

Language Shapes Blame and Victimhood in Bilinguals' Autobiographical Memory

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Abstract

To what extent does language shape what we remember about ourselves? The present study tests whether Spanish-English bilinguals recall different types of information when using each language to reflect on accidents in their past. Participants wrote paragraphs describing two accidental events in which they were involved, one from childhood and one from adulthood. Afterward, they assessed their share of blame and victimhood for each of the accidents they described. All participants were balanced bilinguals and were randomly assigned to complete the task either in English or Spanish. When thinking in English, people recalled events in which they were equally likely to be the cause or the victim. Conversely, when thinking in Spanish, people were more likely to recall events in which they were the victim than events for which they were to blame. These findings inform our understanding of the role of language in shaping autobiographical memory for accidental events.