



How Hispanic bilinguals' cultural stereotypes shape advertising persuasiveness



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ABSTRACT

Given the size of the Hispanic bilingual market in the United States, it is important to understand the relative effectiveness of using English versus Spanish when advertising to these consumers. This research proposes that Hispanic bilinguals' cultural stereotypes about the users of Spanish living in America are a potent determinant of which language is most effective in advertising. Depending on the favorableness of these cultural stereotypes, our results show that Spanish may be persuasively superior, inferior, or functionally equivalent to English in creating favorable attitudes toward the advertised product. The uniqueness of cultural stereotypes about Spanish users in shaping the influence of an ad's language is underscored by our findings that cultural stereotypes about English users do not exert similar effects in determining the relative persuasiveness of advertising in English or Spanish. The paper offers suggestions for advertising practice and future research.

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1. Introduction

America is in the midst of a cultural and ethnic transformation. Certainly one of the strongest driving forces behind this transformation has been the influx of individuals born outside of the U.S., many of whom speak a language other than English. Of particular interest to this investigation are the millions of Hispanic bilingual consumers that communicate in both their language of origin and the dominant language of the country in which they currently reside. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau \(2015\)](#), 55 million Americans are of Hispanic or Latino origin and more than 38 million of them use Spanish when at home. An important consideration for companies targeting Hispanic bilinguals, then, is whether advertising effectiveness might depend on the language used when making contact with these consumers.

So what does existing research say to those that advertise to Hispanic bilinguals about the persuasive implications of using Spanish versus English ad language? It depends on who is doing the talking. Some say English is more effective ([Koslow, Shamdasani, & Touchstone, 1994](#)), others maintain just the opposite ([Roslow & Nicholls, 1996](#)), and some report ad language is inconsequential to the

attitudes created about the advertised product ([Noriega & Blair, 2008](#)). Then there are those who articulate a contingency view in which either language may be most persuasive depending on certain ad features ([Carroll & Luna, 2011](#)) or individual differences such as a person's level of acculturation ([Ueltschy & Krampf, 1997](#)) or generational status ([Chapa & Becerra, 2014](#)).

This investigation echoes each of these voices in that the use of Spanish ad language may enhance persuasion, reduce it, or have no effect relative to the same ad in English. It does so by advancing a contingency perspective emphasizing the moderating role played by an individual difference previously unconsidered in the literature on advertising to bilingual Hispanics, cultural stereotypes. Cultural stereotypes represent a person's perception of societal opinions about a particular social group ([Devine, 1989](#)). Of particular interest here is the favorability of Hispanic bilinguals' cultural stereotypes about how Americans generally view users of the Spanish language and how these stereotypes shape the persuasive impact of Spanish versus English ad language. The perspective proposed by this research prescribes how and when these cultural stereotypes will influence whether Spanish ad language is persuasively inferior, superior, or equivalent to its English counterpart. The findings of three studies document these predictable changes in the relative effectiveness of an ad's language on Hispanic bilinguals' attitudes toward the advertised product. As such, they offer guidance to advertisers in tailoring the language used in their messages targeting the Hispanic bilingual market.

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The paper unfolds as follows. It begins by describing an often adopted conceptualization of ad language effects, followed by the proposed perspective and the hypotheses it suggests. Three studies evaluating these hypotheses are then presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of research limitations, implications for advertising practice, and suggestions for future efforts.

2. Conceptualizing ad language effects and research hypotheses

An often advanced conceptualization on language effects is grounded in Grosjean's (1982) analysis of a language's majority/minority status in a multilingual society (e.g., Carroll & Luna, 2011; Koslow et al., 1994; Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008; Luna & Peracchio, 2001; Luna & Peracchio, 2005a, 2005b). Because users of the majority language typically hold the society's economic, cultural, and political power, this language majority is expected to be linked to more favorable associations than those attached to the language spoken by any of the minorities. By virtue of English's more favorable associations in this country, ads using this language should produce attitudes toward the ad and advertised product that are more favorable than if they employed Spanish. A very similar view can be found in the literature on ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1987).

Although such views of a language's majority/minority status may accurately characterize the mindset of many within a society, it may not do so for all of its members. Ultimately, macro-level factors such as a language's societal status are influential because of how individuals respond to them and their responses need not be universal in nature. Given that half of Hispanics report being discriminated against because of their ethnicity (Krogstad & Lopez, 2016), expectations of Spanish being tainted by its minority status seem likely to hold for many, but perhaps not all, Hispanics. Indeed, some may believe that society embraces diversity and is respectful of other cultures coexisting with its own. This view may be quite prevalent among those that are bicultural (Alvarez, Dickson, & Hunter, 2014; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Ramirez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martinez, Potter, and Pennebaker, 2006; Ueltschy & Krampf, 1997). Thus, some Hispanic bilinguals may not perceive Spanish and its users as being regarded negatively by American society. For these individuals, it would be inappropriate to presume a persuasive edge for the majority language.

The proposed conceptualization of ad language effects emphasizes a language's associations as well as their potential to influence consumers' responses to an ad depending on their accessibility during ad processing. Accessibility represents the likelihood that a judgmental input stored in memory is retrieved and available for use when rendering a judgment (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). The basic premise is that advertising utilizing Spanish may differ in its persuasiveness from that using English among Hispanic bilinguals because the use of Spanish enhances the accessibility of their ethnicity and those associations linked to the societal status of this ethnicity and its language. Although ethnicity is a permanent trait determined by one's ancestors, like any aspect of a person's self-identity, its level of accessibility is not constant. For example, when people describe themselves, they are more likely to mention their ethnicity when this trait is made more accessible by their environment (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). This temporary surge in the accessibility of a person's ethnicity has been referred to as ethnic salience (Grier and Deshpandé, 2001) and increases a person's responsiveness to ethnic-relevant stimuli (Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001).

That language serves as a potent cue of its user's social or ethnic identity (Grosjean, 1982) underscores its powerful connection to one's ethnicity. Spanish is strongly connected to Hispanics' ethnicity. The language employed by an ad is an environmental cue that enhances ethnic accessibility among users of the language. Processing an ad containing Spanish should temporarily increase the accessibility of both Hispanics' ethnicity and those associations attached to

this ethnic group and its language usage (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008). Of particular interest are associations indicative of the societal status of a language and its users. Cultural stereotypes (Alvarez, Taylor, & Gomez, 2016; Devine, 1989), representing a person's perception of societally endorsed views, seem particularly well suited for this purpose. In the present context, this would involve Hispanics' perceptions about how Spanish speakers residing in America are regarded by American society. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are advanced:

H1. Advertising in Spanish (versus English) increases bilingual Hispanics' ethnic salience.

H2. Advertising in Spanish (versus English) increases the accessibility of bilingual Hispanics' cultural stereotypes about how users of Spanish are viewed by American society.

Enhancing the accessibility of Hispanics' ethnicity and their cultural stereotypes is important because of the potential for these associations to influence their advertising responses. Conceptualizations of judgment formation such as Feldman and Lynch's (1988) accessibility-diagnostics perspective and Menon and Raghurir's (2003) mere-accessibility perspective emphasize the importance of a judgmental input's accessibility at the time of judgment. The impact of Hispanic bilinguals' cultural stereotypes becoming more accessible will, in turn, depend on their favorability. Specifically, for those holding negative cultural stereotypes about users of Spanish in America, employing Spanish in advertising should undermine its persuasiveness relative to its English counterpart. However, as these cultural stereotypes become less unfavorable, this disadvantage should start to diminish and, at some point along this continuum of favorability, disappear. If so, an ad's language should prove immaterial to the product attitudes generated by the ad. As we progress even further along the continuum to those cultural stereotypes of a highly positive nature, the associations attached to the users of Spanish should eventually become sufficiently favorable to produce a persuasion advantage for Spanish over English. These expectations are formalized as follows:

H3. Hispanic bilinguals' cultural stereotypes about users of the Spanish language moderate the relative persuasiveness of advertising in English or Spanish. Although English will outperform Spanish when these stereotypes are relatively negative, this advantage will disappear as stereotypes become relatively neutral and reverses (Spanish will outperform English) when these cultural stereotypes become relatively favorable.

Thus far the focus has been on associations tied to users of the Spanish language. Associations also exist for English language users. Hispanics will possess cultural stereotypes about those living in America that speak English. To the extent that cultural stereotypes about users of the English and Spanish languages are equally accessible and applicable to Hispanic bilinguals, they should exert similar moderating influences on ad language effects. Yet it seems unlikely they would be equally accessible and applicable. Advertising using Spanish should enhance the accessibility of Hispanics' ethnicity and, in so doing, their membership within this minority group in America. This, in turn, increases the accessibility of associations with this ethnic group, including cultural stereotypes about users of Spanish. In this country, English is linked to the majority, a group to which Hispanics do not belong. As such, advertising using English cannot enhance the accessibility of belonging to a group (and the group's associations) of which one is not a member. Moreover, because of their ethnicity, cultural stereotypes about users of Spanish are more personally relevant to Hispanics than those about users of English, causing the former to have a much greater frequency of activation that strengthens its accessibility. For these reasons, it is anticipated that, among minority members, cultural stereotypes about the majority and their language will be less accessible and applicable than those involving the minority and their language. This

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