

Emotional Activation in
Bilingual Spanish-English Speakers

By

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the Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
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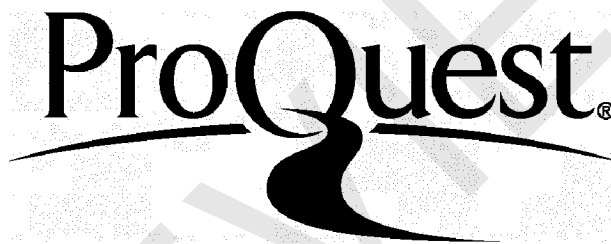
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To Camila, so that where we flew, you may soar

In Memory of Jose Pedro Carmona Martinez

PREVIEW

“You can’t show me a sentence, word, or phoneme that is meaningless; by its nature,
language is packed with meaning and emotion.”

Kenneth Goldsmith

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.”

Charlemagne

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ABSTRACT

Emotional activation refers to the phenomenon whereby words with emotional content produce emotional arousal in the individuals experiencing them. Studying emotional activation can assist us in better understanding the relationship between language and emotion and the mechanisms that cause emotional language to be processed differently by bilingual individuals than by monolingual individuals. Using an emotional and taboo Stroop task, this study sought to examine whether Spanish-English bilingual speakers react differently toward highly charged emotional words and taboo words in comparison to less emotionally charged words and whether such an effect is stronger in Spanish than in English. A total of 62 self-report Spanish-English bilinguals (49 females, 11 males, 2 unreported) participated in an online emotional Stroop Test in responding to positive, neutral, and negative emotion words, as well as taboo words, presented in both Spanish and English. Interference effects were found to be higher in Spanish (L1) than in English (L2) for all word type categories except English/taboo, which exhibited the highest interference effect overall. No significant interaction effects were found between language and word type. Results support previous findings that, for bilinguals who are not in a L1 dominant environment, emotional activation is heavily impacted by L2.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon whereby words with emotional content produce emotional arousal in the individuals experiencing them, described here as emotional activation, has long been a subject of informal observation and inquiry. Poets, scientists, and laypeople alike have noted the heightened effect of some words over others, when these words carry affect and meaning that stir in us all manner of related thoughts and emotional experiences. This effect is complicated in bilingual individuals, given the two linguistic contexts within which they grow and develop their emotional associations. Studying emotional activation, via interference effects, can assist us in better understanding the relationship between language and emotion and how it may differ in bilingual versus monolingual populations, which is an important distinction to make, living as we do in a monolingual society that is becoming increasingly multilingual.

Hispanics are one of the fastest growing segments of the population, according to the United States Census Bureau (2005). Thirty-one million people age five or older speak Spanish at home, at least half of which also report fluency in English (US Census Bureau, 2005). These statistics suggest a rapid shift is tipping the monolingual language balance in the United States and they highlight, not only the changing national demographic, but also the pressing need to conduct more research with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups. Because of their prevalence, as reported in census records, bilingual Spanish-English speakers were chosen to be the focus of this study.