



***Risk taking and lying:
How bilinguals can perceive or select their languages
strategically – Implications for language use
in situations of conflict***

Guillaume Thierry

Bangor University & Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan

Research into language–emotion interactions has revealed intriguing cognitive inhibition effects by emotionally negative words in bilinguals (e.g. Wu and Thierry, 2012). Here, I will present results obtained in Chinese-English bilinguals engaged in betting games, who either have to take risks or lie strategically to increase their score. In one study (Gao et al., 2015), we engaged late Chinese-English bilinguals with “bet” or “drop” decisions upon presentation of equal-odds bets while manipulating language of feedback and the outcome of their bet (positive or negative). When participants received positive feedback in their native language Chinese, they were 10% more likely to bet (i.e., take more risks) in the next trial than when feedback was negative. Remarkably, however, feedback valence did not differentially affect risk-taking when the same participants received feedback in their second language English. We concluded from this result that the “hot hand effect” (the illusion that one is on a winning streak) is attenuated when an individual operates in a non-native language. In another study (Yang et al., submitted), we engaged participants in a game of bets against an artificially intelligent agent, in which they could choose to announce bets in the native or the second language. We showed that, when given the choice, Chinese-English individuals prefer telling the truth in Chinese. Furthermore, when they tell the truth in a given trial, they tend to use the native language in the next, and when they have lied, they tend to choose their second language English in the next trial. This pattern of response is compatible with a greater readiness to lie in one’s second language. The evidence considered here show that language of operation interacts with decision-making in very subtle and sophisticated ways: The language a bilingual hears can determine her behaviour and, reciprocally, bilinguals may use their languages differentially depending on their current objective. These findings may have important consequences for everyday communication, especially in situations of conflict, where risk-taking and deception are common place, and can even mean the difference between survival and death. I will review of few examples of life scenarios in which language could plays such a critical role.