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No offence! A multilingual perspective on the implicit affective connotation swearwords in Belgium

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Most perceptual work on swearwords has respondents explicitly report the frequency, arousal or offensiveness of swearwords in questionnaires and interviews (e.g. Beers Fägersten 2012, De Waele 2016, 2017). This leaves us largely in the dark concerning the more automatic implicit affective associations with swearwords (though Harris et al. 2003, Eilola & Havelka 2011). Yet, such knowledge can help address standing issues on variation and change in swearwords use, such as the interaction between contact-induced change in swearwords and the euphemism treadmill.

Targeting this issue, we studied the implicit affective value attached to borrowed and heritage swearwords by multilingual speakers of Dutch, English and French in Belgium through an affective priming experiment (cf. Degner et al. 2012).

- **Participants:** 60 L1 Belgian Dutch speakers and 60 L1 Belgian French speakers (all with English as L2). The sample is controlled for gender, age, education and personality (Dewaele 2017).
- **Task:** Respondents are presented with valence-benchmarked visual target stimuli which have to be categorized as positive or negative. Each target stimulus is preceded by a subliminal prime (cf. Fig.1). The primes consist of 120 swearwords balanced for arousal (Roest et al. 2017), source domain (Zenner et al. 2017) and language (English, French, Dutch).

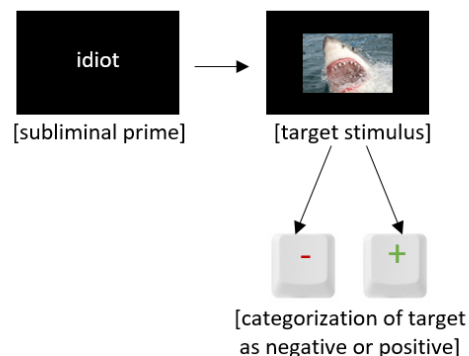


Figure 1 – Schematic presentation of experimental task

- **Dependent variable:** Participants categorize target stimuli faster if they are preceded by a prime which has the same valence as the target. Hence, reaction times are indicative of the affective value of the prime stimuli, viz. our swearwords.
- **Predictors:** Inferential statistics assess the relation between reaction times and the language of the swearword and the respondent's L1, including arousal, source domain and respondents' self-reported familiarity with the swearwords as moderators.
- **Expected results:** Analyses are expected to reveal euphemistic effects for borrowed swearwords, with interactions between language of the swearword and L1 of the speaker. Results will be interpreted against the global position of English, the local position of French, and the overall euphemistic potential of L2 words (cf. Dewaele 2004, Woumans et al. in press).

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