Does linguistic identity influence social attention? It depends on the status of the language

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Eye-gaze stimuli can elicit orienting of attention in an observer, a phenomenon known as gaze- cueing of attention[1]. Recent evidence has shown that social factors modulate this phenomenon[2]. At the same time, recent evidence indicates that language is a critical cue for social categorization[3]. Here, we explore the role on categorization based on languages of different social status on the gaze-cueing effect. Italian native participants were first familiarized with 8 Caucasian faces together with auditory sentences. Half of faces were associated with the participant native language (Italian) and the other half with an unknown language (Albanian, Exp.1, N=48) and Basque (Exp.2, N=48) (faces were counterbalanced across languages). Participants performed then a gaze-cueing task (i.e., discriminate a target located in congruent or incongruent positions according to gaze direction) using the faces as cueing stimuli. In a last phase, the auditory sentences were presented again, and participants decided which face uttered each sentence. Results indicated that participants were more likely to confuse faces from the same language category than from the other language category, replicating the role of language in social categorization. In addition, results revealed a greater gaze-cueing effect for 'Italian' faces versus 'Albanian' faces (Exp.1), while similar gaze-cueing effects were observed between 'Italian' and 'Basque' faces (Exp.2), suggesting that differences in social status ascribed to the two unknown languages may modulate the gaze-cueing effect. Our findings revealed the impact of language as a social cue on the gaze-cueing effect, suggesting that social attention is sensitive to the language of our interlocutors.

References

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