

PERSPECTIVE

Contemporary Perspectives on Multilingualism and Emotional Expression: An Interview with Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele

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1. Introduction

Research in the fields of applied linguistics and multilingualism has become increasingly interdisciplinary in the last two decades. Neighbouring disciplines such as positive psychology, social psychology, personality psychology, educational psychology, cultural psychology, and cognitive psychology have provided applied linguists with exciting new theories, concepts, methods, and tools to investigate established and new topics in foreign language learning and teaching, as well as in research on individual multilingualism and multiculturalism. Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele has been a driving force behind these developments.

This interview focuses on his views on some current debates in applied linguistics and multilingualism, on theoretical developments, methodological approaches, and the future directions for research in the field of multilingualism and foreign language learning.

2. Career Trajectory and Research Vision

2.1. Foundational Motivations

Forum for Linguistic Studies (FLS): Given that your research has long been in the areas

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of multilingualism, individual differences, and the role of emotion in language learning and use, what do you think are the intellectual influences or formative experiences that you have had that shaped your research trajectory?

Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele (JMD): My research interests grew out of my life experiences. Growing up in Bruges (Flanders in Belgium), I realised that speaking French at home made me linguistically different from most other children who were monolingual Dutch speakers who spoke the local Western Flemish dialect with everybody (I discuss this in more detail in Dewaele^[1]). French used to be the language of the higher social classes in Flanders, so anyone using French was perceived to be ostentatious. Not speaking the dialect but being perfectly fluent in Dutch and being bilingual, I had to work hard to fit in. I deflected attention by being the clown in class. It made me wonder why my parents had opted for a bilingual upbringing, and why many of the people I came across did not seem to find that a good idea. I did have an advantage, of course, when French was taught as a foreign language at school from age 10. Having had classes of Dutch, ancient Greek, Latin, French, English, and Spanish at school and university, I was well placed to observe individual differences in our classrooms. My father, a classicist, had introduced me to Latin at age six, with very little success. Although I had Latin classes up until I graduated in Romance philology in 1984, I never enjoyed the language and hated translation exercises. My grades for Latin were mediocre. I worked harder for Dutch and French, and after my Latin teacher introduced to me Frank Herbert's *Dune* in the original version, I started enjoying books in English despite having bad English teachers. I did not mind making errors in English and I could not have foreseen that English would become my dominant language for writing one day. My parents' house was filled with books. We also had a library card,

and I remember as a primary school pupil getting the maximum number of books to devour. Becoming a quick reader was a crucial skill that became extremely useful later on. My father was a freemason and a fervent defender of freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition. He encouraged me to go to the Free University of Brussels that has a Latin motto "Scientia vincere tenebras" (Conquering darkness by science). I loved the principle of academic freedom and the rejection of dogma. This became my own credo and I developed it further: Never blindly believe what people in positions of authority claim. Don't shirk away from uncomfortable questions. Make up your own mind. Always check what lies beyond the corner. Scratch below the veneer to find the unvarnished truth. Check whether inconvenient facts have been swept under the carpet. Stand up for what you believe in. Be curious. Be rigorous. Be open-minded. Maintain your academic integrity. Be optimistic. Be aware of your limitations. Try to do some good. Don't take yourself too seriously. Have fun. Seek intellectual or physical challenges. Push the boundaries of your field. Read. Walk. Love.

2.2. Evolution of the Field

FLS: How would you characterise the major shifts in applied linguistics and multilingualism research over the last two decades?

JMD: Three of my early and highly cited publications come to mind that may have contributed to some these shifts.

The first one, Dewaele and Pavlenko^[2] focused on the use of emotion words in French and English interlanguage. We realised that very few researchers in applied linguistics had been paying attention to emotions in a foreign language context. It also allowed us to move beyond the traditional field of Second Language Acquisition and of research on the sociolinguistics of second language use. After publication, we realised that this early paper

suffered from many limitations, and it encouraged us to set up a new project to collect data from multilinguals all over the world about the communication of emotions in their different languages. Thanks to a colleague of mine at Birkbeck who was able to set up the first online questionnaire in applied linguistic research, we collected a treasure trove of information from over 1500 multilinguals over a two-year period^[3]. We used the data for our books^[4] and many papers and presentations. This early research inspired researchers in psychology^[5] and in psychotherapy^[6]. This work also allowed us to connect with psychologists and to exchange ideas about epistemologies, methods, and research questions.

The second publication that was a milestone in my own career was Dewaele and Furnham^[7]. It was based on data that I had collected for my PhD on individual differences in French interlanguage and how they could be linked to the learners' degree of extraversion. Adrian Furnham is a highly published personality psychologist with a very wide interest, and he agreed to co-author the paper with me. I felt it was important for the credibility of the paper to have a proper psychologist as co-author. I was surprised at the time that so little applied linguistic research focused on personality traits. We suggested that early research in the 1970s on the topic had led to null results because of methodological issues. The myth that the extravert had to be the good language learner was shattered and it led to a relative neglect of the psychology of foreign language for years to come. Our own paper in 1999 showed that this area deserved more research. Thanks to the encouragement of Lourdes Ortega, I contributed a paper to a special issue that she guest-edited^[8], where I called for more research on the emotions and personality of foreign language learners.

The third paper that turned out to be a catalyst was Dewaele and MacIntyre^[9].

Peter MacIntyre and I had become good friends

after meeting at the annual conferences of the *American Association of Applied Linguistics*. Peter, who is a psychologist, had come across the concept of flow in Positive Psychology. We realised that this could be relevant in the foreign language class. We wondered whether we could define and operationalise the emotions underlying the state of flow. Thinking back to our own learning and teaching experiences, we established a list of items that tapped into foreign language learner enjoyment. We wanted to check how it was related to foreign language learner anxiety. We agreed that enjoyment requires challenge and effort on the part of the learner, and that it is shaped by the classroom context, namely the relationship with the teacher and fellow students, but also by the wider institutional and societal context^[10]. The instrument was translated in Chinese and became immensely popular^[11].

2.3. Defining Impact

FLS: Given your exceptional and extensive publication record and leadership roles to date, what do you think is your most impactful or important contribution to the field and why?

JMD: Frankly, I never imagined that I would make it to the Stanford list of the top 2% of the world's most influential researchers, let alone the second place in the language and linguistics category. I have listed the three publications that had impact, but they only tell part of the story. When these three papers appeared, they were no more than single sparks in a field characterised by a thousand other sparks. So what made them stand out and why did these three papers have an above-average impact? One reason is that the time was right, and that these ideas were in the air. The second reason is that we invested heavily in the topic: presenting papers at conferences, organising panels on the topic, and seeking collaboration with outstanding researchers who shared similar interests. We created socio-professional networks, guest-

edited special issues, edited books, reviewed hundreds of papers and abstracts, and ended up creating our own international association. In other words, we were enthusiastic, optimistic, open-minded, and we worked tirelessly, to say the least. We welcomed friendly colleagues with original ideas, and we encouraged and mentored promising young researchers to do their MAs or PhDs on these topics. We realised that once a critical mass of researchers had been reached, interest in the new field would keep growing without our direct intervention.

3. Multilingualism

3.1. Psychological Dimensions of Multilingualism

FLS: In your research, you have highlighted emotional and personality factors in multilingual contexts. How has research and practice evolved?

JMD: Research on personality factors in foreign language contexts has increased exponentially, especially on positive traits such as emotional intelligence, growth mindsets, resilience, well-being... I hope that these results will be noticed by the teaching profession and those in charge of education policies. The aim of foreign language learning is not just about the acquisition of language knowledge and skills; it is also about expanding understanding of the world, fostering well-being, and promoting social justice^[12].

The finding in Dewaele^[13] that multilinguals' first language(s) (L1) have more emotional resonance than foreign languages (LX) led to increased research on language preferences in psychotherapy. Costa and Dewaele^[6,14] and Dewaele and Costa^[15] showed that using an LX can allow patients to disclose and process trauma that would be simply too painful to discuss in their L1 and that a patient's switching between languages is therefore highly relevant for the therapist. The active dissemination of

these findings by Beverley Costa in her clinical training of therapists has raised awareness about multilingualism and multilingual identity as a therapeutic asset, leading to improved practices of UK therapists dealing with LX users of English and ultimately benefiting some of the most vulnerable and traumatised groups in society. Trauma-informed foreign language learning, informed by relational and multilingual pedagogy, has also shown to support post-traumatic growth of refugee learners^[16].

3.2. Methodological Innovations

FLS: What type of methodological developments do you foresee as being the most promising in terms of capturing the complexities of differences in second language acquisition (SLA) and multilingualism research?

JMD: We are seeing increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques in the field. This is great as long as the authors don't lose sight of the conceptual and narrative part. In other words, the (academic) story that needs to be compelling. Data are never intrinsically interesting, neither are masses of complex analyses if they do not answer a good and original question. The arrival of AI has made it relatively too easy to throw in handful of randomly selected independent variables to see if they are connected with a handful of dependent variables. Without a good solid hypothesis based on the existing literature, it is impossible to reach meaningful conclusions. We are also seeing interesting developments in qualitative analysis such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

4. Emotions in Language Learning and Usage

4.1. Concepts of Emotion across Languages

FLS: Your research emphasises how emotional expression and concepts differ across various languages and cultures. In what ways do these

differences challenge the existing models of affective processing or interlanguage pragmatics?

JMD: The aim was never to challenge any particular models or to dis/prove any specific theories. Our research was always very much bottom-up. Theories and models can help explain findings. I immensely dislike the hostility shown by researchers who claim that only their theoretical basis is valid^[17]. Let all flowers bloom!

4.2. Learner and Teacher Emotions

FLS: There is now a growing interest in both emotion research and positive psychology, especially in terms of SLA. What are the ways that future studies can consider integrating constructs like anxiety, enjoyment, or even boredom to inform teaching practice?

JMD: I am delighted by the interest in emotion research, and I hope that it will have repercussions on the way that foreign languages are taught and how the education system is organised. Our studies show that anxiety and boredom smother the enthusiasm, the motivation, and the willingness to communicate across learners' ages and proficiency levels. It is therefore crucial to adopt pedagogical practices where teachers create safe, positive environments where learners can experiment with the new language without fearing ridicule or the nagging feeling that they are wasting their time. Teachers need to nurture positive emotions like enjoyment and excitement by presenting learners with challenging tasks, by having them engage in authentic communication, and by being sincerely interested in their growth and well-being. We need further research on the many emotions that interact, and on interventions to boost the positive ones and reduce the deleterious effects of the negative ones^[18]. Moreover, more research is needed on teacher emotions and well-being, as well as on the institutions in which these teachers work^[12,19].

5. Multilingualism in Applied Context

Technological and Sociocultural Changes

FLS: Digital communication is changing language usage and contact. What type of emerging trends do you foresee impacting multilingual identity and language learning?

JMD: Access to authentic material on the web is becoming easier, and AI may help (or hinder) language acquisition. AI can be a useful tool in the classroom, but it cannot replace a teacher who cares about the students and is sincerely interested in their well-being and progress. AI tools may spew nice words because they mimic human interaction, but these words are empty and the tool does not remotely care about the user. I feel that the impact of digital communication on multilingual identity can only be modest.

6. Reflections on Scholarly Practice

6.1. Advice for Emerging Scholars

FLS: What guidance do you foresee emerging scholars in this field needing when they aim to conduct rigorous research in the areas of multilingualism and affective factors?

JMD: My main advice is to study research methods! Do not start collecting data too soon. Spend extra time on the research design, on the instruments, and don't forget pilot testing them and trying out interview questions^[20]. Don't "milk" participants for data. Respect them by not overloading them with endless questionnaires and tasks. Also, it is important to be aware that participants may be vulnerable and that it would be totally unacceptable to harm them, even unintentionally. Finally, researchers must be psychologically and practically prepared to deal with people who may be vulnerable and distressed^[21]. Once the findings have been analysed, it is of vital impor-

tance to write them up slowly, methodically, and well. Handing them to an AI-generator might result in superficially pleasing text that is, in fact, linguistic blubber with a thin layer of varnish. AI-generated text is always superficial, impersonal, and often wrong. Such papers deserve immediate rejection. AI also tends to either hallucinate and “invent” papers or drag worthless papers to the surface where they are treated as if they were of equal value to papers published in top refereed journals (typically hiding behind paywalls). They are not, and uncritical use of these weak sources will contaminate the literature review, undermine both the research questions and hypotheses, and they will fatally weaken the discussion and kill the conclusion.

My advice is to work on the text, its structure, its arguments, and its form. The author needs to be aware of every comma in the text, every logical transition from one sentence to another, from one paragraph or section to another. The author needs to inhabit the text. It implies knowledge of every source cited, of every possible interpretation of the findings in light of the previously reported literature. The text needs to be polished as a carpenter would use a smoothing plane to remove fine shavings to create a perfect flat finish that reveals the wood’s natural beauty. Good writing is aesthetically pleasing and makes the arguments more convincing.

6.2. Future of the Field

FLS: Looking into the future, what do you foresee as being some of the big questions in the areas of multilingualism as well as language learning research that have yet to be resolved and how do you think these researchers could best work towards addressing them?

JMD: It is impossible to predict the future. The big questions in the field will continue to be investigated using new angles and approaches. New questions may emerge, new methods will

be developed, and new datasets will be collected. What we know about applied linguistics and multilingualism could be compared to a giant puzzle to which our predecessors and ourselves have contributed small pieces that could have drawn attention to particular parts. Nobody controls what comes next and nobody knows what the puzzle represents exactly as there is no “final” state. I would thus encourage future generations of researchers from various disciplines to join in to inspire us all and to contribute shining new pieces to this infinite puzzle. Finally, I hope that we can collectively remind politicians and the public that learning a foreign language is not a luxury. Having small talk with a taxi driver in a foreign country is impossible with Google Translate. Finally, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and diversity are not threats to societies but rather a key ingredient for creativity and development.

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