

The impact of bilingualism on hate speech perception and slur appropriation:

A first study on Italian UK residents

Mattia Zingaretti¹, Maria Garraffa² and Antonella Sorace¹

¹*University of Edinburgh*

²*University of East Anglia*

The use of hate speech to attack individuals has been found to exert a depressing influence on collective self-esteem and to yield extreme emotional responses (Boeckmann and Liew, 2002). A clear link thus exists between hate speech and the emotions it evokes in the targeted individuals. Interestingly, multiple studies have explored the relationship between emotion and bilingualism (see Pavlenko, 2006; Wilson, 2008; Dewaele, 2010), yet no study to date directly addresses the potential link between hate speech and bilingualism. This research thus constitutes a first investigation of the impact of bilingualism on hate speech perception, by asking whether (1) hate speech perception differs for bilinguals in their first/second language (L1/L2), and whether (2) hate speech perception further differs among bilinguals according to their bilingual experience – i.e. based on differences in length of residence (LoR) in the L2 country or language dominance. Finally, this study explores whether (3) bilinguals' degree of slur 'appropriation', that is the use of slurs by in-group members in a non-derogatory way (cf. Bianchi, 2014), is modulated by factors pertaining to their bilingual experience (such as language, LoR or dominance) or by being part of a minority group targeted by hate speech.

The bilingual group tested consists of 43 highly proficient Italian speakers of English, who grew up in Italy until at least the age of 16 and have been in the UK for an average of 5 years, seven of whom report being dominant in English. Participants' experiences with hate speech in Italian-English are gathered through an online questionnaire in three parts: (1) a series of questions regarding personal experiences with hate speech since adolescence; (2) ratings on a 1-9 Likert scale of nine hateful word pairs in English-Italian (e.g. asshole-*stronzo*) for seven variables (familiarity, personal use, offensiveness, tabooess, valence, arousal and imageability; cf. Janschewitz, 2008; Sulpizio et al., 2020); (3) in each language, four scenarios containing verbal assault due to sexual orientation or ethnicity, with/without slur appropriation by the target (e.g. 'Aye, we're fucking fags. You've got a problem with that, pal?'), to elicit whether participants would appropriate a slur to use it in such a way (yes/no) in both L1/L2. We hypothesised that longer LoR in the UK and a switch to English dominance may result in a higher degree of emotionality and slur appropriation in L2 English and a potentially lower degree in L1 Italian, in line with the selective and temporary changes that occur in different L1 domains of bilingual speakers (cf. L1 'attrition'; Sorace, 2020).

The responses to our survey reveal that over two thirds of our participants are familiar with hate speech, with the majority reporting to have encountered episodes of hate speech since adolescence. Similar examples of hate speech are also reported in both English and Italian across the three periods of time (e.g. *frocio*-faggot, *negro*-nigger, etc.). Multiple linear regressions are carried out to predict each of the seven variables in our word pair ratings based on LoR and language dominance (Italian/English): Whilst an increase in LoR is found to yield lower ratings for familiarity, personal use and imageability of hate words in L1 Italian, the same variables in English and the other variables in Italian/English cannot be predicted by either LoR or dominance. A binomial logistic regression is also conducted to predict slur appropriation (yes/no) based on language, LoR, dominance, sexuality and ethnicity: Whilst both sexuality and ethnicity significantly predict appropriation, none of the variables related to the bilingual experience are significant predictors of slur appropriation. Taken together, the results in this study seem to indicate that Italian residents in the UK perceive hate speech very similarly in their L1/L2, contrary to some evidence pointing towards a lower degree of emotionality involved in the L2 (cf. Costa et al., 2014), with Italian terms being less accessible (in terms of familiarity, use and imageability) the longer Italians reside in the UK. Moreover, slur appropriation does not seem to be affected by any of the variables related to the bilingual experience, but rather by more broadly being part of a target group. We conclude by recommending that further studies investigate the

effects of bilingualism on the perception of hate speech by also examining both L2 acquisition and L1 attrition, and that other methods (e.g. EEG, eye-tracking or pupillometry) could be implemented to probe deeper into the subtle changes that may occur in the bilingual mind.

Keywords: *hate speech perception, slur appropriation, bilingualism, second language acquisition, first language attrition*

References

1. Bianchi, C. (2014). Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 66, 35–44. [10.1016/j.pragma.2014.02.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.02.009)
2. Boeckmann, R. & Liew, J. (2002). Hate speech: Asian american students' justice judgments and psychological responses. *Journal of Social Issues*. [10.1111/1540-4560.00265](https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.00265)
3. Costa A., Foucart A., Hayakawa S., Aparici M., Apesteguia J., Heafner J. et al. (2014) Your morals depend on language. *PLoS ONE*, 9(4), e94842. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0094842>
4. Dewaele, J. M. (2010). *Emotions in multiple languages*. Palgrave Macmillan.
5. Janschewitz K. (2008). Taboo, emotionally valenced, and emotionally neutral word norms. *Behavior Research Methods*, 40, 1065-1074. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BRM.40.4.1065>
6. Pavlenko, A. (2006). *Bilingual minds: emotional experience, expression, and representation*. Multilingual Matters.
7. Sorace, A. (2020). L1 attrition in a wider perspective. *Second Language Research*, 36(2), 203–206.
8. Sulpizio, S., Vassallo, E., Job, R. and Abutalebi J. (2020). *ITABÙ: Dati preliminari di un database delle parole tabù per l'italiano*. *Giornale italiano di psicologia*, 2, 599-614. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1421/97887>
9. Wilson, R. J. (2008). *'Another language is another soul': Individual differences in the presentation of self in a foreign language* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Birkbeck College, University of London.