I Speak Starbucks, Do You? Distinction and Inclusion on Linguistic Brand Codes

Ignacio Luri, University of Arizona, USA
Hope Schau, University of Arizona, USA

Brands are active producers of cultural objects. We define and explore linguistic brand codes, branded codes that mirror natural languages. Our ethnographic study of Starbucks’ code reveals two opposing consumer discourses around embodying and opposing respectively brand codes as legitimate, though field-specific, forms of cultural capital.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024682/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
I Speak Starbucks, do You? Distinction and Inclusion on Linguistic Brand Codes

Ignacio Luri, University of Arizona, USA
Hope Schau, University of Arizona, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Successful brands are active producers of cultural objects, rather than mere parasites that appropriate popular culture. Indeed, brands create symbols, myths, and even prescriptive models for the way we think and the way we behave – our goals, ideals, and values. Eavesdropping on someone ordering a drink at Starbucks or talking about a sci-fi narrative brand will make obvious that brands also change the way consumers talk. Despite the widely-accepted centrality of language to culture (Crawford & Valsiner 1999), brand-specific linguistic codes have been largely overlooked in cultural approaches to consumer research.

Despite the lack of deliberate examination, the existence of linguistic codes shared and used within consumption communities and brand communities is widely recognized. Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard (1998) use the words “jargon or group speak” to describe the insider code used within cyber-communities. Schau and Muñiz (2002) find a “community jargon” shared in brand-related personal websites. Langerak et al. (2003) use the term “specialized language” for the jargon spoken within an e-brand’s virtual community. In their ethnography of the new bikers, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) define subcultures of consumption as having unique jargons, and their data illustrates several examples of “biker vernacular.” One of the Trekker sub-communities described by Kozinets (2001) revolves around the constructed language Klingon. Muñiz and Schau (2005) describe a characteristic “formulaic language” within users of the discontinued Apple Newton. Whereas the presence of brand codes has been repeatedly acknowledged, their relevance to consumer researcher theory and marketing implications have yet to be explored. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by putting the spotlight on this particular brand cultural object.

We bring together Bourdieu’s cultural capital theories (e.g. Bourdieu 1986, Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), a brand culture approach (Schroeder 2009), and a consumer research reading of sociolinguistics to study the practices and discourses created by branded jargon and dialects. Starbucks is our context for studying brand codes. Brand-specific linguistic codes were studied using an ethnographic (Kozinets 2002) approach complemented with in-store observation. Brand related conversations were extracted from official and fan-created websites, Twitter messages and YouTube videos. Findings were further informed by naturalistic observation in Starbucks coffeehouses.

Findings confirm the appropriateness of the “brand language” metaphor, revealing the ubiquity of its use among consumers and illustrating the many ways in which linguistic brand codes mirror natural languages. Specifically, this study sheds light on the largely unexplored topic of how “brand literacy” (Bengtsson & Firat 2006) is acquired. Careful examination of Starbucks’ linguistic brand code reveals “jargon” to be an insufficient term to refer to a code with grammar-like properties in which issues of syntax (e.g. word order), pragmatics (e.g. tacitness and sub-textuality), and style (e.g. redundancy) matter. Linguistic competence in “Starbuckese” is revealed as a continuum ranging from complete lack of fluency to “native-like” competence. Two main opposing discourses co-exist around Starbucks’ ordering script. A wide range of oppositional and skeptical consumers see the brand code as unnecessarily cryptic, putatively designed to pretentiously sound “vaguely European” or simply expert Starbucks cultural hegemony. A second discourse (as voiced by baristas, and endorsed by most fans) is to discount the need for the code and the barriers to learning it without denying its complexity.

Among the most brand loyal customers endorsing the latter discourse, competence in Starbucks linguistic code signals commitment to the brand (and hence, status within the fan community). These fans often police the brand discourse and community in such a way that lack of fluency is tolerated, if looked down upon, but oppositional discourse is attacked and silenced.

On the other ideological end, oppositional customers, in their own words, “make a point” of not learning or using the linguistic brand code while ridiculing those who do and sharing with like-minded users their successes in defying Starbucks cultural dominance. Interestingly, they do so while still being Starbucks customers (many of them declared frequent customers).

Amid this dialectical war, occasional and unaligned Starbucks customers must still manage to navigate the brand code. Lacking fluency, they do so using a variety of compensatory strategies that typically result in negative feelings or suboptimal outcomes.

Fans use brand codes as a field-specific cultural capital and a source of identity, belonging, and group status. In the case of a highly accessible brand like Starbucks, cultural capital is more tied to how to consume and to what is consumed (Holt 1998). Whereas less-than-expert customers are needed if code competence is to be a signal of high status, deniers of the value of “speaking the brand” are a menace to status-seeking fans who have learned the code. Lack of fluency is described by consumers as a source of rejection and anxiety. Consistent with previous theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Lamont and Lareau’s 1988), cultural and social exclusion prove to be a central component of the status game. On the other hand, and deviating from previous literature on consumer resistance, we find oppositional consumers who are “anti-Starbuckese” rather than anti-Starbucks. Consumers can be polarized not only for and against a brand (as in Thompson & Arsel 2004, Kozinets & Handelman 2004) but for and against a brand’s cultural objects while still consuming the brand. Ethic interpretation of this form of consumer cultural resistance is that consumers are inverting the sign of marketer-imposed codes (Ozanne & Murray 1995) while still using them for status-seeking purposes. As Holt (2002) points out, opposition does not liberate from the market, but instead drives consumers to build their resistance identity through the market. We extend Holt’s findings by adding that even opposition to a brand’s cultural objects does not emancipate from the brand: knowing and denying brand cultural objects can be two fields within the same context; two strategies in the same status-seeking game of cultural capital.

REFERENCES


