The Impact of Language Code-Switching on Ad Claim Recall

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This study investigates how the direction of language code-switching (Spanish/English) in an ad and the language of the media context in which the ad appears interact to influence message recall. Main results from 122 Mexican-American youth show that when the language of an ad’s code-switched elements match the language of the media context, recall of the code-switched elements is lower than when their language does not match the media context. These findings provide validity to the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton 1993), which is used as the underpinning theory in Luna and Peracchio’s (2005a, b) recent works in code-switching.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13138/volumes/v35/NA-35

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how using language code-switching in advertising interacts with the context language of the medium to influence message recall. Code-switching refers to the practice of alternating between two languages during conversation (Scotton 1988). The Spanish/English code-switching that occurs among bilingual Mexican-Americans is of interest in this research.

According to the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton 1993), a term is marked when it stands out in conversation. Luna and Peracchio (2005a) state that the direction of code-switching determines which language is marked. For example, if a person is speaking in Spanish and then switches to English, English is marked. Markedness is similar to perceptual salience, in which part of a message is salient when it stands out from its immediate context (Fiske and Taylor 1984). Code-switching has the inherent ability of making code-switched elements salient (Heller 1988). Salience is important in terms of its ability to positively influence message recall, as perceptually salient attributes are easy to recall (Hutchinson and Alba 1991). Therefore, message elements that are made more salient through code-switching should stand apart from non-salient message elements.

Furthermore, the language of the media context (e.g., magazine, television program) in which a code-switched ad is placed may influence recall. It is proposed that the language of the media context in which an ad occurs may serve to alter the degree of salience of the matrix (“switched from”) and the embedded (“switched to”) elements of a code-switched message. In this study, the code-switched message is presented in two forms, depending on the direction of code-switching (switching from English to Spanish or Spanish to English). The context language refers to the language of the medium in which the ad appears (all-Spanish vs. all-English).

In code-switched advertising, when the embedded text differs from the context language of the medium, the embedded elements are made the most salient. Therefore, when the embedded text does not match the language of the medium context, level of recall of embedded elements will be lower than when the embedded text matches the language of the medium context (H1).

Alternatively, although the attribute of salience in message processing may increase recall, it has been shown in brand research that salience can serve to hinder recall of non-salient alternatives (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1985). When one brand is made increasingly salient, this brand will be easier to recall while other non-salient brands will become harder to recall during memory-based tasks. Thus, as salience may inhibit recall of non-salient brands, this same effect may be observed among message recall elements. That is, message elements that are made more salient should cause inhibition of other message elements that are not as salient. When the context language of the medium in which an ad appears does not match the embedded language of a code-switched ad, the embedded elements will stand out more. This will lead to decreased salience of the matrix (the “switched-from” ad language) elements in these conditions. Hence, when the matrix language of a code-switched ad matches the context language of the medium, recall of matrix language elements will be lower than when the matrix language differs from the medium language (H2).

Study

To test these hypotheses, 122 Mexican-Americans between the ages of 18-30 with some reading ability in both English and Spanish were recruited. Each individual randomly received one of four treatments, consisting of an advertisement for a fictional cell phone company placed in between two magazine articles. The ad was either in mostly Spanish with several noun code-switches in English (Spanish-to-English code-switching) or vice versa. For example, a statement in the English-to-Spanish code-switched ad said, “We offer affordable prices! Our rates fit almost any presupuesto”. The magazine articles that occurred before and after the ad were both written either in only English or only Spanish. This produced a 2 (direction of code-switching) by 2 (language context of the media) factorial design.

Participants were given strict time limits for reading all materials and were then required to complete two recall tests—unaided (first) and aided (second). In the unaided recall test, individuals were given three minutes to record any statements, words, etc., that they could recall from the ad onto a blank piece of paper. Responses could be recorded in Spanish, English or in both. Individuals were then given 2.5 minutes to complete an aided recall test, which had a fill-in-the-blank format. In this test, subjects viewed the language version of the ad which they had received in full, with several omissions of phrases that included the code-switched words. They were instructed to fill in as much missing information as they could remember. For both tests, independent coders awarded one point for each of the correct number of items recalled.

Results

ANCOVA was used to test all hypotheses as several covariates were measured in the study, including Spanish and English reading ability, involvement in the ad and articles and age of respondent. H1 stated that recall of code-switched elements would be higher when their language differed from the language of the context medium. This was supported at both the unaided level of recall [F(1, 121)=12.65, p=.00] and the aided level, though less strongly [F(1, 121)=3.31, p=.07].

H2 stated that recall of matrix (non-code-switched) elements would be lower when their language matched that of the medium language. Only partial support was found for this hypothesis, in that recall of matrix elements in the Spanish context, English-to-Spanish code-switching condition was significantly higher (p<.05) than that of the Spanish context, Spanish-to-English condition. No significant differences were found in either of the conditions when English was the context language of the medium.

In summary, results from this study suggest that advertisers may be able to strategically increase recall of code-switched ad elements when their language differs from the context language of the medium in which the ad is placed. However, code-switching may also result in diminished recall of matrix elements in certain cases, representing a possible double sword for advertisers wishing to use this language strategy.

References