

# No foreign language effect in self-sacrificial moral dilemmas

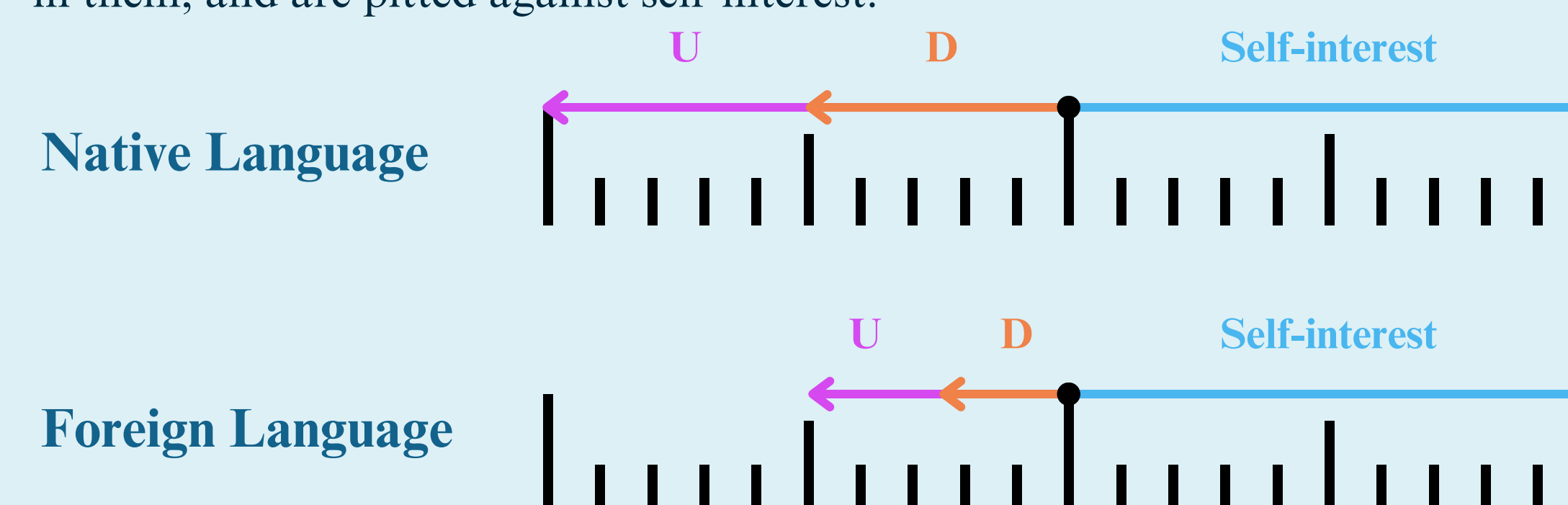
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## Abstract

The Moral Foreign Language Effect (mFLE) shows that people make different moral decisions in a foreign language. We studied this in self-sacrifice dilemmas, where both deontology and utilitarianism suggest the same choice. Experiment 1 (native Polish speakers) found no significant effect of language on moral choices. Experiment 2 showed reduced self-sacrifice in foreign language for saving relatives. Experiment 3 included dilemmas for strangers, relatives, and non-sacrifice scenarios, finding inconsistent effects except in the footbridge dilemma. Our results highlight mFLE variability in self-sacrifice and the need for further research beyond common dilemmas.

## Introduction

Previous research shows foreign language use affects moral decisions. It usually pitted utilitarian and deontological motivations against each other. Self-sacrifice dilemmas are unique because utilitarian and deontological motivations align in them, and are pitted against self-interest.



## Methodology

In three experiments, we asked N=425 participants whether they would self-sacrifice to save other people. In Experiment 1, the people to be saved were strangers. In Experiment 2, they were relatives. Experiment 3 replicated the first two with the addition of the control condition with the option to sacrifice a stranger instead.

We collected data from:

- Exp 1. N=114 Poles (59f, 55m, mean Age 20.6, age range 18-76),
- Exp 2. N=123 Poles (56f, 67m, mean Age 21.2, age range 19-29),
- Exp 3. N=188 Ukrainians (126f, 62m, mean Age 19.6, age range 16-26).

## Dilemmas used

An exemplary dilemma reads as follows (Experiment 1):

*You are negotiating with terrorists to save a group of five tourists that have been captured. The leader of the terrorists gives you the choice: if he shoots you, the five tourists will be safe; if you decide not to self-sacrifice, the terrorist will kill five tourists and you will be safe. Would you decide to self-sacrifice?*



Data and materials (osf)

[Yes, I would. / No, I wouldn't]

In the Experiment 1 we used Yes/No answering paradigm, and in Experiment 2 and 3 we changed it to 1-7 Likert scale (1 - No, I definitely wouldn't do it, 7 - Yes, I definitely would do it).

## Results

	Experiment 1 (strangers)	Experiment 2 (relatives)	Experiment 3
Language (FL - NL)	F (1, 106) = 0.89 p = .348	F (1, 121) = 6.74 p = .011	F (1, 187) = 0.22 p = .639
Scenario	F (3, 336) = 7.72 p < .001	F (3, 363) = 7.41 p < .001	F (3, 2003) = 42.13 p < .001
Dilemma type (strangers/relatives/regular)			F (2, 2005) = 486.32 p < .001
Language*Scenario	F (3, 336) = 1.29 p = .279	F (3, 363) = 0.56 p = .641	F (3, 2003) = 3.09 p = .026
Language*Dilemma type			F (2, 2005) = 2.13 p = .119
Dilemma type*Scenario			F (6, 2003) = 18.96 p < .001
Language*Dilemma type*Scenario			F (6, 2003) = 1.48 p = .181
ID (ICC)	0.315	0.361	0.230
ID (SD)	0.245	0.923	0.891
Observations	456	492	2210
N ID	114	123	188
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>	.039 / .494	.058 / .397	.306 / .466

Across three experiments with N=425 bilinguals, we found **no moral Foreign Language Effect in scenarios other than the footbridge scenario.**

Our results are inconsistent with two prior studies demonstrating increased willingness for self-sacrifice when using a foreign language. In one of them, Fernández-Sanz et al. (2023) examined 85 Spanish-English bilingual children's moral judgments. The authors concluded that children were more willing to self-sacrifice in L2 (and made more utilitarian judgments). In the other paper, Romero-Rivas et al. (2022) studied 300 students' moral judgments in Spanish or English using two scenarios: the footbridge and the switch. The conclusion from the study points to how people are more willing to sacrifice themselves in their foreign language (likely due to a lowered self distance)

## Discussion

**FL doesn't make you more utilitarian.**

**FL doesn't make you sacrifice yourself more.**

**Consistent effects only for the footbridge dilemma, we don't know what makes it special.**

## Key Literature

- Białek, M., et al. (2019). Foreign language effects on moral dilemma judgments. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 85.
- Costa, A., et al. (2014). Your morals depend on language. *PloS One*, 9(4).
- Fernández-Sanz, C., Romero-Rivas, C., & Rodríguez-Cuadrado, S. (2023). Child, would you sacrifice yourself? *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 26(2), 446-455.
- Romero-Rivas, C., López-Benitez, R., & Rodríguez-Cuadrado, S. (2022). Would You Sacrifice Yourself to Save Five Lives? Processing a Foreign Language Increases the Odds of Self-Sacrifice in Moral Dilemmas. *Psychological Reports*, 125(1), 498-516.