

”DO YOU HAVE A LANGUAGE OF EMOTIONS?”:

Early multilinguals' perceptions of emotional weight in their languages

Bachelor's Thesis

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<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b> <p>Monikielisyys on tänä päivänä hyvin yleinen ilmiö, jota on tutkittu monista näkökulmista. Yksi suosittu aihe on monikielisten henkilöiden omiin kieliinsä yhdistämät tunnemerkit, eli kuinka jotkut kielet voidaan kokea tunnetasolla painoltaan tai merkitykseltään voimakkaampina kuin toiset. Tämä tunneherkkyys on yleisesti ottaen vahvin henkilön äidinkielessä, mutta niille puhujille, joilla ei ole yhtä selvää äidinkieltä, tilanne on toinen.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena oli selvittää, kokevatko tällaiset hyvin varhaiset monikieliset puhujat, että jokin heidän kielistään on selvästi emotionaalisemmalta painoarvoltaan selkeämpi kuin muut, tai onko heillä kieli, jonka voisi luokitella <i>tunteiden kieleksi</i> – kieleksi, jolla mieluiten tai helpoiten ilmaisee tunteitaan. Tämän lisäksi tutkimuksessa kysyttiin, minkälainen rooli englannin kielellä on näiden puhujien elämässä, ja näkyykö se mahdollisesti tunteiden ilmaisussa.</p> <p>Kolmea eri taustoista tulevaa henkilöä haastateltiin aikaisemmassa tunteita ja monikielisyyttä koskevassa tutkimuksessa käytetyn kysymyslomakkeen pohjalta. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että <i>tunteiden kielen</i> tunnistaminen ja kehittyminen on hyvin yksilöllistä, mutta että ympäristössä käytetyillä kielillä näyttää olevan siihen suuri vaikutus. Englannin kielen erityinen asema, myös tunteiden ilmaisussa, näkyi enemmän tai vähemmän jokaisen haastateltavan elämässä. Vaikka tutkimusta tunteiden ja kielten osalta onkin tehty aika paljon, erityisesti näiden syntymästään asti monikielisten henkilöiden (<i>multilinguals from birth</i>) kohdalla tutkimustiedossa on vielä selviä aukkoja.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is a common phenomenon in most parts of the world. It might even be a surprise to those who come from a very monolingual background that, globally, it is more likely to find a person who speaks two or more languages, as opposed to finding a person who only speaks one. Multilingualism is also a field with an increasing research interest, the research areas varying from cognitive processes, such as memory and learning, to language use and identity questions, such as how one feels when using different languages in different social situations. One of the interesting topics among all these different aspects is the emotional behaviour of a person who speaks multiple languages; emotions are a complex reality known to be connected to one's languages, which makes the theme an exciting one to examine.

The previous research conducted on the topic of multilinguals and emotions is quite extensive. One of the findings that has been widely accepted is that one's first language (L1) is typically perceived as most sensitive to emotional concepts (Dewaele 2004; Anoshian and Hertel 1994; Bond and Lai 1986). These results are based on studies that examined people who clearly had a first language but learned other languages some time later in life. The absence of research that focuses on early bilinguals or multilinguals only is, however, very noticeable. This is a truly unfortunate situation since the studies done on speakers who have become multilingual only later in life cannot be assumed to similarly apply, for instance, to multilinguals from birth.

Therefore, the present study focuses on multilinguals who have actually grown up speaking many languages that could perhaps all be described as one's L1. The aim of my study was to find out whether the different languages of these multilinguals carry similar emotional weight to their speakers or whether some of the languages are perceived clearly more suitable for dealing with emotionality than others. This study also considered whether a specific language, in this case English, can appear distinct among the other languages in emotion expression for these speakers. As the study was restricted to concentrate on *multilinguals from birth* only, it serves to offer a unique and important perspective for the present field of multilingualism as well as for better understanding how expressing one's emotions is connected to language.

## 2 MULTILINGUALISM AND EMOTIONS

This section will first discuss the concepts of multilingualism and multilinguals together with the notion of bilingualism, and later attempt to explain the complex relations between emotions and language. These topics will be discussed in the light of previous studies on emotions and multilinguals, and reasons for the definitions chosen to be used in the present study will be provided.

### 2.1 Multilingualism

Multilingualism is a rather problematic term as it is used in multiple different senses. Since the main importance regarding these definitions for the present study's point of view is not whether one is a speaker of precisely two languages, or perhaps three or more, I have chosen to discuss bilinguals as multilinguals here. Furthermore, since previous research seems to have given more attention for pointing out the differences particularly between monolinguals and bilinguals, I have chosen to look at the range of definitions of bilinguals in order to also understand the nature of multilingualism.

Bilingualism and bilingual are terms that do not possess only one self-explanatory definition. As these terms can be applied to various studies of diverse natures, the very definitions and their need of accuracy also range from the very strict to the more flexible ones, depending on the case. One of the popular ways of seeing bilinguals can be found in the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which states that bilingual denotes *a person fluent in two languages*. Other common definitions include *being able to speak two languages perfectly* (Bloomfield 1935: 56), as well as managing to master two languages early in life, while also *being able to move back and forth between them smoothly and effortlessly* (Huston 2002, as cited in Grosjean 2010: 19). These definitions are, however, only some of the many descriptions applied in studies of bilinguals. Macnamara (1967, as quoted in Hamers and Blanc 1987:6), for example, offers a much more flexible definition stating that anyone who is able to process another language even to a small extent can be called bilingual – or multilingual, if you will.

While the group of individuals referred to as being bi- or multilingual could, depending on context, consist of speakers of very varied linguistic habits and backgrounds, the present study has limited its view to the fairly strict definition by Huston (ibid.) given above. For the purposes of the study, it is important that the multilingual participants have spoken each of their languages from the very

beginning of their lives, either having acquired them naturally at home or in the surrounding environment, or in an instructed school environment. In this study, these speakers are called *multilinguals from birth*. This approach has been adopted to ensure that the participants have all experienced using their languages in the very sensitive phase of their early lives, which is a matter of importance that will be discussed in the next subsection.

## 2.2 Emotions and language

Emotion is another broad concept that can be approached from several points of view. Here I will, however, discuss it mainly from a perspective offered by Panayiotou (2004: 125). According to Panayiotou (*ibid.*), an emotion can be described as “a biologically manifested element [...] created and learned with particular cultural meaning-making system, constructed in context and located within cultural categorization system.” What is important to notice in this statement are the cultural elements that guide and affect emotion formation and expression. How we express our emotions is commonly context and culture dependent, often having been learned in a given cultural framework. Wierzbicka (1999: 240) goes as far as insisting that culture provides one with ready-made propositions, *sets of scripts*, that work to define what one should actually feel, and how one should deal with the feeling.

Our ways of expressing emotions are also, perhaps surprisingly, closely tied to the nature of our languages. Language, just like emotions, is usually strongly bound to the community and culture in which it is being used. According to Ożańska-Ponikwia (2013: 7), language can be seen as a means to realize matters like one's personal identity, attitudes or cultural beliefs. Veltkamp et al. (2012) go on to note that language actually determines what one is able to think, or even feel, since it is the language that provides the concrete words and concepts for one's expression of ideas. In the most extreme cases, this reality can become evident when certain emotion concepts that are completely normal and relevant in one culture can be found *linguistically non-existent* in another (Panayiotou 2001, as cited in Ożańska-Ponikwia 2013: 4). Therefore, for one to be able to recognise or understand an emotion, the language needs to first provide ways to linguistically address the concept in question. Once the terminology has been acquired, one can more efficiently express and discuss one's emotions.

This leads us to the interesting question of whether speakers of more than one language prefer one of their languages in terms of vocabulary or other linguistic resources for the expression of emotions. Previous research on multilinguals and emotions (Dewaele and Nakano 2013; Anooshian

and Hertel 1994; Bond and Lai 1986) has shown that chronology of acquisition of one's languages plays a crucial role in how one feels when speaking different languages. More specifically, it is one's first language (L1) that tends to be experienced as most sensitive to emotionally loaded topics (Dewaele 2004: 219). This sensitivity to a language can then affect one's self-expression either by causing avoidance of certain emotional expressions in the L1, or by adding some seriousness or authenticity to the message. Either way, it seems that even if one by learning another language comes to lose the fluency in one's original L1, it can still remain the language that carries the greatest emotional weight and sensitivity that has been adopted early in life.

Nurmi et al. (2006: 49) go on to point out that emotional bonds to other people affect a multilingual's development in a language. As a strong emotional bond benefits the acquisition of a language, this process of getting to know the language, then, enables one to become more sensitive and attached to the ways in which emotions are expressed in the language in question. This view of an *emotional system co-developing with early language use* is not a new one, and has been brought to attention in previous research (Bloom and Beckwith 1989) as well.

Finally, there is the concept of a language of *emotions* accompanied with a language of *distance*. Many studies on multilinguals (see e.g. Dewaele and Foth 2002; Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002; Javier and Marcos 1989) seem to support the idea of one language being the language of emotional expressiveness – be it the L1 or some other – and the others being languages of distance or detachment. Basically, the term *language of emotions* implies a similar notion as that of a *language with greatest sensitivity* that was discussed above. In other words, a speaker of many languages might experience one of them as having more apparent emotional weight in it, while in the rest of the languages the weight would not feel as great. Even so, while this might be true to some multilingual speakers, the idea could be questioned in the sense that even if one language appeared to be perceived as clearly most suitable for expressing emotions, it should not automatically entail that the other ones take the position as languages of emotional distance.

The studies mentioned above, however numerous they seem, have mostly concentrated on speakers who clearly have a first language. Considering the very early multilinguals, however, who perhaps cannot identify one L1 for themselves, the phenomenon seems to be much more complex. Where linguistic preferences for expressing emotions in late bilinguals, for instance, could be easily explained by the environment or the age of acquisition, which could then affect their willingness to address certain emotion topics, the same does not seem to apply to the *multilinguals from birth*.

Since these so called *true* multilinguals have used the many languages from the very beginning of their lives, they must also have gotten very similar opportunities for creating emotional sensitivity to all of them.

My aim is to explore whether these multilinguals can still, despite the possibly equal sensitivities to all their languages, identify one language that would work as the language of emotions.

Furthermore, if one language is found to be clearly preferred, my aim is to find the reasons for such a distinct position for that language. Additionally, special attention is paid to the status of English as one of the early languages of these multilinguals. In other words, my intention is to find out whether one in some way favours English above the rest of the languages when it comes to expressing emotions, and if so, why. By examining these questions, the present study attempts to give a glimpse of the realisations of these multilinguals' perceptions of emotional weight in their different languages.



### 3 THE PRESENT STUDY

#### 3.1 Participants

Three early multilinguals took part in the present study. Each of them was given a fake name to cover their true identities. The participants are all settled in Finland; however, all of them have lived in another country, as well.

The first participant is called John. He is a 29-year-old male doctoral student from Cameroon who speaks English, French and Oku. Oku is a tribal language in Cameroon that would in John's case be used mainly at home with the family, whereas French was acquired in the otherwise very dominantly French-speaking environment. Finally, English has always been the language of education for John; his school years started when he was only three years old. That does not, however, imply that English would have been learnt or used only in an instructed environment but, just like the other two languages, it was acquired; after all, English is the other official language of the country together with French. After having lived in Finland for about six years, John does not speak much Finnish, and therefore uses mostly English. French and Oku are used noticeably less.

The second participant is a 24-year-old female student, Mary, who speaks English, Nyanja, Ila and Finnish (Finnish having been learned later in life). Mary has both Zambian and Finnish nationalities as she moved from Zambia to Finland at the age of 12. Nyanja and Ila are regional languages that were and still are spoken in Mary's childhood home by her mother and siblings, who now also live in Finland. English, on the other hand, is the official language of Zambia, being dominant in public contexts such as the media, education etc. Therefore, today, Mary uses four languages in her life in Finland: Finnish, English, Nyanja and Ila.

Finally, the third participant is a 15-year-old female student, Sarah, who speaks English, Finnish and Bengali. Sarah was born and raised in Finland, but has spent six months abroad in England with her family at the age of six. Her parents are Bengali speakers, and that is still the main language at her home. Due to many English speaking relatives and friends, English is and has always been another very commonly spoken language in Sarah's surroundings. Finnish, on the other hand, has been acquired in the dominantly Finnish speaking living environment. In addition, although Finnish is hardly spoken at home, it has always been the main language of Sarah's education and of other formal contexts.

The participants in this study were chosen both based on their age of acquisition of their languages as well as their current usage of the languages. The requirements were that all of the languages had been started and spoken already in the very early childhood, and are still used on a regular basis nowadays. If some languages were not spoken anymore, they were not included to be analysed in this study. In the case of the later acquisition of an additional language, however, some exceptions have been made to address the new language, yet keeping its distinct position in mind.

### **3.2 Research questions**

The aim of the study was to examine whether multilinguals who have grown up speaking two or more languages (*multilinguals from birth*) show clear preferences for expressing emotions in a certain language of their own. The first research question entailed whether one language is clearly preferred for expressing one's emotions, as well as the possible reasons for such a case. In addition, since all of the participants had English as one of their languages from birth, and also in order to contribute to the research on the globally and internationally distinct position of the English language, the second research question concentrated on the role of English in the lives of these multilinguals among all the other spoken languages; more specifically, whether the status of English in their lives was shown in their preferences regarding expressing emotions. The research questions were the following:

1. Do *multilinguals from birth* prefer one of their languages for expressing emotions? If so, how did the language come to gain that status?
2. What is the role of English in these *multilinguals'* lives, and how does it relate to their expressing of emotions?

### **3.3 Data and methods**

My data consists of three semi-structured private interviews. Each participant took part in an interview session that lasted approximately an hour. The sessions were also audio-recorded to help the analysis process. The language of the interviews was in each case English. Semi-structured interviews were found most suitable for the present study's purposes; the discussion sessions were led by the interview questions rather than simply happening in a form of sequences of questions and answers. The participants could freely add to their answers anything they thought is relevant while the interviewer was able to make sure that all the right topic areas were covered to an adequate

extent. Both parties were also able to ask for clarifications when needed.

The actual interview questions (see the Appendix) were based on the web questionnaire *Bilingualism and Emotions* by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2001-2003). This was done to facilitate the comparability of the findings in the analysis phase. However, some of the questions were slightly modified or completely left out, and additional questions were created so to suit the intentions and point of view of the present study. The questions approached the concept of emotions through three main categories: anger, affection and embarrassment. Nevertheless, some questions dealing with other kinds of emotionality were also included in order to widen the perspective of emotions and that way to more profoundly understand how the different languages relate to the speakers' self-expression. In addition, the notions of spontaneousness and inner speech in emotion expression were taken into account.

For the analysis, I applied the method of content analysis which is especially suitable for drawing conclusions from any recorded communications (Babbie 1992: 328), enabling the data to be systematically summarized and compared through processes of categorizing (Holsti 1969: 3). Therefore, after the recorded interviews had been transcribed, the most relevant content of each participant's answers were carefully selected and systematically categorized in the light of the interview and research questions. Finally, each participant's perceptions and reflections were compared with each other to reveal any major differences.

## 4 ANALYSIS

The aim of this study was to examine whether multilingual speakers, having spoken multiple languages since the early childhood, can recognise a language of emotion, or a language in which the emotional weight is most apparent for them. In addition to this, the position of English in these speakers' lives as opposed to the other languages was being observed.

The three interviewed multilinguals – John, Mary and Sarah – had quite a few similarities to their situations. Firstly, all were speakers of three languages from birth. Secondly, each one had English as one of their languages. Thirdly, they all had lived in another country in addition to Finland where they all are currently settled. These facts, of course, leave a lot of room for variety in other areas of life. Each speaker's individual background and current living situation will be looked at in more detail below.

### 4.1 Language of emotions

First of all, it is crucial to understand that identifying a language of emotions does not here entail incapability to express emotions in other languages. On the contrary, these speakers are all capable of expressing themselves in all of their languages since they are fluent in each of them. Recognising the language of emotions is then more of a question of personal preference than of proficiency. The term *dominant language* will also appear in some of the responses of these participants, and it should be recalled that this expression is not supposed to automatically imply the preference for emotional expression in the language in question.

Considering the first part of the first research question, i.e. whether these *multilinguals from birth* prefer one of their languages for expressing emotions, the responses were quite varied. For John, the default language, and the preferred language of emotions, is always English over French and Oku. Mary, in contrast, could not recognise preferences for any one specific language when it comes to emotional expressiveness, saying she is best able to express herself by a mixture of all her languages (English, Nyanja, Ila and Finnish). However, merely for the fact that English and Finnish are currently the most dominant languages for her, they seem to be the automatic default option. Finally, according to Sarah, her language of emotions is English. However, she thinks that perhaps occasionally Finnish and English can together be seen as the most suitable means of emotion expression. Bengali, on the other hand, was not given any such recognition considering emotion expression.

However diverse the three responses above seem at first hand, at a closer look, they reveal clear similarities regarding the speakers' individual preferences; each recognises English as one, or the only, language of emotions. Furthermore, in two cases, Finnish and English can occasionally be preferred together. Where one's personal preferences could be a result of various factors, it seems quite obvious that, here, it is a question of one's living environment playing a major role in determining the language of emotions; living in Finland, it is not unlikely that the two seemingly preferred languages, Finnish and English, would be used more often than French, Oku, Ila, Nyanja or Bengali.

## 4.2 Developing a language of emotions

To answer the second part of the first research question, of how a language of emotions gains its status over all the other spoken languages, it is now useful to look at the three participants and the reasons for their preferences more individually.

### 4.2.1 John

As for John, the preference for English appears very clear-cut. In his case, it is quite evident that the environment has been a substantial factor in the process of developing a language of emotions; after all, having lived in Finland for the past six years, John's usage of English has been greater compared to that of French or the Cameroonian tribe language Oku. As he explains it:

(1) *I think I do almost everything in English, that's why I say it's like the default [language]... Before I came to Finland I used to talk all the three [languages] more often. But for the past six years in Finland, the degree of usage has been extremely high, English has been extremely dominant. It wasn't really the default before, just one of the three.*

It is quite obvious why John calls English *the default language* of his life; the other two do simply not work as well in his current living environment. Since he does not really speak Finnish, English is left without any real competitors. If John did learn Finnish better, however, one might argue that there is a possibility of Finnish eventually reaching the same level as English, and thus becoming a language where the emotional weight is equally apparent for him, which is exactly what happened to Mary.

### 4.2.2 Mary

Mary speaks English, Nyanja and Ila *from birth*, but has learnt Finnish clearly later in life after moving to Finland at the age of 12. The need for as well as exposure to both Finnish and English in Finland has made the two her most dominant languages; Finnish is basically the language of the society she lives in, whereas English works as the means of communication in many other daily encounters, i.e. when meeting friends or taking care of different responsibilities at the local church. However, although she finds these two the most dominant ones at the moment, she also recognises that being able to use all of her languages interchangeably would be the most ideal situation for expressing herself and her emotions:

(2) *For me, having so many languages, sometimes it's hard to find words... Nyanja and Ila, or Finnish and English... For me, if I can use them all I can best describe myself.*

Unlike John, who clearly has wired himself to operate in one language in all occasions, Mary seems to find it useful to make use of all of her languages as much as possible. To be more specific, the languages seem to appear in sets of two; either Nyanja and Ila, or Finnish and English, depending on people and place. As mentioned before, Nyanja and Ila often appear mixed together making up the unique language of Mary's childhood home and nuclear family. Nyanja and Ila are still very limited in the sense of where and with whom they can be spoken. The other language set, Finnish and English, on the other hand, that are also often used interchangeably, are present and more actively used in wider contexts. Therefore, although the ideal for Mary would be to be able to use all the four languages for expressing herself, due to her present living circumstances the reality for her is to speak mostly Finnish and English. Since dominance in a language tends to entail some sort of automaticity and easiness of self-expression, it is no surprise that Mary would report preferring especially these currently most dominant languages also for expressing her emotions.

### 4.2.3 Sarah

Finally, according to Sarah, English is her most evident language of emotions, while Bengali, being strongly present in her daily life because of her Bengali-speaking family, is her most dominant language. Despite this dominance, however, English, and perhaps Finnish as well, have somehow managed to outdo Bengali in terms of emotional weight. In Sarah's case, it is unlikely that the reason for such distance regarding Bengali would be because of lack of usage. As she explains it:

(3) *I use [Bengali] at home all the time. I speak in Finnish only when I'm at school. And English only with my other friends, when I'm not at school or at home. And I'm mostly at home.*

The reason for English and Finnish being preferred for expressing emotions might then not be due to lack of use of Bengali; after all, Sarah notes that she is *mostly at home* where Bengali is always present and used. I would claim that the reason Bengali is experienced more distant than the others is likely to be because, despite its regular usage, there is rather little exposure to it. The exposure to both English and Finnish, on the other hand, is vastly greater in the wider context of Sarah's current living environment in Finland. Having been exposed to these languages so much might have given her a clearer sense of how they work in different settings and contexts, possibly also making her more comfortable to use the languages for expressing herself. This would certainly agree with Panayiotou's (2004: 125) earlier statement on how one's expression of emotions naturally develops to be tied to one's surrounding culture and languages. Thus, the languages one is more familiar with in more domains of life – in Sarah's case, English and Finnish – are better options for becoming developed languages of emotions.

Another factor that might affect Sarah's strong preference for English is the very company with whom she gets to use the language. Expressing oneself might be easier among certain people more than with others, and in Sarah's case, there are reasons to believe that the company or the place to talk about emotionally sensitive topics just happens to be an English-speaking environment. As her comment below suggests:

(4) *The only people I discuss something bad with, it's usually with my cousins, and they speak English.*

The *bad* she mentions refers to the interview question on ability to talk about difficult or bad memories in a certain language – that is, the ability to discuss possibly very emotionally loaded topics. It seems that there are some people close to Sarah who simply happen to speak English, and therefore she might also have become more fluent and more used to the ways of expressing emotionality in that very language. As Nurmi et al. (2006: 49) point out, the people one is close with – the people one has an emotional bond with – affect the ways one's language develops. As mentioned before, part of this language development is developing an emotional dimension to it. Therefore, in the process of developing emotional weight in a language, not only the surrounding

languages but also the people who are close to oneself can affect one's personal preferences for emotion expression.

To conclude, although there are many languages known to be present in the daily lives of John, Mary and Sarah, all three seem to have created a habit of expressing emotions in a language, or languages, that are best understood by the people around them. Quite naturally, English and Finnish (if known) are, therefore, the most probable candidates to be considered one's languages of emotion in their current setting. As for the rest of their languages – French, Oku, Ila, Nyanja and Bengali – similar habits might be fairly difficult to establish to the same extent in a place like Finland where there is little use for them.

#### **4.3 Emotional weight vs. language of emotions**

An important insight that arises from the data is one concerning the concepts of *language of emotions* and the *emotional weight in a language*. The present study started off with the understanding that the two concepts imply the same reality; when there is emotional weight in a language it can also be called one's language of emotions. However, what was learnt from the interviews was that *languages of emotions* are not necessarily only those languages which carry the strongest and clearest emotional weight but also those of *distance* might be experienced useful for emotion expression.

This is seen in how John and Sarah would prefer English namely because of its familiarity and clearer emotional weight, whereas Mary would sometimes find English useful for its *distance* (see 4.4.2 for further discussion), which enables her to use the language for emotional discussion and expression more easily. Therefore, where previous research (Dewaele and Foth 2002; Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002; Javier and Marcos 1989) would present a *language of emotions* and a *language of distance* as opposites, Mary's reality shows that a *language of distance* can actually be identified as one of the *languages of emotions*. Although such stance has not appeared in earlier research, in practice these patterns can be seen to agree with Dewaele's (2004: 219) findings that show that having emotional force in a language can either advance or hinder the usage of a language, depending on one's personal intentions.

It seems that among the participants there were at least two different views of how to understand this concept of *language of emotions*; either as a language with greatest emotional sensitivity (as for John and Sarah), or as a language for whatever reasons most suitable for one's everyday expression



of emotions (as for Mary). That would explain why John and Sarah would only name English as the language of emotions, whereas Mary could include all of her languages (both those of emotional weight and of emotional distance) to serve as her languages of emotions.

To conclude, there seems to be a pattern which says that if a language is perceived to have strong emotional weight, it is always perceived as one of the languages of emotions (at least for the participants in the present study), and if a language is perceived to have a distancing function, one might or might not prefer it for emotion expression. If a language of distance is indeed preferred, it can also be called a language of emotions.

#### **4.4 The role of English**

The second research question focused on the role of English in these multilinguals lives, and how it might be seen in relation to the interviewees' preferences in emotion expression. This question was not examined through a separate interview question but studied in the light of the data of the interviews. As has already become evident in the preceding discussion, all of these multilingual speakers considered English having a vital part in their lives, and more specifically, to be an essential means in their expression of emotions. Regardless of their diverse language repertoires, all of the participants considered English the language, or one of the languages, of emotions. Although these findings already to some extent answer the question of how English relates to the participants' emotion expression, in order to better understand the position of English in these speakers' lives, the following sections will now move on to discuss further features of how the English language is perceived in terms of emotionality. The focus of these sections is then on the English language; however, it has also been compared to the other spoken languages only to point out where they differs from each other.

##### **4.4.1 John**

John's experience is an example of how the role of English can change over the years. For him, English was originally only one of the three local languages back in Cameroon. After moving to Finland, the position of English changed dramatically; suddenly it was the only language to use for communication and for expressing oneself, making it distinctly dominant for him, in every domain of life. One could say that the circumstances forced English to become special for him.

There was, however, one exception to John's otherwise so fixed preference for English. Despite English's status as the default language, when it comes to swearwords and swearing, John would

suddenly prefer languages other than English:

(5) *I think it's easier to swear in French, or the weight is stronger. In English it's like as if it is a joke. Oku is also good for swearing, it makes more sense.*

John's favour for English in everything but swearwords is hard to comprehend, and it is difficult to say whether there is something more behind it. For one thing, this preference does not seem to derive from a desire to detach oneself when swearing either since French would be preferred specifically for its strong emotional weight. However, swearwords as compared to other types of words are also a class of exceptionally clear and strong emotional weight (see e.g. Dewaele 2004; Dewaele and Foth 2002) which might have something to do with John's exception to the rule. Either way, this makes the status of English again look somewhat special as opposed to those of the other two languages, Oku and French.

#### 4.4.2 Mary

In Mary's case, the role of English has also changed in a way after moving to Finland: English has become clearly more dominant than what it used to be back in Zambia. Nevertheless, the change of environment has not affected Mary's use of English in a similar way as it affected John's. Although English is one of the languages Mary feels currently most fluent in, when it comes to emotional perception (and not only swearwords), Mary has always identified English as a *surface* language, a language of distance:

(6) *English is the surface language. In English I could use a bad word without really feeling it.*

Whereas the change of environment made John start to operate mainly in English and make it his language of emotions, for Mary, the English language has not managed to establish a similar stance. The current dominance in English (and Finnish) has not changed the fact that English is still perceived a language of emotional distance. There is no apparent explanation for why English feels this way for Mary; although Nyanja and Ila were the languages that were spoken at home the most, English has always been present in her life since childhood as it is the official language of Zambia used i.e. as the language of media, government and education. For some reason, still, English never gained the same degree of sensitivity as the other languages. This experience seems to partly support previous findings (e.g. Dewaele and Foth 2002; Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002; Javier and

Marcos 1989) that suggest one language being the language of emotional expressiveness, while the others serve as languages of distance or detachment. In Mary's case, however, there seems to be several languages of emotional sensitiveness, and only one language – English – that remained the language of distance. Furthermore, as discussed before (in 4.3), English as a language of distance does not, for her, mean that it would not be used for expressing emotions; after all, Mary notes that she prefers all of her languages.

Another interesting realization of the role of English can be seen when compared to that of Finnish. Somehow even Finnish, a language Mary learnt clearly later in life, has been able to gain sensitivity over English, becoming more distinct in meaning in such a way that the emotional weight in it is stronger than in English:

(7) *In my mother tongue or Finnish, it's not as easy to just say words like 'I love you'... then it's like, oh my God, I'm really being serious.*

To be clear, as explained before, Mary has spoken several languages from early childhood, and the *mother tongue* she refers to here is the language combination of Nyanja and Ila, as she has always used them mixed together. By using the term *mother tongue*, she does not then imply having one L1, but rather it is used to refer to the language of the ethnic group of the part of Zambia she comes from. What is more important about Mary's comment above, however, concerns the role of English; while Finnish has somehow over the years become as sensitive and emotionally transparent to her as both Nyanja and Ila, English has all this time remained a language of distance. This clearly speaks of the special and distinct status English has for Mary compared to her other languages.

#### 4.4.3 Sarah

In Sarah's life, the role of English seems quite distinctive – after all, she calls English her language of emotions. However, it is not the only language with a special position in her life. Bengali as her most dominant language has always been the language of her home, and the language of her education has always been Finnish. English, on the other hand, seems to be profiled more as the language among friends and relatives, as well as much of her free time. From this point of view all of the three languages appear, in their own ways, to have a very prominent position in Sarah's life, making them look quite equal in terms of importance. However, Bengali and Finnish could also be understood to be rather restricted; Bengali to home, and Finnish to school. English, then again, seem to be more connected to various types of environments, as well as used in multiple different

occasions. That would explain why, for many contexts, Sarah eventually prefers English:

(8) *Like I said, everything just sounds better in English.*

The fact that everything sounds better, or in other words, feels more natural to Sarah in English must be because of the close relation she has developed to the English language. English is, then, not only a special language to Sarah in terms of emotional expressing, as shown before, but it is special generally in other areas of life, too. There is no clear evidence of Finnish or Bengali being perceived in a similar way, which makes the role of English in Sarah's life quite distinct.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to find out whether *multilinguals from birth* identify one of their languages as the language of emotions. The findings revealed a fairly diverse reality to the matter. One participant reported having one default language for everything, one that also applied to emotions. Another speaker hardly recognised one specific language, preferring a mixture of all of her languages for emotion expression. Finally, the third one agreed to having one, or perhaps two languages that could be called her languages of emotions. It was noticed that a language for expressing emotions can be decided upon either by recognising emotional weight in it, or because of the language's features of distance. These patterns seem to accord with earlier findings (Dewaele 2004) on the matter. However, the present study also found that when a language is preferred precisely for its emotional distance, it can also be called a language of emotions as such, which is an idea that has not come up in previous research.

As each of the participants had English as one of their early languages, the research questions also examined the role of English in their lives, and how it relates to their expression of emotions. English did, indeed, have a very prominent position in each of these multilinguals' lives. All the participants identified English as one or the only language of emotions. In two cases, Finnish and English were occasionally preferred together. Furthermore, English seemed to maintain its distinct status also in other domains of life, either by carrying clearly weaker or clearly stronger emotional weight to it as opposed to the rest of the spoken languages. In other words, two speakers felt that English was their most emotionally sensitive language, while one of the participants felt that out of all of her languages, English was clearly most distant in terms of emotionality.

While the supposition concerning these *multilinguals from birth* tends to be that they have equal sensitivities to all their languages, the reality seems to be that these sensitivities differ, and can be affected very early in life, as well. It is probable that any of these speakers' languages could become the one dominant, default language of emotions, given the right circumstances, and given enough time for familiarity and dominance to evolve. Similarly, the findings of this study showed that all the three participants seemed to have created a habit of expressing their emotions in a language, or languages, that are best understood by the people around them. The process of developing a language of emotions is, then, highly individual while being strongly tied to one's environment.

Previous research has not been totally unanimous on all the details of the matter of emotions and

languages. For one thing, nevertheless, the findings of this study generally reflected those of the previous ones. The importance of one's environment for language and emotion development (as in Panayiotou 2004) as well as the theme of emotional bonds in respect of development in languages (as in Nurmi et al. 2006) were all present in the findings of this study. The concepts of a language of distance and a language of emotional sensitivity (as in e.g. Dewaele and Foth 2002; Dewaele and Pavlenko 2002; Javier and Marcos 1989) were also commonly discussed, however, sometimes perceived slightly differently among the participants. As for some of these details that showed a little different reality from what previous studies have brought up, it is good to recall the present study's restriction to *multilinguals from birth* only. Some of these experiences concerning languages and emotions for the early multilinguals might, indeed, be very different from those who clearly have an L1; therefore, the results between the two groups might in some matters be poorly comparable.

As unique as the present study might be in its restricted approach to *multilinguals from birth*, it undoubtedly remains very limited in its scope. Although both research questions were answered, the study rather evoked more questions than it gave definite conclusions. For instance, it is still unclear how long it takes for new environment to make a difference for one's personal preferences regarding languages of emotions, as well as how only one of the languages from birth can remain a language of distance in similar circumstances with the other languages. I believe that having a deeper appreciation of these patterns would be helpful especially for educational and parental purposes; knowing more about the multilingual ways of thinking, perceiving and feeling would definitely make a difference in how well they can be supported in many fields of life. Therefore, to answer the remaining questions and also to gain a more comprehensive ground to support the findings of the present study, further research that aims at understanding these truly multilingual minds and the fascinating relations between languages and emotions will be needed.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview: Multilinguals and emotions

What languages do you speak?

What was the age of acquisition for each of them?

Where/with whom did you learn them?

Which language would you consider to be your most dominant language?

Do you still use all of your early languages on a regular basis?

Who do you speak your languages with?

Describe your languages. What kinds of adjectives would you connect to them?

Could you say that one of your languages is your language of emotions? (If yes, how did the language of emotions come to gain its status?)

Do you ever switch between languages within a conversation? Give an example of a situation.

Do you ever wish to switch between languages when having to address or discuss certain topics?

Which topics?

If you were to recall some bad or difficult memories, what language would you prefer to discuss them in?

Is it easier or more difficult for you to talk about emotional topics in your less dominant languages (compared to the dominant language)?

Do swear or taboo words in your different languages have the same emotional weight for you? How do they differ?

Does the phrase *I love you* have the same emotional weight for you in your different languages?

Do you prefer using emotion terms or terms of endearment in one language over all others?

What language do you express your deepest feelings in?

If you form sentences silently in your mind, what languages do you typically use?

If you ever talk to yourself, what language do you use?

If you pray, what language do you use to express yourself?

Are there differences in how you react to songs that are sung in your different languages?

Which language would you use when reacting spontaneously to something that evokes emotionality in you?

What languages do you typically use to express your anger?

If you swear, what language do you typically swear in?

If you happened to hit yourself with a hammer, in what language would the words come out of your mouth?

What language do you argue in? What language would you prefer for arguing?

Is there anything else you would like to add concerning what we have already discussed?