Gujarati-English bilinguals’ responses to aurally presented emotional words

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Current evidence on the processing of emotional words in bilingual speakers’ first (L1) and second (L2) language suggests that early bilinguals and highly proficient speakers of L2 respond equally strongly to the emotional words in their L1 and L2 (e.g., Ferré et al., 2010). However, this evidence is based on studies using written words as stimuli. Given that spoken words may lead to stronger emotional responses than written words, the aim of the present study was to investigate the processing of emotional words in early, highly proficient bilinguals using a Stroop-like task where the words were presented aurally. The experiment was conducted with Gujarati-English bilinguals who had started learning both of their two languages early in life and reported speaking them with a high level of proficiency. They were presented with L1 (Gujarati) and L2 (English) positive, negative and neutral words, which were spoken either in a male or a female voice. The participants were instructed to identify whether the words were pronounced in a male or female voice as quickly and accurately as possible while ignoring the meanings of the words. The responses were given manually by pressing one of two keys. After the experiment participants were also asked to complete a language history questionnaire and to rate the word stimuli in respect to their perceived familiarity and personal relevance. The results showed significantly slower RTs in response to positive and negative words when compared to neutral words in both L1 and L2, but the interference effect to negative words was found to be reduced in the bilinguals’ L1 (Gujarati) when compared to L2 (English). Furthermore, the word ratings showed that the participants perceived L2 words overall as more familiar and personally relevant than L1 words, but these differences were not specific to negative words. The key novel contribution of the study was to provide evidence of reduced emotional impact of early bilinguals’ L1 when the speakers live in the L2 environment. The language history data and ratings of the stimuli suggest that the effect observed was due to L2 dominance leading to stronger emotionality effects in that language.