

# **Consumer willingness to communicate in a second language: Communication in service settings**

Jonas Holmqvist<sup>a</sup>  
Yves Van Vaerenbergh<sup>b,c</sup>  
Christian Grönroos<sup>d</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Department of Marketing, Kedge Business School, France

<sup>b</sup> Research Center for Human Relations, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

<sup>c</sup> Center for Service Intelligence, Ghent University, Belgium

<sup>d</sup> Department of Marketing and Logistics, Hanken School of Economics, Finland

## **Consumer willingness to communicate in a second language: Communication in service settings**

*Purpose* – The service management literature emphasizes the importance of communication, but language difficulties can make communicating in business settings more difficult. This paper addresses consumer willingness to communicate in a second language to identify the antecedents that drive consumer language preferences.

*Design/methodology/approach* – The paper presents the findings of an empirical study in two multilingual countries with a total of 361 adult respondents.

*Findings* – The findings show perceived control to be the strongest antecedent of consumer willingness to communicate in a second language, and identifies second language skills as an antecedent in countries with little political tensions related to language, while political considerations is a strong antecedent in countries where language use is political.

*Research limitations/implications* – The study is limited to countries with more than one official language. While multilingual countries make up around 2/3 of the world's population, future research could test whether the same antecedents are applicable in monolingual societies.

*Practical implications* – The findings help managers to understand in which situations consumers may be willing to switch language, and in which situations it is important to serve consumers in more than one language.

*Originality/value* – The paper is the first to draw upon both the service management literature and the sociolinguistic literature to develop and test a model to explain consumer language preferences.

**Keywords:** service encounters, language, perceived control, willingness to communicate

**Article classification:** Research paper

## INTRODUCTION

Service management research has long recognized that the globalization of business is changing companies' interactions with consumers (Grönroos, 1994). In an increasingly global and multilingual world, managers face the challenge of both managing transnational and multilingual organizations (Maclean, 2006), serving consumers speaking different languages, and understanding which language consumers prefer to use in different situations (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). Building on the view of the service encounter as a dyadic interaction in which consumers actively participate (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987), service research emphasizes that interactions in which both the consumer and the service personnel play integral roles strongly influence services (Bitner, 1990; Grönroos, 2008). As the actual interaction between the consumer and the company is a crucial part of how consumers perceive service encounters (Bitner, 1990), communication quality play an important role for the outcome of the interaction (Sieg *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the emergence of the service logic mandates increased attention to the importance of the consumer as a value creator during interactions (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vega-Vazquez *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the emphasis on the importance of understanding how consumers communicate in interactions with companies, current research would appear to build on the premise that the consumer and the company personnel are perfectly *able* to interact and communicate effortlessly, which might not always be the case in bilingual regions (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). Most research about bilingual consumers focus on language use in situations without active consumer involvement, mainly bilingual advertising or text-processing (e.g. Puntoni *et al.*, 2009; Tavassoli and Han, 2001; Zhang and Schmitt, 2004). This lack of research on what language companies should use when serving consumers is surprising given the longstanding emphasis on the importance of the interaction between consumers and employees (Eiglier and Langeard, 1975; Grönroos, 1978; Gummesson, 1979).

Lack of good communication between consumers and service providers may lead to negative consumer outcomes, a problem that is even more pronounced in bilingual markets. Two recent studies show that consumers receiving service in their second language are less likely to tip the waiter in a restaurant (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013) and are less likely to recommend the service provider to others (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2014). Given the negative impact of being served in a second language, managers need to understand under what

circumstances bilingual consumers are willing to switch to their second language, or prefer service in their native language. To this end, this paper examines consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language during service encounters in bilingual markets. Drawing upon sociolinguistic research (e.g. MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998; MacIntyre *et al.*, 1999) as well as recent service research on consumers' language preferences (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012), we develop and test a comprehensive framework of antecedents explaining consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language.

Understanding the antecedents that drive consumers to be either willing or unwilling to communicate is a main challenge facing managers in many markets with more than one language (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). While long recognizing that service providers should take cultural differences between and within countries into account when designing services (Alam, 2011; Morales and Ladhari, 2011), service research largely ignores the impact of language differences. The aim of this paper is thus to delineate under which circumstances service providers need to consider language use when providing services in bilingual markets.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **A Model of Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language**

The focus in this paper is specifically on consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language, addressing interactions in which consumers and service providers do not share the same native language. Willingness to communicate in a second language is defined as the readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person in a second language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998). When facing a situation in which a service employee does not speak the consumer's first language, bilingual consumers might either be willing to switch to their second language or might prefer service in their native language. The antecedents that drive the consumer's decision in this situation is of importance to service management research, as it can help determine when consumers chose to interact with companies despite possible communication problems or when they chose not to interact with the company.

In their seminal model of second language use, MacIntyre *et al.* (1998) suggest that people prefer to use their native language when they fear comprehension problems, or when they lack the necessary competence to efficiently reach their goals. Adapting these findings to a service setting, it appears that consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language might differ

across types of services, as some services are inherently more complex than others. This viewpoint is echoed by Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012), who propose that native language use will be particularly important in services where the consumer feel less in control.

Sociolinguistic research further identifies two important antecedents of willingness to communicate in a second language: perceived second language skills and political considerations. Logically, individuals' perceived proficiency in a second language is an important antecedent of willingness to communicate in that second language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998; MacIntyre *et al.*, 1999). Despite ability to speak a second language, however, many highly proficient second language speakers still tend to avoid communication in a second language (Dörnyei, 2003; MacIntyre, 2007). These findings lead researchers to consider the intergroup context as another antecedent of willingness to communicate, concluding that second language use also carries political implications, such as the relative socioeconomic power of different language groups and the representation of different language groups in different layers of society (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998). Testing both second language skills and political considerations as antecedents of willingness to communicate in a second language would thus provide a more comprehensive model. In addition, prior research did not yet test interactions among antecedents of willingness to communicate in a second language; this paper addresses this issue.

In summary, this paper adapts findings from the field of sociolinguistics to the conceptual framework of language use in services by Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012). We build on these two research streams to examine the impact of perceived control, second language skills and political considerations in order to explain consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language in service encounters. Figure 1 presents an overview of this conceptual framework.

Figure 1 here, please

## **Hypotheses Development**

*Perceived Control.* The concept of control is heterogeneous in consumer research, with many different definitions (Lunardo, 2010; Skinner, 1996). In this paper, we use perceived control to refer to the extent to which consumers feel that they can influence the outcome of the service encounter. This definition builds on the understanding of control as a sense of personal control of a given situation (Inesi *et al.*, 2011; Paterson and Neufeld, 1995); this feeling of controlling the situation can alleviate stress (Glass and Singer, 1972) as it gives the individual a sense of being in

charge over what happens. This definition of perceived control is crucial to understanding services, as it leads to higher consumer confidence (Bearden *et al.*, 2001) and satisfaction (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002) with the service. However, achieving the desired outcome might be easier in some services and more difficult in others; in more complicated service contexts such as visiting a bank or visiting a doctor, the use of a special vocabulary might lead to misunderstandings, particularly if the interaction takes place in the consumer's second language (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). This could have consequences for the outcome of the service, as the level of control that consumers perceive that they have over the service further influences their perceptions of the whole service (Grewal *et al.*, 2007).

The need to feel a sense of control is thus crucial to consumers (Hui and Bateson, 1991) and perceived control influences consumer perceptions (Jewell and Kidwell, 2005). The feeling of being in control, also expressed as assurance, is a key determinant in the Servqual model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), further underlining how the feeling of control is connected to perceptions of service quality. Consumers respond positively to an increased feeling of being in control (Hui and Bateson, 1991) and consumers interacting in service contexts require control to feel assured about the service process (Namasivayam, 2004).

Perceived control is of particular importance for consumers engaging in service encounters, as the intangible nature of services impedes consumers' ability to predict the outcome of the interaction (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Laroche *et al.*, 2005). Based on this situation, Holmqvist and Grönroos's (2012) fifth proposition suggests that it could be particularly important for consumers to use their language in situations in which consumers already feel a certain loss of control. This proposition is in line sociolinguistic research that also posits that when people fear that there is a risk of comprehension problems that may cause uncertainty in the conversation, they are unwilling to converse in their second language (Kang, 2005). Moreover, when individuals feel that they are not in control, they are more unwilling to communicate in their second language and prefer to use their native language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998). Based on this, we hypothesize:

***H1: Perceived control during a service encounter leads to higher consumer willingness to communicate in a second language.***

*Perceived Second Language Proficiency.* Even though bilingualism among consumers may be widespread (Comrie, 2011), not all bilingual consumers are fluent in their second language

(Zhang and Schmitt, 2004). Building on research identifying second language competence as a key component in willingness to communicate in a second language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998), we propose that consumers' perceived second language proficiency impacts their willingness to communicate in that language. Fluent bilinguals can easily activate both languages, whereas non-fluent bilinguals have to put more effort into activating their second language (Jared and Kroll, 2001). This distinction is important, as it is individuals' perceived competence rather than their factual competence that drive their willingness to communicate in a second language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1999). Individuals who perceive themselves as poor communicators in a second language are less willing to communicate in that second language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998; MacIntyre *et al.*, 1999). Adopting these findings to a service context, we propose that consumers who perceive themselves as less fluent in their second language prefer to conduct the service in their native language, and are less willing to communicate in their second language than consumers who perceive themselves as good communicators. We hypothesize:

**H2:** *Stronger perceived second language proficiency leads to a higher willingness to communicate in one's second language.*

*Political Considerations.* Language is not just a tool of communication; consumers often perceive an emotional connection with their native language (Puntoni *et al.*, 2009). As consumers' emotional experiences drive their decisions to switch service provider (Roos and Friman, 2008), the fact that language use is emotional becomes particularly important. While earlier research has focused solely on second language skills (Zhang and Schmitt, 2004), Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) propose that language use may also depend on emotions, including the extent to which consumers identify with their own language group, and the feelings they have for their language.

Emotional preferences for one's own language are often manifested in political preferences for protecting the language group and a preference for using the language, particularly in markets where two language groups also tend to have political differences that largely follow linguistic and/or ethnic lines (Fraser, 2006; Spolsky and Cooper, 1991). Sociolinguistic research in bilingual countries concludes that consumers' emotions and their choice about which language to use becomes a political act (Heller, 1982), and that willingness to communicate in a second language depends on with which group people affiliate (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998). Consumers may

even base their feelings of identification with companies based on the language the company uses (cf. Spolsky and Cooper, 1991), and language preferences can echo ideological preferences (Kreander and Sundberg, 2007; McRae, 1999). Preferring to speak a given language may be based on language proficiency, but also on political ideology related to language use (Holmqvist, 2011; Torras and Gafaranga, 2002). At the same time, these emotions may be stronger in some regions than in others; language use can be highly politicized (Fraser, 2006) but also relatively moderate (Kreander and Sundberg, 2007). Furthermore, the same speaker may ascribe different considerations to language use in different contexts (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012).

As consumers with a strong identification with their own language are proposed to be less willing to use a second language (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012) and as sociologic research shows language use to be connected to political and ideological feelings (Drouilly, 2007; Heller, 1982; Torras and Gafaranga, 2002), we hypothesize:

***H3: Stronger political considerations lead to less willingness to communicate in a second language.***

*Interactions effects.* Consumers find it important to be in control of the interaction with the company (Bagozzi and Kimmel, 1995; Hui and Bateson, 1991) and might feel uncomfortable about interacting in their second language. In certain situations, people may not be willing to interact in their second language at all, because it would hinder them from effectively reaching their goals (Kang, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 1998). This suggests that consumers prefer to communicate in their native language in services where they perceive less control. When feeling more in control and perceiving less risk due to misunderstandings, consumers could be more willing to switch to their second language (cf. Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012).

People with strong second language skills experience less difficulties to communicate in a that language, and could be expected to be more willing to communicate in a second language than people with weaker second language skills (cf. MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al., 1999). Adapting these findings to a consumer context, consumers with weaker second language skills might run the risk of misunderstandings even in simple services, while consumer with strong second language skills could be expected to face fewer problems in simpler services while still perceiving a loss of control in more complicated services. We thus hypothesize that:



**H4:** *Perceived second language proficiency moderates the influence that perceived control during a service encounter has on consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language.*

Language is not only a functional tool for communication; in many markets, language plays a political role (Heller, 1982) and is important part of consumer identifications (cf. Spolsky and Cooper, 1991). Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages, Graham Fraser, describes how language choice in daily encounters may reflect political preferences and how some people express their political views by means of language use at the possible expense of control (cf. Fraser, 2006).

Even in services with little loss of control, consumers with high levels of political considerations might be less willing to communicate in a second language. For them, language use is a political matter (cf. Fraser, 2006) and the decision about which language to use is thus not dependent on the service but rather on a matter of principles. Consumers with low levels of political considerations, on the other hand, could be more willing to communicate in a second language in services with little loss of control; as language use is more functional than emotional for them, they would be more willing to use a second language as long as this does not impede their desired outcomes. To summarize, we expect that perceived control has a stronger impact on willingness to communicate in a second language for consumers with lower levels of political considerations, whereas consumers with high levels of political considerations are always less willing to switch to their second language regardless of control. We thus hypothesize:

**H5:** *Consumers' political considerations moderate the influence that perceived control during a service encounter has on consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language.*

*Cross-country comparisons.* While more than half the countries in the world are multilingual (Comrie, 2011), attitudes towards multilingualism can differ markedly between countries and language groups. Sociolinguistic researchers on such attitudes indicate that language conflicts are common in some countries (e.g. Canada or Belgium, cf. Mabry, 2011; Mnookin and Verbeke, 2009), whereas language conflicts are less common in other multilingual countries (Kreander and Sundberg 2007). Finland, for example, is a multilingual market with a history of political compromises concerning language (Andersson and Herberts 1996). Building on this situation, we might expect that the antecedents of consumers' willingness to communicate in a second

language might differ across countries. More specifically, political considerations might be a more prominent antecedent in countries where language conflicts are common. In addition to our hypotheses about the antecedents of willingness to communicate in a second languages, we thus also test whether these antecedents differ across countries between countries.

## METHOD

A questionnaire was designed to test the hypotheses, consisting of nine different types of services. The services were chosen based on a small prestudy ( $n=15$ ) in which we asked respondents to identify service encounters they perceive as either important or not important in terms of native language use. Based on the interviews, nine services were selected for the questionnaire: negotiating a bank loan, a medical visit, negotiating insurance, buying electric installations, booking a holiday online, visiting a hairdresser, buying an etching, buying groceries and visiting a café. All of the services were mentioned by respondents in the prestudy, most being mentioned several times. Eight of the services typically take place face to face, but based on the emergence of on-line services (Grönroos *et al.*, 2000), we also selected the booking of a holiday on-line. The selection of nine different kinds of service increases the generalizability of our results and creates variability in perceived control.

As Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) suggest that perceptions of language use may differ depending on whether the consumer belongs to a linguistic majority or minority, we decided to focus on one national majority language (Dutch in Belgium) and one national minority language (Swedish in Finland). This further allows us to compare a country where language conflicts are common (Belgium) and a country where language conflicts are less common (Finland). 223 Dutch-speaking Belgians (47.3% male,  $M_{age}=29.20$ ;  $SD_{age}=14.16$ ) and 138 Swedish-speaking Finns (43.7% male,  $M_{age}=34.61$ ,  $SD_{age}=10.26$ ) completed an online survey. Respondents were recruited via an online research panel. All had Dutch (Belgium) or Swedish (Finland) as their native language. In order to attain data collection equivalence (Hult *et al.*, 2008), we collected data simultaneously in both countries and used the same data collection methods. Both Belgium and Finland are bilingual, and the two official languages (Dutch and French in Belgium; Finnish and Swedish in Finland) are different enough to ensure that speakers of one language cannot understand the other without having studied it.

Respondents rated their willingness to communicate in a second language on a four-item nine-point Likert scale for all of the nine services; perceived control for each of the services was evaluated on a four-item nine-point Likert scale adopted from Bansal and Taylor (2002) and Dabholkar (1996), with 1 being the lowest and 9 the highest. Additionally, participants rated their second language skills on a three-item nine-point Likert scale adapted from Krishna and Ahluwalia (2008), and their political considerations on a three-item nine-point Likert scale based on the literature of political preferences in language use (Fraser, 2006; Heller, 1982). The suitability of the measurement items was ultimately judged by three independent reviewers; one professor of service management, one professor of sociolinguistics and one professor of consumer behavior and culture. Table 1 provides an overview of the measures, together with the Cronbach's alpha's. All of the Cronbach's alpha's are well above the 0.7 threshold, attesting the internal consistency of the measures. Important to note is that willingness to communicate in a second language and perceived control were evaluated for each of the nine services, while the respondents rated their second language skills and political considerations only once.

Table 1 here, please.

Back-translation was used to reassure that the questions measured the same concepts in both languages. During the back-translation procedure, we ensured that the translated items did not only possess lexical, idiomatic and grammatical equivalence but also had experiential equivalence; that is, items had the same meaning in both languages (Usunier, 2011). No large discrepancies were found between the alphas between the countries, indicating similar internal consistency properties for both countries (Hult *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, a multigroup confirmatory factor analytic procedure outlined by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) was employed to test cross-national invariance of our measurement instruments. Results in Table 2 indicate that metric invariance was achieved, thus the analysis reassures that we are able to compare the results of the multilevel regression models across the countries.

Table 2 here, please.

## RESULTS

The descriptive statistics for the dependent and service-related variables are listed in Table 3. Consumer willingness to communicate in a second language varies across the nine different services, ranging from consumers being very reluctant to switch language during a bank-

interaction (Belgium:  $M=1.86$ ; Finland:  $M=2.07$ ) or a medical visit (Belgium:  $M=2.32$ ; Finland:  $M=2.24$ ) or when buying an insurance (Belgium:  $M=1.95$ ; Finland:  $M=2.44$ ). Consumers are more willing to use their second language when buying electric equipment (Belgium:  $M=3.76$ ; Finland:  $M=4.65$ ), booking a holiday online (Belgium:  $M=4.11$ ; Finland:  $M=5.21$ ) or when going to a hairdresser (Belgium:  $M=4.36$ ; Finland:  $M=5.11$ ), yet they are most willing to communicate in a second language when buying an etching (Belgium:  $M=5.16$ ; Finland:  $M=5.94$ ), buying groceries (Belgium:  $M=5.46$ ; Finland:  $M=6.11$ ) or visiting a café (Belgium:  $M=6.18$ ; Finland:  $M=6.07$ ). These results already indicate that consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language might differ across different service settings.

A similar pattern was found for perceived control; for example, consumers feel a lack of control in encounters with banks (Belgium:  $M=4.62$ ; Finland:  $M=4.39$ ) or a moderate feeling of control when installing electric equipments (Belgium:  $M=6.45$ ; Finland:  $M=6.11$ ), while feeling most in control during café visits (Belgium:  $M=7.96$ ; Finland:  $M=8.11$ ). The average second language skills were 5.61 ( $SD=2.12$ ) in Belgium and 7.17 ( $SD=2.02$ ) in Finland; the average political considerations were 4.99 ( $SD=1.78$ ) in Belgium and 4.37 ( $SD=1.84$ ) in Finland.

Table 3 here, please.

The data were checked for multicollinearity before analysis. No high correlations between the independent variables were found (Belgium: all  $r_{(x,y)} < 0.106$ ; Finland: all  $r_{(x,y)} < 0.191$ ), hence all three variables were retained in the analysis. As part of the data analysis, we controlled for the demographic variables of age, gender and level of education. The results did not change however when adding or removing these covariates. Owing to the hierarchical structure of the data, we applied multilevel modeling to test the hypotheses, as multilevel models are well-suited for analyzing repeated measures data (Hox, 2010). Table 4 lists the regression results. We find a strong effect of perceived control in both Belgium ( $b=0.636$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Finland ( $b=0.699$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The less consumers feel in control, the less willing they are to switch to their second language, supporting H1.

Looking at Hypothesis 2, we find a significant effect of second language skills in Finland ( $b=0.126$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), though not in Belgium ( $b=0.065$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). The more fluent Finnish consumers feel to be in their second language, the more willing they are to communicate in their second language, supporting H2 in Finland but not in Belgium. Regarding political considerations, we find a significant and strong main effect in Belgium ( $b=-0.273$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); whereas no such effect

was found in Finland ( $b=-0.054, p>0.05$ ), providing support for H3 in Belgium, but not in Finland.

Looking at the interactions, we do not find a significant interaction effect between perceived control and second language skills in Belgium ( $b=-0.009, p>0.05$ ) nor in Finland ( $b=0.012, p>0.05$ ). Consequently H4 is not supported in either country. Notable differences, however, are found for the interaction between perceived control and political considerations. This effect is significant in Belgium ( $b=-0.029, p<0.05$ ) but not in Finland ( $b=0.017, p>0.05$ ). Belgian consumers who perceive low control are unwilling to switch language regardless of their political considerations. However, even in situations in which they are in control, Belgian consumers with strong political feelings remain unwilling to switch language while consumers with less political motivations are more willing to communicate in their second language. These results support H5 in Belgium. The antecedents of consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language would seem to be different across countries. Consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language appears to be driven mainly by second language skills in Finland, while being driven mainly by political considerations in Belgium. These differences, however, should not dim the similarities. In both countries, consumers' feeling of control during a service encounter is the major antecedent of willingness to switch language.

Table 4 here, please.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This manuscript introduces and tests a comprehensive framework of antecedents of consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language, offering two main contributions to the existing literature. First, the findings suggest that language might play an important role for consumers in their interactions with service providers. The results highlight the importance of focusing on language in interactions, as consumers prefer service in their native language in many business contexts. Through this study, we not only respond to Holmqvist and Grönroos' (2012) call for more service research on consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language in service encounters, we further show that consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language varies across service settings. Moreover, our findings are robust across service encounters in two different countries, Belgium and Finland. In both countries, consumer

willingness to communicate in a second language is shown to be low in a large number of different services.

Second, the findings highlight a noteworthy distinction between the countries. These results show that rather than language preferences being a result of second language skills *and* political considerations, language preferences seem to be the result of either second language skills *or* political considerations. While the effect of perceived control paints a coherent picture in both countries, the interaction effects show notable differences for perceived second language skills and for political considerations between markets. To a large extent, these differences seem to suggest that consumers are driven either by language skills or ideology, and that they may come at the expense of each other.

The situation in Finland is relatively straightforward: alongside control, second language skills have a direct impact on consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language. In contrast, political considerations do not appear to play any role for Finnish consumers. In Belgium, the situation appears to be the opposite: Belgian consumers' political considerations have a direct impact on their willingness to communicate in a second language, and political considerations also moderate the impact of control. Unlike in Finland, second language skills have no influence. These differences between markets might be explained by considering the sociologic difference between Belgian and Finnish society. Belgium is a market where the language question is at the core of politics, and political considerations are closely connected to how consumers perceive language use. It thus seems logic that political considerations take precedence over second language skills in Belgium, where language use appears to be an emotional matter rather than a functional matter, thus contributing empirical evidence for Holmqvist's and Grönroos' (2012) proposition that language should be understood in terms of consumers' emotional attachment to their native language. In Finland, a market with a history of political compromises concerning language (Kreander and Sundberg, 2007), political considerations have less strong connections to language use. This explains why perceived second language proficiency turn out to be a stronger antecedent instead of political considerations.

These findings underline the need to understand language use in an international context, as language influence looks different for consumers in different markets. While perceived second language proficiency mainly focuses on how capable consumers are to interact with companies in a second language, political considerations add another dimension to language use as they

concern consumers' emotions and identity. The results indicate that consumers take political considerations into account when evaluating language issues. Our findings show that by excluding political considerations, researchers risk viewing only part of the complex structure underlying consumer evaluations of language use. These findings show that being bilingual does not guarantee that the consumer is willing to use both languages. Many respondents in the study report being fully bilingual with strong perceived second language proficiency, yet still display a strong preference for native language use due to political considerations.

### **Managerial Implications**

From a managerial perspective, understanding consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language has potentially far-reaching implications as it helps managers design the firm's language strategies. Our framework of consumers' willingness to communicate in a second language in service encounters offers managers an instrument to help decide whether or not to invest in offering their services in different languages. Overall, this research carries three important implications for managers active on bilingual markets.

First, while our findings show that consumers are unwilling to communicate in a second language if not in control, the findings also show that consumers might be more willing to communicate in a second language if their continued control over the interaction is assured. For managers active in multilingual markets, particularly in contexts where the consumer might feel a lack of control in complex service situations, managers need to accommodate consumers to make sure they feel comfortable and able to understand all stages of the service delivery. For example, recent research on serving customers in a second language demonstrate the benefits of accommodating customers to let the customers know that the service provider recognizes the customer's situation if having to switch languages (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013). Using a few words in the customer's language, even when not able to speak it, could thus go some way towards accommodating customers in less language-intensive situations such as cafés, grocery stores or restaurants. It is less likely that the same strategy would work in more language intensive situations, such as banks, insurance companies or hospitals, where the whole outcome depend on the quality of the communication.

Second, the findings that both second language skills and political considerations can influence how willing consumers are to communicate in a second language are important to managers. One possible consequence is that managers on multilingual markets need to be

sensitive about the way they use language. Issues such as the order in which languages appear on signs, and the language in which employees first address consumers could cause politically sensitive consumers to perceive that the company views their language as less pertinent, and subsequently cause them to develop a negative image of the company (cf. Spolsky and Cooper, 1991). Building on earlier research on managing services in technology-driven firms showing the importance of extensive information-use (cf. van Riel *et al.*, 2011), we suggest that companies who have the possibility to register consumer preferences should take care to note what language preferences consumers select when entering a website. However, this option is not available for the large number of services with an actual physical interaction, emphasizing the importance of linguistically adapt service personnel.

Third, the opposite interaction findings from Finland versus Belgium regarding language skills and political considerations carry important implications for managers in multinational companies. In some countries, language use is more emotional and political than in other countries, and this emotional role also influences how consumers feel about switching language when interacting with companies. One important consequence is that managers cannot simply look at demographics; only looking at how well a consumer segment in multilingual countries speaks the language a company uses could be a risky measure. While such a measure would seem relatively reliable in Finland, where consumers are ready to interact in their second language if able to do so fluently, the same strategy would backfire badly in Belgium. Understanding such differences between countries is an important implication for managers in companies operating on several markets. However, these market-specific differences should not dim the similarities. In both markets in this study, consumers display a consistent preference for native language use, increasing in importance in contexts with potential lack of control, such as financial or medical services.

The strong emotional feelings for language use, particularly in Belgium, underline a different challenge facing managers. Using the language of one group risks alienating another group, as has been shown by sociolinguistic research (cf. Spolsky and Cooper, 1991). This challenge is not necessarily limited to countries with several official languages. Even in countries with one official language, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, the use of minority languages has increased as witnessed for example by the increasing use of Spanish in parts of the United States or Welsh and Gaelic in parts of the United Kingdom. While these efforts usually are welcomed by speakers of



the minority languages, there have been reports of a backlash from speakers of the majority language against the use of minority languages. This suggests that managers attempting a multilingual strategy need to find the right balance; in some cases managers may need to communicate the reason for a multilingual strategy to mention their desire to serve all consumers.

### **Limitations and future research**

Several limitations also serve as opportunities for future research. The focus in this manuscript is on two bilingual countries in which both languages are official and enjoy equal rights in each country's constitution. Furthermore, the smaller language within each country (French and Swedish) is larger on a global scale than the language that is largest within the country (Dutch and Finnish). These factors make for a certain equilibrium in status between these languages. An interesting avenue for further research is to test whether consumer language preferences look different in countries where the minority languages do not have the same protection and civil support. Languages such as Gaelic, Basque or Catalan are examples of languages that are smaller than the language spoken around them in the countries where they are spoken, lack the same official recognition and are not the main language of any state. As sociolinguistic research calls attention to the role the status of a language has for willingness to use it (Holmes, 2001), future research could investigate language use in more unequal settings where one language is more dominant than the other and enjoy higher status. Another possible venue for future research is to look at language in a local or regional context; this study focused on bilingual countries, but bilingual regions such as Brittany in France, Wales in the United Kingdom or California in the US could provide interesting variations.

The different kinds of interactions seem to suggest a distinction between language-intense and relatively language-free interactions. While some interactions require a lot of communication between the consumer and the company, other services might require less. This is evident in the findings, where consumers perceive it very important to speak their own language in services such as visiting banks or doctors. Future research could provide a more in-depth focus on this distinction, looking at whether consumers' language use could be driven by different emotions in different situations.

An additional aspect worth considering is the individual's approach to second language use. While some people may be reluctant to speak a foreign language even though relatively proficient in it, others are more prepared to make use of their second language skills even though

far from fluent. This topic has received considerable attention in the field of psycholinguistics, but its adaption to business research would make for an interesting research avenue.

Future research might also explore whether bilingual consumers within an officially unilingual country attach importance to being served in their native language, and which antecedents play a role in this situation. Finally, although we have examined how willing consumers are to speak a second language, research has not yet examined how bilingual consumers react to actually being served in a second language.

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**Table 1: Measurement scales**

	<b>Cronbach's <math>\alpha</math></b>	
	<b>Belgium</b>	<b>Finland</b>
<b>Willingness to communicate in a second language (New scale, based on Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012; MacIntyre 2007)</b>	0.929	0.946
I find it important to be served in [my native language] in this service context (R)		
If this service provider wouldn't serve me in [my native language], I would be dissatisfied (R)		
Given this context, I wouldn't mind being served in [my second language]		
Being served in [my native language] is crucial to me in this context (R)		
<b>Perceived control (Bansal and Taylor, 2002; Dabholkar, 1996)</b>	0.835	0.899
In a situation like this I feel that I'm in control		
I have the possibility to get out precisely what I want from the interaction with this service provider.		
If served in [second language] in this situation I achieve the same results as if served in [native language]. (R)		
In this situation I have complete control over what the outcome of the service will be.		
<b>Second language skills (Krishna and Ahluwalia, 2008)</b>	0.907	0.862
I am very fluent in [my second language]		
I understand both [my second language] and [my native language]		
I can easily switch from [my native language] to [my second language]		
<b>Political considerations (New scale, based on Drouilly, 2007; Heller, 1982; Kreander and Sundberg, 2007)</b>	0.806	0.855
My language plays a part in how I vote in elections		
I am in favor of increased autonomy for [my linguistic region]		
[My linguistic region] should become independent		

**Table 2: Measurement equivalence tests**

	$\chi^2$	$df$	$\chi^2/df$	<i>RMSEA</i>	$\Delta \chi^2$	$\Delta df$	<i>p</i>
Unconstrained model	315.32	162	1.946	0.072	-	-	-
Metric invariance	329.64	177	1.862	0.070	14.32	15	0.501

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics**

	<b>Belgium</b>		<b>Finland</b>	
	<b>Willingness to communicate in second language</b>	<b>Perceived control</b>	<b>Willingness to communicate in second language</b>	<b>Perceived control</b>
Bank	1.86	4.62	2.07	4.39
Medical visit	2.32	4.94	2.24	4.94
Insurance	1.95	4.84	2.44	4.60
Electric installments	3.76	6.45	4.65	6.11
Holiday online	4.11	6.09	5.21	6.99
Hairdresser	4.36	5.52	5.11	6.36
Buying an etching	5.16	6.01	5.94	6.35
Buying groceries	5.46	7.45	6.11	8.07
Café visit	6.18	7.69	6.07	8.11

*Measured on Likert scales where 1 is lowest and 9 highest*

**Table 4: Multilevel regression results**

	<b>Belgium</b>			<b>Finland</b>		
	B	SE(b)		B	SE(b)	
<i>Level 1: Service-related antecedents</i>						
Constant	3.490	0.244	***	3.525	0.718	***
Perceived control (CONTR)	0.636	0.024	***	0.699	0.026	***
<i>Level 2: Person-related antecedents</i>						
Second language proficiency (SLP)	0.065	0.043	n.s.	0.126	0.062	*
Political considerations (POL)	-0.273	0.050	***	-0.054	0.068	n.s.
<i>Level1 * Level2 interactions</i>						
CONTR*SLP	-0.009	0.012	n.s.	0.012	0.011	n.s.
CONTR*POL	-0.029	0.013	*	0.017	0.017	n.s.
<i>Covariates</i>						
Gender	-0.033	0.182	n.s.	-0.285	0.256	n.s.
Age	-0.028	0.007	**	-0.022	0.013	n.s.
Education	0.189	0.093	*	0.205	0.128	n.s.

**Notes:** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , n.s. not significant. Perceived control, second language skills, political considerations, and age are grand-mean centered.

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework of main and interaction effects**

