

Embarrassment and Code-Switching into a Second Language

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ABSTRACT. Second languages are typically mastered in more emotionally neutral settings than are first languages. Consequently, less arousal will be conditioned to second-language words. It should be relatively easier, therefore, to discuss embarrassing topics in one's second, compared to one's first, language. Chinese undergraduates ($N = 48$) interviewed one another in Cantonese and English to test this hypothesis. As predicted, interviewees answered questions on embarrassing topics compared to unembarrassing topics at greater length in their second language than in their first. This result suggests that code-switching may serve a distancing function, permitting bilinguals to express ideas in their second language that would be too disturbing in their first. Possible adverse consequences for cross-cultural person perception and interaction are also raised.

IN DISCUSSING THE MANY FUNCTIONS of linguistic code-switching, scholars, such as Scotton and Ury (1977), rarely mentioned reduction of embarrassment as a significant reason for shifting to a second language with an in-group member. In one such rare case, Kwok and Chan (1972) alluded to a Chinese student who could never allow himself to confess to a priest in his native Cantonese because "it would hurt too much" (p. 70). Instead, he used his second language of English. Informal observations of multilingual cultures suggested that a similar preference for second-language use extends to swearing, revelation of personal problems, and other speech productions that would normally lead to anxiety.

All cultures erect sanctions around the discussion of certain topics by

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