

Feel Your Languages: A survey of multilingual youths' emotions

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Over a thousand young people aged 15 to 20 years from Germany and German-speaking Switzerland participated in this online survey ($n = 1,023$). All of them knew a language other than German that they had learned from their families, their “heritage languages”, among which were Turkish, Russian, Polish, Italian, English and Spanish, but also many languages less frequently spoken in Germany and Switzerland, such as Twi, Somali and Estonian. We wanted to know how these youths felt about speaking their two languages.

Two languages, many emotions

Many young people agreed that they experienced positive emotions related to using their languages and some also experienced negative emotions, more so when using the heritage language. For example:

- Over 70% of youths agreed there were situations in which they enjoyed speaking the heritage language and almost 60% said the same about German
- 30-40% said they sometimes got nervous or felt embarrassed speaking their heritage language
- Around 20% said they sometimes got nervous or felt embarrassed speaking German

When we asked young people to imagine everyday situations where they spoke either language, many also reported pride or positive emotions, but they also admitted to negative feelings. For example, over 40% felt ashamed when imagining not knowing a few words when talking to sales people in the heritage country and almost 30% felt guilty imagining speaking German in front of a mildly disapproving grandparent.

Why do multilingual youths feel the way they do?

We asked youths about themselves, their families, and their schools to begin understanding why they might feel good or bad about using their languages. Whether they felt joyful, proud, guilty, anxious or ashamed was connected to many factors: for example, whether they or their parents had lived in the heritage country, how closely they felt connected to each of their two cultures, and how well they thought they spoke each language.

Do schools and teachers matter?

Some of these connections were unexpected: for example, youths attending or having attended higher school tracks reported more negative emotions when using the heritage language and German. Maybe they were holding themselves to very high standards?

What really stuck out was the importance of teachers: young people who thought their teachers displayed negative attitudes towards the heritage language, for example by prohibiting its use, felt more negative not only when speaking their heritage languages, but also when speaking German. Youths whose teachers complimented them on and valued their heritage languages experienced more joy when using either language.

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