Who Are You? The Relationship Between Language and Personality

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Guiding question: for individuals who can speak multiple languages, does what you speak have a significant impact on your personality or how you portray yourself?

Introduction & Background

Interest in the possible correlation between language and personality was sparked when I was studying abroad in China in the summer of 2023, noticing that the new surroundings and lexicons seemed to show character changes in people I was otherwise somewhat familiar with. Some became more emboldened when speaking the language we were all there to learn–Mandarin–while others, like myself, became more reserved. Some overestimated their own abilities while others underestimated them, leading to some amusing social situations, and others still seemed to be broadly unchanged regardless of if they were speaking English or Mandarin. Seeing this phenomenon first-hand piqued my curiosity as to how one’s personality impacts how they present themselves linguistically, particularly in a language they are not a native speaker of.

Research on this relationship is, unsurprisingly, robust. Cursory Google searches were rather overwhelming because of this, and I found it difficult to stay focused due to the sheer amount of books, research papers, and articles that all clambered for my attention. This research paper will include three major sections: the question and its
The Question & its Problems

Subsection: What is “Personality”? 

Interestingly, an issue I encountered right off the bat concerned how “personality” could even be categorized. Berenice Anaya and Koraly Perez-Edgar (2018) define personality as the “variability in human behaviors and attitudes that are stable across context and can arise from within the individual”, utilizing the Five Factor Model to guide their research. The Five Factor Model—also dubbed the acronym OCEAN, refined and popularized by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae—postulates that the five core tenets of personality are a mixture of basic tendencies and characteristic adaptations consisting of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Anaya and Perez-Edgar also argue that emergent personality can be defined through temperament (“individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation that are constitutional or biologically based”) due to their ability to create lasting physiological and cognitive profiles in an individual. These definitions were the ones I kept in mind throughout the project.

Aside from the OCEAN model are the vastly popular MBTI tests, or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator; MBTI classifications have taken the world by storm since their creation in the mid-20th century, inspired by the work of psychologist Carl Jung. The MBTI tests differentiate between Extroverted and Introverted, Sensing and Intuition,
Thinking and Feeling, and Judging and Perceiving\(^1\) cognitive traits in individuals. It is worth noting that despite its popularity, the MBTI categorization system has garnered significant criticism due to neither of its creators (Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers) having a background in psychology.

**Subsection: the Importance of Culture**

For many—particularly for those who grew up speaking their L2 at home to native-speaking parents, or who lived in a country where their L2 was the more widely-spoken language—there is an intrinsic link between language and culture. In her 2013 paper “Does Language Affect Personality Perception? A Functional Approach to Testing the Whorfian Hypothesis”, Sylvia Chen et al. posit that “when individuals acquire different languages, they also encode different cultural systems associated with using each language”. When considering the vast differences one can experience cross-culturally it naturally follows that language might carry some of these differences through a phenomenon called Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which concerns emotion, cognition, and behavior. Similarly, Ehab Alnuzaili and Nasir Uddin found in their 2020 study that “learners’ socio-cultural background is said to impact in creating anxiety when found widely distant from target language socio-cultural background”. The examples Alnuzaili and Uddin drew upon were Japanese and Saudi Arabian learners of English, whose more indirect and hesitant communication styles created stress around whether or not students would be able to maintain conversations with others while speaking English.

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\(^1\) Distinctions between these traits can be found [here].
Michiko Toyama and Yoshitaka Yamazaki explore this idea of FLA through a study of individualist (independent-self) versus collectivist (interdependent-self) perspectives, furthering the argument that culture can have a strong influence over how one presents themselves linguistically. They posit that a collectivist culture can have a negatively reinforcing effect on FLA– given that collectivist cultures emphasize avoidance of confrontations more than individualist ones students are less likely to speak up in classroom settings, creating greater senses of anxiety when needing to due so due to lack of comfort or familiarity. A counterargument to the collectivist cultural critique could also be gleaned from individualist impacts on FLA; if an individualist culture encourages speaking up in class, possibly past the point of preparation or comfort, the obligation to participate could create senses of shame, embarrassment, or reluctance regarding one’s language capacity. This also ties into Alnuzaili and Uddin’s concept of “cultural distance”, where an individualist in a collectivist culture (or vise versa) might experience heightened FLA due to their cultural values not aligning with their host culture’s values. Higher levels of FLA are likely to impact how comfortable one feels using their L2, which in turn could have an impact on how one presents themselves linguistically.

In their 2002 work “Language and the Bicultural Self”, Ross et al. theorize that bicultural individuals have a greater aptitude for “a malleability of self-concept”; that is, the ability to alter one’s personality to suit whatever situation they find themselves in. Self-concept for bicultural individuals would therefore be highly contextual, leading to
changes in self-perception that hinged upon one’s cultural setting (and, by extension, the language used in that setting). They also hypothesize that this adaptability may act as a buffer for phenomena such as culture shock and, I suspect, Foreign Language Anxiety.

**Existing Scholarship**

The most robust, relevant source I found was the 2011 article by Katarzyna Ozanska-Ponikwia titled “What has personality and emotional intelligence to do with ‘feeling different’ while using a foreign language?”. In it, Ozanska-Ponikwia focused on two relevant questions: why some people “feel different” when speaking another language while others don’t, and if certain personality traits could be linked to whether or not this difference is felt or perceived.

Ozanska-Ponikwia utilized the OCEAN model as described above to study the relationship between basic personality traits and language, with the trait of extraversion was found to be the most significant of the tested factors for if a participant “felt different” when speaking in their L2. A hypothesized explanation for this outcome was that extraverted individuals simply tended to use their L2 more, as they were more likely to put themselves in social situations where its usage would be required. Behind extraversion was agreeableness, which Ozanska-Ponikwia connected to heightened social awareness and friendliness; openness ranked third. Participants who tested high on emotional intelligence traits such as emotion expression, empathy, and social awareness were also speculated to have a greater aptitude for self-awareness, which would in turn make them more likely to notice their own shifts in behavior or personality.
There is also much research into how one’s MBTI can affect their foreign language learning. In 2008, Alastair Sharp conducted a study of 100 undergraduate Hong Kong students learning English to test for the relationship between MBTI and language proficiency, revealing a dominance of introverted personality types over extroverted ones; then, in 2024, Hao Jiang’s selected study of 188 sophomore students in the Foreign Studies College of a university in Changsha revealed a near 50-50 split between introverted and extroverted personality types. Jiang’s study focused on individuals’ ability to obtain new vocabulary in their L2, concluding that extroverts had no particular advantage over introverts in this aspect. Jiang also made specific note of the instability of personality tests—“fallibility”—arguing that tools such as the MBTI should be used to better understand the differences in how different people digest and utilize new information. Compared to Ozanska-Ponikwia’s research regarding extroverted individuals’ ability to sense differences in their personality, it is worth noting that existing scholarship does not indicate a preference towards either introverts or extroverts when considering language learning ability. If foreign language students as a whole tended to be more extroverted than introverted it could be a matter of pure statistics that extraversion was a significant factor in whether someone can sense a difference in their personality when using their L2, but this does not seem to be the case.

**Participant Input**

Initial desires to have in-depth discussions about this relationship between language and personality wilted upon realizing just how complex this relationship was—
taking inspiration from Ozanska-Ponikwia’s work, I decided to send a few targeted questions to willing participants to get some feedback. The L2 of participants included French, Russian, Spanish, and Japanese, and the questions asked were verbatim as follows²:

1. Briefly introduce yourself & describe the languages you speak: to what level, how long have you spoken them, etc
2. How did you learn your second language(s) (school, at home, other)?
3. On a scale from 1-10, how would you rank yourself in each of these categories (1 being least, 10 being most): extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, anxiety?
4. Do you consider your personality to be different depending on which of your languages you’re speaking (“feeling different“)? Please briefly explain.
5. Do you know your MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator)? If you do, please include it and whether or not you feel it to be accurate.

The questions regarding the five OCEAN traits and MBTI are fairly obvious, as I saw the value in directly connecting participant answers to pre-existing scholarship. The fourth question, about “feeling different”, I wished to include due to the importance of self-awareness in how one presents themselves through language. The decision to change “neuroticism” in the original OCEAN traits to “anxiety” was due word neuroticism often holding strongly negative connotations. Considering that the nature of this questionnaire was self-assessing, changing the word to something less harsh (but still roughly synonymous) increased the likelihood that participants would feel comfortable identifying with it.

² Questionnaire responses can be found in their original form [here].
When asked to describe if they “feel different” when speaking their L2, some words participants chose for themselves included “muted”, “aware”, “reserved”, and “polite”. These choices reflect interestingly upon Alnuzaili and Uddin’s work on anxiety surrounding L2 learning, as the authors’ examples focused specifically upon how non-native English speakers’ cultures would translate over to English-speaking cultures. While I cannot speak to this cultural argument as a whole, I would argue that an individual’s personality holds a more significant impact on their comfort level using their L2, as those from English-speaking cultures seem to experience just as much language anxiety as non-English speaking cultures. Multiple participants also mentioned comfort level as a crucial factor in whether or not they felt their personality to be different when using their L2, attributed to factors such as frequency of usage and vocabulary size. Either way, comfort and FLA seem to be directly related— as comfort increases, FLA decreases. Broadly speaking, each participant agreed that they “feel different” when using their L2.

Regarding question 3, although participants tended to skew extroverted, extraversion did not come out as the dominant trait. Below is a table with the mean of participants’ self-identification with OCEAN traits, of which conscientiousness ranked highest. Ozanska-Ponikwia’s research didn’t contain a specific hypothesis as to how conscientiousness relates to L2 personality change, but my guess is that the nature of the word lends itself towards a greater understanding of one’s personality—conscientiousness can be directed both inward and outward.
Mean Questionnaire Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCEAN Trait</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>7.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>8.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alt text: a 2x6 graph labeled “OCEAN Trait” on one side and “Mean” on the other, relating to questionnaire respondents’ answers. The mean scores for extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and anxiety were, in order, as follows: 7.25, 8.5, 8.25, 8.75, 6.0.

Participants 2 and 4 indicated that they had some level of L2 learning done at home, which is a worthwhile connection to the bicultural arguments mentioned previously. My previous hypothesis that a more bicultural experience would reduce anxiety was inconsistent with their questionnaire responses, as these two participants had higher anxiety rankings than the other respondents (7 and 8, respectively). The monocultural participants 1 and 3, on the other hand, ranked higher on extraversion (8 and 9, respectively).

Takeaways

There are three main takeaways I gleaned from this project: first, despite the sheer volume of research looking at the introvert/extrovert split, there is no clear answer on how these factors affect one’s language. While Ozanska-Ponikwia’s work indicates that extroverted individuals may be better at sensing their personality shift while using their L2 (and the questionnaire responses I collected seemed to also skew on the
extroverted side), there are disagreements on if extroverts are more suited for L2 learning than their introverted counterparts. Jiang’s research on vocabulary acquisition—which has significant impacts on FLA and comfort levels while using an L2—showed no preference between the two personality types. In general, findings from this area of research are inconclusive.

Second, the importance of culture cannot be overstated, but attention must be paid toward not oversimplifying or stereotyping aspects such as collectivism vs individualism. The biculturalism argument suggested individuals would be more apt towards noticing differences in their personalities due to cultural context being encoded into language usage, which seems consistent with questionnaire responses regarding participants 2 and 4. The “malleability of self-concept” theorized by Ross et al. corroborates why bicultural individuals are able to perceive differences in their own personalities, but does not lend insight into how monocultural individuals are able to do the exact same thing.

Third, relating specifically to questionnaire responses and the concept of FLA, is that comfort and confidence play a large role in whether an individual can sense changes in their personality regarding language usage. Each participant in the questionnaire mentioned some form of these traits when describing why they “felt different” when using their L2, regardless of the language being used, length of study, or disparities between OCEAN traits.
Works Cited


Analysis. SageJournals.