When I Grow Up: the Moderating Role of Aspiration in Intergenerational Code-Switching

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The present research investigates the effect of values (“aspiration”) on attitudes toward different language varieties used in advertising. The current research argues that when consumers aspire to belong to a reference group older than their own the opposite effect of code-switching will be seen. Investigation of aspiration as a moderator helps understand previously unexplained findings by Luna and Peracchio (2005). As such, this study extends existing code-switching research by introducing aspiration as a moderating variable between code-switching and attitude toward the ad (Aad).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Code-switching refers to the practice of mixing languages, such as English and Spanish, within a sentence, a common practice among bilingual consumers (Myers Scotton 1983; Luna and Peracchio 2001, 2002, 2005abc). Existing research within the marketing literature examines the impact of code-switching on the persuasiveness of advertising messages directed at bilinguals (Koslow, Shamdasani and Touchstone 1994; Luna and Peracchio 2001, 2002, 2005abc). Specifically, the direction of code-switching has been studied primarily among bilingual consumers. For example, minority language (e.g., Spanish) slogans switching to the majority language (e.g., English) result in greater persuasion than majority language slogans switching to the minority language (Luna and Peracchio 2001, 2002, 2005abc).

The current study extends existing bi-lingual code switching research in the following two ways. First, existing bi-lingual literature (Luna and Perrachio 2005) investigates the code-switching effect at the group-level (e.g. Majority and minority language speaking populations). However, the current research also investigates the consumer’s reaction to code-switched ads driven by an underlying, individual-level, construct: aspiration level, and tests the role of aspiration as a moderating variable between code-switching and attitude toward the ad (Aad). Also, the current research contributes to the code-switching literature by introducing a social theory (aspiration) to the previous sociolinguistic treatment (e.g. Markedness Model, Accommodation Theory) of code-switching.

According to bi-lingual code-switching research, the activation of the majority language culture and schemas (e.g. English) will lead to positive evaluation because minority language speakers (e.g. Spanish) have more positive associations with majority language and culture (e.g. English) and want to belong to a majority society (Luna and Peracchio 2005a, Luna and Peracchio 2005b). However, the current research suggests that majority language and culture schemas (e.g. older adults use of the standard English) in an intergenerational context will lead to negative evaluation because minority, or rather contemporary, language speakers (members of generation Y) may react unfavorably towards authority and disrespectful towards a majority (older adults) (Lauer 2006). The present research investigates the effect of values (“aspiration”) on attitudes toward different language varieties used in advertising in an intergenerational context.

In exchange for extra credit, 170 undergraduate Business students at a major southeastern university participated in the experiment. Subjects were provided with two different kinds of questionnaires that manipulated code switching direction with scenarios. Study 1 has two main purposes: 1) to test whether standard-to-contemporary English code switching in ad slogan will lead to more positive attitude toward the ad than contemporary-to-standard English code switching; and 2) to examine if aspiration moderates the relationship between code-switching and Aad.

A between subject experiment was conducted in which two factors were examined (2 x 2 ANOVA): code switching (standard-to-contemporary code switching or contemporary-to-standard code switching) and aspiration level (high or low). The code-switching factor was manipulated while the aspiration was measured. Older adults’ formal English was designated as the standard English and Generation Y’s simplified English as the contemporary English. Code switching was manipulated by two different scenarios respectively.

Study I results provide empirical support for the notion that for Generation Y, standard-to-contemporary code switching direction will lead to more positive attitude towards the ad (Aad). This research hypothesized direction effect with salience or marked contemporary English. Standard-to-contemporary code switching makes the contemporary language portion salient, or marked, as compared with the standard English, thus activating a Generation Y language and culture schema, which is related to with more positive association. This is an interesting result. Common thought would suggest that, if Generation Y prefers contemporary English, more contemporary English in advertising messages would lead to positive responses. Our findings show the counter-intuitive results. The results show that having one or two salient contemporary words in an advertising message leads to a more positive response from Generation Y than having many less salient contemporary words in an ad message.

Study I also supports the notion that aspiration level for the position of older adults moderates the relationship between the code-switching and Aad such that a high level of aspiration for the position of older adults leads to more positive Aad toward contemporary-to-standard code switching and more negative Aad toward standard-to-contemporary code switching. The hypothesized moderating role of aspiration is based on research which demonstrates that the individual’s aspiration level would assimilate with the aspiration group. The individual’s wish to belong to an aspiration group makes a positive self-standard language connection if he or she perceives that an aspiration group uses standard language. Thus, the more Generation Y members wish to belong to an older adults’ group, the more their attitude is positive toward the ad message which has salient standard English (contemporary-to-standard). The current research suggests that even in the same code-switching direction, the impact of code-switching can be stronger or weaker depending upon each individual’s aspiration level.

This research extends the existing code-switching literature by identifying an underlying individual level construct, aspiration level, which acts to explain or influence the effects of code switching. In the existing code switching literature, the framework presented is meant to be applicable to all situations in bi-lingual groups as a whole. The key questions here are, “Does code switching direction effect apply to all bi-linguals to the same degree? Is the consumer’s cognitive or affective reaction to code switching driven by an underlying individual-level construct?” The current research extends the existing bi-lingual code-switching literature by examining aspiration as an individual level construct which explains the different effects of code switching. Additionally, in the socio-linguistic and code switching applications, the Markedness model has been used mainly in multi-lingual socio-linguistic context and has been examined through how bilinguals produce code switched utterance. In our research, the Markedness model is extended to the perception of uni-lingual communication within an intergenerational context in an experimental setting. An aspiration level explanation is also offered in our application of the Markedness model.
References


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