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Article

‘Christ fucking shit merde!’
Language preferences for swearing among maximally proficient multilinguals

Jean-Marc Dewaele

Abstract

The present study investigates language preferences for swearing among two groups of multilinguals. The first group consisted of 386 adult multilinguals who filled out the Bilingualism and Emotion web based questionnaire (BEQ, Dewaele and Pavlenko, 2001–2003) and had declared that they were maximally proficient in their L1 and L2 and used both languages constantly. The second group consisted of 20 multilinguals with a similar sociobiographical profile who were interviewed about their language choice for the communication of emotion. A statistical analysis of the quantitative data revealed that despite similar levels of self-perceived proficiency and frequency of use in the L1 and L2, the L1 was used significantly more for swearing and L1 swearwords were perceived to have a stronger emotional resonance. An analysis of the quantitative data from the BEQ and the interview data confirmed the findings of the quantitative analysis while adding rich detail about the difficulties in deciding which language to choose for swearing.

KEYWORDS: SWEARING; EMOTIONAL STRENGTH; L2 USER; INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS

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1 Introduction

Nancy Huston, the Canadian author who has been living in France for several decades, was asked by a journalist on the radio (France Inter) on 30/09/2006 what language she would prefer to express sudden anger in, she answers that she would prefer English, her L1. The journalist then asks her to imagine what exactly she would say: she utters three strong swearwords in English, followed by a high frequency swearword in French: 'merde' ('shit'). The sudden occurrence of 'merde' seems to have taken her by surprise:

N: Quand j'ai véritablement besoin d'exprimer une émotion forte, comme comme la peur, s'il y a un chauffard qui qui manque m'écraser dans la rue ou si je laisse tomber un marteau sur mon pied, je vais jurer en anglais.
'If I really need to express a strong emotion, like anxiety, if a bad driver almost runs me over in the street or if I drop a hammer on my foot, I swear in English.

J: Vous dites quoi?
'What do you say'?

N: Je dis Christ fucking shit merde!
'I say *Christ fucking shit merde*!'

N: Ah je peux ajouter *merde*!
'Ah, I can add *merde*!

J: Hahaha, vous êtes bilingue mais vous xxx?!
'Haha, you're bilingual but you xxx?!'

N: Le *merde* a dû faire le voyage!
'The *merde* must have traveled over'

(France Inter. N: Nancy Huston; J: Journalist)
Dewaele (2010:189)

Nancy Huston's surprise at the presence of 'merde' in her inventory of swearwords forces her to revise her previous statement that English is her preferred language for expressing strong emotions. The mere presence of 'merde' reminds her that language preferences can shift, often escaping conscious attention, and resulting from a total immersion in French language and culture.

Jay (2009:155) compares swearing to using the horn on one's car, which can be used to signify a number of emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, joy, surprise). He points out that our control over swearwords ranges from the reflective forms (e.g., an obscene joke) to the spontaneous forms over which we seem to have little control (e.g., habitual epithets).

Nancy Huston's string of swearwords probably belong to the latter category as she reflects on what she thinks she would produce in a spontaneous outburst. Van Lancker and Cummings (1999:99) observe that 'in periods of anger, frustration, and other intense emotional situations where limbic structures are activated and limbic vocalizations may be facilitated'. These outbursts are quite

different in nature from speech routines or habituated verbal production. We have argued that this distinction is potentially important for multilinguals as speech routines in a particular language are the result of a speaker's conscious decision to use that language, while unplanned limbic vocalizations may escape the speaker's conscious control and be uttered in a different language than that used in the rest of the interaction (Dewaele, 2004a:86).

In the present paper, we propose to investigate the matter raised by the anecdote on Nancy Huston's sudden multilingual swearing in a more systematic way. Why is it that Nancy Huston, who has been immersed in French language and culture for decades, and has published more books in French than in English, still produces more swearwords in English than in French in her imagined spontaneous outburst? (We do not know how Nancy Huston would have reacted had she really been angry or frustrated.) In other words, do swearwords in the L1 retain a special status and power which make them more likely to be used by the multilingual? Finally, adopting an emic perspective, we want to investigate multilinguals' metapragmatic comments in order to throw light on the issue of language choice for swearing.

The paper is organized as follows: we will start by presenting a short literature review on multilingual swearing. After that, we will present the rationale for the present investigation. The methodology will be explained in the following section. We will then present the results of the quantitative analyses and look at the participants' metapragmatic comments on their swearing behavior. The patterns that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative analyses will be discussed in the following section. Finally, a few tentative conclusions will be presented.

2 Literature review

Swearwords have been defined as multifunctional, pragmatic units which assume, in addition to the expression of emotional attitudes, various discourse functions (Dewaele, 2004b; Jay, 2000). Swearwords can help coordinate discourse among interlocutors, organizing the interaction and structuring of verbal exchange (Drescher, 2000). Swearwords can also fulfill the function of discourse and identity markers. Indeed, swearwords signal in-group membership and they establish boundaries and local social norms for language use (Drescher, 2000; Rayson, Leech and Hodges, 1997; Stenstrom, 1995).

Researchers in various disciplines have looked at aspects of multilingual swearing. Although there is very little research on swearing in interlanguage pragmatics, excellent research has been carried out in the psychological-pragmatic approach (Jay, 2000; Jay and Janschewitz, 2008), in the cognitive psychological approach (Harris, Ayçiçeği and Gleason, 2003; Harris, Gleason and Ayçiçeği, 2006) and in more general applied linguistic approach (Dewaele, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2010, 2011).

Jay and Janschewitz (2008:267) point out that 'The main purpose of swearing is to express emotions, especially anger and frustration. Swear words are well suited to express emotion as their primary meanings are connotative'. The authors point to the variability of the emotional impact of swearing, as it is linked to a speaker's 'experience with a culture and its language conventions' (p. 267).

The authors looked at variation in offensiveness ratings and likelihood of use of taboo words among 68 native speakers (NS) of American English and 53 non-native speakers (NNS), who were all students at the University of California in Los Angeles. The researchers defined offensiveness as the 'basis for determining the extent to which speech is rude or impolite' (p. 268). The results showed that appropriateness of swearing depends strongly on the general context, on the relationship between speaker and listener in terms of status, on the social-physical context (public or private location), and on the specific word used. A gender effect emerged among the NS with females providing higher offensiveness ratings than males. However, no significant gender difference emerged among the NNS (p. 283). The differences between offensiveness or likelihood ratings of NS and NNS) were non significant, which could linked to the fact that the NNS were highly fluent in English, having spent an average of 11 years in the US, and had been sufficiently exposed to swearing in the university context. An interesting effect of age of onset of acquisition emerged in the NNS group, with late learners (who started at age 12 and above) providing significantly higher average offensiveness ratings (p. 283).

Cognitive psychologist Cathy Caldwell-Harris and her colleagues have carried out some ground-breaking work on physiological responses to swearwords and taboo words in the L1 and L2 of bilinguals. Using lie-detector technology, Harris, Ayçiçeği and Gleason (2003) investigated skin conductance responses in Turkish-L1 compared to English-L2 of 32 Turkish-English bilingual speakers who were students at Boston University. Physiological reactions to taboo words presented auditorily in the L1 Turkish were found to be much stronger than their translation equivalents in the L2 English.

In a follow-up study, Harris (2004) checked whether physiological responses remain stronger in the L1 of bilinguals even if it is the weaker language. She compared the adult children of Latin American immigrants in the US, for whom English was the L2 but had become the dominant language, with bilinguals who had arrived in the US from Latin America more recently. She found that only the recently arrived immigrants reacted more strongly to reprimands in L1 Spanish. The first group displayed similar patterns of electrodermal responses in English and Spanish. Words and expressions of languages learnt in childhood thus elicited comparable physiological reactions. The superior emotionality of the dominant L1, which was acquired in childhood, could be linked to 'a

mechanism independent of age, namely the emotional contexts of learning hypothesis; where language is experienced as emotional when it is acquired and used in an emotional context' (pp. 276–277).

A series of further studies with Turkish-English bilinguals living in Istanbul confirmed the original finding that emotional expressions presented in an L1 elicited higher skin conductance responses than comparable phrases in the L2 (Caldwell-Harris and Ayçiçeği-Dinn, 2009). Emotional words have been found to be better recalled than neutral words in psycholinguistic experiments. This emotion memory effect emerged among 59 Turkish-English students from Istanbul university (Ayçiçeği-Dinn and Caldwell-Harris, 2009). Overall emotion-memory effects were similar in the L1 and L2, with reprimands having the highest recall, followed by taboo words, positive words, negative words and finally neutral words.

A number of studies have investigated self-reported language preferences for swearing of 1039 adult multilinguals, using a part of the corpus collected through the BEQ, and their perception of the emotional force of swearwords in their different language (Dewaele, 2004a, 2004b).

The general pattern is that multilinguals prefer to swear in their dominant language, which is typically their L1. Foreign languages that had only been learnt through classroom instruction were less likely to be used for swearing. Also participants who had started learning a foreign language later were less likely to use the language for swearing. One of the strongest correlations emerged between general frequency of use of a language and the use of that language for swearing (a significant effect in the L2, L3, L4 and L5). This could be explained by the fact that 'a frequent user of a language develops the correct perception of the emotional force of swearwords and may at some point feel he/she is close enough to the in-group to dare using these powerful words' (Dewaele, 2004a:102). Language choice for swearing was unaffected by participants' gender and education level. Finally, frequency of language choice for swearing was positively correlated with perceived emotional force of swearwords in that language.

The following study on the same corpus focused on individual variation in perceived emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in the multilinguals' different languages (Dewaele, 2004b). A similar pattern emerged, with participants judging the emotional force of swearwords to be significantly higher in languages acquired early and gradually lower in languages learned later in life. This pattern confirms much of the earlier research, namely that the L1 is typically perceived to be more emotional than later languages (cf. Dewaele and Pavlenko, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002, 2005, 2008; Harris, Ayçiçeği and Gleason, 2003). Participants who had learned their language(s) only through classroom instruction gave lower ratings on emotional force of swearwords in that language than languages which had been learned in a naturalistic – or mixed –

instructional context. Unsurprisingly, self-rated proficiency in a language and general frequency of use of that language was positively linked to perception of emotional force of swearwords. An early onset of acquisition was linked to a stronger perception of emotional force of swearwords in the L2, but not in later languages. Participants' observations confirmed the general preference for swearing in the L1. However, a number of participants preferred using swearwords in a foreign language, with a lower emotional resonance, because it allowed them to escape some social constraints.

A further study on the same corpus looked specifically at the effect of context of acquisition on the self-reported use and perceived emotional force of swearwords (Dewaele, 2005b). Although the context of acquisition effect was significant for both dependent variables, it was stronger for self-reported language choice for use of swearwords than for perception of their emotional force.

Dewaele (2010) presents an overview of variation patterns in language choice for the communication of emotions, including self-reported code-switching (CS) frequency, using the data from the full 1500 participants in the BEQ database. These data were complemented by more qualitative data drawn from interviews from with 20 UK-based multilinguals that will also be used in the present study. Statistical analysis revealed that self-reported CS was significantly more frequent when the topic of the conversation was rather than mere personal or neutral topics. Self-reported CS was also significantly more frequent with familiar interlocutors rather than with less well-known with interlocutors or strangers. Referring to Grosjean's theory of language modes, it was suggested that a sudden increase in emotional arousal could force a speaker out of a monolingual mode into a bilingual or trilingual language mode. The sudden burst of emotion might loosen the inhibition of the languages in the background. The interview data showed that code-switching in situations where strong emotion had to be expressed typically went from the foreign language to the L1.

A minority of participants went against this general trend, namely those of Asian and Arab origin who reported code-switching towards the foreign language, typically to express an emotion that was considered inappropriate in their L1 culture.

3 Research questions

We will investigate the following research questions:

1) Does self-perceived native-like oral proficiency in L2 and daily use of L2 entail that language preference for swearing and perception of emotional strength of swearwords in the L2 will be similar to that of the L1?
2) What reasons do multilinguals give for differences in their perception of emotional strength of swearwords and their language choice for swearing?

4 Hypotheses

Multilinguals who feel equally proficient in their oral first (L1) and second language (L2)[1], who use the L1 and L2 daily,

1) will use the L2 less frequently for swearing,
2) will perceive swearwords in the L2 to be less 'emotional'.

5 Methodology

5.1 The research instrument

The BEQ (Dewaele and Pavlenko, 2001–2003) generated a rich database covering many aspects of multilingual communication. The BEQ had been put on a dedicated Web page, which was advertised through several listservs, through targeted emails to multilingual colleagues and their students in academic institutions, through appeals in translators' magazines, and through informal contacts around the world. It remained online between 2001 and 2003.

The BEQ contained questions relating to participants' sociobiographical and linguistic background. The second part of the BEQ consisted of Likert-type questions on language choice for the expression of various emotions with various interlocutors, on code-switching behaviour in inner and articulated speech, on the use and perception of swearwords, on attitudes towards the different languages and, finally on communicative language anxiety in the different languages. The last part of the BEQ presented open-ended questions which asked about the communication of emotion. The complete BEQ has been incorporated as an appendix in Pavlenko (2005:247–256) and is discussed in detail in Dewaele (2010).

5.2 Participants

The first group consisted of 386 multilinguals (288 females, 98 males) contributed to the BEQ database used in the present study. The participants spoke a total of 42 different L1s. Anglophone native speakers represent the largest group (n = 86), followed by native speakers of Spanish (n = 57), French (n = 49), German (n = 37), Catalan (n = 22), Dutch = 21), Italian (n = 17), Russian (n = 12), Afrikaans (n = 12)… The remaining participants share another 57 languages. The participants spoke a total of 31 different L2s. The most frequent L2 is English (n = 86), followed by French (n = 49), Spanish (n = 57) and German (n = 37). The L2 was defined as the second language to have been acquired and the age of onset of acquisition ranged from age 1 to age 41. Mean

age of onset was 7.9 yrs with a SD of 6.7 yrs. Participants were generally highly educated with 57 having a high school diploma, 109 a Bachelor's degree, 124 a Master's degree, and 96 a doctoral degree. The mean age was 35 years.

The second group of participants in the present study consisted of 20 fluent multilinguals (12 females, 8 males) who filled out the BEQ before being interviewed by a research assistant, Benedetta Bassetti, on the topics covered by the BEQ. The aim of these interviews was to establish language choices for swearing in specific situations and also specific swearwords, something that the BEQ did not inquire about. The interviews were transcribed and amounted to 115,000 words (including the interviewer's questions and comments). This group of participants has a similar socio-demographic make-up as the participants in the BEQ. Age ranges from 23 yrs to 65 yrs, mean age is 36. One participant had a high-school degree, 5 a BA, 3 an MA and 7 a PhD. There were 5 bilinguals, 7 trilinguals, 4 quadrilinguals, 3 pentalinguals and one sextalingual. Participants were native speakers of Italian (n = 3), German (n = 3), Japanese (n = 3), Arabic (n = 2), English (n = 2), Greek (n = 2), Catalan (n = 1), French (n = 1), Kurdish (n = 1), Serbian (n = 1), and Taiwanese (n = 1).

All participants could be defined as multiple language users, with different levels of proficiency in their different languages.

5.3 The dependent variables in the BEQ

The quantitative analysis is based on the scores (five-point Likert scales) provided in response to the following two questions (and repeated for all known languages):

1) *If you swear in general, what language do you typically swear in?* Possible answers on a 5-point Likert scales included: never = 1, rarely = 2, sometimes = 3, frequently = 4, all the time = 5.

2) *Do swear and taboo words in your different languages have the same emotional weight for you?* Please circle the appropriate answer. Possible answers on a 5-point Likert scales included: 1 = does not feel strong, 2 = little, 3 = fairly, 4 = strong, 5 = very strong.

5.4 The distribution of the dependent variables

A series of one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed that the values for self-reported language choice for swearing and values of perceived emotional strength of swearwords are not normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z-values vary between 4.37 and 6.16, all significant at $p < .0001$). The non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests were therefore used instead of t-tests.

6 Results

6.1 Comparison of self-reported language choice for swearing in the L1 and L2

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed a signifi cant diff erence between self-reported language choice for swearing in the L1 and the L2 ($Z = -4.98$, $p < .0001$). Figure 1 shows that the mean value for frequency of swearing in the L1 is much higher than in the L2.

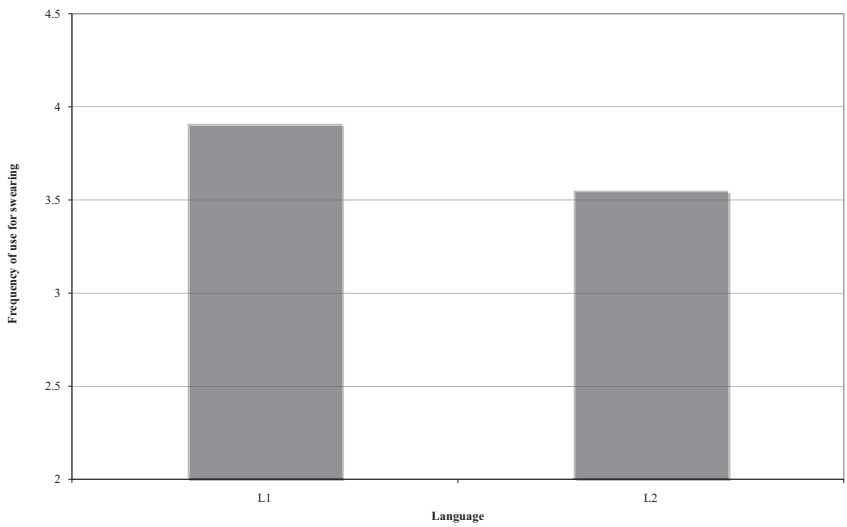

Figure 1: Self-reported language choice for swearing in the L1 and L2

This result confirms patterns uncovered in the whole BEQ database, namely a clear preference for swearing in languages acquired earlier in the life (L1, L2) compared to languages acquired later (Dewaele, 2004a, 2005).

6.2 Comparison of self-reported perception of emotional strength of swearwords in the L1 and L2

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed a significant difference between frequency of swearing in the L1 and the L2 ($Z = -8.09$, $p < .0001$). Figure 2 shows that the mean value for perceived emotional strength of swearwords in the L1 group is much higher than in the L2 group.

This result also reflects the pattern that emerged in the whole BEQ database, namely a perception that the emotional strength of swearwords was superior in the first languages that had been acquired, compared to languages acquired later (Dewaele, 2004b).

To sum up, even highly proficient and frequent users of the L2 do not feel in the same way about L2 swearwords as they do about their L1 equivalents, and they prefer swearing in the L1.

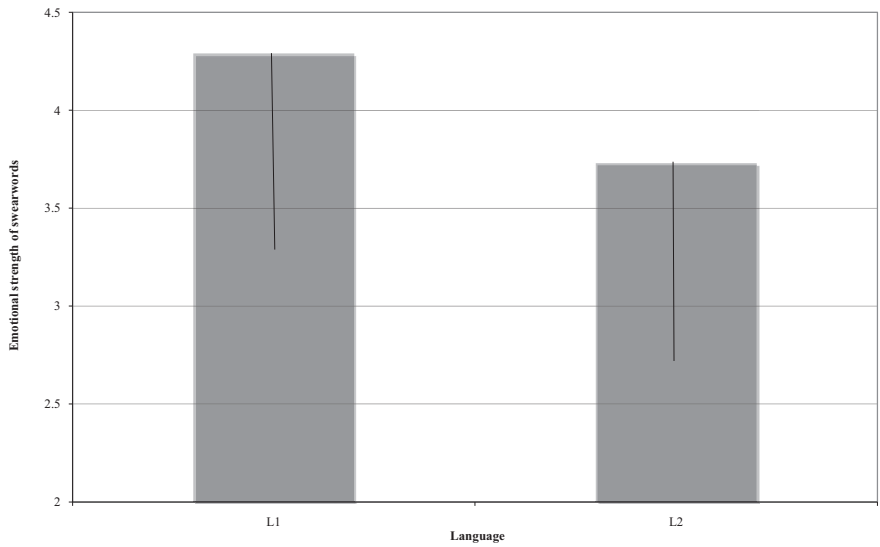

Figure 2: Self-reported perception of emotional strength of swearwords in the L1 and L2

6.3 Narratives from the UK-based participants

We calculated the language preferences for swearing among the participants. One of the striking fi ndings is that perceived emotionality of swearwords in a language is quite independent from actual use of swearwords in that language. Most participants feel that swearwords are most powerful in their L1, yet only one reported using the L1 to swear at others and only 4 used it for swearing when they are alone (see Table 1). Th e interviewer's questions about the reasons for their perception and language choices yield interesting metalinguistic comments. Most feel that it is more acceptable to swear in a foreign language (which is typically English, the language in which they live and work). Some argue that swearwords in a foreign language are not as bad and more fun than in the L1, others feel that cultural constraints prohibit the use of swearwords in the L1, and one participant extended this prohibition to all languages. Th ose who have overcome the cultural constraint on swearing typically report that they use euphemisms like 'sugar' and 'shoot' in English.

Table 1: Preferred language for swearing

Preferred language	Swearing alone	Swearing to others
L1	4	1
L1+LX	11	12
LX	2	6
No swearing	3	1

Theodora (Greek L1, English L2, German L3) uses Greek with her family and English with her colleagues and students. She feels equally fluent in both languages and uses them constantly.[2]

T: When I say a swearword in English it won't feel as strong as I say it in Greek, so I could say the worst swearing swearwords in English and it just wouldn't feel, you know it wouldn't feel that strong in me as it would feel to an English person, 'cos it has happened to me for example, someone taught me a very bad English word, and you know I just kept saying it as a joke, because it just doesn't mean anything to me you know, it's it's it's a swearword you know, it's just another foreign word. Of course after some time I lived in England I realized you know that you don't use these words very often, you use it in very specific objects, but still you know if someone provokes me I I have no problems saying this word. Now in Greek there are some words which are very very bad swearwords, but even though I know them I would never ever use them, because I know that they are very very offensive.

Andrew (English L1, French L2, Spanish L3) feels dominant in both English and French, yet his favorite swearword is the Spanish equivalent of 'fuck':

A: Yeah, I forgot, I swear in Spanish.
B: You swear in Spanish, ok, so can you explain me why? [laughs]
A: I don't know! (…) I learnt Spanish at school, so it's not it's not a language I have particularly deep emotional associations with, I never really get out with any Spanish, I don't have any close Spanish friends, I'm not interested in Spanish cinema, but since my trip to Spain when I was 16 I've always used used the word 'joder' to swear if I fall over, I would often rather than say 'fuck' for example I would say 'joder'.
B: Ok.
A: I don't know why it stuck.
B: You never lived there?
A: Never lived there, it's only I like that word.
B: Ok.
A: And and it just, it is stuck.
B: Ok, but no other words?
A: No other words no.

B: Only that one. Ok, so which other languages do you use for swearing?
A: French and English.
B: Both of them?
A: Yeah.
B: Any preferences?
A: Ahm… I like swearing in all languages.
B: Ok [laughs]
A: [laughs] don't know why, but I don't use Spanish for anything except for swearing. (...)
B: OK, so when you hear a swearword in French and in English, do they have the same emotional weight, or is one stronger?
A: No, English is, I feel much more that English swearing is much more taboo and much more, you know, certainly English swearwords still produce a frisson you know of transgression, whereas French swearwords don't, I don't I don't know why.

Dewaele (2010:115–116)

A number of participants mention the specific sociocultural constraints weighing on the use of their L1 swearwords. For some, like Tomomi (Japanese L1, English L2, Italian L3, Spanish L4, married to an Italian, dominant in Japanese and living in the UK for 4 years), it means she does not swear in any language:

B: Do you swear?
T: I don't.
B: No, never, in any language?
T: No, in Japanese we don't really have swearword, and English swearword I don't like it, especially you know with the kids, they can get so easily, so I don't have this habit to use swearword so I don't.
B: Have you learnt any Italian swearwords?
T: I know it because you know some people around me say that, but I don't, I don't use any.

Dewaele (2010:122)

Other participants report that swearing is taboo in their L1 culture, but they might use mild swearwords in English. This is the case of Layla (Arabic L1, English L2) who feels dominant in both languages and has lived for 5 years in English-speaking countries.

L: Speaking of swearing, (….) I never swear in Arabic, never never at all, because I know exactly what it means, because it's my language anyway, and how offensive it would be to swear, but in English because it's not my native language, sometimes I use some swearwords, but I don't really aware I'm not really aware of how immense those words. One of the words that sometimes I use is 'bloody', 'bloody rude' you know, this is the only swearword I use.
B: The only one? I see.
L: Yeah. Sometimes I use another one, you want to know what, you want to hear what kind of words I use?
B: Yes.

L: Sometimes I say 'shit'.
B: Ok, right.
L: But it's just because I know many, many of my friends they keep using it, and I'm not really aware of how immense and strong this word, because it's not my native language so I feel like, I feel much more confident in swearing in English than Arabic.
B: But if you're speaking Arabic and you are in a situation where you would normally use the s-word in English, what do you say in Arabic?
L: I don't, I don't because it's just, I was raised up in, my family never swear, never sweared never at all, and I never got used to it, and basically it's part of my, not only how I raised, it's also part of my beliefs that I don't like to swear because I think it's uncivilized, it's uncivilized way of speaking, and I feel that I can use any, although sometimes you really really feel you'd like to do it, but I don't in Arabic, I never never say any swearword in Arabic, I never really honestly.

Dewaele (2010:123)

Michelle (Taiwanese L1, Mandarin L2, English L3) has lived in the UK for 17 years and feels very fluent in English. She reports that despite the fact that Chinese sociocultural norms forbid her from swearing, she does use mild English swearwords with her Chinese friends in London:

B: Do use ever use Chinese with your husband?
Mi: No! not even I swear or, because I don't swear in Chinese you see.
B: I see yeah.
Mi: It's not because I'm good, it's just because education, you see ehm it's different, ehm, English swearing is different from Chinese swearing. English swearing is quite common to even, you know, whatever you educated whatever you are, you do it, but in Chinese you really, most educated people don't swear
B: So do feel something is missing when you speak Chinese, because you can't swear?
Mi: Ah ah! I haven't thought about that.
B: [laughs]
Mi: Maybe, yes, maybe, no. It's funny, you do get by isn't it without swearing, you still get by, but I just think that even now I swear, I swear when I'm with my friends, Chinese friends, you have to say 'oh shoot' or 'sugar' or whatever, and you know and then you say that in English, so…
B: While you speak in Chinese?
Mi: Yeah.
B: While you speak in Chinese you swear in English?!
Mi: Yeah.
B: Or while you speak in English?
Mi: While I speak in Chinese, both. I never I still swear because again I think it's a habit, because that reaction just come out, so it's a bit like you have to ask yourself what do I do before I knew English swearing, ehm, how do I survive.

Dewaele (2010:117)

The next extract comes from Mustafa (Kurdish and Turkish L1, German L2, French L3, Arabic L4 and English L5). He has lived in the UK for 12 years and feels dominant in both Turkish and English.

B: When you're angry, do you prefer to express your anger in one of your languages, and which one?
Mu: Um… well, Turkish and English and Kurdish.
B: Turkish and English and Kurdish, ok, so in which language do you prefer to swear?
Mu: Turkish and English.
B: Ok, how do you choose in which language to swear?
Mu: To swear? Um, you know if I am kind of, it's difficult because this is all about social life you know, and when I am too much involved you know, immersed in English, then I swear in English, because I have permanently been living with English friends outside Turkish Kurdish community in England, and Turkish as well sometimes of course you know is the language like my mother tongue and it's difficult to escape from it and that's how I yeah that's how I feel really swearing is always kind of in these two languages Turkish and English.
B: Ok.
Mu: But not Kurdish.
B: Not Kurdish, why?
Mu: Because there aren't many swearwords in Kurdish, and there are extremely rude and undignified kind of expressions, it's kind of cultural, so even in Kurdish there aren't many swearwords that I can use, they are usually Turkish.
B: Right, so when you hear a swearword in Kurdish, in Turkish or in English, which one sounds stronger, heavier?
Mu: For swearing.
B: Yes, when you hear it.
Mu: Um… heavier.
B: Yes.
Mu: What do you mean heavier?
B: More you know, more rude.
Mu: Um… well, as I said I mean you know between those three languages Kurdish especially.
B: Yeah.
Mu: Is because of kind of cultural context, is a bit heavy, quite heavy, and then comes Turkish and English.

Dewaele (2010:125)

Another participant, Klaus (German L1, English L2, French L3, Russian L4, Spanish L5) has lived in the UK for nearly 20 years and is highly fluent in English. He is married to a native speaker of Catalan and Spanish with whom he communicates in English. He feels that he can swear in any language he shares with an interlocutor:

K: Because the context is usually English, I swear in English as well (...) if I speak to a German friend of mine and I feel anger, then I would swear in German. (…)

BB: So when you argue with your partner you argue in English?
K: English yeah.
BB: With any German swearwords?
K: No no, no.

Dewaele (2010:125–126)

Finally, Jean (French L1, English L2), who has arrived in the UK from France a year earlier, declares that he prefers swearing in French, but just as Nancy Huston, he reports that one English swearword has recently been included in his repertoire:

J: Actually, it is French most of the time but since one year now I started to swear in English from err, spontaneously.
B: Ok.
J: But just, just 'fuck'.
B: Ok.
J: It's just the word 'fuck', sorry I give you these details but…
B: No no no, ok.
J: It's just the word 'fuck' comes naturally, spontaneously, but this is recent, I mean this is just last year, before this it was always in in French.

Dewaele (2010:123)

7 Discussion

The first and second research hypotheses were confirmed in the quantitative analysis. The 386 multilinguals who are equally proficient in their L1 and L2, and use both languages constantly, use the L1 significantly more for swearing. The difference was even stronger in the perception of emotional strength of swearwords, with L1 swearwords reported to have a much stronger emotional resonance than L2 swearwords. This fits with patterns uncovered in the same sample (Dewaele, 2011) for different variables. Not only did participants prefer the L1 for swearing but they reported a more frequent use of the L1 to communicate feelings and anger, to address their children, to perform mental calculation and to produce inner speech. They also perceived their L1 to be emotionally stronger than their L2 and reported lower levels of communicative anxiety in their L1 (Dewaele, 2011).

An analysis of the narratives of 20 multilinguals living in the UK confirmed the first hypothesis, namely the generally superior emotionality of swearwords of the L1, but led to a rejection of the second hypothesis about the preferred language for swearing. Indeed, participants who had been living in UK for some time reported a preference for the use of English swearwords or euphemisms. It could be argued that the UK-based multilinguals who were not native speakers of English had undergone a stronger secondary socialization in English than the

participants in the BEQ who might be using their L2 daily, but without necessarily living in the L2 environment. One participant, Jean, is still in an early stage of this secondary socialization, and reports how a single English swearword has been added to his French repertoire of French swearwords. Theodora reported how her understanding of the emotional force of swearwords in her English L2 had evolved since she came to the UK. They evolved from 'funny' words without any emotional or social connotation, to proper swearwords, ready to be deployed if necessary, but still lacking the muscle of her L1 Greek swearwords. Andrew confirms the general trend of swearwords being weaker in a foreign language, having picked up a 'funny' swearword in his Spanish L3 and using it in private speech. He goes on to say that he uses both in his English L1 and French L2 for swearing, but that the emotional strength of swearwords is greatest in his L1, as they produce a frisson of transgression.

Several participants, typically of Arabic or Asian origin (Layla, Mustafa and Michelle) reported that swearing in English allows them to escape the social constraint that weighs on them in Arabic, Kurdish and Chinese, where swearing carries strong social stigma. One participant, Tomomi, claimed she stuck to her Japanese rule of avoiding swearing in any language. All participants with the exception of Jean had spent a considerable amount of time in the UK and were highly fluent in English, and could probably be described as multicompetent biculturals, aware of the differences between the L1 norms and the English norms. For participants who use their L2 with their partner, the L2 is also the preferred language for swearing. This could be the illustration of a high level of socialization in the L2. For participants who do not use English systematically within the family, language preference and swearing practices are somewhere in the middle between L1 norms and English L2 norms. Layla, Michelle and her Chinese friends report using euphemisms rather than the actual English swearwords, but in doing so clearly behave differently than their L1 monolingual peers.

To sum up, the findings from the quantitative and qualitative data generally confirm findings from previous studies, while highlighting some interesting new facts. The main point is the dynamic character of perception of swearwords and swearing practices. With a few exceptions, most of the participants in the interviews accommodated to various degrees towards English swearing practices and reported having learned the strength of these words and the rules governing their appropriate use through their daily contact with English (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008).

The analyses also show that swearwords in the L1 are typically perceived to be emotionally stronger than their equivalents in the L2 (cf. Harris, Gleason and

Ayçiçeği, 2006; Pavlenko, 2002), but they show that L2 swearwords gain in emotional strength as socialisation in the L2 culture increases.

The present findings complement earlier work that considered all participants of the BEQ database (Dewaele, 2004a, 2004b, 2005b, 2008, 2010). Since a very strong positive correlation emerged between, on the one hand frequency of language use and self-perceived proficiency, and on the other hand language choice for swearing and perception of emotional force, one could have argued that frequency and proficiency explained most of the variance, and that other variables could at best have a marginal contribution to explaining the variance. By selecting only BEQ participants with maximal self-perceived levels of proficiency and constant users of the L1 and the L2, the difference between L1 and L2 could have been neutralized. The statistical analysis showed that this was not the case, which suggests that other factors, possibly the 'emotional contexts of learning' (Harris, Gleason and Ayçiçeği, 2006), favor the preference for the L1 and the perception that L1 swearwords are stronger than L2 equivalents.

Further research could investigate whether the lower emotional resonance of swearwords in the L2 make swearing in the L2 less cathartic than swearing in the L1. In other words, do L2 users feel better after swearing in their L2? Less catharsis after swearing in the L2 could explain why multilinguals often code-switch to their L1, as Nancy Huston demonstrated.

8 Conclusion

A quantitative analysis of 389 multilinguals who were maximally proficient in their L1 and L2 revealed subtle differences between their languages. They used their L2 less frequently for swearing and perceived their L2 swearwords to be weaker than their L1 equivalents.

A qualitative analysis of 20 multilinguals based in UK confirmed the finding that L1 swearwords are generally felt to be stronger in the L1, but showed that these participants typically preferred the L2 for swearing. In other words, the link between perception and use, which emerged in previous work (Dewaele, 2004a, 2004b), seems absent for this group of participants. A closer look at the participants' linguistic history suggested that higher levels of socialisation in the L2 culture are linked to a change in perception of swearwords and in swearing practices. For some Asian and Arab participants, swearing in the L2 helped them overcome the sociocultural constraint on swearing in their L1. Just like Nancy Huston seemed surprised at the sudden occurrence of a French swearword in her swearing repertoire, many UK-based participants commented on how English swearwords had crept into their swearing repertoire without them realizing it.

In sum, this research on self-reported bilingual swearing practices throws an interesting light on the dynamic nature of the L2 users' linguistic systems, cultural values, and perceptions of appropriate behaviour. While values and practices of the L1 culture remain strongly ingrained in these multilinguals, with swearwords in the L1 typically scoring higher in emotional weight than their L2 equivalents, the effects of the L2 language and culture are visible. In other words, there is a clear permeability between L1 and L2 values and practices, which, after some years, results in a unique linguistic behaviour both in the L1 and L2. The CS to the L2 for swearing is one manifestation of the newfound freedom to express oneself without violating L1 norms.

From a methodological point of view, the present research showed that while questionnaires can provide useful data in multilingual swearing research, they should ideally be accompanied by qualitative data. The interview data showed how specific questions by the interviewer revealed a complex and rich picture of swearing behaviour.

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Notes

1 This result confirms patterns uncovered in the whole BEQ database, namely a clear preference for swearing in languages acquired earlier in the life (L1, L2) compared to languages acquired later (Dewaele, 2004a, 2005, 2010). The L2 was defined as any language acquired after the L1.

2 These transcripts appear in their original form.

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