

# The Language of Fairness: how Cross-Linguistic Norms in Spanish and English Influence Reactions to Unfair Treatment

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## Resumen

We integrate recent findings from the linguistics literature with the organizational justice literature to examine how the language used to encode justice violations influences fairness perceptions. The study focused on the use of non-agentive syntax to encode mistakes in Spanish ("The vase was broken") versus using agentive syntax in English ("She broke the vase") influences event fairness perceptions. We hypothesized that when justice violations are encoded using Spanish, because the non-agentive syntax makes the responsible party less salient, the event would be perceived as less unfair. In Study 1 ( $n = 111$ ), English-speaking participants rated the fairness of an event in which a mistake was made and an employee received a negative outcome. They rated it as more unfair ( $p < .01, \eta(2) = .06$ ) when the scenario was presented in agentive syntax. Experiment 2 ( $n = 70$ ) used native English- and Spanish-speakers who watched a video of manager making a mistake. We found that Spanish-speakers used less agentive syntax ( $p < .01, \eta(2) = .21$ ), perceived the event as less unfair ( $p < .001, \eta(2) = .23$ ), and were more willing to help the manager who made the mistake. In Experiment 3 ( $n = 101$ ) we replicated this effect controlling for cross-cultural differences and native language; further, we found an interaction between entity fairness (event vs. entity) and native language (Spanish vs. English) on citizenship intentions ( $p < .01, \eta(2) = .08$ ). These results extend our understanding of how language may influence relevant workplace attitudes.

## Palabras clave

**Palabras clave de autor:** [agentive syntax](#); [cross-linguistic differences](#); [fairness](#); [organizational justice](#); [perception](#)

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