

---

# Multilinguals and Language Choice in Dreams

---

**Marta Šarčanin**

University of Zagreb

marta.sarcanin@hotmail.com

**ABSTRACT** The study explored the complex question of multilingual dreaming, more specifically, the choice of language in multilinguals' dreams. Studies have already proven the importance of proficiency for dreaming in a language other than the participants' L1, so the intention of this study was to look at language choice more closely and take into account the frequency of use and the influence of the environment on dreaming in an L2, L3, L4, etc. The instrument used was a questionnaire combined with a dream journal distributed to 11 students who have studied at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb. All of the participants were speakers of Croatian between 23 and 25 years old who had learnt more than one foreign language. The questionnaire was used to determine the participants' language proficiency, frequency of use of their languages and whether they were living in a country where their L1 was not spoken. The participants were asked to keep a dream journal for one month and write down references to language in their dreams. The dream journals demonstrated the complexity of the matter of multilingual dreaming and provided a more detailed insight into multilingual dreaming.

---

**KEYWORDS** multilingualism, dreams, language choice

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike various other topics considering multilingualism, the question of multilinguals' dreams has not been the focus of recent research. As Sicard and de Bot (2013) note, empirical data on this topic is difficult to find. One of the reasons for the lack of empirical research on dreams may be due to the limited insight into dreams or, in other words, the impossibility to experience participants' dreams directly. Therefore, studies rely on some form of dream recall, be it a more immediate or a later one. Although this study is plagued by the same restrictions, the main focus was to investigate the languages multilinguals experience in their dreams. This study was interested in testing the existing theories that aim to explain language choice in dreams. Secondly, the study focused on examining Sicard and de Bot's (2013) conclusion that living in an L2 environment increases instances of dreaming in a language other than your L1.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. MULTILINGUALS' LANGUAGE CHOICE

Apart from the lack of literature on the subject, language choice in multilingual dreams is sometimes subsumed under the category of language choice in general. For example, in a chapter called *Thinking and Dreaming in Bilinguals*, Grosjean (2010, 128) draws a parallel between bilinguals' language choice in thoughts and in dreams: "things are no different when one is dreaming. [...] Once again, the complementarity principle is at work here: depending on the situation and the person we are dreaming about, we will use the one language, the other, or both". A similar tendency can be observed in Sicard and de Bot's (2013) application of social linguistic terminology regarding language choice to language choice in dreams. However, it is common-sense that dream speech is a different phenomenon in itself due to the lack of external input and deficient monitoring abilities of the dreamer (Foulkes et al. 1993). Nonetheless, the research on language choice is exceedingly useful in

the study of language choice in dreams if we work under the assumption that cognitive processes in our sleeping and waking state are the same (Foulkes et al. 1993). The assumption that language choice in dreams and in the conscious state largely overlap is partly a product of a cognitive approach to SLA and psychology (Okada, Matsuoka, and Hatakeyama 2005). Accordingly, this could present another approach to the question of multilinguals' access to their lexicon.

The topic of lexical access in multilingualism centres on the question of whether lexical access is selective or non-selective. Selective lexical access signifies that “words can be accessed individually within a language-specific lexical network and that the correct language is selected by way of an ‘input switch’ which guides the selection process” (De Angelis 2007, 103). To simplify, selective lexical access invokes the image of a switch in a multilingual mind, switching languages on and off according to the language needed. On the other hand, non-selective lexical access implies that “words from different languages are activated in parallel until a certain point in the selection process” (De Angelis 2007, 103). As de Bot (2004) mentions, the neighbourhood effect in word recognition, the influence of cognates in word recognition and the effect of cross-linguistic priming give legitimacy to the claim of non-selective access.

A few models which aim to explain non-selective lexical access have emerged and it is relevant to discuss the most prominent ones. De Angelis (2007) acknowledges the BIA model which introduces the idea of a language node level. In this model, words are also tagged for language, which means that an activation of one word also contains information about which language it belongs to. Language information from this word then hinders the choice of a word from a language that is not in use (De Angelis 2007, 105). Just as the bilingual model, the MIA model is based on the idea that “selection occurs by way of activation and inhibition of potential competitors” (De Angelis 2007, 106). Furthermore, it is relevant to mention Grosjean's Language Mode model. Grosjean (2010) differentiates between a monolingual and a bilingual mode at two end points.

Bilinguals' level of activation of a particular language can be on any point on the continuum between the two poles. However, Grosjean (2010) also notes that the monolingual mode does not imply that the other language is completely deactivated and it is also susceptible to change due to a change in interlocutors, in context, etc.

In discussing language choice, lexical access is only part of the discussion. Also, a speaker's choice of language depends on more than the interlocutor. For example, there is the phenomenon of distancing: "... bilinguals may codeswitch to their second language to distance themselves from what they say. Ideas that would be too disturbing when expressed in the first language are less anxiety-provoking in the second language" (Dewaele 2004, 207). His study supports the claim that L1 is more emotionally charged than multilinguals' other languages, which is also mentioned by Aneta Pavlenko. As Pavlenko (2005) asserts, the greater emotionality of the L1 often influences a speaker's choice of language. For example, multilingual authors often cannot imagine writing literature in a language that is not their L1 and numerous multilingual parents believe that L1 is crucial for establishing an emotional connection with their child. It is interesting that bilinguals in the research carried out by Foulkes et al. (1993) used their L2 more while awake than while asleep. The authors ascribe this to the hypothesis that thinking in an L2 is a cognitively more demanding task, which is not easily achieved in sleep. However, the emotional force of the L1 could also be an important factor in this case. Pavlenko (2005, 461) notes that choosing L1 due to its heightened emotionality sometimes goes directly against the interlocutor since "some speakers choose the L1 even though their partners have little or no proficiency in the language". Therefore, it is important to take into account all of the possible factors, especially emotional ones, which influence a speaker's choice of language, and not just the situational context or the interlocutor.

## 2.2. LANGUAGE CHOICE IN DREAMS

The topic of multilingual dreaming has not been widely researched, but there are some important observations on the subject. Firstly, it is useful to mention that the majority of multilinguals report dreaming in more than one language (Grosjean 2010). Moreover, multilinguals report dreaming in languages other than their L1 regardless of their proficiency, although proficiency is an important factor for language choice in dreams (Sicard and de Bot 2013). Bilingualism and multilingualism do not constrict dream speech and dream speech is generally “both grammatically well-formed and contextually appropriate” (Foulkes et al. 1993, 872). Moreover, language is chosen only after the rest of the dream environment has been created and self-participation in dreams in regards to language is more difficult than the participation (speech) of others (Foulkes et al. 1993).

Considering the theories on why certain languages are used in dreams, there are three that will be discussed. The first one is called the *accommodation theory*. It comes from sociolinguistics and is based on the idea that speakers accommodate interlocutors because “individuals find social acceptance and approval rewarding” (Sicard and de Bot 2013, 333). Accordingly, if someone is a speaker of German and is dreaming about talking to another speaker of German, they will use the language they find appropriate, for example, German. Then there is *waking appropriateness*, which Foulkes et al. (1993) find to be quite influential as a factor for language choice in dreams. They found that if the dream context fits the context we are exposed to in our waking life, we are likely to use the language appropriate for that given context. The last theory will be called *language mode*, according to Grosjean’s theory (2010). It refers to the fact that language choice in dreams can be influenced by activating language(s) before sleep, that is entering the mode of an L2, L3 etc. (Foulkes et al. 1993).

Lastly, the conclusions from Sicard and de Bot's study (2013) ought to be mentioned. One of their interests was to establish whether living in an L2 environment – any environment in which the speaker's L1 is not the most frequently spoken language – influences instances of multilingual dreaming. They found that living in an L2 environment positively influenced multilingual dreaming because, according to the study, participants living in an L2 environment experienced more instances of multilingual dreaming. A similar conclusion was drawn by Foulkes et al. (1993) insofar as they found that the socio-cultural context had a strong influence over their participants, although not stronger than the influence of the participants' L1.

### 3. STUDY

#### 3.1. AIM

The aim of the study was to research the matter of multilingual dreaming in more detail. The study's focus was twofold. Firstly, the study was interested in whether the present theories regarding language choice in multilinguals' dreams would be applicable to our participants' dreams. The second part of the study was focused on Sicard and de Bot's (2013) conclusion that living in an L2 environment increases instances of multilingual dreaming. Therefore, the research questions were as follows:

RQ1. Could language choice in dreams be explained through existing theories – *accommodation theory*, *waking appropriateness* and *language mode*?

RQ2. Did participants living in an L2 environment have more instances of multilingual dreaming?

#### 3.2. SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 11 speakers of Croatian as their L1, with the exception of one simultaneous bilingual, that had studied at the Faculty of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. All of the

participants had spent more than 18 years of their life in a Croatian-speaking country. They were all between 23 and 25 years old and had all learnt at least two more languages along with Croatian, their L1. The number of languages and the languages themselves vary. Ten participants had studied at least one language at university, which entailed taking courses in linguistics. All participants reported using languages other than their L1 in their studies and/or work. While participating in the study, five of them were living in Croatia and five of them were living in an L2 environment. During the course of the study, one participant was living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian are spoken. Participants were divided into two groups in order to answer RQ2: group A, living in a country where their L1 was the most frequently spoken language in their environment, and group B, living in a country where a language other than their L1 was the most frequently spoken language in their environment.

### **3.3. PROCEDURE**

Participants were required to state some basic information about themselves and to complete a version of a language biography – writing down which languages they have learnt so far, which languages they are most proficient in, where they use these languages and with whom they use these languages. This constituted the first part of the questionnaire. In the second part, they were asked to keep a dream journal for a month and pay attention to any potential references to language in dreams, be it through speaking, thinking, writing, reading or listening. Furthermore, they were asked to write down which language was present in their dreams. Lastly, they were encouraged to write down any details they found relevant to the study.

### **3.4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

With regard to RQ1, it was found that existing theories could be used to explain the participants' language choice in dreams.

### *Accommodation theory*

I was talking to a woman who spoke to me in Italian but I tried to explain in English that I don't understand her. However, she didn't speak it. She asked me something in German but I didn't understand, and while she was trying to think of how to communicate with me, she spoke Polish to herself, saying things like: "How do I say this?" I then told her I spoke Polish and we both laughed.

Fleur – Croatian L1, English L2, Polish L3, German L4, Spanish L5

As evident from the example, the participant adapted to their collocutor until they were able to find an appropriate language for successful communication.

### *Waking appropriateness*

I was at a folk concert and I met Jelena Karleuša. She spoke in Serbian and I spoke in Croatian.

Minerva – Croatian L1, English L2, German L3, Spanish L4

Since it is natural for Croats and Serbs – the collocutor is a Serbian singer – to stick to their own languages while successfully communicating with each other, we can conclude that the interaction in the dream context followed the principle of waking appropriateness.

### *Language mode*

I was in a bar talking to a lot of foreign students in English and German. Coincidentally, that's what I was actually doing before going to bed, so I think my drunken mind was not able to create anything on its own, so it just showed me what it remembered the best.

Tom – Croatian L1, German L2, English L3

Evidently, the languages activated before sleep influenced the dream context.

However, not all cases were as straightforward to explain. To exemplify, let us examine this participant's dream:

Had a dream I was talking to my parents who apparently had a problem with my brother and his girlfriend, or, more specifically, with the bank that the two of them chose. The conversation was in Croatian and it was exactly like a normal conversation would be like between me and my parents in real life.

Gilderoy – Croatian L1, English L2, German L3, Portuguese L4,  
Latin L5, Italian L6, Spanish L7, French L8, Dutch L9

This participant's dream can be explained through waking appropriateness because the speaker usually speaks Croatian with their parents. Therefore, this choice of language matches the choice made in everyday life. On the other hand, language choice can also be explained through the accommodation theory since the speaker obviously adapts to his parents. Evidently, there is an overlap in these theories.

Furthermore, the theories were not applicable to all dreams. Take, for example, a dream of one of the participants:

A vegetarian friend who is Czech has a carp on her plate and cannot decide whether to eat it or not. While she's looking at the piece of carp, she says in Croatian: "Oh, oh! I don't know!" When she sticks her fork into it, it turns into a juicy piece of red meat.

Helena – Croatian L1, English L2, German L3,  
Latin L4, Czech L5, Spanish L6

In such cases, it is evident that language choice of the speaker is illogical, which reminds us that dreams are indeed a separate phenomenon from our waking life. Moreover, there was the example of a participant exhibiting knowledge of language that they do not have:

I used Spanish in a conversation with a Spanish girl at someone's wedding, even though I have never learned it. I know only some soap-opera expressions.

Tom – Croatian L1, German L2, English L3

This is an example similar to the one given by Grosjean (2011), in which he exemplifies that dreaming of speaking in an unknown language is usually the dreamers' conviction, but not a real possibility. Nevertheless, these dreams were also not possible to explain through the aforementioned theories, and they demonstrate the limitations of the existing theories.

Considering RQ2, the results were as follows:

1. Ten out of eleven participants (90.9%) reported dreaming in at least one L2 during the one-month period they kept the dream journal.
2. Eight out of eleven participants (72.7%) reported dreaming in more than one L2. Three of them (37.5%) belonged to group A (living in an L1 environment) and five of them (62.5%) belonged to group B (living in an L2 environment).
3. The instances of L2 dreaming amounted to 49.66% in group A and 65% in group B.

As demonstrated, the difference between the participants living in an L1 and L2 environment was minimal, which brings us to the problematic aspect of Sicard and de Bot's (2013) conclusion – the baseless assumption that living in an L2 environment inherently increases L2 exposure and L2 use and, accordingly, instances of multilingual dreaming. It would not take long for one to come up with examples that contradict this statement. Exposure and use of the L2 can be achieved in an L1 environment, as demonstrated by our participants in group A. They used L2s in their everyday life – through work, university, and communication with friends. Moreover, work, studying, music, television, and internet guaranteed L2 exposure for our participants. Exposure and use of L2 should not be boiled down to living in a certain environment, especially in the globalised and connected contemporary world. In conclusion, the results of group A put Sicard's and de Bot's (2013) conclusion about the influence of the L2 environment into question insofar as L2 environment was not found to be a detrimental factor for multilingual dreaming in this study.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In response to RQ1, it was evident that existing theories were able to explain our participants' instances of multilingual dreaming, but that they also had their limitations. A certain overlap in theories came into light, and it was evident that some instances of language choice in dreams were not covered by the existing theories. What is more, the research highlighted the need to treat dreams as a separate phenomenon. Of course, more detailed research on the subject of multilingual dreaming could change and improve our assumptions on language choice in dreams.

Regarding RQ2, the results from group A showed that L2 environment was not a crucial factor for multilingual dreaming. Furthermore, it became evident that Sicard's and de Bot's (2013) claim about L2 environment was based on the false assumption that living in an L2 environment automatically increases L2 exposure and L2 use.

Finally, although the findings are limited due to the nature of the study, they will hopefully motivate others to research the matter in more detail.

## REFERENCE LIST

- De Angelis, Gessica. 2007. *Third or Additional Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- De Bot, Kees. 2004. "The Multilingual Lexicon: Modelling Selection and Control." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 1: 17–32. doi: 10.1080/14790710408668176.
- Dewaele, Jean-Marc. 2004. "The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25: 204–222. doi: 10.1080/01434630408666529.
- Foulkes, David, Barbara Meier, Inge Strauch, Nancy H. Kerr, Laura Bradley, and Michael Hollifield. 1993. "Linguistic Phenomena and Language Selection in the REM dreams of German-English bilinguals." *International Journal of Psychology* 28: 871–891. doi: 10.1080/00207599308246969.
- Grosjean, François. 2010. *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Šarčanin, Marta. 2018. "Multilinguals and Language Choice in Dreams." XA Proceedings 1(1): 120–131. Zagreb: English Student Club.

---

Grosjean, François. 2011. "Thinking and Dreaming in Two (or More) Languages: The Language(s) of Thoughts and Dreams." *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-bilingual/201103/thinking-and-dreaming-in-two-or-more-languages>.

Okada, Hitoshi, Kazuo Matsuoka, and Takao Hatakeyama. 2005. "Individual Differences in the Range of Sensory Modalities Experienced in Dreams." *Dreaming* 15: 106–115. doi: 10.1037/1053-0797.15.2.106.

Pavlenko, Aneta. 2005. *Emotions and Multilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sicard, Jessica and Kees de Bot. 2013. "Multilingual Dreaming." *The International Journal of Multilingualism* 10: 331–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2012.755187>.