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The differential roles of verbs, nouns, and adjectives in English and Chinese messages among bilingual consumers

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ABSTRACT

Different word categories have distinct impacts on consumers' perceptions of a good or a service. Through 3 studies, this article tests the use of verbs, nouns, and adjectives among bilingual consumers. Study 1 examines word category use among bilinguals who speak both English and Chinese through an open-ended questionnaire. Study 2 measures the participants' reactions toward advertisements which are composed of different word categories. In Study 3, two experiments test the word category effect in the service domain. The findings indicate that: (1) to describe a good or a service, bilinguals prefer adjectives and nouns in general, while using more verbs in Chinese contexts; (2) English advertisements are perceived as more informative than Chinese ones, and noun-composed advertisements are perceived as more informative than the ones with verbs or adjectives; (3) the interaction effect of language and word category on purchase intentions is true for both advertisements and services; specifically, noun-composed messages are more efficient in affecting bilinguals' purchase decisions in Chinese contexts, while adjective-composed advertisements work better in English contexts; and (4) in the service domain, the interaction of language and word category has an impact on positive word-of-mouth and website use experience satisfaction. Conceptual and managerial implications are provided.

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1. Introduction

The importance of language in marketing communications as well as in service encounters is acknowledged in the literature (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Choosing the right language and the most effective terms has always been the main concerns of strategic planners. Given the prominent relationship between advertising and services (Turley & Kelley, 1997), and the essential role of language in services, to investigate the use of words in advertising and service encounters is of great importance. Suggett (2014) reports the 10 most powerful words that could boost advertising return on investment. Although these powerful words may work well in general, companies usually ignore the interactive aspects of communications between a company and its consumers in advertising practices, and fail to design their strategies in a customer-centric view (Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, & Grönroos, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Also language is a prominent element in this interaction (Holmqvist, Guest, & Grönroos, 2015). Not only should the linguistic symbols used by

native speakers be studied, but also the relevant word categories. For example, all the 10 powerful words reported by Suggett (2014) fall into either the adjective (e.g., new), verb (e.g., discover), or noun (e.g., results) categories. Speaking the consumers' language facilitates the communications between a company and its consumers (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012); consequently, this impacts consumers' purchase decisions and post-purchase behaviors (Holmqvist et al., 2015). However, to speak the right language and to choose the right words are never easy; thus this topic is worthy of further investigation.

A consumer's evaluation of a good or a service can be influenced by many factors, but culture has been researched on various aspects (Laroche, Toffoli, Zhang, & Pons, 2001; Mazaheri, Richard, & Laroche, 2011). A typical culture can influence an individuals' judgment through specific regulations and norms. Among all the cultural elements, language is a factor that should not be neglected (Semin, 2012), inasmuch as the right language and words can smooth the consumption experience, and even save a company from service failure (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Previous research focused on the language phonetical, structural, lexical and other related attributes, and reported the attributes' effect on cognitive processes, emotional reactions, and so on (Tavassoli, 1999; Tavassoli & Han, 2001; Tavassoli & Lee, 2003).

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In modern societies, people travel and migrate more frequently. To hear people speak a language other than their mother tongue is not rare. Given this trend, linguists have investigated the second language acquisition and learning processes, the differences between the first and the second languages, and even the impact of the language differences on individual behavior in a marketing context (Laroche et al., 2001; Zhang & Schmitt, 2004). Scholars find that the different languages used in advertising would prime people with different cultures. This impact of language makes people respond differently to the Chinese version of a questionnaire compared to the English one (Toffoli & Laroche, 2002). Sometimes, people from different cultures use different word categories to describe the same object. In Maass, Karasawa, Politi, and Suga (2006) study, when participants are asked to describe their close persons (i.e. their families and friends), Italians are more likely to use adjectives whereas Japanese are more prone to using verbs. In accordance with the construal level theory (Maass et al., 2006), individuals with different cultural backgrounds have distinctive preferences in language use. For instance, individuals have different perceptions of the psychological distance from the exposure of different languages in service settings (Holmqvist et al., 2015). Forming language in line with customers' preferences (e.g. their native language) can reduce the psychological distance and perceived risk toward the company, and even create value (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012; Holmqvist et al., 2014, 2015). In addition, consumers may be emotionally attached to the service language in service encounters if the consumers' desired languages are spoken (Holmqvist, 2011). Knowing that language is important, more questions arise: Do marketers interpret consumers' preferences correctly and use their desired languages and words? Are the findings from interpersonal descriptions applicable to non-interpersonal contexts? Will the same results be obtained in the service domain? How companies' language strategies respond to bilingual or multilingual consumers? These questions relate to the call for research on language in service encounters (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012; Holmqvist et al., 2014).

To be specific, this article focuses on the language preferences of bilinguals who speak both English (alphabetic) and Chinese (ideographic) (Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994). Being as two representative languages from alphabetic and ideographic systems, as well as being distinctive and essential in marketing, English and Chinese are two typical languages to investigate (Francis, Lam, & Walls, 2002; Schmitt et al., 1994). This article aims to find out: 1) if bilinguals (i.e. speaking both English and Chinese) use more adjectives to describe a product when responding in English, but use more verbs when responding in Chinese; 2) if an advertisement or a service encounter using Chinese (English) is perceived as more favorable when composed with verbs (adjectives); and 3) how consumers react to nouns given their powerful role in marketing.

By answering these questions, this article contributes to a better understanding of bilingual consumers' language and word uses. This article also helps managers use proper language to achieve more effective communications, and provide better services. Furthermore, this research is the first to investigate nouns, and to test the role of nouns for bilinguals in comparison to adjectives and verbs. Through a more thorough knowledge of consumers' language and word uses, companies are more able to provide effective communications, and facilitate the value-in-use, value-in-context, and value-in-experience processes with their customers (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Helkkula, Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012).

In particular, this article examines the language use in service encounters. Because communications are prominent in the provider sphere, joint sphere, and customer sphere, this study also benefits the language interactions between a company and its customers through the whole service encounter process (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Finally, this work responds to the call for research on web based service encounters, and contributes to a fruitful knowledge of language use in online phenomena (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012).

2. Literature review

2.1. Cognitive processing: abstract versus concrete construal levels

Individuals are distinct information processors (Wyer, 2012). A person with a different processing style may use a more distinctive (e.g., lexical) language than others. For instance, people may see an object in the frame of either the present or future, the close or distant, the expected or unexpected, and so on (Semin, 2012; Trope & Liberman, 2012). Trope and Liberman (2012) claim in their construal level theory that two distinctive construal levels – high and low – are observed in an individual's evaluation, judgment, and selection (Liberman & Trope, 1998). They define high-level construals as “schematic, decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information, emphasizing a few superordinate core feature of event,” and low-level construals as “relative unconstructed, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events” (p. 120). Temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical are the different dimensions used to capture the construal levels. Accordingly, the future, distal, and unexpected characters are categorized as high construal levels, which are often summarized and abstract; in this case, people emphasize the invariant attributes and central features, which usually are the goals. In contrast, the present, proximal, and expected attributes are associated with low construal levels, representing detail and concrete; in this case, peripheral attributes are more plausible (Trope & Liberman, 2012).

In line with the Trope and Liberman's (2012) concrete versus abstract construal levels, Semin and his colleagues (Semin, 2012; Semin & Fiedler, 1988; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005) extend the distinctive dimensions into the language use contexts. In a series of experiments, respondents use different abstract levels of language in their interpersonal descriptions. One of the four levels in the linguistic category model (LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1988), is the descriptive action verb (DAV), representing the most concrete level. This group of words depicts things concretely through the action verbs (e.g., hug). Interpretive action verbs (IAV) and state verbs (SV) are more abstract than DAVs; they indicate verbal descriptions and interpretable meaning. The difference between IAV and SV is that SV associates with less overt actions, such as envy (SV) versus cheat (IAV). The most abstract group is labeled as adjective (Adj), aiming to characterize the traits. One example is “aggressive” (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Apart from the linguistic category model which essentially deals with verbs and adjectives, Coenen, Hedeboew, and Semin (2006) stress that nouns could be classified as adjectives in some circumstances, inasmuch as nouns can “refer to actions, objects, and situations” just like adjectives (p. 11).

Holmqvist et al. (2015) extend the construal level theory into the language study in service contexts. They believe that the asymmetry between a company's language policy and its consumers' level of construal causes a psychological distance. An effective service communication strategy which aligns with a consumer's construal level can diminish this distance, and increase positive word-of-mouth (WOM), as well as the value creation process (Helkkula et al., 2012; Holmqvist et al., 2015; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

2.2. Cultural emphasis: English-abstract-adjective versus Chinese-concrete-verb

Following the LCM study, Maass et al. (2006) report that individuals' cultural backgrounds influence them to use different words from the four categories for interpersonal descriptions. More specifically, Italians use adjectives more often than the Japanese, but the Japanese use more verbs, which is eight times as frequent as the Italians. Both of them regard adjectives as more enduring whereas verbs are more situational (Maass et al., 2006). Although the cultural differences are easily observed in this study, is this distinction applicable to other languages,

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