The Effect of Document Language Quality on Consumer Perceptions

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The authors propose a model that describes how the quality of language in documents accompanying the product shapes consumer perceptions. Language quality impacts perceptions by determining document evaluation. Document evaluation fully mediated the relations between language quality and both product and organization evaluations, implying that documents accompanying the product are a vital extrinsic cue used by consumers to evaluate the product and the organization. For their part, product and organization evaluations formed consumer behavioral intentions. Findings also show comprehensibility to be affected by language quality, and support the notion that documents accompanying product are secondary products as document evaluation directly influenced intentions.

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Abstract

The authors propose a model that describes how the quality of language in documents accompanying the product shapes consumer perceptions. Language quality impacts perceptions by determining document evaluation. Document evaluation fully mediated the relations between language quality and both product and organization evaluations, implying that documents accompanying the product are a vital extrinsic cue used by consumers to evaluate the product and the organization. For their part, product and organization evaluations formed consumer behavioral intentions. Findings also show comprehensibility to be affected by language quality, and support the notion that documents accompanying product are secondary products as document evaluation directly influenced intentions.

Empirical work on language quality is scant. As the majority of documents accompanying the product (hereafter, “documents” or “instruction guides”) are initially written in English (TCEurope, 2005), and as studies of document quality have been mainly conducted by researchers in English-speaking milieus (where the quality of language in documents does not suffer from translation issues), little attention has been given to the role played by language quality. Simultaneously, literature delineates the importance of extrinsic cues in shaping consumer perceptions. In this work, we hypothesized that language quality will determine both document perceived quality and document evaluation or affection. We also hypothesized that documents accompanying the product are important extrinsic cues used by consumer to infer product quality. Similarly, based upon attribution theory, we postulated that document evaluation will shape consumer perceptions of the product’s manufacturer and that product and organization evaluation will determine behavioral intentions.

The independent variable in our model and experiment was the language quality of the document, which is defined as the text’s conformity to established linguistic conventions of the targeted audience. As the research was conducted in a French-speaking North American city, focus groups and the experiment were performed in French. Two focus groups indicated the soundness of the hypothetical relationships, showing consumers to exhibit low levels of tolerance to inferior language quality in documents and to express various negative responses ranging from deception to intentions of boycotting the manufacturer. In a following laboratory experiment that involved 116 participants drawn from a consumer panel, the independent variable was operationalized by three levels. Version A of the instruction guide had no errors, whereas version B had few spelling and grammatical errors, and version C had additional syntaxical and vocabulary errors. The versions were prepared based on real examples from existing guides. The task consisted in assembling a product (chest box) with one randomly assigned version. The manufacturer’s identity was concealed from participants. Upon task performance, participants filled out a questionnaire which measured the dependent and potential influencing variables.

Document quality was measured using the document quality scale (Guillemette, 1990). We only included the items pertaining to six of the seven suggested dimensions (systematic arrangement, understandability, credibility, task relevance, demonstrativeness, and fitness). Where oblique rotation suggested the previous dimensions, factor analysis implied two dimensions. The first dimension (α = 0.96) pertained to the majority of document quality dimensions and hence was used to reflect document quality in general. The second dimension (α = 0.87) dealt mainly with document understandability and was thus used to examine whether language quality affected perceived comprehensibility.

Document evaluation (α = 0.92) was measured using the five items of two scales reflecting the satisfaction toward a specific object (Eroglu and Machleit 1990, α reported = 0.87; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996, α reported = 0.94). Because product evaluation was considered by some researchers as cognitive (Smart, Madrigal, and Seawright, 1996) and by others as affective (Doll and Gholamzera, 1987; Easley and Chaiken, 1993; Torkzadeh and Doll, 1993), we included both elements. Product evaluation was therefore measured using Peracchio and Meyers-Levy’s scale (1994, α reported between 0.85 and 0.92) with the exception of one item removed and the addition of three of the four items proposed by Leclerc, Schmitt, and Dubé (1994, α reported = 0.92). As expected, these items were found to result in one dimension (α = 0.94).

Organization evaluation was measured using the only scale found to reflect the general attitude toward company (Goldsmith, Lafferty, and Newell, 2000, α reported = 0.94, α obtained = 0.97). Intentions were measured using the three items of intention to buy as in Patterson, Johnson, and Spreng (1997, α reported = 0.97), the three items of positive recommendation intention of Price and Arnould (1999, α reported = 0.95), and the three items of negative recommendation intention adapted from Blodgett, Hill, and Tax (1997, α reported = 0.97). The previous items were adapted to each measure the product and organization intentions. One item was used to verify the manipulation.

ANOVA analysis revealed that language quality significantly affected document quality dimensions. The impact of language quality on document perceived comprehensibility was clear and significant for all language quality levels, leading us to conclude that even a few