The impact of acquisition context on the affective perception of swear words

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Background

- Bilinguals report that their second language is less emotional
- Bis-dialects have different patterns of use for taboo words, but retain taboo understanding regardless of use
- Late Positive Component (LPC): Explicit, emotional processing

Research Question

Can the affective perception of words be influenced by the context in which they are acquired, even within L1?

Methods

- Materials: 30 American Taboo words (AT), 30 British Taboo words (BT), 30 negative words, 30 positive words, and 120 neutral words
- Norming studies: Native speakers of American English (N=63) and British English (N=63) participated in the norming of categories.

Methods: Stimuli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Native Dialect</th>
<th>American Taboo</th>
<th>British Taboo</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>slut</td>
<td>wanker</td>
<td>mangy</td>
<td>giggle</td>
<td>salute</td>
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<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>Valence</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Arousal</td>
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<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Behavioral Results

Overall, BT words had lower accuracy and slower RTs than all other conditions. AT and positive words had the highest accuracy, however only positive words showed facilitation in RTs.

ERP Results

RM-ANOVA of resulting ERPs showed that American taboo words showed an increased amplitude of the late positive complex (LPC) as compared to all other categories of words. British taboo words did not differ significantly from any category of non-taboo words.

Discussion and Conclusions

- Social context is required to acquire a complete understanding of a word and alters the affective perception of said word.
- Contextual interaction matters for word learning
  - While taboo words from the native dialect showed differences in later, explicit language processing, words from the non-native dialect that were still considered taboo showed no difference in processing from non-taboo words.
  - That is, despite knowing that the word wanker is offensive, speakers of American English do not process it the same way as a word like asshole
  - Similarities in N400 confirm that despite being non-native BT words are still processed as words.

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