

# Examining the relationship between language divergence and word-of-mouth intentions

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## **Abstract**

More than half of the countries in the world are multilingual, and more than half the world's consumers speak more than one language. Thus, bilingual consumers often receive services provided in a second or nonnative language. This article examines these consumers' word-of-mouth intentions after a service provision in a second language. Two studies show that consumers served in a second language are less likely to spread positive word of mouth. The results also reveal a negative halo effect, such that consumers served in a second language perceive the service provider as less responsive in general. Furthermore, the service provider's perceived responsiveness appears far more important for determining positive word-of-mouth intentions than other factors, such as service reliability. This study therefore contributes to the fields of service and sociolinguistics, with important implications for managers as well.

**Keywords:** language; multilingualism; service encounter; word of mouth

*If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen [then you must speak German].*

—Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt

## **1. Introduction**

Despite this recommendation, in interactions between buyers and sellers with different native languages, consumers may not always be able to use their native language (Callahan 2006; Schau, Dellande, and Gilly 2007). This is a problem that is particularly prevalent in countries with more than one official language as well as in spreading international contexts due to increased globalization and tourism (Duchêne 2009). Marketing research has started considering the role of language in services, and recent contributions offer a conceptual model of how language influences service encounters (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012) and an analysis of consumers' perceptions of receiving service in native languages (Holmqvist 2011). Yet to date, no empirical research examines consumer reactions to being served in a second language, nor does prior research provide potential explanations for why consumers might react differently to service in native or second languages.

The present article seeks to address these gaps by examining the impact of language convergence and divergence on word-of-mouth intentions. Language convergence occurs when a speaker accommodates an interlocutor by speaking the latter's language, and implies that one party of a bilingual conversation insists on speaking his or her first language. In this situation, the interlocutor must switch away from his or her native language (Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis 1973; Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991). For example, if a native French-speaking Canadian provides service to a native English-speaking consumer and does so in English, that service provider converges to the consumer's native language. If this service provider instead serves the consumer in French, the service provider diverges from the consumer's language. Such language convergence or divergence likely influences consumers'

word-of-mouth intentions, because effective communication during a service encounter has a particularly strong influence on word-of-mouth communication (Harrison-Walker 2001). In addition, unfavorable experiences during service encounters make consumers less likely to recommend the service provider to other people (Choi and Mattila 2008). Word-of-mouth intentions also constitute a central measure of customer evaluations of service encounters, which Reichheld (2003) even calls the most important metric.

With this analysis, the present manuscript offers two main contributions to marketing literature. First, this study provides the first empirical demonstration that consumers who receive service in a second language are less likely to spread positive word of mouth about the service provider. By showing that language divergence can influence intentions, this article also validates parts of Holmqvist and Grönroos's (2012) framework and specifies that in markets that contain different language groups, service in a second language may have a negative influence on consumers' intentions to recommend the service provider to others.

Second, this study offers a potential explanation of how language divergence relates to word-of-mouth intentions. Using speech accommodation theory and the similarity attraction paradigm as theoretical anchors, this research suggests that consumers who receive service in a second language engage in a negative halo effect: If the service provider appears to be making insufficient efforts to provide service in their native language, consumers also perceive the service provider as less responsive in general. That is, consumers who receive service in their second language believe that the service provider is less attentive and helpful in general.

The next section reviews literature on the role of language in service encounters and formulates the study hypotheses. Next, this article describes the method and principal results of two studies. The concluding section offers a discussion of the findings, some managerial implications, and limitations of this research.

## **2. Theoretical background and hypotheses**

### *2.1. The role of language in the service encounter*

Service encounters are at the core of services as dyadic interactions between consumers and service providers (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). To deliver service, a service provider must understand what consumers need and consumers need to explain their preferences. The recent focus on value cocreation further emphasizes the importance of this dyadic interaction (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Vargo and Lusch 2004). In this dialogical process (Ballantyne and Varey 2006), service providers' and consumers' processes merge into an interactive process in which both actors play active roles (Grönroos and Ravald 2011). Service providers and consumers also must engage in verbal communication to communicate expectations and requests (Oliver 2006). However, few studies examine service encounters from a communication perspective (Echeverri and Skalén 2011). Previous studies examine the extent, frequency, or quality of information that salespersons or service providers provide (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007), the use of ceremonial, conventional, or commercial language (Otnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni 2012), the adoption of dialect (Mai and Hoffman 2011; Schau, Dellande, and Gilly 2007), and the use of accents (Hill and Tombs 2011). Overall, these studies suggest that communication quality influences consumers' perceptions of the service provider.

While these studies enhance the understanding of the role of language in service encounters, all current studies focus on a setting where the consumer and the service provider speak the same language. Yet in the modern global world, countries with only one official language are fewer than multilingual countries (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012). Service encounters might be more complex if the consumer and service provider do not speak the same language. Sociolinguistic research indicates that the most powerful party in a conversation expects the other party to converge to their language (Callahan 2006). The

consumer is often the most powerful party in a service encounter (Grönroos 2008), consumers consequently may expect to be served in their native language. In addition, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) suggest that consumers who are served in their second language on a bilingual market might attribute this event to the service provider's unwillingness to speak their native language, rather than service provider's inability to speak their language. Owing to this situation, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) emphasize the need for more research into how language influences service encounters. This study examines (i) whether language differences between customers and service providers during service encounters might influence word-of-mouth intentions, and (ii) whether consumer perceptions of the service provider's unwillingness to serve them in their native language extend to less favorable perceptions of the service provider's overall perceived responsiveness. The current study examines this relationship empirically, building on insights from speech accommodation theory.

## *2.2. Speech accommodation theory as a theoretical anchor*

Interpersonal interactions without a shared native language appear commonly in sociolinguistic and social psychological research, as conceptualized in speech accommodation theory (Giles et al. 1973). Speech accommodation occurs when a speaker adapts his or her speech to approximate the speech of an interlocutor, in the form of minor adjustments, such as adapting speech rates, pauses, or pronunciation, or more drastically, such as switching language (Callahan 2006). In addition to being particularly important in the context of bilingual countries or regions, where interactions with speakers of different languages are common, speech accommodation can influence any encounter that involves native speakers of two different languages.

Several studies note people's reactions to language convergence or divergence and show that even a minor speech divergence yields negative effects. For example, Kelly and

Toshiyuki (1993) consider whether people have more negative feelings toward speakers whose voice volume differs from their own, finding that respondents produce less affective warmth toward and feel less persuaded by speakers whose speech volume is higher rather than similar. That is, people develop less favorable impressions of speakers who diverge rather than converge. Genesee and Bourhis (1982) present respondents with constructed conversations, in which the speakers either converge with the respondents' native language or do not. The results indicate that more negative evaluations result when the speakers diverge (speak respondents' second language) rather than converge (speak the respondents' native language). Yet no prior literature demonstrates whether language divergence have a negative influence on consumers' willingness to spread positive word of mouth.

Sociolinguistics researchers often rely on the similarity attraction paradigm to explain why language convergence leads to favorable responses and language divergence leads to unfavorable responses (Giles et al. 1991). This paradigm (Byrne 1997) suggests that as two people become more similar to each other, the increased similarity increases the chances that each person likes the other (Montoya and Horton 2013). Increased similarity also can induce people to spread positive word of mouth. For example, Brown et al. (2005) show that the more similar customers' and retailers' identities, the more positive word of mouth the customers spread. Zhang and Bloemer (2008) also note that similar values between customers and service providers lead customers to spread more positive word of mouth.

Communication and language might serve as a source of similarity (Montoya and Briggs 2013). Sunnafrank and Miller (1981) observe that people feel attracted to others with whom they can communicate well. In a language context, attraction results from lowered language differences, such that the speaker becomes more similar to the listener (Koslow, Shamdasani, and Touchstone, 1994; Montoya and Briggs 2013). Therefore, the language that service

providers use might serve as a source of similarity, and when consumers and service providers are more similar, consumers are more likely to spread positive word of mouth.

*H1: Consumers who receive service in a second language during service encounters express lower positive word-of-mouth intentions than consumers who receive service in a native language.*

### 2.3. Mediating role of perceived employee responsiveness

Speech accommodation literature proposes that the perceived amount of effort exerted by a speaker drives the negative effects of language divergence. Listeners who do not hear their native language perceive that the speaker fails to exert enough effort or show sufficient flexibility or accommodation. As a result, listeners put less effort into reciprocating, and evaluate the speaker more negatively (Giles et al. 1991). For example, Giles et al. (1973) asked Canadian English speakers to listen to tape recordings of a French-Canadian speaker who either attempted to speak English or only spoke French. The respondents offered more negative evaluations when the speaker spoke only French, because these listeners perceived insufficient efforts by the speaker to use their native language. Listeners instead reciprocate efforts to accommodate native languages; for example, listeners engage in more reciprocal behaviors with speakers who attempt to converge rather than diverge in the language spoken (Simard, Taylor, and Giles 1976). The more effort a speaker puts into messages, the more favorably listeners perceive this speaker, and the more favorable behavior the listeners display in return.

The present article proposes that the negative effects of being served in a second language result from the perceived amount of effort service providers display when serving consumers in their native language, and also extend to more general negative perceptions of the service provider as less responsive *in general*. Perceived responsiveness refers to the service provider's willingness to help customers and provide prompt service, which entails an



important service quality dimension (Ladhari, Pons, Bressolles, and Zins 2011; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988).

The similarity-attraction paradigm also might help explain this effect. Boshoff (2012) proposes that people engage in negative stereotyping of a service provider who is dissimilar. In a meta-analysis, Montoya and Horton (2013) compare multiple perspectives underlying the similarity-attraction paradigm and finds that the information-processing perspective offers the most suitable explanation. The information one person has about another person determines the level of attraction to that second person, especially if the information is salient. Kaplan and Anderson (1973) also show that a single, salient source of negative information leads to expectations of various other negative characteristics and thus less attraction to the person.

Language is a highly salient feature of interactions between customers and service providers and might lead to stereotyping (Giles et al. 1991). In other words, one particular cue (the language used) might affect an overall evaluation of a person. On the basis of the information processing perspective of the similarity-attraction paradigm (Kaplan and Anderson 1973; Montoya and Horton 2013), the present research proposes that customers who detect language divergence by the service provider (salient cue) believe the service provider is less responsive in general. This perception in turn can influence customers' likelihood of recommending the service provider to others. Thus, both speech accommodation theory and the similarity attraction paradigm suggest that customers who receive service in their second language experience a negative halo effect and limit overall assessments of the service provider to this single, negative attribute (McDougall, Riley, Cameron, and McKinstry, 2008).

*H2: Customers' perceptions of employee responsiveness mediate the relationship between language divergence and positive word-of-mouth intentions.*

### **3. Studies**

Two studies provide tests of the hypotheses. Study 1 tests the main effect of language divergence on positive word-of-mouth intentions using scenario-based experiments in two bilingual countries, Belgium and Finland. Study 2 confirms the external validity of the impact of language divergence on positive word-of-mouth intentions by investigating actual customer experiences. Study 2 also tests whether perceived employee responsiveness mediates the relationship between language divergence and positive word-of-mouth intentions.

### 3.1. Study 1

3.1.1 *Method.* Belgium (Puntoni, de Langhe, and van Osselaer 2009) and Finland (Holmqvist 2011) provide good settings for this study, because of these countries' sociolinguistic characteristics. Belgium is bilingual Dutch/French, and Finland is bilingual Finnish/Swedish. The sample consists of 54 adult Dutch-speaking Belgian bilinguals (51.9% male;  $M_{age} = 33.06$  years) and 118 Swedish-speaking adult Finnish bilinguals (54.7% male;  $M_{age} = 31.36$  years), randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Participants read a scenario in which they visited a restaurant in Brussels (Belgium, bilingual French/Dutch) or Helsinki (Finland, bilingual Finnish/Swedish), where a waiter provides service in their native or their second language. This scenario provides a realistic setting as restaurant visitors in these regions often switch between two languages. The respondents read the following scenario:

*Please imagine the following situation. Today you and a friend are visiting [Brussels/Helsinki] and are going for lunch. You enter a nice looking restaurant and take a seat at one of the tables. After going through the menu, you decide to order French fries and a steak, and your friend decides to order some pasta. You call the waiter, who immediately comes to your table. The waiter looks proper and speaks [native language/second language]. You order your food and drinks. Some time later, the drinks are delivered to your table, and some further time later, your meal is also brought to your table. The food tastes delicious. After the delicious meal and a nice chat*

*with your friend, you ask for the bill, which is for 29.70€. After paying the bill, you leave the restaurant.*

In the scenarios, the restaurant looks nice, the food tastes good, and the price is moderate, so this presentation should isolate the effects of language divergence on customer outcomes. The samples consist of only native Dutch-speaking Belgians and native Swedish-speaking Finns. After reading the scenario, participants evaluated their word-of-mouth intentions (Belgium  $\alpha = .94$ ; Finland  $\alpha = .92$ ) on seven-point Likert scales (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002). A two-item, seven-point Likert scale (Liao 2007) provided the measure of scenario realism (Belgium  $\alpha = .93$ ; Finland  $\alpha = .85$ ). The respondents were also asked some filler questions about the restaurant and their general experience in order to ensure that the focus on language use would not be obvious.

*3.1.2. Results.* The respondents evaluated the scenarios as realistic, in both Belgium ( $M = 6.0$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ) and Finland ( $M = 5.8$ ;  $SD = 1.3$ ). The average scenario realism rating did not differ across scenarios (Belgium  $t_{(52)} = .24, p > .05$ ; Finland  $t_{(116)} = .97, p > .05$ ).

Consistent with H1, language divergence exerted a negative impact on positive word-of-mouth intentions (Belgium  $F_{(1,52)} = 23.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .32$ ; Finland  $F_{(1,116)} = 25.62, p < .001; \eta^2 = .18$ ). Customers who received service in their second language expressed lower positive word-of-mouth intentions (Belgium  $M = 3.9$ , Finland  $M = 4.6$ ) than customers who received service in their native language (Belgium  $M = 5.6$ , Finland  $M = 5.8$ ). These findings support H1 in both countries.

*3.1.3. Discussion.* Study 1 supports the idea that language divergence has a negative impact on consumer word-of-mouth intentions. The findings are consistent across two bilingual countries, illustrating the generalizability of the results. This consistency is important, because Belgium and Finland display different sociolinguistic structures. Dutch-speaking Belgians represent around 55% of the Belgian population in Belgium, whereas Swedish-speaking Finns

represent only around 6% of the Finnish population. Moreover, language conflicts are high on the political agenda in Belgium (Mnookin and Verbeke 2009) but less prominent in Finland (Holmqvist 2011). Finding the same effect among Swedish-speaking Finns and among Dutch-speaking Belgians provides a conservative test, because Swedish-speaking Finns clearly represent a minority, and language conflicts are not common in Finland. The findings thus indicate that consumers' preference for native language service is a widespread phenomenon and should be important to managers in all markets with more than one language group.

The use of scenario-based experiments represents a limitation of Study 1. This approach increases internal validity but possibly at the cost of external validity. Study 2 aims to enhance the external validity of the results by conducting a survey and testing for the impact of language divergence on consumer word of mouth using real customer experiences. In addition, Study 2 examines the mediating role of perceived responsiveness in the relationship between language divergence and word of mouth.

### *3.2. Study 2*

*3.2.1. Method.* One hundred forty-six adult Belgian bilinguals (45.6% male;  $M_{age} = 32.3$  years), recruited through an online research panel, recalled a restaurant visit in Brussels during the previous six months. Previous research shows that a six-month period is suitable as a means to reduce recall bias (Liao 2007; Singh and Duque 2012). The participants described their experience and then rated their positive word-of-mouth intentions ( $\alpha = .96$ ), using the same scales as in Study 1. A four-item, seven-point Likert scale (Andaleeb and Conway 2006) provides the measure of consumer perceptions of employee responsiveness ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

In addition, the questionnaire also contains covariates. According to Andaleeb and Conway (2006), perceived food quality and reliability ( $\alpha = .82$ , three items), restaurant physical design and appearance ( $\alpha = .84$ , two items), and price perceptions ( $\alpha = .82$ , two items) can influence consumers' perceptions of a restaurant. The present study therefore used

a seven-point Likert scale to measure these variables (Andaleeb and Conway 2006). Respondents indicated if the waiter at the restaurant in Brussels spoke in their native (Dutch) or their second (French) language. Finally, the respondents provided demographic information. Similar to Study 1, the questionnaire contained a few filler items. Table 1 provides an overview of the measures.

**Table 1 here.**

*3.2.2 Results.* The majority (55.7%) of the respondents described a restaurant visit in which the waiter provided service in their native language, whereas the remainder (44.3%) received service in their second language. These results show that language divergence can be quite common, particularly in multilingual regions. The results also reveal that language divergence has a significant impact on word-of-mouth intentions ( $F_{(1,144)} = 9.20, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$ ). Consumers who receive service in their second language are less likely to spread positive word of mouth ( $M = 4.0$ ) than are consumers who receive service in their native language ( $M = 4.8$ ). These findings provide additional support for H1.

As Iacobucci, Saldanha, and Deng (2007) recommend, a structural equation model tests the second hypothesis. Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step procedure ensures an adequate measurement and structural model. The first step establishes an appropriate measurement model; the confirmatory factor analysis reveals that the chi-square value for the overall model is 87.5 ( $df = 76, p = .17$ ). The other fit indices (comparative fit index [CFI] = .99, Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = .99, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .93, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .03) are all satisfactory. The estimated covariance thus approximates the observed covariance among the constructs.

Additional tests assess convergent validity, reliability, and discriminant validity. The confirmatory factor analysis results in Table 1 lend strong support for the convergent validity of the measures. All standardized factor loadings exceed the recommended .6 threshold

(Bagozzi and Yi 1988). The composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE; Fornell and Larcker 1981) indices demonstrate the internal validity of the measures. That is, measures are internally valid if all CRs are greater than .7 and all AVEs are greater than .5; in the present study, the minimum CR is .82, and the minimum AVE is .65.

Finally, the test of discriminant validity relies on a comparison of the AVE estimate for each construct with the squared correlation between any two constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity exists if the minimum AVE exceeds the squared correlation between the two variables. Table 2 lists the correlations (below the diagonal) and squared correlations (above the diagonal) among the latent variables. The lowest AVE is .65 (food quality and reliability), and the highest squared correlation between any two variables is .61 (word-of-mouth intentions and perceived employee responsiveness). These results confirm the discriminant validity of the constructs. The measurement model thus meets all relevant psychometric properties.

**Table 2 here.**

In the second step, a structural model that specifies the relationships among language divergence, word-of-mouth intentions, and perceived employee responsiveness provides a test of the hypothesized relationships (Figure 1). The proposed model also links the covariates—price perceptions, food quality and reliability, and physical design and appearance—with word-of-mouth intentions. The goodness-of-fit statistics indicate that the proposed model fits the data reasonably well ( $\chi^2 = 174.3$ ,  $df = 86$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .96, GFI = .87, RMSEA = .08). Including the correlations of perceived employee responsiveness with perceived price, food quality and reliability, and physical design and appearance significantly improves model fit ( $\chi^2 = 94.5$ ,  $df = 80$ ,  $p = .13$ , CFI = .99, TLI = .99, GFI = .92, RMSEA = .03). The significance of the results does not change, so the correlations among these variables remain constrained to zero. Table 3 lists the structural model results (see also Figure 1). The

presented direct and indirect effects support H2: Language divergence has a significant impact on perceived employee responsiveness ( $\beta = -.24, p < .01$ ), showing that if service personnel use consumers' second language in service interactions, the consumers consider the service provider less responsive in general. This perceived lack of responsiveness in turn influences consumers' positive word-of-mouth intentions ( $\beta = .74, p < .001$ ). Therefore, increases in perceived responsiveness induce consumers to spread favorable word of mouth about the service provider. The indirect effect of language divergence on word-of-mouth intentions through perceived employee responsiveness also is significant ( $\beta = -.28, p < .001$ ), so perceived employee responsiveness mediates the relationship between language divergence and word-of-mouth intentions. The significant effect of language divergence on word-of-mouth intentions disappears ( $\beta = -.26, p > .05$ ); perceived responsiveness acts as a full mediator, in support of H2.

**Figure 1 here./Table 3 here.**

Finally, consumers' price perceptions exert a negative impact on word-of-mouth intentions ( $\beta = -.20, p < .01$ ); consumers who believe they paid too much are less likely to speak positively about the restaurant. In contrast, physical design and appearance have positive effects on word-of-mouth intentions ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ). The more attractive consumers find the restaurant's servicescape, the more likely they are to recommend the restaurant to others. Yet food quality and reliability surprisingly have no significant effects on word-of-mouth intentions ( $\beta = .10, p > .05$ ).

*3.2.3 Discussion.* The results of Study 2 further illustrate that language divergence can have a direct negative impact on consumers' word of mouth intentions. Because Study 2 relies on real customer experiences rather than experimental manipulations, these findings provide additional support for the findings in Study 1. Moreover, the results show that consumers' perceptions of employee responsiveness mediate the negative impact of language divergence

on word-of-mouth intentions. Consumers served in their second language may be willing to overlook the negative impact of language use if the service provider is otherwise responsive.

#### **4. General discussion**

The combined results of two studies contribute to a coherent picture, in which language divergence strongly influences consumer word-of-mouth intentions. With these findings, this research offers two contributions to service, marketing, and sociolinguistics literature. First, the results expand understanding of the role of language in service contexts. As many researchers show, language can affect consumers through advertising and text-processing (e.g., Puntoni et al. 2009; Spielmann and Delvert 2013). Yet these contexts lack direct consumer–company interactions. Building on the role of the consumer as an active value creator in interactions (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Vargo and Lusch 2004), this manuscript proposes that language has a significant role in service contexts as well. The results of the two studies support this proposition; when consumers must switch to their second language during a service encounter, the switch exerts a strong negative impact on their evaluations of the service provider. This situation makes language a crucial ingredient in the service interaction. The findings validate parts of Holmqvist and Grönroos’s (2012) conceptual framework while also expanding the framework by introducing the concept of speech accommodation, adapted from the field of sociolinguistics. The present study further combines speech accommodation with perceived employee responsiveness to demonstrate that the employees’ efforts to accommodate the consumer influence the consumer’s perceptions of responsiveness. In addition, finding that language divergence affects word of mouth intentions represents a contribution to the field of sociolinguistics. Several studies show that language divergence affects attitudes and emotions toward an interlocutor (e.g., Genesee and Bourhis 1982; Giles et al. 1991) but ignore how language divergence actually affects people’s intentions. The



findings thus show that the negative consequences of language divergence are much stronger than extant literature currently assumes.

Second, this study offers a potential explanation of how language divergence affects word-of-mouth intentions. Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) make a case for focusing on language in service encounters, but their conceptual framework does not provide insights into why being served in a second language might lead to lower word-of-mouth intentions. The present research addresses this gap by showing that consumers experience a negative halo effect that lowers their perceptions of service providers' overall responsiveness. This finding adds to speech accommodation theory by showing that listeners' reactions to language divergence are not limited to perceptions of a lack of effort (Giles et al. 1991) but also create more general negative perceptions of the speaker. Studies formally examining the mediating effects between language divergence and people's reactions are rare; uncovering this underlying process therefore represents a contribution to service and marketing literature.

The findings reveal an interesting pattern regarding the importance of different quality dimensions on word of mouth. A service provider's responsiveness has a more crucial effect on consumer word-of-mouth intentions than does the reliability of the offer, the servicescape, or price perceptions. This observation is interesting, considering that prior literature stresses the importance of reliability over responsiveness in triggering word of mouth about restaurants (Kim, Ng, and Kim 2009). A bilingual context may increase the importance of the interpersonal dimension during service encounters, in line with speech accommodation theory. Giles et al. (1991) propose that language divergence makes an intergroup comparison more salient. Consumers who must switch to a second language likely start thinking in terms of us (speakers of the native language) versus them (speakers of the second language). This increased emphasis might induce people to focus more on the interpersonal dimension and thus shape reactions to language divergence.

#### *4.1. Managerial implications*

This research offers important implications for managers of firms that serve consumers from different language groups. When consumers interact with employees in a language other than their native language, the interaction lowers their word-of-mouth intentions. Adapting language during service encounters thus might pay off, in that word of mouth is vital to business performance (Aksoy et al. 2012); the growing presence of online social networks continues to intensify the importance of word of mouth (e.g., Kim and Gupta 2012).

The studies focused on restaurant settings, a service setting in which consumers tend to consider language less important than in many other services (Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh 2013), so the negative effects of language divergence could be even more pronounced in settings with higher levels of risk and involvement. Whenever possible, managers should provide service in consumers' native languages. Intuitive as this proposition might seem, Study 2 shows that language divergence is quite common. Many markets around the world are multilingual (Comrie 2011), and consumers often must interact in a language other than their native language (Callahan 2006). Thus, identifying and avoiding the negative effects of language divergence represents an important managerial goal.

Managers can consider several potential ways to address the problems caused by language divergence. Firms might use language skills or multilingualism as a hiring criterion for new employees, and managers can encourage employees to participate in language courses, such as by offering compensation for such classes or granting bonuses to employees who achieve fluency in multiple market languages. The viability of such practices might vary across countries though. In many European countries (e.g., the two countries in this study, Belgium and Finland), bonuses for strong language skills are common practice, perceived as similar to bonuses earned for any other skill. However, in other countries, especially those in which different language groups reflect different ethnic identities, bonuses for language skills might

appear discriminatory, and firms offering such bonuses could suffer backlash. Managers therefore should confirm that language bonuses match the norms of the society before instituting such practices.

Another option to avoid the negative consequences of language divergence is to use nonverbal behaviors. In a study of managers' impacts on employees who speak different languages, Madera, Dawson, and Neal (2012) find that nonverbal behaviors can enhance employees' job performance. Thus service providers serving bilingual consumers might use facial expressions, such as eye contact and discrete smiles, together with friendly hand gestures, to help facilitate cross-cultural communication (Knapp and Hall 2010).

The finding that perceived responsiveness mediates the effects of language divergence on word of mouth also yields interesting insights for managers. Employees might try to avoid the negative effects of language divergence by stressing their overall responsiveness. By exhibiting responsiveness to consumers' needs, along with a willingness to remedy problems instantaneously, service employees likely can limit the spillover effects from language divergence to overall responsiveness perceptions. For example, if a diner raises her hand and summons a waiter, the waiter can show responsiveness by quickly going to the consumer's table. Such actions might dampen the negative consequences of language divergence.

For managers, the finding that perceived responsiveness has a very strong impact on word of mouth also poses additional challenges. Managers cannot assume that consumers will overlook language divergence, even if the company provides reliable service in a nice atmosphere at an acceptable price. Instead, service providers must invest to enhance perceived responsiveness, which can drive word of mouth. Providing language training or selecting bilingual employees might be a way to do so.

#### *4.2. Limitations and further research*

Several limitations of the present study offer opportunities for further studies. First, this article uses scenario-based experiments and a retrospective method to examine the impact of language divergence on word-of-mouth intentions. A field experiment might provide a fruitful research extension. Second, this manuscript centers on service encounters in regions in which interactions in different languages are common. Consumers might react more strongly to language divergence in a region in which the consumers' native language is predominant, and thus interactions in different languages are less common. Analyzing whether language influences are stronger or weaker in such regions would be an interesting extension of the current study. Third, this research focuses only on perceived responsiveness as a potential explanation for why language divergence might affect word-of-mouth intentions. Additional research might examine other mediating variables such as consumers' negative emotions.

The results show that having to switch languages causes consumers to feel more negative about the service, so examining different recovery efforts might be an interesting pathway for further research. Previous service recovery literature implies that offering an immediate apology and providing explanations are the best options (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999). Ongoing research also should investigate whether these service recovery tactics are appropriate in the context of language divergence. Moreover, research might examine whether, for example, providing an apology in a consumer's second language has the same meaning as providing an apology in a consumer's native language. Researchers could examine too whether a service provider who is unable to conduct a full conversation in the consumer's native language might mitigate the negative consequences of language divergence by starting the conversation simply in the consumer's native language. For example, the service provider might begin by saying, "I'm sorry I don't speak [consumer's native language] fluently, are you comfortable in [consumer's second language]?"

Finally, as previously noted, the practice of providing bonuses for language skills is a common practice in many countries but might appear discriminatory in others. Investigating how consumers who belong to the linguistic majority perceive a firm's efforts to accommodate consumers who speak a minority language would be an interesting and relevant avenue for research into consumer perceptions of language use.

In summary, this research shows that managers should strive to serve consumers in their native language. The large number of multilingual regions in the world, and the increasing importance of communicating across languages due to globalization, imply that the present contributions are only the beginning. More work is necessary to understand fully how to deal with language divergence.

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**Table 1: Construct measures and confirmatory factor analysis results**

<b>Measures</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>
<b>Word-of-mouth intentions</b>		0.96	0.90
How likely are you to speak positive word of mouth about this restaurant? <sup>a</sup>	0.96		
I would recommend this restaurant to my friends.	0.95		
If my friends were looking for a restaurant, I would tell them to try this restaurant.	0.93		
<b>Perceived employee responsiveness</b>		0.94	0.80
The waiter was attentive	0.92		
The waiter was helpful	0.99		
Service was prompt	0.84		
The waiter was courteous	0.81		
<b>Price perceptions</b>		0.88	0.69
This restaurant was expensive.	0.78		
I paid more than I had planned.	0.88		
<b>Food quality and reliability</b>		0.84	0.65
The food was fresh.	0.91		
The temperature of the food was just right.	0.74		
The meal I ordered was delicious.	0.75		
<b>Physical design and appearance</b>		0.82	0.70
Lighting in the restaurant was appropriate.	0.80		
The décor was visually appealing.	0.87		

**Notes:** Unless stated otherwise, all questions were measured on seven-point scales, anchored by “I totally disagree” and “I totally agree.” CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted.

<sup>a</sup> Anchored by “not at all likely” and “very likely.”

**Table 2: Means, standard deviations, correlations, and squared correlations**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
1 Language divergence	-	-	1	0.06	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.02
2 Word-of-mouth intentions	4.4	1.8	-0.24	1	0.61	0.08	0.26	0.13
3 Perceived employee responsiveness	5.0	1.5	-0.24	0.78	1	0.02	0.21	0.09
4 Price perceptions	3.1	1.4	-0.15	-0.29	-0.15	1	0.15	0.02
5 Food quality and reliability	5.8	1.0	-0.10	0.51	0.46	-0.38	1	0.23
6 Physical design and appearance	4.6	1.4	-0.13	0.36	0.29	0.14	0.48	1

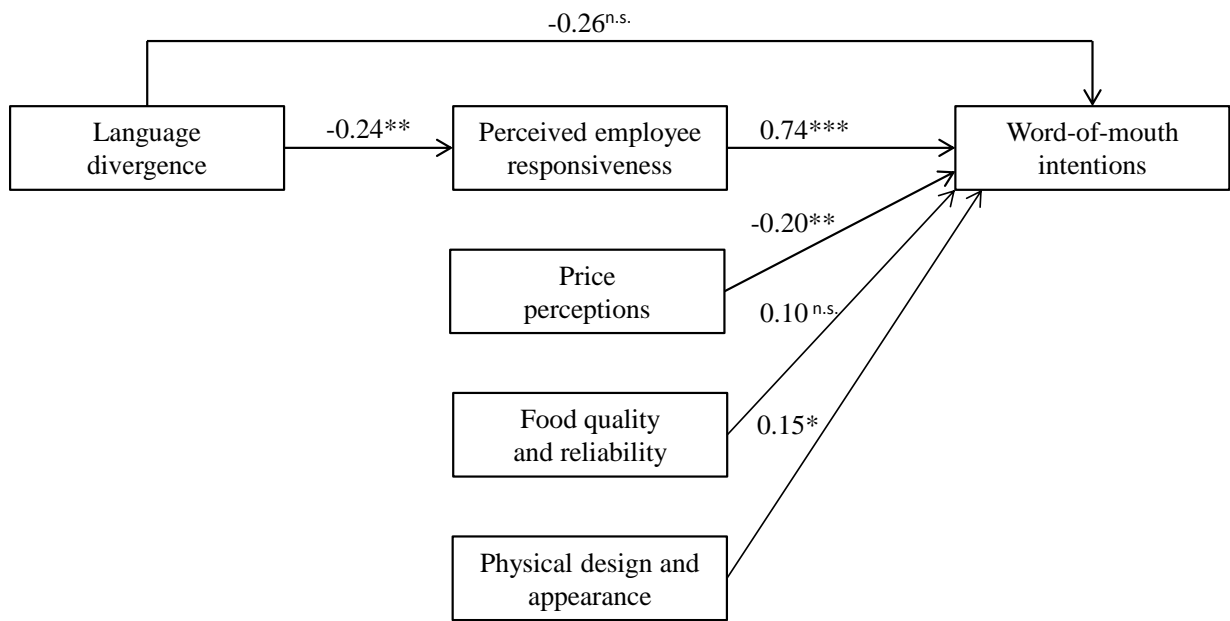
**Notes:** Squared correlations are listed above the diagonal, with correlations below the diagonal.

**Table 3: Structural equation modeling results**

<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Standardized estimate</b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
<i>Hypotheses testing</i>			
Language divergence → Word-of-mouth intentions	-.26	1.55	.121
Language → Perceived employee responsiveness	-.24	3.00	.003
Perceived employee responsiveness → Word-of-mouth intentions	.74	8.31	<.001
<i>Covariates</i>			
Price perceptions → Word-of-mouth intentions	-.20	3.07	.002
Food quality and reliability → Word-of-mouth intentions	.10	1.72	.085
Physical design and appearance → Word-of-mouth intentions	.15	2.40	.016

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$ . <sup>n.s.</sup>Not significant.

**Figure 1: Estimated model (Study 2)**



\*\*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$ . <sup>n.s.</sup> Not significant.