

DOES YOUR LANGUAGE SHAPE YOUR PERSONALITY?

“To have another language is to possess a second soul,” Charlemagne is rumoured to have said. He may have been on to something. In the 1960s, sociolinguist Susan Ervin-Tripp of the University of California at Berkeley asked English-Japanese bilinguals to describe what was going on in ambiguous pictures. One person, for example, told a different tale depending on their storytelling language. A picture of a woman leaning against a couch elicited a story in Japanese about a woman contemplating suicide after the loss of her fiancé. The same person, asked to respond at a separate session in English, said the woman was completing a sewing project for a class. “In general, there was more emotion in the Japanese stories,” Ervin-Tripp wrote in a description of the experiment. “The switch in language draws with it the cultural baggage associated with that language.”

Nairán Ramírez-Esparza at the University of Connecticut asked bilingual Mexicans to rate their personalities using both English and Spanish questionnaires. English responses emphasised openness and extroversion, while Spanish responses were more humble and reserved. “Language is such a powerful thing. It obviously makes you see yourself differently,” Ramírez-Esparza says.

According to Shai Danziger of Ben-Gurion University in Israel and Robert Ward of Bangor University in the UK, it can also influence how you think of others. They asked Arabic-Hebrew bilinguals to match Arab and Jewish names with positive or negative trait words by pressing a key. They say participants showed more involuntary positive attitudes towards Jews when tested in Hebrew than when tested in Arabic. Paula Rubio-Fernandez of the University of Oslo, meanwhile, has found that bilingual children perform better on tests that require them to understand a situation from someone else’s perspective.

Evidence is mounting that the words we speak and think shape our brains, perceptions, and personalities. Who knows what else? Perhaps our tastes, habits, or values. The door is wide open.

Megan Scudellari



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English will move outside of native speakers’ control

WILL WE ALL ONE DAY SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE?

With over a billion native speakers, Mandarin Chinese is the language spoken by the greatest number of people. English comes third, after Spanish. But unlike Mandarin and Spanish – both spoken in more than 30 countries – English is found in at least 100. In addition to the 335 million people for whom it is their first language, 550 million cite it as their second. It dominates international relations, business and science.

All this suggests English is on course to be the planet’s lingua franca. It just probably won’t be the English that native speakers are used to.

Millions of second-language English speakers around the world have created dialects that incorporate elements of their native languages and cultures. Anna Mauranen of the University of Helsinki in Finland calls these varieties similects: Chinese-English, Brazilian-English, Nigerian-English. Taken together they – not American or British English – will chart the language’s future path, she says.

“We used to think there were two possible futures,” says Jennifer Jenkins at the University of Southampton, UK. “In one we’d all end up speaking American English. In the other, English would separate like Latin did, and we’d end up with [new] languages. I don’t think either of those is happening.”

Instead, English similects are probably here to stay. Even in a future where China, India and Nigeria are global superpowers, English is likely to be the language of choice

for international discourse, simply because it is already installed. Weirdly, this puts native speakers at risk. “We’re getting to the stage where all the educated people of the world have English,” says Jenkins. “Once it’s no longer a special thing, native speakers lose their advantage.”

They could even be at a disadvantage. Non-native speakers are all tuned to each-other’s linguistic quirks. “If you put a Chilean, a Japanese and a Polish person in a discussion in English, they understand each other perfectly,” says Jenkins. “Put one with two native English speakers and there might be problems.”

Mauranen envisions a future in which English similects begin to blend over national borders. New dialects are likely to form around trades or regions. She says these common goals will drive the evolution of the lingua franca, regardless of whether we call it English or not.

That is not to say that all other languages will vanish. German will remain the language of choice within German borders. Even Estonian, spoken by just 1 million people, is safe. “It’s a fully fledged language, used for everything [in Estonia],” says Mauranen.

Likewise, the language directly descended from Shakespeare’s English has staying power with Brits and Americans. But English, like football, will soon move outside their control, pulled into something new by the rest of the planet. **Hal Hodson** is a technology editor at *New Scientist* ➔