

# The Language Paradox of Marketing Research:

## *Challenges and Propositions for Service Research*

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## **Abstract**

**The service encounter depends on the mutual interaction between the customer and the company, but what if language difficulties impede the interaction? Reviewing the current marketing literature, this conceptual article suggests that there exists a language paradox in marketing research: The contexts in which communication is most important and most prevalent are the same contexts in which language use is least studied and hardest to implement. While the importance of communication and interaction has been emphasized in service encounters, little attention has been paid to the role of language in these contexts. By incorporating sociolinguistic research into language use, the article argues that more research into how language influences consumers in service contexts is urgently needed in order to better understand the service encounter, the role of the customer and how these are influenced by language use. The article analyzes this situation and presents eight propositions about language use in service.**

**Keywords:** service marketing, service encounters, language in service, native language use, value co-creation

## **Introduction**

Services are to a large part characterized by the extent to which the customer takes part in the service by interacting and communicating with the service personnel (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bitner 1990; Grönroos 1978; Surprenant and Solomon 1987; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Such is the importance of this interaction between companies and consumers that it has even been argued that for the consumer, these encounters *are* in fact the service (Bitner 1990; Shostack 1977). Given this, it is not surprising that interactions involving communication and customer participation in the service encounter have received considerable attention within the field of service marketing (Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, and Zeithaml 1997; Grönroos 1978; 1984; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996). Much of the research on interactions and communication in services, however, appear to have assumed that the consumer and the service personnel by definition are perfectly *able* to interact and communicate effortlessly with each other. Writing about the future directions of marketing research, Gummesson

concludes by asking which phenomena that are crucial to marketing are we currently ignoring (Gummesson 2002). We propose that for service marketing, language use is one such phenomenon.

In this article, we argue that language could play a crucial role in service contexts, particularly when customers interact with companies. Building on the current marketing literature, the article revolves around two central claims

**a. Communication between the customer and the company is particularly impactful in service settings with direct firm-customer interactions**

Communication between the customer and the service personnel is of crucial importance to the outcome of the service encounter (Bitner et al. 1997; Grönroos 1978, 1984; Zeithaml et al. 1984). Following the publication of the service logic, the active role of the customer has been further emphasized within the service context (Grönroos 2008; Payne, Storbacka and Frow 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2004; 2008).

**b. Research on service marketing ignores the role of language, while existing studies on language in marketing focus on settings without direct communication**

When language has been studied in a marketing contexts, the focus has been on advertising and one-way communication (Luna and Peracchio 2001; 2005, Noriega and Blair 2008; Puntoni, de Langhe and van Osselaer 2009). While acknowledging the importance of understanding language in these contexts, we propose that the interactive nature of services (Eiglier and Langedard 1976; Grönroos 1978; Surprenant and Solomon 1987; Vargo and Lusch 2004) makes the importance of understanding language in service encounters even more crucial.

Combined, these two claims constitute what we term the language paradox of marketing research: the very contexts in which language would be likely to be most crucial are the same contexts in which the influence of language has received the least attention. To a certain extent, this situation is understandable. For both practitioners and researchers, it is easier to focus on language outside service settings. The interactive and intangible nature of services (Grönroos 1978; Surprenant and Solomon 1987) might make it more difficult to study and to implement multilingualism in services. However, the fact that it might be harder both to study languages in service contexts and to implement a company language policy for service does not diminish the importance of language for customers in service. We propose the contrary,

that the interactive and intangible nature that could make it more difficult to study and use language in service also makes it more crucial to understand its effects. A summary of the current situation is provided in Figure 1, outlining the emphasis on communication and interactions in service research, the existing language research in advertising but the lack of studies on language in service contexts.

Figure 1 about here, please

In addition to these two literature streams within marketing research, we also draw upon relevant literature from the field of sociolinguistic research to underline why language is likely to be important for customers, and why it needs to be studied in service contexts. The article states that there is no language that can be used as a lingua franca to reach customers across language barriers. Drawing on sociolinguistic research, we argue that there is no one language that can be used in international contexts. We also propose that using only one language may often not be enough even in national contexts.

Building on the current literature of service marketing, of studies of language use in marketing and of sociolinguistics, the article presents eight propositions about language use in service contexts, and for why this topic is in need of further research to better understand service encounters.

### ***Why is Research on Language Needed?***

Two objections might be raised to the importance we attach to language use. Throughout much of the world, especially North America and Europe, English has emerged as global lingua franca (Crystal 2003). On a local scale, a great many markets are still characterized by one dominating language. Although there is some truth to both of these of these objections, we argue that neither English nor any other language serves as a truly international language, and that there are few countries in which one language suffices to satisfy customers.

In recent times, the English language has shot to unprecedented success in becoming a global language facilitating international communication (McArthur 2002; Peters 2004). In parts of Western Europe, especially in the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, self-reported second-language competence in English exceeds 85% of the population (Eurobarometer 2006). In many other countries, English tend to be more widely spoken by people in the tourism

industry or by people with a higher education (cf. Mei 2001). Travelling in parts of Europe or working in higher level company management or in international academia, it might at times be easy to be lulled into thinking that English is an even more wide-spread language than it is. Worldwide, knowledge of English is still relatively limited. While it is probably true that never in human history has a language been as widely spoken as a second language as English is today, the fact remains that the vast majority of the world's population speak no English whatsoever (cf. Crystal 2003). Even in Europe, knowledge of English remains relatively limited outside Scandinavia and Benelux, with just one in three Europeans able to communicate in English (Eurobarometer, 2006).

*Proposition 1: As there is no one international language that can be used to interact with customers, and one language is often not enough even in domestic markets, marketers need to understand how language influence consumers.*

Looking at individual markets, one language is often dominating but truly monolingual markets are rare. Luna and Peracchio (2001), building on Grossjean (1982) and Hoffman (1991), propose that more than half the consumers in the world already speak more than one language. In major US cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami, Spanish is fast becoming a significant minority language, while in Canada, English is spoken as the first language by less than 60% in both Toronto and Vancouver, and by a mere 12% in Montreal (Michon and Chebat 2004). Similarly, several major Asian and African countries are made up of people speaking many different languages. In India alone, there are no fewer than sixteen official languages while there are eleven in South Africa. The situation in Europe is not much different, as countries and markets are becoming less and less homogenous. Two factors in particular account for much of this development. One is the presence of national minorities in most European countries. The largest of these groups is the around five million Catalan speakers in Spain, but every European country bar Iceland is home established linguistic minorities. The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, EBLUL, estimates that there are near 50 million native speakers of minority languages, a language that is not the largest language in the country, within the European Union (EBLUL 2010). This is something that has always been the case, but a general revival of minority languages has made them more visible. The other factor is a relatively recent phenomenon and consists of the immigration to most European countries. According to the United Nations, people with an immigrant background make up around five million in the United Kingdom, slightly over ten million in

Germany and over six million in France (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2006). Counting speakers of minority languages and immigrant languages together, the European Union is home to more than 100 million people who speak another language than the largest language of the country, and thus the market, in which they live. Add to this the fact that markets themselves are becoming less dependent on national boundaries, and a global situation emerges where it can no longer be assumed that the consumer and the company always speak the same language.

The discussion so far has focused on language competence as a key to understanding to what extent customers are able to interact with companies. However, the role of languages is more extensive than merely as a means of communication. Even when able to speak a second language, it should not be assumed that customers are always happy to do so. Languages and language use also have the potential of communicating identities and loyalties in themselves (Brala 2007; Spolsky and Cooper 1991), as language is strongly linked to nationalist feelings that influence the consumer's perceptions (Dunn 1976; Redondo-Bellón 1998). Feelings regarding the own language and/or a foreign language have the potential to influence consumers, affecting the choices they make (Gopinath and Glassman 2008). The extent to which consumers identify with their native language thus needs to be taken into account alongside the consumers' capacity to use another language.

When considering the role language might play for consumers, we thus propose that language is influencing not only how *well* consumers can communicate with service providers, but that attention also is needed to how *willing* consumers are to communicate in another language than their native language. In the Benelux countries, one of the regions in Europe in which English is most widely spoken as a second language (Eurobarometer 2006), recent research found that customers display an emotional preference for native language use even when perfectly able to speak English (Puntoni et al. 2009). This connection between native language and identity is highly relevant for understanding the influence of language on consumers, as it reinforces the point that language is not limited just to communication. It is directly linked to the consumer's identity, helping to explain why even perfectly fluent bilinguals may prefer using their native language for emotional rather than functional reasons.

Sociolinguistic research thus demonstrates that language can influence which stores consumers choose to frequent (cf. Spolsky and Cooper 1991), and that even fluent bilinguals

still perceive that their native language is more strongly connected to their identity (Brala 2007). The latter finding is echoed by recent advertising research showing that consumers connect less strongly with ads in their second language, despite being fluent in the latter (Puntoni et al 2009). We propose, based on these prior studies, that language will have an impact on which companies and service providers customers are prone to prefer, and that this language preference depends on the consumers' emotional attachments to the language, rather than on their language skills.

*Proposition 2: Language not only influences how well consumers can interact with companies in service encounters, but also how willing they are to interact.*

*Proposition 3: Even when fully fluent in a second language, consumers display an emotional preference for their native language.*

### ***Communication in the Service Encounter***

Following the publication of the service logic or service-dominant logic (Grönroos 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2004), the last few years have seen marketing research paying increasing attention to the importance of the consumer as a value creator through service interactions with the company (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Grönroos 2008; Payne et al. 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Common to this view is an increase in the importance awarded to the interaction between the consumer and the company, as it is precisely from this interaction that value for the consumer is taken to stem (Grönroos 2008; Gummesson 2006; Vargo and Lusch 2004).

The interaction taking place in the service encounter, using the definition of Suprenant and Solomon, is “the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider” (Suprenant and Solomon 1987, p. 87). This definition emphasizes the active participation and involvement of both parties in the service encounters. Such encounters have been shown to influence how the consumer perceives the quality of the service (Bitner 1990, 1992; Grönroos 1984). The service encounter, then, is an interaction between the company and the consumer, involving an exchange of communication of some sort that can be more or less extensive, but which virtually always is to be found to at least some extent (Grönroos 1978; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988; Wägar 2007). It has further been shown that both the outcome and the quality of the communication directly influence the service encounters (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Mattson and den Haring 1998; Stiles 1985).

*Proposition 4: Use of the customer's native language in service encounters may have a positive effect on the customer's perception of service quality*

Emphasizing the importance of interactions between customer and the company, Vargo and Lusch argue that for customers to be able to successfully participate in the interaction, the customer needs to have the required competences to participate (Vargo and Lusch 2004; 2008). We propose that if consumers are not able to interact at full ease, an important component of this competence is missing. The successful outcome of the consumer-company interaction is dependent on the language used by both the consumer and the company and the degree to which both parties understand each other (Marcella and Davies 2004). Thus the role of language, and consumer preferences for native language use, would appear to be crucial for better understanding the value co-creation process.

*Proposition 5: The intangible nature of services will heighten consumer preferences for native language use.*

While the interactive nature of the service encounter is the main reason why we feel that research into language is needed in order to better understand consumers in service contexts, uncertainty about the outcome is an additional reason why marketers need to understand how language influences service encounters. Uncertainty influences consumer perceptions in many settings (cf. Johnson, 2005; Mitchell, 1999; Thompson, 2005). Whenever the customer has to use a second language, this may lead to an increased feeling of uncertainty. Research in advertising show that customers who have to process information in a second language do so slower than in their native language (Luna and Peracchio 2005; Schmitt et al. 1994; Tavassoli and Han 2001). This makes it particularly important to understand language influence in service. The intangible nature of the service process makes it harder to predict the outcome of the interaction (Crosby et al. 1990; de Ruyter et al. 2001; Laroche, Teng, Michon and Chebat 2005; Murray and Schlacter 1990), and this could lead the consumer to perceive an increased importance of native language use in order to feel confident about the service interaction.

*Proposition 6: If language impedes the customer from interacting confidently with the company, the quality of the service interaction will suffer.*



The emphasis on the importance of communication between the customer and the company in services (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bitner 1990, Grönroos 1984; Vargo and Lusch 2004) makes the need for research into language influence in services all the more crucial. Looking at the field of health care and hospital management, findings about hospital patients' needs and preferences show a strong preference for native language use, and attention has been called to the need for doctors and hospital staff to use the language of the patients (Brach and Fraser 2002, Fennel 2005). These studies carried out on patient satisfaction within the field of medical studies resulted in findings that might have implications for the service provider. Studies from hospitals – a service encounter of perceived importance for many consumers – show that Spanish-speaking patients in California perceive a higher quality if their doctor can speak with them in their native language (Fernandez et al. 2004; Jacobs et al. 2006). Outside this particular field of hospital management, however, little attention has been paid to the influence of language on consumers in service encounters.

The findings on language use from medical studies add support to the proposition that there is likely to be a language influence in at least some service encounters. When entering into service encounters in which communication is required for the outcome to be successful, the consumers may prefer being served in their native language, even when able to speak the language of the service provider as a second language. We propose that this may be the case even for consumers who are virtually fluent in their second language; research into language processing shows that even fluent bilinguals have been shown to be more at ease in their strongest language (La Heij et al. 1996; Luna and Peracchio, 2001, 2005). This corresponds to the findings from the health care field, where response from patients indicate that it is not always enough that the consumer is able to communicate with the company in a language that he / she is able to speak (Jacobs et al. 2006). When the service provider and the consumer do not share the same native language, there is always a risk for communication problems. This risk is in turn related to how well the consumer is able to speak the language that the service provider is using (Marcella and Davies 2004). The communication in the service encounter is thus dependent on how well the consumer and the service employee are able to communicate with each other, meaning that the consumer's competence in other languages than his / her native language will influence how well he / she can interact with the service provider.

*Proposition 7: Even fluent bilinguals are more at ease when interacting in their strongest language*

### ***Current Research into Language in Marketing***

Although the influence of language remains largely absent from the field of service research, the importance of language use for consumers has received extensive coverage in other marketing fields (Hastie and Park 1986; Luna and Peracchio 2001; Schmitt, Pan and Tavassoli 1994; Schmitt and Zhang 1998; Tavassoli 1999). Most of the research into language influence on consumers, however, has focused on one-way communication, either on language use in mass-communication (Appiah 2001; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999; Lass and Hart 2004; Luna, Lerman and Peracchio 2005) or the role of language in branding (LeClerc, Schmitt and Dubé 1994; Leclerc, Schmitt and Dubé-Rioux 1989; Yorkston and Menon 2004).

Within the field of language studies in advertising, several studies have focused on the impact of ethnic affiliation (Appiah 2001; Deshpandé, Hoyer and Donthu 1986; Forehand and Deshpandé 2001; Green 1999; Koslow, Shamdasani, Touchstone 1994). While consumers in immigrant groups in many circumstances react positively to advertising directed to them in their native language, this may not always be the case. Among immigrant groups adapting to a new culture, an inferiority complex towards the consumer's native language in comparison with the main language of the market may lead consumers to take a negative view of their language (Koslow, Shamdasani, Touchstone 1994). For some consumers, use of their native language serves as an unwelcome sign of their being different, thus they might prefer to use the main language of the market instead of their native language (Berry and Krishnan 1992). Alongside the need for understanding the role of language as a tool of communication and consumer's emotional attachments, this constitutes an important part of understanding language use. Marketers need to recognize that although consumers usually tend to react positively to use of their native language (Noriega and Blair 2008; Puntoni et al. 2009) there may also be circumstances in which consumers may not wish to use their native language.

*Proposition 8: In certain contexts, some consumers might prefer not to use their native language due to how they perceive their native language.*

### ***Discussion***

Reviewing the marketing literature focusing on language, this article suggested that a language paradox exists in the current marketing literature. As service research emphasizes the communication and the interaction between the customer and the company (Bendapudi

and Leone 2003; Grönroos 2008), with the interaction being key to the service logic (Grönroos 2008; Payne et al. 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2004; 2008), the article proposed that the role language plays in these interactions needs addressing. Contexts where language use has been studied in marketing are mostly limited to situations in which the customer is a passive recipient of communication directed *at* the customer. Studies focusing on language in situations where the company communicates *with* the customer are rare. Herein lays the language paradox of marketing research.

The literature review showed that although language has been shown to influence consumers' perception of marketing, especially in the field of advertising, language is rarely studied outside the context of advertising. As studies from other fields show, language can play different roles for consumers, and understanding these roles is a challenge for marketers. On the one hand, language is a tool that enables consumers to interact with companies; in situations where the customer does not speak the language of the service provider, the outcome of the interaction depends on the language skills of the customer, or vice versa (cf. Marcella and Davies 2004). Interactions would be well nigh impossible with no common language, while a situation in which one of the parties use a second language are influenced on second language skills and its implications for the interaction. On the other hand, language should not be seen as merely a means of communication. Although crucial to interactions, language also contains an important emotional aspect that influences perceptions of identity (cf. Brala 2007). Even customers who are fluent in a second language still show an emotional attachment to native language use (cf. Puntoni et al. 2009). The consequences of this are far-reaching. Looking at a market or a customer segment, it is not enough for marketers to assume that all customers with strong second language skills are willing to communicate with a company in their second language. An interesting implication of this would be the consequences this could have for how consumers react towards service providers. Given the role of emotional connotations to native language use, it seems likely that customers would prefer a company willing to serve them in their native language over a competitor not prepared to do so. If findings from health care management (Morales et al. 1999) and advertising (Puntoni et al. 2009) are applicable to service contexts, many consumers would be likely to prefer to interact with companies in their native language no matter how good their second language skills. We believe it possible that the interactive role of the customer in communicating in service encounters may result in an even stronger native language preference than in the more passive context of interpreting advertising messages.

The article argues that language is likely to influence consumers in service contexts. This argument builds on both the emotional and functional role language plays for consumers in advertising and on the crucial role attached to communication by many researchers within the field of service. The continued emphasis on communication in the service interaction between companies and consumers makes it probable that something as fundamental for communication as language influences anything that depends on good communication. The article highlights this gap in the current marketing literature, providing eight propositions about how and why language use in services is likely to be important, and call for further research into this neglected area of service research.

The lack of research into language use in services is likely to be partially due to the more complex nature of services and the more challenging task of analyzing service encounters. While consumer responses to advertising or other messages can be measured in several relatively straightforward ways, the roles of language in services pose a more intricate research problem, as service encounters are intangible processes that are more difficult to evaluate or simulate in experiments.

We believe that there are two reasons in particular explaining why this topic is becoming increasingly relevant and in need of further studies. From a managerial perspective, we live in a global world, and this influences companies and consumer all over the world; interactions between customers and companies not sharing the same native language are increasingly common. From a theoretical perspective, more and more attention has been paid to the role of the consumer, especially the consumer's and the service provider's role in creating value in service encounters. Value is not something that the company produces and then serves the customer, value is what the customer perceives (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Rather than being passive recipients of value from the company, it is the customers themselves who create value by interacting with the company (Grönroos 2008). How are these interactions and their outcome influenced if the customer and the company do not speak the same language? The lack of research into this aspect of service appears to constitute a gap in the existing service theory.

*Managerial implications*

Increasing globalization of services and the growing heterogeneity of many markets make language use a matter of practical concern for many companies. It seems probable that multiple language use will become more prevalent in advertising and on signs before being implemented in service encounters, just as research into language use has been studied in advertising before receiving the same amount of attention in service contexts. The reasons for this, we believe, are practical: while language use in advertising requires a one-time translation and printing, language use in service required a more far-reaching approach. To be able to serve the customer throughout the service interaction, company policy would need to be directed towards recruiting service personnel that are able to serve customers in their native language. This represents a challenge for companies. It is hardly ever feasible or even possible to offer all customers on a market service in their native languages. As a rough rule of thumb, it could be expected that the larger the customer segment speaking a different language than the main language of the market, the greater the need for a multilingual service strategy. The numbers that drive the need for multilingual service, however, would also offer companies a larger recruiting pool of potential service employees. Even though a larger customer segment often will lead to a larger need for multilingual service, however, it is likely that the situation is often more complex. For a company contemplating a multilingual strategy, knowledge of the sociolinguistics of the market is imperative. Sociolinguistic research shows that some segments prioritize native language use stronger than others, and as stated in proposition eight, there may also be consumers who might not wish to use their native language at all. It would seem probable that the perceived importance of native language use also would depend on the service context, with a possible correlation between higher involvement and higher perceived importance of native language use. These are just some of the practical concerns related to language use for which service research could provide valuable managerial contributions by offering insight.

#### *Implications for service research*

By identifying an existing gap in the service literature, the article strives to call attention to a largely neglected area of service research and to encourage further research within this area. As outlined in this article, we believe that language use could have a considerable impact on several crucial service elements. These include, but are not limited to, the extent to which language influences customers in different kinds of services, the customer's ability to participate in the value-creation process is influenced by language, the impact of the customers' emotional perceptions of their native language, and the ways in which language

use could influence how customers perceive the quality of the service they receive. The implications of how customers perceive language use in services would constitute a topic of multiple research possibilities. Consumer perceptions of the quality of the communication could depend on the language used in the interaction. Testing whether the emotional attachment the customers have to their native language lead to increased loyalty and satisfaction or, when not served in their native language, to dissatisfaction or decreasing repurchase intentions would constitute another interesting view on language in services.

The eight propositions outlined in this article all represent potential research objectives. Drawing upon the field of service research, the field of language influence in advertising as well as the field of sociolinguistics, the propositions represent what we perceive to be eight possible ways in which language could influence service. While support for introducing the eight propositions can be found in the relevant literature, their adaption to service encounter and their implications within this field constitute a challenge for service research.

## **Conclusions**

The current literature in service marketing emphasizes the importance of communication and interactions, but assumes that the customer and the service personnel are native speakers of the same language. While this is likely to be the most common scenario on most markets, it cannot be taken for granted. The world is becoming more globalised, and countries with only one official language are fewer than the multilingual countries. These developments are likely to increase the importance of language. The interactive and intangible nature of the service encounter alongside findings from both sociolinguistic studies and advertising research all suggest that language, language skills and language difficulties are likely to influence how consumers perceive, execute and evaluate the service interaction with the company.

The lack of research into how language affects service constitutes what we termed the language paradox of marketing research: the contexts in which language are likely to be most crucial are the same contexts in which the influence of language remains unstudied. Building on sociolinguistic research, we suggested that language is likely to have a considerable impact on the service encounter, and that it will have both a functional and an emotional influence on consumers. The article concludes that more research into how language may influence service encounters is urgently needed.

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<b>Different languages</b>	<p><i>Consumers feel positively about the use of their native language</i> Noriega and Blair 2008; Puntoni et al. 2009</p> <p><i>Consumers display stronger text-processing in native language</i> Luna and Peracchio 2002; Schmitt et al. 1994; Tavassoli and Han 2001</p> <p><i>Negative view of native language among immigrant consumers</i> Berry and Krishnan 1992; Koslow et al. 1994; Luna and Peracchio 2005</p> <p><i>Language plays a role in consumers' ethnic identification</i> Appiah 2001; Forehand and Deshpandé 2001; Green 1999</p> <p><i>Language influences brand perceptions</i> LeClerc et al. 1994; Yorkston and Menon 2004</p>	<p><b><i>The Language Paradox of Marketing Research</i></b></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">The field of advertising research <i>Outside the scope of this article</i></p>	
<b>One language</b>	<b>Advertising and one-way communication</b>	<b>Service encounter and interactions with customers</b>

**Figure 1** The language paradox of marketing in the current literature



ERROR: syntaxerror  
OFFENDING COMMAND: --nostringval--

STACK:

```
(Holmqvist_ Grönroos)
/Title
()
/Subject
(D:20101220171226)
/ModDate
()
/Keywords
(PDFCreator Version 0.8.0)
/Creator
(D:20101220171226)
/CreationDate
(Insemma)
/Author
-mark-
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