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Expressions of emotion in bilingual mothers' child directed speech

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Research suggests that bilingual speakers feel that they express emotions differently when they change languages (Pavlenko, 2005) and that mother-child interactions play a fundamental role in the socialization of children (Chen, Kennedy, & Zhou, 2012). The current study examines the emotional expressions bilingual mothers use when speaking to their children in each language to discover how socialization might be affected for children raised in bilingual homes. Spanish-English bilingual and monolingual English mothers were observed during video-taped play sessions with their children (Hoff, et al, 2012). Maternal utterances were coded for explicit expressions of emotion (e.g. fear, liking), volition (e.g. want, desire), and epistemic stance (e.g. think, believe) to evaluate the nature and frequency of these expressions when speaking in each language. Bilingual mothers' expressivity was then compared to monolingual English mothers' expressivity. Results showed that bilingual mothers used more expressions of volition when they were speaking English than when speaking Spanish, and in comparison to native English speakers. When speaking English, bilingual mothers used more emotional expressions than did the monolingual mothers, but did not differ in use of epistemic language. When speaking their native languages, the monolingual mothers used more epistemic language than the bilingual mothers, but they did not differ in their use of emotion language. These results suggest that bilingual mothers may adjust their emotional expressions according to the cultural norms of the language they are speaking. Further study is needed to clarify the reasons for these variations in expression.

Research Question

Mother-Child interactions play a fundamental role in the socialization of children (Chen, Kennedy, & Zhou, 2012). However, bilingual speakers may express emotions differently depending on which language they are speaking at the time (Pavlenko, 2005). The present study examines the emotional expressions bilingual mothers use when speaking to their children in each language to discover how socialization might be affected for children raised in bilingual homes.

Method

Participants

10 Native Spanish Speaking, Bilingual Mothers
10 Native English Speaking, Monolingual Mothers
Participants were matched for maternal education (62% had a 4-yr degree, 19% had a 2-yr degree, and 19% had a high school diploma) and gender of child (50% male).

Procedure

Participants were recorded during 30-minute structured play sessions with their 30-month-old child in each language condition (Bilingual-Spanish, Bilingual-English, Monolingual-English). Video-recordings were transcribed in CHAT and the transcripts were coded for use of emotional expressions. Maternal utterances were coded for explicit expressions of emotion to evaluate the nature and frequency of these expressions when speaking in each language. Bilingual mothers' expressivity in each language was then compared to monolingual English mothers' expressivity.

Identifying Emotional Expressions

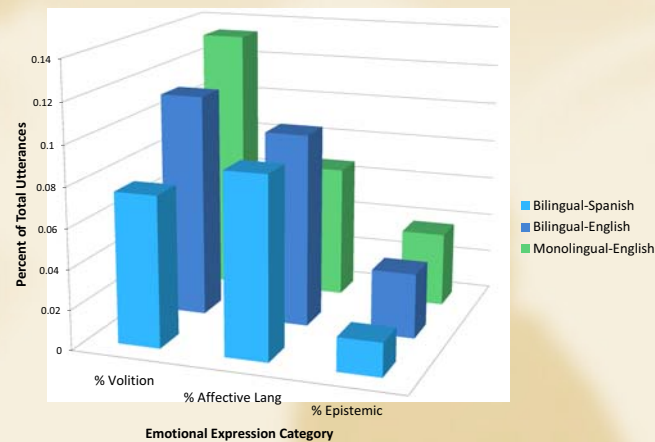
Each instance of maternal use of explicit emotion was identified and grouped into one of the following categories based on the type of emotion expressed.

- **Affective Expressions:** utterances containing explicit reference to or expressing emotion. Contains positive or negative expressions that fit into the following emotional categories:
 - **Affection:** "Are they friends?" "Ayúdame a encontrar un pato."
 - **Anger:** "She's very upset." "Pero sin pelear."
 - **Fear:** "Be careful." "Cuidado con esa araña."
 - **Happiness:** "They're all happy." "Está feliz?"
 - **Physical:** "I'm still hungry." "Estás cansado ya?"
 - **Pleasure:** "Do you like iguanas?" "Qué lindo!"
 - **Surprise:** "Uh-oh!" "Wuau!"
- **Expressions of Volition:** utterances containing an explicit reference to volition, such as want or desire.
 - "You want the pizza?" "Let's find some animals." "Quiero una fresa." "Pongamos la gallina acá."
- **Epistemic Stance:** utterances containing an explicit reference to mental states, such as think or know.
 - "Remember the lemon?" "I think this is a fish." "Adivina qué es esto?" "Yo no sé."

References

- Chen, S. H., Kennedy, M., & Zhou, Q. (2012). Parents' expression and discussion of emotion in the multilingual family: Does language matter? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7 (4), 365 – 383.
- Pavlenko, A. (2005). *Emotions and multilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Percent of Total Maternal Utterances Using Explicit Emotional Expressions



Results

Three sets of analyses provided a comparison of mothers' use of emotional expressions in each language category.

- **Bilingual-Spanish vs Bilingual-English:** Evaluated whether bilingual mothers use different emotional expressions when speaking in each language. Found that bilingual mothers use more expressions of volition when speaking English than when speaking Spanish ($t(10) = -3.240, p < .01$). Use of epistemic stance in each language approached significance ($t(10) = -2.03, p = .07$), suggesting that bilingual mothers may use a higher percentage of epistemic stance as well when speaking in English.

- **Bilingual-English vs. Monolingual-English:** Compared use of emotional expressions when all mothers were speaking English. Found that bilingual mothers speaking English use a higher percentage of affective expressions ($t(19) = 2.462, p < .05$). Due to the small sample size, analyses of the individual affective expressions categories could not be conducted.
- **Bilingual-Spanish vs Monolingual-English:** Compared use of emotional expressions when mothers were speaking their native language. Found that monolingual English mothers use a higher percentage of epistemic stance ($t(19) = -2.59, p < .05$) and volition ($t(19) = -3.53, p < .01$) expressions than Bilingual mothers speaking in Spanish.

Conclusions and Implications

These results suggest that bilingual mothers may adjust their emotional expressions according to the cultural norms of the language they are speaking. Specifically, bilingual mothers speaking English use levels of epistemic stance and volition language that are more frequent than when they speak Spanish. They do so in a way that resembles the difference between native English and native Spanish on these measures. However, bilingual mothers use more affective expressions when speaking English than the monolingual mothers in this study, suggesting that they do not adjust their emotional expressions entirely. It is also possible that mothers' vocabulary knowledge affects their use of emotional expression more than social intent. Further qualitative examination is needed to clarify the reasons for these variations in maternal emotional expression.

Three follow-up studies have been planned to replicate this study with an expanded sample size, to evaluate how additional conversational properties (topic and perspective) affect the use of emotional expressions, and to explore the effects of these differences in expression on bilingual children's emotional expressions in each language.

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