

Exploring the Foreign Language Effect: A Study on Emotional Responses to Taboo Words

The "foreign language effect" (FLE) is a psycholinguistic phenomenon observed in bilingual individuals, acting as an emotional "filter" that differentiates their native language (L1) from a subsequently acquired foreign language (Pavlenko, 2005, 2008; Shanahan, 2008). This disparity influences the emotional depth of language use, with L1 being more intuitive, emotionally loaded, and context dependent (Grosjean & Li, 2013; Pavlenko, 2005). The L2, acquired in formal settings, tends to be emotionally detached, resulting in a "foreign language effect" (Huang & Nicoladis, 2020; Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2002; Lai et al., 1986). This study aims to investigate the FLE, particularly in response to taboo words, and explores whether emotional reactions are primarily driven by phonological form or word meaning. The purpose of this study was to replicate the results from Rastovic (2019) and to build on it.

To investigate this issue, electrodermal conductance (EDA) measurements were employed to gauge physiological reactions. The study recruited 14 female native French speakers with English as their L2. Participants were exposed to taboo words and emotionally neutral words in both languages while their physiological responses were recorded. They performed two tasks.

In the first part of the study, known as "Experiment 1," a bilingual task was conducted. This task consisted of a total of 5 taboo words in both French and English, alongside 10 neutral words in each language. The selection of these words was guided by their potential to be immediately recognized as insulting, especially toward women. An essential criterion for these words was that they had to be a single word in length and still in contemporary use.

The second part of the study was a monolingual task conducted entirely in French. In this experiment, a total of 20 taboo words, 20 non-words derived from taboo words, 20 neutral words, and 20 non-words derived from neutral words were included. Throughout the study, the aim was to select and create stimuli that met specific criteria, considering factors like offensiveness (where the threshold to be reached during the pre-testing was an average offensiveness of 2 or more out of 5), phonological distinctiveness, and intonation normalization.

Experiment 1 demonstrated a significant language effect, with stronger reactions to taboo words in French compared to English, consistent with prior research. Experiment 2, however, revealed that reactions to taboo words and non-words were influenced by word type (non-word or word), contradicting the initial hypothesis. No significant condition effect was observed.

The study's results also highlighted individual variations, suggesting sensitivity to phonological violations. These results align with prior studies that emphasize the complex nature of the FLE.

This study enhances our understanding of how bilinguals process taboo words and the impact of language and phonological form on emotional responses. It contributes to the expanding research on the Foreign Language Effect (FLE) and emotional reactions to taboo words, which has primarily focused on decision-making and risk-taking. The insights gained here are valuable for fields such as marketing, diplomacy, and law, highlighting the crucial role of language in shaping emotions in our interconnected world.

Word count: 500

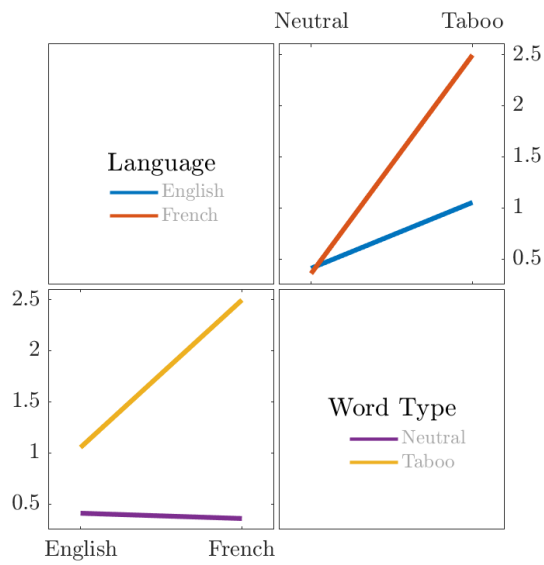


Figure 1: Interaction between language (French/English) and condition (neutral/taboo) during Experiment 1

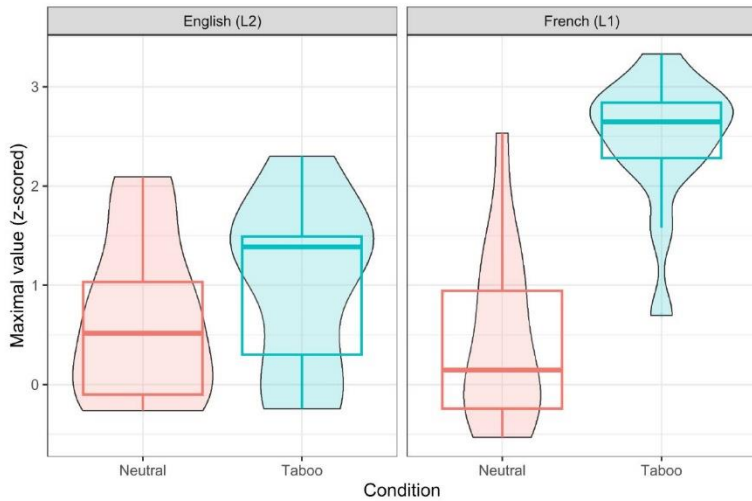


Figure 2: Interactions between condition and language in Experiment 1

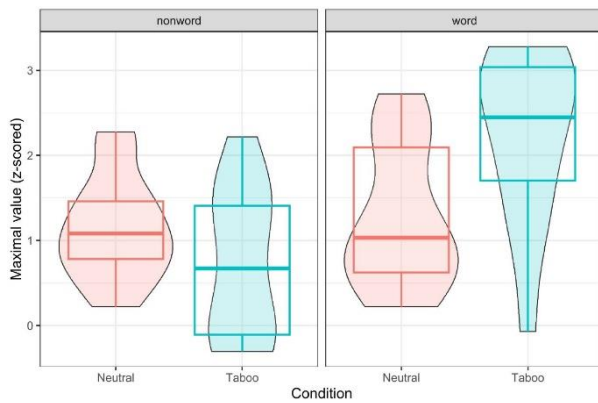


Figure 3: Interaction between lexical status and condition in Experiment 2.

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