



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



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

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 September 2016

Accepted 1 October 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Customer
Interaction
Language
Management
Service

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 (Salciuviene, 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.

3.2. During the service encounter

Six articles in the current special section deal with understanding how language use influences customer outcomes during a service encounter, and whether this language issue differs for customers coming from majority versus minority populations. Addressing what happens both before and during the service encounter, [Touchstone, Koslow, Shamdasani, and D'Alessandro \(2017\)](#) look at Hispanic immigrants' use of Spanish in a retail banking context in California by combining sociolinguistic research with service research. Coining the term 'the linguistic servicescape' to describe language use not just in the encounter but also on signs and other written material, the authors show that service providers failing to show sensitivity in their language use risk being perceived as discriminatory by minority customers. Failing to accommodate customers in a widely spoken minority language, such as Spanish in Southern California, not only creates confusion and a sense of alienation among the minority customers, but also renders them less likely to commit to a long-term relationship with the service provider.

[Alvarez, Taylor, and Gomez \(in this issue\)](#) examine how speaking the majority (versus minority) language influences negotiation outcomes. Using samples of U.S. Hispanic bilinguals, the authors show that bilinguals obtain different negotiation outcomes depending on whether they negotiate in the majority language (English) or the minority language (Spanish). The use of a minority (majority) language might activate unfavorable (favorable) stereotypes of that minority group, which results in less (more) favorable negotiation outcomes. In a follow-up study using a sample of Mexican bilinguals (Spanish-English), the authors show that differences in negotiation outcomes dissipate when the stereotypes associated with the minority and the majority language are perceived equally favorable.

[Bell and Puzakova \(in this issue\)](#) also take the majority versus minority distinction into account. The authors examine whether U.S. Hispanic customers prefer to be served in the majority (English) or minority (Spanish) language, depending on their accompanying friend's native language. In three studies, the authors examine the effects of social presence on the relationship between language divergence and customer satisfaction. Their results show that serving customers in a minority language – regardless of whether this is the focal customer's native language – has a negative impact on customer satisfaction if their friend speaks a different language. They also identify cultural symbolism (i.e. symbols related to the minority language in the servicescape) and reward focus (self-reward versus other-reward) as boundary conditions. This study provides nuance to the general recommendation that customers should be served in their native language.

In many multilingual contexts, code-switching (using either different languages or different registers depending on the situation and the topic) is becoming increasingly common for minority consumers. Looking at language use on-line among Chinese consumers in the United States, [Schau, Dang, and Zhang \(2017\)](#) find that Chinese consumers on a Chinese language forum consistently use English when discussing brands and marketing communication. Schau et al. illustrate that this use of English to communicate about American brands, services and marketing campaign helps to bridge the distance between the consumers' home culture and the culture of their new country. The authors further show that using the dominant language, English in this case, becomes a way for minority consumers from a different culture to learn how to navigate the servicescape of their new country.

Two studies approach the topic of language use in service encounters from an employee perspective. [Cayla and Bhatnagar \(2017\)](#) address the service employee's language use, and the use of English in particular, in a postcolonial context. Extending previous research on social class and globalization in India ([Derné, 2008](#)), Cayla and Bhatnagar show that in some cases, language use can, at least for the duration of the encounter, reverse the social stratification, as the use of English by personal trainers in gyms bestow upon them a certain status in their interaction with upper class customers who frequent these types of

gyms. In another service context, western-style coffee shops, Cayla and Bhatnagar find a different dynamic, as language use here is more scripted, and the Indian staff are required by their managers to learn a number of standard phrases in English. On the one hand, having this register of scripted phrases to fall back on allow service employees, who often doubt their own English skills, a certain confidence in their interactions with customers. On the other hand, Cayla and Bhatnagar shows that many of these phrases are deferential, enforcing the difference in class. Overall, Cayla and Bhatnagar's study and their findings on the power struggle that language use can represent in postcolonial contexts offer a welcome addition to previous studies on language use, which have mainly focused on egalitarian societies where the connection between language use and social class is negligible.

The study by [Kraak and Holmqvist \(in this issue\)](#) examines how frontline employees' language use might shape customers' perceptions of authenticity in the service encounter. Their interviews with and observations of service employees in British pubs outside the UK (in France) reveal that frontline employees need to align their language use to the customers' expectations of authenticity. Their analysis reveals that in their search for authentic service experiences, customers might sometimes prefer to be served in their second language rather than in their native language. These findings show that in specific circumstances, the general recommendation to serve customers in their native language does not hold. Kraak and Holmqvist also show that employees may use language as a tool to sabotage the service encounter. In case frontline employees are confronted with stressed or verbally aggressive customers, they may switch to the customer's native language in order to signal their dissatisfaction. Finally, their study provides initial insights into the human resource management practices necessary to accommodate the complexity of service encounters among multilingual customers.

3.3. After the service encounter

The accepted contributions examining the role of language use after the service encounter mainly examine the effects of language on word of mouth. Word-of-mouth intentions were a dependent variable in [Zhang et al.'s \(in this issue\)](#) study, and was covered in more detail by [Balaji, Roy, and Lassar \(2017\)](#). Balaji and colleagues offer a replication of an earlier study on how language divergence influences word-of-mouth ([Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014](#)). Replications of previous studies play an important role both in validating previous studies and creating new knowledge ([Lynch, Bradlow, Huber, & Lehmann, 2016](#)). Using the specific context of retail banking, this replication confirms the previous research in finding that language divergence leads to negative consumer outcomes. The authors show that using the customers' second language leads to a more negative impression of the service employee, and reduces both trust and satisfaction with the service provider. By setting the study in an emerging Asian economy, Malaysia, the authors' replication of the original study set in Europe provides further strength to the generalizability of the negative role that language divergence can play.

4. Suggestions for future research

As [Lusch, Vargo, and Gustafsson \(2016, p. 2962\)](#) suggest, "special issues of academic journals serve an important role in drawing attention to topics that, if expanded, can further catalyze research." We hope that this special section inspires many others to examine language-related issues in services. While this special section advances understanding on the role of language use in service, many issues still remain unaddressed. Examples of specific research questions regarding the role of language before, after, and during a service encounter are outlined below.

4.1. Before the service encounter

As most research on language use in services has focused on what happens during or after the service, the articles in this special issue on influences before the service represent a real contribution and also open up the door to future research. Future research on language use before the actual service encounter could benefit from looking at whether the language in the linguistic servicescape may influence the decision to even engage with the service provider. Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) propose that the language a service provider uses may influence whether customers chose to engage with the service provider. There is to date no research on this topic, which could be addressed both from the perspective of majority and minority language. Not using the language of the minority may make minority consumers perceive the company to be discriminatory, as Touchstone et al. (2017) describe. On the other hand, might the use of the minority language make some majority speakers less like to engage with the firm? This is a delicate situation, and one that most likely varies between countries (cf., Holmqvist, 2009). From a managerial perspective, getting this situation right is crucial and future research could draw upon socio-linguistic research to further explore the fine balance of the linguistic servicescape.

4.2. During the service encounter

Customers attach a strong emotional value to their native language (Puntoni et al., 2009), making it very likely that customers will react emotionally to language divergence in service encounters. These propositions have not been tested in detail, yet capturing emotional reactions using self-report measures might be inaccurate due to social desirability bias. Similar to Boshoff (2012), we therefore recommend to measure the (neuro)physiological processes underlying customer reactions to language divergence.

Even though some articles start to address language use in services from an employee perspective, several issues warrant further examination. For example, research might examine why frontline employees do not switch to the customer's preferred language. Are frontline employees simply not able to serve the customer in his or her language, or is the frontline employee not willing to do so? In addition, future research might adopt a multilevel perspective to examine how organizations can implement policies aimed at serving customers in their native language. How do these policies affect frontline employees? And what is the effect – ultimately – on firm performance in a multilingual market?

The focus on technology in service encounters also creates opportunities for future research. Researchers might examine how technology assists in avoiding language divergence. “Can technology replace interpreters?” might be an important question to answer from both economic (i.e. cost savings) and social (i.e. social contact, potential to ask clarifications) perspectives. The adoption of robots in service encounters also creates various opportunities for future research. For example, Royakkers and Van Est (2015) suggest that robotics find their way into home services and health care services, among others. Do people communicate with robots in service encounters? Do they communicate differently with robots than with ‘regular’ service employees? What is the value of a human conversation in a service encounter? And can robots induce warmth and empathy? The growing number of breakthroughs in the development of robots (and associated: artificial intelligence) requires a better understanding of how these robots might be part of our everyday service encounters.

4.3. After the service encounter

Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) argue that the language used during the service encounter might influence customers' propensity to return and willingness to recommend the service provider. Current research

seems to have focused exclusively on the consequences of language divergence on word-of-mouth intentions (Balaji et al., 2017; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Moreover, current research focuses on behavioral intentions. The literature is in need of studies examining actual customer behavior such as churn or share-of-wallet, to make stronger claims about the consequences of language issues in service encounters.

Service recovery represents another area in need of more language-related research. Considering that customers might interpret language divergence as a service failure (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), future research might examine how firms can recover such failures. On the other hand, recovery research might benefit from a more in-depth exploration of the language used in complaint responses. For example, the literature on apologizing after service failures suggests that employees should apologize to the customer. Yet an apology might have different meanings. “I'm sorry to keep you waiting” is an expression of regret, “Please accept my sincere apology” refers to the offer of an apology, whereas “I'm terribly sorry” refers to a request for forgiveness (Trosborg & Shaw, 1998, p. 74). Combining linguistics research with service recovery research might inform an organization's recovery guidelines and policies, which is especially useful as many organizations still struggle with their service recovery to date (Van Vaerenbergh & Orsingher, 2016).

Finally, customers are sometimes asked to participate in a customer satisfaction or customer experience survey after the service encounter. To date, researchers and practitioners typically use the quantitative information in those surveys (e.g. a satisfaction rating), and sometimes discard the qualitative, textual information. Recent research applied text mining procedures (typically developed in computational linguistics) to the open-ended questions in those surveys, and shows that this information is useful to monitor the customer's experience across the entire journey (Villaroel-Ordenes, Theodoulidis, Burton, Grüber, & Zaki, 2014). Yet several questions remain unanswered. Is customer's textual feedback a better predictor of customer behavior than a satisfaction score? To what extent can we ‘mine’ social media content and link this to customer behavior? How do we go beyond what a customer says and identify what he or she means?

All these challenges and research questions show that a more interdisciplinary approach to the study of language use in services is warranted. With this editorial, we call for a more extensive collaboration between service researchers and (applied, computational, and social) linguistics researchers to address the non-exhaustive list of issues mentioned in the previous sections.

Guest editors' note

The guest editors extend a warm thank you to the reviewers for this special issue, some of whom even were kind enough to review several manuscripts. The reviewers include Dries Berings, Lieven Brebels, Laura Callahan, Julien Cayla, Annelies Costers, Cécile Delcourt, Nathalie Dens, Apramey Dube, Arne De Keyser, Simon Hazée, Elina Jaakkola, Christopher Lennartz, Renaud Lunardo, Hsiang-Fei Luoh, Chatura Ranaweera, Hamid Rizal, Mark Rosenbaum, Carlos Diaz Ruiz, Piyush Sharma, Nancy J. Sirianni, Magnus Söderlund, Arne Vanderstukken, Peeter Verlegh, Gianfranco Walsh, C. Wang, and Luk Warlop. This special issue would have been impossible without the invaluable help and expertise of the reviewers, and we are most grateful for their time and efforts.

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