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‘Am I Sincere about
My Feelings?’: Changes
in Multilinguals’
Self-perceptions when
Discussing Emotional Topics
in Different Languages

Abstract: The first language (L1) is generally considered by multilinguals as the one in which they feel more ‘themselves’ in emotional circumstances. Affective socialization in a foreign language (LX) can help speakers develop a similar level of authenticity when using that language. This study is conducted on a sample of 468 migrants living in Anglophone countries who are L1 speakers of Italian and LX speakers of English, the language of the host society. The objective is to verify if the frequency of use for expressing emotions and the perceived emotional resonance of both languages can predict changes in migrants’ self-perceptions when discussing emotional topics in the LX. Survey data revealed that the emotional resonance of the L1 was the only factor increasing participants’ sense of feeling different when using the LX in emotional conversations. Narratives from 5 interviews and 303 answers to an open-ended survey question suggested that these self-perceptions varied extensively according to the intensity and type of emotion expressed.

Key words: self-perceptions, emotions in different languages, language emotionality, affective socialisation, migrants’ identities

Introduction

A majority of multilinguals report feeling like a different person in their different languages (Pavlenko, 2006). These perceptions are unique to individuals and change over time (Dewaele, 2016a). The “sense of self” in a language has been often linked to the emotional resonance of that language (Dewaele, 2010; Pavlenko 2005, 2006). The first language (L1) is typically depicted as the “language of the heart” while foreign languages (LX)¹ can be described as emotionally weaker and more distant (Dewaele, 2010, 2015, Dewaele et al., 2021, Dewaele et al., in press; Pavlenko, 2012). When using an LX, individuals

¹ In this study ‘LX’ refers to any language other than the first language, acquired after age 3 regardless of the chronological order of acquisition.

may feel a sense of constraint because of incomplete pragmatic competence (Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017; Panicacci, 2021), but can also experience liberation from restrictive heritage emotional scripts (Mijatović & Tytus 2016; Wilson 2013). Grosjean (2015, 2021) speculated that part of the variation in these feelings of difference when switching languages could be simply linked to situational changes. This was confirmed in (Panicacci & Dewaele, 2018) where multilinguals' self-perceptions when speaking an LX were found to be shaped by interlocutors and topics of conversation. Emotional circumstances emerged as the *leitmotif* of individuals' feelings of difference when switching languages and often informed their sociolinguistic practices. Code-switching can in fact be used strategically in response to the speaker's emotional needs (Cook, 2019; Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2016; Resnik, 2018; Rolland et al., 2017). If individuals' feelings of difference when switching languages relate to the emotions they experience when using their languages, what happens to their self-perceptions when specifically discussing emotional topics? Can the emotional attachment they experience in relation to a specific language explain their sense of feeling different when having to use another language to express their emotions? This research takes a sociolinguistic approach (cf. e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) that puts the experiences of participants and their reflexivity at the centre of the analysis to answer these questions. By focusing on the self-perceptions of migrants' who are L1 users of Italian and LX users of English, the present paper follows the steps of a previous study on speakers' reflexivity, conducted on the same sample of participants (Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017, 2018). In contrast with the previous study, this paper investigates the causes of multilinguals' feelings of difference specifically when talking about emotional matters. Given the prominent role of emotions in explaining multilinguals' sociolinguistic practices, we believe that this approach could help shed light on multilinguals' multicompetence (Cook, 2016) and, more specifically, their emotional multicompetence (Dewaele, 2016b).

Literature Review

Expressing emotions is one of the most daunting challenges in everyday communication. Whether it is an expression of sympathy or an outburst of frustration, voicing emotions appropriately is challenging in the L1, and exponentially more so in the LX (Dewaele, 2010). A challenge is not by definition something negative. Pavlenko (2006) pointed out that expressing emotions in an LX can be described both “as a source of both anguish and creative enrichment” (Pavlenko, 2006, p. 5). A number of studies on this topic emerged from the Bilingualism and Emotions Questionnaire (BEQ) (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001–2003). The BEQ investigated 1,579 adult multilinguals’ language perceptions and choices for expressing emotions in several languages (L1, L2, L3, L4 and L5)². Independent variables included sociobiographical factors like age, gender, education, and language-specific aspects such as self-perceived dominance, proficiency in the different languages, age of onset, context of acquisition, frequency of use, degree of socialisation, and network of interlocutors. The analyses indicated that languages acquired later in life were perceived to be significantly less useful, less colourful, less rich, less emotional, and less likely to be used to express emotions (Dewaele, 2010, 2015). Yet, an LX could be the preferred choice to express emotions, depending on communicative intents, the people involved in the conversation, or secondary affective socialisation in the LX (Dewaele, 2008; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2018; Pavlenko, 2005). In other words, an LX could potentially evolve from “an obscure echo of social interactions to a language of the heart” (Dewaele, 2015, p. 16). This means that the emotional resonance of the L1 is not set in stone and that the LX can take over that position, resulting “in the feeling of greater language emotionality and reinforce the attachment to the language in question” (Pavlenko, 2013, p. 17). Only recently has a proper psychometric scale been developed for measuring the reduction in emotional resonance in the LX relative to the L1 (Toivo et al., 2023). The 15-item scale *Reduced*

² The numbers stand for the chronological order of acquisition.

Emotional Resonance in LX (RER-LX) showed solid test reliability, near-normally distributed values, and content validity. It was found to correlate well with the subscales referring to language preferences for swearing, expressing feelings and anger in Dewaele and Pavlenko's (2001–2003) *Bilingualism and Emotions Questionnaire*. Dewaele et al. (2023) was the first study to use the RER-LX to investigate sources of variation in emotional resonance in the English LX of 141 L1 Arabic pupils and students in Saudi Arabia. A comparison of the L1 and LX confirmed that the former had significantly higher emotional resonance. Variation in LX emotional resonance was found to be linked to sociobiographical variables as well as participants' linguistic profiles: older and female participants, as well participants who had been in English-speaking primary (but not secondary) schools, and frequent and intense users of English scored significantly higher on LX emotional resonance.

The BEQ was the first survey to include an open question on shift in the sense of self as a result of code-switching. Two thirds of participants claimed to feel like a different person when switching languages and the analysis of the initial one thousand responses showed that the perception of a shift in identity was unrelated to proficiency or age of acquisition of the LX (Dewaele, 2016a) as McWhorter (2014) had suggested. Mostly, participants claimed that they felt more authentic in their L1, especially in emotionally charged circumstances (Dewaele, 2010; Pavlenko, 2005, 2006). The superior power of the L1 was confirmed in Dewaele and Nakano's study (2013) where the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from 106 multilinguals revealed a systematic shift across languages, with participants feeling gradually less logical, less serious, less emotional, as well as increasingly fake, when using respectively the L2, L3 and L4. In this instance, self-perceived proficiency was a significant predictor of shift on all the feelings scales in the L2 and only on feeling fake in the L3. The authors argued that a certain mastery of a language is needed before developing feelings in it. However, the most remarkable finding was the parallel effect on feeling both less logical and less emotional in all LXs.

Wilson (2008) used the feedback from the 1414 participants that answered the BEQ open question on the sense of self. Her analysis revealed recurrent

themes strongly related to emotions, such as Control/Lack of control (19%) and Emotionality (14%). In a separate analysis of 172 British adults, Wilson (2013) found a negative relationship between the personality trait Extraversion and the sense of feeling different when using an LX emerged. She speculated that: “A foreign language can give shy people a mask to hide behind even at relatively modest levels of proficiency” (Wilson, 2013, p. 305). Likewise, Ożańska-Ponikwia (2013) focused on the psychological factors linked to the self-perceptions of 137 Poles living in an English-speaking country when using English. She found that those who used English more frequently, were also more proficient and more likely to express emotions in it. Several personality traits, such as Extraversion, Openness and Conscientiousness, as well as Emotional Intelligence, were positively linked to the sense of feeling different while speaking English. In order to explain the discrepancy from Wilson’s (2013) results, she argued that bilinguals who were socially and emotionally skilled were probably also “better able to notice subtle changes in personality and behaviour while using the L2” (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2013, p. 152). When describing their perceptions, many participants linked their self-alterations to a sense of anxiety when speaking English (p. 231). Using the same database, Ożańska-Ponikwia (2016) focused on 62 Polish-English bilinguals’ code-switching practices. Participants reported switching to their L1 mostly when discussing personal topics with known interlocutors (57% of the cases) in emotionally charged situations (30% of the cases). Informants claimed not be able to express themselves accurately enough in the L2. Focussing specifically on the perception of the sentence “I love you” versus the Polish equivalent “Kocham Cię,” the researcher conducted another follow-up study on 72 Polish migrants living in England and Ireland (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2019). According to the analysis, the phrase was perceived as stronger in Polish, participants’ L1, but socialisation in the local culture was linked with increased emotionality of the English equivalent and its increased use in emotional situations.

Mijatović and Tytus (2016) examined data from 88 German-English bilinguals and found that individuals’ feelings of difference when switching languages were linked with cultural differences, language proficiency, personal

changes related to the type of interlocutors, and the desire of “breaking free” from the L1 personality. Based on qualitative data, the authors interpreted results following Wilson's argument that an LX can be a ‘liberating force’ that allows the speaker to escape from the heritage norms, especially in emotional situations (Mijatović & Tytus, 2016, p. 9).

In order to clarify the relationship between multilinguals' proficiency and feeling of difference in the LX, which proved inconsistent across different studies, Dewaele (2016a) analysed the feedback from 1005 participants in the BEQ database. While some participants did mention a limited proficiency in the LX as the principal cause of their altered self-perceptions, no significant statistical relationship emerged. Similar patterns appeared between the LX frequency of use and feelings of difference when using the LX. However, age, education level, and anxiety when speaking with colleagues or over the phone predicted the speaker's sense of feeling different in different languages. This study suggested that multilinguals have divergent opinions about the causes of feelings of difference in the LX.

Like Ożańska-Ponikwia (2013), Hammer's (2016) study of 149 Polish migrants in the UK revealed that participants' sociocultural and psychological integration was linked with a more frequent use of English, also in private and intimate domains. Informants with higher acculturation levels, who developed meaningful social relationships in English, reported feeling ‘more themselves’ when speaking it. Hammer speculated that developing an emotional attachment to English helped participants identify more strongly with it, creating ‘an emotional bond’ (Hammer, 2016, p. 44). As Pavlenko (2012, 2013) suggested, the emotional value of an LX might also coincide with the development of a new self, in a sort of ‘emotional embodiment’ of the language.

Panicacci and Dewaele (2017) used the database on which the present paper is based to investigate the link between migrants' self-perceptions when using the LX, their personality traits, and socio-psychological engagement with the LX culture. Data from 468 Italian migrants living in an English-speaking country showed that feelings of difference when using English were more intense among participants who scored higher on Neuroticism and Introversion, confirming both Wilson's (2013) and Mijatović and Tytus' (2016)

findings. Also, a stronger identification with local cultural practices seemed to constrain migrants' sense of feeling different when speaking English, echoing Hammer's results. In a follow-up study, Panicacci and Dewaele (2018) used the same database to verify whether speakers' reflexivity could be explained by contextual factors, such as the type of interlocutors or topics of conversations. Statistical analyses revealed that participants' feelings of difference peaked when using the LX to discuss emotional topics with less familiar interlocutors. Qualitative accounts showed that these perceptions were linked to a large number of interacting variables, namely, affective socialisation within the new cultural environment, cultural orientation and, above all, unique emotional experiences in the LX.

In another study conducted on intercultural couples, Dewaele and Salomidou (2017) examined whether linguistic and cultural differences made emotional communication more challenging. Confirming previous studies (Pavlenko, 2006; Wilson, 2013), half of the 429 participants mentioned emotional constraints when using an LX with their partner, mainly due to a lack of emotional resonance, while a quarter voiced a sense of liberation in the LX. Only a minority reported experiencing a lack of genuineness when using an LX with their partner at the beginning of the relationship, a feeling that generally faded over a period of months. In other words, the partner's language became the language of the heart for many LX users in longer relationships.

The reduced emotional resonance of the LX has been found to be highly beneficial in psychotherapy. Cook and Dewaele (2022) found that English LX – even with limited proficiency – allowed three torture-survivors now living in London to verbalise a trauma that was too raw to discuss in their L1. They felt that the LX liberated and empowered them and allowed them to build a new identity. Similarly, Rolland et al.'s (2017, 2021) mixed methods study of 109 multilingual clients revealed that very few psychotherapists discussed languages choices and code-switching with their clients. Some clients reported switching to an LX to maintain distance from pain. The authors point out that therapists who are unaware of the protective effect of code-switching may inadvertently allow it to become a client's defence mechanism which may endanger the progress of the therapy.

Emotions clearly emerge as a recurrent theme in the literature on multilinguals' reflexivity. Even though individuals struggled to identify the origin of their perceptions when switching languages, they often referred to their emotional states. Affective socialisation in an LX seemed to affect the speaker's perceptions of the language and, consequently, their sense of self when using it. In other words, the more the LX gains emotional resonance, the more it becomes a novel identity marker (Cook & Dewaele, 2022; De Fina, 2007; Panicacci, 2021; Pavlenko, 2012, 2013).

To our knowledge, no study has systematically considered cross-linguistic influences when it comes to multilinguals' self-perceptions in different languages. If we consider multilinguals as linguistically integrated identities (Cook, 2016; Resnik, 2018), this aspect could offer important keys to the interpretation of multilinguals' reflexivity. Focusing on migration contexts, this study aims to fill this gap and includes all relevant linguistic dimensions, the L1 and the target language, in the analysis of migrants' self-reported changes when expressing emotions.

Research Questions

Based on a sample of Italian immigrants residing in Anglophone countries, who are L1 speakers of Italian and LX speakers of English, this research addresses the following questions:

- 1) Can the frequency of use of the L1/LX for expressing emotions explain the variation in migrants' sense of feeling different when using the LX to talk about emotional matters?
- 2) Can the perceived emotional resonance of the L1/LX explain the variation in migrants' sense of feeling different when using the LX to talk about emotional matters?

We hypothesise that a stronger sense of feeling different when using the LX to talk about emotional matters could be attributed to a more frequent

use of the L1 for expressing emotions and higher degree of perceived emotional resonance of the L1. Conversely, a more frequent use of the LX for expressing emotions and a higher degree of perceived emotional resonance of the LX are expected to reduce migrants' sense of feeling like a different person when using the LX to discuss emotional topics.

Methodology

Procedure

The present research adopted a mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2015), which proved valuable in a series of similar studies (Dewaele, 2016a; Mijatović & Tytus, 2016; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017, 2018; Pavlenko, 2016). First, quantitative data has been collected through a web-survey, advertised using a snowball sampling strategy. Lastly, five participants randomly selected from the survey respondent pool were interviewed using a semi-structured script.

Participants

Participants were all L1 speakers of Italian ($n = 468$), living in English-speaking countries (United Kingdom: $n = 360$, Ireland: $n = 48$, United States: $n = 56$, and Canada: $n = 4$). Their average age was 34 ($SD = 9$), ranging from 18 to 73 years old. The average age of migration was 27, ranging from 0 to 53 ($SD = 7$), and the average number of years spent in an English-speaking country was 7, ranging from a few months to 68 years ($SD = 9$). Most participants were highly educated: 62 completed high school, 124 an undergraduate degree, 177 a postgraduate degree and 105 a doctoral degree. Self-perceived proficiency in English³ on 5-point Likert scales and revealed relatively high scores on all different dimensions: M Speaking = 4.19, M Listening = 4.31, M Reading = 4.56,

³ No such data were collected for Italian, given all participants were late migrants, borned and raised in Italy.

M Writing = 4.20. The sample was also highly multilingual: with 170 bilinguals (Italian and English), 155 trilinguals, 96 quadrilinguals, and the remaining 47 participants could speak 5 languages or more.

Data Collection

Participants filled out a short socio-biographical survey with questions about gender, age, education, and language history and use. The second section of the questionnaire was modelled on the BEQ (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001–2003). Respondents were asked about their self-perceptions when using English. An optional open-ended question was included to let respondents explain their perceptions in more in detail. The survey also contained questions concerning informants' language use for expressing emotions and a question asking them to rate the emotionality of both Italian (the L1) and English (the LX).

Five UK-based survey participants took part in an interview session. They differed in age, years spent in an Anglophone environment, status in the country, social networks, and migration history (Table 1). Participants were given the choice to have the interviews in Italian or English. All opted for English though there was regular code-switching to Italian. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Questions ranged from the more general (migration experience, habitual language use) to the more specific (self-perceptions when expressing emotions and language preferences when communicating intimate feelings with different interlocutors). The aim was to establish some patterns of interpretation to explain the trends emerged from the quantitative part of the study (Creswell, 2015).

Table 1. Interviewees' profile

Name	Gen	Edu	LX prof.	Status	Age	Age on Arrival	Years Abroad	Notes
Samuele	M	BA	4	Perm. Resident	33	28	5	Migrated together with his Italian girlfriend to gain work experience.
Damiana	F	MSc	4.5	Perm. Resident	45	27	18	Strong Italian identity. Her migration to the UK was a struggle. She speaks Italian with her British husband and son.
Federica	F	MA	4.75	UK Citizen	42	24	13	Also lived in Belgium and Spain. She migrated to London to experience a multicultural environment. Has an Egyptian-British husband and a son.
Francesca	F	MSc	5	UK Citizen	35	29	6	She lives in Chester with her Welsh partner. She defines her experience a positive "emotional migration".
Lucrezia	F	PhD	5	Temp. Resident	28	19	8.5	She always loved the English language and migrated to immerse herself in it.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of the present study is migrants' sense of feeling different (FD) when talking about emotional matters in English (their LX). Feedback on the question 'Do you feel like a different person when using English

to talk about emotional matters?' was coded on a Likert scale ranging from: (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) frequently, (5) all the time (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). An optional open-ended question followed to allow participants to explain their perceptions: "If you feel like a different person when speaking English, please explain your feelings...". This question was answered by answered by 303 participants, generating a corpus of approximately 8000 words.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	M	SD		M	SD
Feeling Different (FD)	2.68	1.34			
L1 Emotionality	4.27	1.94	LX Emotionality	3.22	1.26
L1 Emotion Expression	2.74	.77	LX Emotion Expression	2.46	.79

Independent Variables

L1/LX Emotionality. Feedback on the matrix question "Is [Italian/English] an emotional language?" were coded as following: (1) not at all, (2) somehow, (3) more or less, (4) to a large extent, (5) absolutely, generating two variables: "L1 Emotionality" and "LX Emotionality" (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics).

L1/LX Emotion expression. The questionnaire asked about participants' language use for expressing anger, love, and about their swearing practices with different interlocutors. The pattern of the questions was similar: "How often do you typically choose to [express your anger, express your love, swear] in [Italian/English] when speaking with [strangers, colleagues, friends, family, partner, alone]?". The question about expressing love only contained 4 categories of interlocutors: colleagues, friends, family, partner. Feedback on all questions were coded on a Likert scale ranging from: (0) N/A, (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) frequently, (5) all the time. Given the flexible nature of emotion, including different types of circumstances and interlocutors seemed the most viable way to assure reliability. In order to have a composite

variable, informing participants' L1 and LX affective socialisation, the mean score of all pertinent sub-scores was then computed, based on the language. This generated two variables: "L1 Emotion Expression" and "LX Emotion Expression" (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). The survey counted a total of 16 items per variable and reliability analysis showed a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha for "L1 Emotion expression" = .799; Cronbach's alpha for "LX Emotion expression" = .838).

The Q-Q plot in Figure 1 suggests that the dependent variable (FD) followed a normal distribution reasonably well. Parametric analysis was selected, being more statistically robust (Field, 2014). In order to validate correlations results, bootstrapping and Bonferroni correction were also applied, lowering the threshold of significance to $p < 0.025$ (Loewen & Plonsky, 2017).

Results

Quantitative Analyses

Participants' sense of feeling different when using the LX to talk about emotional matters was significantly linked with their scores for L1 Emotionality ($r = .204, p < .001, CI: .084$ and $.272$) and L1 Emotion Expression ($r = .098, p < .024, CI: .013$ and $.189$). These correlations are positive but the effect sizes are very small⁴. No statistically significant correlation emerged with LX Emotionality ($r = .060, p < .180, CI: -.064$ and $.148$) and LX Emotion Expression ($r = -.078, p < .091, CI: -.174$ and $.004$).

Linear multiple regression analysis highlighted L1 Emotionality ($\beta = .204, t(467) = 4.503, p < .001$) as the unique significant predictor of migrant's feelings of difference scores: $F(1, 467) = 20.280, p < .001$ (Table 3). The effect size (Cohen's $d = .439$) was small-medium (Cohen, 1988). The values for the Durbin-Watson's

⁴ Plonsky and Oswald (2014) recommend the following benchmarks for the interpretation of effect size in correlation coefficients: "we suggest that r s close to .25 be considered small, .40 medium, and .60 large" (p. 889).

test were acceptable, as all included between 1 and 3 (Fields, 2014). Likewise, tolerance eigenvalues from collinearity diagnostics were all above the threshold of .20, showing that the independent variables were not highly correlated (Szmrecsanyi, 2005). The regression line is illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis conducted on migrants' sense of feeling different when using the LX to talk about emotional matters

Predictor(s)	r ²	F	p	β	Durbin Watson	Collinearity diagnostics Tolerance	BCa 95%	
							Lower	Upper
							.803	1.927
L1 Emotionality	.046	20.28	.000	.204	2.040	.974	.110	.328

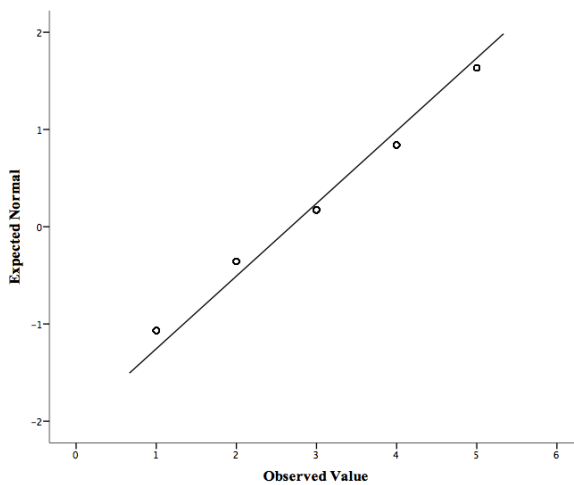
Dependent variable: FD

Independent variables: L1 Emotionality

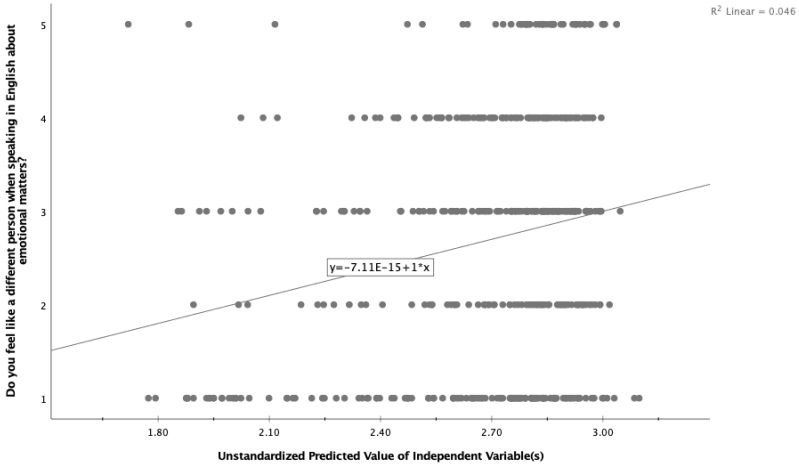
Excluded variables: L1 Emotion Expression

Figure 1. Normal Q-Q plot of FD variable

Figure 2. Scatter plot showing regression line



Qualitative Analyses



A total of 303 migrants answered the open question about the sense of feeling different when speaking English. Their insights, together with the interviews' transcripts, were coded according to the variables of this study (Table 4). Overall, participants focused more on expressing emotions in general (221 observations) rather than on the perceived emotional resonance of their languages (142 observations). However, a total of 9 sub-themes emerged, where the largest one was the emotional resonance of the L1 (123 observations). Only a few comments mentioned the emotional resonance of the LX (19 observations). Other frequent sub-themes within the “expressing emotions” code were focusing on aspects or reactions related to the use of English: frustration (55 observations), a sense of detachment (28 observations) a sense of constrain (27 observations), cultural mismatch between the emotions (32 observations), and the perception that emotions are more intense in the L1 (23 observations). Other sub-themes centred specifically on expressing love in the L1 (22 observations) and on the sense of enrichment related to multilingualism (17 observations). All these sub-themes were highly intertwined and often overlapped in participants' comments.

The strength of emotional resonance of the L1 was the most frequent theme across participants' narratives and it was often related to a sense of

irritation when having to talk about emotional topics in English. For instance, in his interview, Samuele observes:

· Sometimes I'd got this frustration of not really giving the right amount of
· information about what I was feeling. Italian is more... expressive itself.
· It's my own language, so I've got some sort of attachment that is more...
· emotional [...] it's more meaningful... for my inner feelings [...] Italian hurts
· more, it's more natural. I can feel it inside. (FD: 2, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1
· Emotion Expression: 4.56)⁵

In his words, Italian emerges as emotionally richer than any other language. Several comments from the survey respondents echoed this impression: "Needless to say that Italian language is definitely more rich and 'dramatic' than any English or vernacular language." (ED, male, 30, US, FD: 4, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 2.61).

In her interview, Federica states that she occasionally feels different when speaking English: "I do change sometimes... depending on the language that I speak" (FD: 3, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 2.86). Her emotional attachment to Italian, for example, translates into a distinct preference to be addressed in that language. Referring to her son, she says: "I want him to call me *mamma* or it does not feel the same." This is because, in her experience, the Italian language unleashes a more vivid emotionality: "The sonority, the sound... it's more familiar [...] it evokes more feelings [...] it definitely goes to my heart."

The intense emotional power of the L1 seems to remain unchanged, regardless of migrants' sociolinguistic practices. This power does not fade even when individuals develop a growing attachment to the LX. Lucrezia, in her interview, explains how English has become 'her' language, but she still perceives a shift in her identity when speaking in English:

⁵ Participants' scores for all variables that revealed statistically significant correlations accompany each extract.

The moment I'm speaking English I kind of... it is like a different identity takes over [...] and, you know, as a grown up is this is my language. (FD: 3, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 3.11)

Her deep love for the language is the actual reason of her migration to the UK and recalls Federica's description of Italian's emotionality:

I was really in love with English [...] I enjoy the sound I've always loved it like that's something that goes way back...

However, notwithstanding her attachment to the English language and the intimacy in her affective relationships with English speakers, she admits having felt much more emotionally wired when she started dating someone that could speak Italian:

Two my closest friends are British... we have these moments of intimacy... it's actually really beautiful... the fact that we're sharing our feelings... it's really meaningful... [...] but with things to do with feelings... Italian always wins over it [...] It's not random occurrence that now I am hanging out with someone from my hometown [...] it keeps me sane that I don't have to explain myself.

Damiana's experience is the one that stands out for the detailed description of the emotional strength of the Italian language. She explains how she had to 'reconstruct' her identity, re-adapting it to an English-speaking environment. In response to the sense of disorientation experienced in this process, she intentionally worked hard to reintroduce the L1 in many domains of her life. She started teaching Italian, married a fluent Italian LX-speaker, and recreated an Italian environment around her. This helped her feel connected with her cultural roots. In particular, when talking about her son she says:

For emotional reasons I could speak to him only in Italian. I was never dreaming of speaking English to him, or singing songs, reading stories. It wouldn't feel natural [...] it makes you feel a bit different probably [...] When he tells me: 'mommy I love you' it has an emotional impact... because I know what he means but... it has a different impact, yeah, when he uses Italian words... *mamma ti voglio bene* [...] Italian is my emotional language. (FD: 5, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 3.53)

She explains: "I probably feel a bit colder in English or a bit... less emotional." Overall, she emphasises that it is not the lack of emotional interactions in the LX that causes her perceived changes in self but rather the superior emotional status of her L1.

Only a few participants described the experience of relying on two languages when expressing emotions as positive: "I feel I can express my emotions and ideas in more than one language, and this enriches me" (AS, 45, female, US, FD: 3, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 2.75). Most respondents lamented a sense of lack of authenticity when expressing intimate feelings in English LX, connecting the sub-themes of "frustration," "detachment," and "cultural mismatch":

I guess it is just a matter of speaking a foreign language, so sometimes I may feel like a different person because I am using the words and the expressions that I know, rather than those that I actually feel. (SC, male, 33, UK, FD: 3, L1 Emotionality: 2, L1 Emotion Expression: 1.78) (Panicacci, 2021)

When trying to express deep/intense emotional matters or strong opinions it can be harder to find the right word in a language which is not "mine". It's the "lost in translation" effect [...] it's a little bit frustrating and not just due to a language difference, but also cultural differences which make it harder to 'connect' on certain levels. (MM, female, 46, US, FD: 3, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion expression: 2.36)

In some instances, the perceived “emotional gap” when using English had a positive connotation. Some survey participants commented on the beneficial effect of using the LX when dealing with unpleasant emotions:

I feel easier to express my feelings: emotional words are lighter in a foreign language. Plus, I feel less anxious and more self-confident when I speak English, as it is not connected to painful memories. (PG, 53, female, UK, FD: 5, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 2.33)

In her interview, Francesca describes how the English language gives her a sense of emotional liberation. When talking about expressing emotions, she recalls her experience in her home country as quite vexing:

I could not express them [my emotions] as much as I wanted [...] If I do speak English, I sound much more open and able to deal with emotions rather than if I was talking in Italian. (FD: 3, L1 Emotionality: 4, L1 Emotion Expression: 2.56)

She claims that migrating to the UK helped her become more emotionally stable:

I can now use English quite comfortably. I don't really need Italian for expressing emotions [...] I sometimes do perceive me more, yeah maybe more calm when I talk in English.

Yet, she is aware that words in both languages do not affect her in the same way:

'Thank you,' 'sorry,' 'I love you' are much more easy for me in English, because I don't think that they've got the same meaning they've got in Italian... not that they all have a different meaning, but they do feel different. (Panicacci, 2021)

Damiana, too, explains how voicing daily emotions in English elicit no change, whereas deeper emotions increase her sense of feeling different:

English it's the functionality of my daily life, it's more the pragmatic part of myself and Italian is more deep into myself [...] I can express anger in both languages I think, yeah I can be angry in English [...] For affectionate, playful little things with children... Italian is more natural [...] I went through I think a little breakdown uh although I was functioning and that, but it was a very difficult period [...] what I was suffering... could not be expressed in English [...] In Italian I can express more details and more maybe convey the emotional level more (Panicacci, 2021).

She stresses how the language choice for expressing emotion could be in fact deliberately dictated by specific emotional needs or relate to the underlying cultural dimension:

There are words that are untranslatable as we know, also they are deeply associated with your feelings and even if you have the equivalent in the other language you don't want to use it, so sometimes I don't – which is interesting, I don't want to use an English word [...] It's a cultural dimension. Sometimes is difficult to translate (Panicacci, 2021).

Therefore, it seems that not all emotional speech acts and intents function in the same way in different languages or convey the same perceptions. Federica is quite at ease when using LX swear words instead of Italian ones: "Fuck' is more direct... efficient [...] because I need to convey the feeling very quickly." However, she echoes Damiana's, explaining that this has practical benefits more than emotional ones. In fact, when romance is involved or when she feels cheerful, the Italian language takes over:

I'm not a person of 'sweetish,' 'darling'... I don't even use them with my husband. With my husband when I want to be daring, I say *bello*... It doesn't feel natural [...] I'm very Italian in my manifestation [...] The Italian identity will always travel over (Panicacci, 2021).

One of the emerging sub-themes of emotion expression was indeed centred on expressing love specifically:

Words have different emotional meanings in different languages to me. Saying "I love you" in English is fine for me, but it feels as if I put a filter between me and that deep meaning. (*Ti amo* [I love you] has a totally different weight inside me). (AM, 27, female, UK, FD: 4, L1 Emotionality: 5, L1 Emotion Expression: 2.94)

Retracing both Damiana's need for expressing affection to her son in Italian and Francesca's preference for Italians terms of endearment, Francesca explains how expressing love to her Welsh partner in English felt odd at the beginning of their relationship:

When it comes to more sentimental things, sometimes I was like sort of asking myself if I was sincere about my feelings and that really sort of made me question the relationship (Panicacci, 2021).

Thus, the sense of detachment when using English to discuss emotional matters can be pleasant when communicating difficult and painful feelings but becomes detrimental when intimacy and love are involved.

Discussion

The statistical analyses showed that migrants' sense of feeling different when using the LX to talk about emotional matters was linked to the perceived emotional resonance and frequency of use for expressing emotions in the L1.

In the regression model, only the emotional resonance of the L1 predicted migrants' feelings of difference when using the LX to discuss emotional matters. No relationship emerged with any LX variable, which may suggest that overall English had not yet become a language of the heart among participants.

The qualitative analysis revealed striking individual differences. Those who maintained a strong emotional connection with the L1 and used it more frequently to express their feelings detected stronger feelings of difference when expressing emotions in the LX. In line with statistical findings, the emotional resonance of the L1 emerged as the core theme across participants' narratives and was often intertwined with other sub-themes, like frustration, detachment, or sense of constraint, or of cultural mismatch when using English to talk about emotional topics. Some respondents, like Samuele, suggested that Italian's linguistic richness and emotional resonance were inherent in the language, echoing previous literature (Dewaele, 2010, 2016a, 2015; Dewaele et al., 2023; Grosjean, 2010, 2015; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017; Pavlenko, 2006; Toivo et al., 2023). The exceptional emotional value attributed to the L1 meant that most participants experienced a sense of lack of authenticity when using the LX to discuss emotional matters, also confirming earlier research (Dewaele, 2016a; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017, 2018; Pavlenko, 2005; Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2013; Wilson, 2013).

Individuals' language use in emotional situations sometimes emerged as a deliberate strategy to regulate their emotions, typically using the L1 to experience the emotion more vividly or switching to the LX to gain distance (Cook & Dewaele, 2022; Panicacci, 2019, 2020; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2018; Rolland et al., 2017, 2021). This could explain why participants' frequency of use of their languages to express emotions did not predict much variance in their self-perceptions when discussing emotional matters. The feelings of difference that surfaced when talking about emotional matters in the LX could be an extremely awkward experience they tried to avoid as much as possible. This can be observed in Damiana's active effort in recreating an Italian environment at home, in Francesca addressing her husband in Italian, and in Lucrezia's need for an Italian-speaking partner.

Other themes emerging from participants' accounts were that emotions generally felt more genuine in Italian, especially love, which, in particular,

made participants feel quite odd when conveyed in English words. In romantic circumstances, where pain and anger are not involved, using the LX to communicate affection made many participants feel odd and fake. These findings echo previous studies that showed how multilinguals tend to feel more fake and less emotional in any LX (Dewaele & Nakano, 2013). Some participants even questioned their feelings when expressing love to their partner and felt the urge to codeswitch to their L1 to prove they meant it. This extends the findings reported in Dewaele (2008), Dewaele and Salomidou (2017) and Ożańska-Ponikwia (2016, 2019) by clarifying why these feelings of difference emerged more vividly when having to express love without relying on the language that feels closest to the heart (cf. also Dewaele, 2015; Panicacci, 2020, 2021).

The picture is different when it comes to everyday interactions or milder emotions. As Federica confirmed, English swearwords surface in her speech, whereas English terms of endearment are very rare. Thus, while some milder emotions could be voiced in the L1 or LX interchangeably, intense feelings required the L1 to feel 'right' (cf. Dewaele, 2004, 2010; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2018). This seemed to happen regardless of the degree of emotional resonance of the LX, even when participants considered it a 'language of attachment' (Hammer, 2016; Pavlenko, 2012, 2013), like in Lucrezia's case, evidencing the importance of conducting a holistic analysis that takes into account all linguistic dimensions present in migrants' minds. In some instances, the lack of emotional resonance of the LX was also mentioned as a positive thing. The emotional detachment in the LX allowed participants to talk about things that were either too painful or distressing to discuss in their L1 (Cook, 2019; Cook & Dewaele, 2022; Rolland et al., 2017, 2021; Wilson, 2013).

Other than the fact that participants could completely refrain from using English to talk about emotional matters because of the experience being so unpleasant and weird, the variation in their perceptions according to the type of emotion and its intensity may explain the lack of statistical findings in terms of LX variables. Indeed, different types of emotions and experiences seemed to regulate multilinguals' self-perceptions in different ways. This is an original finding that could lay the ground for future research into multilinguals' reflexivity.

The present study is not without limitations. Firstly, we are aware that the concepts “feeling different” and “language emotionality” might have been interpreted in various ways by participants, blunting statistical findings (cf. Dewaele & Nakano, 2013). Qualitative data clarified participants’ experiences, allowing a more nuanced analysis.

Secondly, results might have been influenced by the nature of the sample: our participants were mainly late migrants who still maintained strong connections with their L1 speaking community. Further research on early or younger migrants who display a weaker attachment to the heritage culture could reveal different patterns. Future studies should therefore consider the possibility of discriminating between different types of multilingualism and different types of emotions when exploring multilinguals’ reflexivity.

Conclusion

The emotional resonance of the L1 was the key factor dominating participants’ self-reported quantitative data and narratives about their feelings of difference when discussing emotional topics in the LX. Italian L1 remained the unconditional ‘language of the heart’ despite living in an English-speaking environment. They expressed frustration when having to use the LX to voice their feelings but did point out that the lack of emotional resonance of the language could also be beneficial, according to the type of emotion. The picture was less clear in terms of language use for expressing emotions. Interviewees mentioned socialising in English and adopting local swearing practices or basic emotion scripts as something that made them feel at ease. However, their perceptions varied largely when romance was involved, especially when expressing love to their children or partners.

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