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Linguistic Distancing and Emotion Regulation in English and Spanish

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Abstract

Cognitively reappraising a stressful situation—reinterpreting it to alter its emotional impact—is effective for regulating negative emotions. When reappraising, English speakers spontaneously engage in linguistic distancing, using fewer first-person singular pronouns and present-tense verbs. We investigated whether this pattern generalizes to Spanish, a language proposed to offer unique distancing tools. Spanish and English bilinguals and English monolinguals (N = 163) transcribed their thoughts while responding naturally to negative images or reappraising them (for bilinguals, in both languages). We found that reappraisal increased standard markers of linguistic distancing similarly in English and Spanish. Moreover, stronger linguistic distancing when reappraising in either language was associated with greater reduction in self-reported negative affect. Notably, bilinguals did not utilize Spanish-specific distancing words (e.g., "estar" and diminutives) when reappraising. In showing that English-derived linguistic signatures of emotion regulation extend to Spanish, our findings offer initial evidence that linguistic distancing reflects emotional well-being across languages.