

# The Language Effect in International Trade: A Meta-Analysis

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# The Language Effect in International Trade: A Meta-Analysis

#### **Abstract**

Gravity models of international trade have been frequently applied to estimate the impact of common (official or spoken) language on bilateral trade. This study provides a meta-analysis based on 701 language effects collected from 81 academic articles. On average, a common (official or spoken) language increases trade flows directly by 44%.

JEL-Code: C210, O400, H540, R110.

Keywords: common language, gravity, international trade, trade costs.

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#### 1 Introduction

Gravity models of bilateral trade are widely used to estimate the effect of trade cost (e.g., geographical distance) or trade facilitation factors (e.g., common official language) on bilateral trade. These models usually take the generic cross-sectional form:

$$X_{ij} = e^{\lambda Lang_{ij}} e^{Rest_{ij}} u_{ij}$$

where  $X_{ij}$  measures bilateral exports or imports between countries i and j,  $Lang_{ij}$  is a trade facilitation indicator variable which is unity in case that i and j share a common (official or spoken by large-enough a fraction of the population) language and zero else,  $\lambda$  is the direct semi-elasticity of trade with respect to a common language,  $Rest_{ij}$  is a catch-all term consisting additively of (log) trade cost factors times their parameters and of exporter- and importer-specific factors of influence (such as GDP, price indices, etc.; see Anderson and van Wincoop, 2004), and  $u_{ij}$  is a disturbance term. While channels through which common language affects bilateral trade are well understood (see Melitz, 2008, Melitz and Toubal, 2011) and there is abundant evidence that having an official or speaking a common language increases bilateral trade between countries, there is enormous variability of  $\lambda$  in the literature.

This paper provides a meta-study about estimates  $\hat{\lambda}$  based on 701 coefficients from 81 articles published in 24 refereed journals. The weighted average  $\hat{\lambda}$  suggests a direct effect on bilateral trade flows of 44%. Meta-regressions suggest that the estimated direct effect of common language on bilateral trade is most sensitive to the sample period and control variables used.

### 2 The meta-analysis approach

Meta-analysis and meta-regression are valuable to generalize results from a host of individual empirical studies (see Stanley, 2001, or Disdier and Head, 2008). Our data-set of 701 coefficients is mainly compiled from articles which were found by a systematic search in the *JSTOR* and *Science Direct* databases conducted on 17 October 2011. The utilized keywords were gravity, trade, and language in all articles published between 1970 and 2011. That search produced 149 matches and 223 matches in *JSTOR* and *Science Direct*, respectively. In addition to the articles found by the search algorithm, we included 13 (frequently cited) articles from an *IDEAS* search which were not identified by the algorithm in *JSTOR* and *Science Direct*. This resulted in a raw data-set of 385 studies. Then, we dropped studies and estimates of the following kind: (i) purely theoretical contributions; (ii) empirical

papers that did not control for language at all; (iii) papers that focused on trade in services rather than goods; (iv) estimates that focused on the extensive margin of trade; (v) two papers that controlled for several languages separately; (vi) one paper that coded  $Lang_{ij}$  as one for English as the main language in a data-set including non-English speaking countries, and one paper that included English as the language dummy for a study on trade of India with its trading partners; (vii) estimates from studies with *direct communication* or *Toefl Scores* as measures for common language; (viii) estimates from regressions including variables that are supposed to measure the same thing, e.g., common spoken and common official language (in those cases, one of the coefficients usually carried a negative sign); (ix) one paper with estimates that interacted language with a preferential trade indicator; (x) one observation that was based on log bilateral exports as the dependent variable in poisson pseudo maximum likelihood estimation; (xi) estimates without reported standard errors or t-statistics (46 observations), two observations with standard errors of 23 and 66, and 3 observations with negative standard errors; (xii) and nine outlier observations with values for  $\lambda$  of -1.26, 2.296, 2.301, 2.317, 2.319, 3.27, 3.42, 5.02, and 30.69 (identified by the multivariate outlier approach of Hadi, 1994). We were then left with 701 coefficients and 81 studies (see Table A.1). Most studies in our sample relied on aggregate bilateral goods trade flows and OLS regression with a log-transformed version of equation (1), controlling for exporter and importer GDP, log distance, adjacency, and various forms of trade agreements.

In meta-regressions, we account for three main sources of heterogeneity of  $\hat{\lambda}$  – structural heterogeneity, sampling heterogeneity, and method heterogeneity – by coding indicator variables as follows. Choice of the dependent variable: 1 if the dependent variable was not log bilateral trade (exports, imports, or the sum of the two) but a ratio or share (in a country's total trade or GDP) and 0 else. Zero bilateral trade flows: 1 if authors took into account zero bilateral trade flows and 0 else. Endogeneity of GDP: 1 if a study or regression accounted for the possible endogeneity of GDP and 0 else. Choice of control variables: use four indicator variables which are 1 if common border, trade agreements between trading partners, colonial ties, and measures of remoteness were included (or were not relevant; log distance was included by all studies) and 0 else, respectively. Fixed effects: 1 if importer and exporter effects were introduced in cross-section equations, importer, exporter, and year fixed effects, or importer-year and exporter-year fixed effects in panel specifications, and 0 else. Sample period: use three indicator variables which are 1 if the sample period falls into the time span before 1948 (pre-General Agree-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Earlier work suggested to use  $ln(X_{ij} + 1)$  in the presence of zero bilateral trade, while recent work proposed more appropriate methods such as poisson pseudo maximum likelihood (PPML), (see or Santos Silva and Tenreyro, 2006, Melitz and Toubal, 2011).

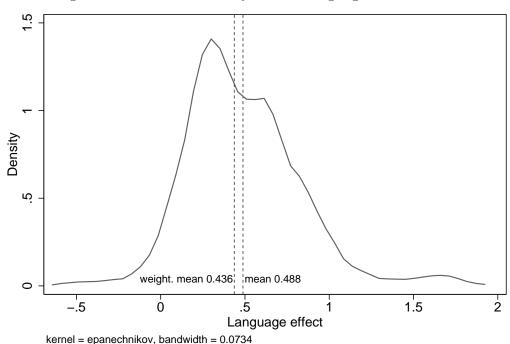


Figure 1: Estimated Density of 701 Language Coefficients  $\hat{\lambda}_i$ 

ment on Tariffs and Trade, GATT), between 1948 and 1995 (GATT), and post 1995 (WTO) and 0 else. Level of aggregation: 1 if the authors used industry-level or Rauch-classification grouped data and 0 else. Sample composition: 1 if industrial countries are included and 0 else, 1 if developing countries are included and 0 else, or 1 if there is trade of only one country with several other ones and 0 else. Panel data: 1 if panel data were used and 0 else. Top-ranked journals: 1 if the paper was published in a top-ranked journal (4 points in the Keele journal ranking). We also included the publication year to account for a possible trend in  $\hat{\lambda}$ .

### 3 Results: the estimated language effect

Figure 1 displays the distribution of all 701 estimated language coefficients  $\hat{\lambda}_i$ ,  $i = 1, \ldots, 701$  included in the meta-regression. They range from -0.57 to 1.85. The average  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  in the full sample is 0.49 and the standard deviation is 0.34 (see Table 1). The average  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  weighted by the inverse of its corresponding standard error (see

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>22 journals out of 442 in economics are rated at 4 points. See http://www.keele.ac.uk/cer/resources\_journals.htm.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Number of Coefficients	Mean	Weighted mean (1/s.e.)	Weighted mean (1/R-squ.)	Standard deviation
Full data set	701	0.488	0.436	0.481	0.337
Significant data	588	0.550	0.465	0.527	0.312
Language dummy	642	0.482	0.435	0.473	0.326
OLS-based data	420	0.485	0.444	0.476	0.302
OLS-based & y=ln(trade)	372	0.474	0.439	0.458	0.297
Panel equation	425	0.474	0.419	0.454	0.322
Colony included	475	0.449	0.408	0.468	0.317
Full set of control variables	200	0.326	0.327	0.302	0.294
Full set of fixed effects	301	0.502	0.436	0.541	0.324
Data < 1948	27	0.299	0.186	0.286	0.351
Data 1948-1995	305	0.513	0.471	0.538	0.339
Data > 1995	90	0.557	0.583	0.560	0.298
Endogeneity of GDP	172	0.578	0.467	0.558	0.383
Zero trade	167	0.463	0.440	0.532	0.351
High-quality journal	150	0.456	0.380	0.365	0.408
Industry data	93	0.567	0.512	0.609	0.393
Industrial country data	79	0.684	0.538	0.629	0.390
Developing country data	30	0.461	0.572	0.584	0.271
Single country data	11	0.618	0.382	0.509	0.378

Saxonhouse, 1976) is 0.44. Its median is 0.43, the 5th and 95th percentiles are 0.05 and 1.03, respectively, and the interquartile range is 0.41 (not shown). Table 1 summarizes key statistics for different sample choices. We are mainly interested in the differences of the inverse standard error weighted averages among those samples. Table 1 shows that the weighted average  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  became higher over time. It is higher when using OLS or when endogeneity of GDP and zero trade are taken into account. It is also higher for disaggregated data, for industrialized countries than on average and even higher for developing countries than in pooled data. It is lower in panel data studies, in single country studies, in studies which were published in top-ranked journals, and if more trade cost control variables were included. The latter points to some confounding effects of omitted cultural variables on the effect of common language on trade. We calculate an alternative mean weighted by the R-squared of the corresponding regression shown in Table 1, rather than choosing one estimate per paper based on, e.g., the R-squared of the regressions as suggested in the literature in order to account for publication bias (see Card and Krueger, 1995). It is 0.48 in the full sample and reveals a rather similar pattern compared to the standard-error weighted mean.

We may decompose the variance of  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  in a more systematic way than in Table 1 by way of meta-regressions as summarized in Table 2. Due to the expected dependence of observations within papers (through the use of common samples, methods, and specifications, etc.), we estimate models with study-specific random effects – Columns (1)-(3) – or clustered standard errors – Columns (4)-(6). We weight the variables by the inverse of the estimated standard errors as suggested by Saxon-

house, 1976 throughout. Columns (1) and (4) of Table 2 refer to the full sample, Columns (2) and (5) to the sub-sample of significant coefficients, and Columns (3) and (6) to the sub-sample of OLS-based coefficients, respectively.

Across the board, the meta-regressions suggest that  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  is lower in studies which included control variables measuring cultural proximity (e.g., colonial ties). Aligned with Disdier and Head, 2008 – who found that the distance effect in gravity models increases over time (consistent with economic theory as outlined in Egger, 2008) – we find an increasing language effect on trade over time. Panel specifications produce higher language effects. In addition,  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  is lower in developing-country samples if estimation is based on OLS. The results from the random effects regressions in Columns (1)-(3) suggest that  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  is lower in studies that control for common borders, that use trade ratios as the dependent variable, and are published in high-quality journals. The estimates  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  are higher in studies that treat GDP as endogenous and control for remoteness. The publication year time trend is significant but close to zero. The OLS models with clustered standard errors show that common border and endogeneity of GDP only remain significant in the sub-samples of Columns (5) and (6), respectively.

Overall, a substantial part of the variability of  $\hat{\lambda}_i$  in the covered literature is unexplained by the models in Columns (1)-(6). An important reason for this may be the varying meaning of common official language and common spoken language across countries and country-pairs (see Melitz and Toubal, 2011).

Table 2: Metaregressions of Language Coefficients

	Random effects			Clustered standard errors		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Full data	Significant	OLS-based	Full data	Significant	OLS-based
	Full data	coefficients	coefficients	Full data	coefficients	coefficients
Trade ratio	-0.082	-0.138**	-0.125*	-0.052	-0.066	-0.136
	(0.057)	(0.054)	(0.067)	(0.127)	(0.130)	(0.120)
Zero trade	-0.038	-0.028	-0.004	-0.019	-0.033	-0.074
	(0.101)	(0.107)	(0.050)	(0.068)	(0.069)	(0.077)
GDP endogeneity	0.096*	0.091*	0.177**	0.055	0.046	0.177**
	(0.050)	(0.049)	(0.069)	(0.053)	(0.051)	(0.075)
Adjacency	-0.224**	-0.212***	-0.091	-0.159	-0.193**	-0.113
	(880.0)	(0.079)	(0.107)	(0.098)	(0.092)	(0.118)
Trade agreement	0.075	0.034	0.143	0.037	0.009	0.030
	(0.070)	(0.070)	(0.087)	(0.070)	(0.072)	(0.087)
Colonial ties	-0.272***	-0.272***	-0.350***	-0.237***	-0.246***	-0.304***
	(0.057)	(0.056)	(0.076)	(0.040)	(0.035)	(0.056)
Remoteness	0.112***	0.093**	0.074	0.032	0.058	-0.028
	(0.042)	(0.045)	(0.050)	(0.045)	(0.040)	(0.044)
Fixed effects	0.023	0.007	-0.005	-0.001	0.001	-0.050
	(0.034)	(0.039)	(0.025)	(0.038)	(0.036)	(0.045)
Pre-1948 data	-0.468***	-0.336***	-0.492***	-0.395***	-0.318***	-0.510***
	(0.107)	(0.084)	(0.105)	(0.081)	(0.081)	(0.100)
1948-1995 data	0.143***	0.146***	0.093**	0.166***	0.181***	0.161**
	(0.042)	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.057)	(0.059)	(0.073)
Post-1948 data	0.225***	0.226***	0.225***	0.323***	0.347***	0.222***
	(0.068)	(0.068)	(0.058)	(0.071)	(0.066)	(0.084)
Disaggregated data	-0.079	-0.121*	-0.012	-0.055	-0.048	-0.113
	(0.062)	(0.066)	(0.096)	(0.087)	(0.083)	(0.114)
Industrial countries	-0.096	-0.111	-0.037	-0.015	-0.058	-0.076
	(0.105)	(0.099)	(0.122)	(0.091)	(0.093)	(0.114)
Developing countries	0.006	0.004	-0.230***	0.067	0.051	-0.207***
	(0.143)	(0.144)	(0.044)	(0.155)	(0.159)	(0.058)
Single country	0.003	-0.025	0.096	-0.066	-0.120	-0.082
	(0.094)	(0.092)	(0.152)	(0.097)	(0.090)	(0.115)
Panel	0.083	0.078	0.154***	0.109*	0.101*	0.081
	(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.055)	(0.073)
High-quality journal	-0.194**	-0.175**	-0.193**	-0.103	-0.057	-0.092
	(0.079)	(0.074)	(0.092)	(0.091)	(0.070)	(880.0)
Publication Year	2.959e-04***	3.142e-04***	1.691e-04**	0.001	0.004	0.007
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(800.0)	(800.0)	(800.0)
Observations	701	588	420	701	588	420
Number of clusters	78	76	61	78	76	61
Between/R-squared	0.79	0.79	0.81	0.54	0.53	0.24

Random-effects regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses (\*p<0.10, \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.01) in (1)-(3), WLS regressions with paper-clustered standard errors in (4)-(6). Intercept not reported. Dependent variable: estimated language coefficients weighted by standard error.

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## **Appendix**

In Table A.1, we provide a full list of all 81 articles the 701 parameters underlying the meta-analysis in this paper are collected from.

# Authors 1 Amil, May and Katharine Wakelin 2 Andreson, James E. and Douclas Marcouller	Year Article title 2003 his vestment light and international for light and internation
3 Aviat, Antonin and Nicolas Coeurdacier	2007 The geography of trade in goods and asset holdings
4 Baier, Scott L., Jeffrey H. Bergstrand	2007 Do free trade agreements actually increase members' international trade?
5 Barro, Robert and Silvana Tenreyro	2007 Economic Effects of Currency Unions
6 Berger, Heige and Volker Nitsch	2008 Zooming out: The trade effect of the euro in historical perspective
7 Bergstrand, Jeffrey and Peter Egger 8 Brouwer, Jelle, Richard Paap and Jean-Marie Viaene	2007 A knowledge-and-physical-capital model of international trade flows, foreign direct investment, and multinational enterprises 2008 The trade and FDI effects of EMIJ enlangement
9 Brown John C.	1995 Imperfect Competition and Anglo-German Trade Rivalry. Markets for Cotton Textiles before 1914
10 Chang, Pao-Li and Myoung-Jae Lee	2011 The WTO trade effect
11 Calderon, Cesar, Alberto Chong and Ernesto Stein	2007 Trade intensity and business cycle synchronization; are developing countries any different?
12 Chor, Davin 13 Clark, Ximena, David Dollar and Aleiandro Micco	2010 Unpacking sources of comparative advantages. A quantitative approach 2010 Port efficiency, maritime transport costs, and bitate la trade
14 Crozet, Matthieu and Pamina Koenig	2010 Structural gravity equations with intensive and extensive margins
15 Eaton, Jonathan and Sam Kortum	2002 Technology, Geography and Trade
16 Eaton, Jonathan and Samuel Kortum	2001 Trade in capital goods
17 Egger, Peter	2002 An Econometric View on the Estimation of Gravity Models and the Calculation of Trade Potentials.
16 Egger, Peter and Mario Laich 10 Egger, Dater Mario Larch Kavin Stank and Painer Winkelmann	2011 That assessing to the European agreements effects on binaterial rade, GDP and Wellate 2011 That Trade Effects of Endocarda agreements effects on binaterial trade Arneaments
20 Evans, Carolyn L.	2013 The Economic Significance of National Border Effects
21 Fally, Thibault, Rodrigo Paillacar and Cristina Terra	2010 Economic geography and wages in Brazil: Evidence from micro-data
22 Feenstra, Robert C., James R. Markusen, Andrew K. Rose	2001 Using the Gravity Equation to Differentiate among Alternative Theories of Trade
23 Felbermayr, Gabriel and Benjamin Jung	2009 The pro-trade effect of the brain drain: Sorting out confounding factors
24 Felbermayr, Gabriel and Farid Toubal	2010 Cultural proximity and trade
25 Fielding, David and Kalvinder Shields	2005 The Impact of Monetary Union on Macroeconomic Integration: Evidence from West Africa
26 Fink, Carsten, Aaditya Mattoo and Ileana Cristina Neagu	2005 Assessing the impact of communication costs on international trade
27 Frankel, Jeffrey A. and Andrew K. Rose	1998 The Endogeneity of the Optimum Currency Area Criteria
28 Frankel, Jeffrey A. and Andrew K. Rose	2002 An Estimate Of The Effect Of Common Currencies On Trade And Income
29 Fratianni, Michele and Heejoon Kang 20 English Candinal and Diana Majahald	2006 Heterogeneous distance—estaticines in rade gravity models 2004 Heterogeneous distance—estaticines in rade gravity models
34 Geraci Vincent Land Milfried Prewo	2004 Triedelect of unit interfer to the many state of the many sta
32 Ghosh Sicharita and Steven Yamarik	
33 Ghosh, Sucharita and Steven Yamarik	2004 Does trade creation measure u.S. A reexamination of the effects of regional trading agreements.
34 Gil-Pareia. Salvador. Rafael Llorca-Vivero and Jose Antonio Martinez-Serrano	2007 Did the European exchange-rate mechanism contribute to the integration of peripheral countries?
35 Gil-Pareja, Salvador, Rafael Llorca-Vivero and Jose Antonio Martinez-Serrano	2008 Trade effects of monetary agreements: Evidence for OECD countries
36 Glick, Reuven and Andrew K. Rose	2002 Does a currency union affect trade? The time-series evidence
37 Hayakawa, Kazunobu	2011 Measuring fixed costs for firms' use of a free trade agreement. Threshold regression approach
38 Head, Keith and Thierry Mayer	2004 Market Potential and the Location of Japanese Investment in the European Union
39 Head, Keith, Thierry Mayer and John Ries	2010 The erosion of colonial trade linkages after independence
40 Helpman, Elhanan, Marc Melitz and Yona Rubinstein	2008 Estimating Trade Flows: Trading Partners and Trading Volumes
41 Herander, Mark G. and Luz A. Saavedra	2006 Exports and the Structure of Immigrant-Based Networks: The Role of Geographic Proximity
42 Imps, Jean 43 Impson Tomors and Colla Kirkmatelok	2UV4 Trade, Inanties, Pagedalization, Am d Symbolization 2000 Trade Enallisation and Manufacturad Example: In Africa Different?
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46 Klein, Michael W. and Jav C. Shambaugh	2006 Eixed exchange rates and frade
47 Ku. Hveiin and Assaf Zussman	2010 Inqua frances: The role of English in international trade
48 Liu, Xuepeng	2009 GATT/WTO Promotes Trade Strongly: Sample Selection and Model Specification.
49 Lohmann, Johannes	2011 Do language barriers affect trade?
50 López-Córdova, J. Ernesto and Christopher M. Meissner	2003 Exchange-Rate Regimes and International Trade: Evidence from the Classical Gold Standard Era
51 Magee, Christopher S.P.	2008 New measures of trade creation and trade diversion
52 Martin, Philippe, Thierry Mayer and Mathias Thoenig	2008 Make Trade Not War?
53 Melitz, Jacques E4 Mait   Postino	2006 North, South and distance in the gravity model
55 Mitchoon Kris Ismos and Mars Weidonmier	2000 Languaga and inade 2000 Languaga and inade
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	2003 On the impact of a common currency on bilateral trade
55 Nilsch, Volker 56 Nilsch, Volker 59 ON, Chang Hoon and W. Trawis Semier II 66 Race, Andrew K. 62 Rose, Andrew K. 63 Rose, Andrew K. 64 Rose, Andrew K. 66 Rose, Andrew K. 66 Rose, Andrew K. 66 Rose, Andrew K. 67 Rose, Andrew K. 68 Rose, Andrew K. 68 Rose, Andrew K. 67 Rose, Andrew K. 68 Roye, Andrew K. 69 Rose, Andrew K. 60 Rose, Andrew K. 61 Rose, Andrew K. 62 Roye, Andrew K. 63 Roye, Andrew K. 64 Rose, Andrew K. 65 Roye, Andrew K. 66 Rose, Andrew K. 67 Rose, Andrew K. 68 Roye, Andrew K. 68 Roye, Andrew K. 69 Roye, Santos Silve, J. M. C. and Silvana Tenteyro 67 Rose, Andrew K. 69 Roye, Santos Silva, J. M. C. and Silvana Tenteyro 70 Sentenga, Laura and Yongcheol Shin 71 Supramarian, Andrew and Shaqo, In Weil 72 Stein, Ernesto and Christan Dauce 73 Tenreyo, Silvana 74 Thom, Rochoy and Bendan Walsh 75 Turrini, Alessandro and Tanguy van Ypersele 76 Verbasten Walii 77 Sebbasten Walii 78 Wei, Shang-Jin and Zhiwei Zhang 79 Wei, Shang-Jin and Zhiwei Zhang 80 Wong, Weil Shang-Jin and Zhiwei Zhang	81 Yeyatı, Eduardo Levy