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Hearing Double: the Effect of Voice-Over Translations in Informational Messages.

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HEARING DOUBLE: THE EFFECT OF VOICE-OVER TRANSLATIONS IN INFORMATIONAL MESSAGES

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ABSTRACT

Media technology that has enhanced exposure to people around the world has increased opportunities to use voice-over translations for foreign language speakers. A study examined undergraduates' responses to an educational videotape wherein the narration was in English only or was in a foreign language voiced-over in English. Measures were taken of the perceived informativeness of the videos, and the recall of the materials. Participants rated the video with the voiced-over language as less informative. However, somewhat counter-intuitively, the same voiced-over tape produced a marginally higher level of correct recall. Discussion suggests ways to further examine the effects of voice-over translations.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that a classroom of students is watching a videotape about a cultural ceremony. The narrator, who speaks in a foreign language, is voiced-over by an individual speaking English. As is typical, the foreign language is predominant at the very start of each spoken segment, and then is quickly dropped in volume and overridden by a translator. How do the students respond to the information? Is the low sound of the foreign language distracting? Or, does it bring increased attention to the material? Do audience members who are familiar with the cultural ceremony respond differently to the voice-over translation than those lacking prior knowledge? This research investigates these questions.

Advanced media technology around the world, and the continuing emergence of "borderless consumption" that has removed barriers between consumers, has increased opportunities for voice-over translations of individuals speaking foreign languages. We hear voice-over translations in informational programs, for example, when listening to pre-recorded interviews of foreign leaders. In entertainment programming, voice-over translations are heard in some shows that are broadcast internationally, such as when the Japanese television show *Iron Chef* appears on the English language Food Network.

Yet, despite widespread use of this presentation format, a review of research reveals a surprising lack of work in this area. Most studies on voice-overs have focused on single narratives involving one language, instead of on translations. For example, content analyses have examined the persistence (Bresnahan et al. 2002) or the decline (Bartsch et al. 2000; Furnham and Farragher 2000) of gender stereotyping in advertisements narrated by males and females. One experimental study that examined viewer perceptions (Dimofte, Forehand, and Deshpandé 2004) found that ethnic group members who watched advertisements provided directionally (but not significantly) more favorable evaluations when the voice-over was provided in the language matching their ethnicity than in the mainstream language. Work on the effect of two languages, which is the focus of this research, has centered largely upon technological issues related to obtaining high sound quality voice-overs (Jackel 1995). Franco (2001), who reviewed the use of voice-over translations in television documentaries, noted that audiovisual translation

is a relatively new research field that has a long way to develop. Hence, this research provides an exploratory look at the impact of voiced-over languages. The described study focuses on an information-oriented videotape presented in an educational setting.

Most inquiries about narrator translations have focused on other means of accommodating language differences. For example, Koolstra, Peeters, and Spinhof (2002) reviewed the pros and cons of dubbing and subtitling. Note that dubbing is different from when a speaker is voiced-over. In the former, the foreign language is not heard in the background but instead is completely replaced by a translator. Nonetheless, Koolstra et al.'s (2002) research provides insights into this inquiry because they--similar to findings of prior work (Kilborn 1993)--found that viewers prefer presentation formats with which they are most familiar. German viewers, who are accustomed to dubbing, prefer that format to subtitling. In contrast, Dutch viewers have more exposure to, and more highly prefer, subtitling. A preference for the norm suggests that viewers would more favorably evaluate material that does not have a voice-over translator to one that does, because the former format is typically more prevalent.

Other insights can be gained from studies on narrators' accents. Researchers (Bottriel and Johnson 1985; Gill 1994) have noted that information presented by speakers without foreign accents seems to encourage higher comprehension. Perhaps that finding is due to the extra attention and effort required to understand nonstandard speech patterns (Fuertes, Potere, and Ramirez 2002). If voice-over translations, similar to accents, require more work and focus to process, then audio-visual materials without them would be preferred.

Narrators speaking foreign languages are often describing attitudes or traditions customary to their background. In such cases, audience members who are more familiar with the information described might have a different reaction to voice-over materials than those without such prior knowledge. For example, individuals who are familiar with traditions associated with Hanukkah might more readily process information in a videotape depicting that holiday than those who are not. Hence, the effect of participants' prior knowledge of the presented information is examined in this research.

The following exploratory study examined if voice-over translations, relative to straight narration with no foreign language involvement (a) are perceived differently in terms of informational value, (b) encourage disparate levels of recall, and (c) prompt different reactions from individuals who do and do not have prior knowledge of the events depicted.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-six students enrolled in an undergraduate marketing course in the United States were asked to volunteer for this study. One participant who did not complete the survey was eliminated from the analysis.

Procedure

An educational videotape was created that depicted various aspects of a traditional Vietnamese New Year's celebration, which is based on the lunar calendar. In one version there was no voice-over translation. The narrator--who was born in the United States and who was of Asian descent--spoke English with an American accent typical of the participants' geographical area. In another version, the same English narration was added over the narrator speaking Vietnamese. The visual content, which was identical for each video, was approximately six-minutes long.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of two viewing rooms, in each of which was shown one version of the video. After watching the tape, all participants were asked to complete a related questionnaire. To secure students' anonymity, the course instructor stayed out of both rooms while research assistants showed the videos and distributed the measurement instruments.

Dependent Variables

Informational Value. All participants were asked to rate how informative the videotape was on a scale of one (1 = uninformative) to five (5 = very informative).

Recall of Videotape Content. Participants were asked to recall the information in the tape. Two undergraduate students were trained to code the open-ended responses into those that correctly and incorrectly reflected the information content. For example, one participant recalled accurately from the video that, "Red [clothing] is a symbol of good luck." In contrast, it was not correct to claim that, "Traditional festivities start on New Year's Eve"; in actuality, in the video it is mentioned that activities engaged in days before the New Year are important parts of the celebration. Coder agreement was 76%. Note that many of the initial disagreements were questions of symmetry. For example, the video describes how fireworks are lit to "scare away the evil spirits." One coder felt that stating, "Fireworks bring good luck" was correct, while the other felt that it was not the same as avoiding bad luck. The discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The resulting level of accurate recall, as noted below, is quite high.

Prior Knowledge Measure. To examine if the students' prior knowledge of the video topic (i.e., with the

festivities related to the Lunar New Year) influenced their reactions to the materials, they were asked, "Before watching the video, how much previous knowledge did you have about the traditions depicted about the Vietnamese New Year?" They responded on a scale of one (1 = I knew nothing that was in the video) to five (5 = I knew everything that was in the video). The responses were divided into those with and without high prior knowledge of the festivities based upon a median split of the data. The 43% who provided a rating of four or higher were in the high prior knowledge group.

To add validity to the prior knowledge measure, participants were asked to list what languages they speak other than English. Twenty percent of the participants noted that they speak Vietnamese, and 23% noted Chinese language skills (in Cantonese or Mandarin). Both the Vietnamese and Chinese cultures celebrate the Lunar New Year, yet not all families maintain country-of-origin traditions when immigrating to the United States. Hence, it should come as no surprise that 73% of the participants in the high prior knowledge group, compared to 22% without high knowledge, had Vietnamese or Chinese language skills.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

To investigate the influence of voice-over translations, the data were initially analysed using ANOVA with the voice-over condition (voice-over translation present or absent) and the level of participants' prior knowledge (high prior knowledge about the Lunar New Year present or absent) as factors. Preliminary analysis revealed that the prior knowledge factor was not significant for any of the dependent measures ($ps > .50$). Hence, the data were collapsed across this variable.

INFORMATION VALUE OF THE VIDEOTAPE

Congruent with research findings of a preference for familiar presentation formats (Koolstra et. al 2002), t-tests ($p < .05$) reveal that participants rated the video with just the English narration as more informative than the one with the voice-over translation ($t(33) = 2.43, p < .04$). Table 1 presents the means of the dependent variables.

TABLE 1
TREATMENT MEANS (STANDARD DEVIATIONS)

Measure	Absent (English with no foreign language)	Present (English voiced-over a foreign language)
Informative of the video	3.95 (0.61)	3.33 ^a (0.90)
Total number of recalled items	5.00 (2.10)	5.33 (2.09)
Proportion of correctly recalled items	0.90 (0.14)	0.97 ^b (0.10)

^a Means in the same row differ at $P < .05$.

^b Means in the same row differ at $P < .10$.

RECALL OF INFORMATION IN THE VIDEOTAPE

T-tests reveal no differences in the mean total number of items recalled across the voice-over conditions ($t(33) = 0.47$, NS).

The difference in the mean proportion of correctly recalled items also is not significant, but the results are “directional.” That is, somewhat counter-intuitively given the “informativeness” findings, those who saw the videotape with just the narration in English had a marginally *lower* mean proportion of correctly recalled items than those who viewed the voiced-over tape ($t(33) = 1.82$, $p < .08$).

DISCUSSION

Participants in this study rated the videotape as more informative when there was no English voice-over translation of a foreign language. This finding is congruent with past work that suggests that audience members prefer presentation formats with which they are familiar (Koolstra et al. 2002). Examining the results of the other dependent variables offers insight into what did and did not influence the preference for the norm in this study.

Specifically, dissimilar from research on accents (Fuertes et al. 2002), the preference for the norm does not seem to be based upon the ability to comprehend the narrator. The level of correct recall was not higher for the English-only version of the tape. In fact, it was marginally *lower*. The juxtaposition of the high “informativeness” rating and the directionally lower correct recall suggests that factors other than the ability to understand the narration influenced the evaluation of the videotapes.

In addition, the preference for the tape without the voice-over translation does not seem to be based upon prior knowledge of the video topic. High prior knowledge of the events depicted did not have an effect on the perceived informativeness or on the recall for the material. To further investigate this issue, the data provided only by those with Vietnamese and Chinese language skills were analysed across videotape conditions. Within this group, the mean “informativeness” rating is marginally higher for the videotape that was in English only ($M = 4.00$, $n = 7$) than it is for the tape with the voiced-over translation ($M = 3.33$, $n = 8$; $t(13) = 1.79$, $p < .10$). Note that the marginal effect, as opposed to the fully significant effect for the entire sample, is likely due to low statistical power. In fact, the difference in the means is a bit larger for the partial than for the full participant group. Hence, even when looking only at participants from cultures that celebrate the Lunar New Year, there was a directional preference for the version of the tape that was closer to what they normally see and hear in educational settings. Within the language-skilled group, no significant differences are found across the absent and present voice-over translation conditions in terms of total recall ($M = 5.86$ and $M = 6.00$, respectively; $t(13) = 0.26$, NS), or in the proportion of correct recall ($M = 0.92$ and $M = 1.00$, respectively; $t(13) = 1.35$, NS).

Before concluding that audience members generally prefer materials that do not contain voice-over translations, it is important to consider factors that might have influenced the results. First, this study had a relatively small sample, with 15 and 20 participants in the present and absent voice-over translation conditions, respectively. It should be replicated with larger cell sizes to test the generalizability of the findings.

Given more participants, it would be helpful to analyse the results grouping separately those who do and do not speak the foreign language heard in a voice-over tape. As stated above, there appear not to be large differences in the way that the Vietnamese and Chinese speaking participants responded to the materials relative to the rest of

the sample. However, low cell sizes of those who speak Vietnamese (i.e., seven participants with that language skill split across two study conditions) make it impossible to draw conclusions specifically about the matched-language group. Although same-language effects were not the main focus of this study, further examining them would be worthwhile. For example, a focus on individuals who speak the same foreign language as a narrator would allow a researcher to determine if the preference for the norm seen in this study was based in part upon a lack of familiarity with the language that was voiced over.

Researchers can also use more measures to ascertain why participants have preferences for materials without voice-over translations. For example, this research was conducted in an area where that presentation format is prevalent in educational settings. However, asking participants how often they view programs with voice-over translations would allow a more specific test of relative familiarity. In addition, asking participants if they have first-hand experience with the activities depicted in the tape would better separate those who have prior background information from those who do not.

Similarly, researchers can pinpoint the direction of the discrepancy between materials that do or do not contain voice-over translations. That is, do individuals upgrade the single-language communications, or do they downgrade dual-language presentations? One way to address this issue is to ask more questions about the delivery of the information. Participants can be asked specifically about the authority and credibility of the English narration when it is alone and when it is used as the translation. Targeted questions about the foreign language can similarly provide more specific information about its positive or negative effects. The combination of measures would provide insights into any increases in credibility for the English-language only narration, any downgrading due to the dual-language presentation, or both.

Subsequent studies can focus on the discrepant findings in this research between perceived informativeness and recall. Intuitively, the measures should correlate positively. But in this study, one is significant and one is not, and the latter even leans in the opposite direction. This finding suggests that there are other favorable aspects to voice-over materials that were untapped in this study. It may be, for example, that the foreign language attracts increased attention to the materials, which in turn enhances recall. Or, perhaps the foreign language made understanding the English narration more difficult, and prompted more careful processing that resulted in relatively higher levels of recollection. Asking participants if the foreign language is interest-provoking, enjoyable, or distracting would help provide insights into the perceived informativeness and recall findings.

More generally, the counter-intuitive pattern of results suggests that there are times when individuals (i.e., students) do not accurately perceive formats from which they learn the most. This lack of awareness of voice-over effects is congruous with recent research on endorsers by Forehand and Perkins (2005). When examining celebrity voice-overs, they found that celebrity attitudes predicted brand attitude change, even when participants did not explicitly recognise the famous persons’ voices. Hence, the subtle effects of voice-over translations are a topic for future work.

As media technology exposes audiences to speakers in different parts of the world, and as populations become more diverse, the effect of language voice-overs will likely remain a relevant area of study. It is hoped that this research provides insights into the reaction to messages containing voice-over translations.

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