



Does a Foreign Language Make Us More *Rational*, or Just Less Capable of Moral Thought?

Eva Dias Costa^{1,2} 

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Abstract

Bilinguals often choose more utilitarian options when reasoning in a second language. This pattern is commonly read as improved rationality through emotional distance. I argue the better explanation is processing cost and reduced expressive capacity: these nudge people toward simpler, outcome-counting heuristics and thinner deontic justification. The critique has prior defenders, who drew on the somatic marker hypothesis to show that native-language reasoning tends to produce more ethical choices. The present paper extends that line of argument in a specific direction. Model-based decomposition studies show that the foreign-language effect reduces both deontological and utilitarian inclinations simultaneously; the apparent utilitarian shift arises because deontological sensitivity drops further in high-conflict dilemmas, not because utilitarian motivation increases. This dissociation is the empirical backbone my justificatory thinning account requires. Emotions here are not mere noise but epistemic inputs that supply moral concepts and appraisals; their attenuation under expressive constraint matters for how decisions are justified, not only chosen. I propose a processing-cost mechanism with testable predictions by proficiency and dilemma type, a five-item coding scheme for justificatory texture, and practical safeguards for multilingual deliberation – including native-language stages at key decision points, slower pacing with interpreters, and records that separate outcomes from justifications.

Keywords Foreign-language effect · Cognitive load · Moral judgement · Deontic justification · Reason-giving · Bilingualism · Expressive capacity · Emotion in moral reasoning

✉ Eva Dias Costa
eva@upt.pt

¹ Universidade Portucalense (UPT), Porto, Portugal

² Faculty of Medicine, Bioethics Centre, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

1 Introduction

Research on bilingual decision-making suggests that the language of deliberation can shift moral judgement; in second-language settings, people more often endorse calculative trade-offs. The foreign-language effect, one of the most studied phenomena in this area, appears to show that when people face ethical dilemmas in a second language, they are more likely to choose utilitarian solutions – sacrificing one life to save five, for example – often at the expense of adherence to stricter moral rules (Costa et al. 2014).

Consider the Footbridge dilemma, a variation on the well-known Trolley Problem. A runaway trolley is about to kill five people. You stand on a footbridge above the tracks, next to a large stranger. The only way to stop the trolley is to push this person onto the tracks; they will die, but the five others will be spared.

Most people, when asked this question in their native language, refuse to push the person. When answering in a foreign language, they become significantly more willing to do so – a shift observed across languages and samples (Costa et al. 2014; Cipolletti et al. 2016; Corey et al. 2017), and summarised in meta-analytic work showing robust effects for personal dilemmas and attenuation with higher self-reported second-language reading proficiency (Stankovic et al. 2022). On the standard reading, using a foreign language dampens emotional responses, thereby producing more detached, apparently ‘rational’ moral judgement (Eilola and Havelka 2011; Hayakawa et al. 2017; Caldwell-Harris 2014).

Foreign languages are often learned in academic or otherwise structured settings rather than through emotionally charged interaction, and so are said to create psychological distance from moral dilemmas, reducing gut-level aversion to causing harm (Hayakawa et al. 2017). Related findings indicate that people reasoning in a second language take more calculated risks and show fewer classic decision biases (Keysar et al. 2012), and make less emotionally driven financial choices (Costa et al. 2017) - reinforcing the idea that language can shift us from the emotional to the analytical.

The effect appears circumscribed to emotionally loaded contexts, however; across six large studies, no foreign-language effect was found for the outcome bias, the conjunction fallacy, or base-rate neglect (Vives et al. 2018).

In applied philosophy, several authors have examined how linguistic frameworks shape ethical reasoning (Bonotti 2019; Richardson 2024), yet the specific dynamics of the foreign-language effect remain largely unexamined.

Two boundary conditions already suggest a different reading. First, the shift is strongest for Footbridge and is not consistently found for the standard Trolley switch; high-conflict, personal-force cases appear to drive the effect. Meta-analytic work further specifies that the effect attenuates as self-reported second-language reading proficiency increases (Stankovic et al. 2022). Second, direct tests show that while foreign-language use can attenuate distress, this reduction does not mediate the moral shift; what changes is not simply how much one feels, but which reasons and norms are readily available in the language of deliberation Geipel et al. (2015). These patterns are consistent with evidence that cognitive-processing manipulations thin moral reasoning more broadly: a meta-analysis of 44 studies found that such manipulations

reduce the overall quality and engagement of moral judgment, even where their effect on outcome choice is not reliably directional (Rehren 2024).

The data for the foreign-language effect are robust. But what if the dominant interpretation is wrong? I argue that the effect reflects processing cost and reduced expressive resources rather than a general rise in rationality. I show how this reading predicts known patterns across proficiency, dilemma type, and tasks that impose cognitive load. I clarify what is measured when outcomes are counted without attention to the texture of reasons. I bring the empirical and philosophical threads together to explain why some justifications thin out in the second language while others remain resilient. Finally, I draw practical safeguards for multilingual deliberation in clinical, legal, and policy settings, with specific steps for interpreter use and documentation of reasons.

The critique of the rationality interpretation is not new. Caldwell-Harris and Ayçiçeği-Dinn (2021) showed, using behavioural ratings and electrodermal monitoring, that native-language reasoning produces more ethical choices, and drew on the somatic marker hypothesis to explain why emotional signals typically aid rather than distort moral decision-making. Their account, like the present one, resists the inference that a foreign language improves moral reasoning. My argument extends that line of critique in a specific direction: by proposing justificatory texture as an operational measure of what is lost, by grounding the loss in processing cost and expressive constraint rather than somatic marker attenuation alone, and by deriving practical institutional safeguards from the account.

What this paper adds. The challenge to the rationality interpretation has prior defenders, and I build on that tradition. The specific contributions are as follows. First, I give the critique an operational form: justificatory texture – the richness and deontic content of reasons given, not merely the outcome chosen – is proposed as the relevant dependent variable, with a five-item coding scheme for future empirical use, with a five-item coding scheme for future empirical use. The scoring rubric, decision rules, and illustrative examples are given in Appendix A. Second, I offer a processing-cost mechanism with testable predictions by proficiency, dilemma type, and task load. Third, I correct a measurement habit that treats outcome counts as a proxy for reasoning quality. Fourth, I translate the account into practical safeguards for committees working in non-native or interpreted language – a normative extension that prior critiques have not pursued.

This is a theoretical account. It draws on existing findings and proposes testable predictions and measurement tools for future studies.

1.1 Predictions

P1. Greater second-language processing effort will correlate with thinner justificatory content, holding outcome choice constant.

P2. Higher self-reported reading proficiency in the working language will attenuate P1.

P3. Personal-force dilemmas will show larger texture loss than impersonal variants.

P4. Independent cognitive load will mimic P1 in native-language settings.

2 Thesis

I do not dispute the findings. People do make different moral choices in a foreign language. But I challenge the inference that these choices reflect greater rationality or improved moral reasoning. The effect is better explained by cognitive strain and reduced expressive capacity than by any clearer, more deliberative form of thought. My analysis draws selectively on replicated findings in bilingual moral dilemmas, on cognitive-load studies, and on affective appraisal, emphasising moderators such as proficiency and dilemma type.

2.1 Processing Cost, Expressive Constraint, and the Apparent Utilitarian Shift

There is good reason to think that increased processing effort thins moral reasoning, but the mechanism is more specific than a simple load-leads-to-utilitarianism claim. Model-based decomposition shows that operating in a foreign language reduces sensitivity to consequences and sensitivity to norms simultaneously, without increasing either Muda et al. (2018); Białek et al. 2019a, b; Hennig and Hütter (2021). Both moral inclinations are attenuated. The apparent utilitarian shift observed in conventional binary-choice studies arises because the attenuation is not perfectly symmetric: deontological sensitivity is more robustly reduced in high-conflict, personal-force dilemmas – which are structurally designed to amplify it – while reductions in consequence sensitivity are weaker and more variable across samples and contexts Hayakawa et al. (2017); Barabadi et al. (2023). The dilemma is de-moralised rather than re-moralised. In conventional binary-choice studies – where participants simply choose whether or not to push – this de-moralisation reads as a utilitarian shift, because the threshold for the outcome-maximising option is crossed when deontological resistance weakens more than consequence sensitivity does; but no increase in utilitarian motivation has occurred.

(Białek et al. 2025) have formalised this logic. Because the deontological inclination starts at higher activation strength in direct, personal-force dilemmas – in which the morally repulsive quality of the act amplifies it – a proportional reduction of both inclinations yields a larger absolute drop on the deontological side, narrowing the gap and tipping choice toward the outcome-maximising option. The utilitarian inclination does not rise; the deontological one simply falls further. That distinction is precisely what binary-choice measures cannot recover.

This fits a processing-cost reading: under expressive constraint, the form of justification that survives is not outcome-counting because it is superior, but because it is easier to carry. Stating that one person died so that five might live requires little more than arithmetic; stating why the distinction between doing and allowing matters, or why the separateness of persons resists aggregation, requires conceptual resources that effort depletes. Białek (2023) has proposed a related mechanism at the meta-cognitive level: the foreign language impairs access to the cues that signal when an intuition should inform judgment. What is harder to say is also harder to notice as something that demands saying.

Indirect evidence for the articulability mechanism comes from group decision-making. Rokosz et al. (2025), using the CNI model, found that groups show stronger

sensitivity to consequences than individuals deliberating alone, without a corresponding change in norm-sensitivity or action aversion. The most plausible account of this asymmetry is that verbal deliberation allows utilitarian arguments to be stated and defended in ways that deontic arguments – more intuitive and more resistant to propositional rendering – are not. The foreign-language case is structurally analogous but operates in the opposite direction: where group deliberation expands the discursive space for reason-giving, foreign-language processing compresses it. What survives compression is what could already be stated simply.

The cognitive load literature does not straightforwardly support the claim that load increases utilitarian responding. A meta-analysis of 44 studies and over 14,000 participants found no significant overall effect of cognitive-processing manipulations on moral judgments in sacrificial dilemmas; bias-corrected estimates were near zero (Rehren 2024). Nor does processing a foreign language reliably increase measurable cognitive effort in the sense required by the increased-deliberation account; studies using reasoning tasks and response-time measures have generally failed to find the predicted increases (Białek et al. 2020).

My argument does not depend on load producing utilitarianism. It depends on a narrower and more defensible claim: that processing constraint reduces the capacity to articulate deontic content, and that outcome-counting is what remains when that capacity is insufficient. Lower self-reported reading proficiency in the working language – a proxy for processing cost – is associated with a larger shift toward outcome-counting responses (Stankovic et al. 2022).

The same logic applies to parallel phenomena such as intoxication: where processing costs produce an apparent utilitarian shift, model-based analyses show the pattern typically reflects symmetric attenuation of both inclinations rather than a genuine rise in consequence sensitivity (Paruzel-Czachura et al. 2023).

2.2 Language as a Tool for Reason-Giving

Wittgenstein's line – 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world' – remains serviceable here (Wittgenstein 1922). Where fluency is limited, so too is the ability to formulate and sustain complex moral reasons (Kirova et al. 2023). Bilinguals frequently report that they 'lack the words' to express themselves fully in a second language, especially when discussing abstract or emotionally freighted matters; empirical work supports this phenomenology (Dewaele 2004).

On this account, the foreign-language effect is not a sign of increased rationality but a symptom of moral impoverishment (Tappolet 2016). If a person cannot articulate why an act seems wrong, they may abandon that intuition and settle for what is easiest to explain. In native-language reasoning we have a richer stock of moral concepts, cultural references, and finely grained emotional terms. Remove those resources and justification becomes thinner, shallower, more transactional.

Second-language processing also attenuates the capacity to generate vivid mental imagery of a situation – a distinct route through which intuitive moral responses are normally activated. (Vives et al. 2018) note that a disruption of this capacity may modify the automatic reactions the autonomous mind would otherwise supply; they flag that the argument applies in the moral domain too, though they do not test it

directly. The expressive constraint account is consistent with this: where a speaker cannot readily picture what is at stake, the imagery-driven pull toward protective norms is among the resources that thins.

2.3 Emotions as Epistemic Inputs

We should also ask whether emotional detachment really improves moral judgement. Emotions are often framed as biases that distort reason, yet a substantial literature suggests they are constitutive of ethical thought (Prinz 2006). Moral disgust, empathy, and intuitive aversion to harm play fundamental roles in shaping sound decisions. If foreign-language use weakens these responses, does this make us more rational - or merely less sensitive to moral salience?

Clinical evidence points the same way. Damasio's work on patients with damage to ventromedial prefrontal cortices shows that, although such individuals can appear more 'rational' in certain contexts, they struggle profoundly with social and moral reasoning (Damasio 2005; Koenigs et al. 2007). The detachment is not a virtue; it marks an absence. The foreign-language state may create a modest, artificial form of detachment that mimics aspects of this underlying deficit - giving the appearance of sharpened clarity without the corresponding depth of moral appraisal.

Emotions that reliably track harm and rights are epistemic resources; pacing, native-language staging, and careful record-keeping exist precisely to give them room to surface (see § 4 and Box 1).

3 Objections and Replies

3.1 Cultural Confound

It may be said that what looks like a language effect is really culture at work: many bilinguals acquire a second language within a different cultural frame, so the 'five over one' shift might be cultural priming. Yet studies that hold culture constant, or that measure cultural identification separately from language of deliberation, still report a residual second-language effect – on both choice and the thickness of justification (Kyriakou et al. 2023).

This suggests a contribution from the language channel itself. Recent work shows that the foreign-language effect on moral judgment persists even when culture is held constant, but diminishes when cultural proximity or linguistic similarity reduce emotional distance. Within-culture designs (Geipel et al. 2015; Jensen Mækelæ and Pfuhl 2019; Dylman and Champoux-Larsson 2020) and meta-analyses controlling for cultural identification (Stankovic et al. 2022) indicate that language, rather than culture, primarily drives the observed shifts in utilitarian reasoning.

Cross-cultural studies that explicitly measured cultural identification (Brouwer 2019) further support this picture. (Čavar and Tytus 2018) reported that the FLE weakens in highly acculturated bilinguals, but a direct commentary by Białek and Fugelsang 2019a showed the study was underpowered, used unvalidated materials,

and lacked the interaction analysis needed to validate that conclusion; the result is better treated as uninformative than as evidence for moderation by acculturation.

A further complication is that (Dylman and Champoux-Larsson 2020) found the FLE disappears for linguistically similar language pairs – Swedish–Norwegian bilingual pairs showed no effect, while Swedish–French pairs did. This suggests language distance may be the more fundamental variable rather than cultural identity as such; the processing-cost account accommodates this straightforwardly, since closer languages impose lower effort and leave expressive resources less constrained.

Recent research that equates or explicitly measures cultural background consistently finds that the language of deliberation accounts for the observed differences in moral reasoning, with cultural identity exerting a comparatively limited role once controlled for. Meta-analytic and empirical evidence shows that the foreign-language effect persists even when culture is controlled or modelled statistically (Muda et al. 2020; Stankovic et al. 2022; Del Maschio et al. 2022; Kyriakou et al. 2023).

3.2 Motivated Reasoning

A second reply is that emotion misleads, and that the cooler tone of the second language curbs parochial pulls. Detachment can sometimes blunt parochialism; however, the same detachment removes resources for reason-giving – affect appraisal, a nuanced deontic vocabulary, and the capacity to state side-constraints cleanly.

In high-conflict cases, the second-language state often aligns with patterns of impoverished justification: when expression is thinned, people tend to count outcomes because counting is the form of justification that requires least articulation – a claim supported by the finding that verbal group deliberation selectively increases consequence sensitivity without a corresponding change in norm sensitivity (Rokosz et al. 2025); see § 2.1). Counting outcomes requires less from the speaker than stating why a norm holds; under constraint, the cheaper form wins.

Balanced models of moral cognition suggest that emotion is neither simply noise nor virtue, but a context-sensitive input to moral reasoning. Dual-process and social-intuitionist accounts locate affect as the source of moral salience and deontic sensitivity, with reflective reasoning modulating its reach (Haidt 2001; Greene et al. 2008; Cushman 2013). Philosophical and neuroscientific analyses similarly indicate that emotional engagement supports the articulation of moral constraints and empathic understanding, even as certain emotions can bias judgment when left unchecked (Prinz 2006; Huebner et al. 2009; Bloom 2018). In this sense, the emotional attenuation characteristic of second-language use may promote detachment, but it risks thinning the justificatory texture that makes moral reasoning recognisably human.

3.3 Measurement Scope

Moral theory distinguishes decision quality from mere outcome counting: a choice may maximise numbers while failing to meet standards of justification that bar certain wrongs. Consequentialist aggregation captures outcomes but not the justificatory structure of moral reasoning – the reasons that make some actions impermissible

even when net benefit is higher (Foot 1967; Thomson 1985; Nagel 1989; Kamm 1996; Scanlon 2000).

Taking ‘five over one’ as the benchmark of rationality therefore begs the question. In personal-force and other high-stakes dilemmas, what matters is not only the outcome preferred but whether a person can articulate reasons that exclude certain means. Conceptual and empirical critiques converge on this point: utilitarian responses under cognitive load often reflect heuristic simplification or emotional blunting rather than superior justification (Greene et al. 2008; Conway and Gawronski 2013; Kahane et al. 2015; May 2018). The foreign-language shift, on this interpretation, aligns less with refined reasoning than with *thinner justification* - underscoring philosophical cautions against identifying maximisation with moral adequacy.

4 Implications for Institutions and Practice: Preserving Justificatory Texture

At a hospital ethics meeting, the case concerns withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment from a patient whose family speaks little Portuguese. The discussion proceeds in English, with an interpreter mediating between the mother and the committee. As the clock runs, the group’s reasons begin to narrow to what translates quickly - bed-days saved, probability curves, projected quality-of-life scores - while the mother’s account of duty and promise arrives fragmented and delayed. Research on interpreter-mediated consent and communication shows that linguistic mediation can shape moral deliberation, particularly when ad hoc or rushed, by privileging quantifiable content over relational or deontic reasoning (Flores 2006; Schenker et al. 2008). When a bilingual clinician pauses to restate the mother’s reasons first in her native language and only then translate, the justificatory texture changes and the committee reopens a question they thought settled. Comparable moderation effects appear in experimental work on the moral foreign-language shift: higher second-language proficiency reduces utilitarian responding, suggesting that expressive capacity and processing cost - rather than increased rationality - drive the effect (Stankovic et al. 2022; Kirova et al. 2023). The same logic explains why the effect is strongest in high-conflict, personal-force dilemmas (Greene et al. 2008; Conway and Gawronski 2013; Kahane et al. 2015) and recurs under cognitive strain in financial and risk contexts (Keysar et al. 2012; Costa et al. 2017).

In multilingual committees such as those of the EU or UN, the choice of working language, uneven proficiency, and reliance on interpretation can tilt group reasoning toward more calculative, easily stated trade-offs. Reasons that depend on deontic nuance or culturally specific terms are more likely to be under-represented when time is tight or translation is compressed. The claim is probabilistic and fits with evidence that language arrangements shape participation, perceived expertise, and the kinds of arguments that surface (Tietze and Dick 2013; Tenzer et al. 2014).

In clinical and legal practice, a practical safeguard is careful pacing: whenever possible, stage critical deliberation in the participant’s native language, allow slower translation cycles, and record not only outcomes but the adequacy of the reasons expressed.

These safeguards operationalise the texture account for real committees. They are designed to protect reasons during multilingual deliberation and can be audited in minutes and transcripts:

Box 1. Safeguards for multilingual deliberation.

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- (1) Native-language staging for consent and key hearings. Where feasible, hold the decisive stage in the participant's first language, with a short written record of reasons kept in that language.
 - (2) **Slow the clock when interpretation is used.** Allow longer turns, permit clarifying restatements before translation, and record the interpreter's presence in the minutes.
 - (3) **Two-step translation of reasons.** Invite a brief restatement in the speaker's first language, then translate. Note the original phrasing, even if paraphrased later. *Rationale: helps counter omission and compression in interpreted exchanges.*
 - (4) **Separate outcomes from justifications in the record.** File counts and reasons in distinct lines. *Rationale: under higher language load, reasons can thin to outcome tallies; clear minutes help preserve justificatory content.*
 - (5) **Proficiency and comprehension check.** Document the participant's self-reported reading and speaking comfort in the working language, and adapt pace and format accordingly.
 - (6) **Structured prompts that invite deontic content.** Use questions that elicit duties, rights, commitments, and promises, not only probabilities and utilities.
 - (7) **Brief training for chairs and interpreters.** Cover how language load can thin reasons, how to cue slower pacing, and how to preserve key terms across languages.
 - (8) **Audit trail for language effects.** In the minutes, note when translation, proficiency limits, or time pressure may have shaped the form of reasons, and record any corrective steps taken.
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5 Conclusion

This paper has argued that reasoning in a second language increases processing effort and constrains expressive resources. The likely result is a thinning of justificatory texture and a greater pull toward outcome counts. The pattern is clearest in high-conflict, personal-force dilemmas, attenuates with higher reading proficiency, and has close parallels under independent cognitive load. Evidence from interpreter-mediated exchanges shows how institutional conditions can press in the same direction by compressing what is said and how it is recorded.

A practical response is to protect reasons through measures that counter the drift toward detachment. Committees can do this with careful pacing, native-language stages at decisive moments, permission for restatement before translation, and minutes that separate outcomes from justifications. These steps are modest, auditable, and compatible with a range of institutional settings.

The account also yields testable predictions and a small measurement correction. Predictions include thinner justificatory content under greater effort, attenuation with higher proficiency, stronger effects in personal-force cases, and mimicry of the pattern under generic load in native-language settings. The measurement correction is to track justificatory texture alongside outcome choice, so that claims about improved reasoning are not inferred from numbers alone; the coding rubric for this purpose is provided in Appendix A. Recent evidence extending the effect to a non-WEIRD population – Tanzanian participants evaluating dilemmas in informally acquired Swahili

rather than their native Chagga – suggests the processing-cost account may not be limited to formal second-language learners, though direct tests of justificatory texture in such populations remain to be done (Białek et al. 2025).

This analysis is probabilistic and context-sensitive. It does not deny that cooler states can help in some circumstances. It claims that effort and constrained expression make certain reasons harder to bring to speech, and that this matters for how decisions are justified and recorded.

If moral reasons are things we must assemble, hold, and say, then their fate is tied to the channel we use. Extra effort narrows what can be carried at once; calculative answers travel light. Institutions should notice that tendency and make room for thicker reasons. The foreign-language effect reads more clearly as a change in justificatory texture under effort than as a rise in rationality. Reframing the phenomenon in this way yields testable predictions and concrete safeguards that institutions can adopt now.

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