

Lying in a foreign language is easier

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Dr. Kristina Suchotzki, since March 2015 researcher at the Department of Psychology I. Credit: Gunnar Bartsch

It is not easy to tell when someone is lying. This is even more difficult when potential liars speak in a language other than their native tongue. Psychologists of the University of Würzburg investigated why that is so.

Most people don't find it more difficult to lie in a foreign [language](#) than in their native tongue. However, things are different when telling the [truth](#): This is clearly more difficult for many people in a foreign language than in their native one. This unexpected conclusion is the result of a study conducted by two psychologists from the University of Würzburg: Kristina Suchotzki, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Psychology I, and Matthias Gamer, Professor of Experimental Clinical Psychology. The two scientists now present their insights in the latest issue of *Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

Their findings could be important for a lot of processes in which the trustworthiness of certain people must be evaluated—for example in asylum procedures. In such situations, reports by non-native speakers tend to be perceived as less believable even though they may be truthful. Their discovery also explains another phenomenon, namely that people communicating in a foreign language are generally perceived as less trustworthy even though this may not be justified.

Scarce research on lying in a foreign language

"In our globalized world, more and more communication takes place in a language that is not the native language of some or all communication partners," says Kristina Suchotzki, describing the background of the study. There are a number of situations in which there are incentives for persons to lie. Imagine, for instance, business negotiations in which one business partner wants to convince the other of the advantage of her product. Or take a police interview in which the murder suspect tries to convince the police of his alibi at the time of the crime.

So far, forensic research has mostly focused on the perceived trustworthiness of people speaking in their native or a non-native language. This research has revealed that observers seem to be more likely to judge statements of native speakers as truthful compared to

statements of non-native speakers. "Only little research, however, has investigated whether people do indeed lie less well in a non-native language," the psychologist says.

Two contradicting theories

There are two research theories to predict differences between deception and truth telling in a native compared to a second language: Research from cognitive load theory suggests that lying is more difficult in a foreign language. "Compared to truth telling, lying is a cognitively more demanding task," Kristina Suchotzki explains. Adding a foreign language imposes an additional cognitive challenge which makes lying even more difficult.

Lying is easier in a foreign language: This should be true according to the emotional distance hypothesis. This assumption is based on the fact that lying is associated with more emotions than staying with the truth. Liars have higher stress levels and are more tense. Research from linguistics, psychology, and psychophysiology shows that compared to speaking in a native language, communicating in a second language is less emotionally arousing. "Based on the emotional distance hypothesis, you would hence expect lying in a foreign language to be less arousing emotionally," Suchotzki says. Accordingly, this reduced emotional arousal would facilitate lying.

Experiments and results

To settle this question, the Würzburg psychologists conducted a number of experiments in which up to 50 test persons had to complete specific tasks. They were asked to answer a number of questions—sometimes truthfully and sometimes deceptively both in their native language and in a foreign language. Some questions were neutral such as "Berlin is/is not

in Germany"; other questions were clearly emotional like "Have you ever taken illegal drugs?" or "Would you work as a nude model?". While the test participants answered the questions, the scientists measured their response time, skin conductance and heart rate.

In a nutshell, the results are as follows:

- Usually, it takes longer to answer emotional [questions](#) than neutral ones.
- Answers in the foreign language also take longer than their native language counterparts.
- Generally, it takes longer to tell a lie than to tell the truth.
- However, the time differences between deceptive and truthful answers are less pronounced in a second language than in the native language.
- The slight difference does not, however, result from giving a faster deceptive response. Rather in a foreign language, telling the truth takes longer than in one's native tongue.
- Whether neutral or emotional question: The time differences between telling the truth and lying are generally smaller in a foreign language.

The scientists believe that these findings reflect the "antagonistic effects of emotional distance and cognitive load". "Based on the cognitive load hypothesis, one would have expected increased effort for truth telling and lying in a foreign language, with the increased effort being more pronounced for lying," Kristina Suchotzki says. The data suggest that the increased cognitive effort is responsible for the prolongation of the truth response in the foreign language.

The reason why this prolongation does not exist or is less pronounced in lying can be explained with the emotional distance hypothesis: The greater emotional distance in a foreign language thus "cancels out" the

higher cognitive load when lying.

More information: Kristina Suchotzki et al, The language of lies: Behavioral and autonomic costs of lying in a native compared to a foreign language., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000437](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000437)

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