

Foreign language effect in affect rich decisions: differences between anticipated, anticipatory and experienced emotions

Imagine that you have the opportunity to choose the solution how to deal with the migrant crisis in European Union. You can choose to open the borders to help people reaching Europe safely and save many lives, or alternatively, just like Hungary, decide to block migrants' route with a razor-wire fence to protect your citizens against possible occurrence of terrorists. No matter what is your decision, your preferences should be the same, regardless of whether you decided in your native language or in the foreign language. Surprisingly, our choices differ depending on the used language. Growing literature demonstrates that presenting a problem in a foreign, rather than in the native language, may change our decisions. This phenomenon is labeled as the foreign language effect.

The most plausible explanation of the foreign language effect is, that using a foreign language attenuates the emotional reactions elicited by a decision problem. This seems to be crucial due to the fact that decision making is very often based on emotions and heuristics that lead to the disturbance of rational decision making. Susceptibility to biases is usually connected with emotional reactions – the higher emotional reactions the greater the decision bias. And no matter we want it or not, we include emotions in decision-making process all the time. Before choosing a specific option, we make predictions about the future emotions and anticipate how obtaining an outcome will make us feel. These predictions can easily influence our choices. We simply ask ourselves “How do/will I feel about it?” and treat this as an instructive decision predictor.

Returning to the issue of decision-making in a foreign language: note, that communicating and decision-making in a foreign language in the modern world is a common activity at both individual level, business, and international organizations, such as UN, NATO or EU. So, if using a foreign language attenuates emotional reactions what in turn can influence decision-making, it might have a great impact on millions of decisions that are made at every single day. Including those on the world's highest level.

Despite that growing body of evidence shows that using a foreign language shapes our choices, previous studies made only a general conclusion about its attenuating impact on emotional reactions (i.e. that using a foreign language lowers the emotional reaction and prompts cooler mindset, what in turn results with more rational decisions). In my project, I would like to extend previous findings and to explore if and how the foreign language effect influences decision making under a broad spectrum of emotional reactions. A better understanding of how using a foreign language influences decision process might give knowledge not only about the boundaries of the foreign language effect but also about the impact of affective processing on decision making in general. More precisely, I would like to examine the foreign language effect under three most frequently analyzed and most impactful categories of emotions in the domain of decision making: (1) anticipated, (2) anticipatory and (3) experienced emotions.