Bilingualism and the Emotional Intensity of Advertising Language

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This paper contributes to current understanding of language effects in advertising by uncovering a previously ignored mechanism shaping consumer response to an increasingly globalized marketplace. We propose a language-specific episodic trace theory of language emotionality to explain how language influences the perceived emotionality of marketing communications. Due to the language specificity of episodic memory and the difference between L1 and L2 in frequency of use, we predict that bilingual consumers tend to experience more intense emotions for marketing messages (e.g. slogans) presented in L1 than in L2. A series of experiments provides support for the theory.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Regardless of their cultural heritage and native language, consumers around the world are routinely addressed by large numbers of marketing messages in a foreign language, mostly English. Calls for an increased focus on the consequences of globalization for consumers (e.g., Johar, Maheswaran, and Peracchio 2006) emphasize the need to improve current understanding of how the globalization of advertising language influences consumer response to marketing communications. In particular, no previous research has examined the emotional consequences of the use of a foreign language in commercial messages. This issue is important because generating emotional experiences around a brand is an important goal of brand communication and it is currently unclear what the emotional consequences of the globalization of advertising language are. Extending recent literature on the emotions of bilinguals (e.g., Pavlenko 2005), we propose a language-specific episodic trace theory of language emotionality to explain how the emotionality of marketing messages is influenced by the language used.

Following Hintzman’s influential Minerva 2 model (Hintzman 1986, 1988), we argue that each experience is stored as an array of elements. At the time of retrieval, presenting one or more elements of such an experience activates memory traces of experiences that contain that or those elements. Activation of an experience makes the other elements of that experience that were not in the probe accessible. Although Minerva 2 was not designed to deal with linguistic issues or emotions, a multiple-trace view may be applicable to emotional appraisals of advertising in one’s first (L1) or second (L2) language. It seems possible that consumers’ episodic memory traces include not only the direct, external perceptual elements of an experience, but also the emotions that were felt during an episode. In addition, it seems natural that the sights and sounds of words or series of words perceived during an episode would be stored as elements of the episodic trace as well. This would imply that if a word or series of words is encountered later, it functions as a probe for the multi-trace memory of experiences. Thus, advertising copy or slogans in L1 or L2 may function as memory probes which lead to the activation, and feeling, of emotions experienced before in same-language contexts. Assuming that emotional echo content is a positive function of the number of activated emotional traces (e.g., Hintzman 1986), this would imply that the perceived emotionality of advertising messages depends on the number of experiences in which the words of that message, in that language, have been encountered previously. In the context of the globalization of advertising language, it is reasonable to assume that the number of events experienced by consumers in concomitance with an L1 language context outnumber those of events experienced in an L2 language context. L1 marketing communication should in general therefore trigger stronger emotional responses that L2 marketing communication. We assessed the language-specific trace theory of language emotionality in a number of studies.

In Study 1, Dutch-English-French trilinguals were addressed in English and rated a series of Dutch and French advertising slogans on emotionality and originality. Half of participants were L1 speakers of French and half were instead L1 speakers of Dutch. We observed a two-way interaction between language and type of appraisal such that L1 slogans were rated as more emotional than L2 slogans, with no difference between L1 and L2 slogans in perceived originality. The two-way interaction, moreover, was not qualified by a three-way interaction with population: the emotional advantage of L1 was in fact exactly the same for Dutch and French native speakers.

In Study 2, nonnative speakers of English from a variety of countries rated the emotionality of single English words after having copied the word either in English or in their native language. Participants for whom the native language translation had been made more accessible rated the native language words as more emotional. In this experimental paradigm all participants rated the same stimuli, ruling out a comprehensibility account for the effect of language on emotionality.

In Study 3, we provided direct evidence for the role of the context of language use for the effect of language on emotionality obtained in the previous studies. A set of L1/L2 word pairs was selected based on a pretest to differentiate between pairs that had been predominantly encountered in L1 versus L2 language contexts. Participants in the main study (Dutch native speakers who were fluent in English) then rated the emotionality of both L1 and L2 words from each pair. We observed a crossover interaction between language and language context. For concepts encountered predominantly in L1 language contexts we replicated the emotional advantage of L1 found in previous experiments but for concepts encountered predominantly in L2 language contexts we observed a reversal of this effect: in this case L2 words were rated as more emotional than L1 words.

In Study 4, we replicated the emotional advantage of L1 using ads featuring congruent visual information. Moreover, we manipulated the language of the rating scales. Participants reported more extreme ratings of emotional intensity when performing the task using L2 than L1 rating scales. This reversal of the effect of language across the two stimulus elements (ads and rating scales) is consistent with the stronger emotional intensity of L1 by showing that language shifts the perceived intensity of the anchoring points of semantic differentials. That is, the emotionality scale anchors are perceived as less extreme in L2, leading to more extreme ratings of stimuli on the L2 scale.

This article is the first to focus on the consequences of language for the perceived emotionality of marketing messages and, from a broader point of view, the first to adopt a psycholinguistic perspective on the emotional consequences of the process of globalization for consumers. Bilingualism is a growing area in consumer research (e.g., Luna and Peracchio 2001) and the article adds a new dimension to this body of literature.

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