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LANGUAGE MATTERS: STABILITY AND/OR CHANGE OF PERSONALITY TRAITS IN BILINGUAL DAMPLE

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Abstract. This study examines how language influences personality assessment outcomes in bilingual individuals by comparing responses to standardized instruments administered in both English and Bulgarian. A community sample of 236 Bulgarian-English bilinguals (Mage = 32.89, SD = 9.61), who used English daily for at least two years, completed four personality measures in both languages during a single session, with a music-based cognitive task break in between to reduce translation effects.

Overall, results showed strong equivalence between language versions. However, subtle differences emerged, particularly in subscales related to reality testing, reflective functioning, and detachment – suggesting that certain self-perceptions may be more nuanced or emotionally resonant when assessed in the mother tongue. Age-related differences in Negative Affectivity were significant only in the Bulgarian version, aligning with developmental theories that highlight emotional and personality shifts during emerging adulthood.

These findings support psychodynamic perspectives emphasizing the emotional depth and symbolic richness of the native language. Clinically, they underscore the importance of considering language preference and emotional comfort in bilingual assessments and therapeutic contexts. Future research should explore these effects in clinical populations and investigate how language shapes psychological expression and therapeutic outcomes.

Keywords: linguodidactology; personality assessment; bilinguals; emerging adulthood; psychological counselling; mother tongue

Introduction

Personality assessment is at the core of psychological research and clinical practice, allowing for the evaluation of stable individual differences in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In the contemporary multicultural and multilingual contexts at universities and huge multinational companies, the accuracy and equivalence of personality assessment become critical issues. The existing

Guidelines of International Test Commission for translating and adapting tests (2017) creates a comparatively clear protocol to be followed but even when the language equivalence of the two test versions is reliably established, there are groups (bilinguals for example) and settings (legal, counselling/therapeutic, etc.) that require special research attention and practical solutions. Bilingual individuals, who are proficient in more than one language, often exhibit variability in their responses when assessed in different languages. This phenomenon raises important questions about the linguistic and cultural influences on self-perception and the expression of personality traits. Some studies indicate that bilinguals may express themselves differently depending on the language context, particularly when the constructs being measured are emotionally charged or culturally nuanced (Dewaele & Pavlenko 2004). Personality assessment in clinical or legal settings raises questions of accuracy, sensitivity and many ethical considerations with potentially serious implications on person's life and well-being. A psychodynamic perspective further complicates the issue, claiming that language is intrinsically linked not only to emotional expression but also to the unconscious processes. The mother tongue is often seen as the language most closely connected to affective experiences, while second languages may reflect more cognitively processed or socially mediated responses (Amati-Mehler 1995; Clauss 1998; Meissner 2008). Given that personality inventories often assess affective and interpersonal dimensions, the language of administration could significantly influence the results, potentially leading to biased interpretations or inaccurate clinical conclusions.

The present study aims to investigate differences in personality inventory responses between two language versions (mother tongue and second language) when administered to a bilingual sample. We hypothesize that: 1) Bilingual participants will demonstrate variations in responses between the two language versions, particularly in dimensions related to emotion and interpersonal interactions; 2) The mother tongue will elicit responses that are more emotionally nuanced, whereas the second language will yield more restrained or analytically processed answers; 3) These differences may offer empirical support for the psychodynamic psychotherapy practice of using the mother tongue to facilitate deeper emotional processing.

Theoretical Background

Language and Personality Assessment. Personality assessments are designed to evaluate stable traits that define an individual's characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Popular frameworks include the Big Five Personality Model (Goldberg 1993) and dimensional approaches in the DSM-5, which offer comprehensive measures of broad personality traits. Within those two frameworks two most commonly used tools are developed and used – the Big Five Personality Traits Inventory (Costa & McCrae 1992), and the Personality Inventory for DSM-5

(PID-5; American Psychiatric Association 2013). The Big Five Model, assesses five broad personality dimensions: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. It has been translated into numerous languages, with cross-cultural research demonstrating both universal and culture-specific aspects of personality structure (McCrae & Costa 1997). Similarly, the PID-5 assesses maladaptive personality traits across five domains: Negative Affectivity, Detachment, Antagonism, Disinhibition, and Psychoticism. The inventory is designed to align with the Alternative Model for Personality Disorders (AMPD) as outlined in the DSM-5.

Studies have demonstrated that even with careful translation and cultural adaptation, certain items may not fully capture the same psychological constructs across languages. For instance, subtle semantic differences and culturally specific connotations can lead to variations in how participants interpret and respond to items (Cheung et al.,2011). This issue is particularly pronounced when assessing traits related to emotionality and interpersonal relationships, which are inherently context-dependent and linguistically sensitive.

Bilingualism and Cognitive Processing: Implications for Personality Assessment. Bilingualism is a complex phenomenon involving the ability to use two languages fluently, often shaped by social, cognitive, and emotional factors. Cognitive psychology research demonstrates that language influences thought patterns and self-concept, as bilinguals often report feeling like "different people" when speaking in different languages (Salmani Nodoushan & García Laborda 2014). This phenomenon can be attributed to cognitive framing, where language serves as a contextual cue that activates specific schemas and emotional states. One well-documented effect of bilingualism is the phenomenon of code-switching, where individuals alternate between languages depending on the context, audience, or emotional tone. Research suggests that bilinguals' self-perceptions and emotional experiences may shift based on the language in use (Ramírez-Esparza et al. 2006). This linguistic switch may result in variations in self-reported personality traits depending on whether the assessment is conducted in the first or second language. Bilingual individuals often report feeling more emotionally connected and authentic when expressing themselves in their mother tongue compared to a second language. This phenomenon is supported by research indicating that emotional memories and affective processing are more accessible when using the native language (Pavlenko 2002). In contrast, responses given in a second language may be more detached, as the second language is often acquired in formal settings, where emotional expression is less integral (Pavlenko 2005). Additionally, studies indicate that the emotional intensity and interpretive depth are typically greater when discussing personal or traumatic experiences in the native language (Kassem, Rum & Perry 2022). Bilinguals may perceive and regulate emotions differently depending on the language context, which can significantly impact responses on emotionally laden personality

inventories. For instance, feelings of detachment or emotional blunting may be more pronounced when using a second language, reflecting a cognitive distancing effect (Dewaele 2004). The Cognitive-Affective Theory of Bilingualism posits that bilingual individuals might develop dual self-schemas, where different languages activate distinct aspects of identity and emotion regulation (Pavlenko 2006). This duality can result in discrepant responses on personality inventories administered in different languages, as self-descriptions and emotional expressions may align more closely with the cultural and linguistic framework activated at the moment.

Understanding how language shapes cognitive and emotional processing is essential for accurately assessing personality in bilingual individuals. Without accounting for these linguistic effects, assessments may misinterpret or overlook fundamental aspects of an individual's self-concept and personality structure.

Language and psychological counselling / psychotherapy. From a psychodynamic perspective, language is more than a mean of communication; it is a medium through which unconscious thoughts, emotions, and symbolic expressions emerge. According to classical Freudian theory, the unconscious mind communicates through symbols, metaphors, and linguistic associations that are deeply rooted in an individual's primary language (Freud 1915). This concept aligns with the idea that the mother tongue holds a deeper emotional resonance and is intimately connected with early life experiences and fundamental aspects of self-concept and identity (Akhtar 2006). Counselling and therapeutic practices often emphasize using the mother tongue to facilitate deeper emotional insight and self-reflection. This principle suggests that bilingual clients may experience a dissonance between their authentic emotional states and their ability to articulate these states when using a second language. Psychodynamic therapists argue that psychotherapy conducted in the mother tongue is more likely to evoke authentic, emotionally charged narratives. Conversely, when conducted in a second language, patients might present more rationalized or less emotionally intense accounts of their experiences.

Methodology

Participants. The study sample consisted of bilingual individuals proficient in both Bulgarian and English, recruited through social media platforms and among students enrolled in the Master's Program in General Psychology. Participants were selected based on their ability to comprehend and fluently communicate in both languages and additional criteria of using predominantly English for the last two years in one of the following contexts: at home, at work, in social environment, and/or with friends and for hobbies. The inclusion criteria ensured that the participants had comparable proficiency levels, allowing for accurate comparison of responses between the two language versions of the instruments.

A total of 236 participants (66.5% female, Mage=32.8 years) completed the study, comprising a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, educational background, marital/partnership status, and religious affiliation (see Table 1). Participants were predominantly young adults, studying at university or working in different areas and broad range of specialties. The gender distribution was typical for community research samples with one third male subjects and less than 1 % identifying themselves as "other", The educational level ranged from undergraduate students to professionals holding advanced degrees. The diversity within the sample enhances the generalizability of the findings to other bilingual populations.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

	Age groups								**Total**
(Mage=32.89 SD=9.61)	18 – 29 years			30 – 39 years			40+ years		
N	87			99			50		236
Gender male/female/ other	36	50	1	29	69	1	12	38	77/157/2
Use English in the following contexts[1]									
at home (with a partner/parent)	19			18			4		41
at work	74			86			53		213
social environment (community)	26			21			13		60
friends and hobbies	55			48			25		128
Consider oneself bilingual yes/ no	73/14			73/26			37/13		
Religion									
Orthodox	44			62			32		138
Catholic	4			0			1		5
Protestant	2			0			2		4
Buddhist	1			2			1		4
Atheist	18			17			8		43
Other	18			18			6		42
Education									
College/gymnasium	30			5			2		37
Bachelor	30			18			19		67
Master/PhD	27			76			29		132
Marital status									
Single	64			54			18		136
Marriage/relationship	23			45			32		100

[1]*More than one answer is possible and the total % exceeds 100.*

Instruments. This study employed four validated self-report instruments to assess personality traits, personality functioning, organization, and reflective capacity. All were originally developed in English and adapted into Bulgarian by the author, with empirical validation confirming their reliability and factor structures.

1. Personality Inventory for DSM-5 – **Brief Form (PID-5-BF),** (APA, 2013) PID-5-BF is part of the emerging measures, based on the dimensional model of personality pathology which aligns with the Alternative Model for Personality Disorders proposed in DSM-5. A 25-item tool measuring five maladaptive trait domains: Negative Affectivity, Detachment, Antagonism, Disinhibition, and Psychoticism. The Bulgarian version replicated the original five-factor structure and showed strong internal consistency ($\alpha > .70$). Participants rated the items using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *"Very True or Often True" (3) to "Very False or Often False" (0)*, reflecting the degree to which each statement applied to them.

2. Level of Personality Functioning Scale – **Brief Form (LPFS-BF)** (Weekers et al. 2019)

This 12-item scale evaluates impairments in self and interpersonal functioning across two domains. The LPFS-BF conceptualizes personality disorders as characterized by core impairments in self and interpersonal functioning, rather than as discrete categorical entities. The Bulgarian version maintained the original factor structure and reliability. Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale.

3. Inventory of Personality Organization – Revised (IPO-R) (Smits et al. 2009)

Assesses Reality Testing, Primitive Defenses, and Identity Diffusion (combined as PDID). Originally developed by Kernberg and Clarkin (1995) it evaluates three key dimensions of personality pathology: *Reality Testing (RT)* – the capacity to differentiate self from others and internal from external stimuli, essential for maintaining realistic perspectives, *Primitive Defense Mechanisms*, and *Identity Diffusion* – reflects poorly integrated concepts of self and significant others, indicative of fragmented identity. In IPO-R the last two dimensions are calculated together – *PDID*. Items were rated on a 4-point scale.

4. Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (RFQ) (Fonagy et al. 2016)

Measures mentalizing capacity through subscales of *Certainty (RFQ_C*) reflects confidence in understanding one's own and others' mental states, and *Uncertainty (RFQ_U)*, that Indicates doubts or confusion regarding mental states. The 7-point Likert scale version demonstrated conceptual and linguistic equivalence in Bulgarian.

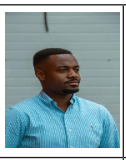
In all personality measures used in this study higher scores mean more salient difficulties in adaptation, bigger impairment and higher degree of problematic behavior.

Procedure. Data were collected via an online survey. Participants (N=236) completed all measures in both English and Bulgarian, with randomized order to

control for priming. A cognitive break involving music listening and image selection served to reduce carryover effects. After completing the first language set, participants received a standardized instruction to "listen to your favorite piece of music or musical fragment and then choose the image that corresponds best to it." Analysis confirmed the break's effectiveness in minimizing bias across age and gender groups.

To verify the effectiveness of the distractor task, the distribution of music and image preferences was analyzed by gender and age group (see Table 2). The results showed no systematic pattern related to gender, age, or socially desirable responses, indicating that the chosen method successfully minimized any response bias related to social identity or preference alignment.

Table 2. Choice by age group and gender

		Options of visual correspondence to a favorite music piece						Total
								
Age Group	20ties	15	13	22	10	24	3	87
	30ties	27	3	12	13	38	6	99
	40+	13	9	6	2	19	1	50
	male	10	12	14	12	25	4	77
	female	44	13	26	12	56	6	157
	other	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Total		55	25	40	25	81	10	236

Analysis. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20). Paired t-tests assessed mean differences between English and Bulgarian responses, appropriate for within-subject comparisons. Mixed ANOVA was used to examine language effects while controlling for demographic variables (age, gender, religion, education), and to explore potential interaction effects.

Results

Descriptive statistics confirmed that all scales and language versions replicated the original factor structures, aligning with their theoretical constructs. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) exceeded .70 across all measures, indicating good reliability. Variance across scales fell within the expected range for a community sample.

To assess potential language effects, paired samples t-tests were conducted comparing English and Bulgarian versions for each of the five PID-5 personality dimensions.

No significant difference was found for *Negative Affectivity* (Mdiff = 0.033, t(235) = 1.069, p = .286), suggesting consistent self-reports across languages. However, a one-way ANOVA across age groups revealed a tendency toward higher Negative Affectivity in emerging adults (p = .079), with a significant effect in the Bulgarian version only (F(2, 233) = 3.644, p = .028).

Antagonism (Mdiff = 0.005, p = .837) and *Disinhibition* (Mdiff = -0.004, p = .878) showed no language-based differences. *Detachment* showed a marginal trend (Mdiff = 0.044, p = .075), suggesting slightly higher scores in Bulgarian.

A significant difference was observed for *Psychoticism* (Mdiff = 0.079, t(235) = 2.570, p = .011), with higher scores in Bulgarian.

In the RFQ, no significant difference appeared for *Uncertainty* (RFQ_U; Mdiff = 0.031, p = .137), but participants reported significantly less *Certainty* (RFQ_C) in Bulgarian (Mdiff = -0.093, t(235) = -3.399, p = .001).

For LPFS-BF, no significant differences emerged in *Self-Functioning* (t(160) = 0.997, p = .320) or *Interpersonal Functioning* (t(160) = 1.389, p = .167).

In the IPO-R, *PDID* showed no significant difference (t(235) = -1.196, p = .233). However, *Reality Testing* was significantly lower in Bulgarian (Mdiff = -0.047, t(235) = -2.531, p = .012), indicating greater vulnerability in native-language assessments.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the extent to which language influences the outcomes of personality assessments among bilingual individuals. The findings largely support the equivalence of the Bulgarian and English versions of the instruments used, suggesting that both versions generally offer reliable and valid assessments of personality traits, personality functioning, and reflective capacities. The replication of the original factor structures and expected variance ranges across all scales further affirms the psychometric robustness of the Bulgarian adaptations for community use.

However, several nuanced yet meaningful differences emerged, revealing the complex interplay between language, self-perception, and psychological functioning. Notably, the *Reality Testing* subscale showed a significant difference between language versions, suggesting that individuals' self-reported capacity to distinguish between self and non-self or between intrapsychic and external stimuli may be subtly influenced by language. This finding supports the notion that language context can shape the interpretation of perceptual and cognitive experiences, especially those with strong cultural and emotional connotations. As Smits et al. (2009) emphasize, the *Reality Testing* subscale is sensitive to impairments associated with psychotic symptoms, even though it is not a direct measure of psychotic personality structure. Therefore, caution is warranted in interpreting this difference in non-clinical samples. The connotations or emotional

resonance of terms related to unusual beliefs or experiences might differ between languages, particularly in a clinical context where expressing such traits can carry varying social implications.

A parallel observation was made for the *Reflective Functioning Certainty* subscale, where scores differed significantly depending on the language. Prior research has associated high certainty scores with pathological hypermentalizing in clinical populations (Fonagy et al. 2016), but in the current community sample, a reduction in *Certainty* scores in the Bulgarian version could indicate a more refined and cautious understanding of mental states. From the lens of mentalization theory (Hancheva 2019), this reduction may actually signify greater mentalizing capacity, as it reflects a willingness to acknowledge ambiguity and the limits of one's understanding—a sign of psychological maturity rather than dysfunction.

A trend toward higher *Detachment* scores in the Bulgarian version may further suggest that emotional distancing or social withdrawal is more vividly or authentically expressed when using the mother tongue. This could reflect either deeper emotional resonance or culturally ingrained differences in how individuals interpret and report interpersonal engagement.

The significant age-related difference in *Negative affectivity* observed in the Bulgarian version and present as a tendency (not reaching the level significance) in the English version, suggests that language may modulate how affective traits are expressed or perceived across developmental stages. This finding may reflect the greater emotional resonance and cultural familiarity of the mother tongue, particularly in the context of self-assessing negative emotional experiences, resulting in clearer differentiation among age groups. In light of emerging adulthood hypothesis (Arnett, 2000), individuals in this transitional phase (late teens to late twenties) are undergoing substantial identity exploration and emotional change, which may be more accurately captured in their native language, disregarding of the massive use of English in all spheres of their personal and professional life. Supporting this, studies and reviews of Bleidorn et al. (2022) and Seifert et al. (2022) highlight that personality traits—particularly emotional stability – undergo notable mean-level changes and increases in rank-order stability during early adulthood, stabilizing around age 30. The nuanced language of the mother tongue may thus enhance the sensitivity of personality assessments to these developmental changes, especially in younger participants still navigating affective maturity.

All the above-mentioned findings are highly consistent with the psychodynamic perspective, particularly the view that the mother tongue provides a more emotionally rich and symbolically nuanced vehicle for self-expression (Bager-Charleson et al. 2017; Clauss 1998; Or-Gordon 2021). Language is central and inextricably linked to the formation and differentiation of the self and emerging capacity to integrate loss and absence (Borossa 1998). Expressing emotionally charged content is often more accessible in one's

native language, a phenomenon supported by empirical evidence showing that autobiographical memories are more emotionally vivid when recounted in the mother tongue (Marian & Kaushanskaya 2004). Furthermore, psychodynamic psychotherapy traditionally emphasizes the use of the client's first language, as this facilitates deeper access to unconscious material and emotional authenticity (Amati-Mehler 1995; Rolland et al. 2017).

In the context of personality assessment, these observations underscore that language is not a neutral medium. Even with carefully translated and psychometrically sound instruments, the linguistic context may subtly shape how individuals access, interpret, and report their internal experiences (Van de Vijver & Hambleton 1996). Research on bilingual cognition supports this, showing that language modulates self-concept, emotional regulation, and memory (Pavlenko 2006). Therefore, language of administration should be carefully considered when assessing personality traits in bilingual individuals, particularly when assessments are used for clinical or diagnostic purposes.

Key Findings. This study confirmed that bilingual individuals may exhibit subtle yet meaningful shifts in personality self-report based on the language of administration. Affective and interpersonal traits, as well as reflective capacities, showed heightened emotional engagement and differentiation in the mother tongue. These findings align with the psychodynamic perspective that native language enhances emotional authenticity, which has critical implications for both personality assessment and psychotherapy.

Implications for Clinical Practice. Given these results, clinicians should be attuned to the emotional and symbolic significance of language in bilingual clients. Choosing the appropriate language for assessment or therapy is not merely a matter of proficiency but may influence the depth of self-disclosure and emotional engagement. As Karp and Vögele (2016) aptly note, "the assessment should be conducted in the language most compatible with the multilingual client's language proficiency and dominance" (p. 156). Furthermore, therapists may consider integrating discussions of language preference and identity into clinical work, particularly when working with clients navigating cultural transitions or multiple linguistic selves.

Limitations and Future Directions. This study was based on a community sample, limiting the generalizability of findings to clinical populations. While the results suggest that language can influence self-report even in psychologically healthy individuals, further studies are needed to assess whether these differences are magnified in clinical or high-risk samples and how these findings correspond to clinician-rated scales (Morey et al. 2011). Moreover, the study relied on self-reported bilingual proficiency. Future research should include objective measures of language competence, explore the role of language dominance, and assess whether similar effects are observed in therapy outcomes. Qualitative research may also

provide richer insight into the subjective experience of self-expression in different languages.

Conclusion

This study underscores the subtle but important influence of language on personality assessment among bilingual individuals. While most scales showed strong equivalence across English and Bulgarian versions, specific differences—particularly in reality testing, reflective functioning, and detachment—highlight the impact of language on self-perception and emotional expression. These findings lend empirical support to psychodynamic theories that emphasize the primacy of the mother tongue in emotional and unconscious communication. As the field moves toward more culturally sensitive and individualized approaches, researchers and clinicians alike must remain mindful of how language shapes psychological assessment and therapeutic engagement**.** Future studies should continue exploring the rich interplay between language, self, and personality—particularly in the context of multilingual and multicultural societies.

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