NEWS LESSON

The Language You Speak May Change How You Feel. It May Not Change What You Do



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Do you think a person's identity is stable, or does it shift with the language and the setting?
2. What might explain why a second language feels more distant or more neutral than a first?
3. How far should we trust people's descriptions of their own values?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**sacrificial**	☐	A	fixed and impossible to change
2	**literature**	☐	B	published again somewhere else
3	**peer-reviewed**	☐	C	all the published research on one subject
4	**self-report**	☐	D	not large or extreme
5	**mixed bag**	☐	E	information people give about themselves
6	**set in stone**	☐	F	involving giving up one thing for another
7	**modest**	☐	G	a group of things of very different quality
8	**republished**	☐	H	checked by other experts before publication

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A preregistered study of 106 Greek-English bilinguals suggests that moral identity predicts moral choices better than language does, though the sample is small and the result far from universal.

1 For about a decade, one of the more striking findings in bilingualism research has been the moral foreign-language effect. When people weigh sacrificial dilemmas, such as whether to harm one person to save several, they tend to make more utilitarian choices in a second language than in their first. A popular explanation is emotional distance: the first language carries childhood and family values, while the second feels more deliberate. The evidence, however, has been uneven, and some studies find little effect.

2 Irini Mavrou and Andreas Kyriakou argue that this literature has paid close attention to which language people use and little to the person making the decision. Their study, published online in Bilingualism: Language and Cognition in August 2026, tests that idea. They set out to correct that. The study was preregistered, and the analysis used both conventional and Bayesian statistics. The 106 participants were native Greek speakers with upper-intermediate or advanced English, and each did the whole task in either Greek or English. They judged four dilemmas, two involving sacrificial harm and two involving honesty, lying on a CV and revealing a partner's infidelity, and completed a questionnaire measuring moral self and moral integrity.

3 Language did not reliably affect decisions. The two groups were no more or less likely to take the sacrifice option. Moral identity told a different story. Those with a stronger moral self and integrity reported stronger emotional reactions and favoured rule-based choices, particularly in the honesty scenarios. Language did leave a trace: Greek speakers rated moral self higher, which the authors link to a first language's association with early family values, but moral integrity stayed stable across both groups.

4 The emotional picture is a mixed bag. Participants generally reported stronger emotions in English, yet reported stronger emotional intensity in Greek for the sacrificial dilemmas. A mediation analysis found that emotional intensity did not reliably explain any link between language and choice. In other words, English could make people feel more, and still leave their decisions untouched, which does not back up the neat idea that emotional distance drives the foreign-language effect.

5 There are good reasons to hold the findings lightly. The sample is small and culturally specific, and the study involves one language pair. None of this is set in stone. The dilemmas were hypothetical, and the devil is in the detail: because each person used only one language, the design compares groups, not individuals. Self-report carries its usual weaknesses, and the authors themselves point out that the results may not generalise beyond Greek-English bilinguals. An account written by the researchers for The Conversation, and then republished elsewhere, deserves to be read next to the peer-reviewed paper. It would be wrong to say that switching language automatically changes moral choices, but it would be equally wrong to say the language never matters.

6 What the study offers is a shift of emphasis. If a stable moral identity carries across languages, the question is not simply which language you are using, but who is using it. That is a more modest claim than the headlines about a second-language moral compass, and probably a more accurate one.

Sources: Phys.org (from The Conversation), Speaking in a second language may shift your moral compass but it can't overpower it; Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, Moral identity and language jointly influence how bilinguals feel and decide. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The authors imply that earlier research gave too little attention to differences between individual decision makers. (T) (F) (NG)
2. Greek speakers reported stronger emotions than English speakers across all four dilemmas. (T) (F) (NG)
3. The design lets the authors say how one bilingual would behave in each language. (T) (F) (NG)
4. The researchers recruited their participants through universities. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The article treats "language never matters" as no more defensible than "language automatically changes choices". (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

conventional	deliberate	emphasis	exhaustive	impulsive	stable	trace	uneven

1. After a hasty first reaction, she took a more _____ approach and weighed each option carefully.
2. The quality of the translations was _____ : some chapters were superb and others barely readable.
3. Unlike _____ surveys that ask for a single score, the new method tracked answers over time.
4. Years abroad had left a faint _____ of an accent in her otherwise native French.
5. The temperature in the lab must remain _____ for the results to be valid.
6. The new director's arrival brought a change of _____ from sales to customer care.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. A more _____ sample would allow researchers to draw broader conclusions. (REPRESENT)
2. The authors were _____ about extending their findings to other languages. (CAUTION)
3. It is _____ to assume that one study settles the debate. (WISE)
4. The _____ of self-report data is a recognised weakness. (RELY)
5. Participants rated the _____ of their emotions on a scale. (INTENSE)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some verbs, nouns and adjectives need one exact preposition. A wrong choice sounds unnatural, so learn them as chunks.

by for from of on to with

1. The question may hinge _____ who is using the language rather than which one.
2. The authors link the higher moral self rating _____ early family values.
3. The sample consists _____ 106 native Greek speakers.
4. Language alone cannot account _____ the differences in moral choices.
5. The result is at odds _____ the neat idea that emotional distance drives the effect.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Why might moral identity predict decisions better than the language used?
2. What would you want to know about the people in this study before applying the result to other groups?
3. Does your own experience of speaking more than one language support or challenge the idea that your values travel with you?

9 Role-play: which language for a difficult talk?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the team leader

Your company works in English. A colleague made a mistake with some figures and you need to talk about it. You want to speak English so the whole team can follow. Ask why your colleague disagrees, then look for a deal.

Student B · the colleague

You made the mistake and you want to be honest about it. You'd rather explain it in your first language, because you feel more like yourself. Say why, and suggest another way to do it.

Useful phrases

I'd feel more comfortable in my own language.

That's fair, but the others won't understand.

Could we start in English and switch if you need to?

I don't feel like myself when I speak English.

What if we asked someone to translate?

We're both trying to be honest, so let's find a way.

Afterwards, tell the class: which language did you choose, and did you reach a deal?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 F · 2 C · 3 H · 4 E · 5 G · 6 A · 7 D · 8 B

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 deliberate · 2 uneven · 3 conventional · 4 trace · 5 stable · 6 emphasis

6 Word forms

1 representative · 2 cautious · 3 unwise · 4 reliability · 5 intensity

7 Language focus

1 on · 2 to · 3 of · 4 for · 5 with

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**