

How Do Bilingual People Avoid Falling for Tricky Words?

Abstract

Speaking feels effortless, but the brain performs many steps before a word comes out. For bilingual people, both languages can be active at once. This can cause difficulty when words look or sound alike but have different meanings. For example, Spanish pluma means "feather," but resembles English plum. We studied how Spanish-English bilingual people responded to such tricky words and whether language dominance influenced their performance.

How Does the Brain Juggle Two Languages?

When you see an apple, your brain activates related ideas, considers possible words, selects apple, and organizes the sounds needed to say it.

For bilingual people, both languages take part in this process. They do not simply switch one language off while using the other. Instead, both remain active, a process called parallel activation. A Spanish-English bilingual person may activate both apple and manzana.

Bilingual people manage competition between their languages through inhibitory control, which reduces the influence of the language they do not intend to use. Like bicycle brakes, this control makes selecting the correct word easier.

Which Words Are Tricky?

Some word pairs make bilingual speech easier. Cognates look and sound similar across languages and share a meaning, such as chocolate in English and Spanish. They are usually easier to name than non-cognates, such as apple and manzana, whose forms differ.

False cognates are harder because they look or sound similar but have different meanings. English plum resembles Spanish pluma, meaning "feather." French librairie means "bookstore," not "library," and Spanish embarazada means "pregnant," not "embarrassed." Their similar forms activate conflicting meanings.

Cognates are generally easiest to process, non-cognates are less helpful but not misleading, and false cognates are often hardest because their forms overlap while their meanings conflict.

How Did We Study Bilingual Speakers?

Bilingual people differ in when and how they learned each language, how often they use it, and how skilled they are. We focused on language dominance: the degree to which one language is stronger than the other.

We estimated language dominance from participants' daily exposure to Spanish and English, their self-rated skills, and their picture-naming performance. These measures placed each participant on a continuum from more English-dominant to more Spanish-dominant.

Participants named pictures in Spanish while ignoring a word printed over each image. The word was a false cognate related to the English name, an unrelated word, or the correct Spanish name. We measured speed and accuracy.

What Did We Find?

Participants showed crosslinguistic interference: they were slower and made more errors with false cognates than with unrelated words. The misleading connection between the languages made naming harder.

They also showed identity facilitation: when the printed word was the correct Spanish name, they responded faster and made fewer errors.

Language dominance mattered too. More English-dominant participants benefited more from seeing the correct Spanish word, perhaps because those with weaker Spanish relied more on the printed name.

What Do These Results Tell Us?

The findings show that bilingual people's languages interact even when they intend to use only one. False cognates slow word selection, while matching words help. Differences in language experience and dominance also affect performance.

Bilingual speakers are skilled at managing their languages, but tricky words reveal the competition behind the scenes. Studying this process helps researchers understand how experience shapes speech and how the brain controls more than one language.

Glossary

Bilingual: A person who knows and uses two languages.

Parallel Activation: The simultaneous activation of a bilingual person's languages.

Inhibitory Control: The process of reducing the influence of the language a speaker does not intend to use.

Cognates: Words that look and sound similar across languages and share the same meaning.

Non-cognates: Words that share a meaning but look and sound different across languages.

False Cognates: Words that look or sound similar across languages but have different meanings.

Crosslinguistic Interference: When knowledge of one language makes using another language more difficult.

Identity Facilitation: The benefit of seeing the correct name of a picture while naming it.

Source: Adapted and shortened only from Gálvez-McDonough et al. (2026), "How Do Bilingual People Avoid Falling for Tricky Words?", *Frontiers for Young Minds*, doi: 10.3389/frym.2026.1611962.

Questions:

1. What is the main purpose of the text?

- A. To compare language-learning methods used by bilingual speakers
- B. To examine how competing words affect bilingual language processing
- C. To explain why bilingual speakers frequently confuse their languages
- D. To identify the best age for learning a second language

2. Why is inhibitory control compared to bicycle brakes?

- A. Both prevent a person from responding too quickly
- B. Both reduce an unwanted influence without stopping the process
- C. Both become stronger through repeated physical practice
- D. Both allow two systems to operate at the same speed

3. In the sentence “These measures placed each participant on a continuum,” what does “continuum” most nearly mean?

- A. A division into two fixed language groups
- B. A scale ranging between two degrees of dominance
- C. A test measuring the speed of language learning
- D. A sequence showing when each language was learned

4. Why did the experiment include unrelated printed words?

- A. To provide a comparison for the effects of false cognates
- B. To determine which language participants learned first
- C. To improve the participants’ accuracy during picture naming
- D. To measure familiarity with the objects in the pictures

5. Which conclusion is best supported by the study?

- A. Bilingual speakers completely separate their languages while speaking
- B. Language interaction occurs only when speakers make an obvious error
- C. Word selection is influenced by both languages and language experience
- D. Language dominance determines which words a speaker can understand

Answer key: 1–B, 2–B, 3–B, 4–A, 5–C.