

Face Recognition and Bilingual Lexical Access: Viewing familiarized faces primes performance in a Spanish-English language-selection task

Studies of language activation in bilinguals have focused mainly on priming language with stimuli tied to specific linguistic forms, e.g., text, speech, or images to be named. This overlooks the potential of non-linguistic context to prime language. Given previous research suggesting that face recognition is innate, subconscious, automatic, and domain-specific, faces may have a privileged role in activating language. This study used flashing images of familiarized faces (associated with either English or Spanish in an experimental context) as primes for a language decision task in a group of English native speakers with advanced Spanish proficiency. Congruence between the language of the face primes and the words had a significant effect on response times for English words but not for Spanish words. This result suggests that non-linguistic stimuli that typically co-occur with a specific language may modulate access to that language in bilinguals, but that this effect depends nativelike language proficiency.