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The implicit affective processing of swearwords in Belgian multilingual speakers: An experimental study

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Previous studies on language processing in multilingual settings have demonstrated that speakers show reduced emotional activation in response to emotional words in general and swearwords in particular in an L2 compared to an L1 (e.g. Dewaele 2004). This suggests that the emotional impact of swearwords in a non-native language may be weaker than the emotional impact of the same words in a native language. So far, most perceptual work on swearwords has respondents directly report the frequency, arousal, or offensiveness of swearwords in questionnaires and interviews (e.g. Beers Fägersten 2012, Dewaele 2016, 2017). This leaves us largely in the dark concerning the more automatic implicit affective associations with swearwords (though see Harris et al. 2003 and Eilola & Havelka 2011 for two psychophysiological studies that monitor arousal through skin conductance and Vattovvaara & Peterson 2019 for the study of one alternation pair). Moving forward with these indirect methods can help address standing issues on processing, variation and change in swearwords use, such as the interaction between contact-induced change in swearwords and the euphemism treadmill.

Targeting the more automatic processing of swearwords in multilingual settings, 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 Belgian language professionals who have either Dutch or French as L1 and a high proficiency in English and French or Dutch respectively. The sample is controlled for gender, age, education, and personality (Dewaele 2017).
- **Task:** Respondents are presented with valence-benchmarked visual target stimuli and are instructed to categorize the stimuli as positive or negative. Each target stimulus is preceded by a prime (cf. Fig.1). The primes consist of 36 neutral, positive and taboo words balanced for gender, familiarity, source domain (Zenner et al. 2017), language (English, French, Dutch) and word length (Barton et al. 2014).
- **Dependent variable:** Participants categorize target stimuli faster if the valence of the target is congruent with the valence of the prime it is preceded by. Hence, reaction times are indicative of the affective value of the prime stimuli, in this case our swearwords.
- **Predictors:** Inferential statistics assess the relation between reaction times, the language of the swearword, the respondent's L1 and their reported L2 and L3 proficiency. Respondents' self-reported familiarity with the swearwords is taken into account as moderators.
- **Expected results:** It is expected that data analysis will reveal euphemistic effects for L2/L3 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 positions of French and Dutch, and the overall euphemistic potential of Lx words (cf. Dewaele 2004, Woumans et al. in press).

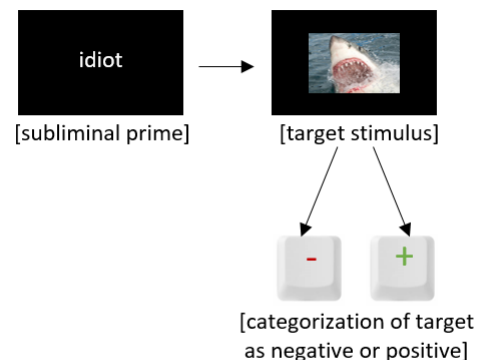


Figure 1 – Schematic presentation of experimental task

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