A Bilinguals’ Second Language Is More Emotionally Distant Than Their First: Articles Review

Psychologists have investigated whether a bilinguals’ second language is more emotionally distant than their first. ‘Emotionally distant’ can be defined as the absence of an arousal or characterized intense feeling to a source. The processing of emotion is primarily in the limbic system in an area known as the amygdala whereas language is subject to hemispheric lateralization as examined by Sperry (1968). It has been investigated that specific amygdaloid nuclei receive afferent information from and sends efferent information to the hippocampus and this connection allows memory to be processed in either short-term or long-term memory form based on the importance of the emotional source which is how language-emotion is mediated (Le Doux 1989 and Parrott and Schulkin 1983 as cited in Arlene Clachar, 1999). The question of whether individuals have personal involvement in their first language and a more emotionally detached involvement to their second language has been investigated by many scholars.

The study ‘Embarrassment and code-switching into a Second Language’ by Bond and Lai (1986) highlighted the significance of a bilingual avoiding discussing in their first language topics concerning embarrassing matters; thus, feeling more confident to discuss this in their second language. The experimental test consisted of 48 female undergraduate students whose second language was in English. They were told to attend university, they had to have good proficiency in English and therefore were informed that they will need to take part in an interview to assess their behaviour as a form of selection. In the standardized measure, students were told that they will be placed in pairs (one person being the interviewer and the second being the interviewee). The interviewer was instructed to ask questions that were written given on paper which was based on two embarrassing topics and two neutral topics that didn’t differ in knowledge or interest and enunciated in either English or Cantonese. This deduced any possibility of confounding variables affecting the hypothesis and therefore giving it greater external validity. In an attempt to control for the effects of order, the experiment was counterbalanced so half the pairs were asked the embarrassing questions first and the other half were asked the non-embarrassing questions first. The dependant variable was the avoidance in answering the questions which was measured by the operationalization of the amount of time in seconds the individual had spoken in each of the four topic questions. The results had shown that the undergraduate interviewees spent more time discussing embarrassing topics in their second language English than their first language and additionally spoke for a longer duration of time when they were asked the embarrassing questions after the non-embarrassing questions. In a post-interview questionnaire, they were asked which topic they spoke the most of and it was reported they acknowledged non-embarrassing topics far greater than the embarrassing topics communicated in their first language Cantonese. Therefore, these results appear to support the hypothesis and consequently show that bilinguals are initiated closely emotionally to their first language as they appear to avoid discussing embarrassing or upsetting subjects. Bond and Lai (1986) did state that less arousal is associated to a bilingual's second language and consequently they find it much easier to discuss embarrassing topics. This may be because individuals experience more anxiety if they discuss emotional or embarrassing topics in their first language, hence they code-switch to their second language to avoid an anxiety-provoking situation and so a bilinguals second language does serve as an emotional distant basis far greater than their first language. Evidence from a case of a Chinese student showed that he

wouldn’t allow himself to confess his sins to a priest in his native language but instead would be happy to do so in his second language (Kwok and Chan 1972 as cited in Bond and Lai, 1986). This supports the idea that a bilinguals' second language leads to more communication regarding strong feelings of emotion and allows them to address topics that would be too embarrassing to do so in their first language.

In another article called ‘Emotionality in Free Recall: Language Specificity in Bilingual Memory’ by Anooshian and Hertel (1994) showed that Spanish-English and English-Spanish bilinguals who had acquired their second language after the age of 8 had recalled more emotional words than neutral words in their native language. The experiment consisted of two groups of 36 people overall whose first language was in either English or Spanish. To avoid any confounding variables, the participants had a similar education level and age which ensured that there weren’t invalid results due to intellect and so the findings can be comprehended. Using a standardised measure, participants were instructed to rate a list of 36 words using a 7-point scale; half of the words were in English and the other half was in Spanish. Between the 18 words for each language, it was divided in 9 words each for emotional words and neutral words. The rating was based on how easy it was for them to articulate the word, the strength of emotion linked to the meaning of the word and its implied activity. Findings showed that ratings for emotion on emotional words, the mean proportion being 0.58 was recalled greater in the native language than the individual's second language, the mean proportion being 0.48 regardless of whether it was English or Spanish. Additionally, the ratings for emotion on neutral words was greater in the second language than their first. Consequently, this shows that individuals adhere to their first language and experience less arousal and stimulation emotionally which contradicts Bond and Lai’s findings and argues that bilinguals are emotionally more distant to their native language than their second language.

Although both articles are conflicting in their ideas about whether a bilingual individual serves an emotionally distant function to their second language than their first language, their study’s however can be challenged. The article by Bond and Lai (1996) only included a single culture of Chinese who have similar values, beliefs and patterns of behavior that reflects their identity so there is no universality in this, therefore this cannot be generalized and concluded that all bilinguals serve an emotionally distant function to their second language. Instead, it needs to employ the concept of derived etic where several emic investigations are needed to take place in other cultures using the same standardized procedures and instructions (Berry 1969). After this, we can draw a level of comparison and see whether their hypothesis was in fact accurate and a true representation of the world population of bilinguals based on cultural differences for their hypothesis to obtain good validity. As it remains, psychologists need to be mindful of the cultural relativism in their research and it may be that bilinguals do not in fact serve an emotionally distant basis to their second language and hence the results appear not to be valid. Additionally, the sample consisted of only females so therefore findings cannot be generalized to the male population. It may be that males don’t serve an emotionally distant function to their second language, thus there is beta bias in their experiment as it ignores and minimizes psychological differences between men and women based on physiological differences. Freud did state that ‘anatomy is destiny’ and so it is important to take into consideration of sex differences in research so there needs to be another study conducted with the same standardized methodology on men and so as it remains, their findings lacks validity. The second article by Anooshian and Hertel (1994) can be criticised because it cannot be acknowledged that their findings are a universal trait amongst all bilinguals without studying the effect on other bilingual languages in other cultures. Likewise, to Bond and Lai’s investigation, they also need

to employ derived etic as their study included a large Hispanic population in America so this ensures that cultural differences are considered (Berry 1964). Additionally, the variables under review that Anooshian and Hertel (1994) had used such as one emotional word being ‘bed’ may not be experienced in the same way in regard to sentiment or an intense feeling by all bilingual individuals whereas a neutral word they used such as ‘tree’ may be an emotional word to a bilingual individual from a different culture, for example, those that live in poverty and are in need of trees as a source of food in order to survive.

In conclusion, the question of whether bilinguals serve an emotionally distant function to their second language is debatable. Due to invalid findings and biases in the investigations by Bond and Lai and Anooshian and Hertel, it is difficult to assess the result. It could appear that the emotionality function level is based on your gender, age, and culture that you belong to and this can influence which language you have more of personal involvement to or which language you direct too based on your emotions and feelings in a given context. If you are in a social context with your friends at school where the main language spoken is English, you’ll find that you direct to this language more than your first language of Bengali for instance. Therefore, whether bilinguals serve an emotional distant basis to their second language depends on various circumstances and so isn’t a global generalization to all bilinguals.