Examining the relationship between language divergence and word-of-mouth intentions ☆

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A B S T R A C T

More than half of the countries in the world are multilingual, and more than half the world's consumers speak more than one language. Thus, bilingual consumers often receive services provided in a second or nonnative language. This article examines these consumers' word-of-mouth intentions after a service provision in a second language. Two studies show that consumers served in a second language are less likely to spread positive word of mouth. The results also reveal a negative halo effect, such that consumers served in a second language perceive the service provider as less responsive in general. Furthermore, the service provider's perceived responsiveness appears far more important for determining positive word-of-mouth intentions than other factors, such as service reliability. This study therefore contributes to the fields of service and sociolinguistics, with important implications for managers as well.

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If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen [then you must speak German].
[—Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt]

1. Introduction

Despite this recommendation, in interactions between buyers and sellers with different native languages, consumers may not always be able to use their native language (Callahan, 2006; Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007). This is a problem that is particularly prevalent in countries with more than one official language as well as in spreading international contexts due to increased globalization and tourism (Duchêne, 2009). Marketing research has started considering the role of language in services, and recent contributions offer a conceptual model of how language influences service encounters (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012) and an analysis of consumers' perceptions of receiving service in native languages (Holmqvist, 2011). Yet to date, no empirical research examines consumer reactions to being served in a second language, nor

does prior research provide potential explanations for why consumers might react differently to service in native or second languages.

The present article seeks to address these gaps by examining the impact of language convergence and divergence on word-of-mouth intentions. Language convergence occurs when a speaker accommodates an interlocutor by speaking the latter's language, and implies that one party of a bilingual conversation insists on speaking his or her first language. In this situation, the interlocutor must switch away from his or her native language (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973). For example, if a native French-speaking Canadian provides service to a native English-speaking consumer and does so in English, that service provider converges to the consumer's native language. If this service provider instead serves the consumer in French, the service provider diverges from the consumer's language. Such language convergence or divergence likely influences consumers' word-of-mouth intentions, because effective communication during a service encounter has a particularly strong influence on word-of-mouth communication (Harrisson-Walker, 2001). In addition, unfavorable experiences during service encounters make consumers less likely to recommend the service provider to other people (Choi & Mattila, 2008). Word-of-mouth intentions also constitute a central measure of customer evaluations of service encounters, which Reichheld (2003) even calls the most important metric.

With this analysis, the present manuscript offers two main contributions to marketing literature. First, this study provides the first empirical demonstration that consumers who receive service in a second language are less likely to spread positive word of mouth about the service provider. By showing that language divergence can influence intentions,

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this article also validates parts of Holmqvist and Grönroos's (2012) framework and specifies that in markets that contain different language groups, service in a second language may have a negative influence on consumers' intentions to recommend the service provider to others.

Second, this study offers a potential explanation of how language divergence relates to word-of-mouth intentions. Using speech accommodation theory and the similarity attraction paradigm as theoretical anchors, this research suggests that consumers who receive service in a second language engage in a negative halo effect: If the service provider appears to be making insufficient efforts to provide service in their native language, consumers also perceive the service provider as less responsive in general. That is, consumers who receive service in their second language believe that the service provider is less attentive and helpful in general.

The next section reviews literature on the role of language in service encounters and formulates the study hypotheses. Next, this article describes the method and principal results of two studies. The concluding section offers a discussion of the findings, some managerial implications, and limitations of this research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. The role of language in the service encounter

Service encounters are at the core of services as dyadic interactions between consumers and service providers (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). To deliver service, a service provider must understand what consumers need and consumers need to explain their preferences. The recent focus on value cocreation further emphasizes the importance of this dyadic interaction (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In this dialogical process (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006), service providers' and consumers' processes merge into an interactive process in which both actors play active roles (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). Service providers and consumers also must engage in verbal communication to communicate expectations and requests (Oliver, 2006). However, few studies examine service encounters from a communication perspective (Echeverri & Skalén, 2011). Previous studies examine the extent, frequency, or quality of information that salespersons or service providers provide (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007), the use of ceremonial, conventional, or commercial language (Otnes, Ilhan, & Kulkarni, 2012), the adoption of dialect (Mai & Hoffmann, 2011; Schau et al., 2007), and the use of accents (Hill & Tombs, 2011). Overall, these studies suggest that communication quality influences consumers' perceptions of the service provider.

While these studies enhance the understanding of the role of language in service encounters, all current studies focus on a setting where the consumer and the service provider speak the same language. Yet in the modern global world, countries with only one official language are fewer than multilingual countries (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). Service encounters might be more complex if the consumer and service provider do not speak the same language. Sociolinguistic research indicates that the most powerful party in a conversation expects the other party to converge to their language (Callahan, 2006). The consumer is often the most powerful party in a service encounter (Grönroos, 2008), consumers consequently may expect to be served in their native language. In addition, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) suggest that consumers who are served in their second language on a bilingual market might attribute this event to the service provider's unwillingness to speak their native language, rather than service provider's inability to speak their language. Owing to this situation, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) emphasize the need for more research into how language influences service encounters. This study examines (i) whether language differences between customers and service providers during service encounters might influence word-of-mouth intentions, and (ii) whether consumer perceptions of the service provider's unwillingness to serve them in their native language extend

to less favorable perceptions of the service provider's overall perceived responsiveness. The current study examines this relationship empirically, building on insights from speech accommodation theory.

2.2. Speech accommodation theory as a theoretical anchor

Interpersonal interactions without a shared native language appear commonly in sociolinguistic and social psychological research, as conceptualized in speech accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1973). Speech accommodation occurs when a speaker adapts his or her speech to approximate the speech of an interlocutor, in the form of minor adjustments, such as adapting speech rates, pauses, or pronunciation, or more drastically, such as switching language (Callahan, 2006). In addition to being particularly important in the context of bilingual countries or regions, where interactions with speakers of different languages are common, speech accommodation can influence any encounter that involves native speakers of two different languages.

Several studies note people's reactions to language convergence or divergence and show that even a minor speech divergence yields negative effects. For example, Kelly and Toshiyuki (1993) consider whether people have more negative feelings toward speakers whose voice volume differs from their own, finding that respondents produce less affective warmth toward and feel less persuaded by speakers whose speech volume is higher rather than similar. That is, people develop less favorable impressions of speakers who diverge rather than converge. Genesee and Bourhis (1982) present respondents with constructed conversations, in which the speakers either converge with the respondents' native language or do not. The results indicate that more negative evaluations result when the speakers diverge (speak respondents' second language) rather than converge (speak the respondents' native language). Yet no prior literature demonstrates whether language divergence have a negative influence on consumers' willingness to spread positive word of mouth.

Sociolinguistics researchers often rely on the similarity attraction paradigm to explain why language convergence leads to favorable responses and language divergence leads to unfavorable responses (Giles et al., 1991). This paradigm (Byrne, 1997) suggests that as two people become more similar to each other, the increased similarity increases the chances that each person likes the other (Montoya & Horton, 2013). Increased similarity also can induce people to spread positive word of mouth. For example, Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst (2005) show that the more similar customers' and retailers' identities, the more positive word of mouth the customers spread. Zhang and Bloemer (2008) also note that similar values between customers and service providers lead customers to spread more positive word of mouth.

Communication and language might serve as a source of similarity (Montoya & Briggs, 2013). Sunnafrank and Miller (1981) observe that people feel attracted to others with whom they can communicate well. In a language context, attraction results from lowered language differences, such that the speaker becomes more similar to the listener (Koslow, Shamdasani, & Touchstone, 1994; Montoya & Briggs, 2013). Therefore, the language that service providers use might serve as a source of similarity, and when consumers and service providers are more similar, consumers are more likely to spread positive word of mouth.

H1. Consumers who receive service in a second language during service encounters express lower positive word-of-mouth intentions than consumers who receive service in a native language.

2.3. Mediating role of perceived employee responsiveness

Speech accommodation literature proposes that the perceived amount of effort exerted by a speaker drives the negative effects of language divergence. Listeners who do not hear their native language perceive that the speaker fails to exert enough effort or show sufficient