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How Language Use Reflects Emotion Regulation: Evidence from Spanish

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Abstract

Cognitively reappraising a stressful situation—reinterpreting it to lessen its emotional impact—is effective for regulating negative emotions. When reappraising, English speakers engage in linguistic distancing, spontaneously using words that are more abstract or impersonal. Previous work showed that this pattern generalizes to Spanish but was equivocal as to whether Spanish-specific markers of psychological distance (e.g., “estar”—“to be” for temporary states) are signatures of successful emotion regulation for Spanish speakers. Here we revisited this possibility. Spanish-English bilinguals in majority Spanish-speaking countries ($N = 138$) transcribed their thoughts in each of their languages while responding naturally to negative images or reappraising them. Reappraisal increased the use of distance markers common to both languages as well as the use of “estar,” which was associated with reduced negative affect when reappraising. Our findings suggest that people distance their language in both cross-linguistically shared and language-specific ways when regulating their emotions.