchers are working with colleagues at UChicago including Eric Oliver, professor of political science; Ali Hortacsu, the Ralph and Mary Otis Isham Professor in Economics; James Evans, professor of sociology; Howard Nusbaum, professor of psychology; and Greg Norman, assistant professor of psychology. The group plans to use a variety of lenses to explore how language affects choice—not only for an individual but society as a

whole.

The article details how research so far shows that people using a foreign language are more willing to take risks, perceive costs and benefits differently, and make less biased inferences. However one of the most striking effects is in the moral domain.

"It is relatively novel," Hayakawa said. "When you get a moral dilemma delivered in a foreign language, it appears to be more divorced from the emotional system."

The article cites a 2014 study by a group of researchers including Costa, Hayakawa and Keysar that found that when faced with the [moral dilemma](#) of saving the lives of five people at the cost of killing one person, participants using a foreign language were more than twice as likely as those using a native language to sacrifice one life.

One of the leading explanations for the result is the fact that a second language, often learned in a less emotional classroom setting, creates a "psychological distance" for the decision-maker, resulting in individuals being "less sensitive to intention and more sensitive to outcomes when using a foreign tongue."

Hayakawa explained that looking into the effect of language on decision-making began with her research with Keysar. In an article published in 2012 in *Psychological Science*, they discovered through the use of gambling games that subjects were less concerned about taking risk when using a non-[native language](#).

"I knew about the findings that people are less connected emotionally in their foreign language, and also knew about research in decision-making that shows that emotional reactions make us biased," Keysar said.

"Somehow I connected the two and that got me thinking maybe that

would lead people to make decisions differently in a [foreign language](#)."

After reviewing the research done since then, Hayakawa and her co-authors write that further inquiry should include looking into how individuals first acquire a second language and how increased proficiency in a second language might impact results.

More information: Sayuri Hayakawa et al. Using a Foreign Language Changes Our Choices, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tics.2016.08.004](#)

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