

# Bilingualism and expressing the emotion of sadness

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**Bilingualism and expressing the emotion of sadness**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the differences in emotional expression in bilinguals between their L1 and L2, while focusing on the emotion of sadness. Specifically, this thesis attempts to uncover the participants' language preferences for expressing emotions, the emotional impact and authenticity of emotion expression in L2, and the perceived strength of emotion words in both languages. The first part of the thesis focuses on the theoretical framework and includes information about bilingualism, emotions, emotion-laden words, and the role of language in emotion processing and expression. It also provides an overview of previous studies on bilingualism and emotional expression. The second part of the thesis presents the research conducted for this study. The data was first collected using a web questionnaire and then presented using tables and graphs. The findings of this research show that participants prefer to express negative emotions in L1. Additionally, participants find it easier to express negative emotions and discuss sad experiences in L2, and find L1 to be more emotionally charged. Furthermore, participants reported that the expression of sadness felt more personal and authentic in L1 and perceived the given emotion words as stronger in L1 than in L2.

Key words: emotion, bilingualism, emotion expression, emotion words, sadness

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## 1. Introduction

Bilingualism can be defined as the ability to use two languages. Considering bilingualism is on the rise in many parts of the world, it is crucial to gain insight into the workings of the bilingual mind.

The ability to express emotion in words is a trait unique to humans, allowing us to share experiences, convey complex emotions, and build strong connections. However, although emotions are innate, the way they are expressed may differ across languages and cultures (Guy-Evans, 2023). But is there a difference in how a bilingual individual expresses emotion in L1 compared to L2? Previous research has attempted to uncover the perceived differences in emotionality between L1 and L2 (Harris, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002, 2006; Javier, 2007; Dewaele, 2010). However, the pressing questions still remain: Do bilinguals perceive and express emotions differently in their first language compared to their second language? Is one language perceived to be more emotional than the other? Do participants prefer to express emotions in L1 or L2? This thesis will attempt to provide answers to these questions.

## 2. Understanding bilingualism

The definition of bilingualism found in dictionaries is often overly simplistic and does not capture the full nuances of the concept. For example, Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024) defines bilingualism as “the ability to speak two languages”, and Cambridge Dictionary similarly defines it as “the fact of using or being able to speak two languages”. Jean-Marc Dewaele (2015) reflects on the broadness and ambiguity of the term 'bilingual', explaining how it does not include a specific set of requirements, but can rather encompass a wide range of individuals with varying capabilities and experiences. This spans from those with minimal competence in one of the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in a non-native language, to those with native-like control and proficiency in two languages. A balanced bilingual however, as Moradi (2014) defines it, is a person who can speak, read, interact, or understand two languages equally well. That being said, a bilingual person will often be more proficient in one language than the other. However, Grosjean (2010) states that a bilingual person does not necessarily have to be equally fluent on all topics in both languages but must be proficient enough to satisfy the specific need for that language and the domain in which it is used.

Recent studies have focused on discovering differences between bilingual individuals in terms of the age of language acquisition, use, proficiency, and switching between languages, as well as the way these differences can affect language-related processes and executive functioning (de Bruin, 2019). De Groot (2011, p.3) suggests that bilingualism may impact language acquisition, representation, processing, thought, and other aspects of non-linguistic cognition.

Kotkov (2021) states that there are three ways to acquire a second language and become bilingual: simultaneous bilingualism, successive bilingualism, and receptive bilingualism. Simultaneous bilingualism refers to the act of learning two languages at the same time and giving equal emphasis to both languages. Successive bilingualism occurs when a second language is introduced later in life, after acquiring the first language. Receptive bilingualism refers to bilingual individuals who can understand two languages but can only speak one.

Furthermore, literature differentiates three types of bilingualism: compound, coordinate, and sub-coordinate. A compound bilingual is a person who learns both languages in parallel and in the same environment. The individual acquires one notion with two different verbal expressions, which creates a fused and interdependent representation of the two languages in

the brain. A coordinate bilingual is a person who acquires two languages in different contexts, for example, a child learning one language at home and the other at school. As a result, the words from each language are part of separate, independent systems. Sub-coordinate bilingualism occurs when one language predominates the other, that is when the dominant language is used to interpret the meaning of the words in the weaker language (D'Acerno, 1990).

### 3. Emotions

It is important to begin by providing a clear definition of emotions. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024) defines emotions as "a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body". American Psychological Association (2018) defines emotion as "a complex reaction pattern that includes experiential, behavioral, and physiological elements". This reaction pattern presents how individuals deal with events and situations they find significant.

Moreover, Lud (2015) gives a more abstract definition and defines emotions as psychological compounds resulting from more basic psychological elements that are themselves not specific to emotions. For example, a person will feel fear when they use concept knowledge (such as understanding fear) and exteroceptive sensations (like the sounds of a dark alley) to interpret bodily states (such as a racing heart and sweaty palms) in a specific situation.

Additionally, a distinction can be made between primary and secondary emotions. Primary emotions are instinctual, direct responses to stimuli. They represent the core feelings that arise directly from an experience without being influenced by thoughts or habits. They are considered to be universal and innate, shared across different cultures and societies. Primary emotions include joy, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust (Damasio, 1994, as cited in Possati, 2021). Secondary emotions often follow primary emotions and reflect reactions to the initial emotional experience. They are influenced by one's thoughts and beliefs, often shaped by past experiences and social conditioning (Guy-Evans, 2023).

Although the expression of emotions is not uniquely human, Harris (1993) explains that being able to express emotions with words is what differentiates humans from other primates. This enables humans to share and explain emotional experiences in the past, future, or hypothetical situations and not just communicate emotions they are currently feeling.

Recent research suggests that facial expressions of basic emotions and their vocalization are recognized across a wide range of cultures. Laughter, for example, seems to universally signify amusement (Nauret, 2018). Although basic emotions seem to be universally and innately recognized, the way humans express and interpret emotions may vary in different cultures. Evidence shows that emotional expression is learned during childhood. Around the age of 4 children learn to conceptualize emotions, and emotion words, which are necessary



for expressing and perceiving emotions, become a part of their vocabulary. Interestingly, people show a better understanding of the emotional expression of those people who share their emotional dialect. (Dylman et al., 2020).

Emotional expression varies across cultures, partly due to differences in language. Languages differ in their emotional vocabulary, including the number of words they have for each emotion, and how precisely those words convey subtle nuances or combine multiple emotions. Even if speakers of two languages experience the same emotion, one language might not have a word to express that exact feeling. The lack of a word needed to express a particular emotional state might change emotional experience and make differentiating emotions more difficult. Tahitians, for example, lacked a word or concept for sadness in their culture (Inglis-Arkell, 2014). Although they displayed behaviors associated with sadness, such as loss of appetite, and sorrowful expressions when rejected by a lover, they could not name these feelings. In fact, they did not connect their emotions to the rejection, but instead attributed their feelings to illness (Turner, n.d.). It can be concluded that emotion words influence the perception of emotions, emotional experiences, and emotional regulation (Lindquist, 2021).

Emotion words are processed differently from abstract words and should as such be considered to be a separate class in the mental lexicon. Pavlenko (2008) makes the distinction between emotion words, emotion-related words, and emotion-laden words. She defines emotion words as "words that directly refer to particular affective states ("happy", "angry") or processes ("to worry", "to rage"), and function to either describe ("she is sad") or express them ("I feel sad")" (Pavlenko, 2008, p.148). Emotion-related words, on the other hand, describe behaviors related to particular emotions, for example, words such as "tears" or "tantrum". Lastly, she defines emotion-laden words as "words that do not refer to emotions directly but instead express ("jerk", "loser") or elicit emotions from the interlocutors ("cancer", "malignancy")" (Pavlenko, 2008, p.148). They can be divided into six subcategories which include: (1) taboo or swearwords ("shit"), (2) insults ("idiot"), (3) (childhood) reprimands ("behave"), (4) endearments ("honey"), (5) aversive words ("death") and (6) interjections ("ouch").

#### 4. The role of language in emotions

Language has a crucial role in shaping both emotional experiences and perceptions (Lindquist, 2015). According to the Conceptual Act Theory (CAT), emotions arise when bodily sensations are interpreted in the context of a situation using emotional concept knowledge. Language provides the conceptual framework needed to interpret and understand occurring sensations. Research shows that impairing people's access to the meaning of emotional words impairs their ability to perceive emotion in faces. For example, one might describe facial expressions of anger or fear as simply unpleasant without having access to the meaning of these emotion words (Lindquist, 2015).

Furthermore, different languages encode different emotion concepts (Lindquist, 2021). Learning a language enables individuals to adopt and understand emotional concepts important to that particular culture. Young children's ability to recognize facial expressions of emotions correlates to the number of emotion words they use in their speech. Children who possess a higher number of emotion words in their vocabulary seem to be better at interpreting facial expressions, which suggests there might be a link between the ability to identify emotions and one's vocabulary of emotion words (Lindquist, 2021).

Colexification is another factor that leads to differences in the conceptualization of emotions within different languages. Colexification can be defined as "a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when multiple concepts are expressed in a language with the same word" (Di Natale et al., 2021). For example, the word "ruka" in Russian stands for both arm and hand, while English language has two separate words. Research conducted on 20 major language families shows that emotion colexification varies significantly between languages, which suggests that emotions are conceptualized differently, and thus emotion words do not have identical meanings in different languages. For example, in Austronesian languages, surprise is closely associated with fear, while in Tai-Kadai languages it is associated with hope (Jackson et al., 2019).

Register for emotion words is another determining factor in the perceived emotionality of the language. Different languages have different emotional registers, and some are inherently more emotional and expressive than others (Cuong, 2023). For example, the Spanish language has a lot of emotion words with subtle nuances in meaning. Wider emotional vocabulary enables the speakers to express their emotions more precisely, which is

particularly evident when it comes to the expression of love. In contrast, Japanese has a less expressive emotional register, which may lead to less emotional expressions (Cuong, 2023). The study of Veronica Zhengdao Ye (2004) provides insight into her experience as a Chinese immigrant living in Australia. She explains that openly and publicly expressing her emotions felt foreign to her, and how it was something she struggled with, because she was used to subtle, nonverbal ways of expression. She reflects on the use of terms of endearment and how natural it appeared for Australians to say phrases like "I love you" in casual conversation, which was shocking to her because in Chinese culture love is expressed through actions and not words (Dewaele, 2010).

## 5.The influence of language on thought

Twentieth-century linguist Edward Sapir and his student Lee Whorf proposed a theory known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or Theory of Linguistic Relativity. The hypothesis suggests that “the particular language one speaks influences the way one thinks about reality” (Lucy, 2001, p. 1348). One's native language and the language habits of one's community predispose certain interpretations of surrounding reality (Gerrig and Banaji, 1994). The structure of a language impacts cognitive processes, and therefore affects the way individuals think, act and perceive things (Frothingham, 2023). An emotional version of the hypothesis, as Perlovsky (2009) names it, proposes that language not only influences the way individuals think but also how they feel.

For example, research shows that words for color influence color perception, which can be used as evidence that language influences cognition (Perlovsky, 2009). He et al. (2019) conducted research on Mongolian and Chinese speakers and compared their performances in sorting tasks. They found that Mongolian speakers, who have separate words for different shades of blue in their vocabulary, could identify colors quicker and sorted them differently than Chinese speakers who only have one word for the color blue. However, Shiota and Keltner (2005) point out that language does not necessarily influence the ability to perceive or experience things. For example, if a language does not possess the word for the color green in its register, that does not mean that its speakers do not see green or cannot distinguish it from other colors, but it may affect their proficiency and speed in certain discrimination tasks. Similarly, although an individual may not possess a specific emotion word in their vocabulary, they can still experience and perceive that emotion, however, their ability to express themselves and understand other people may be impaired.

## 6. Bilingualism and emotions

Javier (2007, p.23) defines bilingualism as 'the acquisition of two linguistic codes' that affects processes such as perception, personality formation, and the perception of various kinds of processed visual and auditory information. Research on emotional expression in bilinguals indicates that language use affects the expression of emotions. That is, bilingual speakers express emotions differently depending on which language they are speaking at the time, as language influences how emotions are conceptually understood and the way emotion words are comprehended (Marian and Kaushanskaya, 2008).

Language proficiency is one of the factors that can influence how emotional the second language is. Dewaele (2006) gives an account of a personal experience to show how difficult it can be to express strong emotions, such as anger, in a foreign language. He wanted to complain after missing his flight for reasons out of his control but felt like he could not express his anger adequately in Spanish because he was not yet fluent. In his book he also touches upon his experience as a beginner Spanish speaker during his stay at a Spanish university, and how much he struggled to portray the depth of his emotions in Spanish (Dewaele, 2010).

Koven (1998) conducted research on children of Portuguese immigrants living in France, and asked the participants to recount the same personal event in Portuguese and French. He found that speakers perceived themselves differently and felt differently when speaking Portuguese compared to when speaking French. Furthermore, the peer evaluators noted that the two sets of recordings of the same person gave the impression of different speakers, from different backgrounds, and with different reactions (Pavlenko, 2006). This is because when people speak, the sounds of their words include hints about their identity that listeners can discern. Guiora et al. (1975) explain how in order to speak a second language authentically, one must take on a new identity, for changing how one talks and sounds includes changing oneself. Javier (2007) further analyzed the connection between language and identity through the case of a female patient discussed by Quiñones (2007). The woman's first language was Spanish, but she refused to speak it because it reminded her of painful memories from her childhood. Speaking a different language allowed her to distance herself from her past and take on a new identity, and she felt that speaking English aligned better with the image of a successful businesswoman she tried to achieve.

Pavlenko (2002) explains that by learning to speak a second language, an individual must integrate themselves into the social and communicative norms of that linguistic community. This concept is illustrated by Anna's experience in Pavlenko (2006), who explains how she has to change the way she talks and expresses herself when speaking English in order to conform to the style of native speakers. She believes people would misunderstand her if she talked with the same level of expressiveness as is appropriate in Greek. Similarly, Wendy, an Italian-Icelandic bilingual, states in Pavlenko (2006) that when speaking Italian, she feels more emotional and gesticulates more. In contrast, her emotional expression is more subdued when speaking Icelandic, because a native Icelandic speaker would find such an open display of emotions unusual.

When asking bilinguals to recount an emotional event in both languages, Javier et al. (1993) noticed differences in terms of how detailed the description was and the affective tone of the memories in L1 compared to L2. His findings showed that participants were able to provide a more detailed description of the situation in their first language. Marian and Kaushanskaya (2004) found in their research on Russian-English bilinguals that participants expressed more intense emotions when they spoke the same language during recall as they did when the situation originally happened. Because the negative experience occurred in Russian, the speakers had a stronger reaction when talking about it in Russian than in English. The immediacy of the conversational context and the length of time individuals have spent using a language can impact how they recall experiences in that language. Javier (2007) found that memories conveyed in each language vary significantly, and that participants often give more emotionally rich descriptions in one language, and recount the same experiences more concisely and practically in the other language. This suggests that emotion words learned in a second language might not carry the same emotional weight as those learned in the first language during childhood (Ayçiçeği and Harris, 2004). A second language acquired after puberty may have a lesser emotional impact and feel more detached, while the first language remains the one with deeper personal significance (Pavlenko, 2002).

Furthermore, Marian and Kaushanskaya (2008) found that participants used more emotion words when recounting an emotional experience in their second language. This phenomenon can be attributed to two primary factors. The second language might feel less emotional, so speakers need to use more words to express themselves. Additionally, speakers may feel more emotionally detached from the situation when using their second language, which makes it easier to talk about their experiences. Greater emotional distance in the second language may also impact decision-making. Keysar et al. (2012) found that presenting a

problem in the participants' second language reduced their decision-making biases and therefore enabled them to make more rational decisions.

Research shows that bilingual speakers 'feel' stronger in their first language, the first language tends to be more emotional and elicits a stronger emotional response when speaking or hearing it (Harris, 2004). For example, Caldwell-Harris and Ayçiçeği-Dinn (2009) in their study on Turkish-English bilinguals found that participants showed decreased sensitivity to the material presented in L2 compared to L1. Furthermore, Dylman and Bjärtå (2018) found that Swedish-English bilinguals exhibited a weaker emotional reaction when they read negative texts in L1 and answered questions about them in L2, compared to when they both read the texts and answered the questions in L1. This suggests that processing emotionally charged content in L2 reduces its emotional impact.

Additionally, Santiago-Rivera and Altarriba (2002) propose that emotion words in L1 are stored at a deeper level of representation than emotion words in L2 learned later in life. Because of this, they are likely to trigger a broader range of associations, and thus elicit stronger emotional responses. Anooshian and Hertel (1994) give an example of a woman who, despite having switched to speaking English in all areas of her life, still prayed in Spanish (L1) because it 'felt right'. Johanna in Dewaele (2010) explains how it is easier for her to keep her composure and remain calm when speaking Italian (L2). She finds expressing negative emotions in English (L1) more emotional and upsetting. Dewaele (2008) found that when it comes to strong emotions such as love, bilingual participants rated emotion words for expressing love as stronger in their L1 compared to their L2.

This phenomenon can further be observed by the use of swear words and childhood reprimands. Harris et al. (2003) found that swear words elicit a stronger response in one's first language. Participants found it easier to use taboo words in their second language, and they felt more comfortable talking about embarrassing or anxiety-inducing topics in their second language. Furthermore, participants showed a greater emotional response to hearing childhood reprimands (e.g. "Shame on you!") in their first language than to their translation equivalents. However, Harris (2004) found that bilingual speakers who had acquired their second language early in childhood showed no significant difference in their reaction to reprimands in both languages, which indicates that the age of acquisition of the second language affects speakers' physiological response to emotional language. Dewaele (2004) further researched the emotional force of swear words in L1 and L2, and similarly found that participants perceived a higher emotional force of swear words in the first language. The perceived disparity was greater for those who learned the second language in an 'instructed'

setting rather than the naturalistic context. This indicates that the age at which the second language is acquired impacts how forcefully the swear words are perceived in L1 compared to L2, and the earlier the acquisition happens, the lesser is the difference in perception. Besides the age of language acquisition and level of proficiency, the setting in which the language was learned (informal or academic) affects how emotional words are perceived to be (Ardila et al., 2017).

Pavlenko (2006) states that bilinguals often describe their first language as 'real' and 'natural', and therefore expressing themselves in their second language might feel learned and performative. Bilinguals who are not fully proficient in their second language, or do not think in their second language yet must first translate their emotions from their native language into the second language. Because they focus on finding the right words to describe their emotions and must think about how they express themselves (e.g. grammar and pragmatic rules), this process may lead to diminished emotional reactions and calmer responses, which then may feel less authentic and natural (Dewaele, 2008). Similarly, Sharif and Mahmood (2023) imply that L2 has an advantage in emotional regulation due to slower emotional processing and decreased automaticity.

Dewaele (2010) explains that expressing emotions in a language that is not one's native language might be difficult because the words and phrases available in L2 might not fully capture the complexity or nuances of those emotions in the same way that L1 does. That is, certain feelings or emotions might not have an equivalent term or concept in the second language which makes it more difficult to translate them appropriately. Pavlenko (2002) discussed Wierzbicka's experience, who explains that upon moving to Australia from Poland, she struggled to express her emotions in English, because the English emotion lexicon does not contain the exact translation equivalents for Polish emotion words.

Belcher and Connor (2001), as cited in Dylman (2018), indicate that bilinguals generally prefer to express emotions in their first language. However, although the first language is often perceived as more emotional than the second language, this does not mean that all bilinguals prefer it for expressing emotions (Pavlenko, 2006). In certain situations, bilinguals may prefer to express their emotions in their second language due to severe negative experiences associated with their first language. Pavlenko (2002) provides an example of a German refugee who, after World War II, renounced German and started expressing herself exclusively in English. Nevertheless, when it comes to the expression of positive emotions, research indicates that bilinguals prefer to express them in their first language. This preference can be attributed to the stronger emotional connections to L1, which is acquired



during early childhood and thus closely linked to one's core memories, emotional experiences, and cultural background (Ayçiçeği and Harris, 2004). In contrast, research suggests that bilinguals prefer to express negative emotions in L2 due to the reduced emotionality of the second language (Pavlenko, 2005), which provides a sense of distance and detachment (Pavlenko, 2002).

Another interesting thing about bilinguals is their ability to code-switch in the middle of the conversation. Code-switching is a phenomenon where bilingual individuals shift between languages during a conversation, often automatically and in response to the social context, topic, or interaction with others (Javier, 2007). Bond and Lai (1986) found stress to be one of the factors that can prompt code-switching. Highly emotional situations may impair a speaker's cognitive control and therefore increase the frequency of code-switching. Additionally, bilinguals may code-switch either naturally or intentionally in order to regulate the intensity of their emotions (Izsóf Jurásová and Kissová, 2021). Bilingual speakers may “up-regulate” and code-switch to their first language during positive experiences because they perceive L1 as stronger and want to adequately portray the depth of their emotions. In contrast, they may “down-regulate” and switch to their second language in negative situations in order to distance and detach themselves from the experience (William et al., 2019). For example, Foster (1996) found that patients are likely to code-switch in therapy when discussing negative or stressful experiences, because it allows them to distance themselves from the experience, speak about it with greater ease and view it more objectively.

## 7. The study on bilinguals and expressing emotion of sadness

### 7.1. Research questions

Do bilinguals perceive and express emotions differently in their first language compared to their second language?

Is one language perceived to be more emotional than the other?

Do participants prefer to express emotions in L1 or L2?

### 7.2. Methodology

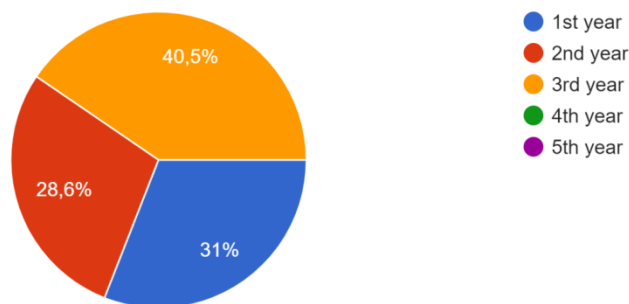
For this research, quantitative data was collected using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was created in Google Forms and was available online for participants to complete at their convenience. It remained active for two weeks. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the questionnaire took less than 15 minutes to complete.

The first two questions in the questionnaire collected personal information, including the gender and education level of the participants. The second part consisted of 19 Likert scale questions. The participants were presented with statements regarding the expression of emotion and asked to rate them on a scale from completely disagree to completely agree. These statements were followed by two multiple-choice questions that asked participants how often they switch to English when discussing the emotion of sadness (options: never, rarely, sometimes, often and always), and their language preference for expressing sadness (options: Croatian, English, both, or I don't like expressing emotions verbally).

The last part of the questionnaire consisted of nine questions which asked participants to decide whether the Croatian or English equivalent of certain emotion words felt stronger (examples given: *Tužan sam- I'm sad*, *Slomljeno mi je srce- I'm heartbroken*, *Povrijeđen sam- I'm hurt*, *Potišten sam- I'm feeling down*, *Očajan sam- I'm desperate*, *Potišten sam- I feel dejected*, *U depresiji sam- I'm depressed*, *Osjećam se nemoćno- I feel helpless*).

### 7.3. Participants

The participants for this study were chosen using purposive sampling. The participants were undergraduate students of the English department, selected because of their proficiency in the English language. The link to the questionnaire was shared with the participants through the WhatsApp groups. The questionnaire was completed by 42 participants in total: 34 female, 7 male, and 1 other. Regarding education level, there were 13 participants in the first year, 12 in the second year, and 17 in the third year of university.



*Graph 1. Education level*

#### **7.4. Hypotheses**

1. Participants prefer expressing negative emotions in their second language.
2. Participants find it easier to express negative emotions and emotions of sadness in L2.
3. L2 is less emotional than L1.
4. Expressing emotions (sadness) in L2 feels less authentic and natural.
5. Emotion words in L1 feel stronger than emotion words in L2.

#### **7.5. Results**

The first part of the questionnaire assessed participants' ease of expressing emotions in their first and second languages. For the statement (1), "I find it easier to express my emotions in English," 42.9% of participants completely agreed, and 28.6% agreed. In contrast, the disagree and completely disagree options were both chosen by only 4.8% of participants. For the statement (2), "I find it easier to express my emotions in Croatian," 16.7% of participants completely disagreed, and 40.5% disagreed, while only 4.8% agreed and 9.5% completely agreed. Similarly, for the statement (3), "I find it easier to express negative emotions in English," 23.8% completely agreed, and 38.1% of participants agreed, while only 14.3% disagreed, and 4.8% completely disagreed.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
(1)	2(4.8%)	2(4.8%)	8(19%)	12(28.6%)	18(42.9%)	4.00	1.126
(2)	7(16.7%)	17(40.5%)	12(28.6%)	2(4.8%)	4(9.5%)	2.50	1.134
(3)	2(4.8%)	6(14.3%)	8(19%)	16(38.1%)	10(23.8%)	3.62	1.147

1=completely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=completely agree

Table 1.: Statements 1-3

The next set of statements explored perceived differences between the expression of emotions in their first and second language. The majority of participants agreed (42.9%) or completely agreed (28.6%) with the statement (4), "I'm more open and honest about my sad emotions when speaking in English," while only 2.4% completely disagreed, and 16.7% disagreed. Similarly, a significant portion of participants either completely agreed or agreed (35.7% each) with statement (5) "I find it easier to talk about sad experiences in English", with only 2.4% completely disagreeing and 19% disagreeing. Surprisingly, the majority of participants disagreed (40.5%) or completely disagreed (4.8%) with the statement (6), "I am more likely to talk about a sad experience if I have a chance to do so in English," while 16.7% agreed, and 26.2% completely agreed. Responses to the statement (7), "I have to use more words to describe the depth of my sadness in English," were more evenly distributed, with the most frequently chosen option being neither agree nor disagree (28.6%). An equal number of participants completely disagreed and completely agreed (19% each), while 11.9% disagreed, and 21.4% agreed. Regarding the statement (8), "Expressing the emotion of sadness in Croatian conveys a stronger sense of intensity," the majority of participants completely agreed (59.5%), followed by 26.2% who agreed. Only 2.4% completely disagreed, and 7.1% disagreed with this statement.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
(4)	1(2.4%)	7(16.7%)	4(9.5%)	18(42.9%)	12(28.6%)	3.79	1.116
(5)	1(2.4%)	8(19%)	3(7.1%)	15(35.7%)	15(37.7%)	3.83	1.188

(6)	2(4.8%)	17(40.5%)	5(11.9%)	7(16.7%)	11(26.2%)	3.19	1.348
(7)	8(19%)	5(11.9%)	12(28.6%)	9(21.4%)	8(19%)	3.1	4.33
(8)	1(2.4%)	3(7.1%)	2(4.8%)	11(26.2%)	25(59.5%)	1.376	1.028

1=completely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=completely agree

Table 2.: Statements 4-8

The following statements focused on vocabulary and proficiency in L1 and L2. Only 9.5% of participants agreed, and 4.8% completely agreed with the statement (9), "I feel as though expressing the depth of my sadness in English is challenging due to vocabulary constraints," while 47.6% completely disagreed, and 33.3% disagreed. For the statement (10), "I substitute certain emotion words with their English equivalents when discussing sadness in Croatian," the results were more varied. The majority of participants agreed (38.1%) with the statement, followed by 23.8% who completely agreed, 19% who neither agreed nor disagreed, 11.9% who disagreed, and 7.1% who completely disagreed.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
(9)	20(47.6%)	14(33.3%)	2(4.8%)	4(9.5%)	2(4.8%)	1.91	1.165
(10)	3(7.1%)	5(11.9%)	8(19%)	16(38.1%)	10(23.8%)	1.17	1.191

1=completely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=completely agree

Table 3.: Statements 9-10

The next set of statements focused on the emotionality of the expression in L1 and L2. The majority of participants completely disagreed (38.1%) with the statement (11), "When speaking English, I sometimes use certain emotion words in Croatian because they feel stronger," followed by equal number of participants who chose disagree and neither agree nor disagree (19%). Slightly fewer participants completely agreed (16.7%), and the fewest agreed (7.1%). For the statement (12), "During a highly emotional situation, I will switch to Croatian," the majority of participants neither agreed nor disagreed (45.2%). The second most common option chosen was completely agree (21.4%), followed by 14.3% who disagreed, and 9.5% who either completely disagreed or agreed. Surprisingly, for the statement (13), "During a highly emotional situation, I will switch to English," responses were more evenly distributed. About 26.2% completely disagreed, 19% disagreed, 23.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16.7% agreed, and the fewest (14.3%) number of participants completely agreed.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
(11)	16(38.1%)	8(19%)	8(19%)	3(7.1%)	7(16.7%)	2.45	1.485
(12)	4(9.5%)	6(14.3%)	19(45.2)	4(9.5%)	9(21.4)	3.19	2.738
(13)	11(26.2%)	8(19%)	10(23.8%)	7(16.7%)	6(14.3%)	1.22	1.398

1=completely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=completely agree

Table 4.: Statements 11-13

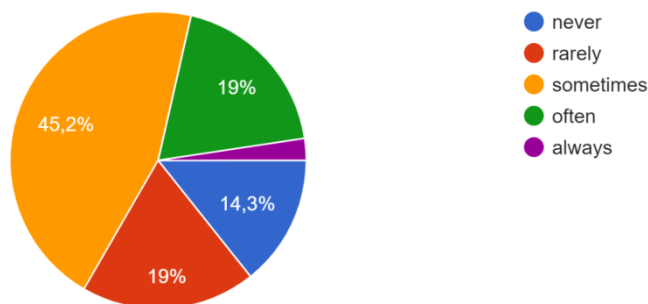
The last set of statements explored the perceived emotionality of L2 compared to L1. The majority of participants either agreed (40.5%) or completely agreed (31%) with the statement (14), "I can discuss a sad experience more objectively in English," the same number of participants chose disagree and neither agree nor disagree (11.9%), and only 4.8% completely disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, most participants completely agreed (47.6%) with the statement (15), "Expressing sadness in English feels less personal," followed by 31% who agreed. Significantly fewer participants completely disagreed (9.5%), and the fewest disagreed (2.4%). Responses to the statement (16), "Expressing sadness in English feels natural/authentic," were more evenly distributed. The same number of participants (14.3%) completely disagreed, agreed, and completely agreed, while the most chosen option was neither agree nor disagree (31%), followed by 26.2% who disagreed. For the statement (17), "Expressing sadness in Croatian feels more genuine/authentic," the majority of participants completely agreed (42.9%) and 21.4% agreed, following 26.2% neither agreed nor disagreed, and significantly fewer participants disagreed (7.1%) or completely disagreed (2.4%). Most participants completely agreed (38.1%) with the statement (18), "I can rationalize my sadness better when speaking in English," followed by 21.4% who agreed, 16.7% who disagreed, and only 4.8% who completely disagreed. Surprisingly, the majority of participants either completely disagreed (23.8%) or disagreed (38.1%) with the statement (19), "Hearing/reading about other people's sad emotions/experiences in English affects me less," while 16.7% agreed and 11.9% completely agreed.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
(14)	2(4.8%)	5(11.9%)	5(11.9%)	17(40.5%)	13(31%)	3.81	1.153
(15)	4(9.5%)	1(2.4%)	4(9.5%)	13(31%)	20(47.6)	4.05	1.248
(16)	6(14.3%)	11(26.2%)	13(31%)	6(14.3%)	6(14.3%)	2.88	1.253
(17)	1(2.4%)	3(7.1%)	11(26.2%)	9(21.4%)	18(42.9%)	3.95	1.103
(18)	2(4.8%)	7(16.7%)	8(19%)	9(21.4%)	16(38.1%)	3.71	1.274
(19)	10(23.8%)	16(38.1%)	4(9.5%)	7(16.7%)	5(11.9%)	2.55	1.347

1=completely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=completely agree

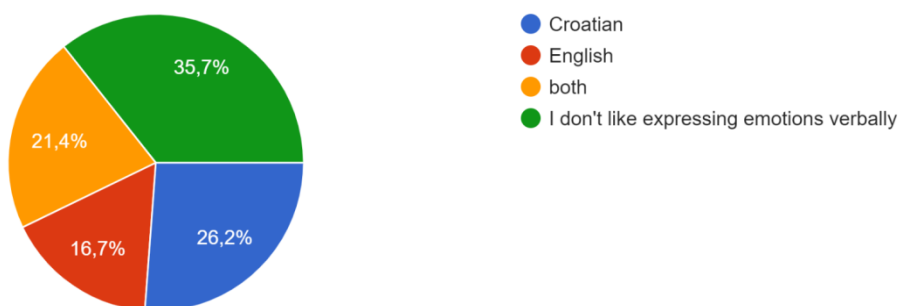
Table 5.: Statements 14-19

The next question assessed how often participants used the English language to talk about the emotion of sadness. The most popular response was sometimes (45.2%), followed by an equal number of participants who chose often and rarely (19%). Additionally, 14.3% chose never, and only 2.4% opted for always.



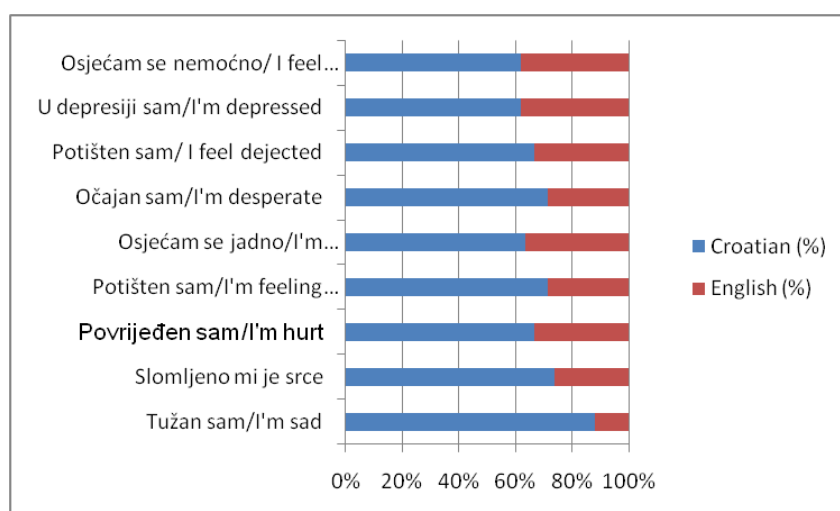
Graph 2.: "I switch to English when discussing the emotion of sadness."

The second multiple-choice question asked about participants' language preferences when expressing negative emotions. The majority (35.7%) chose that they do not like to express emotions verbally. Slightly more participants chose Croatian over English, with 26.2% of participants who said they prefer to express emotions in Croatian, and 21.4% who chose English. The fewest number (16.7%) expressed a preference for expressing emotions in both languages.



Graph 3.: "I prefer expressing my negative emotions in"

The last part of the questionnaire assessed the perceived difference in strength of the emotion words in L1 and L2. For every given example, the Croatian emotion word was rated higher than its English equivalent. The phrase "tužan sam" was chosen by 88.1% of participants, while only 11.9% selected "I'm sad." Similarly, 73.8% selected "slomljeno mi je srce" as stronger, compared to 26.2% who chose "I'm heartbroken." The phrase "povrijeđen sam" was chosen by 66.7%, while 33.3% opted for "I'm hurt." "Potišten sam" was judged as stronger by 71.4% of the participants, while only 28.6% chose "I'm feeling down." The phrase "osjećam se jadno" was preferred by 63.4% of participants, while 36.6% chose the English equivalent "I'm miserable." Additionally, 71.4% chose "očajan sam," compared to 28.6% who selected "I'm desperate." The phrase "potišten sam" was preferred by 66.7%, while 33.3% chose "I feel dejected." The smallest difference was observed with the phrases "u depresiji sam" and "osjećam se nemoćno," each chosen by 61.9% of participants, while their English equivalents "I'm depressed" and "I feel helpless" were chosen by 38.1%.



Graph 4.: "Which feels stronger"

## 7.5. Discussion

The first hypothesis proposed that participants prefer using English (L2) to express negative emotions. This hypothesis was disproven as only 16.7% of participants expressed a preference for the expression of negative emotions in English. In contrast, Croatian was chosen by 26.2% of the participants, which was the second most selected option after "I don't



like to express emotions verbally". Furthermore, a significant majority of participants (40.5%) disagreed with the statement that they are more likely to talk about a sad experience if they have a chance to do so in English. These results contradict Pavlenko (2002) who found that bilinguals prefer to express negative emotions in L2 due to the emotional distance and detachment it provides. A possible reason for this discrepancy is that Pavlenko's study focused on traumatic events which participants found difficult to relive and talk about, while this study addressed general negative emotions and emotions of sadness. However, the findings are consistent with Belcher and Connor's (2001) research, as cited in Dylman (2018), and Pavlenko (2006) who found that bilinguals generally prefer to express emotions in their first language. Additionally, the majority of participants (45.2%) reported that they express sadness only sometimes in English. This result was expected, given that all participants live in a Croatian-speaking country, which limits their opportunities to express emotions in English.

The second hypothesis proposed that participants find it easier to express negative emotions and sadness in L2. The results confirmed the hypothesis, as 71.5% of participants either agreed (28.6%) or completely agreed (42.9%) that they find it easier to express emotions in English. In contrast, only 14% of participants reported that they find it easier to express emotions in Croatian. Additionally, 61.9% of participants (38.1% agreed and 23.8% completely agreed) stated that they find it easier to express negative emotions in English, and 71.4% agreed or completely agreed that they can discuss sad experiences more easily in English. Furthermore, 71.5% of participants agreed (42.9%) or completely agreed (28.6%) that they talk about their sad emotions more openly and honestly in English. These findings align with Marian and Kaushanskaya's (2008) study, who found that bilingual speakers often find it easier to discuss their negative experiences in L2 due to the emotional distance and detachment it provides. They also confirm Pavlenko's (2002) observation that L1 typically carries a deeper emotional weight. Additionally, these results are consistent with Koven's (1998) suggestion that people experience different emotions and exhibit different speaking habits when using different languages. As previously mentioned, Dewaele (2006) suggests that lack of proficiency in L2 might impact the emotionality of expression in that language. However, it is important to note that language proficiency did not seem to present a hindering factor in this study, as 80.9% of participants either completely disagreed (47.6%) or disagreed (33.3%) with the statement that expressing the depth of their sadness is challenging due to vocabulary constraints. Likewise, most participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement regarding whether they have to use more words to describe the depth of their

sadness in English (28.6%). An equal number of participants completely disagreed and completely agreed (19%), which may suggest that the disparity in the answers can be attributed to personal preference, rather than language proficiency. Additionally, 38.1% agreed and 28.3% completely agreed with the statement 'I substitute certain emotion words with their English equivalents when discussing sadness in Croatian.' This suggests that participants may code-switch to English (L2) when discussing sad experiences because it creates a sense of detachment, which makes it easier for them to express their emotions. This finding aligns with Izsóf Jurásová and Kissová (2021) and William et al. (2019), who suggest that code-switching decreases the emotional intensity of a situation and helps the speaker regulate emotions.

The third hypothesis proposed that L2 is less emotional than L1. The majority of participants (85.7%) either agreed (26.2%) or completely agreed (59.5%) that expressing sadness in Croatian (L1) conveys a stronger sense of intensity. Additionally, a significant number of participants agreed (40.5%) or completely agreed (31%) that they can discuss sad experiences more objectively in English, as well as agreed (21.4%) or completely agreed (38.1%) that they can rationalize their sadness better when speaking English. These findings are consistent with Marian and Kaushanskaya (2008), who suggest that L2 might be less emotional than L1, and align with Foster (1996) and Keysar et al. (2012), who propose that speaking in L2 may create the emotional distance needed to observe situations more objectively. However, the result was unexpected for the statement regarding whether hearing or reading about other people's sad emotions or experiences in English affects them less. The majority of participants (61.9%) either completely disagreed (23.8%) or disagreed (38.1%) with this statement, while only 28.6% either agreed (16.7%) or completely agreed (11.9%). These findings diverge from expectations and contradict Harris (2003) and Caldwell-Harris and Ayçiçeği-Dinn (2009), who found that participants were less affected by emotionally laden stimuli in L2.

The fourth hypothesis proposed that expressing emotions (sadness) in L2 feels less authentic and natural than in L1. The results confirmed this hypothesis, with 78.6% of participants who agreed (31%) or completely agreed (47.6%) that expressing sadness in English feels less personal. The statement 'Expressing sadness in English feels natural/authentic' did not give clear results, because the most commonly chosen option was 'neither agree nor disagree' (31%). However, a significant number of participants completely agreed (42.9%) or agreed (26.2%) that expressing emotions in L1 feels more genuine and authentic, while only 9.5% disagreed (7.1%) or completely disagreed (2.4%). These findings align with Pavlenko (2006),

who suggests that a second language might feel performative and less natural than L1, and Dewaele (2008), who proposes that the cognitive processing involved when communicating in L2 may lead to less authentic emotional expression.

The fifth and final hypothesis proposed that emotion words feel stronger in L1 than in L2. This hypothesis was supported by the findings, as participants judged emotion words in Croatian as stronger than their English equivalents for all nine examples provided. These results indicate that emotion words in L2 do not carry the same emotional weight as emotion words in L1, as was previously indicated by Ayçiçeği and Harris (2004), Santiago-Rivera and Altarriba (2002), Pavlenko (2002) and Dewaele (2008). In contrast to the previous result, the majority of participants completely disagreed (38.1%) with the statement 'When speaking English, I sometimes use certain emotion words in Croatian because they feel stronger.' Additionally, responses to the statements "During a highly emotional situation, I will switch to Croatian", and "During a highly emotional situation, I will switch to English" were not statistically significant, as most participants chose the option neither agreed nor disagreed (45.2%) for the first statement, while responses to the second statement were almost evenly distributed across all options. However, this finding might not reflect the relative strength of emotion words in L1 and L2, but could rather be attributed to situational constraints, such as participants expressing their emotions in a different language would be inappropriate or lead to misunderstandings.

This study contributes to the ongoing research of the bilingual mind by examining the perceived emotional differences when expressing sadness in L1 and L2. While a significant portion of existing research focused on bilinguals who live in foreign countries and communicate in L2 daily, this study focused on bilingual speakers who still live in their L1-speaking country and predominantly use their L1. The limitations of this study include a relatively small number of participants, as well as not using qualitative methods to uncover the underlying psychological factors, situational context and constraints that may have influenced participants' responses. Increasing the sample size and using additional methods to explore the reasoning behind participants' responses are suggested areas for further research.

## 8. Conclusion

This thesis focused on the disparities in perception and emotional expression between the first and the second language. It aimed to discover the language preference for emotional expression, and the perceived differences in the emotional strength and authenticity of the second language when expressing the emotion of sadness. The findings suggest that bilinguals generally prefer to express negative and sad emotions in L1 but find it easier to do so in L2. This may be due to the diminished emotionality of L2, as participants reported that emotional expression in L1 carries a stronger emotional intensity and authenticity.

This study contributes to a better understanding of the bilingual mind and addresses a perceived gap in existing research by focusing on the emotional differences perceived between the L1 and L2 in bilinguals who live in their L1-speaking country. A recommendation for future research includes incorporating qualitative methods with quantitative questions, which would offer a deeper understanding of the factors and context contributing to the results of this study.

# 9. Appendix

02. 09. 2024. 2024 Bilingualism and expressing emotion of sadness

### Bilingualism and expressing emotion of sadness

This survey is intended for students of the English Department and focuses on how bilingual individuals express sadness. Your responses will remain anonymous and confidential. The survey will take less than 15 minutes to complete. Thank you for participating :)

1. Gender  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
 M  
 F  
 other

2. Education level  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
 1st year  
 2nd year  
 3rd year  
 4th year  
 5th year

3. I find it easier to express my emotions in English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

02. 09. 2024. 2024 Bilingualism and expressing emotion of sadness

4. I find it easier to express my emotions in Croatian.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

5. I find it easier to express negative emotions in English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

6. I'm more open and honest about my sad emotions when speaking in English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

7. I find it easier to talk about sad experiences in English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

02. 09. 2024. 2024 Bilingualism and expressing emotion of sadness

8. I am more likely to talk about a sad experience if I have a chance to do so in English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

9. I have to use more words to describe the depth of my sadness in English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

10. Expressing emotion of sadness in Croatian conveys a stronger sense of intensity.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

11. I feel as though expressing the depth of my sadness in English is challenging due to vocabulary constraints.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

02. 09. 2024. 2024 Bilingualism and expressing emotion of sadness

12. I substitute certain emotion words with their English equivalents when discussing sadness in Croatian.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

13. When speaking English, I sometimes use certain emotion words in Croatian because they feel stronger.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

14. During a highly emotional situation I will switch to Croatian.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

15. During a highly emotional situation I will switch to English.  
Označite samo jedan oval.  
1 2 3 4 5  
com      completely agree

Odjeljak bez naslova

16. I can discuss a sad experience more objectively in English.

Označite samo jedan oval.

1 2 3 4 5  
 corr:      completely agree

17. Expressing sadness in English feels less personal.

Označite samo jedan oval.

1 2 3 4 5  
 corr:      completely agree

18. Expressing sadness in English feels natural /authentic

Označite samo jedan oval.

1 2 3 4 5  
 corr:      completely agree

19. Expressing sadness in Croatian feels more genuine /authentic

Označite samo jedan oval.

1 2 3 4 5  
 corr:      completely agree

24. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Tužan sam  
 I'm sad

25. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Stomijeno mi je srce  
 I'm heartbroken

26. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Povrijeđen sam  
 I'm hurt

27. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Potišten sam  
 I'm feeling down

28. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Osjećam se jadno  
 I'm miserable

20. I can rationalize my sadness better when speaking in English.

Označite samo jedan oval.

1 2 3 4 5  
 corr:      completely agree

21. Hearing/reading about other people's sad emotions/ experiences in English affects me less.

Označite samo jedan oval.

1 2 3 4 5  
 corr:      completely agree

22. I switch to English when discussing the emotion of sadness.

Označite samo jedan oval.

never  
 rarely  
 sometimes  
 often  
 always

23. I prefer expressing my negative emotions in

Označite samo jedan oval.

Croatian  
 English  
 both  
 I don't like expressing emotions verbally

29. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Očajan sam  
 I'm desperate

30. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Potišten sam  
 I feel dejected

31. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

U depresiji sam  
 I'm depressed

32. Which feels stronger?

Označite samo jedan oval.

Osjećam se nemoćno  
 I feel helpless

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