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The linguistic servicescape: Speaking their language may not be enough

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Hispanic immigrants' reactions to linguistic servicescapes in retail banking in Southern California. This fertile area of enquiry combines the sociolinguistic theory of linguistic landscape with research into multilingual service encounters describing what happens in the retail servicescape before the service encounter which sets up expectations for what happens during the service encounter. This new term describes the use of language in and around a service encounter including signage and promotional materials as well as bilingual personnel. In multilingual areas such as Southern California where the use of a minority language is politically charged, effective encoding of symbolic language by the service provider is crucial for the success of a service encounter. The results of this study indicate that management's actual or perceived lack of sensitivity to appropriate linguistic symbols leads to both confusion and an attribution of discrimination towards the targeted ethnic group—even if none were intended. What is written or said in the service encounter is important, but this research illustrates that the context is also significant. The wider symbolic use of language is key in determining the success of service encounters.

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Recently Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) and Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) published broad appeals for more empirical studies on the use of languages in service encounters, particularly in multilingual areas. They identify two main reasons for this call-to-action. Although English is becoming more of a global lingua franca, the world is still exceedingly multilingual. Secondly, the nature of services means that language, as the medium of communication, can significantly impact how the customer perceives the service provider, and even the whole service encounter. Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012, 430) note:

Because communication quality in the interaction influences consumer perceptions of overall service quality, the use (or nonuse) of the consumer's native language is also likely to influence the consumer's assessment of the whole service [emphasis added].

It is not only the successful use of the customer's native language by the service provider which is important; service research should assess to what extent language shapes customers' experience. Use, non-use or misuse of the customer's native language by service providers can also influence the expected cultural sensitivity of the provider towards the customer. A lack of cultural sensitivity has been shown in other studies

to influence consumer satisfaction and loyalty towards the service provider (Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, & Grönroos, 2014; Sharma, Tam, & Kim, 2009; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014).

The service setting has been studied under the framework of servicescapes (Ezeh & Harris, 2007; Harris & Ezeh, 2008; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2013; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005), but the multilingual dimensions of this concept need more development. We focus on the sociolinguistic concept of the linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) and discuss this as a dimension of the retail servicescape. Accordingly, this paper examines the impact of the linguistic servicescape, the language used in and around a service encounter including signage and promotional materials as well as bilingual personnel, on ethnic minority customers' responses to the service encounter.

A sociolinguistics-based approach takes into account the rich area of language and semantics research which is presently lacking in systematic detail in service research. This area of enquiry considers language interactions as communication settings of either a symbolic nature to represent accommodation (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014) or as a method of communicating information efficiently. While all language can embody both symbolic and informational messages, this study differentiates between more informational and more symbolic types of communication. For example, retail signage often contains little information but sends an important signal about the importance of that language – and speakers of that language – to the customer. Bitner (1992) refers to these signs and symbols of the servicescape

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which Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) apply to ethnic consumers. However, other elements of the linguistic servicescape, like the availability of ethnic language brochures or service in the consumer's ethnic language, can have a more informational orientation. That is, under Bitner's (1992) classification the aspects are more akin to functionality of the servicescape.

The relevance of these two dimensions is that the effects are not independent. The symbolic elements of the linguistic servicescape may be more focused on social aspects of service, while informational elements deal with the functionality of the interactions that take place in a retail setting. Some retail managers mistakenly believe focusing on one or the other aspect of the linguistic servicescape is sufficient. However, this research concludes that all of the elements of the linguistic servicescape—that is, the signage, brochures and personal interactions of service providers which make up the physical environment, procedures, and participants of the services marketing mix need to be strategically planned.

If language use is not well planned, immigrant consumers dominant in an ethnic language (or even international tourists) may become confused during complex service encounters, and may in turn infer unintended meanings—possibly a lack of cultural understanding by the retailer or even discrimination or racism from the enterprise. This research carefully considers how retailers should use language in service encounters, but more importantly examines possible unintended consequences which may lead to poor consumer responses to the service provider. To study the dynamics of the linguistic landscape as part of a wider servicescape, our research focuses on Hispanic immigrant consumers and their interactions with banks in the United States.

1. Theoretical framework

To understand the impact of language on consumer responses, it is necessary to first review how language affects consumer behavior and to what extent language has been included in servicescape research. Later, the research framework of a linguistic servicescape is introduced in order to set the stage for research directions and propositions.

1.1. Hispanics in the United States and banking

With a US population of 53 million in 2012 (Brown, 2014), growing to 100 million by 2050, Hispanic immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America as well as Hispanic American customers are being targeted by retail banks as excellent growth prospects (Shanmuganathan, Stone, & Foss, 2004) with more than half of all US retail banking growth over the next two decades predicted to come from the Hispanic market (Ayers, Kiser, & Sanchez, 2004). Not only do the majority of Hispanic banking customers prefer to speak Spanish, but language barriers are a significant reason why many Hispanic immigrants decide to remain “unbanked” (Robbins & Contreras, 2013). This has prompted major public and private institutions such as the US Federal Reserve Bank, Bank of America and Charles Schwab to provide Spanish-language advertising campaigns as well as services like multi-ethnic branch staff, multilingual signage, specific Hispanic-targeted service products and even dedicated Spanish-oriented branches (Shanmuganathan et al., 2004).

1.2. Language and consumer behavior

Research in the area of consumer behavior provides insights into how factors like language and ethnicity can influence consumer evaluations and choices. Given the large and growing Hispanic population in the United States, research has focused mainly on how this language group responds to different language appeals in advertising.

This is a common problem throughout the consumer behavior and language literature: “Most research about bilingual consumers focus

on language use in situations without active consumer involvement, mainly bilingual advertising or text-processing” (Holmqvist et al., 2014: 951). Koslow, Shamdassani, and Touchstone (1994) report that Hispanics, whether immigrants or Hispanic Americans, feel positively towards retailers who use varying amounts of Spanish in advertising. Research by Chattaraman, Rudd, and Lennon (2009) and Chattaraman, Lennon, and Rudd (2010) on Hispanic consumers in the United States show that these consumers make higher aesthetic judgments and evaluate products more highly if the product has both language and cultural background cues. Dolinsky and Feinberg (1986) show in a study involving Hispanic- and non-Hispanic Americans that both groups become stressed and suffer overload when provided information in a non-native language. Information overload also occurs sooner in the Hispanics than in non-Hispanic Americans. Donthu and Cherian (1994) show that Spanish language usage by a retailer leads to ethnic identification with the retailer which influences shopping behavior of Hispanics based on the strength of their identification with that ethnic group. Research by Rosenbaum and Montoya (2006) suggests that ethnic consumers are more likely to be loyal to stores based on appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues including interacting with store employees of their same ethnic background (Rosenbaum & Walsh, 2011).

Brumbaugh and Rosa (2009) explain that subcultural groups may feel discriminated against in retail settings which may pass on to higher level behavioral effects. Language choice does appear to alter consumers' schemata or reference frames (e.g. Yorkston & de Mello, 2005), and for Hispanics this can be even more critical (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008). Holmqvist et al. (2014) report that multilingual consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language in Finland and Belgium varies for reasons such as the importance of the service encounter outcome, political considerations and second language proficiency. In general, there is a surprising gap in the research on language use in services which needs to be rectified (Holmqvist et al., 2014: 951).

1.3. Servicescapes and language

Servicescapes, or the physical environment where the service transaction takes place have been recognized as an important means by which marketing and organizational goals can be achieved for both employees and customers (Bitner, 1992) and are seen as an important predictor of service quality and behavioral intentions (Hooper et al., 2013; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). Servicescapes are also an important means by which social interactions take place between customers (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999). There is considerable agreement that cues in the servicescape are particularly important for some consumer groups such as those with disabilities (Baker, Holland, & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2007) and gay consumers (Rosenbaum, 2005). These cues make them feel welcomed or accepted by the service provider; the converse is also true that they may feel discriminated against. There is also research which shows servicescapes can help brand or create a feeling of “place-identity” where consumers may feel welcomed and that they belong (Hall, 2008).

What is clear from this research is that the nature of the servicescape can affect both cognitive and emotional outcomes for consumers (Wakefield, 1994) and that the perception of the servicescape means consumers make judgments about the providers' quality of service which subsequently forms a basis of expectations before any interaction with the provider takes place (Verhoeven, Van Rompay, & Pruyn, 2009; Vilnai-Yavetz & Gilboa, 2010; Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2006). The motivation for the current research is the paucity of existing studies investigating the linguistic servicescape: how language signage, the availability of other-language promotional materials, ethnicity of staff, language spoken by staff and other customers all combine to form an important aspect of a servicescape (Dailey, Giles, & Jansma, 2005; Holmqvist, 2011; Touchstone, Homer, & Koslow, 1999).

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