An Analysis of the Language Preference of Chinese-English Bilinguals in Different Situations

Zhang Ran

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Luoshi Road, Hubei, China

zr_zhangran98@163.com

Keywords: Bilinguals; Context; Emotional-Language effect; Foreign-Language effect; Code-switching

Abstract: Based on the Foreign-Language effect, the Emotional-Language effect, emotive function of language and code-switching theory, this paper uses questionnaire method to explore the preference of Chinese-English bilinguals for Chinese or English under the influence of emotional arousal in different situations. The results show that, first, bilinguals who acquire English in a natural language environment are more inclined to speak English than those in a classroom environment. Second, the quantity of Chinese use is greater in negative situations than in positive situations, and English use is greater in negative situations than in negative situations. Third, the reasons involve three dimensions: the frequency and habits of language use, the sociocultural background and the individual's perception of degree to which the emotion he or she wants to express is embodied or detached in the language.

1. Introduction

Recently, research on bilinguals and bilingualism is gradually related to emotional and other psychological dimensions. In the previous studies of bilingualism and emotion, a large number of empirical studies have been carried out on English native speakers, while the number of studies on Chinese native speakers is limited; the culturally environmental factors behind the language of them need to be further explored.

Bilinguals are generally defined as individuals who are able to speak and write in two languages. However, this term also applies to those who are able to think and feel in two languages. bilingual and multilingual individuals are often described as multilayered selves that experience the world through them, the expression and interpretation of emotions would be included in these layers and would play an important role in determining the expression chosen (Panayiotou, 2004)[1]. A number of empirical studies have shown that the use of different languages by bilinguals has profound effects on their psychological, cognitive, emotional and physiological states.

In the decision-making situation, thinking in a foreign language will reduce the decision bias and enable individuals to weigh the advantages and disadvantages more accurately. In the moral judgment situation, bilinguals think in a foreign language will make more utilitarian judgments. The phenomenon that different thinking patterns among different languages bring about diversified results is called Foreign-Language effect, which was first proposed by keysar et al.[2]. At present, the supporting evidence of the Foreign-Language effect mainly focuses on two cognitive fields: decision-making and moral judgment. However, there is no systematic study on the influence of the Foreign-Language effect on emotion.

According to the emotive function of language, the emotive function is one of the most powerful uses of language, because it plays a crucial role in changing the emotional status of an audience for or against someone or something. Besides, some interjections do not usually have a social purpose, but they are important as a verbal response to a person's own feelings. In addition, expressive utterances can consolidate the mutual verbal expression between groups to show solidarity (HU Zhuang-lin, 2006)[3]. The emotive function of language mainly affects the speech perception of the listener through the use of words, intonation, tone etc., which can convey emotion and emotional signals,

cause and change the emotional experience of the listener (or the speaker himself).

In speech production, the difference of the speaker's psychological feelings in different languages can be explained by the Emotion-Language effect. The Emotional-Language effect refers to the phenomenon that the intensity of emotion caused by using a foreign language is less than that caused by using the native language (ZHANG Shi-rong&HU Ping, 2017)[4]. The most common category of explanations is that emotional resonances in the discourse context accrue to utterances because human memory is inherently associative (Caldwell-Harris&Catherine, 2015)[5]. That is to say, this kind of language acquired through embodied cognition will mobilize relevant emotional information in memory to trigger emotional experience in the future speech production process.

Code is used by sociolinguists to refer to language or any variety of language. According to the definition of code switching, it can be understood as the phenomenon that the speaker changes the language or dialect into another one in speech or conversation (QU Jing&SUN Furong, 2007)[6]. From a functional perspective, code switching can be divided into discourse related transformation and participant related transformation (Auer, 1990)[7]. From the perspective of psycholinguistics, the factors that trigger code-switching can be divided into external factors and internal factors (Clyne (1967,1972))[8,9]. External factors include situation, social environment and interpersonal relationship, while internal factors include motivation, emotional distance between two speakers and the speaker's language habit. As a strategy and means of language communication, code-switching embraces multiple factors including language, culture, society, psychology and cognition. Among them, the psycholinguistic study of code-switching can help us understand the thinking process of bilinguals, so as to reveal the cognitive process of language users to this language phenomenon (HE Zi-ran, YU Guo-dong, 2001)[10]. However, due to the complexity of human cognitive processes and the difficulty of its research at present, there are few achievements in code-switching psycholinguistics, the field is still a new one with a lot of room for exploration.

2. Research design

2.1 Hypothesis

In the process of language production, bilinguals can generate choice preferences for native or foreign languages according to the emotional responses activated by different contexts. The reasons for preferences may be related to the language acquisition context, language usage frequency and habits, social and cultural background, expression content and emotions.

2.2 Participants

This study focuses on Chinese-English bilinguals. The participants were 229 students from universities in Wuhan, including 104 English majors, 125 non-English majors, 54 males and 175 females. Ages 18 to 25. Among them, 177 have passed cet-4, 99 have passed cet-6, 52 have passed cet-4 and 10 have passed cet-8. The duration of English study is nine years or more. So the participants can be considered as bilinguals.

2.3 Methodology

This study adopts anonymous questionnaire, which is divided into three parts: the first part is personal information, the second part is English proficiency and English acquisition environment, and the third part is the reasons of language preference in different situations.

The second part of the English Proficiency Survey is based on the standards of CET and TEM and the duration of English study. The design of English situation refers to the two situations (natural language environment and classroom language environment) divided by Dewale[11] in the study of the Foreign-Language effect. According to the proportion of two situations involved in the process of input and output, participants are divided into natural language environment group and Classroom Language Environment Group.

The third part is the main problem of this research. The question pattern is: Chinese-English bilinguals are instructed to choose their preferred language between Chinese and English after being

set in different emotional-arousal situations. Referring to the classification criteria of Circumplex theory of affect (Waston and Tellegen, 1985)[12] and considering other standards of emotion classification, for example, complex emotions, positive and negative emotions, we chose ten situations to analyse: when expressing love, praise, anger, fear, apology, gratitude and talking about taboo topics. At the same time, in order to explore the reasons behind bilinguals' language preference, we demanded subjects to choose among the four given reasons and have an open choice to give other reasons. The four main reasons involve three dimensions: (1) frequency and habit of language use, (2) sociocultural background and (3) the individual's perception of the degree to which the emotion he or she wants to express is embodied or detached in the language.

2.4 Tools

SPSS23.0 was used to analyze the data. The main considerations are central tendency, discrete tendency and correlation.

3. Results and analysis

3.1 Language acquisition environment

The t-test was applied to evaluate the effect of language acquisition environment(natural language environment group and classroom language environment group) on the English speaking preference. The descriptive statistics and result are shown in Table 1and Table 2.

Table 1 Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
English use	A	89	3.663	1.9940	.2114
	B	89	3.011	1.7869	.1894

Table 2 Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
English use	Equal variances assumed	1.796	.182	2.296	176	.023	.6517	.2838	.0916	1.2118
	Equal variances not assumed			2.296	173.926	.023	.6517	.2838	.0915	1.2119

It was found that F=1.796, P (sig.) =0.182>0.05, and t=2.296, P=0.023. This demonstrates that there was statistically significant difference of English speaking preference between the two groups. This result provides empirical support for Chinese-English bilinguals' hypothesis that the environment of foreign language acquisition is a key factor affecting the Foreign-Language effect.

This is because most bilinguals acquire L2 in a classroom setting where the lack of an immersion context limits the emotional associative memory between language and the corresponding situation. Therefore, L2 is more likely to be used as pure text symbols and information transmission tools without emotional resonance with language. On the contrary, mother tongue is a language that people acquire through embodied cognition in daily situations, which is more perceptive than foreign language in understanding, cognition and emotional experience. Consequently, the foundation of Foreign-Language effect lies in the difference of bilinguals' psychological distance between their native language and foreign language. This is why, in everyday life, people feel embarrassed to express their love in their mother tongue; while it is easier to express it in a foreign language.

3.2 Language emotional distance and emotional expression

According to whether the emotion aroused by the situation is positive or negative, ten given situations were divided into positive emotional arousal group and negative emotional arousal group. The result shows that (1) Chinese is used far more than English in two groups. (2) The quantity of Chinese use in the negative emotional arousal group is larger than the positive emotional arousal group. (3) The quantity of English use in the positive emotional arousal group is larger than in the negative emotional arousal group. The hypothesis proposed by Sheikh and Titone in 2015 was tested by eye tracking methodology: Negative emotions are enhanced in the mother tongue, while positive emotions are enhanced (or more accessible) in the foreign language. They reasoned that in a later-learned language, negative words do not have extensive opportunities for emotional grounding because adult social interactions have a positivity bias. Therefore, emotional distance in a foreign language may be restricted to negative words (Sheikh, Titone, 2015) [13]. As a result, in terms of L2, bilinguals are inclined to experience more intensive feelings when expressing positive words than negative words. The results show that the Emotional-Language effect can dispel the emotional intensity of some negative words in foreign language expressions, but correspondingly, the emotive function of language can be also weakened, that is, the intensity of the speaker's emotional experience through language communication or catharsis is reduced. In that case, bilinguals are more likely to use Chinese when strong negative emotions are desired to be expressed or alleviated.

3.3 Reasons for language preference

3.3.1 Frequency and habit of language use

Basic habitual English vocabulary is preferred by bilinguals in situations involving low emotional intensity. Words such as "thanks" and "sorry" have become colloquial expressions for bilinguals to express gratitude or apology without being too formal.

3.3.2 Sociocultural context

The sociocultural context in which bilinguals live has an important influence on language choice. After totaling the quantity of L1 and L2 used in all given situations, it turns out that Chinese, as the dominant language, shows a higher frequency of language use. It would be really interesting though when the context is created in an English-speaking country where a large number of Chinese-English bilinguals exist in the speech community. In this complex situation, 83.41% of the bilinguals show a preference for English, which is higher than the proportion of their Chinese preference in the situation where they are set in a Chinese-speaking context (72.58%). The linguistic preference of bilinguals shows the choice between social environment factors and the psychological self-identification as well as a sense of belonging, which are relevant to code-switching on discourse-related alternation and participant-related alternation. The analysis shows that under the influence of the foreign language environment, the bilinguals attempt to construct their identity by speaking the foreign language in order to integrate into the sociocultural environment. Their psychological motivation embodies the principle in Chinese culture that the collectivism values are dominant and Individual interests subordinate to collective interests.

3.3.3 Personal perception of the degree to which the emotion they want to express is embodied or detached from the language

In all given emotional-arousal situations, the reason why subjects choose to speak English is the highest proportion of "easy to say", the reason for choosing to speak Chinese is that it is easier to "express feelings". These two comparisons show that bilinguals have a higher degree of detachment and a further psychological distance from English; while a higher degree of embodiment and a closer psychological distance from Chinese. When the speaker wants to convey stronger emotions, they are more inclined to use their mother tongue, such as expressing love (61.14%), formally apologizing (88.65%) and formally thanking (84.28%).

4. Conclusion

Based on the Foreign-Language effect, the Emotional-Language effect, the emotive function of language and the code-switching, this study investigates the language use preferences of Chinese-English bilinguals in different situations. It verifies that foreign language acquisition environment is the key factor influencing Foreign-Language effect and that positive emotions or negative emotions aroused in different situations can influence bilingual choice. Besides, the reasons behind Chinese-English bilinguals' language preference are analyzed from their perspectives. Four main relevant theories show their universality in the empirical study while some particularity appears under the under the Chinese social and cultural background. As for the practical implications, exploring the relationship between languages and emotions will bring enlightenment to situational approach and embodied approach in foreign language teaching. However, the lack of a unified method and standard for the measurement of subjective psychological dimensions such as emotions and feelings in academic circles as well as the particularities and differences of the personal subjective psychological experience, language habits and personality traits of bilinguals are liable to create error.

In the future research of psycholinguistics, it will be a new exploration space to further study the cause and mechanism of the Emotional-Language effect and the role of sociocultural factor as a moderating variable.

References

[1] Alexia Panayiotou. Switching Codes, Switching Code: Bilinguals' Emotional Responses in English and Greek[J]. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,2004,25(2-3).

[2] Keysar Boaz, Hayakawa Sayuri L, An Sun Gyu. The foreign-language effect: thinking in a foreign tongue reduces decision biases. [J]. Psychological science,2012,23(6).

[3] HU Zhuang-lin, Linguistics: A Course of Book[M]. third ed. Beijing University, Beijing, 2006.

[4] Zhang Shirong, Hu Ping. Foreign language effect: evidence, mechanism and prospect [J]. Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology, 2017,25 (01): 45-49.

[5] Caldwell-Harris, Catherine L. Emotionality Differences Between a Native and Foreign Language: Implications for Everyday Life[J]. Current directions in psychological science: a journal of the American Psychological Society,2015,24(3):214-219.

[6] Qu Jing, Sun Furong. Code-switching in English Teaching [J]. Modern Educational Science, 2007 (05): 148-150.

[7] Auer, P. ed. Code-switching in conversation: Language, interaction and identity. [M]. London and New York: Routledge,1998

[8] Michael Clyne, Transference and triggering. [M]. The Hague, 1967.

[9] Michael Clyne, Perspectives on language contact, based on a study of German in Australia[M]. Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1972

[10] He Ziran, Yu Guodong. Review on the study of code conversion [J]. Modern Foreign Languages, 2001 (01): 85-95.

[11] Dewaele J. Emotions in multiple languages. [M]. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

[12] Jonathan Posner, James A. Russell, and Bradley S. Peterson. The circumplex model of affect: An integrative approach to affective neuroscience, cognitive development, and psychopathology. [J]. Dev Psychopathol, 2005,17(3): 715–734.

[13] Sheikh Naveed A, Titone Debra. The embodiment of emotional words in a second language: An eye-movement study. [J]. Cognition & emotion, 2016,30(3).