The Language Backfire Effect: When Language Switch Threatens Consumer'S Identity and Affects Satisfaction Toward the Service

Jonas Holmqvist, Kedge Business School, France
Yves Van Vaerenbergh, Katholieke University Leuven, Belgium
Micael Dahlén, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden
Renaud Lunardo, Kedge Business School, France

This paper shows that serving consumers in their second (versus first) language leads to higher satisfaction. Further, results show that this effect does not hold when consumers are in the company of others, a context where being served in their second language is perceived as an identity threat.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1021368/volumes/v44/NA-44

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Jonas Holmquist, Kedge Business School, France
Yves Van Vaerenbergh, KU Leuven, Belgium
Micael Dahlén, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden
Renaud Lunardo, Kedge Business School, France

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The vast majority of both the service and sociolinguistic literatures argues that serving customers in their first language yields positive effects (Holmquist and Grönnroos 2012; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmquist 2013). This is echoed by research in the field of sociolinguistics, which shows that employees tend to switch to the language in which a customer feels more comfortable (Callahan 2006), and that people hold more favorable attitudes towards persons who show efforts to speak their first language, or a language in which they feel more comfortable (Genesee and Bourhis 1982). However, relying on self-determination literature and the need for consumers to feel in autonomy and competent (Deci and Ryan 2000), we propose that the positive effect of the use of first language does not hold in service settings where international consumers might prefer to speak the local language.

In study 1A, 89 adults from Sweden and Finland (57.3% female, M=28.9) participated in a two-group scenario-based experiment. Participants read a scenario where they had to imagine themselves visiting Paris, and going to a café. The waiter addresses the consumer in French, and the Scandinavian consumer responds in French, the local language. The waiter either responds in French (condition 1) or in English (condition 2). A short conversation follows and exactly the same phrases are said in both scenarios. After reading the scenario, participants evaluated filler items, and their satisfaction on a scale from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). A check was made that respondents reported at least some knowledge of French, as a basic knowledge of both languages was required for the study. Results reveal that consumers who are served in French, the local language, exhibit higher satisfaction (M=6.14) than consumers who are served by a waiter who switches language and serves customers in English (M=4.21; F(1,87)=40.60, p < .001).

Study 1B aims to replicate findings from Study 1 using another context. Respondents (n=120 French adults, M=31.68, 45.8% female) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Before participating in the experiment, a check was made that the respondents had at least a basic knowledge of English, as a basic knowledge of this language was required for the study. Participants were then asked to imagine they are tourists visiting London. After some sightseeing, they visit a restaurant where the waiter addresses them in English, the local language, and the consumers respond in the same language. In scenario 1 the waiter continues in English and a short and rather basic conversation takes place in English. In second 2, the waiter switches language after the respondent’s first phrase in English, and the waiter then continues the conversation in French. Exactly the same things are said in both scenarios, the language in which it is said is the only difference. After reading the scenario, respondents reported their satisfaction (n=81). Results replicate those from Study 1 and reveal that participants who are served in their second language feel more satisfied (M=5.60) than participants who are served in their first language (M=5.19; F(1,118)=6.24, p < .05). These results, however, stem from a social context where consumers are alone, leading to the question whether the effect of language switch on satisfaction would be replicated in a different social context.

Study 2 employs the same method as in Study 1B but uses the social context of being accompanied by a partner. Respondents (n=118 French adults, M=31.00, 50.8% female) were exposed to the same scenario as in Study 1B, except for the respondents now reading that they are in London with their partner for a romantic weekend. The respondents then reported their satisfaction (n=73) as well as their perceived identity threat (Aquino and Douglas 2003; α=.90). In contrast to the results in the previous studies, results reveals that in this specific context where consumers are not alone, respondents feel more satisfied when served in their first language (M=5.14, M=5.51, F(1, 116)=3.98, p < .05). Results also reveal mediating effect of identity threat (confidence interval: -.46; -.11). Specifically, in the social context when consumers are not alone, a language switch leads to higher identity threat (β=.92, p < .01), which subsequently leads to a decrease in satisfaction (β=-.28, p < .001). These results indicate that when consumers are not alone and served in their second language, feeling that their identity is threatened leads to lower satisfaction with the service.

Overall, these results indicate that there are situations in which consumers prefer to use their second language and may react negatively to a language switch. This effect, here identified as a language backfire effect, occurs when the consumer is alone, and does not hold when the consumer is in the company of others. In this specific case, consumers prefer being served in their first language and may perceive the language switch as a threat to their identity, leading to lower satisfaction.

REFERENCES


