Our love, our language

A qualitative study on non-native speakers’ experiences of bilingual couplehood, language emotionality and self-perception in different languages

Matilda Perovuo

Department of Swedish language and Multilingualism
Magister Degree project
Spring 2018
Supervisor: Christopher Stroud
Our love, our language

A qualitative study on non-native speakers’ experiences of bilingual couplehood, language emotionality and self-perception in different languages

Matilda Perovuo

Abstract

Research on multilingualism, self-perception and the emotional aspect of language has shown that a majority of multilinguals report feeling different when changing languages and usually perceive their L1 as the most emotional language. This study aims to investigate the questions of self-perception and language emotionality in the context of a bilingual romantic relationship, focusing on the point of view of partners who are non-native speakers of the mutual relationship language. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to find out how emotional the non-native speakers perceive their relationship language (LX) versus their L1, whether they feel like they are the same person in the two languages and whether they see that being a bilingual couple affects the relationship. The results of the study suggest that length of the relationship and whether the non-native speakers use their L2 or L3 with their respective partners may affect how emotional they perceive their LX to be. Moreover, the more proficient the non-native speakers perceive themselves in LX the more emotionally resonant LX usually becomes. The findings also showed that those who experienced their LX as equally or more emotional than their L1 did not perceive themselves differently when changing from LX to L1. In contrast, the participants who perceived L1 as the most emotional language reported feeling different in the two languages. Furthermore, the participants considered bilingualism as an essential part of the couples’ joint identity.

Although the partners’ different linguistic and cultural backgrounds were sometimes experienced as challenging, bilingualism was seen as an enriching and unifying factor in the relationship. It’s important to consider that the findings of the study are based on the participants’ subjective experiences on their relationship, language emotionality and self-perception when changing languages, and can therefore not be generalized to a larger population.

Keywords

Bilingual couples, love, language choice, emotional weight, feeling different
## Contents

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 1
2. Literature review ..................................................................................................................... 2
3. Purpose of the study ............................................................................................................... 5
4. Research design and method .................................................................................................. 5
   4.1. Interview guide .................................................................................................................. 6
   4.2. Participants ....................................................................................................................... 6
   4.3. Data collection .................................................................................................................. 7
   4.4. Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 7
5. Results .................................................................................................................................... 8
   5.1. Background ...................................................................................................................... 8
   5.2. Linguistic practices of the bilingual couples ................................................................. 9
   5.3. The experienced emotionality of the participants’ languages .................................... 10
   5.4. Expressing anger in a non-native language ................................................................. 12
   5.5. The emotional weight of *I love you* ......................................................................... 13
   5.6. Language and self-perception ....................................................................................... 14
   5.7. Bilingual couplehood ..................................................................................................... 16
6. Discussion .............................................................................................................................. 18
7. Limitations and future research ............................................................................................ 22
8. Conclusions ............................................................................................................................ 24
References .................................................................................................................................... 25
Appendix A .................................................................................................................................. 27
Appendix B .................................................................................................................................. 28
**1. Introduction**

Bilingual families have been an area of interest for researchers for many years. The focus of the research has mostly been on bilingual children and the language choices made in families where the parents come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In contrast, linguistic practices of bilingual and -cultural couples have been studied much less. However, as Piller (2002) points out, bilingual couplehood is a context where language choice often is an option, as opposed to many public or institutional contexts. Therefore, research on linguistic practices of bilingual couples can be used to better understand the motives behind language choices in interpersonal relationships and the effects these choices might have. Also, in intimate relationships, the ability to express one’s thoughts and feelings, despite different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, is an important factor in partnership happiness.

According to Cools (2004), communication has an essential role in creating and maintaining intimacy and satisfaction in a romantic relationship, affecting the partners’ experience of the relationship. Consequently, research on bilingual couplehood can reveal more about the relationship between language and emotion as well as about *intercultural* communication, which refers to interaction between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Cools 2004).

Furthermore, research on bilingual and -cultural couples has become more and more relevant. With increasing human mobility, the number of intercultural relationships and marriages is growing all over the world. In most European countries, for example, the amount of mixed marriages has risen over time (Lanzieri 2012).

In the present study, the experience of being in a bilingual relationship is investigated from the point of view of individuals who use their second language (L2) or third language (L3) as a mutual language with their respective partners. The terms L2 and L3 are used in the present study to refer to the order in which the non-native speakers have acquired their languages.

One of the main interests of this study is the question of different language selves. This is relevant to many individuals who use more than one language in their everyday lives (Pavlenko 2006), not least to those who are in a relationship with a partner from a different linguistic and cultural background. Another focus of the present study is the self-perceived emotionality of the non-native speakers’ different languages. Emotionality of a language refers to the emotional impact which (using) a certain language has on the individual.
(Pavlenko 2002). The context of a romantic relationship provides a rich subject of research when studying the connection between language and emotion and whether those who speak their non-native language with their partner perceive themselves differently when using their relationship language compared to their mother tongue.

2. Literature review

Linguistic practices of bilingual couples have been studied by Piller (2002). By recording bilingual and cross-cultural English- and German-speaking couples’ private conversations on topics related to bilingualism and relationships, she found out that the couples’ language choice is strongly indicated by the language of the community they live in. Moreover, habit is another factor affecting the choice of one language over another. The couples in Piller’s study preferred to stick to the language of their first meeting. This can, according to Piller (2002), be explained by the close relationship between language and identity. However, many couples were found to prefer some form of language mixing in their mutual communication. The couples had constructed a "cross-cultural" identity and placed a high value on their joint bilingual identity, where the personal mixture of languages they speak is an essential part of who they are as a couple (Piller 2002).

As pointed out by Dewaele (2010), many previous studies about the relationship between language and emotion have mainly focused on the role of attitude and motivation in successful second language acquisition, whereas communication of emotion in L2 has been a relatively overlooked aspect in the research of bilingualism. Furthermore, the subjective nature of emotional experience and factors such as the personal meaning that learning and using a language has for an individual have been seen as obstacles for scientific research (Harris et al. 2006). Nevertheless, as Harris et al. (2006) argue, this view has become outdated during the past decades. According to Dewaele (2010), L2 speakers’ feelings and reflections on language choice and self-perception provide valuable insights into research on language and emotion. In the recent decades, the issues of experiencing and expressing emotions in multiple languages have been taken up by researchers of bilingualism, such as Dewaele (2010, 2013, 2016), Pavlenko (2004, 2006), Altarriba (2003), and Harris (2004).
Dewaele has studied how multilinguals express emotions differently in different languages. In one of his studies (2008), he looked at the perceived emotional weight of the phrase *I love you* in multilinguals’ different languages. Using an online questionnaire with questions related to language behavior and emotions, he found that nearly half of the 1459 multilingual participants felt that the phrase *I love you* was strongest in their first language (L1). Less than a third judged the phrase to have equal emotional weight in their L1 and non-native language (LX), whereas a quarter reported that it has more weight in an LX. Using statistical analyses, Dewaele found that the perception of the emotional weight of the phrase *I love you* was associated with the participants’ self-perceived language dominance, context of LX acquisition and self-perceived oral proficiency in LX.

Dewaele (2006) has also examined multilinguals’ language choices for expressing anger in different situations. Based on the information gathered from 1454 multilinguals in the same web questionnaire as in the forementioned study, Dewaele (2006) suggested that self-perceived proficiency in LX is the strongest factor affecting multilinguals’ language choice for expression of anger. The participants who reported feeling more proficient in a language also reported using that language more frequently to express anger than the participants who reported not feeling as proficient. Even though L1 was generally found to be the preferred language to communicate anger, LX can, after a period of socialization, become the favored language for expression of anger. Furthermore, Dewaele (2006) found that the participants who learned their language(s) in a naturalistic environment used that language more often to express anger than those who learned their language(s) in an instructed context. This might, according to Dewaele (2006), have to do with the wide array of situations LX users face in authentic interactions compared to the limited variety of emotion repertoires provided in a classroom setting.

Pavlenko (2006) used the data gathered with the Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ) (Dewaele & Pavlenko 2001-2003) and studied whether multilinguals feel like they are different people when they change languages. The analysis of the answers from 1039 multilinguals to the open question concerning "feeling different in a foreign language” showed that the majority (65 %) of the participants reported feeling different when using another language, whereas only 25 % reported not feeling different. The responses of the remaining 10% were ambiguous. Pavlenko (2006) also investigated how the participants make sense of their perceptions of different selves and found four main patterns in the
multilinguals’ responses: 1) linguistic and cultural differences, 2) different learning contexts, 3) differences in the level of experienced language emotionality and 4) differences in language proficiency. Based on her findings, Pavlenko (2006) concluded that many multilinguals felt more ”real” when speaking L1, and more ”fake” when speaking languages, they had learned later in life.

Pavlenko’s results were supported by Dewaele and Nakano (2013) who studied a group of multilinguals in order to investigate how they felt when using languages learnt later in life. 106 participants filled out an online questionnaire with closed questions. The results showed that the multilinguals felt more authentic, more emotional, more logical and more serious in their L1. This contrasted with their feelings when using L2, L3 and other languages learnt later in life, in which they felt gradually less authentic, less emotional, less logical and less serious.

A significant body of research suggests that as far as the linguistic repertoire of multilinguals is concerned, first language usually is perceived as more emotional than second language, which often is described as more detached or cold (Dewaele 2010). Altarriba (2003) suggests that the stronger perceived emotionality of L1 may stem from its acquisition in early childhood, when one experiences the world for the first time. These experiences evoke the need to express one’s emotions and needs, strengthening the emotional connotations of the words in one’s first language. Thus, emotion words in the first language are said to be stored at a deeper level of representation than emotion words in L2, which often is learned in more instrumental contexts. (Altarriba 2003.) A language learned in a classroom environment doesn’t necessarily evoke emotional connotations in the same way as naturalistic acquisition of a first language does. If emotion words in L2 are experienced in fewer contexts and practised less than in L1, they usually don’t become as deeply encoded. (Altarriba 2003.)

According to Harris’ (2004: 276-277) emotional context of learning hypothesis “language is experienced as emotional when it is acquired and used in an emotional context”. In other words, it is not the language, but the emotional context behind it, which influences the experienced emotionality of the language. Furthermore, Pavlenko (2004) has suggested that adult second language socialization in a private emotional domain such as family may result in other languages becoming equally or even more emotional than the first language. The experience of using one’s second language in emotional contexts, according to Pavlenko (2013), can reinforce the attachment to the language and therefore make it more emotional.
3. Purpose of the study

There are three main purposes in the present study which explores the experience of being in a bilingual relationship from the point of view of individuals who use their non-native language as the common language with their partner. The first aim of the study is to investigate the experienced emotionality of the participants’ relationship language (LX) versus their first language (L1). The second aim is to study whether the participants feel like they are the same person in their relationship language compared to their mother tongue. Finally, the present study aims to find out whether and how bilingualism has affected the participants’ respective relationships, according to them.

Based on the aims of the study, the research questions are as follows:

• How do non-native speakers of the mutual relationship language perceive the emotionality of their relationship language versus their first language?
• Do the non-native speakers perceive themselves differently in their relationship language versus their first language?
• What effects do the non-native speakers see on their relationship in being a bilingual couple?

4. Research design and method

A qualitative research design was chosen for the present study. This approach is suitable when the aim is to understand the reality from the participants’ perspective, and to allow unanticipated phenomena to be discovered (Maxwell 2013). For the data collection, four semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. Unlike structured interviews, which follow a fixed and pre-set list of questions, semi-structured interviews are more open and flexible, allowing new ideas to be brought up and particular themes to be explored further, based on the participants’ responses (Morse 2012). However, a pre-determined set of interview questions serves as a basis for semi-structured interviews (Morse 2012).

In order to find participants relevant to the study, i.e. participants who are in a relationship where the common language in use is their non-native language and their partner’s first language, purposeful sampling was employed. Purposeful sampling (Teddlie & Tashakkori
2009) is a strategy in which respondents are selected in order to provide particularly relevant information to the research questions. The advantage of purposeful sampling is that while it provides representativeness and typicality of the selected individuals, it can parallelly capture the heterogeneity in the members of the population, ensuring that the conclusions represent different kinds of individuals, rather than solely the typical members (Maxwell 2013). The participants in the present study represent different variations on dimensions such as age, length of relationship, whether they use their L2 or L3 as the relationship language and whether they have children or not.

4.1. Interview guide

The interview questions were grouped into five sections. The first section consisted of background questions related to the participants’ linguistic background and relationship with their partner. In the second section, the participants were asked questions about the linguistic practices in their bilingual relationship. The third section, with focus on the relationship between language and emotion, consisted of questions about the self-perceived emotionality of the participants’ different languages, such as “Which language is the most emotional to you?” and “Which language do you use when you’re having a conflict with your partner?”.

Also, in this section, the participants were asked about the perceived emotional weight of the phrase *I love you* in their different languages. In the fourth section, the participants were asked questions regarding self-perceived changes in their personality when changing languages, such as ”Do you feel like a different person sometimes when you use your different languages?”, adopted from Dewaele and Pavlenko (2001-2003). Finally, in the last section, the participants were asked to reflect on whether and how being a bilingual couple has influenced their relationship, according to them. Follow-up questions were asked whenever the participants’ responses needed clarification. At the end of each interview, the respondents were given the opportunity to add comments and thoughts that had prompted during the interview.

4.2. Participants

Four participants were recruited from a social media community for Finnish people living in Stockholm. All four participants were female, aged 24, 24, 26 and 41. All of the participants had Finnish as their first language, and they reported being in a relationship where they use
their second or third language with their partner who is a native speaker of the language in question. All four participants were highly educated, one of them having an MA degree and the other three respondents currently studying their MA degree.

4.3. Data collection

Four individual interviews were conducted in Stockholm. All participants were given the choice to decide the language in which their interview was conducted. As a result, three of the interviews were held in Finnish while one of them was held in English. All interviews were recorded using a portable digital recorder. Prior to the interviews, each participant was informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. The participants were also informed that all personal information would be confidential, and that the identity of the participants couldn’t be linked to a specific interview.

4.4. Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The aim of content analysis is to give a general, clear description of the investigated phenomenon, and to identify important themes and patterns in the data (Patton 2002). The first step, according to Schreier (2014), is to reduce and simplify the data by selecting meaningful units in the material and to leave out the rest. What guides the selection of important data units are the research questions and the aim of the study (Schreier 2014). In the present study, the aim is to investigate the following three main themes: the experienced emotionality of the non-native speakers’ languages, the relationship between language and self-perception and the effects bilingualism may have on the relationship, according to the respondents. Thus, in the first stage of the data analysis, these three categories were used to simplify the data.

After this, the main categories were further organized into subcategories, such as expression of emotions in different situations, possible changes in the participants’ self-perception when changing languages, and challenges and positive aspects of being a bilingual couple. Finally,
in order to draw conclusions and present the findings, the categories were organized into coherent sections. (Patton 2002.)

Some direct quotations were used to represent findings in different sections. The quotes from the Finnish interviews were translated from Finnish to English by the author. The final translated quotes were edited by the author for added clarity.

5. Results

5.1. Background

All four participants had Finnish as their first language. Two of the participants (P1 and P2) reported using English with their English-speaking partner, while the other two participants (P3 and P4) reported using Swedish with their Swedish-speaking partner. All respondents had English as their second language, so the two participants with Swedish as their relationship language were using their third language with their partner, as opposed to the participants with L2 English as the relationship language.

P1 reported having been married to her English-speaking partner for ten years. She was the only participant having children. P2 reported living in co-habitation with her English-speaking partner, with whom she had been together with for four years. The relationships of the respondents who were together with a Swedish-speaking partner were at the time of the interviews relatively new, that is, five months and eight months old respectively.

When asked about their self-assessed proficiency in the language they used as a main language of communication with their partner, P1 and P2 perceived themselves as very fluent, but not nativelike, in English. Both P1 and P2 reported having learned the language first at school and having lived in an English-speaking country later in life, where they had been exposed to the language in a naturalistic environment. P3 and P4, on the other hand, perceived their Swedish skills as good, but not fluent. P3, who has lived in Stockholm for six months, stated that she struggles to some extent especially when speaking in Swedish. P4 reported having noticed improvement in her Swedish since she moved to Stockholm for 1,5 years ago, and especially during the time she has been together with her Swedish-speaking partner.
5.2. Linguistic practices of the bilingual couples

In this section, the participants were asked more specifically about the language(s) they use with their partner in their everyday life, and whether the common language in use has been the same since the partners met. As previously stated, P1 and P2 use English with their English-speaking partner whereas the common language for P3 and P4 and their partners is Swedish. Three out of four participants reported that the common language between the partners has been the same from the beginning. Only P3, who now uses Swedish with her partner, had started the relationship in another language (English). The switch to Swedish occurred after the first few dates. According to P3, the couple has a practical view on language use, and since they live in Stockholm, speaking Swedish felt like the right choice. She expressed, however, that the change into Swedish as the relationship language has been rather challenging for her.

When asked whether the participants ever switch to other languages when communicating with their partner, only P1 reported sticking to English at all times when communicating with her husband. English is, according to P1, the only language option for them because her husband doesn’t know any other languages.

P2 stated that she mixes languages a lot with her English-speaking partner, depending on the context. All three languages, English, Swedish and Finnish, are somehow present in their daily life, even though English is their main language of communication. Since they both know Swedish, they sometimes use it with their Swedish friends. According to P2, speaking English feels like the natural choice despite their knowledge of Swedish and the fact that they live in Stockholm.

P2: "It feels really kind of fake if we speak Swedish together because for both of us it’s more difficult than English. English is so much more natural, because that’s my stronger foreign language and it’s his mother tongue."

However, they both use some Swedish words in their otherwise English communication in case they know the term in Swedish and don’t bother or know how to translate it. P2 also reported that her partner is learning Finnish, and that there are certain things they always use the Finnish word for, such as ‘mitä’ (‘what’). P2 mentioned her partner’s interest in
Finnish music and that by translating Finnish lyrics into English she has been helping him to learn more Finnish. Overall, P2 concluded that she tries to fit in Finnish in their daily life.

P3, who has switched from English to Swedish as the common language with her partner, reported still resorting to English when for example telling a joke or talking about an article she has read, in case she finds it difficult to explain something in Swedish. She also mentioned using Finnish expressions unintentionally when something happens suddenly.

P3: "I call it the 'brain leak'. In case something surprising happens, my reaction words come in Finnish. Also, words such as 'and', 'or' and 'so', these kinds of fillers come out in Finnish sometimes."

P4 described using some sporadic words in English, and sometimes explaining to her partner how a specific Swedish word would be said in Finnish. Apart from that, P4 speaks only Swedish with her partner, and in case she doesn’t understand something he explains it to her in other words in Swedish.

5.3. The experienced emotionality of the participants’ languages

The third section of the interview consisted of questions related to the relationship between language and emotion. The participants were asked questions about the emotionality of their different languages, and about expressions of anger and love in first language versus foreign language.

When the participants were asked to reflect on which language is the most emotional to them, P3 and P4 stated that it’s definitely Finnish, their first language. P3, who has been singing and making music since childhood, reported having noticed the difference especially when singing in different languages. She described the switch from another language to Finnish as "taking off a mask". P3 reflected on how the context of learning a language affects the experienced emotionality of that language. She reported having learned and used English and Swedish at school and at work, which, according to her, may have resulted in a less emotional relationship to those languages compared to her mother tongue. P4 stressed the possibility of
expressing herself unlimitedly in Finnish as the most important factor for why she perceives Finnish as her most emotional language.

Unlike P3 and P4, the other two respondents reported that English, their relationship language, is either as emotional as Finnish or even the most emotional language to them. P1 said that Finnish and English are as emotional to her, possibly because she has been using English with her husband for such a long time. P2 reported that English is the most emotional language to her, which, according to her, might have to do with the fact that her whole relationship life has happened in English.

When asked in which language the participants find it easier to talk about emotional topics, two of the respondents reported that it’s easier in another language than Finnish, while one participant reported finding it as easy in both of her languages. P4, the only participant who preferred Finnish when talking about emotional topics, reported that due to access to a greater vocabulary in Finnish, she finds it easier to express herself on emotional topics in her first language.

P3 reflected on how previous negative experiences which have happened in one language might make it easier to talk about emotional topics in another language:

P3: "Maybe it is so that I say more things in another language, since I don’t have a similar history with that language. In Finnish you have experiences from when you were younger, and you showed feelings for someone and it ended badly. So, you talk about your core feelings, but not in your core language. It’s maybe easier to talk about them in another language.”

P2, who also reported preferring to talk about emotional topics in English, motivated her answer with a similar reason as P2:

P2: "You don’t have a similar relationship with the words in a different language. In Finnish I really need to mean everything I say, and I have to have a bigger connection to the words maybe when I say them in Finnish than in English.”
P1, who previously reported that for her, there is no difference in the emotionality between Finnish and English, stated that apart from conflict situations she finds it as easy to talk about emotional topics in both languages. When feeling agitated, she reported experiencing that it’s hard to find the right words in English and she feels like she is disadvantaged compared to her husband who is a native speaker of the language.

5.4. Expressing anger in a non-native language

The linguistic challenges of conflicts and arguments were taken up by three of the participants already before the questions related to language choice in conflict situations and the participants’ thoughts on expressing anger in a foreign language were asked by the author. However, only P3 reported switching from Swedish to her second language, English, when having an argument with her partner. None of the participants reported using their first language when having a conflict with their partner.

As stated in the previous section, P1 reported that conflict situations feel challenging in terms of finding the right words when feeling upset or heated up. Like her, P2 and P4 reflected on the difficulty to argue in a foreign language. As P4 stated, not being able to react as spontaneously in Swedish as in Finnish makes it more difficult to argue in her relationship language. Despite this, she reported having used only Swedish in conflict situations with her partner. P2, who otherwise evaluated herself as fluent in English, admitted that she sometimes struggles linguistically when arguing with her partner. She also reported swearing a lot more in English.

P2: "I might say things that I wouldn’t say in Finnish. I swear a lot more which I wouldn’t do in Finnish, because it just feels like it’s not such a big deal. It feels easier maybe to say bad things in English."

Even P3 stated having experienced that it’s easier to be mean in another language. She also reported that she switches to English when having an argument with her partner, and motivated the change of language with factors related to how she perceives herself in her foreign languages:
P3: “I feel like I’m more convincing as a person when I speak English. In Swedish I feel a bit like a teenager.”

5.5. The emotional weight of I love you

The participants were asked about the emotional weight of the phrase *I love you* in their different languages. All four participants reported that it’s more difficult to say *‘I love you’* in their first language, Finnish, and that the phrase is emotionally strongest in Finnish. They also compared the use of the phrase *I love you* in different cultures and experienced that in the Finnish culture or in their own childhood, the phrase has been rarely used.

P1 reported that she prefers to say *‘I love you’* in English, even to her children who know Finnish. According to her, it’s harder to say the phrase in Finnish than in English, possibly because it wasn’t used that often in her own childhood.

P2 stated that using the phrase feels very different in Finnish compared to English:

P2: "When we first started dating, I mean if that had been in Finnish, I probably would have waited a lot longer before saying like *‘Mä rakastan sua’*. In English you can say *‘I love you’* in any situation and to anyone, more or less. In Finnish, we don’t do that, we don’t use the phrase in the same way."

According to P3, *‘Minä rakastan sinua’* isn’t something her family is used to saying that often. She also explained how she experienced the differences between the phrase in three languages, English, Swedish and Finnish, when saying *‘I love you’* to her partner for the first time:

P3: "First I said it in English, then in Swedish. In English, you barely notice you said it, in Swedish there’s this comical tone, like, did I really say this in Swedish now. It feels a little clumsy. And then in Finnish, *‘Minä rakastan sinua’* is quite serious."

For P4, as for all the other participants, the phrase *I love you* is emotionally strongest in
Finnish. She reported feeling that the phrase is easiest to say in English, but that it’s most meaningful in Finnish.

5.6. Language and self-perception

In this section, the participants were asked to reflect on whether changing from one language to another affects how they see themselves as a person and whether they feel like they can “be themselves” in their different languages.

Both P1 and P2 who use English in their relationship, reported not feeling very different in English compared to Finnish. In contrast, the two participants have noticed feeling different when using Swedish. P1 described the difference as follows:

P1: “It’s been really difficult for me, I feel like since we moved here (to Sweden) I can’t be the same person because in Finnish and English I’m a different kind of person than in Swedish. It’s because I can’t express myself in Swedish as well. I feel like I’m so much more boring and quiet in Swedish, and that’s not my real personality. But between English and Finnish, I can’t really say there’s a difference.”

Like P1, P2 reported feeling like she can’t be the same person in Swedish as in Finnish and English. This is, according to her, probably due to her limited vocabulary and lack of proficiency in Swedish compared to Finnish and English. She described feeling like she can’t always say the things she would like to say or to be as funny in Swedish as in her stronger languages.

P2 also reflected on how her identity has been affected by the fact that she has lived abroad, surrounded by different languages and cultures.

P2: “It’s a big deal how you are yourself in your different languages. I feel like I don’t have a specific identity anymore because I’ve been around so much and I’m in such a multicultural environment all the time. I feel like I’ve changed a lot and I don’t know if I have a specific Finnish identity anymore.”
When comparing how she sees herself in Finnish and in English, P2 emphasized how the time spent in England has left a mark on her.

P2: "I feel like I can be myself even more in English than in Finnish in some cases. The whole experience of living in England affected me profoundly in many ways, language-wise as well. It’s not just the language, it’s also the culture. I would say I’m more lively in English than in Finnish, but I think that it has affected my Finnish too, I’m more expressive even in Finnish now."

P3 reported feeling like she is a different version of herself in her three languages, Finnish, English and Swedish.

P3: "In Finnish I am able to express myself the most and to be the 24-year old that I am today. In English I easily become a ‘business-me’, like a work-version of me. In Swedish I feel like I’m a little childish. It’s been a pretty big thing for me, there are situations where I’d like to show my whole personality, but I’m struggling to find the right words and to express myself to the fullest in Swedish."

According to P3, not all of her personality traits come out in Swedish as well as in her first language.

P3: "In my opinion, I’m quite extroverted. I think that the Swedish me seems a lot shyer than what I really am. I’m pretty goofy in Finnish, I joke a lot and I like to play with words. I like these characteristics in myself and I’d like them to show more in the Swedish version of myself.

P4 reported having noticed a change in her ability to be herself in Swedish during the past year.

P4: "I did feel like I couldn’t be myself in Swedish for a year ago. Nowadays I feel like I can joke and be myself without having to think about what to say in different situations. There is still a difference compared to how I am in Finnish but it’s not as big. Maybe I’m a little quieter in Swedish sometimes."
5.7. Bilingual couplehood

In the last interview question, the participants were asked to reflect on whether their relationship with their respective partners has been influenced by the fact that they are a bilingual couple. This question raised plenty of thoughts and reflections among the respondents. Overall, the participants considered the role of language and bilingualism to be a significant part of their relationship. Also, each participant mentioned that along with different first languages, cultural differences between the partners have had an impact on the relationship. Despite the challenges of having different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, all four participants expressed a positive overall view on being in a bilingual relationship.

P1 reported that apart from the linguistic challenges of conflict situations she hasn’t experienced the language to be a problem in her marriage. Being a bilingual couple is a part of her everyday life.

P1: “I’ve become so used to being in a bilingual relationship. It hasn’t really bothered me, and at the end of the day I don’t think that language is the most important factor. You can make it work anyway.”

P3, who speaks Swedish with her Swedish-speaking partner, stated that the two of them have experienced that not sharing a common strong language is a challenge. She also reported how differences in her energy levels affect how well she can contribute to the conversations with her partner, admitting sometimes putting too much pressure on herself:

P3: “When I’m energetic and have slept well I can have all kinds of conversations with him, but when I’m tired I struggle with finding the most basic words. Maybe I put too much pressure on myself sometimes when it comes to the Swedish language.”

On the other hand, P3 reported having experienced that not sharing the same first language has forced the couple to put an extra effort on communication:

P3: “I feel like we talk more. We don’t assume things as much as we would if we had the same mother tongue. We communicate more.”
According to P4, the couple’s bilingualism is an enriching and positive factor, making their relationship unique. During the interview she expressed how grateful she is for her partner’s help with her Swedish language.

P4: "Bilingualism is a positive thing. We have, like, our language. We build this relationship in this language. And it’s a great way for me to learn Swedish. I’m thankful for my boyfriend for having had so much patience with me and my Swedish. Bilingualism gives that extra edge to our relationship."

P2 described, firstly, the cultural differences she has experienced between her partner and herself:

P2: "We come from two different cultures. For me, as a Finn, I’m used to being straightforward, and I guess I might seem rude sometimes. Even though I’ve lived in England I feel like I still might be very Finnish in many ways."

However, P2 didn’t consider the cultural differences between the partners to show to a great extent, especially since they live in a country which is nor her neither her partner’s native country. Instead, she pointed out that their different linguistic backgrounds and the presence of multiple languages in their everyday life has become a great part of who they are as a couple:

P2: "Having all these languages makes it interesting, like the fact that he’s learning Finnish and he can help me with English. It’s a part of our every day. If the both of us were Swedish, we wouldn’t have that in our life. It affects the content of our relationship. We talk about language a lot, English is one of my passions. It’s something we have as a part of us and who we are."
6. Discussion

The present study has investigated the experience of being in a bilingual relationship from the point of view of four individuals who use their non-native language as the mutual language of communication with their partner. The study has examined the perceived emotionality of the participants’ relationship language versus their first language. Another aim of the study has been to investigate whether the participants feel like they are the same person in their relationship language compared to their mother tongue. Finally, the present study has explored how being a bilingual couple affects the relationship, according to the respondents.

Two of the participants used English as the relationship language, while the other two respondents used Swedish with their respective partners. Three out of four participants reported that the couple has used the same language since they met. This supports the findings of Piller (2002), suggesting that the couples prefer to stick to the language of their first meeting. The participant in the present study who had changed from English to Swedish with her partner motivated the change of language with the fact that the couple lives in Sweden. The language of the community is one of the factors Piller (2002) found to affect bilingual couples’ language choices. Three out of four respondents reported that the partners use some form of language mixing in their daily communication, as did many of the couples in Piller’s (2002) study. Based on the findings of Piller (2002) and the present study, the mutual repertoire of languages seems to be one of the key elements in the construction and experience of bilingual couplehood.

When it comes to the experienced emotionality of the participants’ languages, half of the participants reported their first language, Finnish, to be the most emotional language to them. The other two respondents stated that English, their L2 and relationship language, is either as emotional as Finnish or the most emotional language to them. Interestingly, these two participants were the ones who had been together with their partners for several years (ten years and four years respectively). In contrast, the relationships of the respondents who perceived their mother tongue as their most emotional language were relatively new, five months and eight months old respectively. The difference between the responses of P1 and P2 compared to those of P3 and P4 might be at least partly explained by the different extent of LX socialization. As reported by Dewaele (2010), the more socialized in LX one becomes the more likely it is that LX becomes the most emotional language. Moreover, P1 and P2 used
their L2 as the relationship language while the other two participants used their L3 with their respective partners. This supports the findings of Dewaele & Nakano (2013), suggesting that multilinguals feel gradually less emotional when using L2, L3 and languages learned later in life.

P2, who considered English as her most emotional language, believed that it might have to do with the fact that her whole relationship life has happened in English. P1, who perceived English as equally emotional as Finnish, had two children with her husband who she had been together with for ten years. Both P1 and P2 have used English in an authentic, private context for several years, which may explain why the language has acquired such a strong emotional resonance with the participants. The data of the present study provides support for the emotional context of learning hypothesis by Harris (2004), according to which language is experienced as emotional when it’s acquired or habitually used in a naturalistic, emotional context with personal attachments.

The findings also connect with research by Pavlenko (2004). P1, who reported always using English with her husband and a part of the time with her children, has become socialized in the language in the private domain of family. According to Pavlenko (2004), circumstances like these may result in L2 becoming equally emotional as L1.

The challenges of expressing oneself in a foreign language in conflict situations with one’s partner were taken up by most of the participants. As pointed out by Dewaele (2010), anger may involve a certain amount of loss of control over not only one’s emotions, but also one’s linguistic resources, especially in a foreign language. Even the participants who, according to themselves, were very fluent in their relationship language reported sometimes struggling to find the right words in the language in question when feeling upset. When it comes to language choice in conflict situations, only one respondent, P3, reported switching from her relationship language, Swedish, to her L2, English. In Dewaele (2006) participants who had learned their language(s) in a naturalistic context used that language more often for expressing anger than the ones who had learned their language(s) in an instructed environment. P1 and P2 have been together with their English-speaking partners for several years, which means that they have had the opportunity to use the relationship language for a significantly longer time than P3 whose relationship at the time of the interview was five months old. P4, who reported sticking to Swedish in conflict situations has been together with her partner for only a few months longer than P3, but the difference between the two participants’ period of
socialization in Swedish as well as self-perceived proficiency might explain why P3 switches to English but P4 doesn’t. P3 pointed out that she perceives herself as more convincing in her L2 English than in her L3 Swedish, since English is her strongest non-native language. P3’s reflections can be linked to the findings of Dewaele (2006), suggesting that self-perceived proficiency in LX is the strongest factor affecting multilinguals’ language choice for expression of anger.

All four participants reported that the phrase I love you is emotionally strongest in their first language, Finnish. These results connect with research by Dewaele (2008), suggesting that multilinguals tend to perceive the emotional weight of the phrase I love you as strongest in their first language.

Moreover, the participants in the present study reported finding it more difficult to say I love you in Finnish than in English. This might, according to them, be due to cultural differences and childhood experiences. They found it uncommon to use the phrase in the Finnish culture, which is why the expression hasn’t been used often in their Finnish families, either. They described the Finnish Minä rakastan sinua as serious and more meaningful compared to the English I love you which, according to P2, one ”can say in any situation and to anyone, more or less”.

As pointed out by Pavlenko (2006), languages learned at various stages of life often differ in experienced emotionality, which may contribute to the perception of different selves. In the present study, the two participants who perceived their relationship language, English, as equally or more emotional than Finnish were also the ones who didn’t report feeling like a different person in the two languages. The comment by one of these participants, P2, indicates that the experience of living abroad and being socialized into another culture may have a strong effect on how one perceives oneself. She reported that the time spent in England affected her profoundly, resulting in a multicultural identity and a feeling of being oneself even more when using English than Finnish. The other two participants, for whom Finnish was the most emotional language, reported feeling different when using Swedish, their relationship language. P3 described having experienced that due to lack of proficiency in Swedish, she isn’t able to express herself to the fullest. As a result, she experiences that she can’t show her whole personality when using Swedish. P4 reported that her perception of her Finnish and Swedish selves has changed a lot during the past year as she has become more proficient in Swedish. According to her, she still perceives herself somewhat different and
quieter in Swedish, but the difference between the two languages is less significant than before.

The findings of the present study showed that the experienced emotionality of one’s languages, self-perceived proficiency in LX as well as LX socialization may contribute to the perception of oneself in different languages. These factors are similar to what Pavlenko (2006) found when she studied whether and why multilinguals feel different in a foreign language.

Bilingualism has, according to the participants, an essential role in their relationship. Since the participants described their subjective experiences of having a bilingual relationship, each account was of its own kind and illustrated the uniqueness of every relationship. Despite this, the responses shared some common patterns. Similarly to the findings of Piller (2002), the participants in the present study reported that being a bilingual and -cultural couple and using their mutual relationship language(s) is an important part of who they are as a couple.

Overall, despite the linguistic and cultural challenges the participants described having faced, they had a positive view on being in a bilingual relationship. The findings of the present study showed that even though the participants don’t share the same mother tongue with their respective partners, language can be a factor which brings the partners closer to each other. This was shown especially in the responses of P2 and P4, who considered being a bilingual couple as something that affects the content of their relationship and makes it unique. P4 described that the couple’s relationship language, Swedish, has become their language, a language in which they have built the relationship. Her experience illustrates how ‘doing’ couplehood in the mutual relationship language is a common project which may strengthen the partners’ feeling of togetherness. Not sharing the same mother tongue may even make the partners aware of the fact that they need to put an extra effort on communication, as in the case of P3, who has experienced that her partner and she talk more and assume less than what they might do if they had the same first language.
7. Limitations and future research

The four in-depth interviews provided plenty of information about the participants’ experiences of the investigated phenomena. This kind of qualitative studies on a limited number of participants may complement and help to interpret quantitative research findings on larger population samples (Dewaele 2010). However, since the number of the participants in the present study was low, no generalizations can be made based on the findings.

Although the respondents represented different variations on certain dimensions, they had a lot in common, too. For one, all four participants were Finnish females. Moreover, the recruited participants decided to respond to the author’s post in the social media community calling for respondents for a study involving in-depth interviews, which requires a certain degree of extraversion (Wedérus 2017). Furthermore, all four participants were highly educated people with resources for reflecting on questions related to bilingualism and self-perception. Consequently, the interviewees were too homogenous to call them representative of the general population of non-native speakers in a bilingual relationship. However, since two of the participants used their L2 with their respective partners while the other two participants had their L3 as their relationship language, it was possible to make some comparisons between these two groups.

Another possible limitation with the present study is that the translation of the respondents’ answers from Finnish to English was done by the author of this study, who is not a native speaker of English. Due to limited time and resources it was not possible to employ a professional translator to translate the quotes with the author, which would have been ideal (van Nes et al. 2010).

It is important to emphasize that the interview material consists of the participants’ subjective experiences of the examined phenomena. The respondents reflected on questions related to emotional experience, self-perception and their romantic relationship, which makes the reports even more personal. This doesn’t, however, make the participants’ accounts less valid.

The enthusiasm and interest shown towards the present study firstly by voluntary participants during the recruitment process and secondly by the chosen participants during the interviews signals that bilingual couples deserve more attention as a subject of research. The interviews gave the participants a chance to reflect on the emotional aspect of language and the question
of different language selves. Moreover, the participants were able to tell their side of the couples’ stories. The data collected in the interviews also includes material that wasn’t analyzed in the present study. One possible question for further research and analysis is whether and why the non-native speakers’ language of thinking and inner speech is their L1, LX, or both. It would also be interesting to take a closer look at an issue taken up by P3, namely, how previous negative love life experiences in L1 might lead to preferring another language to express emotions in future relationships.

Researcher bias and reactivity, the effect of the researcher on the studied participants, are validity threats that are often raised in qualitative studies (Maxwell 2013). According to Maxwell (2013), it’s not possible or even meaningful to eliminate the researcher’s beliefs, perceptual lens or influence. Instead, it’s important to understand how a particular researcher’s existing values may have influenced the study (Maxwell 2013). The researcher of the present study has experience of being in a bilingual relationship where she is a non-native speaker of the relationship language. Her personal involvement helped her to better understand the interviewees’ experiences. The researcher’s inside perspective was also a possible threat to the conduct of the study. To avoid corrupting the informants’ stories, the recruited participants were not informed about the researcher’s personal experience of being in a bilingual relationship. When collecting data and drawing conclusions, the researcher was aware of the ways in which her ability to view things from the informants’ perspective might corrupt the quality of the information. This type of reflection helped her to monitor her reactions during the research process. However, despite striving for an objective analysis, the informants’ responses were interpreted through the researcher’s lens and conceptual world, which automatically influences the data.

As the number of bilingual and -cultural couples is constantly growing, there is an increasing demand for research on intercultural couplehood. The findings of the present study suggest that despite the partners’ different linguistic backgrounds, language may be a factor which can unify the partners and bring them closer to each other. More research on this aspect of language in bilingual relationships could benefit those bilingual couples for whom the lack of mutual first language poses challenges in the relationship.
8. Conclusions

The present study has investigated the experience of being in a bilingual romantic relationship from the point of view of the partners who are non-native speakers of the mutual relationship language. The findings of the study show a connection between self-perceived proficiency in the relationship language, experienced language emotionality and self-perception in different languages. The two participants who reported using their L2 as the relationship language evaluated themselves as very fluent in the language in question, perceived their relationship language as equally or more emotional than their first language and reported not feeling like a different person when changing from L1 to L2. The other two participants used their L3 as the mutual language with their respective partners, assessed themselves as less proficient in the relationship language than the L2 participants, experienced their L1 as their most emotional language and offered an affirmative response to the question of different language selves.

Whether the partners’ mutual language is the non-native speakers’ L2 or L3 appears to play a role in how emotional they experience the relationship language and on how they perceive themselves in LX compared to L1. Moreover, based on the findings of the present study, it can be suggested that the more proficient the non-native speakers perceive themselves in their LX and the longer they have been together with their respective partners, the more emotionally resonant LX becomes. Furthermore, when LX was experienced as equally or more emotional than L1, non-native speakers did not perceive themselves differently when using the two languages.

The role of language and bilingualism in the relationship was considered significant by the participants. Although not sharing a mutual first language with one’s partner was sometimes found challenging, it was also seen as a possibility to build a stronger connection to one another. Thus, ‘doing’ couplehood in a mutual repertoire of relationship language(s) may allow the partners to practice their joint bilingual identity, strengthening the couple’s feeling of togetherness.
References


CONSENT FORM

Our love, our language
A qualitative study on non-native speakers’ experiences of bilingual couplehood, language emotionality and self-perception

I, ……………………………………………………… agree to participate in the study conducted by Matilda Perovuo. I have seen and read the information sheet and have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study. I understand that all personal information will remain confidential to the researcher. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time.

I am happy to proceed with my participation.

Signature  ………………………………………………………………………
Name (in capitals) ………………………………………………………………………
Date  ………………………………………………………………………
Appendix B: Interview questions

1. Background
   - Age
   - Education
   - Occupation/Profession
   - How long have you lived in Sweden?
   - What is your first language (L1)?
   - What is your second language (L2)? When and how did you learn it? How would you evaluate your proficiency in L2?
   - Which other languages do you know? When and how did you learn them? How would you evaluate your proficiency in those languages?
   - What is your partner’s L1?
   - How long have you been together?
   - Do you live together?
   - Do you have children?

2. Linguistic practices
   - Which language do you use together with your partner? Why?
   - Has your common language been the same since you met?
   - Are there any situations where you switch to your other languages?
   - Does your partner know your L1?
   - Have you taught some words or expressions in your L1 to your partner?

3. Perceived emotionality of languages
   - Which language is the most emotional to you?
   - How would you describe the difference in emotionality between your different languages?
   - Is it easier or more difficult for you to talk about emotional topics in your L1, L2, L3 etc.? If there is a difference, could you tell me about that and perhaps provide some examples?
• Which language do you use when you’re having a conflict with your partner? Do you stick to that language throughout the conflict situation?

• How does it feel to express anger in your relationship language (LX)?

• Does the phrase I love you have the same emotional weight for you in your different languages?

• In which language do you prefer to express your deepest feelings in?

• In which language do you talk to yourself (inner speech)?

• If you write in a personal diary – or were to write in one – what language(s) do you or would you use and why?

• Do you have a preference for emotion terms and terms of endearment in one language over all others? Which language is it and why?

4. Language and self-perception

• Do you feel like a different person sometimes when you use your different languages? If so, could you tell me about that and perhaps provide some examples?

• Do you feel like ”yourself” when using your LX?

5. Bilingual couplehood

• Does the fact that you are a bilingual couple influence your relationship, and if so, could you give me some examples?

6. Do you have any other comments or questions?