



## ¿Y Usted? Social influence effects on consumers' service language preferences



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### ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of consumer multilingualism requires service marketers to consider the impact of service language on service evaluations. While prior research shows that multilingual consumers prefer service in their native language, this research establishes the moderating role of social presence on the relationships between service language and service satisfaction. The current research demonstrates that minority and majority language speakers prefer service in the majority (vs. minority) language when their friend's native language is different from their own. This research also demonstrates the boundary conditions of this effect, including cultural symbolism and self-reward vs. other-directed consumption focus. These findings provide theoretical and managerial implications for service marketing.

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### 1. Introduction

The importance of language in marketing communications and service encounters is gaining attention among marketing scholars and practitioners alike. Globally, multilingual countries are more prevalent than those with a single official language (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). For example, Finland recognizes both Finnish and Swedish as official languages, and Canada has two official languages (English and French) (Holmqvist, 2011). Although the United States widely accepts English as the dominant language, 21% of Americans speak a language other than English at home (Nielsen, 2015). Such multilingual settings compel service marketers to strategically employ communications to address such linguistic varieties. For example, Target, a retail giant in the United States, adopts an inclusive approach to multilingualism through the firm's "Sin Traducción" campaign, which highlights Spanish words that are uniquely indicative of Hispanic culture (Rodriguez, 2015). Similarly, retailers including Ikea, JCPenney, and Home Depot offer Hispanic-designated stores in the U.S. where service staff and signage are bilingual (Cardona, 2005). While many firms accommodate linguistic diversity, the restaurant Geno's Steaks greets customers with a sign that reads: "This Is America. When Ordering Please Speak English" (Zucchini, 2006). Interestingly, Quebec shopping center Carrefour de L'Estrie encountered Canadian consumers' criticism for an advertisement featuring a song performed in English, despite the ad's French message (Lambie, 2015). These examples support

prior findings that service language is encoded with political, social, and emotional meaning (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013).

Given the importance of language in the marketplace, academic research is devoting systematic attention to the impact of language on consumer evaluations of advertising, branding, and packaging (Luna & Peracchio, 2005; Puzakova, Kwak, & Bell, 2015), as well as to language's role within service encounters (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012; Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013). Overall, prior research concludes that consumers are more likely to be satisfied, pay higher gratuities, and recommend a restaurant when service is in the consumer's native language (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013), as well as to prefer to communicate in their native language for high-involvement services (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013). However, prior research provides limited insights into the potential impact of social and environmental contextual factors on service language preferences. For instance, during a service encounter, can the presence of a friend who speaks a different native language than the focal customer shape the customer's response to service language? The current research investigates this question.

This study provides valuable theoretical and managerial contributions. The present research is the first to establish that social presence (i.e., a friend) has an important influence on the relationship between service language and service satisfaction. That is, the findings demonstrate that both minority and majority language speakers have less satisfaction with service in the minority language while they are with a friend who speaks a different native language. These findings complement prior research demonstrating that consumers evaluate services provided in their native language more positively when social presence is not taken into consideration (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Van

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Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013). This work builds on research showing that a complex mix of environmental, social, and psychological factors influences service evaluations (Bitner, 1992) and establishes boundary conditions of the effect of service language in instances of social presence. Specifically, the salience of cultural symbolism reduces the impact of service language only as a social cue and enhances the impact on service satisfaction through perceived service authenticity. Furthermore, the salience of consumers' motives for consumption (i.e., self-reward vs. other-directed focus) moderates the negative effect of a minority service language. For example, when a minority language speaker's consumption focus becomes self-reward oriented (e.g., reconnection with one's cultural heritage), minority (vs. majority) service language increases service satisfaction. Third, this research extends prior work that identifies critical explanatory mechanisms of the service language influence (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013, 2014) and provides further understanding of the underlying impact of service language in the instances of social presence (e.g., perceived friend's service enjoyment). Overall, this research provides managerial insights for service marketers by emphasizing contextual factors that may affect service language preferences.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. The role of language in service satisfaction

Prior research in service marketing provides varying perspectives regarding the scope of the service provider's role in the value co-creation process (Grönroos, 2008; Grönroos & Voima, 2013). According to the service dominant logic, service providers and consumers both play active roles in value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a, 2004b). More specifically, Vargo and Lusch (2008) assert that customers and service providers are co-creators of value, thus indicating that service and the derived value are inherently interactional. Research on value co-creation in services delineates both a firm-controlled perspective (e.g., satisfying customers' needs) and a customer-grounded view (e.g., customers' creation of value-in-use) (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Importantly, Grönroos and Voima (2013) propose value creation spheres wherein customers may create value independently or jointly with the firm. In particular, the authors postulate that: 1) value emerges through use of service offerings; 2) the concept of value-in-use is indicative of value creation within "social, spatial, temporal and physical contexts"; and 3) customers experience value by integrating the myriad resources and outcomes that the firm facilitates. Furthermore, a resource integration perspective states that customers evaluate service value by integrating multiple factors and benefits, including emotional, environmental, and social dimensions (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a, 2004b, 2008). Relying on the view of the service experience as a dyadic interaction to which consumers actively contribute, and taking into account that actual interactions between the consumer and the service personnel are crucial aspects of service evaluation (Grönroos, 2008), this research proffers that the choice of service language, which influences the quality of interaction, is also likely to be an integral part of service value co-creation process. Notably, prior research concurs that customers' perceived service value leads to greater service satisfaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a, 2004b; Vega-Vazquez, Revilla-Camacho, & Cossío-Silva, 2013). The current research examines the impact of service language on service satisfaction (i.e., a combination of affective, evaluative, and emotional responses to service based on predictive expectations; Vega-Vazquez et al., 2013).

Prior research reveals that providing service in consumers' native languages increases consumers' tipping behavior (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013), facilitates positive word-of-mouth intentions (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), and engenders more favorable service provider perceptions in higher-risk services, such as medical care (Brach & Fraser, 2002). Additionally, prior research in sociolinguistics illuminates that people attach a strong emotional significance to their native language and perceive language as a conveyor of personal identity (Pavlenko, 2005). Emotional preferences for one's native language

may also reflect political and ideological considerations (Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, & Grönroos, 2014), as well as the effect of social structures (Spolsky & Cooper, 1991). For example, language choice in Israel advances the maintenance of Jewish dominance in the region (Spolsky & Cooper, 1991). Strong political sentiments also drive Belgian and Canadian consumers to be unwilling to switch to their second language in service encounters (Holmqvist et al., 2014; Holmqvist, 2011). In cross-lingual settings, the extent of identification with an ethnolinguistic group and societal support for language predict minority language choice (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Genesee and Bourhis (1988) also denote situational language norms, relationships between ethnic groups, and in-group favoritism as reasons why multilingual speakers accommodate majority language speakers. Furthermore, communication accommodation theory (CAT) posits that the lower status speaker tends to converge to the language of the higher status speaker to create more positive impressions (Dragojevic, Gasiorek, & Giles, 2015). To date, few studies identify boundary conditions for consumers' service language preference (e.g., service involvement moderates consumers' language preferences; Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013). This research examines social presence as a boundary condition and explores environmental and psychological moderating contextual factors (Fig. 1 presents the overall conceptual framework).

### 2.2. The effect of social influence and language in the service encounter

The presence of others induces an important influence on consumption. For example, research shows that consumers tend to engage in self-presentation behaviors and choose a more expensive brand when other shoppers are present in the aisle (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005). Kurt, Inman, and Argo (2011) show that consumers who place greater emphasis on other-oriented goals spend more when they shop with a friend than when they shop alone. In this research, the term "friend" refers to the type of relationships in which two parties like each other, pursue each other's company, and provide assistance to each other's needs (Kurt et al., 2011).

Prior research shows that consumers who share a consumption experience influence each other's evaluations. For example, people tend to mimic each other's behaviors (e.g., smiling) during consumption (i.e., "the chameleon effect"; Ramanathan & McGill, 2007). This chameleon effect also triggers emotional contagion, in which moods and feelings of others influence a consumer's own emotional reactions (Ramanathan & McGill, 2007). Along with the transfer of emotions, the impact of social presence also occurs through the transfer of informational value (Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006). The positive opinions of others enhance one's own opinion about a product or a service, whereas others' negative judgments decrease one's own experience evaluations. Both emotional and informational influence effects emanate from the desire for social affiliation or the need to belong (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000). When external factors frustrate the need to belong, people tend to enjoy an experience less (Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006). Although prior research indicates native language service increases minority language speakers' satisfaction when they are alone or with other minority language speakers (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012), the presence of a friend who does not share the same native language may reverse this pattern.

In this regard, CAT (Dragojevic et al., 2015; Giles & Ogay, 2007) holds that language use in a bilingual setting has social consequences. In particular, CAT delineates two main broad categories of motives that drive speakers in a multilingual context to adapt their language to the language of others: 1) affective motives that refer to speakers' desires to manage social distance between themselves and their interlocutors and 2) cognitive motives that address speakers' intents to manage communication efficiency (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Vincze & Gasiorek, in press). In general, although not in all circumstances (Gasiorek, Van de Poel, & Blockmans, 2015), speakers tend to converge in their communicative behavior when they are motivated to reduce social distance, appear

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