



# Speak my language or look like me? – Language and ethnicity in bilingual customer service recovery



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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the influence of verbal (language) and non-verbal communication (ethnicity) of service providers on customers' perceptions of service recovery. Drawing insights from speech accommodation theory and inferiority complex, this study uses between subject experimental design to explore conditions under which language convergence and divergence are effective ways to build rapport. Results show that the influence of ethnicity and language cannot be interpreted without considering the ethnic composition of customers and service providers. Results also show that language can trigger stigma with positive country image that interact together to create a more favorable rapport.

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*Catalina and her daughter Isabella are Hispanic consumers living in the US. Each year they plan a fun beach trip as a mother-daughter bonding vacation. As regular hotel customers they were excited to start their trip this year. Unfortunately, when they reached the hotel, they were informed by the receptionist that their reservation had been lost and that the hotel was fully booked. Boiling with anger they called for the manager, thinking he/she was not going to get away with this. The manager came, greeted them in Spanish, expressed his sincere apologies and offered a one-week free stay at their royal suite as compensation for their inconvenience. Catalina walked away saying what a nice guy the manager was. Isabella blurted out “Oh, you were just charmed by his Spanish! What a way to try to fool us into not making big fuss! Look at what he did! He downgraded our ability to understand. He should have spoken to us in English like any other American customer!*

## 1. Introduction

Situations like the one above show how challenging it is for service providers to win customers back after a service failure. Such service encounters are “moments of truths” in which customers decide they will either continue doing business with the service providers or exit and deprive the service provider of all future revenues.

Given that employee/customer interactions are the “heart” of service provision (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012), surprisingly little is known about the role of language and ethnicity in service encounters

(Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007; Tombs & Rao Hill, 2014; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), especially when things go wrong. Service recovery research has made significant contributions in exploring factors leading to a transformation of customer perceptions of a failure to successful recovery. While the tangible aspects of such interactions after a service failure (what is communicated, what solution is offered, compensations etc.) have been studied extensively (e.g., Andreassen, 2000; Liao, 2007), the intangible verbal cues (language used, tenor) (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012) and nonverbal cues (displayed emotions and ethnicity) have not. In other words, would the service provider's ethnicity and language used in communication lead the customer to rate the service recovery differently? Would such assessment differ based on whether the customer is a minority or a majority? The current research attempts to answers these questions.

Managers must understand the impact of language and ethnicity on the service experience if they want to apply appropriate recovery strategies when customers are disappointed, angry, and frustrated at service failures. In the opening scenario, orchestrating the appropriate language, ethnicity of service provider, and displayed emotions in the encounter between customers and service providers could be the difference between Catalina and Isabella's reactions.

Responding to these gaps, the purpose of this research is to explore the role of language use (primary vs. secondary) and ethnicity (similar vs. dissimilar) on service rapport and rapport building between service providers and customers. We investigated this using a between subject video experimental design. This way we were able to manipulate language and bring greater realism and control to the study.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge in three ways. First, this study adds to the scant research on the role of language in

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services and extends it to service recovery. Second, this study gives insight as to how language and ethnicity interact together to affect service recovery. Third, this research sheds light on some of the moderators that play a role in the relationship between ethnicity and language and rapport between customers and service providers.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Service recovery outcomes

Mainstream marketing research is fairly unanimous in saying that it is harder and more costly to attract new customers than to retain customers (e.g., Reichheld, 1996). Because of this, service firms should make every effort to maintain relationships with existing customers in an era of cutthroat competition and choice among many service providers. Yet, delivering error-free services is almost impossible because humans, rather than machines, create and deliver services. Thus, service failures are an undesirable but inevitable part of business. Creating a sustainable competitive advantage, therefore, is challenging. What often distinguishes successful from unsuccessful service providers is how they interact with customers after a service failure and how they are able to build good rapport. Numerous studies have explored factors such as rapport in service delivery contexts (e.g., Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, 2008), but not as much in service recovery contexts (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

Rapport is one of the main components of interpersonal bonds (Gremler & Brown, 1998), and is an overall characterization of the experiential interaction between customers and employees. Rapport is used in common speech to mean chemistry, or relationship quality. While there has not been a clear academic consensus on what *rapport* means, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) show that rapport has two components: 1) an affect-laden cognitive evaluation, that looks at the level of enjoyment of an interaction; and 2) the bond established between the customer and the employee (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

The experience of such chemistry between service providers and customers does not necessarily require multiple encounters. Indeed, service employees and customers often enjoy good rapport after a single encounter (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006). For example, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) found that nonverbal cues, such as the display of positive emotions and authenticity, significantly contribute to favorable rapport between service provider and customers. Gremler and Gwinner (2008) extend this research, identifying four antecedents of rapport: attentive behavior, imitative behavior, courteous behavior, and common grounding. Imitative behavior and common grounding are often triggered by the ethnicities and languages in service encounters (Macintosh, 2009). However, the literature has not explored how language and ethnicity impact rapport and customer outcomes in the service recovery encounter. Before examining the effect of language used in the service encounter, this study explores the context of ethnic minority and majority that could have great impact on the influence of language and ethnicity of service providers.

### 2.2. Minority and majority ethnic compositions

The concepts of *majority* and *minority* are useful when discussing cross-ethnic service encounters. The majority group is the dominant (usually homegrown) group, while the minority group is a smaller (often immigrant) group. Minority groups might use race, language, religion, customs, or their country-of-origin as ways to identify with their own culture. Clearly, use of the terms *majority* and *minority* can be somewhat malleable and arbitrary. For instance, Deshpandé and Stayman (1994) in their study of ethnic identity defined majority status based on whether respondents lived in Austin, Texas and minority status if they lived in San Antonio, Texas. However, in this study, we restrict ourselves to the simple case of a nation-wide ethnic majority, and an ethnic minority. Research has examined

the influence of ethnicity on customers' perceptions of product adoptions (Hirschman, 1981), behavioral intentions (Brumbaugh, 2002) and price evaluations (Saegert, Hoover, & Hilger, 1985). Ethnic minority research studies make up no >3% of top consumer research studies (Williams, Lee, & Henderson, 2008). Yet, this area of research can be essential to customizing marketing efforts/messages to minorities (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000). Therefore, in the first two hypotheses we propose how targeting a minority/majority group by using their primary language or assigning a service provider who shares their ethnicity might lead them to feel that they established a connection between themselves and the service provider or have a favorable evaluation of rapport. In the third to the fifth hypotheses we show how ethnic status, country image and interaction effects might play a different role in the proposed relationship between ethnicity, language and rapport. In the sixth hypothesis, we propose how rapport can have other positive consequences like word of mouth and repatronage intentions.

### 2.3. Language—Trigger of rapport

While, language per se is clearly at the heart of communication, research in marketing has focused more on indirect communication (for example brands, ads) (Luna & Peracchio, 2005; Koslow, Shamdasani, & Touchstone, 1994). Table 1 summarizes the main studies conducted on language. From this summary it is apparent that the influence of majority/minority language in direct communication, such as service settings, has not received much research attention and is studied by very few researchers (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013, Tombs & Rao Hill, 2014). In fact, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) call for research to examine the influence of language in service recovery.

Bilingual consumer research can be studied from either 1) a sociolinguistic approach, when exploring the effects of language as a signal of a shared group characteristic or 2) a psycholinguistic approach to study the results of language as a means for information processing (Puntoni et al., 2009). In this research, we adopt the first approach to show how language has an effect beyond its functional role in communication. Even when both parties are proficiently bilingual, language can trigger a vast array of emotional effects (Holmqvist, 2011). Because in this research, we examine the impact on the “chemistry” between service providers and customers of majority/minority languages used in the service encounter, these non-functional effects of language are of particular interest.

Research in this area is generally based on propositions of speech accommodation theory (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Introduced by Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis (1973), speech accommodation theory proposes that a sender of communication accommodates their verbal (e.g., language, speech rate) and non-verbal behavior (eye contact, facial expression) in a way that they become more similar to the receiver. As a result, the receiver rates the interaction more favorably. Callahan (2006) explains that language accommodation occurs and solidarity emerges, when the speaker uses conversational language, and so converges to the other person in the exchange. However, when the speaker uses a language other than the interlocutor's primary language, divergence occurs in a way that creates a distance between the receiver and the sender (Holmqvist, Guest, & Grönroos, 2015). Language convergence becomes a particular concern in majority/minority service encounters.

Few studies have found support that language convergence results in favorable customer evaluations. For instance, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) found that language convergence is associated with a higher likelihood of tipping in restaurants. By contrast, language divergence is associated with higher negative word of mouth (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Indeed, customers value communication in their primary language especially when it pertains to high-involvement decisions (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013). Language

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