The authentic service employee: Service employees' language use for authentic service experiences

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Abstract

This study analyzes how service employees' language use influences the authenticity of a service. The extant service literature on language use remains exclusively focused on the customer's perceptions of first language use in direct communication. Shifting the focus to the service employee, this paper posits that language could exert a wider influence, contributing both to how customers perceive the authenticity of the service and the entire service experience. Analyzing language use in service encounters, the paper addresses this research gap in the literature from the perspective of the service employee. In many service settings, authenticity is an important part in customers' construal of their experience. The study analyzes how service employees in British pubs outside the UK may use English with local customers who frequent these pubs to get a taste of Britain and British culture, contributing to the service literature by introducing a typology to align the service employees' language use with authenticity to strengthen the customer experience. The paper further contributes to service theory by extending the understanding of service sabotage by showing how, why, and in which circumstances service employees may use a language switch to sabotage the customer experience. Finally, the study extends the extant human resources literature on the effects of allowing service employees to be themselves to show that this managerial practice not only benefits the service employees also results in a more authentic customer experience.

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1. Introduction

Should service employees always try to speak the customers' language, or could using a different language contribute to how customers perceive the authenticity of the service, and even influence the overall customer experience? Understanding how to manage the customer's experience remains one of the main challenges for marketers and is a topic in need of further research (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2015). The extant service literature on how to use language in customer experiences in service contexts argue for significant benefits to using the customer's first language; speaking the customer's language can improve customers' word-of-mouth (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), customer perceptions (Holmqvist, 2011) as well as increase the tip for the service employee (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013). Marketing research in other contexts further echo these positive outcomes of using the customer's first language in service contexts, including more positive reactions to advertising or slogans in the customer's first language (Noriega & Blair, 2008; Puntoni, de Langhe, & Van Osselaer, 2009).

Research in the field of sociolinguistics also reports on how service employees use the customers' first language, even if the customer starts the interaction in a second language; Callahan (2006) shows that employees often switch to the language in which a customer feels most comfortable, regardless of the language in which the customer initially addresses the employee. Building on this situation, extant research on language use in the field of service research (Holmqvist & Grönnros, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), recommends addressing customers in their first language. This paper posits that this practice may not always be the best approach, and that conscientiously using a different language in well-defined customer experiences, such as Spanish at a salsa festival or English in a British pub abroad may contribute to the customers' appreciation of the service by giving the experience a more authentic feel. In 2012, the Norwegian coffee-chain Fugeln (The Bird) opened a Norwegian café in central Tokyo, meeting with huge success. Not only is the name Norwegian; the interior design and the furniture are Norwegian and the Japanese service employees even learn some Norwegian phrases to use with the local customers, underlining how management invokes the language of service employees in combination with the servicescape to provide a more authentic customer experience.

In many service settings, authenticity is important in lending the service provider credibility, and an authentic human touch can even...
determine the difference between the service offerings available to customers (Bowen, 2016). However, management needs to properly manage this authentic touch because service authenticity is multifaceted and may involve personal costs, particularly emotional costs, for the service employee (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2012); the extant HR literature shows that these emotional costs could even lead to the service employee hitting back by deliberately sabotaging the service (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002; Kao, Cheng, Kuo, & Huang, 2014). Recent marketing research shows the benefits of the service employees’ behavior being authentic to the brand they represent (Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013). Homburg et al. (2015) posit that successfully managing customer experiences requires internal consistency, and this research extends their proposition by suggesting that the external consistency is of equal importance to achieve alignment between service employees and perceptions (cf. Sirianni et al., 2013). The extant research on customer preferences for their first language focuses almost exclusively on the customer’s perceptions of language in direct communication with the service employee (Holmqvist, 2011; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013). This paper posits that language could exert an even wider influence, contributing to how customers perceive the authenticity of the whole experience.

Customer experiences often provide the customer with a hedonic aspect (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), an engaging experience representing a break from the ordinary (Arnould & Price, 1993). Building on this understanding of the customer experience, the authors analyze a service encounter in which customers engage to experience a short hedonic break; typical British pubs abroad, designed to offer a British experience. Through a qualitative study of observations and interviews, this study details how service employees in British pubs outside the UK conscientiously use English with local customers who frequent these pubs to get a taste of Britain and British culture. The following sections review the extant literature on the customer experience in services, before reviewing how the literature on language use in services adapts to these experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining the customer experience

The concept of the customer experience goes back to customers’ overall impressions of their consumption experience (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and the customer’s role in the service context is an integral part of service research from its very beginnings (Eiglier & Hirschman, 1982). Building on research in psycholinguistics, the paper posits that the service employees’ language use could play a role for the authenticity of the service establishment. Sirianni et al. (2013) build on Kernis and Goldman’s (2006) and Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, and Joseph (2008) to define authenticity as behavior in accordance with one’s true nature, and show the benefits of the service employees’ behavior being congruent with the brand they represent. The paper extends Sirianni et al.’s (2013) findings on the positive benefits on congruency between the service employees’ behavior and the brand to posit that customers engaging in a service encounter with the intention of experiencing a brief transformation may perceive the service as more authentic if the service employees’ language use is congruent with the design of the wider customer experience.

If some customers engage in the service with the desire to use their second language, how should the service employee deal with this situation? Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) adapt the concept...
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