



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



The effects of Hispanic bilinguals language use and stereotype activation on negotiations outcomes

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 June 2015

Received in revised form 1 March 2016

Accepted 1 April 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Language

Negotiations

Services

Stereotypes

Bilinguals

Hispanics

ABSTRACT

Service encounters often become negotiations between the customer and the service provider. For speakers of multiple languages, the language used in a negotiation can be a critical factor in the success of that encounter. By investigating how U.S. bilinguals negotiate in either English or Spanish, this research examines the effect that the activation of the stereotype related to the minority language-speakers has on negotiation outcomes. The results of two experiments support the general notion that, among U.S. Hispanic bilinguals, the majority language (English) yields more favorable outcomes compared to the minority language (Spanish); a third study with a comparison group of bilinguals in Mexico, where no language-related stereotype exists, shows no effect of the negotiation language on the outcome. The paper discusses theoretical and practical implications of the findings and areas for future research.

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“Hola! Que tal?” “Hello! How are you?”

1. Introduction

More than 60 million Americans over the age of 5 (or 21% of the population) speak a language other than English at home, with the majority of those speaking Spanish (Ryan, 2013). In many U.S. cities, being bilingual, or fluent in more than one language, gives people an edge in the job market (Parker, 2013), and even political candidates are taking notice and producing websites and campaign literature, and giving speeches, in both English and Spanish (Associated Press, 2015). But as Grosjean (2013, p. 12) put it, “bilinguals acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people.” Speakers of multiple languages might find themselves more successful in a given situation using one language or another based upon a number of factors, such as: which is the dominant language of the workplace, which is the primary language spoken by the consumer or members of the household, and even which language seems to better fit the situation. In a service setting, one might be interested in knowing which language would lead to a more successful service encounter for

all parties. Service encounters quite often involve various forms of negotiation, particularly when interacting with an agent or customer service representative or when attempting to resolve a complaint. Indeed, in today's global service environment, customers commonly deal with a representative who is in another country or belongs to a different ethnic group. In these negotiations, service providers and consumers usually seek to maximize their own outcome while still ensuring they achieve an agreement. When both the customer and the service provider are bilingual (proficient in two languages), the language in which the negotiation takes place might become an advantage or a disadvantage in attaining the desired outcomes for both counterparts. The question then becomes, what will be the impact of language on the outcome of the service negotiation. Once the impact of language is clear, such knowledge will allow bilingual customers and service providers to maximize their outcomes in different negotiation situations.

While much of the existing service literature merely calls for more service providers, such as doctors, nurses, or social workers, to be bilingual in order to more effectively meet the needs of their clients or patients (e.g., Chen, 2006; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, 2009), some more recent literature has begun to investigate the impact of the language (native or second language) on consumers of services (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). On the other hand, despite the enormous literature on cultural differences in negotiations (e.g., Adair, Okumura, & Brett, 2001; Graham, Mintu, & Rodgers, 1994; Salacuse, 1998), only limited research examines the role of language in negotiations (e.g., Ulijn & Verweij, 2000).

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This research extends these prior efforts by investigating the role that language, as a component of the person's social identity, has on negotiation outcomes. Social identity is defined in terms of individuals' knowledge of their membership in a group, and the value and emotions attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1981). Language is not only an important component of the individuals' social identity (Grosjean, 1982), but also has the potential to signal membership in an ethnic group (Giles & Johnson, 1987). Thus, this paper will build on the previous work by employing an ethno-linguistic perspective to examine the impact that language (English and Spanish) can have on negotiation outcomes within an ethnic group (U.S. Hispanic). To investigate these effects, the proposed research relies on the threat that being judged unfavorably poses for individuals, affecting their performance and consequently their negotiation outcomes (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). The language-related stereotypes associated with the ethnic group with lower economic, political, and numeric status (Spanish) would then activate the stereotype threat (Grosjean, 1982; Lambert & Lambert, 1973; Montes-Alcala, 2000; Peñaloza, 1980).

Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature in several directions. Specifically, (1) the research extends the service and language literature by incorporating an ethno-linguistic perspective to the effects of language on service encounters beyond language proficiency and language preference; (2) the research also contributes to the literature on stereotype threat, by extending the effects to language-related stereotypes in a non-academic task; and (3) the research expands the negotiation literature by providing evidence that language can affect negotiation outcomes. Pragmatically, service providers and consumers will benefit from learning about the key role played by language when negotiating and using that knowledge to maximize the outcomes when negotiating service encounters.

2. Background literature and conceptual framework

2.1. Language in service encounters

While some prior research shows language to be a useful segmentation criterion in various service sectors (Redondo-Bellon, 1999), much of the literature on bilingualism in services merely discusses the need for, and experience of, bilingual service providers. For example, Chen (2006) offers a personal account of one doctor's experience attempting to work with a patient with limited English ability. The account notes how relying on interpreters, often family and friends, presents a challenge in terms of confidentiality and reliability, thus pointing to the need for professional medical interpreters. Another study evaluates bilingualism in social work services (Engstrom et al., 2009). In a qualitative study, Engstrom and colleagues find that agencies should determine what language skills social workers need, and then should both provide ongoing language training and consider differential pay for those with second language skills (Engstrom et al., 2009). Thus, some prior literature addresses the need for bilingual service providers from an administrative service delivery perspective.

More recent studies investigate the impact of service language usage on the consumer. Holmqvist (2011) studies bilingual people in two countries (speaking four languages) and finds that participants in all groups (English/French or Finnish/Swedish, with either language as the primary) prefer using their first language in service encounters, but that this preference is particularly true for high involvement services (such as banking or medicine). A qualitative study identifies financial reasons (some would switch to a service provider in their second language to get a better price) and comfort reasons (many felt more comfortable receiving the services in their native language) underlying the language preferences in both countries, while also identifying political reasons (some expressed hatred or other strong negative emotions for those who refused to speak a certain language) in Canada, but not in Finland. In similar research across three countries, Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2013) again find a strong preference for service

encounters in one's native language, particularly for high involvement services, and no gender difference in this preference.

Continuing this line of inquiry, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) find that consumers are more likely to tip when served in their native language than in a second language. Moreover, the degree to which the consumer believes the server is making an effort to accommodate them mediates this result, which is independent of the consumer's language skills in their second language. Interestingly, political considerations are again important, as those with strong political feelings about language usage are much less likely to tip in their second language. Further research finds consumers are also less likely to spread positive word of mouth, and feel the provider was being less responsive, when served in their second language than in their native language (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014).

This emerging literature demonstrates the impact of a service provider's language usage on consumers' responses to that service encounter. Clearly, service providers' language usage has important effects on bilingual consumers' evaluations and behaviors, beyond just that of language proficiency. Moreover, the communication and interaction between the consumer and the service provider are critical to the success of the service encounter (Bitner, 1990; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Today, many service encounters are longer and more in depth, such as when dealing with phone service or a computer problem, and often amount to a negotiation between the purchaser and the service provider.

This research fits well within this literature stream by examining the effects of language from a different perspective, as part of the social identity of service providers and consumers. The aim is to extend the literature by examining the impact of language on negotiations, which are likely to be part of a service encounter among bilingual counterparts.

2.2. Language, ethnicity, and stereotypes

As a means of communication, every language conveys a unique representation of the world. Hence, researchers argue that, to some degree, culture frames language and language frames culture (Whorf, 1956). However, language also serves as an identity symbol. Under this conception, attitudes towards the ethnic group associated with a language accompany the attitudes or judgments towards the language itself. An individual's social identity is defined in terms of the social group or groups of which an individual is a member (Tajfel, 1981), and the language of that group is considered to be a valued component of that identity (Smolicz & Lean, 1979). Membership in a group may be positive or negative depending on the social comparison with other groups. Giles and his colleagues introduce the concept of "ethnolinguistic vitality," to define the factors that determine the strength and distinctiveness of the ethnicity and language of the group when confronted with other ethnic groups (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1987). An ethnic group's economic power, political prestige, and demographic status define its ethnolinguistic vitality. Under these circumstances, when two ethnic groups are in constant contact, one language becomes the majority language; the other language naturally becomes the minority language (Giles & Johnson, 1987). When this process occurs, the language of the majority develops more favorable associations than those attached to the language spoken by any of the minorities. These less favorable associations can lead to stereotypes.

Cultural stereotypes (Devine, 1989) represent a person's perception of societally endorsed views. These stereotypes represent the perceptions about what is believed by "people in general" (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Garcia-Marques, Santos, & Mackie, 2006), and they may or may not be in accord with a person's personal beliefs. When two or more ethnic groups are in frequent contact, social comparisons take place and as a consequence, the group's cultural stereotype likely reflects the ethnolinguistic vitality of the group (Hewstone & Giles, 1977). In particular, among Mexican-Americans, perceptions of the English

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