

Can an accent influence moral decision-making?

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When people are presented with a moral dilemma in their native language but the words are spoken with a foreign accent, it appears that they make more rational decisions. This was revealed in research that Susanne Brouwer of Radboud University and Alice Foucart of Nebrija University in Madrid carried out among Dutch and Spanish participants. On 13 December, the two researchers published the results of their study in a special issue of *Brain Sciences* that focuses on the "foreign language effect."

In their article, both of the linguists built on earlier [research](#) that showed that language influences moral decision-making. "People make more rational decisions in their [second language](#) than in their native language; we call this the Foreign Language Effect," explains linguist Susanne Brouwer.

Moral dilemma

Brouwer and Foucart wanted to carry out further research to see whether this effect was also prevalent in foreign accents. For this purpose, they presented 435 Spaniards and Dutchmen with two [moral dilemmas](#) in which the participants were given the choice of sacrificing one person in order to save five people. The dilemmas were either uttered by a [native speaker](#) or a speaker with a [foreign accent](#). In the case of the Spaniards, the speaker either had an English or Cameroon accent and in the case of the Dutchmen, the speaker either had an English, Turkish or French accent.

During these experiments, the researchers found that the same effect was prevalent for accents as had previously been found in languages: in other words, there is a Foreign Accent Effect. "There are obviously differences between each accent, but if you look at the combination of accents, you can see that people react more rationally to a dilemma that is uttered in their [native language](#) with a foreign accent than to the same

dilemma when it is uttered without an accent. This means that people are more likely to sacrifice one person in order to save five people when they hear a foreign accent. In other words, a foreign accent is another linguistic context that may influence people's behavior."

The researchers will also be carrying out follow-up research, essentially so that they can strengthen their research results and so that they can gain more insight into explanations for the Foreign Accent Effect. Brouwer claims that the research has now clearly shown that we need to be more aware of the effect that foreign languages and accents have on our moral decision-making.

More information: Alice Foucart et al, Is There a Foreign Accent Effect on Moral Judgment?, *Brain Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/brainsci11121631](https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci11121631)

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