

Conflict resolution more successful using a native language, research shows

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The choice of language in a negotiation is often considered a technical issue, not something that could influence the outcome. But new research published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* finds peace-building

proposals presented in lingua franca elicit higher levels of hatred and lower levels of sympathy, compared with proposals offered in one's native tongue.

The research team included Leigh Grant, a doctoral student in the Psychology department; Boaz Keysar, the William Benton Professor in the Department of Psychology and the college at UChicago; and Ifat Maoz a Full Professor, Head of the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace and Director of the Swiss Center for Conflict Research, Management and Resolution, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Focusing on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, the research consisted of three studies. In the first study, the researchers found that when Israeli-Jews evaluate a trust-building and security initiative in their native Hebrew—as opposed to English—they're more likely to think it's favorable for their own side. They replicated this effect in a second study with a separate sample.

The third study investigated why proposals in a [native language](#) lead to more favorable reactions. "We actually found that after reading the trust-building proposal in Hebrew, participants reported feeling less hatred and more sympathy for the other side," Grant says. "Which in turn explained why, when they got the proposal in Hebrew, they were actually more open to it, as compared to in English."

"We do know from other work that we've done that people have different emotional reactions in a [foreign language](#) and in their native tongue," Keysar says. "In this case, they reacted more negatively in English, which made the proposal seem worse."

Keysar emphasizes that when animosity can be so extreme between two parties, trust-building measures at the very start of negotiations are

crucial—which means language choice can make an enormous impact on how talks will proceed.

"The finding is counterintuitive," he says. "Most people say, 'Well, I think that it'd be better to use a lingua franca.' In this sense, I think diplomats can inform themselves and can realize the importance of the language they choose. It's consequential here."

Of course, not every negotiation is based in [conflict](#), so the researchers are curious as to how language choice can affect business negotiations, for example. The team is also interested in exploring negotiations in which people are participating in face-to-face negotiation where using a [native tongue](#) requires an interpreter.

"In general," Keysar adds, "The choice of language in cross-national [negotiation](#) could impact it in a variety of ways, so it should not be taken for granted."

Maoz points to the important implications of the findings for the resolution of the Middle East Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: "Discussions, conversations and negotiations between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians are often held in English, that is seen as a more neutral [language](#)," she says. "It is fascinating to consider the potential negative implications of this frequent use of [lingua franca](#) on [conflict resolution](#) and peacebuilding in the Middle East."

More information: Leigh H. Grant et al, Lingua Franca as a Hidden Barrier to Conflict Resolution, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2022).
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