

The language backfire effect:

Do customers always prefer to be served in their strongest language?

Abstract

Current research in service research and sociolinguistics proposes that customers who are served in their native language hold more favorable impressions of the service provider than customers served in their second language. This paper challenges that perspective. Two studies show that consumers served in their first language after initiating contact in a second language feel humiliated. The results show that consumers exhibit a backfire effect to the service provider's language change, and this backfire effect is due to a perceived identity threat. Consumers who are served in their first language when trying to speak a second language assume the service provider doubts their language skills, causing perceived humiliation. As even minor variations in humiliation might have negative consequences for service providers, the findings carry important implications for both theory and practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

In what language should service personnel serve international customers? In 2008, French education minister Xavier Darcos made headlines around the world by encouraging his compatriots to learn better English. One of the reasons behind the minister's proposal was the notion that speaking English is an essential part of accommodating foreign tourists in France, the world's largest tourism market. The minister's recommendation appears to have been met with such a swing to English among Paris waiters that major tourist guides to Paris, including Lonely Planet and Rough Guide, advise their readers that they are likely to be addressed in English by Paris waiters even when trying to speak French.

Is this language switch the right thing to do? While the vast majority of literature suggests that serving customers in their native language, or in a language in which they feel more comfortable, yields positive effects, we test the notion that switching to a language in which consumers feel more comfortable can backfire and result in negative effects instead.

Studies on bilingualism in marketing propose that consumers react more positively when they see advertising or slogans in their native language (Puntoni et al. 2009). Research on language use in services show that consumers prefer to be served in the language in which they feel most comfortable (Holmqvist 2011). Moreover, sociolinguistic research shows that service employees tend to switch to a language in which consumers feel more comfortable, regardless of the language in which consumers first address the employee (Callahan 2005).

All the available evidence thus suggest that addressing customers in the language in which they feel most comfortable is the right thing to do. This paper challenges this view by demonstrating that switching to a language in which consumers feel more comfortable potentially backfires. The language switch is well-intentioned (Callahan 2005) and an expression of the employee's wish to accommodate the customer. However, this paper proposes that the decision to switch language to accommodate consumers after they have initiated contact in their second language could result in the consumers feeling humiliated by the service-employee, an effect we refer to as the 'language backfire effect'.

This paper reports two studies supporting the language backfire effect. Study 1 tests the effect in two different countries, and examines whether the waiter's shift to English causes humiliation. Study 2 not only shows that the language backfire effect still holds after the service provider switches to the customer's native language, but also considers the identity-threatening nature of a language shift as a potential explanation. The findings of this study thus carry important implications for service managers across the globe. Due to an increased globalization and multilingualization (Duchêne 2009), more and more service encounters are conducted between customers and service providers who do not share a common native language. The current research project opens up a new dimension in language research by focussing on situations in which serving customers in their native or strongest language might harm the service provider.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Previous research on consumer language preferences in services has focused on situations where the consumers are in familiar environments, usually in their own country (Holmqvist & Grönroos 2012; Puntoni et al. 2009). Addressing this situation, we posit that consumers' language preferences could differ to a large extent when the consumers are no longer in their home country. With the steadily increasing effects of tourism around the world, this is a common service situation that has not yet been studied.

One of the most consistent findings to emerge from studies on consumers' language preferences over the last years is that language use is mainly an emotional aspect for

consumers (Holmqvist 2011; Holmqvist & Grönroos 2012; Puntoni et al. 2009). When people visit a foreign country, they often want to “go local” and blend in with the local population (Muzaini 2006); speaking the local language is one way to do so. By speaking the local language, consumers may feel that they manage to fit in, and avoid standing out by being identified as foreigners (cf. Berry & Krishnan 1992). Another possible reason for wanting to speak the local language is that the consumer may have studied it as a second language but seldom has the opportunity to use it. This presents a second incentive for consumers to use a second language, as they might enjoy speaking it and feel good about themselves when able to carry out an interaction in a second language (Clément et al. 2003). Adapting these findings from the fields of psycholinguistic research to a service setting, we propose that the preference consumers feel for using their strongest language in normal everyday services (cf. Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012) may be replaced by a desire to use a foreign language when abroad, both to practice it and to make an effort to blend in.

We use the concept of losing face to support this notion. During social interactions, people have a desire to appear independent, to be accepted and to appear intelligent and competent (Lim and Bowers 1991). People who engage in a conversation in a second language might have this desire to appear intelligent and competent, and an action by another person that threatens this desire can cause the customer to perceive losing face. Face loss occurs when people’s abilities are questioned or when their competences are challenged, and results in perceptions of humiliation (Brown and Levinson 1987). In a marketing context, Claus et al. (2012) show that consumers display negative reactions when their self-image is questioned. In our research context, if customers engage in a conversation in their second language, and in the belief of being competent in that language, the service provider’s shift to another language might challenge this perceived competence. Consequently, the customer loses face, and might feel humiliated. We hypothesize:

H1: *Customers who are subjected to a switch to the language in which they feel most comfortable feel more humiliated than customers who are served in their second language.*

Central to the concept of face is its link to a person’s identity. Cupach and Metts (1994) argue that face support is identity confirming, while face loss is identity threatening. An identity threat is any action by another party that challenges a person’s sense of competence (Steele 1988). If service providers decide to switch to a language that the customer understands better, this may call the customer’s second language competence into question. A language shift might be perceived as an identity threat. Such identity threats often produce strong emotional responses such as humiliation (Tedeschi and Felson 1994). We propose that a language shift is perceived as an identity threat, which in turn causes consumers to feel humiliated. We hypothesize:

H2: *Identity threat mediates the relationship between service language switch and perceived humiliation*

3. STUDIES

We test our predictions in two studies. Study 1 analyzes the language backfire effect for consumers who are served by an employee switching to the consumers’ strongest language when the consumers try speaking their second language, leading to consumer humiliation. Study 2 tests the same effect in a different setting, and provides evidence for how identity threat drives the language backfire effect. Customers who are served in their native language after they initiated contact in their second language might experience face loss, resulting in higher levels of perceived humiliation.

3.1 STUDY 1

Method In the first study, 89 Finnish (57.3% female, $M_{age}=28.9$, $SD_{age}=13.1$) and 62 French (53.0% female, $M_{age}=35.2$, $SD_{age}=17.6$) adults participated in a two-group scenario-based experiment. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. All Finnish participants read a scenario in which they are tourists in Paris, and after some sightseeing they visit a café. They initiate contact in French, the local language, after which the waiter either responds in French (condition 1), or switches to English (condition 2). In order to increase scenario realism, the scenarios start with a short description of how the respondent arrives in Paris and visits some famous landmarks that are mentioned in the text. The café in which the interaction takes place looks nice, the coffee and pastries taste well and the price is moderate, in order to isolate the language effect.

French participants received an identical scenario; the setting being the only difference. The French participants were asked to imagine they are tourists in Barcelona, and after some sightseeing, they visit a café. They initiated contact in Spanish, the local language, after which the waiter either responds in Spanish (condition 1), or switches to English (condition 2).

Before participating in the experiment, the respondents were asked whether they knew French (Finnish sample) or Spanish (French sample) and English, as a basic knowledge of both languages was required for the study. Those who did not speak any French (Finnish sample) or Spanish (French sample) (all reported speaking English) were thanked for their willingness to participate but not included in the sample. In the Finnish sample, the 89 respondents are thus all conversational in English and have at least a rudimentary knowledge of French. In the French sample, the 62 respondents are all conversational in English and have at least rudimentary knowledge of Spanish.

After reading the scenario, respondents were first asked some filler questions about the café and their experiences in Paris, in order to ensure that they did not perceive the questionnaire as being about humiliation. After the filler questions, they reported whether they felt humiliated by the service provider on a three-item 7-point Likert scale: 'In this situation, I would feel humiliated', 'In this situation, I would feel embarrassed, and 'In this situation, I would feel ashamed'. (Finnish sample: $\alpha=0.897$, French sample: $\alpha=0.825$). A two-item seven-point Likert scale measures scenario realism: 'This scenario seems realistic' and 'What happens in the scenario could also happen in real life' (Finnish sample: $\alpha=0.897$, French sample: $\alpha=0.906$). The average scenario realism was 6.3 in Finland and 5.5 in France.

The respondents also reported their language skills. Measured on a 7-point scale, the Finnish respondents indicate feeling more comfortable speaking English ($M=6.33$) than French ($M=3.19$, $t_{(88)}=18.199$, $p<0.001$), speaking English more frequently ($M=4.79$) than French ($M=1.80$, $t_{(88)}=15.453$, $p<0.001$) and reading more English texts ($M=5.75$) than French texts ($M=2.06$, $t_{(88)}=21.917$, $p<0.001$). In the French sample, the respondents indicate feeling more comfortable speaking English ($M=5.15$) than Spanish ($M=4.27$, $t_{(61)}=3.028$, $p=0.004$), speaking English more frequently ($M=3.45$) than Spanish ($M=2.03$, $t_{(61)}=6.416$, $p<0.001$) and reading more English texts ($M=2.82$) than Spanish texts ($M=1.65$, $t_{(61)}=6.097$, $p<0.001$). Both samples are thus suited for a study on whether consumers prefer the language in which they are more comfortable (English) or the language of the market they are visiting (French/Spanish) and in which they are less fluent and have less practice.

Results Customers who are served in their weakest language feel less humiliated ($M_{Finland}=1.11$, $M_{France}=1.45$) than customers who are served in their stronger language ($M_{Finland}=2.06$, $M_{France}=2.04$). A one-way between-subjects ANOVA conducted on humiliation ratings yields a significant difference in both the Finnish ($F(1,87)=49.17$, $p<.001$) and the French sample ($F(1,60)=4.22$, $p<.05$). These results confirm Hypothesis 1.

Discussion These results show that consumers prefer being served in the local language of the market when initiating contact in that language, even when much more at ease in English. The results are in marked contrast with previous research on consumer language preferences, which suggests that consumers prefer using their strongest language (Holmqvist & Grönroos 2012). The findings of Study 1 support the language backfire effect, with consumers feeling more humiliated by the waiter's language shift. There are thus situations in which consumers prefer a language in which they are less at ease.

A limitation of the study is that the respondents were all Swedish or French speakers served in either French/Spanish or English. These situations are realistic; serving tourists in English is common in both Paris and Barcelona, as evidenced by the scenario realism scores, but it also means that the respondents did not choose between service in their native language and a second language. Also, while the findings show that consumers in this service setting prefer a second language in which they are less fluent over a second language in which they are more fluent, we did not yet test a potential explanation for the language backfire effect.

In order to address these limitations, Study 2 examines whether the effect still holds even when consumers are served in their native language instead of the local language of the market. In addition, we test identity threat as a mediator of the language shift – consumer humiliation relationship. This provides a more stringent test of the language backfire effect and its theoretical foundations.

3.2 STUDY 2

Method 238 French adults ($M_{age} = 31.34$, 48.3% female) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, using the same screening of participations as in Study 1.

Similar to Study 1, participants were asked to imagine they are tourists, but this time in London. After some sightseeing, they visit a café where they initiate contact in English, the local language. The waiter either responds in English (condition 1), or switches to French (condition 2). French is a compulsory subject in British schools, and approximately 23% of the British population reports being conversational in French. This increases the realism of the scenario; the average scenario realism was 6.2.

After reading the scenario, participants evaluated the same filler items as in Study 1. Afterwards, respondents reported whether they felt humiliated by the service provider on the same three-item seven-point Likert scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .903$). To test for mediation, we included seven measures of identity threat ($\alpha = .903$), adapted from Aquino and Douglas (2003): 'The waiter doubts my English skills', 'The waiter believes I am not capable of speaking English', 'The waiter believes my English is good', 'The waiter judged me in an unjust matter', 'The waiter did something to make me look bad', 'This waiter questioned my English skills', 'This waiter regarded me in a negative manner'. Scenario realism was measured using the same scales as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .897$).

Results

Perceived humiliation. A one-way ANOVA reveals that participants who are served in their native language feel more humiliated than participants who are served in their second language ($M_{native} = 2.15$ vs. $M_{second} = 1.64$; $F(1,236) = 8.99$, $p < .05$). These findings are in line with the results of Study 1, and reconfirms Hypothesis 1.

Identity threat. A one-way ANOVA reveals that participants who are served in their native language perceive it as more identity threatening than participants who are served in their second language ($M_{native} = 3.88$ vs. $M_{second} = 2.60$; $F(1,236) = 47.28$, $p < .001$).

Mediation analysis. Following Zhao, Lynch and Chen (2010), we tested if identity threat mediates the relation between language shift and perceived humiliation ($\beta = 0.50$, $t(236) = 3.00$, $p < .05$) using a bootstrap resampling method based on 5,000 resamples (Preacher and

Hayes 2004). The results reveal an indirect effect ($a \times b = 0.55$, $SE = 0.13$), with a 99% confidence interval excluding 0 (0.92 to 0.26). The Sobel test is also significant ($z = 5.24$, $p < .001$). The waiter's language shift increases consumers' feelings of identity threat ($\beta = 1.29$, $t(236) = 6.88$, $p < .001$). Holding constant the waiter's language, identity threat increases humiliation ($\beta = 0.42$, $t(236) = 8.17$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of the waiter's language on humiliation turns insignificant ($\beta = -0.04$, $t(236) = 0.25$, $p > .05$), so this mediation is classified as complementary (Zhao et al. 2010). These findings support Hypothesis 2.

Discussion The results of the study show that French consumers visiting London prefer being served in English rather than in French. The results thus confirm the results of Study 1, showing a customer preference for their second language. These results are particularly interesting as they show that the language backfire effects still holds even if the service provider switches to the customers' native language to accommodate them. Furthermore, the second study shows that the service provider's language shift is perceived as an identity threat. Rather than feeling accommodated, as the service provider intends, consumers feel that their competence is questioned, leading to an identity threat. The finding thus provide further support for our hypothesis that consumers may prefer their second language in given service settings, and also uncovers evidence for the mechanism driving the language backfire effect.

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of this paper contradict the existing marketing literature by suggesting that there are service situations in which consumers prefer to use their second language, and may react negatively to a language switch. The paper contributes to the service marketing theory by identifying situations in which this language backfire effect can take places, and by uncovering an explanation of this effect. Finding that consumers from different countries consistently prefer using a language in which they are less fluent, even preferring a second language to their native language, might seem counterintuitive at first. The findings presented here are in sharp contrast with earlier research proposing that consumers prefer their strongest language (Holmqvist & Grönroos 2012; Puntoni et al. 2009). To understand these results in the light of earlier research, it is imperative to put them into context. Rather than disproving earlier studies, the results in this paper qualify them by finding that there are situations where consumer language preference is reversed, thus contributing to a further understanding of how language can influence consumers in services. This contribution consists of two main parts

1. Instead of feeling satisfied if served in their first language, customers react negatively when the service personnel switch language to accommodate them. While previous studies that found consumers to prefer their strongest language focused on services when customers are in their everyday setting (Holmqvist, 2011), the results in this paper show that these preferences change markedly when consumers are in different contexts, such as when visiting foreign countries.

2. The negative reaction that the consumers display can be explained by a perceived identity threat. Customers who are able to speak one or more foreign languages might be proud of these skills and want to practice them when given the occasion. If the service personnel switches language in the service encounter, the customer might perceive this as a rejection of their language skills; the results show that this constitutes a perceived identity threat for the consumer.

It is noteworthy that these results are the same for different consumer groups from different countries, and regardless of whether the service personnel switches to the consumer's stronger second language (when consumers try to speak a third language) or to the consumers' first

language. The well-intended language switch, which is condoned by the current marketing literature, consistently causes a backfire effect that leaves the customer feeling humiliated.

The paper presents several direct implications for managers. One practical implication rise above the others: the service personnel should never initiate language change. If consumers chose to address the service personnel in the language in the country, the service personnel should take care to answer in the same language. While this may appear to be a simple rule of thumb, it is in sharp contrast to current practices. Marketers need to understand this situation and make sure that the service personnel never are the first to switch language, but rather take their cues from the customers.

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