Language Domain Effects on Bilingual Advertising

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Translating advertising messages to the minority language is a common practice among marketers targeting linguistic minorities. This paper investigates the impact on this practice of a sociolinguistics theory called language domains. This research extends prior linguistic minority studies (Koslow, Shamdasni, and Touchstone 1994) by illustrating how each speech community has its own set of norms that govern language domains and that the proper use of language domains can result in more persuasive messages. The study also adds to sociolinguistic research by showing that language domains carry over to the realm of advertising.

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Reverse acculturation might be the reason why individuals attend these festivals. In a recent study Chen (1997) examined the concept of reverse acculturation among Anglo-Americans. Chen (1997:18) defined reverse acculturation as “a process in which Anglo-Americans acquire values, attitudes and behavioral patterns via direct and or indirect contact with people from cultural origins other than their own.” It has been suggested that the level of reverse acculturation will vary by individual since some individuals may enthusiastically accept influences from other cultures while others may resist. As such Chen (1997:19) conceptualized reverse acculturation on a continuum from multiculturalism to monoculturalism.

The oldest model of acculturation or assimilation was developed by Gordon (1964). Marketing researchers have examined levels of assimilation or acculturation and the impact on consumer behaviors (Mehta and Belk 1991, Penaloza (1994). Berry (1980) developed a model that examined the level of acculturation that was based on the responses to two questions: a) whether the immigrant wanted to retain their original culture and b) the immigrant’s desire to have a good relationship with the dominant culture. The responses to these questions result in acculturation strategies ranging from a) assimilation, rejection, separation and integration. Cross-cultural psychologists have shown that immigrants who want to have the best mental health follow an integration strategy. Research has shown that rather than assimilate, many immigrants integrate or separate themselves. Thus, the analogy for the United States has moved from that of a melting pot to a salad. This is because U.S. immigrants have retained enough of their original culture, and are thus, as discernible as a cucumber would be in a salad.

Many immigrants retain their original culture and consequently, they can share this culture through their participation in cultural festivals. In the United States the dominant population has slowly embraced multiculturalism. This embracing of the “other” has led to the de-ethnicization of products such as bagels, salsa etc. Another way of experiencing the “other” is through participation in ethnic/cultural activities such as the festival that is the focus of this research. Values guide our behavior, and as such one’s attitude towards new experiences is crucial in determining their acquisition of foreign modes of behavior.

To develop the measurement instrument, 50 written interviews were conducted with individuals who had attended the festival. Two different coders analyzed these written interviews to identify the main motivations for attending the festival. A survey was developed and pre-tested. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement to questions such as: My decision to attend the festival was most influenced by: Ethnic foods (91.1%), Ethnic Drinks (73.6%), Dancing (76.7%) Ethnic Merchandise (63.5%), Learning about other cultures (78.7%). Only 24.3% of the respondents indicated that they were members of the participating organizations/cultural groups. Word of mouth was found to be the most important in learning about the festival. T-test results indicate that there were significant differences in the motivations to attend the festivals by gender. For example, women were more interested in the ethnic merchandise than the men. (t=4.473, p-value <= 0.05). Some interesting findings with regards to the desire for unique products as well as the thrill seeking were also found.

650 surveys were collected over a three day period by students from a local university. The festival organizers promised the respondents the opportunity to win a gift certificate to a restaurant, bookstore etc. In order to vary the type of respondents, the data was collected at varying times during the festival. Preliminary findings indicate that individuals attend these festivals to experience the “other.” The decision to attend the festival was mostly influenced by: Ethnic foods (91.1%) Ethnic Drinks (73.6%), Dancing (76.7%) Ethnic Merchandise (63.5%), Learning about other cultures (78.7%). Only 24.3% of the respondents indicated that they were members of the participating organizations/cultural groups. Word of mouth was found to be the most important in learning about the festival. T-test results indicate that there were significant differences in the motivations to attend the festivals by gender. For example, women were more interested in the ethnic merchandise than the men. (t=4.473, p-value <= 0.05). Some interesting findings with regards to the desire for unique products as well as the thrill seeking were also found.

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In recent years there has been a greater focus on bilingual research in marketing journals. This research has focused on various bilingual linguistic phenomena such as the impact of code switching on ad persuasion (Luna and Peracchio 2005), to the influence of how different languages are processed on recall and attitude of advertising (Tavassoli and Lee 2003). In Koslow, Shamdasani, and Touchstone’s
(1994) research, U.S. Hispanics’ response to the use of the Spanish language in advertising was investigated. Their research found that the positive effects of Spanish language, or minority subculture language, in advertising could be partially explained by the sociolinguistic theory of accommodation. The theory of accommodation predicts that “the greater the amount of effort in accommodation [using the language of the listener] that a bilingual speaker of one group was perceived to put into this message, the more favorably he would be perceived by listeners from another ethnic group, and also the more effort they in turn would put into accommodating back to” the speaker (Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis 1973 p.177). Koslow et al. (1994), using the theory of accommodation, found that the use of Spanish language not only has an impact on a Hispanic individuals message comprehension, but also communicates a message about the advertiser’s sensitivity to the Hispanic culture. This sensitivity to the Hispanic culture can result in a significant and positive influence on the individual’s attitude toward the advertisement (Koslow et al. 1994).

Koslow et al.’s (1994) research supports advertiser’s attempt to target linguistic minorities by translating advertising messages into the linguistic minority’s native language. A potential moderator of Koslow et al.’s (1994) findings is the presence of the language appropriateness indicated by the language domain framework. Currently there is no language domain research on the effectiveness of bilingual advertising. This paper examines the appropriateness of a language in different multilingual situations.

The framework of language domains is based on a corpus of sociolinguistic studies that observed bilinguals in various multilingual speech communities around the world (e.g., Hoffman 1971; Barker 1975; Scotton 1979; Nishimura 1992; Goebel 2005). Through observation of various multilingual speech communities, a theory was established that language use in multilingual settings is not random. By observing the interactions of multilinguals in different speech communities, ethnographers were able to uncover underlying patterns that repeatedly emerged and dictated the proper use of a language at particular times and places surrounding particular topics.

The language appropriateness that corresponds to a particular topic area is a result of many different factors, such as bilinguals having learned how to deal with a topic in a particular language, a language’s lack of specialized terms for a particular topic, or simply because the use of a certain language would be considered strange or inappropriate for discussion in that language (Grosjean 1982). It is important to note that the reason for a particular language to be more appropriate than another may simply be a result of certain languages having been traditionally used when discussing a certain topic. This would suggest that the bilingual has learned from an early age to deal with a certain topic in a certain language. This indicates that there is probably a greater accessibility of a particular language over another with which a bilingual can discuss a certain topic in. It may be the case that the bilingual knows more vocabulary in a particular language surrounding a topic area, or that the bilingual uses particular words more often in one language over another. These situations will result in a greater ease and comfort in discussing a topic in one language over another.

Since the appropriateness of a particular language is so ingrained into a multilingual that it is chosen unconsciously with no extra time or effort (Grosjean 1982), the choice process may be an automatic process of which the bilingual is unaware. The corpus of language domain research would indicate that, for print ads dealing with certain topic areas, there is a particular language that is more appropriate than others.

The empirical study shows the importance of the language domain framework on advertising. The hypothesis of this study is that when ad language is congruent with language domain factor of topic area, the ad evaluation would be higher than when ad language is incongruent with language domain factor of topic area. This study had a 2 (language: Spanish or English) x 2 (Topic area: Work or Family & Friend) between-subject design. Language and Topic area were between-subjects factors. Every subject was presented with the same number of advertisements: three advertisements from the target topic areas and the remaining advertisements were practice and filler ads. The order of the filler and target advertisements in the questionnaire was varied. Ad evaluations were collected on a 7-point six item scale, where higher scores meant more favorable evaluations (Luna and Peracchio 2005). The ad evaluation index yielded a two-way interaction between Language and Topic area (F (1, 26)=11.889, p<.01). These results confirm the expectations, that when advertisements focused on the topic Friends & Family, the Spanish language ads were evaluated higher than the same ads in English (Friends & Family ad, Spanish, M=4.647 vs. Friends and Family ad, English, M=3.769 F (1, 26)=6.775, p<.05). Also, confirming expectation when the topic area of Work used, the English language ads were evaluated higher than the same advertisement in Spanish (Work ad, English M= 5.207 vs. Work ad, Spanish M= 4.659 F (1, 26)=4.945, p<.05).

One plausible explanation for these results could be the accessibility of these words in one language over another. Future studies will hopefully show that there is an increased accessibility for a particular content area in a particular language. This increased accessibility for a particular content area in a particular language could then be resulting in an enhanced processing fluency. This enhanced processing fluency will result in a more favorable attitude toward the target (Lee 2004). Since individuals usually cannot distinguish clearly between the different sources of affect they may be experiencing at any given time, they may misattribute their current mood to the object they are judging (Schwarz and Clore 1983, 1996). The results then equate to a preference for the ad with the increased accessibility.

This study contributes to the consumer behavior research by bringing to light the fact that each multilingual speech community has language domains that dictate the proper use of each language. This article also contributes to the field of sociolinguistics in showing that language domain norms are not just verbal, but also transfer to the written language as well. Most of the sociolinguistic research in this area relied on observational studies with little to no experimental research. This study adds further validity to the prior research in language domains as well as showing the impact that these language domains can have on liking of an advertisement.

References