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Linguistic shifts and emotion regulation across languages: The case of Spanish "estar"

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Abstract

When using cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotions, English speakers shift their language to be more psychologically distant (e.g., using "I" less often) and more abstract (e.g., using more words for categories). For Spanish speakers, successful emotion regulation has been linked to increased use of "estar," the temporary form of "to be." Does "estar" track psychological distance, abstractness, or some other perspective shift? We reanalyzed published data from Spanish-English bilinguals who transcribed their thoughts while responding naturally to negative images or reappraising them. We found that (a) using "estar" was negatively correlated with using both distant and abstract language, and (b) increased use of "estar" when reappraising predicted reappraisal success, even when controlling for shifts in distancing and abstractness. These results suggest that "estar" may be a unique linguistic marker of successful regulation. Perhaps by framing a situation as transient, this Spanish-specific regulation tool may make negative emotions more bearable.

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