

# Can home-culture images impair second-language skills?

June 26 2013

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A newly transferred associate from the Shanghai office nails his presentation to Mr. Smith from Chicago but stumbles in his pitch to Mr. Chen from San Francisco. A visiting professor from Taiwan lectures fluently about a slide of a Grecian urn, but falters and struggles to recall the word "translucent" when discussing a Ming vase. What is it about seeing a Chinese face or even a Chinese vase that can disrupt a Chinese immigrant's fluency in English?

Research on how cultural knowledge operates in the mind increasingly focuses on the dynamics through which our cultural frames are evoked by particular situations. One dynamic is "frame-switching"—the shifts in judgment that bicultural individuals make as they move between settings governed by different cultural norms. A new immigrant may speak Chinese at home, for example, but will speak English and adopt Western mannerisms when in school.

As new research from Columbia Business School Professor Michael Morris and Postdoctoral Research Scholar Shu Zhang shows, the automaticity of frame-switching means that it sometimes interferes with—rather than helps—our performance. Specifically, it can disrupt performance in a second [language](#).

A team of researchers under Morris's lead ran a series of experiments in the Columbia Business School Behavioral Research Laboratory to explore this disruption in more detail. In the first experiment, which simulated a conference call, they found that Chinese immigrants speak

English less fluently when speaking to a Chinese versus a Caucasian face. The second found the same effect from exposure to images of Chinese culture such as a Buddha statue or the Great Wall, versus of American culture, such as the Statue of Liberty or Mount Rushmore.

To test that primes cause Chinese-language concepts to interfere with English-language processing, several experiments used naming tasks. Chinese immigrants exposed to visual icons of Chinese culture became more likely to name pictured objects with literal translations from Chinese (e.g. labeling pistachios as "happy nuts" or a bulldozer as an "earth moving machine"). Another experiment found that Chinese cultural priming evoked resulted in faster recognition of these literal translations, indicating heightened cognitive accessibility.

The results were published this month in *PNAS*, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The study builds on Morris's decade of research on the cognitive dynamics that enable people to operate effectively in multiple cultures. Cultural knowledge can be thought of as lenses for interpreting events and scripts for guiding actions. "Our cultural lenses and scripts activate automatically in response to cultural cues in the setting—sights, sounds, and even aromas that are highly associated with a given cultural tradition," he says. "But in culturally complex or mixed settings, this cultural chameleon-like response doesn't always serve us well."

In related projects, Morris has identified priming effects on social behaviors that differ between East Asian and Western cultures, such as modesty versus self-enhancement in taking credit for projects. Priming that induces East Asian immigrants to speak less fluently and behave less "Western" can hinder their promotion. Knowing how cultural cues in a setting affect people is important for firms seeking to develop their managerial talent.

**More information:** The paper, Heritage-Culture Images Disrupt Immigrants' Second-Language Processing Through Triggering First-Language Interference, was authored by Michael Morris, the Chavkin-Chang Professor of Leadership at Columbia Business School, and researchers Shu Zhang, Chi-Ying Cheng, and Andy Yap.

Provided by Columbia Business School

Citation: Can home-culture images impair second-language skills? (2013, June 26) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-06-home-culture-images-impair-second-language-skills.html>

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