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Assessment of stuttering in a familiar versus an unfamiliar language

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Abstract

The present study investigated how well individuals knowledgeable about stuttering are able to make disfluency judgments in clients who speak another language than their own. Fourteen native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese identified and judged stuttering in Dutch speakers and in Portuguese speakers. Fourteen native speakers of Dutch identified and judged stuttering in Brazilian Portuguese speakers and in Dutch speakers. It was found that judges can make similar level of judgment in a native and a foreign language, and that native and foreign judges can make similar level of judgment irrespective of native/foreign differences. It was also found, however, that the Dutch judges performed significantly better in identifying native stutterers than foreign stutterers. And for the identification of nonstutterers, both panels performed better in their native language than in the foreign language, and in their native language they both performed better than the other panel. Both the Brazilian Portuguese and the Dutch speaking panel were generally also less confident, and found identification of stuttering more difficult in the foreign language than in the native language. In addition, when asked for the characteristics that helped them identify stutterers, they provided more detail in the native language than in the foreign language. Also a number of differences were found between the two panels which may be due to differences in training or cultural background. The implications of the findings for clinical practice and for future research in this area are discussed.

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Educational objectives: The reader will be able to: (1) describe how language influences the identification of a speech disorder such as stuttering, and (2) list, and (3) define behaviors that help to identify stuttering in a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Although stuttering is a disorder that has been known for ages and is recognized worldwide as one of the major human communication disorders (Wingate, 1997), the identification of stuttering is not always straightforward. Studies by Curlee (1981), Kully and Boberg (1988), and Ingham and Cordes (1997) have shown that even trained professionals often do not agree when they have to identify stuttering disfluencies in speech samples.

The problem of identifying stuttering may conceivably be even more difficult when a client speaks a language that is different from the clinician's native language. Due to an increased mobility in the world more and more speech-language pathologists are faced with the task of assessing clients who speak a language which is not their own. It is, moreover, a fact that many clinicians do not master more than one language. In the United States, for instance, less than one percent of clinically certified speech-language pathologists speak more than one language fluently (Holliday, 2001). Watson and Kayser (1994) suggested that if the client is a severe stutterer, identifying stuttering may not be so difficult. In such cases, clinicians will often observe excessive tension and secondary behaviors without difficulty even though the language is unfamiliar. As Finn and Cordes (1997) pointed out, however, there is a lack of empirical evidence concerning whether or how well clinicians are able to make reliable and valid judgments about the presence of stuttering in languages or dialects other than their own. Recently, Humphrey (2004) examined whether bilingual English–Spanish speaking judges are better at making disfluency judgments in Spanish than monolingual English-speaking judges and found that familiarity with Spanish made no significant difference when judging disfluencies in Spanish. He also acknowledged, however, that this result might have been less likely in an area with different demographics. The study was conducted in South Florida and as such it is fairly likely that the monolingual English-speaking judges yet developed some familiarity with certain features of Spanish, even though they did not understand or speak the language.

The present paper reports a study that was designed to further investigate how well individuals knowledgeable about stuttering are able to distinguish between stutterers and nonstutterers in a language which they have not mastered, how they judge the severity of stuttering in clients who speak another language than their own, and which factors influence the identification of stuttering in a language one is not familiar with.

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