Structural Constraints in Mixed Language Ads: a Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Persuasiveness of Codeswitching

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Codeswitching refers to mixing languages within an utterance. Bilingual individuals use this linguistic practice frequently in their everyday lives to communicate certain meanings coded in the act of switching itself or in the language that is made salient by the codeswitch. Because of the ubiquitous nature of codeswitching among certain populations like Hispanics in the U.S. or French speakers in Switzerland, advertisers targeting those populations have also adopted this practice. For example, Latina is a magazine targeting young Hispanic women that is well known for its frequent use of codeswitching. The following two ads recently appeared in that magazine: ARedefine fuerza. Presentamos el totalmente nuevo Chevy Trail Blazer@ (Redefine power. We present the totally new Chevy Trail Blazer); and ASweet sonrisa: We found four ways to brighten your teeth and make the most of your radiant smile@ (sonrisa means smile). The first ad differs from the second in the language that serves as a frame for the codeswitch.

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Extended Abstract

Codeswitching refers to mixing languages within an utterance. Bilingual individuals use this linguistic practice frequently in their everyday lives to communicate certain meanings coded in the act of switching itself or in the language that is made salient by the codeswitch. Because of the ubiquitous nature of codeswitching among certain populations like Hispanics in the U.S. or French speakers in Switzerland, advertisers targeting those populations have also adopted this practice. For example, *Latina* is a magazine targeting young Hispanic women that is well known for its frequent use of codeswitching. The following two ads recently appeared in that magazine: “Redefine fuerza. Presentamos el totalmente nuevo Chevy Trail Blazer” (Redefine power. We present the totally new Chevy Trail Blazer); and “Sweet sonrisa: We found four ways to brighten your teeth and make the most of your radiant smile” (sonrisa means smile). The first ad differs from the second in the language that serves as a frame for the codeswitch.

Linguistic Constraints in Codeswitching

This paper examines the linguistic structural constraints in the practice of codeswitching in advertising. That is, it examines the rules that make a particular code switch correct or incorrect linguistically. We extend a linguistic model, the Matrix Language Frame, or MLF, model (Myers-Scotton 1995). The MLF model specifies certain structural rules that govern the production of codeswitched speech, in a sense laying out a grammar of codeswitching. The MLF model emerged through the analysis of extensive corpora of interactional speech and was developed to understand how codeswitched speech is produced. The present research tests the rules delineated by the MLF model in an experimental setting, applying them to speech perception, not speech production, since language perception is crucial for ad processing.

We expect that codeswitched ads that do not follow the linguistic rules of the MLF model (i.e., ungrammatical ads) will be less persuasive than ads that follow them (i.e., grammatical ads). That effect, however, should be moderated by the type of processing in which consumers engage.

Type of Processing as a Moderator

Roediger (1990) distinguishes between data-driven and conceptually driven tasks. Data-driven processes (e.g., reading each of a list of words) involve processing of perceptual cues. These processes are triggered directly by external stimuli and engage individuals in mostly bottom-up processing. On the other hand, conceptually driven processes (e.g., imagining the content of an expression or generating associates) involve semantic elaboration and are initiated by the subject. This type of processing generally leads to top-down processing.

From a linguistic standpoint, the question to be addressed in our research is whether individuals will overlook grammatically incorrect codeswitching when they process a slogan conceptually. Previous research has examined the possibility that individuals may not notice a codeswitched element. For example, Altarriba, Kroll, Sholl, and Rayner (1996) show that high semantic constraint sentences make people “skip” a codeswitched word. That is, if the codeswitched word is primed through the use of a semantically relevant context, individuals may not notice it in another language. This is a very similar task to conceptual or schema-based processing because it directs attention to semantic features and away from the surface characteristics of the language.

Type of processing could be considered a continuum with two anchors: extreme conceptually driven processing and extreme data-driven processing. Intermediate points are likely to include different mixes of conceptually driven and data-driven processing, depending on their position along the continuum. In our empirical studies, we elicit different types of processing through the manipulation of different variables: processing instructions, rhyme, the design of the experiment itself, and whether respondents evaluate slogan grammaticality on-line or not.

We hypothesize that if individuals are in the extreme data-driven mode, they will pay more attention to the language of the ads, notice the codeswitched elements to a greater degree, and will be affected by structural constraints. However, if individuals are in any other processing mode along the continuum, their processing is likely to include some degree of conceptually driven processing. Therefore, they will not pay as much attention to the language of the slogan and they may ignore or not pay attention to the codeswitched word and they not be affected by structural constraints. This type of processing effect should be manifested in a greater likelihood of language effects on evaluations in the extreme data-driven condition (Chaffin 1997; Elias and Perfetti 1973). Therefore, incorrect codeswitches should not feel “natural” and consequently should lead to lower evaluations than correct codeswitches, but only in the extreme data-driven condition.

Studies 1 and 2 show that structural constraints only influence ad persuasiveness under extreme data-driven processing conditions. Study 3 suggests that even under conceptually driven processing instructions, structural constraints can influence persuasiveness if other ad features direct attention to codeswitching.

Contributions to Theory

We contribute to the area of psycholinguistics providing an extension and empirical validation of the MLF model, and to the area of consumer research in that we outline a series of structural constraints that moderate the impact of codeswitching on persuasion. We also underscore the relevance of linguistic analysis in advertising by showing how structural constraints, or grammar, influence the cognitive processing of advertising text. To date, no consumer research studies have investigated the role of grammar in advertising to bilinguals, and very few studies have acknowledged the general role of grammar in advertising (e.g., Bradley and Meeds 2002).

References


