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Language use in services: Recent advances and directions for future research

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ABSTRACT

While many service management and marketing concepts stress the importance of the interaction between a customer and a service provider, prior research devotes relatively little attention to the role of language use in services. This article describes the importance of broadening understanding of this issue and reviews prior research in this area. Next, this article introduces the articles in this special section. Although these articles individually and collectively contribute to a better understanding of the role of language use in services, we contend that much still needs to be learned. In order to assist researchers in their exploration of this topic, this article ends with a future research agenda that might inspire researchers to expand on the boundaries of knowledge on language use in services.

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1. Introduction

Try to imagine a service encounter between customers and employees, but in which none of them would be allowed to use any kind of language. This thought comes across as unnatural or even impossible, and hence all of our service marketing theories and models implicitly or explicitly assume a dominant role of language. Emerging logics such as service logic (Grönroos & Voima, 2013), service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) and customer-dominant logic (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015) all conceptualize an interaction between a customer and a service provider. Even in a world where self-service technology (e.g. Blut, Wang, & Schoefer, forthcoming) and smart services (e.g. Wunderlich, von Wangenheim, & Bitner, 2013) are gaining importance, language still represents an essential component (either implicit or explicit) in any interaction.

Despite its importance, research on the use of in services remains relatively scarce. Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) identifies a paradox: while the dyadic nature of service makes an understanding of language use far more important than in advertising or in product settings, the bulk of the research on language in marketing developed in the latter two areas. Globalization, in addition to the fact that many countries in the world are inherently multilingual, frequently cause customers and service

providers not to share the same native language (Comrie, 2011; Duchêne, 2009). Studies providing empirical examinations of consumers' language preferences in service encounters however are limited. These studies typically focus on outlining the situations in which customers expect to be served in their native language (e.g., Goethals, 2015, 2016; Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013), understanding customer reactions to being served with an accent (Mai & Hoffman, 2014; Wang, Arndt, Singh, Biernat, & Liu, 2013), or understanding customer reactions to language divergence, that is, being served in a second language (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013, 2014).

These studies focus explicitly on customer evaluations of spoken interactions during service encounters. While this represents an important focus on language in service research, we contend that this might represent a too narrow conceptualization of how language influences services in three ways. First, as Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) suggest, service providers need to manage language issues before, during, and after the customer engages in an interaction with the service provider. Given the increased focus on understanding and managing the customer experience across the entire customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), understanding how language influences customers' service experience across various touch points becomes imperative. Second, the current focus on spoken interactions might yield a too narrow set of language issues in services, as language can also refer to written language and body language, among others (Yule, 2014). Third, current research mainly focuses on customer reactions to language issues in services. Services, however, need to be managed as integrated systems in which employees and the organizational context also play a valuable role (Schneider & Bowen, 1995).

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Given the narrow scope of current research, with the support of former JBR Editor-in-Chief Arch G. Woodside and current editors Naveen Donthu and Anders Gustafsson, we initiated this special issue on the role of language use in service encounters. Our intention was to broaden the scope of research on language use in services, by stimulating researchers to examine this topic from different angles. After a rigorous review process, ten papers were selected for this special issue.

The remainder of this article reviews prior research on the role of language in services, discusses the recent advances made in this special issue, develops an integrative framework of language use in services, and concludes with an agenda for future research.

2. Prior research

Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) develop eleven propositions on how the language used by service providers might influence the customer. Several of these propositions have been tested empirically in the meantime, and new challenges have been proposed and tested. In this section, we provide an overview of how prior research on the topic developed.

The choice by the service provider to use, or not use, the consumers' primary language may have far-reaching consequences for how consumers perceive the service interaction as well as the service provider (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Extant marketing literature recognizes that services depend on interactions in which customers interact with firms (Grönroos, 1990; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987), and that these interactions strongly influence the service outcome as well as the customer's perceived service quality (Bitner, 1990; Grönroos, 2008). Despite this emphasis on the service interaction, there is relatively little research to date on how these interactions may change if the customer and the service personnel speak different languages (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). The late emergence of the field of language use in services is all the more surprising as more than half the countries in the world are multilingual, and more than half the consumers in the world speak more than one language (Luna & Peracchio, 2001).

The managerial implications of understanding language use in service contexts are far-reaching. The joint interaction with the customer is where the company can co-create value with its customers (Grönroos & Voima, 2013), rendering an understanding of this interaction of crucial importance for companies. However, the task of recruiting service personnel with required language competencies and running a multilingual workforce is an additional challenge for managers (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen, & Vesa, 2013).

2.1. The roles of language in service contexts

Languages are crucial for all communication, and their use extend far beyond serving merely as functional tools (Holmqvist, 2009). Customers attach a strong emotional value to their native language (Puntoni, de Langhe, & van Osselaer, 2009). For companies, understanding customer language preferences is multifaceted, as the case of English in international contexts goes to show. On the one hand, customers in non-Anglophone countries may still appreciate the use of English, as illustrated by Spielmann and Delvert (2014) and further developed by Kraak and Holmqvist (in this issue). On the other hand, attitudes may be more negative, with customers able to speak English, or a second language, fluently may outright refuse to take part in a service in that language (Holmqvist, 2011), or may display negative behavior if the company cannot provide service in the customer's desired language (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013, 2014).

Apart from the emotional attachment many customers have to their language, languages play additional roles. Research in branding shows that language use influences perceived brand authenticity (Salciuvieni, Ghauri, Streder, & de Mattos, 2010), but the question of how language use influences customer perceptions of services needs exploring. Adding to this complexity, some customers who are perfectly happy to change

language in certain services are strongly reluctant to change language in other services (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013). Language use in services is thus a complex issue that marketing research has only begun to untangle. The emerging field of research into language use in services aims at advancing the understanding language use from the consumer perspective, the employee perspective, as well as the managerial perspective.

3. Recent advances

The team of guest editors has the pleasure of introducing ten articles accepted for this special section in *Journal of Business Research*. These articles reflect different perspectives (customers, employees) and methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative), which individually and collectively expand our understanding of the role of language use in services. This section provides a brief overview of the articles accepted to this special section. Given our focus on managing language issues across the service experience, we discuss these contributions depending on whether they focus on language issues before, during, or after the service encounter.

3.1. Before the service encounter

Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) propose that the language used by the service provider will influence a consumer's decision to use the service. Three articles in this special section expand upon this proposition.

De Angelis, Tassiello, Amatulli, and Costabile (in this issue) analyze how the use of abstract (vs concrete) language in referrals from other customers influence the persuasiveness of these referrals. Addressing two different service contexts, financial consultancy and homeopathic remedies, the authors show that the use of either abstract or concrete language is not clear-cut, and the efficiency of each option will depend on how knowledgeable the prospective customers are about the service. Using abstract language in referrals appears more persuasive when the future customer already has a certain degree of knowledge about the service, and the authors further demonstrate that the reason for this effect is that customers already knowledgeable about the service are more prone to engage in mental imagery processing.

Looking further at how language can influence consumer decisions before the service, Zhang, Laroche, and Richard (in this issue) complement the findings of De Angelis et al. (in this issue) on abstract versus concrete language use by looking at the foundations of all language use, that is, the different word classes. Zhang and colleagues find that service communication using a larger proportion of nouns is more informative than communication relying more on verbs and adjectives. However, the authors identify differences between different languages. Studying consumers bilingual in English and Chinese, the authors find that the respondents tend to find service messages in English more informative, and further show that bilingual consumers tasked with describing a good service will rely more on nouns in English and more on verbs in Chinese. Finally, the authors show that this interaction of word classes and language has a positive impact on word-of-mouth, which may ultimately inspire other customers to use the service.

The research by Sundar, Dinsmore, Paik, and Kardes (in this issue) expands upon these perspectives by showing that not only verbal language might influence customers to use a service, but also outlining the role of visual language. Sundar and colleagues show that positioning the picture of a service provider at the bottom (versus top) of an advertisement increases (decreases) consumers' perception of power, which in turn influences customers' intentions to use the service. The authors also identify several boundary conditions: The visual metaphorical language effect on power occurs only for services visible for other customers, when customer self-presentational concerns are high, and for individuals with a high need for status. Combined, this study shows that service providers aiming to attract customers should design their messages carefully, not only by focusing on verbal language, but also on visual language.

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